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# **Death and Dying in the Curriculum of Public Schools: Is there a place?**

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**O**ver the past few decades, death has frequently visited our school campuses and nation in alarming ways. During these times there has always been a sense of despair and uncertainty about how to react to this visitor. Willis (2002) contends that people from the American culture often have a difficult time discussing death and dying and dealing with grief, as it is a somber topic with many different emotions attached to it. Death and dying has become a tabooed subject as people are afraid and cannot comprehend what lies beyond it. People are scared that if they acknowledge death or that merely mentioning the word might bring about their own demise. Death is not a myth but a reality of life and living; something we cannot and will not escape. Clearly, there is no resisting, no fighting against it or hating it that will eliminate it from our lives. Death and dying is a common destiny that at some point all the humankind will experience; and the



reality is that everyone eventually dies regardless of their age, gender, race, religion, color, creed, or socio-economic status as death is fate equal to all.

Willis (2002) observes that American children grow up in a culture that try to avoid grief and denies the inevitability of death. These children are growing up in a world in which death, dying, and violence have become synonymous. Death is hardly ever mentioned or spoken about in schools except when it happens as a national trauma or disaster such as in the killing of children in the schools at Columbine in 1999, Paducah in 1997, and the shooting of Amish children in Pennsylvania in 2006, Virginia Tech shooting (2007) and more recently when children commit suicide because of bullying and name calling, the explosion of Challenger in 1986, the Oklahoma bombing in 1995, and the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. When such catastrophes happen teachers and school counselors get into crisis-mode, because they are unprepared to deal with the calamity. Often as human we tend to be able to visualize other people's death but we are either unwilling or unable to see our own immortality. We are all dying as death comes to all of us and this life and living is but for a brief moment.

This paper proposes the inclusion of death and dying as topic to be covered in the curriculum of all public schools. Inclusion in the curriculum will enhance the discourse and conversation about death and dying and thus will hardly be treated with such shock and awe when it appears. This paper will explore two key issues: why death and dying in the curriculum, and how it should be integrated into the public school curriculum. Death education can be offered at various levels of the educational system in elementary, middle and high school levels. It can also be offered at post secondary education level where teachers are prepared and as short-term seminars or workshops as part of professional development for in-service teachers. According to the *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (2010), death education addresses the life and problems of people of today and help students to learn skills to solve them. Understanding and appreciating oneself, others and life, learning ways to manage anger and frustration; developing attitudes of tolerance, respect and empathy and compassion all contribute to a high quality of life. These may be the basic ingredients of long-term primary prevention of destructive behavior and serve as an antidote to the distorted perception children form from the entertainment media.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section present a theoretical framework used as the lenses to discuss inclusion of death and dying in the curriculum. The second section discusses the reasons for inclusion of the topic and how it may be integrated into the curriculum of public schools. The third section presents the conclusion.

### **Theoretical framework**

This article uses Pinar's (1992) theory that the "concept and realities of death need to be integrated in everyday conversation and in everyday curriculum, and not treated as exotic topics of extreme anxiety" (p.99). Pinar argues that it is when death is treated as distant that

it becomes terrible and provokes fear. As life leads to death he asks us not to tempt death but invites us to perhaps make friends with it.

Kubler-Ross (1997) asserts that every man will attempt in his own way to postpone questions and issues until he is forced to face them and will only be able to change things if he can start to conceive his own death. Today families and school personnel as Baker, Sedney & Gross (1992) mention, have to help children, even young children, deal with death and grief on a far too regular basis. Gordon and Klass (1979) made sound argument for teaching the basic facts about death and dying in the school system. However, they caution that schools should not teach about the religious aspect and beliefs of death and dying but allow parents to do so at home.

### **Why death and dying in the curriculum?**

This paper proposes that death and dying should be addressed in the school curriculum the same way we teach about the big bang theory, patriotism, sex, character and moral education. Over the last few decades death has frequently walked the corridors of our schools either through murders, suicide or natural causes as stated above. It has bombarded the nation in ways that were not expected. Though we are never happy when death visits, we cannot deny its imminence and that it is essential to address the topic in schools so that students and teachers may be better able to cope when it comes visiting especially on our school campuses. Society tends to treat death as a distant cousin, a stepchild, and the proverbial mother-in-law or as even an enemy. For many people death is a difficult topic to discuss. People are scared to talk about death and dying especially with our students as they are afraid of what parents will say since it is not listed as a topic to be taught in the curriculum guidelines. The inclusion of the topic in the curriculum will therefore help teachers and students to address it freely and openly. Crase and Crase (1977) assert that if education contributes to the ultimate goal of human happiness and overall well being, then death education should be part of the process. Death education is as much a requisite for a complete education as education for human sexuality, nutrition education, environmental education or drug education (Crase & Crase, 1977).

