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ABSTRACT

This guide provides a set of goals and guidelines for teachers who are introducing "death and dying" into the school curriculum. These goals are: (1) to provide factual information concerning legal, medical, and sociological practices; (2) to give insight into personal feelings and family dynamics when death occurs; (3) to provide consumer information for the wise purchase of medical and funeral services; (4) to initiate social change through education; and (5) to become aware of what creative minds of the past have contributed to human experience of death. (Author/SE)

GOALS IN TEACHING ABOUT DEATH

by

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Teaching about death and dying has recently become popular at all levels of education. The movement can be traced to the seminar for medical professionals begun by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross at the University of Chicago Hospital and publicized by her books and lectures. Both authors were active in the Chicago seminar with Dr. Kubler-Ross and have since been teaching about death at many grade levels from the 7th grade through graduate and medical school. Death education has become so widespread that we feel some systematic thinking needs to be done in the area. Many good curriculum resources have been developed, ranging from filmstrips and books for the elementary grades to profound philosophical and psychological inquiry for graduate level classes. When we consider the misconception, just plain ignorance, and denial about death which has been widespread in our culture, this movement must be regarded as a good thing. However, it has led to some confusion among teachers as to just what goals death education should accomplish.

This article is an attempt to clarify the goals of teaching about death and to suggest various means by which those goals may be reached. All teachers may not choose the same goals, or may rate some goals as major and others as subordinate. This is the teacher's choice, but clear thinking about goals will make it far easier for the teacher to structure the material and allow for evaluation of the learning. In addition such clarification will allow the teacher to anticipate problems that he or she may not have been prepared to deal with because the teacher did not recognize implicit goals in the curriculum plan.

The five possible goals we see in death education are:

1. To inform the students of facts not currently widespread in the culture.

2. To help the student affectively deal with the idea of his or her own death and the deaths of significant others.

3. To make the student an informed consumer of medical and funeral services.

4. To facilitate basic social changes through education.

5. To gain literary, philsophical and artistic insight using the human experience of death as a focus.

1. To inform the student about facts not currently widespread in the culture.

Teaching toward this goal provides answers to the question, "What happens when people die?" Death has been a taboo topic for discussion until recently. This means there has been widespread ignorance of such elementary facts as legal and medical definitions of death, the effect of advancing medical technology upon the life span, common hospital practices concerning the dying and their families, the nature and cost of funeral industry services, appropriate social and religious rituals at the time of death, and ways of coping with death in other times or in other cultures. Due to the previous reluctance of society to sanction such discussions, we might say that everyone needs a generalized remedial education. Folklore provides the background for most of our knowledge about death and dying. In a college class after a presentation on putrefaction in which the teacher traced the decomposition of the body from the time of death to its reentry into the nitrogen cycle, one student timidly raised her hand and said, "Do the worms really eat you?" In a small group for elementary teachers one asked, "Well, how do they cremate bodies?" The most common questions we get in our teaching is "What do you say when you visit the bereaved for the first time?" and "Are people fully conscious when they die?"

Our experience with the bereaved indicates that it isn't necessary to say anything at all. The mourner is in a state of generalized shock and

words mean little at this time. (Later in the mourning period, what you communicate may be very important.) What is most important is touch and shared presence - a hug, and hand, or even a good cry toegether and the ability to listen to the mourner.

To the question of consciousness at the time of death, our experiences with many deaths allows us to say in general, that with a long term illneww, the body with its own wisdom begins gradually to shut down so that full consciousness rarely exists at the end. This is not true, however, for accidental death or other sudden deaths. Questions such as these by students are worth exploring because they ultimately point to the student's fears about their own death. Most people do not fear the fact of death as much as the dying process. It is important, and cannot be stressed too often, that the teacher must think and feel through these questions as applied to his or her own life and death before attempting to guide student discussions. The reason we have been unable to educate our children is because of our own fears and ignorance about death. When we are able to provide answers to some of the most basic questions, then perhaps the more profound questions as to the real meaning of life will emerge. For many of us, the real mystery of life is that life is a miracle given to each person for a limited time to make of what he or she can, and we must create meaning for our life out of that reality.

