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# *The Central Role of Schools in Promoting Death Education Interventions*

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**Abstract:** Avoidance of discussion about death is common in contemporary Western societies. Plenty of literature substantiates that (at the beginning of the sentence), the actual tendency toward death denial can produce many negative effects such as the suppression of death-related thoughts and emotions. Death Education aims to strengthen the psychological anchors that allow us to recognize the profiles of anguish, prevent the decompensating factors of pathological mourning and process the experiences of loss at all ages. The article aims to support the usefulness and use of Death Education interventions in schools and their central role in promoting these interventions.

**Keywords:** Death education; suicide prevention; school; emotions; adolescence; death anxiety.

## Introduction

Life and death coexist inseparably (Wong 2008), living predicts obviously dying, but the two aspects elicit very different responses. Most people are reluctant to discuss dying, as it emotionally, cognitively, and experientially yields anxiety (Cheng 2017; Lehto & Stein 2009; Kennedy et al. 2017; Stylianou & Zembylas 2018). Adults tend to believe that avoiding honest discussions about death can protect children from the pain and fear of death (Mahon et al. 1999), therefore parents, caregivers and teachers tend to avoid the topic of death, facing it only after a tragic event has happened (Mahon et al. 1999; Papadatou et al. 2002; Friesen et al. 2020).

The greater the fear of one's own death or that of loved ones, the lower the psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Iverach et al. 2014; Shukla & Rishi 2014). It is quite common to feel lost in front of the mystery of death which happens for various reasons. The first reason is the mystery itself, unfathomable, inexplicable, incomprehensible that opens glimmers of possibility or chasms of fear and dismay.

The placement between one pole and the other certainly depends on numerous factors, such as previous experiences, the belonging culture, religious faith, personal involvement in the history of those who are dying, the possibility of drawing on personal spirituality, and many others.

The loss caused by death, which characterizes Western societies in particular, seems to be the consequence of a tendency, which lasted several generations, not to address the issue of death and even to hide death itself by outsourcing it, or relegating it to health facilities or making it spectacular. to make it a media phenomenon only. In fact, it is not uncommon to come across television programs that use crime news as a means to increase ratings, with sensitive content aired in time slots accessible even to minors, programs that plumb news events by descending into gruesome and painful details. The same is happening on social media, where sensitive content is presented the way gossip content is presented: large print, huge photos, catchy music and tones, and a trivialization that does not belong in the processing of dramatic events. Trivialising grief, exasperating and amplifying certain tones to produce attention-getting events makes death a media, artificial and ultimately detached experience. Video games and television broadcasts introduce children and young people to violence and horror, offering no chance to critically understand the substance of the message being internalized (Testoni 2018). All this leads to widespread incompetence with respect to death and dying, especially in the family environment (Testoni 2018). The current tendency toward death denial produces many negative effects, such as the possible avoidance of death-related thoughts and emotions and thus possible "alexithymia," or the tendency toward the impoverishment of emotional experience and the language that expresses feelings (Testoni et al. 2019); also, alexithymia is accompanied by hopelessness and a decline in resilience and well-being (Testoni et al. 2020).

As Bormolini (2020, 42) reminds us, "[t]he denial of death and a sort of interdiction to talk about it have created an unprecedented situation in Western civilization, giving rise to an illusory claim to immortality" and to a neurotic society that blurred the border between reality and fiction and compromises an appropriate emotional reaction and the ability to relate with the prospect of one's own death and even with one's own aging (Fagnani & Tangocci 2021).

What therefore appears most necessary is to recover the ability to deal with the theme of death in a mature way with children and adolescents, so that the youngest can have the opportunity to learn how to give the right value to all the manifestations of life itself, including death, learn about the emotions associated with the theme of death and actively participate in the most significant moments of the family biography. At the same time, it is necessary for adults to recover the ability to accept death, give meaning to life and accompany loved ones to the end of life.

## I. Death Education: Opportunities for the Youngest

The bewilderment that death arouses, and the defence attempts made have

favoured the birth of extravagant psychological theories according to which children are unable to understand what death means; other fanciful theories argue that it is better to protect children and adolescents from death to avoid trauma (Testoni 2015). In reality, children already know the meaning of dying around the age of 5 and understand the sense of irreversibility, but what they lack is the understanding of the relationship between existing and dying (Testoni 2015). This understanding is possible only through a dialogic construction with several voices and it is essential that the child can place themselves in a *zone of proximal development*, as Lev S. Vygotskij would have defined it, that is, in that area where current and potential capacities are present, provided with the help of a more competent people. In other words, these are occasions in which the children can go beyond their current abilities thanks to the external support represented by a person who has already reached a higher level of understanding. This naturally happens in the family, school and social contexts where adults offer their little ones the necessary support to place themselves beyond their current skills or knowledge and then gradually remove this support as autonomy is gained. But if the adult is no more competent than the child themselves, a perpetual impasse is created, being able to transmit only the inability to understand and elaborate, leaving gaps that can feed terror and anguish. On the other hand, a mature dialogue on the topic of the finitude of life can reduce the adolescent propensity to adopt risky behaviours (Testoni 2018).

