

A Matter of Life and Death: Situating Death in Education

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Abstract

Death holds a significant place in our social and cultural worlds despite it not being a direct or first-hand experience for many of us. Informal education about death occurs regularly throughout our daily lives in the context of “teachable moments, the unplanned life events from which important lessons can be drawn” (Kastenbaum, 2007, p. 483). Building upon a meaningful clinical encounter with a woman who was dying, this literature review explores the need to situate death as a topic and as a curriculum within the broad context of education and across the lifespan. By exploring some of the relevant discourses on death relating to education, I identify ways in which we receive death education informally through media, religion, culture, and the arts, presenting an argument for more formalized death education within all systems and levels of education.

Prelude

I had seven years of experience in palliative care when Jane (a pseudonym) was admitted to the Hospice Unit where I worked. Jane was a 38-year old woman diagnosed with advanced metastatic cancer. But, much more important than her disease to Jane was the fact that she was a mother to several lively children ranging in age from 6 to 15. She freely admitted the best thing she had ever done in life was become a mother. Jane was not willing to agree with her terminal diagnosis nor hear from the doctors that she might only have months left to live. She needed and wanted to continue to live for her children and swore she would fight her cancer until the end. Jane's goal was to be at home with her children where she felt she belonged. I worked closely with her children, answering their questions about their mother's illness and counselling them through their anticipatory grief. Ultimately, Jane's death was not a peaceful one. She did fight it to the end. She did not die the type of death I would have liked for her, but it was her death. Her family said they understood she needed to do it that way. No matter how agitated and confused she may have seemed to the healthcare professionals working with her, when her children came to see her, she calmed down and appeared a little more at peace. It would have been easier for the palliative care team and perhaps for her family too, if Jane had accepted her dying. But this was not Jane.

An Introduction to Death Education: Theories to Situate Context

Jane was a very powerful death educator. Death education is defined as a developmental process in which death-related knowledge and implications resulting from that knowledge are transmitted (Dennis, 2009). As a death educator, Jane taught me that choice and autonomy in a seemingly choice-less situation is essential. She taught me that quality in dying occurs when people are allowed to die the way they wished, regardless of how challenged others are by it. Jane taught about the importance of death as a way to deepen our appreciation and love of life. She helped me understand that we die as we live and the importance of accepting people's individualized dying. Jane loved hard and fought hard for her children in all aspects of her living. This did not change because she was dying. I work to integrate the experience of my time with her into my living and into my actions as a death educator.

Exposure to death education assisted the palliative care team and me to support Jane and her family during her dying. Palliative Care is a healthcare field specializing in the care for the dying and their loved ones. The focus of its practitioners is to relieve symptoms experienced by individuals who are dying and improve their quality of living. Palliative care is active care that does not prolong life nor hasten death (Hadad, 2009). As the palliative care team, we came into our relationship with Jane with an understanding of death—not of Jane's individual death, but rather of death as a construct and a shared life experience. This understanding enabled us to be able to support and care not only for Jane, but also for her family and children in a way that she was no longer able. We used our experience with death education, both the formal and informal, to provide opportunity for Jane to engage in some “unfinished business” such as completing an advanced care plan and writing letters to her children. I spent time with her children, educating them on the dying process in an attempt to decrease some of their fear and anxiety and to prepare them with what to expect. I also facilitated the normalizing of their grief experience and provided opportunity for them to say goodbye to their mother. I acted as a link between the children and their schools, providing education to their teachers on grief and offering suggestions for supporting the children at school. These interactions at the children's school demonstrated the need for teachers to receive death education because dealing with death and dying will be part of their students' lived experiences.

We live in a death denying and death defying society (Kastenbaum, 1981; Northcott & Wilson, 2001; Rosenberg, 1983; Weisman, 1972). Death holds a significant place in societies and cultures despite the fact it is not a direct or first-hand experience for many. Few people now die in their homes surrounded by family, and we have distanced ourselves from death by geography and the medicalization of death. Furthermore, our understanding of dying and death is influenced by our family, peer group, religion, and culture (Hadad, 2009).