Ignorance and avoidance do not allow people to make informed decisions about their own care or the care of family members during the dying process and it prevents them from making informed decisions after the death occurs. Most important, it prevents them from coming into human contact with each other in the crisis of dying and the necessary grief that follows as a restorative. Working towards this goal should begin with a basic biological definition of life and death. There are now options and corollaries to this definition (such as those raised in the Quinlan case) and several states are

in the process of rewriting statutes defining death. Since the legal definitions are often predicated on medical practices, but are enlivened by the ethical problems, these statutes form a center around which most information can be structured.

The next areas which should be covered are the family grief dynamics and process, that is, the way humans respond to and learn to live after facing traumatic loss. Kubler-Ross' work* can be understood by even the youngest children and constitutes the best resource for the teacher. One of the most helpful explanations to students is a discussion on how people behave when they grieve, what happens when they feel guilty or angry toward the dead (as most mourners do), and how our society wrongly represses natural and healing displays of grief.

Death is a social event, so the next area to be dealt with is the effect of death on the social and religious circles surrounding an individual and the ways various societies respond to death. The funeral home provides a natural center around which to structure a study of the American way of death, including various methods of corpse preservation and disposal, and social and religious rituals concerning funeral practices and the mourning period. The legal aspects of corpse disposal are generally unknown and always provide a stimulating discussion. (Typical comment: "You mean my body doesn't belong to me after I'm dead?")

2. To help the student effectively deal with his or her own death and the deaths of significant others.

Teaching to this goal helps the student find ways to answer the question, "How shall I live with death and be not overcome?" The taboo against discussing death has resulted in a climate of isolation. When we cannot share our experiences with others and have others share theirs with us, we cannot know whether what we experience is normal and real. Feelings

*see Bibliography

and thoughts which stay in our own head only go around in circles, never going anywhere new - they don't move to resolution or acceptance.

We must remember that we can never take away the fear of the student's own death, for that fear is realistic--we will all die someday. (The teacher must confront this personally.) Rather the open and shared realization of our own mortality can make the days we have more precious. Further, we cannot completely take away the pain of deaths the students have experienced. There is no way the hole left in a child's life by the premature death of a parent can be filled. But we can mourn together for the deaths we have known and such a community of mourning is healing and far preferable to solitary grief.

The content, then, is shared experience. Sharing can be throught the use of media like the film "All the Way Home, " by providing settings of trust in which students can share experience, and by assignments which will bring students into contact with family members such as interviewing grandparents about "death in the old days." At times the classroom can become a community of grief, at the death of a student or someone close to a student. A discussion of appropriate responses to the death by the students can open up relevant areas and allow the class to become a community. Adults often assume that young children have little experience with death. Not true! When you consider that leukemia strikes young children before the age of 5, that childhood accidents abound, that grandparents die, and that parents do die prematurely, few children of school age are completely untouched by death experiences in their own lives.

Recently Kubler-Ross has begun investigating the non-ordinary, psychic, or ecstatic experiences which often accompany death. After children are old enough to separate fantasy from reality, these experiences may be presented as further ways people deal with death. It is meaningful to introduce older students to these non-ordinary experiences which often accompany dying and

grieving. (For example, 44 percent of Americans report some kind of felt post death contact within one year of a significant death. "I heard my dead father talk to me.") The fact that these experiences are often considered "abnormal" in our culture, or are linked with the occult, leads to people not using the experiences as a means of reintergrating their life after a loss. It has been our experience that simply presenting the material gives the students permission to use these occurences as a healing force in their own life (and may also reaffirm their sanity). Children's beliefs and fantasies about death and what happens after death should also be explored. The teacher should not worry about raising general religious issues such as resurrection, heaven, reward and punishment, afterlife, etc. since all religions in Western cultures have something to say about these concepts and a free exchange of ideas should only confirm the commonality of shared human experience. We do <u>not</u> believe that the teacher should provide opinions on these matters. It is the function of the teacher to initiate and guide the discussion, not to use it for proselystizing.