Dowdney (2008) found that one in five children who experience a traumatic death of a loved one, friend or acquaintance during childhood will develop mental health issues as a result of being unprepared for the death. Branch & Brinson (2007) suggested that when children experience a death for which they are unprepared, it may increase separation anxiety and impair their ability to form healthy attachments. Therefore, death education can be a health-promoting activity for children, and schools may provide the optimum setting for this education" (Friesen et al. 2020, 332).

But what is the anguish into which children and adolescents could plunge? Unlike fear, anguish is an emotion that does not have a specific object of reference, to use the words of Galimberti (2021, 45–47) it is the emotion aroused by a "feeling of impending danger without being able to identify it" and the defence from anguish consists in the possibility of knowing this emotion that "makes us touch our helplessness, and in doing so helps us to understand that we are not omnipotent." Therefore, it is worth explaining that anguish is a valid prompter that whispers to us that life is uncertain, precarious, and full of pains as well as joys and whispers it to us so that we can be able to attribute value and meaning to every expression of life itself.

The value of an education in the knowledge and care of one's emotions is fundamental, because emotions pervade the first years of life and are strengthened and often conflict with each other over the years, reaching the peak of the conflict in adolescence. Also, Galimberti (2021, 8) points out that "the more societies are structured in the form of a rationality which, due to its needs, tends to contain them, the more emotions threaten to

explode in destructive forms, which could be avoided if they were granted an adequate expressive space." The emotional education we are talking about takes the form of an "embankment that follows the stormy course of the river of emotions, and not as a dam that contains what can only overflow" (Galimberti 2021), an embankment that sets a limit constitutive, an embankment that allows a precise shape while not forcing. The risk in which we are immersed in the present time of technology is that of suspending or repressing the emotions that hinder the efficiency and productivity that technology adopts as absolute values. This also applies to the emotions associated with death and dying.

> Despite what common sense believes, children, adolescents, adults and the elderly, whether healthy or ill, often reflect on death, based on both direct and indirect experiences. In fact, feelings relating to death precipitate into terror and thus into an unmanageable emotional experience if reality appears incomprehensible (...); the fundamental difference between anguish and fear is that the former is an oppressive, undifferentiated and paralysing feeling because it is without an object, while the latter is a stressful emotion of which it is clear what generates it. When one is faced with something fearsome and does not understand its boundaries, fear becomes anguish. An education in which death is censored can only produce this effect. Silence on these issues abandons subjects of developmental age to wholly inadequate media messages, to which they entrust the search for answers to their curiosity. Video games and television programmes thus introduce them to violence and horror, offering no possibility of critically understanding the substance of the message being internalised. To abandon a child to such content is to leave him alone in his attempt to give a concrete profile to what distresses him. If everything is surrendered to the imagination, then ghosts and the most bizarre representations begin to inhabit the mind. This is how horrifying imaginative thoughts take shape with distortions of omnipotence that certainly do not help one to grow serenely and with one's feet on the ground. Often, many inexplicable behaviours, such as walking on the rails, driving with headlights off, joining in collective follies that endanger the lives of adolescents, are a mere attempt on their part to give a concrete profile to death, challenging it: overcoming the fear of the train means giving it perimeters to eliminate the undifferentiated and paralysing anguish (Testoni 2018, 8).

Death Education pathways are aimed at preventing this by allowing the transformation of anguish into fear, enabling the appropriate management of this emotion. These paths of reflection are considered important for the mental health of children and adults by allowing them to consider death issues realistically and acquire a mature concept of it (Alexander & Adlerstein 1958). The discovery of the emotions associated with dying becomes an opportunity to reflect on interiority and spirituality that crosses all ideological boundaries. The concept of emotion is complex and embraces different levels of expression, from physiological activation to social rituals. Learning to recognise, express and understand emotions is an important task and it is often ignored. Dwelling on the emotional aspect is therefore fundamental to learn how to better manage one's emotions so that they support and guide one's behaviour and thinking. Daniel Goleman (1995) theorises the construct of emotional intelligence, arguing that emotional education operates through words and actions and models offered by adult reference figures.