The attitudes we hold about dying and death and the knowledge we possess about this life event are reflected in the language we use, the mass media to which we are exposed, and in the music, literature, and visual arts surrounding us (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009). Many of us will find ourselves unprepared to cope with death's intrusion on our lives as all too often we choose to ignore death until our “number is up” (Kastenbaum, 1981, p. 7). But through examination of death, individuals may develop a greater appreciation, understanding, and reverence for life (Eddy & Alles, 1983).

The purpose of this literature review is to situate death as a topic and a curriculum spanning the continuum of K-12, to professional, and to lifelong education. Using a constructivist theoretical lens, I begin by providing an overview of foundation and goals of death education, followed by an argument to support teaching about death and exploring some of the relevant discourses on death related to education. I also identify ways in which we receive death education informally through the media, religion, culture, and the arts. I do this to present an argument for more formalized death education within all systems and levels of education and to provide a strong foundational argument for access to death education for all members of North American society.

I am working from a constructivist perspective rooted in the idea that learners create their own meaning through interaction with the environment (Charmaz, 2000). Constructivism is a theoretical framework focusing on both the psychological and social ways of knowing (Charmaz, 2008). Philips (2000) identified social constructivism as knowledge that is influenced by social forces, tools, and ideologies. We are all active learners internalizing and processing the meaning of death, our own mortality and that of those we love. This framework suggests that individuals use previous experiences, knowledge and understanding as building blocks from which to construct knowledge for themselves (Charmaz, 2000, Philips, 2000, Richardson, 2003).

It is through psychological constructivism that learners develop their own knowledge through internalizing and processing meaning. This is particularly relevant in a discussion on death education as there are many building blocks that we use to understand death as discussed in this paper. While acknowledging both psychological and social constructivist theory assumes meaning and knowledge is actively constructed, Richardson (2003) noted important differences in focus:

Social constructivism focuses on how the development of that formal knowledge has been created or determined within power, economic, social, and political forces...Psychological approach focuses on the ways in which meaning is created within the individuals mind and more recently, how shared meaning is developed within a group process. (p. 1625)

I incorporate both social and psychological approaches to constructivism to examine the relevance of death education. I have framed this paper by sharing my story of “Jane,” and my narrative demonstrates how I have worked to create meaning throughout my own experience with death education. I have also purposively chosen to use language that situates myself as a member of a diverse community of learners with varied levels of education and experience who strive to understand and learn more about death.

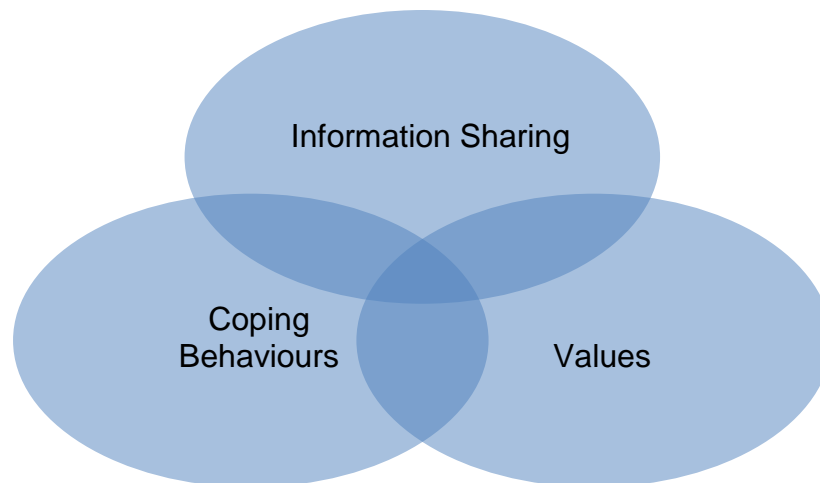
Review of Relevant Literature

This literature review has been compiled from texts, articles and research reports written by prominent scholars in the field of death education. The materials were selected in terms of the goals of death education as a curriculum and its rationale as a cultural and societal construct. Although not exhaustive, the details below serve to illustrate the value of death education across the lifespan, and underscore the importance of understanding the impact of knowledge and understanding, cultural values, and coping mechanisms when confronted with dying and death.