3. To make the student an informed consumer of medical and funeral services.

People rarely die in simple home settings today. Eightly percent die in medical institutions surrounded by technology which often forces physicians to make decisions about expensive and painful procedures which, upon reflection, the patient and family may not wish to have. Physicians are increasingly eager to have the patient and family share these decisions. If the family and patient decline to exercise their responsibility, fear of malpractice suits and their own sense of medical ethics will often force the physician to take measures he or she would not want personally in a similar situation. (The Quinlan case in which there is a disagreement between family and physician is unusual, but may well become more common, unless legal boundaries are clearly established.)

To accept those decisions responsibly, the student needs to know something about the grief process so reactions and opinions of other family members can be understood. The student also needs to know the legal restraints under which the physician works, such as definitions of death, as well as the methods of common heroic measures (such as defibrillation and artificial respirators), and their desirability in various situations. Students should be encouraged to explore their own feelings about organ donation and autopsy, as well as the application of extreme medical measures. This can be done through a discussion of euthanasia and the "living will." As in the second goal, assignments can be given which encourage students to communicate with their families in order to establish a basis for decision before the crisis time. Students are to think about what they would want for themselves if they were in pain and terminally ill and to ask their parents what they would want.

The funeral industry has received some heavy criticism in recent years, but much of that criticism has been based on misinformation. We find in our teaching (even at the graduate level) that few students have ever been inside a funeral home and of these only a minority have been in a casket show room. Yet these same people could at any time be called on to buy the goods and services that the funeral home provides which will average over $2000, and could run far higher. Students need to learn about the services that the funeral director can provide, both to family and community.

A good place to begin is a cross cultural or historic study of corpse disposal. Habenstein's History of American Funeral Directing provides fascinating insights into the past 150 years in America. Students should study corpse decomposition under various conditions and the legal restrainsts on funeral directors and their customers. With this information, visits to local mortuaries or talks with funeral directors are strongly recommended. Ask the local funeral director to visit your classroom. Most funeral directors will be very pleased to arrange for a tour of their establishments at a time

convenient for them. One of the authors makes a funeral home visit a requirement of every course. No child or parent has ever reported an adverse reaction to the visit and most reported that their fantasies and fears about funerals had been greatly relieved. Teachers might also want to explore alternatives available through the Planned Funeral and Memorial Society in their community. Students can then be encouraged to explore their own values and be given assignments which encourage them to communicate with family members about family funeral traditions or about what family members desire for themselves.

4. To facilitate basic social changes through education.

An underlying, but seldom spoken, assumption of a good deal of the death education movement is that Americans handle death and dying poorly and we ought to be doing better at it. As in many other things, we believe education can initiate change. This assumption is found most often at the higher grade levels. Unfortunately there is no well formulated program for this change--as there is in change through education for racial problems, for example. Yet change will come and death education will play as important a part as sex education played a part in changing attitudes toward sex information and wider acceptance of various sexual practices.

We feel that teachers need to be careful here, expecially if upon self examination they find that their own ideas about social change are too idealistic, or too far from the mainstream for ready acceptance at this time. Teachers should be especially wary of broadside attacks on the funeral industry like Mitford's The American Way of Death, which is no longer an accurate representation.

Yet there are important questions of social policy and practice which deserve inquiry. Teachers will best serve their students by presenting the issues in well formulated questions and admit that none of them yield easy answers. Given limited medical and economic resources, should such great

effort be made to maintain the lives of old people at extremely low levels of functioning? Is our definition of life such that we consider length of life (quantity) of greater importance than high level functioning (quality) for a limited time? Is the continuing trend toward privatization of mourning ritual consistent with creating and maintaining communities of concern? Does viewing articially restored corpses help or hinder the mourning process? Does preserving the corpse in concrete vaults, thus preventing natural decomposition, violate the current emphasis on ecology? Is the use of one grave plot in perpetuity for each corpse a good use of the remaining open space in our land?