Cox, Garrett and Graham (2005) mention that children may misunderstand death beyond the obvious cognitive limitations because many tend not to discuss death with their parents or friends because they think the subject is too unpleasant, frightening, or even unnecessary. Thus, education about death and dying should begin in school during the early years as many children have certain knowledge and experience about it. Many students have experienced the passing of family members and friends. However, Cox, Garrett and Graham (2005) argue that the manner in which some parents communicate with their children about death may influence the child's comprehension of it as many parents do so in a ways that are very confusing and potentially harmful to children. When children ask questions about death it is better to gently tell them the truth than to tell them some make believe story about grandmother not being here because she is gone to visit 'Uncle Charlie'



and will be away for a long time. To tell them someone is gone visiting or gone to sleep confuses them. Eventually, that child is going to realize that we have lied and then learn to distrust the one who lies to them. Cox, Garrett and Graham (2005) assert that adults often hinder children's understanding of death by using confusing terms and abstract language to explain the concept to them. Adults tend to protect children from life's realities but we must also realize that we cannot shield them from death. Daily they are bombarded with the happenings on television and in the printed media. Take for instance the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—Operation Iraqi Freedom. How do we protect or shield our children from what is happening? They view the carnage on television each day. Children need to know that death and dying really happens and it is not some television movie or a game in which the bad guys get killed. Pointing at the parents' common weakness, Cox, Garrett and Graham (2005) argues that rather than telling children why and how people die many parents focus on downplaying the emotionality, seriousness, and reality of death.

I recall my friend, the mother of a three-year-old girl, saying she was sitting and watching a children's program with her daughter, Madison, that fateful morning of September 11, 2001. The children's program was interrupted with breaking news and before the mother realized what was happening she was enthralled by the airplanes flying into the towers. Her daughter was sitting on her lap and the mother was so caught up with what was happening that she was only brought back to reality only when her little girl said, "Mommy, will anyone die?" She did not know that her daughter even knew the word "die" or if she understood the concept but this was a teachable moment so rather than trying to protect her daughter, by turning off the television, she used the opportunity to tell the child about death as best she thought she would comprehend. The three-year old was not scarred. A few months later, Madison lost her grandmother, who was sick with cancer and she was able to tell me then, "Grandma, was sick and she died and is gone to be with the angels". Imagine my shock when she continued, "Everybody dies, you are going to die, and I am going to die. Mommy and Daddy are going to die. We will then see Grandma". Madison has grasped the concept.

Death comes to everybody so why treat it as a stranger or a disgusted, hated enemy? Teachers and parents need to find ways to expose children to the reality of death, as it will be better for them. I understand that children should not be robbed of their innocence but telling them about death will empower them. A curriculum that fails to address a topic as important as death and dying is in itself dead. Society changes and our schools and curriculum must adapt to these changes. Education should recognize, assume responsibility for, and maximize the consequences of the awareness of man's temporality (Huebner, 1975). The reality is, sooner or later everyone faces death and we cannot hide from it. If we talk about death to our children they will come to know that we are on this terrestrial ball for only a time and no doubt lead better lives. Heidegger (quoted in Pinar, 1992) tells us "meditation on the fact of death brings this life into focus". Pinar (1992) adds, "It makes this moment we share together, precious worthy of caring, worthy of presence" (p. 99).

Many of us live our lives as if we are fixed on this planet and unfortunately our families come to believe the same, so when the “grim reaper” comes to get us there is this total hopelessness. Had we been taught to live our lives and expect death at any time our whole living would be different. We know what is taught should be age appropriate but we should not neglect the teaching. In her Commencement address “Dancing the circle” at the Cambridge School Mary Aswell Doll (1991) reminds us that:

Death indeed highlights life. Life is not as organized as a set curriculum...Nor is death as end-stopped as we fear. We are all on journeys, destinations, unknown. What better opportunity for students to begin to come to terms with life than by writing about the dying they have experienced along the way. We need death in our lives to define our living (p. 13-14).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century with its societal transformations demands that new topics be added to the curriculum to accommodate these changes. Paradoxically, death has not changed, human life has been devalued and death now walks the halls and grounds of our campuses as man take the lives of their fellowman without thinking twice.

In the fall of 2002, I offered “*Death and Dying*” as an Inquiry Seminar while on the faculty of a university. Although the course was advertised all over two campuses, it was noticed that two weeks before the class should have started only two students had inquired about taking the course. That summer students were told about the seminar with the hope that they would consider taking it. Many of them inquired why anyone would want to teach a seminar with such a title. Some even went as far as to say that they would not take the course as they thought that it was morbid of me for wanting to teach such a seminar. One student retorted, “It is very freaky and spooky. Who would want to talk about death and dying?” Another cynically asked, “Where will you go for fieldtrips...the cemetery?” We indeed went on field trips to the cemetery. Fields trips were taken from the cradle to the grave. Students visited the pediatric wards, kindergarten classes, elementary, middle and high schools, nursing homes, mortuary and cemeteries.

