

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEATH EDUCATION CURRICULUM FOR THE ELEMENTARY AND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN TAIWAN

Huang, Song-Yuan

ABSTRACT

Death education does not only discuss the respectful issue of death, but also talk about the quality and meaning of life. Through the implementation of death education, the students' life will be enriched and fulfilled. In the process of developing a death education curriculum, the aspects of goals, contents, locations, time, personnel, and teaching strategies should be considered. It would be better to develop the curriculum by a committee composed of health educators, medical personnel, psychologists, clergy, lawyers, social workers and other related personnel. The content of death education program contains human life cycle, biological, social, cultural, economic, legal, literature, music, art, religious, moral and value system aspects. Death education can be developed as a separate course at the college level or be integrated with related courses in the elementary and secondary levels. Death education programs must be implemented mainly by school teachers in cooperation with parents and the public. The last, but by no means the least, consideration in the planning process of death education curriculum is evaluation.

Key words: death education
death education curriculum
health education
quality of life

INTRODUCTION

Death education, as defined by Kurlychek is "a process concerned

with increasing an individual's awareness of the part that death plays in that person's life and with providing structures to assist the student in examining these realities and integrating them into his or her life" (1977). With simpler explanation, Gibson, et al., defined death education as "the ongoing process of exploring factors pertaining to death and dying and their relationship to the living" (1982). Death education relates not only to death itself but also to our feelings about ourselves and nature and the universe we live in. It has to do with our values and ideals, the way we relate to one another, and the kind of world we are building. Thoughtfully pursued, it can deepen the quality of our lives and of our relationship (Morgan, 1977).

During the past decade death education has received wide-spread attention in the United States as a result of both biomedical revolution and sociocultural evolution (Knott, 1979). In terms of school death education programs, a growing number of elementary, middle, and junior high schools provide minicourses or units on the topic of death and dying. At high school and college levels units or courses are offered in various disciplines: health education, psychology, sociology, and literature (Gibson, et al., 1982).

Death education in Taiwan is a completely new area. Not much information regarding death and dying are included in the elementary, junior high, and high school courses. There are some medical schools where the issue of death is part of the related courses. In schools, especially in colleges, counseling centers are usually responsible for dealing with such problems as suicide among the students.

No matter death education has not received wide-spread attention in Taiwan, it is worthwhile to discuss the possibility and strategies of death education in my country because a well-designed death education curriculum can help children and youth come to understand and accept the idea of death in the cycle of life (Gibson, et al., 1982). Before discussing the development of death education curriculum in Taiwan, it is important to note that:

- 1) the discussion here is limited to the elementary and junior high levels because senior high school curriculum is already overcrowded and heavily geared to national examination standards.

- 2) the Key points included in this paper are principle-oriented

because there is no possibility to design a comprehensive death education curriculum by one person only. This kind of curriculum should be developed by a committee composed of school personnel, parents, students, medical personnel, the clergy, mental health personnel, and the funeral and legal professions.

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING DEATH EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN TAIWAN

I. Brief sketch of the related courses for integrating the concepts and contents of death and dying

The school system in Taiwan is divided into three levels: nine-year compulsory education, senior secondary education, and higher education. Nine-year compulsory education for all children includes six years of elementary education beginning at age six and three years of junior high school. Secondary education includes senior high schools and vocational schools (Miller & Huang, 1984).

The school curricula are centralized which means that all elementary and junior high school curricula are developed based on the Curriculum Guidelines for the Elementary Schools and the Curriculum Guidelines for the Junior High Schools issued by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China in 1975 and 1983 respectively (MOE, R.O.C., 1975; 1983). In other words, all school curricula are standardized.

There are twelve courses at the elementary level. Among them, health education, social studies, natural sciences, physical education, and mathematics are appropriate courses for integrating the concepts of death and dying. At the junior high school level, each student should finish seventeen courses (not including the elective courses). Apparently, health education, biology, home economics, physical education, social studies, and math can be considered to integrate the concepts of death and dying.

