Death Education and the Elementary School:  
A Unit of Instruction for Grades 5-6

A Senior Honors Thesis (ID 499)

By

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of death education was chosen as the focus of this research because death and dying, as well as educating about these realities, are neglected subjects in modern American life. Without understanding and accepting death as the final process of life, people cannot live a full life, according to those who study death, the thanatologists.

In many communities there is a high death rate resulting from hunting accidents, gang wars or disease. By simply ignoring the problems, the teachers, schools and parents are doing the students an injustice. The students need to grieve, ask questions, and speak their minds. Too often children are sent away and excluded from funerals and visitations. Adults find themselves needing time to help make the adjustment. Is that not asking the children to do something adults cannot do themselves? This seems contradictory to a teacher's basic philosophy.

To many youngsters death is temporary. Television portrays death that way. For example, people die on one show and then reappear on something else the next week. And if a star actually dies, he is immortalized on the silver screen. Death is permanent and can be very frightening to a young child. The purpose of this death education guide is to take some of the fear away by
introducing death to the students in a non-threatening way -- during a time when no one close to them has recently died.

Parents believe that death education is important, but usually see no need to bring up the subject "now." When national tragedies occur, such as the explosion of the space shuttle, the public expects the teacher to take charge and help the children through the tragedy. Suddenly everyone realizes how short and uncertain life is, and how inevitable death is. Although a tragedy of this sort is sad and shocking, the grief can be lessened by having the topic of death and dying introduced at a time when death is not so personal.

Death education is important enough to be included as part of the school curriculum, but the state requires so much already that "one more subject" is snubbed before it even has a chance to prove its worth. It is as though teachers feel they should teach Johnny to read and Johnny will learn everything else on his own. But Johnny cannot do that. He needs guidance to deal with the real problems of life (one being death), so that he can progress and do the most that is possible with his life. It is truly tragic when a child loses his life because he cannot face death.

The author previewed books, journals and magazines, cassettes, and films to see what materials were available for teaching a unit on death education for
intermediate elementary students. The author previewed articles written by adults and some written by children, some written for adults and some written for children. Although the majority was written by adults for adults, they all seemed to emphasize the same messages:

- Death education is important,
- Children/youth should participate in the aging and dying processes,
- Children/youth should be allowed to participate in funeral practices to the extent that they are interested, and
- Adults should be honest and open about death and grieving (morbid or graphic details should be omitted).

By combining the resources with past experiences, the author developed a unit suitable for teaching elementary students. This death education guide was designed for fifth and sixth grade. However, it could easily be adapted up or down in grade level. This unit emphasizes discussion activities rather than writing activities. Some of the activities may be eliminated or changed to writing activities if the teacher finds it necessary to preserve privacy. Open discussion might be more helpful, however. The students not only answer each others' questions and find comfort in the discussion, but also find that death does not need to be taboo.

In this death education guide, the terms listed below will be used. In order for you to more fully understand this project, the terms are defined for you.
Terms

Controversial issues - issues which do not have a "correct" answer and upon which people do not agree.

Cremate - to incinerate the body.

Culminating activities - summarizing or evaluating activities at the conclusion of a unit. Students incorporate skills used during the unit to complete these activities.

Death and dying movement - a new movement brought on by people who wish to remove fear from death. This is a reaction to having death taken from the home by institutionalizing the aged and the dying.

Initiating activities - activities used to introduce the subject, motivate the students for the unit, and determine the experiential background of the student body.

Mortuary - a place where dead bodies are prepared and kept for burial.

Objectives - what the students should learn from the unit.

Purpose - why the unit is important.

School curriculum - the courses of study offered by an educational institution, usually consisting of reading, spelling, language arts, science, health, social studies, math, physical education, music, and art in the elementary school.

Sustaining activities - all of the activities in the unit which are not initiating or culminating.
UNIT PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Purpose: To introduce the "taboo" topic of death and dying in a non-threatening way, therefore, removing the fears associated with death.

Objectives: The students will be able to:

- discuss the feelings associated with death
- talk freely about death experiences they have encountered
- discuss death in the news and in fiction that is encountered daily
- compare death with other forms of loss with which they may be more familiar
- discuss symbols of life associated with death
- visit a mortuary and ask questions so that they will better understand and fear will be dispelled
- consider different types of funeral arrangements
- decide where children fit into the grieving process
- discuss controversies involving life and death situations
- comfort a friend or loved one who is grieving
- decide what is truly important in their life
- visit a cemetery without fear and see that it is a source of history.
INITIATING ACTIVITIES

1. Begin this unit by reading to and discussing with the students A Taste of Blackberries by Doris Buchanan Smith. Some suggested questions are included.

   Explain to the students that this is a story about two best friends, told by one of the boys, about some of the things they do and a problem that must be tackled.

   Read chapters 1 and 2 to the class. Discuss what the boys did and what kind of chances Jamie took. Discuss what Jamie is like and how he differs from the boy telling the story.

   Read chapter 2. Discuss what may have happened to Jamie. Why does his friend seem so harsh? What is Mrs. House like? Why do bee stings make some people sick and barely bother others?