Roots and Goals of Death Education

The philosophical foundation of death education is evident in the humanistic perspective of the founding leaders of death education, Feifel (1959) and Knott (1979), who mapped the basic goals of death education in the form of a triad of objectives which overlap: information sharing, values, and coping behaviours. In the centre is death education.

Figure 1. Goals triad of death education (adapted from Knott, 1979, p. 390).



This triad emphasizes that knowledge alone is not enough to bring about positive change in one's behaviour but, rather, there needs to be instruction concentrating on attitude formation and coping behaviours as well. Each of these elements is both separate and connected.

Building on the work of Leviton (1977), Dennis (2009) identified three primary goals for death education:

- Primary prevention: The preparation of individuals for dying and death
- Intervention: Provision of support around death events
- Rehabilitation: Understanding and learning from death-related crisis. (p. 198)

In a similar model, Corr (2006) recognized three general types of goals for death education for members of the general public. The first goal pertains to individuals themselves and strives to enhance their personal understanding

of dying and death to improve their individual quality of living. The second is focused more on individuals and how they interact within society and centres on improving individual interactions within our healthcare system and funeral industry. The third goal is to prepare individuals for their public roles as citizens within their society. For many, it is the marrying of the three goals in Knott's (1979) theoretical framework that facilitates death as education.

Why Teach About Death

Because death, dying, and bereavement are fundamental aspects of the human experience, education about these topics should be an essential part of academic course curriculum at all levels (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2006). Education is a force for change. It is the medium by which information is communicated and understanding enhanced. Education directly influences attitudes and values and can assist in defining, strengthening, or modifying them. It also attempts to recognize the diversity of emotions experienced within the learning process and to manage them (Wass, 2006). The overarching goals of death education prioritize both “the acquisition of knowledge and development of self-understanding and clarification of values, meanings, and attitudes toward death” (Wass, 2004, p. 292).

It is important that death educators “do not pretend that death education can take place on a purely intellectual or academic plane” (Attig, 1981, p. 169); therefore, a primary focus of death education is to support in a meaningful way individuals who are dealing with the inevitability of their own death and the death of others. There is a growing movement in education to implement death education within the school system (Dennis, 2009), and one of the driving forces behind this is the increasing incidence of suicide amongst children and adolescents. Death education is seen as a potential preventative measure for this as it may provide opportunities for young people to learn about death and begin to see it in a more realistic and final manner (Dennis, 2009; Wass, 2006).

Education will not prevent death as a normative life event, but rather it will work to prevent some of the negative side effects of not understanding dying and death. Some of these negative side effects may include anxiety, depression, fear, complicated grieving, loss of meaning, and the physical reactions associated with these effects. In educating about death, the goal is to inform students of all ages about dying, death, and related experiences to reduce a sense of unfamiliarity (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009; Eddy & Alles, 1983; Morgan, 1995; Wass, 2004) or fear of the unknown.

Identifying death education as a measure of primary prevention presents opportunities to begin engaging in important discussions on individuals’ understandings about the meaning of death and concepts about quality of life—cultural and societal norms and beliefs that guide our living until we die. For the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement (2000), comprised of leaders within the field of death education, “The aim of education about death, dying, and bereavement is to contribute to general education as a basis for personal development and responsible social participation” (p. 60). And just as death will touch us all, death education can be accessible to all by addressing the learning needs of people of all ages, being formal or informal, and facilitated by a variety of individuals from families to educational institutions.