Human suffering and psychopathology can originate from a transversal process

that is the control of one's own internal experiences, i.e., the attempts that the individual puts into action in order to push away, avoid or modify unpleasant or troublesome thoughts, emotions, sensations, memories. If this strategy is used rigidly, continuously and pervasively, it entails significant costs at the psychological level: the constant struggle with unpleasant and painful mental contents can, in the long term, lead to an increase in psychic suffering, hinder contact with what is happening in the here and now, and prevent effective action by the individual, i.e., prevent the achievement of desired goals, or hinder loyalty to values that are meaningful to the person (Harris 2011).

## II. Past and Present of Death Education

Wass (2004) indicates that the term "death education" refers to various educational activities organized by institutions to facilitate understanding of death and bereavement. These contents have been informally thought throughout human history but because of the above reasons we nowadays need more formal courses. Death Education courses were added to the American curricula during the 70s and the first theme of the 1970s was consumerism in the "funeral industry", then students' questions moved to "control," the desire to have a feeling of greater control over their own lives and emotions. Students learned that knowledge about the grief process could not prevent a future loss but lessening the fear of the unknown could help the pain of the loss from being greater. During the 1980s students wanted to know more about a child's understanding of death and next they looked at ways that they could help the child acquire a better understanding of death and the feelings that accompanied it. During the 1990s a re-examination of "death" education took place and to the issues of death, dying, loss and grief were added communication and problem solving (Stevenson 2004).

More than 60 years after the first death education course, there is still some bizarre psychological mythology that children are unable to understand what it means to die or are traumatized by death. Parents and educators sometimes still express concern that death education courses may trigger death anxiety (Fonseca & Testoni 2012) but these worries do not seem to carry over to the daily informal death education experienced through the media that offer sensationalistic and unrealistic representations spreading the idea that death is an extraordinary occurrence happening in a mythical space (Gilbert & Murray 2007; Noppe 2007a, 2007b).

Starting from 2020 every child, like every adolescent and every adult, has been confronted with the theme of death without any warning and with inadequate methods of coping. We have gone from an excess of protection to an unlimited exposure where death has assumed proportions such as upsetting the daily routines, avoiding it is no longer possible, its spectre has invaded every space: home, school, work, public gardens, supermarkets, shops, libraries, gyms, pizzerias… An overturned scenario appears to us, but one aspect has not changed: children and young people today, like yesterday, seem left

alone to deal with their anxieties (Fagnani & Tangocci 2021). Today, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students are likely surrounded by death and loss and their ever-present images as never before (Smilie 2022).

A theory that could help understand the significant negative psychological impact of COVID-19 on the population is the Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg et al. 1986). This theory states how the constant conflict between the survival instinct and the awareness of mortality causes intense cognitive dissonance and suffering to people, that will constantly try to reduce this to manage the resulting anxiety. The "dual process model" elaborated by TMT researchers suggests that distinct defensive processes are activated by conscious and unconscious fears of death. "Proximal defences" are activated when evidence of inevitability of death is brought to current attention (Mortality Salience), they suppress death-related thoughts by denying one's vulnerability. "Distal defences" (self-esteem and cultural worldviews) reduce the terror of death whenever death-related information is presented (Testoni et al. 2019). The pandemic state made it impossible to remove or hide the awareness of one's finitude, playing a very important role in generating anxiety that could result in critical behaviours and situations. Western societies were unprepared to face the enormous amount of news about death and dying (Testoni et al. 2021a).

As stated in *The Lancet* (quoted in Testoni et al. 2021a, 2): "A pandemic is a cause and powerful amplifier of suffering, through physical illness and death through stresses and anxieties, and through financial and social instability. Alleviation of that suffering, in all its forms, needs to be a key part of the response."

> Such an extreme negative impact the COVID-19 pandemic has and the mortality salience it elicits, imply that the contrast to the pandemic is also carried out with initiatives of consciousness-raising that make people aware of their psychological frailty in facing death. These further undesirable effects worsen the state of psychosocial distress caused by the virus. Recent studies show the usefulness of conducting death education courses with children, adolescents, and University students. If conducted properly, it is possible to manage in a positive way the effects of the path of reflection on death, on the fears it arouses, and on the effects. Therefore, it could help in critical periods of the pandemic to set up special paths of death education that support students in becoming aware of what happens and their experiences in this regard (Testoni et al. 2021a, 2).

