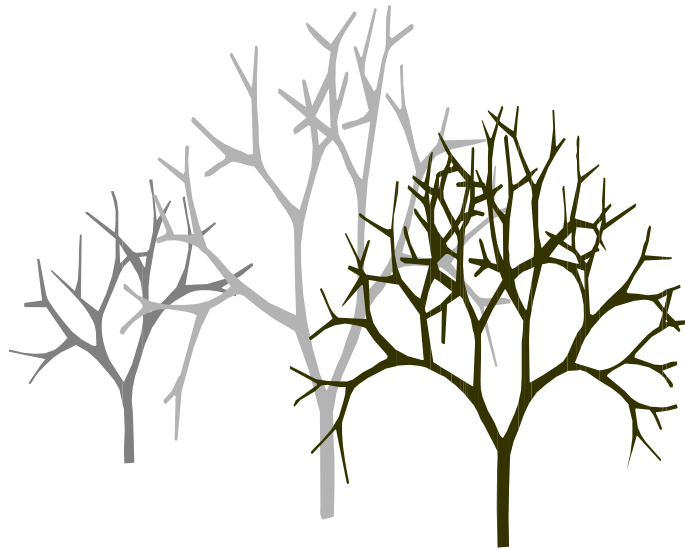


A Matter of Life and Death:

Addressing a Complex Topic

Appropriately with Children



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MRP for Barrie Bennett

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Death.

What a great teacher you are.

Yet few of us elect to learn from you,

About life.

That is the essence of death's teaching,

Life.

Death is not an elective.

One day we will all take the class.

The wise students audit the class in early years

And find enlightenment.

They are prepared when graduation day comes.

-Bernie S. Siegal, M.D.

Preface

The year is 2002; my fourth year of teaching. It is late spring, a hot and sunny day—too humid to sit melting in a sweltering classroom—and I am surrounded by a group of approximately 12 grade twos and threes, heading eagerly out of the school building and down to the nearby ravine. The students’ enthusiasm at being outside is infectious, and despite my stress about upcoming report cards and other year-end procedures, I can’t help but smile at their energy: They are delighted to be alive, and by extension, so am I!

As we head down an overgrown path beyond the creek, a squeal of excitement stops those of us who are straggling at the back of the group: “Ms. Teschow! Look, look! A dead raccoon!” comes the cry from a particularly enthusiastic learner at the front of the assemblage, and as I jog up to the crime scene, I see that a lifeless racoon is indeed at the centre of a circle of curious eyes.

Being myself intrigued by the freshness of the creature’s death, I find myself at a crossroads: Do I “protect” the many sensitive students in my class and move the group along, or do I seize this teachable moment, and thoughtfully facilitate an open, student-led inquiry/analysis about the end of life as a natural, biological event? I chose the latter path.

Chapter ONE - Overview

INTRODUCTION: "Why Death Ed?"

In a culture that exposes children to violence and death of many natures in the media¹, it is ironic that when death is a reality close to home, many adults are eager to “protect” children from the pain they perceive this event to cause. Too often, young children are required to process violent movies filled with gore, yet when a family member dies, they are sent to stay with an aunt while the rest of the family attends the funeral. At best, they may be present at the funeral, but not invited to actively participate. As we know from Piaget (1929), Bruner (1966) and other theorists, children are always learning, are continually forming concepts, are always making sense of the world around them. Although we may not intentionally teach our young people about death, they are nevertheless learning about this inevitable part of life. As Dr. John Morgan, in a 2003 interview with Egenia Pfeiffer notes, "When a child asks a question about death and is told to 'go play', we are in fact teaching [him] that death is a taboo subject." (Pfeiffer, p. 93). Morgan points out, "The question is not will we have death education or not; the question is whether the death education we have will be reliable and helpful for kids".

¹ I was intrigued, as a classroom teacher, to discover how many of my grade 2 and 3 students watched the 9/11 news replays over and over again at home, with very little guidance from family (the children instead brought their questions to school, and for many months after that event, asked their teachers about the event in particular and about death in general). Even earlier in my career, I recall a particular elementary school student writing a movie review about an extremely violent film that his parents had rented for him to watch. When I expressed concern over the age-appropriateness of the movie, and asked if the student had had some discussion around the themes and content with parents, the response of the child was, "naw, my mom was tired and went to bed about half-way through."