Finally, two students registered for the course and I had consultation with them. They asked if I would consider holding the seminar for them, as they were very interested in the topic. They expressed that they were not surprised that more students had not signed up for the seminar, as it is something entrenched in the psyche of people for not wanting to discuss death. “They are scared that if they acknowledge death, or that merely mentioning the word might bring about their own demise,” one student remarked. “It is the same thing with the cancer,” the other student joined in. “No one will come out and say, I have cancer. They are afraid to say it, but will tell you that I have the big “C” and they never use the word cancer”. Cancer for them is the onset of death and they are afraid of death and dying. Many people consider cancer a death warrant and so they will not name it, for to do so is to sign that death certificate they believe. Not mentioning the word “death” will not prolong our lives or let us live forever. In the midst of life and living we are in death and we are all dying and the statistics are there to prove it.



If we learned to make friends with death perhaps we would not treat the elderly as we do. They will not be sent off to nursing homes, as used commodities that are no longer needed or valued. As I visit these nursing homes I am moved to tears when I see the aged grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers and fathers who are abandoned there. We pay the money for them to be provided for but we do not find time to visit and sit for a while and talk with them. They are lonely souls who have nurtured and cared for their families and now that they need to be cared for with love and patience they are ushered off to spend their final days with strangers. I have spoken with many of these elderly who have not seen the face of a loved one for days, weeks and even months. They feel dejected and exported as rejects. Why do we hide our loved ones in nursing homes? “Just as we evade the fact of our deaths we look the other way at the dying around us. We hide them in nursing homes, hospitals, even on the streets, where we look the other way as outstretched arms and voices beg for life” (Huebner, 1975). Are we afraid to experience the presence of those who are dying? We should not be, as this is an experience of our own dying also.

In Randy Pausch’s *Last Lecture* at Carnegie Mellon University in the Fall of 2007, facing pancreatic cancer and the likelihood that he would only live a month or two, Randy summed up his life’s wisdom for his kids (then 1, 2, and 5 years of age). In that lecture he said,

“We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand. If I don’t seem as depressed or morose as I should be, sorry to disappoint you... assure you I am not in denial. It’s not that I am not aware of what is going on. My family, my three kids, my wife we just decamped. We bought a house in Virginia... better place for the family to be, down the road... ”

As Pausch continued his lecture he seemed more at peace than his audience. He handled the news of his dying with such grace and poise and seemed to have come to term with his dying. If more of us come to term with our death then we would be able to do the things that Pausch did to make sure his family would be comfortable when he was no longer with them. In the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Albom (2002) gives an account of visits with Morrie who had asked him to give his eulogy. In their discussion Morrie speaks about his death and dying and that everyone is aware that they will eventually die, though no one actually believes it. Morrie makes a profound statement to Mitch “...the truth is...if you accept that you can die at any time--then you might not be as ambitious as you are.” (p.83). This kind of acceptance comes only if we are educated about death and dying and realize that we are living in the shadow. People have lived to be seventy, eighty years and older and have children, grandchildren and have departed this life without telling loved ones their wishes. Some are hooked up to technology to prolong their lives. Worst, many have made no plans for death and die leaving relatives behind in debts from which they have a hard time emerging. Our days or lives here will end. We will all experience death, either that of a friend, relative, co-worker and our own dying. Though there are technological advances to prolong life, death is still certain. We have learned to defy gravity, we have traveled to the

moon and back, we make trips to outer space, but death is still a reality. Doctors now probe the human body and replace body parts and organs as technicians do in motor vehicles. However, in the long run we will die. Scientists have cloned animals and are thinking about cloning humans. Even if scientists succeed in human cloning, we will still die. *Dolly*, the cloned sheep died. There will be no discovery to let anyone live forever.

### **How to integrate death and dying in the curriculum**

To integrate death and dying in the school curriculum, death education it should be a part of every teacher education preparation program as teachers have the task of comforting children when they have dead pets, friends or relatives. According to Wolfelt (1996), children at a very young age are not able to understand about death and dying, however their distress is real when someone they are close to dies. Cox, Garrett and Graham (2005) state that death is an aspect of life that is not only inevitable but also painful, especially for children. Children, as they mention, do not have the knowledge or experience that adults have; consequently they are often unprepared to deal with the death of a loved one or even of a beloved cartoon character in a movie.