In addition, as Prof. De Leo explains (2021), the web conveys potentially dangerous information with little possibility of filtering the knowledge that can be acquired and younger people have a "resilience limitation by the absence of life experiences and often by 'absence of parental figures engaged in work'," a situation to which is added the reciprocal failure in the dialogue between parents and children. "Death Education can be one of the elective strategies that respond to the need for maturity we are talking about, aimed at restoring the courage to want to be interpreters and actors aware of the limited time of life that we are entitled to" (Testoni 2018, 9). Death Education projects are presented as structured and complex training courses that facilitate awareness of one's emotions and

limitations, listening, sharing, empathy, as well as planning, enhancement, and respect for one's own life and the lives of others. Death education programs in schools would pre-empt questions, doubts, and fears and support parents with difficult conversations, providing age-appropriate, honest and accurate information to children, resulting in healthier coping with death, dying, and other losses (Friesen et al. 2020; Milton 2004).

## III. The Central Role of the School in Promoting Death Education

The school is a privileged center for the development of these paths because it allows the connection between children, adolescents and adults in the guise of parents and teachers, creating networks of relationships between different actors all engaged in the reconstruction of one psychological space with great unifying power. Furthermore, school is often a place of great frustration and emotional difficulty for students, which makes it an ideal place to build such pathways.

Working on emotions creates the opportunity to reflect on interiority and a spirituality that goes beyond personal ideological boundaries (Testoni 2018) allowing listening, reciprocity, relationship, and integration. "School is certainly the first reality within which such a path can be started" (Testoni 2015), and therefore a privileged place for primary prevention courses (of which death education courses are part), promoting a serene and open discussion that retrieves an appropriate basic language, which accompanies each individual throughout their life; the centrality of the school lies in its characteristics as a place of meeting, exchange, solicitation, change.

The prevention of suicide and adolescent self-harm also belongs to primary prevention. Adolescent suicide is often motivated by the idea that death is desirable as it is liberating from the strains and difficulties of life; in addition, the great physical and psychic transformations induce a profound uncertainty regarding the perception of oneself and experiences of anxiety and loss that make death appear to be resolving. Therefore, if it is obvious that the further one moves away from the perception of danger and the less one feels the need to avoid it, it is clear that hiding the theme of death is particularly contraindicated in adolescence. Adolescents may be vulnerable to a lack of competent reflection aimed at managing Mortality Salience (Testoni et al. 2016). Erik Erikson (1968) said that the main psychosocial task of adolescence is the loss of the infantile omnipotence that involves the birth of the awareness of the limits of the life span. For the adolescent who is in between childhood dependence and adult autonomy, the emotions evocated by Mortality Salience may be extremely intense (Bouton 2003; Noppe et al. 2006). Moreover, during adolescence experiences of sudden and tragic deaths of peers from accidents, suicide, and homicide increase (Cupit & Kuchta 2017; Cupit & Meyer 2014). In a culture that tends to deny death, children and adolescents are often forced to form a culturally appropriate concept of death on their own (Corr 1995; Speece 1995). The media portrays death with fantastic sensationalism and horror (Testoni et al. 2018), and adolescents

are often isolated in dealing with Mortality Salience, seeking and finding information and support primarily through social media (Cupit & Kuchta 2017; Testoni et al. 2016). Pubescent youth and adolescents often search for information about death on the web and are therefore subject to the influence of the media offering unrealistic messages that can be dangerous, especially when children think that suicide can be a solution to their problems and when they donot have a relational space in which to discuss feelings and thoughts (Testoni et al. 2020). Death education courses may reduce the anxiety response that stems from personal unconscious defences against the fear of death (Cheng 2017; Park & Pyszczynski 2017).

Furthermore, social isolation and loneliness are increasingly frequent experiences in contemporary Western societies and seem to correlate with suicide in adolescents and young adults, it is therefore necessary to promote inclusion and cohesion within communities, as a protective factor against suicidal behaviours and suicide. It is not just a lived experience that leads to promoting sociability as a factor of well-being, "the literature finds a positive correlation between dense and strong horizontal networks, meaning social ties with family, relatives, friends and colleagues, and mental health outcomes" (Putnam cited in Testoni et al. 2021, 3); and it is not just a personal perception the urgency of significant contributions that support the well-being of the younger generations, in fact The World Health Organization has declared suicide a healthy priority , is the second leading cause of death among those aged between 15 and 29 worldwide, for both sexes (WHO, cited after Testoni et al. 2021, 1). The literature shows that young people (those born after 1995) have grown up immersed in Internet usage, spending 5/6 hours per day surfing the net, using social media, or texting (Twenge 2017) and we are all eyewitnesses to the fact that this use has been increasing during the Covid-19 era for all age groups. There seems to be a link between the use of information and communication technologies and social isolation and loneliness: social isolation of the younger generation seems to be supported by the use of new technologies, then leading to the feeling of greater loneliness. Hunt and colleagues (Hunt et al. 2018) show how reducing social media use among college students to 30 minutes per day leads to a reduction in loneliness perceived and levels of depression; however, many studies point out that the relationship is inverse, i.e., that prior loneliness leads to excessive social media use (Kara et al. 2021).