Although a number of "intervention" or "post-vention" (i.e., bereavement) programs exist to help students in schools deal with death *after* it happens², little "preventative" death education exists. In fact, the very term, "death education" is somewhat problematic: As Charles Corr (in Pfeiffer, 2003) points out, "we're not teaching people to be dead, [and] we're not teaching dead people" (p.27). And yet, if one of the goals of death education, as Aspinall (1996), Leviton (1979, 1983) and others suggest, is increased human happiness through a respect of life and healthy attitudes towards death³, then we as educators must facilitate an environment in which children can feel free to ask about this otherwise taboo topic, and we teachers comfortably weave dependable information about life and death throughout the curriculum we contend with on a daily basis. Perhaps then we can influence children to grow into emotionally and ethically healthy adults who have appropriate coping strategies, when life presents them with the death of a loved one, and eventually, when they must face their own mortality. As Herman Feifel points out, death education is critical: "Evasion and avoidance have a place in man's psychic health, but an excessive ignoring of death is not healthy." (Quoted in Irish, p. 50)

Some readers might ask, "why should the school deal with the topic of death? Is it not better left to parents and or places of worship?" In fact, some authors do advocate for a triadic approach to death education: Donald Irish (1979), for example, argues for a model that incorporates family, religion and school. Similarly, Aspinall's (1983) four-prong approach suggests that death education take on a holistic slant, supported by family, school, community and religion. That said, others, like Daniel Leviton (1979), argue that education about death

² Many School Boards, for example, have a "Critical Incidence Response Team" or similar task force to assist after there has been a shooting or other "incident" in a school.

³ Aspinall, S.Y. "Educating children to cope with death: A preventive model," *Psychology in the Schools*, Oct 96, Vol. 33 Issue 4, p341 , 9p , Leviton, Daniel and William A. Wendt. "The Denial of Death, and Global Well-Being," *Health Education*, v14 n3 p3-6 May-Jun 1983 and other authors in bibliography

should be non-moral, complementary to that received in the home and [place of worship]. In any case, most agree with Deaton and Berkan (1995), who write, "Because of the significant experience with death of many of today's youth, death education needs to be central to the curriculum as courses in math, reading and science. The school can provide a forum for students to intelligently explore this mysterious and elusive subject"(quoted in Pfeiffer, p.42).

CONSTRUCTIVISM

In order to appreciate why a proactive model of death education might be considered as the most effective means of weaving a comfort about death as a natural part of life into teacher repertoires and student reasoning, a general understanding of constructivism is helpful.

Constructivism finds its roots in the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky and the cognitive school of psychology, and proposes that rather than coming as "blank slates", students arrive in schools with many concepts already firmly embedded in their minds. For any new learning to take root, students must attach (quite literally, in their brains) new bits of "knowledge" to already existing ideas and information, that is, they must *construct* their own understanding, making it significant to themselves and thereby giving the knowledge meaning. For example: A teacher can teach students about the concept of division in math by standing at the board and explaining the numerical procedure, or she can provide her students with a rich, meaningful problem to solve, and with concrete manipulatives to sort into groups. The latter method allows students to link the concept of division to experiences they have had in the past, for example, sharing six cookies equally amongst three friends.

This facilitates students in constructing a mathematical understanding of division based on already existing knowledge they possess. Their knowledge of division becomes a well-grounded understanding, as opposed to a series of memorized procedures, which may quickly be forgotten outside the classroom context.

If one assumes a constructivist stance, the importance of proactive death education, particularly in the elementary school years, takes on a new significance. Imagine a world where a healthy grasp of the sanctity of life, and a profound understanding of the finality of death, were developed early on in a child's life. The impact this appreciation of life would potentially have on a disenfranchised high-school student's personal considerations and ultimately their decisions around gang involvement and/or suicide are powerful indeed. One might even argue that the very quality of a young person's relationships with family and friends could be dramatically improved by an early understanding of the value of life and the universality and inevitability of death. These strong personal relationships could in turn perhaps positively impact that young person's academic performance, leading to a holistically healthier quality of life beyond the classroom. The implications are profound.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this MRP is to examine a brief history of death education in North America and review a sampling of the literature on this topic over the past five decades. A constructivist approach to learning is assumed, and the implications of various developmental models on the teaching of death as a natural part of life are considered in the literature review. Assorted goals of a death education program are also examined. From that inquiry a 5-part course for educators

on "proactive death education" (as opposed to bereavement or grief counselling) will be designed and presented. My hope is that by creating and teaching such a course, I will provide the participants with an opportunity to explore the topic of death, so that they will not only become better human resources for their students, but that they will also motivate their colleagues to become more familiar with important aspects of teaching about death at the elementary school level.

Participants in the course will be asked to complete a pre- and post-course survey (Appendices A & B). The information collected on these appraisals will serve as the data to be analyzed by the researcher. Based on this analysis, conclusions will be drawn about the need for and the qualities of effective teacher development in this domain, and implications for further study will be suggested.