   Read chapter 4. Why was Jamie's friend unimpressed by the ambulance? What would you do if your mother told you that your best friend was dead? How did the narrator react? How did the narrator feel about not helping Jamie? Why didn't he or Jamie's other friends help him? What kinds of things did Jamie's friend think about when he went upstairs?

   Read chapter 5. Why did the narrator think Jamie wouldn't be dead if he just didn't act like he was? Why wasn't the narrator glad the bees had died? Why did the narrator decide to go with his parents to the funeral parlor? The narrator said Jamie looked dead. What does "dead" look like? Why did he flick the flashlight and look for Jamie's return signal? Why do you think the boy hadn't cried all day?

   Read chapter 6. Why was the narrator bothered that the other children were playing? Why did the boy go to Mrs. Mullins' garden? What kind of person is she? What do you think of Mrs. Mullins' answers to the boy's questions?

     1) Why did he have to die?
     2) What's it like to be dead?
   Why couldn't the boy eat until after the funeral?

   Read chapter 7. What do you think about Martha's reaction to her brother's death? Why didn't the boy want to see Jamie's mother? Do you think she would want to see him? Do you know anyone who has died? Does the cemetery seem strange to you?
Read chapter 8. Why was it okay for the boy to eat now? Why did the boy pick two baskets of berries? Why didn't he eat any berries while picking? Can you still keep a promise to or an agreement with a friend, even after the friend has died? How did Jamie's mother react when his friend came with the blackberries? How do you think you would feel if your best friend died?

2. After the story has been fully discussed, the students should be free to talk about death experiences they have had. Students should be allowed to talk about family, friends or pets. After this has been aired, bring up plant life, and ask about its life and death.

3. Show the movie "In My Memory" (National Instructional Television, Exxon Corp.) Compare the deaths and the reactions of the people who survived the grandmother and Jamie.

4. Have the students draw a picture depicting death as they see it. Save these drawings for comparison at the end of the unit.
SUSTAINING ACTIVITIES

1. Current issues and recent history are important both to show relevance and to interest students in current events. Students may want to discuss the death of Christa McAuliffe and the six astronauts. Ask questions such as:
   How do you think the teachers who were not chosen felt? Envious of Mrs. McAuliffe's heroic death and publicity? Or fortunate they were not chosen?

2. Clip articles about death out of a newspaper for one week. Discuss the causes of each death. Compare the number of deaths in a local paper with a big-city newspaper (i.e., Chicago Tribune, New York Times).

3. Watch "The Ending" by Sandra Grant. Discuss what it must feel like to approach death. How did the girl feel? What do you think happened at the end of the film?

4. Collect other death and dying information for discussion from television (news and TV shows) and conversation. Is death a more common topic than we realize?

5. Discuss similarities of death to other losses, such as loss of a job, loss of a friendship, loss of a limb.

6. Look at art forms, including sculptures, paintings, dances and poetry, and listen to music which portrays death. Observe some classic as well as modern-day art forms. Can the topic of death be found in both cases? Is it similar? What changes has time made on the portrayal of death?

7. Describe the life signal devices of the 1980's. Explain that the ringing of the bells and the raising of the flag was triggered by the suspected deceased's breath. This device was designed to rescue someone supposed to be dead, but not dead, from the grave. Discuss symbols of funerals. Flowers symbolize life and beauty. They are meant to counteract the sadness of death. Food is a symbol of life and warmth. Explain that some people donate money to a particular cause in name of the person who died.

8. Take a field trip to a local mortuary. Make arrangements for a funeral director to explain the
importance of his job and answer any questions the students may have.

9. Have the students decide what kind of funeral arrangements they would want. Write those directions down. Also write a will for the disposition of their possessions. This should be homework to give the students time to think about it.

10. Ask the students and discuss the following questions:
Should children see adults express sorrow and grief? Should children visit the fatally ill? Should children go to funerals?

11. Discuss the following controversies:
How do you feel about capital punishment? Could you be the one to administer it? Some people consider birth control to be "playing God." Is it "playing God" when life is prolonged? Would you want to live forever? Imagine what it would be like if no living things died.

12. Students should read the following letter and write a response to it.

Dear Jean,

I'm sorry I haven't written for so long. I've been busy since my father's death. Thank you for being there for me. You always took time to listen throughout Dad's illness. No one wanted to listen about what "the man with cancer" had to say, and I just needed to talk to someone.

It has been hard for me to let people know that their presence has helped me -- your presence especially. You never said "I just don't know what to say." You didn't say anything at times and that is fine, and when you did know what to say, you said the most comforting words.

Our neighbors were good about organizing. So much food was brought in, and that was helpful. Mom and I didn't feel much like cooking. The only food we ate was pretty much forced on us. I now know that was for the best. Thank you for not saying, "If there's anything I can do, just let me know." We certainly weren't in any frame of mind to think about asking for anything. As I said, we had to be told to eat.
Once again, thank you. Please write soon. I feel very lonely sometimes. Let's try to get together soon.

Love,

Ann

(If the words are too hard for the students to read, the letter may be read aloud to them.)