At present there is no possibility to develop death education as a separate course. Correlated or incidental instruction would be a good alternative.

II. The principles and procedures of developing death education curriculum

In developing death education curriculum, the following items can be used as important guidelines:

Why?	(The goals)
What?	(The contents)
Where?	(The locations)
When?	(The time)
By whom?	(The death educators)
How?	(The strategies)

A. Why?

The general goal of death education is to let death be accepted and life be more beautiful and fulfilling. Knott (1979) has labeled the following overlapping areas of focus as the goals of death education:

- 1) Information-sharing -- to include the dissemination of relevant, often academic type of data about the broad spectrum of what is currently called "thanatology", or the study of death.
- 2) Value clarification -- to warrant an examination and clarification of one's personal values about the many choice points and vital decision-making opportunities involving what might be called "deathstyle".
- 3) Coping behaviors -- to enable people to master certain types of helping skills, whether the objective is one of effective professional care giving or dealing with the consequences of anticipated or realized loss for oneself or others (pp. 387-390).

For all school levels, Gibson, et al. (1982), have submitted more specific goals of death education as follows:

- 1) To inform children and youth of basic facts concerning the multidimensional aspects of death and dying.
- 2) To enable individuals to be informed consumers of medical services.
- 3) To facilitate the improvement of the quality of life through thoughtful considerations of personal values and priorities.
- 4) To enable children and youth to deal appropriately with feelings about their personal death and the death of meaningful others, and to cope more effectively when death becomes a reality.
- 5) To assist individuals in the process of clarifying values related to social and ethical issues (p.14).

The above goals of death education can be applied to Taiwan.

B. What?

Death education can be designed as a separate course at the college level or be integrated with related course in the elementary and secondary levels. Based on a general point of view, the dominant emphasis of instruction are:

- 1) Emphasis on death as a personal phenomenon.
- 2) Examination of the sociocultural elements and effects of death.
- 3) A limited study of all but a singular aspect of death and dying (Knott, 1979).

The content of death education programs in elementary and junior high schools range from discussion of the death of a pet in kindergarten to a study of human death, burial, and bereavement in the upper grades. The following list of topics is a good example of the content of death education program at elementary and junior high school levels:

- 1) Life cycle in nature as manifested by plant and animal life
- 2) The human life cycle -- birth, growth, aging, and death
- 3) Biological aspect -- causes of death, determination of death
- 4) Social and cultural aspects -- funeral and burial customs, vocabulary of death.
- 5) Economic and legal aspects -- insurance, wills, funeral consumerism
- 6) Aspect of grief, mourning, and bereavement
- 7) Aspects of death as presented in children's literature, music, and art
- 8) Religious viewpoints
- 9) Moral and ethical issues -- suicide, euthanasia
- 10) Personal values related to life and death (Gibson, et al., 1982, pp.19-20).

After integrating a death education unit into the mental health strand for the secondary level, Lang (1981) has adequately served the students with the following unit:

Death Education Unit -- Outline

- Day 1 -- Introduction to death education.
Survey on death.
Drawing: Visual impression of death.
- Day 2 -- Vocabulary of death.
Funeral customs around the world.
- Day 3 -- Protestant-Catholic View of death
(minister and priest guest lecturers).
Other religious view of death.
- Day 4 -- Class collage on life and death.
- Day 5 -- Filmstrip, living with Dying, on how America lives with death.
- Day 6 -- Five stages of death, Grief and bereavement.
- Day 7 -- Film: "What Man Shall Live and Yet See Death", Part I.
- Day 8 -- Film: "What Man Shall Live and Yet See Death", Part II.
Drawing students' own tombstone and writing epitaphs.