Chapter TWO – Review of the Literature

A BRIEF HISTORY

Death Education in North America is not a new idea. In 1956, Herman Feifel, a renowned psychologist, organized the first professional conference on this topic, a symposium on death at the American Psychological Association's annual meeting. This symposium was followed by an emergence of many courses on death and dying throughout American college campuses. That said, courses or curriculum documents related to death education at the elementary school level are scarce. In 1969, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross published her landmark book, On Death and Dying, and with it, the formerly taboo topic of death came into the public domain. The seventies saw a continued growth in interest about death and dying, and more conferences were organized, including the Green and Irish *Symposium on Death Education* at Hamlin University. A multi-disciplinary approach was becoming increasingly popular; by the late seventies a group of psychologists, educators and other interested parties had founded the Association for Death Education and Counselling (ADEC) and in 1979, OMEGA, a periodical on death education was launched (Kalish & Fulton, 1979).

Although a decrease in actual courses offered on the topic in schools was noted throughout the 1980's, professional interest in death education continued to flourish. The focus turned to the importance of studying thanatology with regards to younger children, as evidenced by events such as the *Helping Children Cope with Death* conference in London, Ontario in 1985. The following year, John Morgan (of King's College in London, Ontario) and his colleagues undertook to survey 255 school boards across Canada and published Death Education in Canada

(1986). They found that no course explicitly on death existed at the elementary school level, and that the topic was generally haphazardly dealt with on an "as-needed" basis, for example, following the death of a fellow student or a student's family member. Overall, fewer than 50 percent of the school boards contacted expressed that their health, religion or other curricula included some mention of death, and those who did include this topic generally spent fewer than three hours a year on it. Some respondents indicated that many teachers had a low comfort level with the topic of death. This study was proceeded with a telephone survey in 1990, which found that not much had changed.

More recently, Ellis and Stump (2000) undertook a research study, and found that many younger parents experience relatively few deaths since their own childhood (possibly attributed to modern medicine and the "sterilization" of death), and need to educate themselves with regards to children's cognitive abilities vis-à-vis the death experience. This is an interesting challenge: A search through the library and on the Internet turns up few to no proactive resources for talking about death with children (though many excellent bereavement and counselling sites exist). How then are parents and/or educators to tackle this sensitive topic, and what might a more formal proactive death-education program look like at the elementary school level? Further, how can we effectively integrate this important topic into an already over-packed curriculum?

GOALS OF DEATH EDUCATION

Goals suggested by advocates of thanatology are plentiful. As Charles Corr notes, death education is education "for life and living" (Corr, 1982). As such, it should meet the needs of the living.

In a world where messages come from so many sources, perhaps one of the most important goals of death education is that of *information sharing* (fact vs. fiction). Where are students getting their ideas about death, wonders Donald Irish (1979). Sharing accurate information, Aspinall notes (quoting Corr, 1982 and Pacholski, 1991), helps students to gain important knowledge and make healthy choices accordingly. Educators must assist students in becoming critically literate so that learners can determine for themselves what makes information legitimate.

Health promotion is another important goal. Aspinall, in his 1996 article entitled, "Educating Children to cope with death: A Preventative Model" argues the importance of promoting the normalcy of life and death. He quotes Corr (1982) and Pacholski (1991) in pointing out the educator's role in helping to develop healthy attitudes towards death and loss. Educators should share information so that students can make healthy, informed decisions. Teachers can also help students develop effective coping strategies both for coming to terms with their own eventual death, as well as dealing with the loss of a loved one. Daniel Leviton (1979) speaks of increased human happiness. He writes, "Our goal is to help people understand their own feelings and attitudes towards death and dying so that death will be less fearful and living more enjoyable." (p. 30)

Robert G. Stevenson (1985) writes of the important role an educator can play in helping to decrease a student's death-related anxiety in general. If we can normalize death for our learners, rather than feed into the idea that death is a scary thing not to be discussed openly, then perhaps we can improve the emotional, physical and social health of our younger generation, and by extension, our society at large. Jones, Hodges and Slate (1995) go one step further, and argue

(quoting Eddy and Alles, 1983) that in fact death education lowers suicide rates amongst young people because it forces them to view the finality of death more realistically.

A final goal that emerges in the literature over and over again is that of *values clarification*. Many derivations of this goal exist in the literature. Donald Irish (1979) for example, argues that contemplating death and coming to terms with one's own mortality forces us to live better lives. Morgan (1990) underlines the importance of assisting students in developing a philosophy of life. Helping children to understand and/or clarify their values will lead to an improved appreciation of and respect for their own and others' existence.

Information sharing, health promotion and values clarification are all goals that should be at the forefront when considering a high-quality death education program.

