

**Death Education  
and Research**  

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**Critical Perspectives**

**W.G. Warren**

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# **Death Education and Research: Critical Perspectives**

W. G. Warren

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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The world is afflicted with death and decay, therefore the wise do not grieve, knowing the terms of the world.

In whatever manner people think a thing will come to pass, it is often different when it happens, and great is the disappointment. Such are the terms of the world.

*Gautama Buddha*

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# Preface

Of the various alternative uses of the term *critical* offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* the meaning intended in the present work is: "involving or exercising careful judgement or observation." One would be presumptuous to believe that another meaning, that is, "tending to determine or decide, decisive, crucial," attended the present work. Equally, however, it would be unfair to employ the sense of "fault finding and censorious."

This work is, then, a critical review of research and reflection in the general domain of death, with special attention to Death Education. The field of death and dying is a complex one with special pressures on researchers, helpers and educators. I remain throughout the volume indebted to all those who have contributed to the literature that is the raw material for the observations made herein and acknowledge their efforts and insights. In general, however, my reading and organizing of the material for this present work suggests some reservations and skepticism. For the most part death research has followed the well-worn paths taken by psychology since the turn of the century. These paths are those of objectivity and science when the phenomenon of death rather suggests personal meanings and humanism. Death Education has, in turn, been led down the same paths followed by psychology.

Fields of special interest too easily become fields of specialized interest and sterile debates about "specialism" and "generalism" can arise to distract attention from common concerns to illuminate the human condition. Worse than this, a consequent lack of understanding or sympathy for the perspective of others working in the same field can further narrow and constrain knowledge and understanding. This volume is motivated by an interest in seeing an area that cries out for the most general perspective, properly addressed by many "fields of special interest." A background in psychology, clinical psychology, philosophy, education, and philosophy of edu-

cation, in most cases embracing both theoretical and practical or methodological perspectives, appeared appropriate to a critical review of this area of death research and Death Education. I must leave to the judgement of others if this appearance coincides with reality. Whether it does so or not, however, I hope the volume is received as what some people like to call a “positive” rather than a “negative” critique.

Some of the ideas in the present volume, essentially ideas in Chapters 1, 3 and 7, have been expressed in my other published work in this field. Wherever this is the case, however, the material has been considerably reworked and developed for the present volume.

Research assistance was provided by the University of Newcastle and is gratefully acknowledged. Secretarial staff of the Department of Education in the University have all assisted at one stage or another in the production of the manuscript and their help is acknowledged with thanks. A special thanks to Judy Thomas who prepared the major part of the manuscript and offered helpful advice and support. I also thank the reviewer of the initial manuscript and Dr. Grace Dawson for their tolerance.

# Introduction

The notion of Death Education is essentially an outgrowth of the psychological interest in death, and this interest is relatively recent. Herman Feifel's pioneering work, *The Meaning of Death*, published as recently as 1959, marked the first systematic attempt to broach the topic and was produced against some considerable resistance. Prior to that time Freud's papers (1915, 1916, 1917/1971), bolstered by one or two other psychoanalytic contributions (Deutsch, 1937; Klein, 1940), stood as significant though expressedly nondefinitive works. A paper by Lindemann (1944) shifted the focus to empirical concerns with loss and grief and until quite recently remained the guiding paper in the literature on bereavement. Philosophical interest in death has not been conspicuous, and there has been little systematic sociological attention. Interestingly, however, Death Education as it has emerged has embraced both of these last disciplines.

Death Education emerged having two general senses, reflecting origins in the so-called "applied" or the "pure" psychological approach, respectively. The first meant an attempt to prepare helping professionals for death, dying and bereavement among those they were to help. The best known work in this perspective is that of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969, 1972, 1975), which had its origins in her work with medical students dealing with dying patients. In this vein, courses, conferences, and seminars for nurses, psychologists, physicians, social workers, and, more recently, funeral directors, have been instituted.

Arising from the more pure, usually a more general and research oriented approach, is a wider notion of Death Education. This approach focuses on the perspectives on death of any individual, or group of individuals, regardless of the vocational or other involvement with death and dying. From this approach emerges formal courses in schools and colleges and debates about whether there

should be separate classes or courses, or whether themes of death should be incorporated into literature, science, history, biology, and other traditional subjects.

The two senses of Death Education are not and cannot be independent. Helping professionals seriously trying to understand the feelings of anxiety, fear, loss, pain, guilt or relief in their clients faced with death or experiencing a bereavement are brought in touch with their own feelings as well as with their cognitions about death in its more general, perhaps philosophical dimensions. Also, academic courses should not, perhaps cannot, exclude the emotional involvement component that will usually be present in a theoretical discussion of death. The motives lying behind decisions to enroll or not enroll in what is often an elective academic course in the first place may be quite complex and touch an individual's broader philosophy of life.

In the broadest sense, then, Death Education might be conceptualized in terms suggested by Leviton (1977): *primary prevention* (preparing individuals and societies for subsequent events and consequences), *intervention* (helping a person facing any aspect of death), and *postvention or rehabilitation* (understanding a death related crisis and learning from the experience).

The present volume examines the notion of Death Education from several perspectives; indeed, this subject is an excellent example of one inviting a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach. It is intended as an overview for anyone interested in any aspect of Death Education, and gathers together several of the more central perspectives in a single volume. At the same time no innovation, no new development in education, should be accepted uncritically. Thus an equally important aim of the present work is to raise important questions that should challenge proponents of Death Education no matter what perspective is taken and in whatever sense the expression Death Education is understood. The material in the volume is also highly pertinent to research and scholarship in relation to the general domain of death and dying phenomena.