- Day 9 -- Pictorial report on epitaphs taken
from cemeteries.
Death-related music.
- Day 10-- Group reports on death
- 1) Life insurance
 - 2) Military view on death
 - 3) Medical examiner
 - 4) People who have been brought
back to life.
- Day 11-- Fantasy exercise on death.
- Day 12-- Field trip to funeral home.
- Day 13-- Positive-negative euthanasia.
- Day 14-- Explaining death to children.
(pp.38-39)

Apparently, the above unit can serve as a good strategy in death education in Taiwan no matter we need to develop the appropriate instructional media.

C. Where?

There is a variety of settings where death education program can be implemented effectively. Knott has classified the settings as formal education, clinical education, and lay public education (1979). Indeed, when death education is viewed as an ongoing process throughout the life cycle, the responsibility for it is shared by the home, church, other community agencies, and the schools.

In the aspect of school, Gibson, et al. (1982), have declared its responsibility as follows:

The school's responsibility for death education is complementary to that received in the home and church. Its role is to disseminate current and valid information, to explore philosophical thought, and to serve students' personal needs through its varied counseling services. The schools can help students take a more informed, objective look at the nature of death and dying and to integrate this understanding into a more productive life (p.13).

D. When?

Ideally, death education should begin in childhood and continue through maturity. Some different viewpoints about death education in childhood exist. Some people indicate that death education is a gory, terrible topic that will only frighten children needlessly. Other people mention that death is a part of living, a natural phenomenon. Death education will help prepare children to live more meaningfully (Engs & Wantz, 1978). Death education to be carried out in childhood is important. The question is that whether the parents have adequate knowledge of death and dying, the positive attitudes toward death and dying, and the appropriate skills to deal with their children's questions about death. In the schools systematic death education programs are easier to design, implement and evaluate.

E. By whom?

Needless to say, school teachers are the key persons responsible for death education in schools. Because the subject of death is often taboo at home, the teacher's role in teaching about death is very important. The teacher must consider the following points in preparing to teach about death:

- 1) It is important to examine your personal feelings about death. What a teacher says, how it is said, and how questions are answered may dictate the nature of the children's response.
- 2) Mental health is not the denial of tragedy but the acknowledgment of it.
- 3) The teacher imparts knowledge but must also be a good listener. Fairy tales and half-truths that will have to be unlearned later should be avoided.
- 4) Students will discuss death from a religious perspective. Many learning experiences can be developed that examine religious customs and beliefs about death.

- 5) Anticipate emotional reactions. Children experience grief. A discussion about death may evoke strong feelings that a child is experiencing or has experienced in the past.
- 6) Children's psychosocial development varies. A single curriculum guide may not be suitable for all children. Carefully consider your students' needs before selecting materials, approach and learning activities (Engs & Wantz, 1978).

In addition to the school teachers, teaching positive attitudes toward death requires the supportive assistance from medical personnel, safety officers, attorneys, social workers, and others of the helping professions. Carefully planned staff development programs and teacher preparation courses in death education are necessary to provide teachers and prospective teachers with basic knowledge and skills (Gibson, et al., 1982). In Taiwan, two strategies can be applied to preparing teachers of death education:

- 1) Integrating the concepts and contents of death and dying with the related courses in teachers colleges which are responsible for training the elementary and junior high school teachers.
- 2) Arranging in-service training programs for the existing teachers. Seminars or workshops would be a good technique for this purpose.

F. How?

Before carrying out the death education curriculum, the goals of the curriculum, the characteristics, needs, interests, and concerns of the students, and the sources of family and community resources should be considered carefully. In selecting death education materials, Gideon (1977) has presented the following criteria:

- 1) Are the materials adaptable for multiple use?
- 2) Is the information accurate?
- 3) Are there suggested guidelines for using the materials?