Death and dying by its very nature, lend itself to a multidisciplinary approach. The topic could be integrated into various learning areas including the Social Studies, Science or English curriculum. The interdisciplinary aspect of such a topic is staggering and warrants a place in the curriculum. Students need to be exposed to the reality of death and the school must play a role through its education process. Willis (2002) states that children can and do learn to talk about their feeling although they may not use words or phrases as adults do. Furthermore, Willis argues that young children benefit from the freedom of expressing their feelings by being able to draw or color, even if they are scribbling.

Beginning in elementary level very young children, kindergarteners through the fifth grade can be encouraged to talk about the death of their pets. Whether we flush the goldfish down the toilet or bury other pets in the backyard we can talk to the children about the passing of a friend. In the middle/junior high school classes the topic could be addressed in the Science curriculum as a part of the discussion on suicide. This paper argues that the suicide rate among adolescents is as high as it is because the students have no understanding of the finality of death. Many believe that the very same principle of killing off opponents and enemies in a video game applies to life. At the end of the game they hit the “start over” button and all the characters are alive again and a new game begins. Students think they can kill themselves and their friends and start life over. It is my belief that teaching about death and dying to them would remove this misconception and considerably reduce the suicide rate. Students would learn that life is not a game and we live only once and there are no second chances to life.

High school students could be allowed to pursue the topic from many different angles as they are more matured. Business majors could look at such things as pre-planning services,



the cost of hospice, cost of funerals, making living wills and trusts. Science can look at the biology, chemistry, and ecology/recycling—what happens to dead animals and plants. What of whales in the ocean? What happens to them at the bottom of the ocean floor when they die? In Social Studies it can be examined for the social customs of different cultures/societies and how death influences behavior—from the death of public leaders to death in war as a mobilizing force for a country to fight. Mathematics can look at statistics, figures, and trends, graphs all of which can be on the proficiency test, making the topic relevant to all students and justifiable in the curriculum. The topic should be addressed without emphasis on a multi-theological ways, as everyone dies, regardless of one's own spirituality or religious beliefs. The point is to discuss death and dying not to talk about life after death or anyone's religious understanding or beliefs thereof.

Teachers and students do not have to address the topic in a morbid way. A few years ago I taught English Literature in a high school in Louisiana. One of the books that the students were asked to read was, *Beowulf*, the oldest surviving epic from British Literature. Anyone who has read that book will agree that a teacher has to be creative and innovative to hold the interest of today's student. There were students who complained about the antiquated language of the text. I had to come up with a plan to make the lesson creative, understandable and connected to real life. I had students make connection with their lived experiences, the dailiness of their lives, by reading the obituaries in newspapers, writing letters of sympathy, willing their belongings, making living wills and writing what they would want written as their epitaphs. We even had mock memorial services. All this was done to ensure that the students would be able to grasp an understanding of this rich fabric of fact and fancy. Students who were not interested in the book because of the Old English quickly got a grasp of the story. They were also learning about death, dying, and life. It was several weeks after that some students came to me and confessed that the activities we did in that class not only helped them to understand the text but also had helped them in allaying their fears of death. Then I was not teaching to lessen the fear of death or dying but simply trying to find a way to teach the story of the book. It is interesting that the activities we did taught them something about death and dying. Clearly, schools should be proactive in preparing students by giving them information on death and dying before they are in panic and distress mode from traumas.

## Conclusion

Discussing death and dying can provide both students and teachers an outlet for mending the torn fabric for those who grieve and those who comfort them when someone dies. Death is the surest event of our lives from the moment we take our first breaths into this world. When we talk about our lives we use a lot of “maybe”, “if” and “perhaps”. Maybe we will go to school; maybe we will grow up, go to college and maybe even get married; maybe we will have children. The “maybes” and “perhaps” of life are endless. There is, however, no maybe about our death and dying. We say, “when we die”. We should therefore embrace

our death and our dying. Death can be a beautiful and a less painful experience if we come to befriend it as we do our living. According to de Hennezel (1997), “death can cause a human to become what he or she was called to become. It can be in the fullest sense of the word, an accomplishment”. Death puts life and living into focus. “There is life amid death, life in death, life from death” (Pinar, p.94).

Death and dying is a mystery that man will never be solved or uncovered. Does not nature itself teach this? Animals and plants die and scientist have not been able to bring them back to life. It is inevitable and our students need to be taught and to know about it. Schools should be the place where they learn about death and dying as part of the curriculum. The content of the death and dying education programs can range from discussion of a pet in kindergarten classroom to the study of human death, burial and bereavement as the children get older. The sooner we learn to accept this the better we will live with each other each day as we will acknowledge that we live in the shadow of our dying. We will begin to treat everyone we come in contact with differently. We will live each day as if it is the last day of our lives; not as sad people but with a love, respect and an appreciation for life. The moments we spend on this earth are precious and we “should make the time we share together precious, worthy of caring, worthy of presence” (Pinar 1992, p. 93).

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