Apart from the use of new technologies, adolescents spend most of their time in school, which is why it would be crucial to include suicide prevention education in school curricula (King 2001). These interventions can raise awareness among adolescents with respect to risk factors and warning signs regarding suicide in young people, while also fostering a positive attitude toward requests for help from at-risk peers (King 2001). Such interventions could increase students' ability to identify at-risk peers and make them more willing to seek help them. The reduction of stigma toward psychological difficulties promoted through such interventions could increase the propensity of adolescents to seek help at critical moments (Vogel et al. 2006; Teynders et al. 2015). Death education

takes the form of a safe space for reflection on the issues of living, dying, palliative care, grief, suicide and human limits; it allows for the recognition, experience and sharing of the emotions that result from thinking about these issues by decreasing the anxiety that might arise (Testoni et al. 2020; Solomon et al. 2017; Testoni et al. 2021). According to Linehan (2020) communication is the first step to breakdown prejudice, suicide can be considered a problem that affects everyone and that can be discussed in order to create a shared awareness of the problem (Testoni et al. 2021).

If we turn to social risk factors, the researchers suggest that chronic loneliness could elicit suicidal thoughts and behaviours, probably due to its association with depressive symptoms (Cacioppo & Cacioppo 2018). Furthermore, researchers point to a correlation between loneliness and depression, loneliness and suicidal thoughts and behaviours, and lack of social connection and suicide (Solmi et al. 2020; Westefeld & Furr 1987). Based on the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005), we can say that loneliness, social isolation and opposed belonging can favour suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Van Orden et al. 2010) and correlate with suicidal thoughts and behaviours in university students (Testoni et al. 2021). We can think with Testoni et al. (2021) that this phenomenon happens as a result of the rampant individualism in Western societies, which are incapable of creating social aggregation within communities. Literature tells us of positive correlations between social ties with family, relatives, friends and colleagues, and good mental health status (Ferlander 2007); it also highlights the role of community social support as a potential protective factor against suicide (Zadravec et al. 2017; Christensen et al. 2014). The need to strengthen community ties both in social and virtual reality is also well highlighted by the works of Testoni et al. (2020, 2021).

## IV. Conclusions

The school, like the family, has the duty to actively intervene in the earliest possible construction of the personal safety of children and young people, overturning the current image attributed to it as a social marker of failure and therefore co-responsible for many suicidal choices (Daniel et al. 2006; You & Leung 2012) and a cofactor of risk in the early construction of biographies marked by insecurity (Galimberti 2007). In adolescence, family difficulties added to school failure and inadequate representations of death can put lives at risk. Death Education can be employed as a type of education about suicide prevention for young people in formal schooling (Testoni et al. 2020). Several sources recognize that the school curriculum can play a key role in integrating death education (Mahon et al. 1999; Marguerita & Barry 2000; Milton 2004; Engarhos et al. 2013; Kennedy et al. 2017; Stylianou & Zembylas 2018; Friesen et al. 2020). As Friesen et al. state "child educators are in an ideal position to shift existing death-denying paradigms to new perspectives that accept and honour the realities of death, dying, and grief" (Friesen et al. 2020, 335).

The indispensable prerequisites for the realization of Death Education projects are the existence of an educational reality centered on the person and attentive to the existential dimension of the students and the presence of teachers who are sensitive and aware of their own experiences and emotions (Testoni 2015). In those schools where the selection criteria humiliate the underperforming, it is therefore particularly contraindicated to undertake these paths, because death anxiety is particularly intense in students who experience academic failure (Testoni 2015). The school that can welcome and encourage Death Education interventions is a school that sees the student and their empowerment at the center of its work, a school that respects the freedom of each individual and that knows how to adapt the contents to the learning abilities of individuals, ultimately a welcoming school (Testoni 2015), the one that we all hope to see flourish in the near future.

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