Also noteworthy is the idea of avoiding the topic of death within education. No death education is still death education. The action of not doing perpetuates the status quo, endorsing denial and communicating attitudes and fears that can be harmful to our sense of being (Attig, 1992). Wass’ (2006) argument supports this line of thinking:

Whether we know it or not, agree or disagree, children are recipients of death education from our actions as well as our inaction. Children grow up in society, learn from it, absorb its wisdom, myths and practices, its ambivalence, and its anxieties. (p. 27)

Most people appear to be unaware that death education occurs in society through media, religion, and the arts without our acknowledgement (Hadad, 2009; Wass, 2004). By not including death education in our systems of learning and not engaging actively in death education, we send the message that dying and death are events to be feared and ignored. We are not adequately preparing ourselves to care for each other when we face our own death.

Learning about Death

Education stemming from the death awareness movement has challenged people to develop an acknowledgement of their personal mortality. For many, this acknowledgement is important for living a meaningful life (Wass, 2006) as they come to terms with their own mortality. Informal education about death occurs regularly throughout our daily lives in the context of “teachable moments, the unplanned life events from which important lessons can be drawn” (Kastenbaum, 2007, p. 483). These moments may include experiencing the death of a family pet, spontaneous discussions in a school classroom, or a widely experienced event such as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, an Asian tsunami, school shootings, or the sudden death of a famous person such as Princess Diana or John F. Kennedy. We receive death education from these events as we observe how the world around us, our families, the media, and society respond to them.

Death and the Family

The family setting is often where an individual's primary socialization and most intense experiences of a lifetime occur. What parents and other family members say to children and what is said in their presence facilitates how children discover and understand their experiences of the world around them (Hadad, 2009). Death is one such experience (Leming and Dickenson, 2007). The average age when a child first experiences death is 8 years. When asked about first exposure to death, university students often respond that their parents were their first teachers about dying and death and that their observations of their parental response greatly influenced their understanding of what to think about and how to react to death (Hadad, 2009). Parents have a fundamental role in helping children understand, evaluate, and manage their experiences with death through mediation, reassurance, and emotional support (Wass, 2006).

Despite death being a part of life, parents frequently report not feeling prepared to discuss dying and death with their children (Hadad, 2009). They are often uncomfortable talking about death with their children and in many cases would rather avoid it if possible. According to Wass (2006), they worry they will say the wrong thing and do not want to bring “unnecessary” fear or angst into the lives of their children. Many parents and the general public believe children are uninterested or unaware of dying and death and, thus, it is a topic that is best discussed when they are older (Wass, 2006).

In current North American society, elderly family members often spend their last days of living in nursing homes, hospitals, or extended care facilities. As a result, many family members are not active, hands-on care-providers involved in their dying (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009). Families no longer learn about dying and death through the provision of care of their loved ones in the home. The prevalence of loss and death in the lives of children is increasing through exposure to divorce, school violence, media reports of murder and the preponderance of television violence, yet parents tend to avoid communication with children about death. They often find themselves without support or guidance on how to engage in these discussions (Northcott & Wilson, 2001), and become worried and anxious (Wass, 2006).

Messages received from interpersonal communication around us, but most notably from our family and friends, influence our attitudes towards death, both our own and others' (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2004). As children age and mature and move out into the world, the impact of other socializing sources become greater, especially influences from their peers. Children learn from other children's and other families' attitudes, beliefs, and reactions around dying and death. As a result, they may begin to question their own understanding of death and their own families' reactions (Hadad, 2009).