Each of these issues are multifaceted and deserves dispassionate exploration by students. But such exploration can only be done when students are well informed. It seems to us, therefore, that teachers, if they wish to achieve this goal, should concentrate on specific policy questions, such as those above, and introduce debates, readings, or discussion on the issues at the end of the sections geared to goal one, "to inform the student of facts not widespread in the culture." Many of these issues are now being raised in the culture-at-large, so teachers might do well to watch for media events which can be used as a basis for discussion.

5. To gain literary, philosophical, and artistic insight, using the human experience of death as a focus.

Teaching to this goal answers the question "What is death?" at its profoundest level, but always implies the obverse question "What is life?" The teacher is limited here only by the teacher's own education and inclination. This goal may be reached in conjunction with any of the other goals, since it is from art, literature, and philosophy that we gain the profounder insights that make our living and dying richer. Readings that are especially helpful to older students include Tolstoy's short story "The Death of Ivan Ilych,"

Claudio's speech in Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, Dylan Thomas' poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," and Plato's Phaedo. Among books for primary and intermediate grade level children are Fassler, My Grandpa Died Today and Viorst, The Tenth Good Thing About Barney. Junior high and high school students will benefit from Dixon, May I Cross Your Golden River? and Farley, The Garden Is Doing Fine.

Especially at the levels of higher education, however, teachers need to be careful that knowledge from books and mastery of argument is not substitute for knowledge of real life and death and mastery of living. Those of us who have been in the academic life for too many years often forget that literature, art, and philosophy should reflect and illuminate life, not the other way around. Yet this goal is perhaps the most inspiring, for when we understand our own dying and grieving, we can appreciate even more the reflections of great minds on the same subjects. When we understand creative genius as it has come to grips with the human experience of death and dying, we understand our own experiences all the more.

In summary, we have tried to provide a set of goals and guidelines for any teacher introducing "death and dying" into the school curriculum. These goals can be restated briefly as follows: (1) to provide factual information concerning legal, medical and sociological practices; (2) to give insight into personal feelings and family dynamics when death occusrs; (3) to provide consumer information for the wise purchase of medical and funeral services; (4) to initiate social change through education; (5) to become aware of what creative minds of the past have contributed to the human experience of death.

This article is not intended to provide a comprehensive outline for a course of study. It is the intention of the authors to publish a teaching manual indicating resources, techniques, likely problems and suggested course outlines. This manual could be use in connection with elementary grades and high school. We hope to have the manual available in the near future.

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Fassler, Joan. My Grandpa Died Today. New York: Behavoral Publications, 1971 Gerontology Series.----Geared for the primary grades. An excellent, readable presentation of an important crisis that often occurs to young children. Can be adapted for teaching purposes.

Grollman, Earl. Talking About Death. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971----Excellent dialogue on death for children through grade 7. Parent guide provided to explain dynamics.

Harris, Audrey. Why Did He Die? Minneapolis: Lerner Press, 1970.----For primary grades - poetry to be read and discussed about the natural death of things around us and the death of a grandparent also.

Viorst, Judith. The Tenth Good Thing About Barney. New York: Atheneum, 1971.

JUNIOR HIGH AND HIGH SCHOOL

Dixon, Paige. May I Cross Your Golden River?----Novel. 18 year old discovers he's going to die - unrealistic in its treatment of the disease which is glamorized (as in Love Story) but a good portrayal of family interactions & feelings.

Farley, Carol. The Garden Is Doing Fine.-----A 14 year old girl's father is dying and her mother refuses to admit this and reassures the father that all will be well " and the garden is doing fine" even though it is in the middle of winter. The girl wrestles with her feelings about this.