Part I looks at some philosophical considerations of death and focuses on the difference in emphasis between traditional philosophy and Existentialism and then on the differences within Existen-

tialism itself. In relation to differences within Existentialism, the debate between Heidegger and Sartre over the significance of death and the consciousness of one's own personal death has consequences for the conceptualization of death research goals and Death Education, even within an Existentialist framework. Traditional philosophy, by its relative lack of interest in death, equally colors a concept of Death Education and interest in research on the general phenomena of death. The posture one adopts within this di- or tri-otomy will influence in no small way one's attitude to Death Education and the type of courses constructed, and whether one supports such things as research funding for death research.

There is also the question of rights and values in relation to education in any area that is sensitive to deep differences of opinion. For example, religion in schools is a vexing issue in many countries and the debate has implications for Death Education. Death may be seen as an equally sensitive area of human experience which raises similar questions of values and rights, of which we are usefully reminded. Throughout, concerns are embedded in a Western tradition and some "over the shoulder" glance at other traditions is of value as a postscript to the material under consideration in Part I.

Part II turns attention to psychological aspects. It begins with the phenomenon that most people confront several times in their own lives: bereavement. While this phenomenon is essentially of interest to helping professionals, there are some important implications for Death Education to be derived from the wide literature on bereavement. Some differentiation in the way attitudes about death have been conceived and how these conceptions (for example, fear, anxiety, acceptance) have been allegedly measured might be useful in formulating and assessing Death Education courses and these issues are taken up in this Part. Since Death Education is applicable to a wide spread of chronological and developmental ages it is also useful to review differences in death attitudes and cognitions at different stages of life. A review of the developing interest in assessing programs, or more generally simply finding out what effects programs have, is also of value. A number of studies are noted with some critical observations made, especially in relation to the pre-

vious overview of concepts and assessment. Finally, an alternative perspective in Personal Construct Psychology is considered as a way of adding some qualitative observations in an area that has tended toward operationalism and quantification.

Part III considers some sociocultural aspects of this subject including the special relation of Death Education, and death concerns generally, to religion. To some extent death research and Death Education will have goals specified or circumscribed by social conditions and sometimes by ideological positions. A recognition of the ideological factors may be especially important, and Death Education conceived as formal institutionalized courses may have “hidden-curriculum” dimensions that might be of as much concern to proponents as opponents.

Part IV discusses some problems of curriculum for Death Education in view of the foregoing considerations and in terms of “internal” issues derived from the area of Curriculum Studies. The Curriculum Studies area is a “growth area” and the insights here ought to say something for Death Education. The traditional aims/content/method/evaluation approach to curriculum is reviewed against more social and more dynamic models specifically related to the *how* of Death Education. Finally, the significance of Philosophy of Education for Death Education is drawn more clearly.

The Conclusion summarizes the general critical thrust of the volume by posing some fundamental questions. In general, a cautionary note is sounded for Death Education and death research, though some positive suggestions are also made.

While Chapter 11 is a detailed consideration of practical aspects set in the context of curriculum studies, it may be of assistance to indicate at this point (and by way of introduction for those not already initiated to the field) something of the nature of Death Education. In simplest terms Death Education is an attempt to provide a formal, institutional program addressing the phenomena of death and dying. It is an effort to impart information and to foster certain attitudes, that is, to *educate* about that fact of life that is death. The nature of the recipient group, the students, will determine whether primary prevention, intervention, or rehabilitation is the overall goal of that education. However, any program of death education

might be expected to address two general areas, stressing either one or both and then in more or less detail depending on the overall goal. The first area relates to the individual and will raise personal aspects concerning such questions as one's expectations of the program and what one's own experiences, feelings, attitudes and beliefs in relation to death and dying are. This represents a general consciousness raising experience and may be set in the context of the second area, the social aspects of death and dying. In this second area historical and sociological factors will be considered, demographic aspects reviewed, and the manner in which death and dying is dealt with in different cultures and subcultures will be examined. There may also be some attention to legal and moral questions such as the definition of death or issues involved in euthanasia and suicide. A comprehensive program might also attempt to draw some implications for more general questions of life and destiny.

Death Education as a concept involves, then, notions of intention, formality, institutionalization, knowledge transmission, and attitude and behavior change. It is based on an acceptance of the idea that it is both possible and desirable to impart knowledge and to influence attitudes in this area. It accepts that it is legitimate to impart this knowledge and influence these attitudes in institutions like schools, colleges, and universities. There is also a belief that is central to the usual sense of the term *education*. This is the belief that there will be a positive outcome, that people will be better able to deal with whatever aspect of death or dying the program is aimed at illuminating, or perhaps will be generally improved as human beings.

This volume reviews and raises questions concerning all of these last assumptions of Death Education and of the death research that underpins it. There is material for both advocates and critics of Death Education in particular and death research in general. Beyond the general tone of *reservation* and *caution* the volume takes no specific stand. It is, however, a theoretical discussion, not a manual of practical advice for a Death Education program. Numerous manuals of this last type are available as well as syllabi and course kits. What is generally lacking and must underpin the practi-

cal, however, is a broader theoretical context of a questioning nature. It is this context and perspective to which the present work addresses itself in relation to both Death Education particularly, and to the entire domain of research on death and dying.

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*PART I*

*SOME PHILOSOPHICAL  
CONSIDERATIONS*

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