Cultural background greatly influences individual, family, and group attitudes and practices at the end of life and during bereavement (Hadad, 2009). The number of diverse cultures found within Canada continues to grow, and it is inaccurate to contend that there is a “Canadian cultural view” of dying and death (Hadad, 2009). Yet at the moment, the dominant culture of Canada's English-Western-Euro-Judeo-Christian-based traditions generally reflects a stoic acceptance of death without any great emotional display (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009). In our Euro-western culture, there is an assumed personal remoteness from death due to geography; we tend to live further away from

our families, prioritizing of the nuclear families with less exposure to extended families and older members. This geographic remoteness, coupled with the medicalization of dying, has served to sever the intimate experiences with dying and death that earlier generations have had that and that served to normalize the experience (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009; Hadad, 2009).

The Language of Death

How individuals speak of death reveal its influence on life and living and how they were educated about death. The language used by people talking about dying and death is often indirect; as well, Western society has many euphemisms for death. The “D- words” (i.e., dying, death, and dead) are often avoided and instead replaced by vague words or expressions such as “passed away,” “laid to rest,” “no longer with us,” and “up in heaven.” These terms are used to keep death at “arm's length and [thereby] masking its reality” (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009, p. 11). Some of our Western language even devalues death and makes light of it. For example, the commonly-used euphemisms “croaked” and “kicked the bucket” imply a minimization and even a vulgarization of death (Hadad, 2009). The use of euphemisms or metaphors, however, cannot always be linked with avoidance or a denial of death. Using a constructivist lens, these linguistic devices may also be used to communicate more subtle or deeper meanings. Phrases such as “passing on,” “gone home” or “met her/his Maker” convey an understanding of death strongly linked to a spiritual transition—especially among members of religious traditions (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009).

Different attitudes that sometimes reflect cultural frameworks are evident in the subtle distinctions of language as noted above. Acknowledging the power of language, the use of metaphors, euphemisms, slang, and other linguistic devices used by individuals provides opportunity to begin to appreciate the wide variety and range of attitudes expressed towards dying and death (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009).

Death in the Media

Media plays an important role in the transmission of information about dying and death. Cultural attitudes towards dying and death are communicated vicariously to people, in particular children, through the media. News of a death is no longer communicated throughout a community primarily by word of mouth; rather, deaths are announced on television and the Internet and in newspapers and magazines. Research in the field of communication (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2004) reveals how attitudes may be influenced through exposure to mass-mediated messages. Television, movies, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, and the Internet all possess a very powerful socializing influence on our lives (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009, Hadad, 2009, Schiappa et al., 2004). For example, modern communication technology provides ample opportunity for us all to become instant “survivors” as news of disaster, terrorism, war, and political assassination is flashed around the world (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009).

The media has become a primary source for learning about how death occurs and what emotions and behaviours are expected from those affected by death (Hadad, 2009). Television has been found to have great opportunity to influence attitudes and beliefs relating to phenomena about which there is little opportunity for first-hand, experiential learning. As DeSpelder and Strickland (2009) explained, “The media often submerge the human meaning of death while depersonalizing the event further by sandwiching actual reports of loss of life between commercials or other mundane items” (p. 8). This depersonalization allows us to “other” the death experience. Despite this, people often look to the media for not only information about events, but also for indications to their meaning as well.

Corr, Nabe, and Corr (2006) estimated that children witness approximately 8,000 deaths on television by the time they complete elementary school. This process of “enculturation” or socialization prepares young people for their roles, actions, and interactions as adults as they learn to negotiate with dying and death in their everyday living (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009; Wass, 2006). Yet this form of death education results in a mis-education of death as a normative life event, and fails to acknowledge a lack of personal experience in dealing with death and dying. Ways to understand the emotions associated with grief and loss are also absent from media’s role in death education, and

its students are ill-prepared to negotiate the meanings of dying and death into their constructs and perceptions of the world around them (Wass, 2004, 2006).