- 4) Are there appropriate references and bibliographies for both teachers and students?
- 5) Is the death education curriculum material of adequate quality?
- 6) Is the materials readily available?
- 7) Are the results from previous use in field tests or pilot programs reported?
- 8) Is the cost of the materials within the budget of the school system? (p. 237)

In addition to the materials, teaching methods or patterns are also an important component in an effective death education curriculum. In this aspect, Gibson, et al. (1982), have the following suggestions:

Typical methods of instruction include: (1) incidental teaching when a death-related incident occurs (e.g., the death of a classroom pet); (2) an information-discussion approach utilizing films, filmstrips, outside speakers, field trips, and appropriate related literature; (3) an information-discussion approach with affective elements such as role playing, values clarification activities, and writing activities; and (4) a self-instructional approach (p.18).

After conducting a survey on death education course, Tandy & Sexton (1985) found that methodological approaches ranged from lecture-discussion to field trips and involvement sessions. For example, students were asked to role play, react to wills, and to encounter and cope with grief. Films, video tapes and audio cassettes were used more frequently than books, newspapers and guest lecturers to introduce a topic or to emphasize principles associated with a particular concept.

In an article, Klingman (1978) had suggested the use of simulation in death education. In discussing teaching about death at the elementary level, Engs & Wantz (1978) have developed several teaching strategies which can also be used as important reference materials for death education in Taiwan.

EVALUATION OF DEATH EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Evaluation is the last, but by no means the least, consideration in the planning process of death education curriculum. The evaluation strategy should be consistent with the curriculum philosophy and objectives. The evaluation should start with the initiation of the program. Evaluation process should also involve school personnel, members of the community, and students. Input from all these groups is needed to provide direction for needed program changes. Evaluation of death education programs should be comprehensive, ongoing, and include death education components at all grade levels. The outcomes of evaluation should be communicated to students and the community. Responsiveness to feedback will increase the likelihood that death education will succeed in becoming a viable part of the whole school program (Gibson, et al., 1982).

In Taiwan evaluation of death education curriculum should be twofolded:

1) The experimental project for death education curriculum --

Because there is no designed curriculum that can be adopted, the experimental task for death education curriculum is very important. For this purpose, the experimentation of population education in Taiwan can be utilized as an example (Huang, 1985).

2) The national wide evaluation task --

After the death education curriculum is applied to all schools, periodic evaluation is necessary. Because the students in each grade in Taiwan is culturally homogeneous, there should be no difficulty in evaluating the students' learning outcomes in terms of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains.

In summary, the following items should be included in the evaluation strategy for death education curriculum:

Why to evaluate?

What to evaluate?

When to evaluate?

Where to evaluate?

Whom to be evaluated?

How to evaluate?

CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

Based on the above discussion, it is easy to understand that dealing openly with death has the potential for improving the quality of life. Death education is one of the most significant and effective ways of achieving this goal. In other words, teaching about death and dying can lead to a more intense appreciation of the wonders of life. No matter death education is a new field in Taiwan and there is a long way to go, we should consider the issue and take action as soon as possible because death education like death itself is for all.

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我國台灣地區中小學死亡教育課程之發展

黃松元

死亡教育不僅在探討「死亡」這一個莊嚴的課題，也在研究生命的本質和意義，各級學校死亡教育的實施，可使學生的生活更為充實，生命更有價值。死亡教育課程之發展必須顧及目標、內容、場所、時間、人員和方法等層面，因之應由衛生教育、醫學、心理、宗教、法律、社會工作等領域的專家組成委員會發展之。死亡教育的涵蓋面很廣，包括人類生活史、生物、社會、文化、經濟、法律、文學、音樂、美術、宗教、道德以及價值體系等方面。這個科目在未允單獨設科之前，國小階段可將有關教材融入健康教育、自然科學、體育、音樂、數學等科目內，國中階段則可納入健康教育、生物、家政、體育、物理、化學、數學等科目內。學校教師固然是死亡教育實施時的核心人物，家長和社會大眾的支持和協助，也是非常重要的。另外，在發展死亡教育課程時，更應該顧及評價這一個重要環節。

關鍵詞：死亡教育、死亡教育課程、衛生教育、生活品質