MODELS OF DEATH EDUCATION

Given the goals from the section above, what might an effective death education program look like? Certainly, it must be timely. As Herman Feifel points out, “Death education initiated on or just prior to the death bed is no more adequate than sex education on the marriage bed”

(Quoted in Irish, p. 50)

Most thanatologists agree that effective death education is a co-operative approach. Levitan, 1979, for example, writes of a triadic approach, including the home, the school and the [place of worship] (sic). In this manner, he argues, the approach the school takes can be a “non-moral” one, complementary to that received in the home. (Of course if we consider that far fewer children attend places of worship today than they did in the 1970s, and if we take into

consideration Ellis and Stump’s 2000 research findings that parents have little first-hand experience with death, we are left to wonder how effective this collaboration can be.) Donald Irish also advocates for this triune, institutional approach involving the *Family* (which he notes is the first and potentially the most influential, as well as being full of paradoxes and inconsistencies), *Religion* and *School*. Aspinall adds *Community* as a fourth dimension.

The developmental level of the learner must also be considered when thinking about death education. Aspinall (1996), for example, illustrates Nagy’s 1948 three-stage process of children’s understanding of death, which corresponds conveniently with Piagetian Constructs, as in the diagram below:

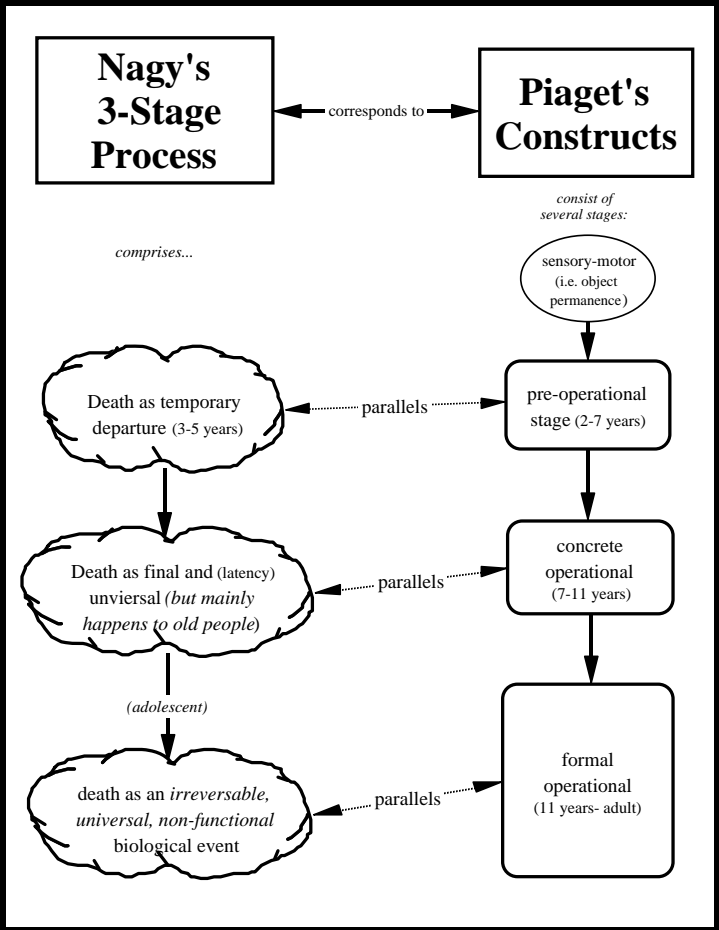


Figure 1. Comparison of Nagy and Piaget Models

A “mature” concept of death includes the understanding that death is a biological event that is irreversible, non-functional and universal. An effective death education program must guide children gently towards this understanding. It is comprehensive and thoughtful, rather than a rushed response to a crisis. Bereavement counselling and critical incidence response teams have their place, but a *preventative* model of death education prepares students for discussion once a death is experienced (Jones, Hodges & Slate, 1995).

Death Education, Corr insists, must be honest and accessible to children (Corr, 1982). Little mention is made of Public Health Nurses or other “death experts”. Corr points out that teachers are more accessible to children than an “expert” in the field, therefore we must provide educators with the necessary professional development that will allow them to flourish in their accessible situations, for example, by taking advantage of so-called “teachable moments” (as in my racoon example in the preface). Corr’s professional development model for educators advocates for inclusion of the following five topics:

1. Acknowledgement and Examination of Personal Needs Related to Death;
2. Society’s Attitudes;
3. Developmental Research on Concept Formation;
4. Guidelines for Interacting; *and*
5. Resources for Helping.

This list is developed further by Leviton (1979), who underlines the importance of teachers not only becoming familiar with the subject matter (i.e., by learning about crisis intervention, sociology, thanatology, etc.), but also becoming comfortable with the topic of death, and being able to use the language of death easily and naturally.

Donald Irish writes, “life should be viewed educationally as a process and not as a set of encapsulated stages” (p. 53). Obviously, teaching children intentionally and thoughtfully about this topic requires some preparation. With this process-oriented approach in mind, I have developed the five-part course that follows in the next chapter.