It is also interesting to consider from a social constructivist perspective how accurately news reports resemble the deaths we experience in society. Many people appear to be less interested in media coverage about deaths from car accidents, cancer, and heart disease, leading causes of death in North America, compared to deaths from plane crashes, roller-coaster mishaps, or bear attacks which are much less likely to befall us. Bizarre and unusual deaths appear to grab public attention and are generally what is reported in the media. The journalistic stance of “If it bleeds, it leads” can set the priorities of what death exposure viewers receive. Mass media, as a death educator, does a disservice, as generally the emotional aftermath of survivors is not included in the media reports we receive. Arguably this has led people to consider death as an end in itself and without any real consequence to others. Such death desensitization as Dennis (2009) has suggested, can be linked to the increase in violence resulting in death seen in today's real human society. The frequent exposure to violence and death in the mass media has allowed us to become desensitized to the realities of death (Hadad, 2009).

As viewers learn about death indirectly and as we give witness to the death of others via the media (Wass, 2006), using a constructivist perspective it is reasonable to hypothesize that attitudes about death and dying are influenced by mass-mediated messages. Despite the increased presence of information and images of death and dying in popular culture, researchers interested in attitudes about dying and death have done little work examining the effects of mass media (Schiappa et al., 2004).

The Presence of Death in Religion and Spirituality

Historically, religion has been assumed to be the “custodian and arbiter of suffering” (Hadad, 2009, p.36) at the end of life. All world religions have attempted to understand and provide individuals with meaning and purpose to suffering. For people who have been exposed to and involved with a religious belief and system or traditions, such cultural conditioning plays an important role in the determination of attitudes and beliefs towards dying and death. These values and beliefs may be taught to children through religious training in places of worship, in schools, and in the home (Hadad, 2009).

Regardless of the religion individuals align themselves with, death plays a role in everyone's education about living. For example, the curriculum or biblical content used as the primary text of religious instruction by Jews and Christians contain accounts of death and discussions or lessons of death (Leming & Dickinson, 2007). Although many Canadians report not following a formal religion, (Hadad, 2009) there are few individuals who would admit to not having some sort of spiritual concern with transcendent meanings shared in a variety of religions as they pertain to dying and death (Hadad, 2009). As they strive to develop an understanding of death and after death possibilities, these “non-affiliated” individuals will often borrow from religious traditions and spiritual practices (Leming & Dickinson, 2007).

Many people believe in some form of an afterlife; furthermore, a belief in life after death has been increasing in North America since the 1980s (Kastenbaum, 2007). According to Kastenbaum (2007), even those individuals identifying themselves as not having a religious preference are now more likely to believe in an afterlife (63%), compared to 44% in the 1970s who believed in an afterlife. Most people characterize the afterlife as comforting, envisioning it with positive terms and reporting that they believe they will be reunited with friends and family there (Kastenbaum, 2007). As a death educator, religion and spirituality may act as guides and provide rituals or a belief system that supports people as they strive to make meaning and understandings of dying and death.

Death in Literature, Music, and Visual Art

Literature, music, and visual art have always been powerful mediums for expressing and exploring thoughts and feelings pertaining to dying and death (Dennis, 2009). In literature, the meaning of death is examined as it relates to both the individual and society as a whole. For example, novels about war depict how individuals and societies search for meaning in extreme experiences of trauma and loss. Emily Dickinson's poetry is a form of death

education in that her writing speaks to the impossibility of affirming life without the examination of death (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009).

Themes of loss and death have been prominent in musical styles throughout the ages. Music can bring hope and comfort after a death through its sound and lyrics and the emotions created from its creation and expression. Music is a powerful response to death as demonstrated by music produced as a reaction to deaths from war or famine or large-scale tragedy such as 9/11 or individual deaths such as Princess Diana. It can also challenge us to consider our own mortality. As a specific tool for death education, it has been suggested that the death imagery found in rock music helped to rupture a Western taboo against the public mentioning of death (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009).