13. Have the students imagine they only have six months to live. Have them write what they feel, and what they would do during that time. Are there reasons why they shouldn't do these things even though they have not been given only six months?

14. Consider the following scenario for discussion. A little boy runs out in the street and is hit by an oncoming car that did not have time to stop. Paramedics come and have to administer CPR and hook up a respirator. When they reach the hospital, the boy has a flat EEG reading. Elsewhere a nationwide search goes out for a human heart to save another little boy who will certainly die in a month without one. What should the boy's parents do? What about the doctor? Who is responsible for the accident in the first place? Who killed the boy? The driver? The doctor? The parents? The boy himself? The boy who needs his heart?
CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

1. Take a trip to a local cemetery. Students should look at differences in the graves and markers. Have students make rubbings to compare data later in class. Did a lot of people die at one time? Why? (disease, war) Students who enjoy drawing may enjoy making sketches. How is the cemetery portrayed? Scary? Lonely? Calm and peaceful? Make a note of differing epitaphs.

2. As homework, have students write their own epitaph. Browsing through a book such as Bartlett's Familiar Quotations (John Bartlett, 1953) will give students examples of famous and noteworthy sayings.

3. Draw another picture depicting death. Remind students what has just be studied. Compare it to the initial drawings to see if the child's ideas of death have changed or matured through this study.
CONCLUSION

"'Being prepared to die' is not the same as 'being ready to die.' Preparing to die is preparing to live." (Documentary Photo Aids, Inc. Teacher's Guide)

This search has shown that there are very few materials available to teach a unit on death, especially for the elementary grades. Mostly I found statements about how important death education is for children. There are several story books which include the topic of death, but they are designed for an individual, not for a class. Some educational journals are beginning to include week-long units on death, and some health books dedicate a few pages to death and dying. However, these need to be combined with other subjects (i.e., Language Arts, Social Studies) to show the students exactly how life and death are part of the life cycle and part of history. By combining with the other content areas, more time may be spent dealing with the topic of death.

This project was designed as an example of an approach to death education in the intermediate grades of elementary school. It may be used as is or adapted to the students involved and the amount of time the state will allow for such topics.

Since death and dying is such a sensitive subject,
it is not recommended to begin this study early in the
school year or to teach this unit with someone else's
class. This unit would be most effective when everyone
in the class, teacher and students alike, knows everyone
else fairly well. If a class campout is part of the
curriculum, this would be an excellent unit to do
following that. Knowing each other well will make the
students less inhibited and the unit less threatening
and more successful.
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND LIST OF RESOURCES

Children's Books


Books for Adults


Booklets for Adults


Children's Films

The Ending by Sandy Grant

The End of One (Columbia Pictures, 1970)

In My Memory (National Instructional Television, Exxon Corp.)

Understanding Death Series by David W. Berg and George G. Daugherty, parts 1-4.

Where Is Dead?

Films for Adults

Alex: The Life of a Child. Frank DeFord

Care for the Dying and Bereaved: How Can We Help? (Guidance Associates, 1977)


Living with Dying. (Sunburst Communications, Inc., 1973)


Photo Studies

"Gramp, a True Story of Living with Dying."
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Cassettes/Records


"Death." Indian Rocks Beach, FL: Relevant Productions, 1976.

"Death and Life." Center for Cassette Studies, 1975.


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Kushner, Harold S. "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?" Reader's Digest, Jan. 1983, pp. 143-146.

Michelmore, Peter. "Jacob's Dead, Isn't He?" Reader's Digest, Mar. 1985, pp. 96-100.


White, Robert J., M.D. "...And Not So Sudden Death." Reader's Digest, July 1982, pp. 96-100.

OTHER RECOMMENDED READINGS

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Alcott, Louisa May. Little Women.

Alexander, Sue. Nadia The Willful. (Pantheon)

Armstrong, William H. Sounder. (Harper & Row)

Bernstein, Joanne E. Loss and How to Cope with It. (Clarion Books)

Brenner, Barbara. A Year in the Life of Rosie Bernard. (Harper & Row)

Brooks, Jerome. Uncle Mike's Boy. (Harper & Row)

Brown, Margaret Wise. The Dead Bird. (Harper & Row)

Cleaver, Vera & Bill. Grover. (Harper & Row)

DePaola, Tomie. Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs. (G.P. Putnam's Sons)

Greene, Constance C. Beat the Turtle Drum. (Viking Press)

Gunther, John. Death Be Not Proud.

The Kids' Book About Death and Dying. (Little, Brown and Company)

Krementz, Jill. How It Feels When a Parent Dies. (Alfred A. Knopf)

Miles, Miska. Annie and the Old One. (Little, Brown and Company)

Paterson, Katherine. Bridge to Terabithia. (Harper & Row)

Reed, Elizabeth. Helping Children With the Mystery of Death.

Rodowsky, Colby. What About Me?

Stein, Sara Bonnett. About Dying: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children Together. (Walker and Co.)
Viorst, Judith. *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney.* (Atheneum)

White, E. B. *Charlotte's Web.* (Harger & Row)

Wilhelm, Hans. *I'll Always Love You.* (Crown Publishers)