One of the main functions of visual art is to “engage our awareness and bring us closer to what language cannot reach” (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009, p. 135). In the visual arts, themes of death and loss are evident through the use of symbols, signs and images (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009). Cultural beliefs and attitudes determine the expression of such themes. It is common for art to be used therapeutically to express the powerful impact of loss (Hadad, 2009). Art offers an opportunity to memorialize the dead and may provide comfort to individuals who are bereaved as demonstrated by the AIDS Memorial Quilt. As a form of death education, art provides a window to enhance understanding of the customs and beliefs of dying and death during different times and places (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009). Together, art and music cross societal and cultural boundaries serving as an important form of death education.

Concluding Thoughts

Corr (2006) noted, “all the mediating and expressive functions of a societal death system involve education” (p. 47) and argued “no one can expect a democratic system to function effectively when its educational underpinnings on matters such as these are inadequate” (p. 54). For example, caring for individuals who are dying requires recognition of the needs of vulnerable persons and drawing attention to how and why support should be provided. Working from a constructivist theoretical perspective, educators in K–12 schools can begin teaching about death as a normative life experience through curriculum that integrates dying and death into social and physical sciences, literature, and the arts in ways that build from students’ prior knowledge and understanding and that are culturally-sensitive and age appropriate. This education can be continued through intergenerational learning and into healthcare education in higher education. Learning about death promotes quality of living as we learn throughout our lives (Hadad, 2009).

When people are educated appropriately on matters of death and dying, there can be more opportunities for stakeholders to initiate and implement sound public policy (Dennis, 2009; Hadad, 2009) on important issues such as assisted dying and allocation of resources at the end of life. As societies adjust to changing demographics of age and cultural diversity, its informed citizens can be tasked with and given greater responsibility to contribute to policy development on issues such as the definition of death, physician-assisted dying, euthanasia, organ and tissue donation, and capital punishment through their votes and action within the political process. From a constructivist perspective it is essential that death education occur at each level of society and respect and incorporate prior understandings and knowledge built from an informed, respectful, and shared understanding of these critical policy issues; the grassroots efforts of educators in our schools and communities are important foundations in the process of understanding dying and death.

Death systems are not neutral; they reflect attitudes and perspectives through which education is delivered. According to Dennis (2009), death education is now perceived as having replaced sex as the last “taboo”—despite it being every bit as essential to society’s and individual’s developmental processes of sex. Each society speaks through its death system, identifying how its members cope with death currently and predicting how they will strive to cope with death in the future. These messages are part of the milieu in which humanity lives and thrives and are “powerful and omnipresent” (Corr, 2006, p. 48). As long as death continues to be an unknown or shrouded in mystery and taboo, there will always be some fear attached to it. The goal of constructivist death education is not to remove this fear, as some variation of it will always be present, but rather to explore ways in which individuals can incorporate this fear as a respect for the dying process into their living effectively and respectfully (Miller & Rotatori, 1986).

Not everyone has the opportunity to be educated about death by those who are actively engaged in the process of dying. Death education is needed so that when it is time to die, individuals and those to whom they are connected have already begun to grapple with their understanding and integration of the meaning of dying in living (Wass, 2004). In all of its diverse forms—formal, informal, academic, public, and cultural—as expressed, replicated, and created via the media, religion, art and language, death education serves to provide society’s members with the materials to suggest insights, guide personal reflection, and make meaning, ultimately contributing tools to cope more effectively with and develop greater understanding about an individual’s own dying and death and of those they love (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2009). When death education is viewed and addressed using a constructivist pedagogy, individuals, consumers, caregivers, and citizens of society are supported in making informed decisions about the implications of death throughout their lives (Hadad, 2009; Wass, 2004). We need death education across our lifespan as we are all dying to know.

Epilogue

I remember, quite vividly, one day that was particularly awful for Jane. She was struggling both physically and existentially with pain, and screamed out her pain and anger at us and at her dying. At one point she yelled, “Learn from this!” I did not ask her what she meant. But I can now say, Jane, I am learning. And I am striving to take my learning to another level and provide opportunities for others to learn about dying and death. I am learning, for Jane, for others and for myself.

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