

Death Education in Taiwan



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How many people killed themselves yesterday? The affective investigations in Taiwan's Suicide Prevention Website issued a terrifying discovery: the suicide rate since 1993 has been like a chronically increasing flood. For example, the 2417 suicide cases in 2000- equaling to 7 desperate suicides per day- demanded Taiwan to confront the increasing suicide rate by 8.33% per year. The high suicide attempts resulted from the lack of precious relationships, survival means and lives' meaning. In the 1960s, intoxicated in the economic and industrial thrives, Taiwan's people "avoided death and distorted the essential meaning of life" (Despelder and Strickland) . However, in recent decades, Taiwan's people- shaken by natural disasters such as the devastating 921 earthquake and the persistent high jobless rate for the last 15 years- lived among the permeating death anxiety and despair. This is when and why Taiwan's Death Education comes in. Taiwan's Death Education sprang from America; with the term "Thanatology" originally introduced by Metchnikoff in *The nature of man*, proclaiming that doing researches regarding death and elders helps reduce pain and improve the quality of life. Then in 1993, instead of copying America's Thanatology, professor Fu Woe Suin adopted and combined it with Chinese humanities to form the eastern-thinking-based Chinese Life and Death study. This marked the initiate of the rapidly-blooming administration of Death Education among schools, articles and relative institutions. "Death Education" mainly considers death, dying, bereavement and the emotional aspects of death. It is a meta-subject educational integration which provides continuous discussion of the mysterious relationship between life and death. Moreover, researches have proved

Death Education to be highly and widely effective: it aroused both students' and teachers' curiosity toward learning, teaching, dying and living (Huang 20). Although doubts for Death Education's effectiveness in lowering death anxiety exists among some scholars, there have been no solid prove.

Therefore, I agree with Morgan, who announced

Death Education is necessary for everyone because it concerns not only about death but also about our emotions with our nature. Profound functions reside in Death Education: to assist us to meditate our lives' meaning through knowing death, to mature and refine our lives' values and quality, and to pass on the correct life attitude to our children.

Thus in this paper I will argue that Death Education should be practiced thoroughly in Taiwan's schools due to the following reasons- the necessities, profitabilities, and expendabilities of Death Education- amply elaborated in the ensuing sections.

1. The necessity of Death Education

Numerous scholars have verified a statement: because death anxiety exists among school-aged children, Death Education is necessary. According to G. Stanley Hall, young girls more than 14 can't think of death "without shedding tears" and boys of the same age bracket describe death as "undeniably frightening;" in addition, he stated "Among the 6500 kinds of anxieties mostly related, death anxiety is the fourth one" (Chan 44). Moreover, death anxiety has aggravated due to both the neglect of Taiwan's Family Education and the concept distortion of Taiwan's mass media.

Firstly, Taiwan's families' failures in Death Education implementation necessitate the crucial

Death Education practice. One of the six goals listed in the 2001 official demonstration of “The Intermediate Plan for Impelling Life and Death Education” was the triad impetus of Life and Death Education through the endeavors of Taiwan’s families, schools and society (Chen 13). However, families in Taiwan, counting for the essential 1/3 part, had failed due to the following three reasons.

First of all, Chinese people misinterpreted Confucianism. For so long Chinese people have rashly and ignorantly construed one of Confucius’ famous lines “How can we know death if we don’t know life?” as a forbiddance to discuss death, whereas it actually points out that to know what death is is to understand life first (Lin 4-13). What aggravated the situation was the intentional avoidance of discussion. In 1994, Professor Chan Shu-Mei’s experiment indicated only 24.9% of the surveyed students chose “my family discusses death openly at home;” on the contrary, the remaining 73.3% fell on choices like “never,” or “discuss death uncomfortably,” or “not if necessary” (Chan 26). It is as if in Taiwan, “the new obscene word,” quoting from Earl A. Grollman, is “death” (Chan, preface).

Secondly, parent’s lack of knowledge concerning children’s mental development also resulted in the failure. Psychologist Nagy termed the four internationally integrated sub-concepts of death: irreversibility, nonfunctionality, universality, and causality as the four “crisis in a child’s evolution;” his theories regarding children’s death-concept-developing-phase agrees to Piaget’s and Erikson’s. For example, children from 5 to 9 want the universality of death; as a result, encountering other’s death, they tend to personify death as “Mr. Death” and deny their own mortality (Chan 26). Besides, guardians constantly ignored children’s ability to observe and adopt adults’ “proper” behaviors toward death; for

example, little John Kennedy imitated other officers to salute his father's coffin covered with the national flag (DeSpelder 44). Likewise, a thirty-year-old lady, who could still reflected vividly the day her mother ran over a cat and came home crying her heart out in the bathroom, started treating every life with respect. "I've been discreet not to kill anything, even bugs, ever since that day," she concluded (DeSpelder 53). This instance proved that adults' value of life and death can be observed and inherited by children; on the other hand, excluding adolescents from grieving experiences or leaving their questions unanswered induce their death anxiety, confusion, and pain (DeSpelder & Strickland). Therefore, with the cultivation of Taiwan's Death Education, we can not only atone for guardians' miscarriage of death education within the family but also certify a promising future for Taiwan, with children of positive attitude toward life and death.

The second reason necessitating Taiwan's schools' Death Education is Taiwan's mass media's distortion and exaggeration of the concept of death. Taiwan's widely-spurned media lacked work ethic and veracity, which annihilated the promotion of Death Education. Firstly, they distorted children's concept of death. According to Piaget's cognitive development, children of age seven to twelve commence the construction of their mellower concept of death (Lin 3-15); in other words, all the media input before seven would be absorbed as undeniable truth. Nowadays adolescences indulge themselves in television shows and online games full of massive killing and violence that deliver incorrect messages regarding death; consequently, they gradually become numb, lost or even violent. For instance, the highly controversial comic book *Death Notebook* illustrated with detail of how "Death"

accidentally dropped the “death notebook” in the human world and how the protagonist abused it to kill anyone he listed on that notebook (Ho). What’s more, the media have profound influence on children. Inquired by Taiwan’s former Minister of Education Chang Chi Lang, an eight-year-old boy stated that death is “just like in the movie, you died and wake up the next morning” (Chang). Similarly, in 1994, Chan Shu-mei was stricken by a student’s confession: “I often attempt to commit suicide because of bad test scores...it’s just like in the movie, after death you go to Heaven. That’s amazing!” (120) Apparently, the successful “make-believe” of media has thoroughly brain-washed our children with unmoral distortion of the concept of death. Furthermore, their curish overblow of some celebrities’ suicides triggered suicide tide (“Meditate the suicide tide”). The over-sensational report of Ni Min-Ren’s suicide, a famous Chinese actor, resulted in another suicide tide: men were found copying his suicide, and the suicide rate increased appallingly by 17% (par. 3). Instead of guiding the audiences toward compassion and devotion to life, “the media always obsessively focus on the celebrities’ tragic events,” Craig Bleiler protested in his journal *When a Friend Dies* (par. 2). Therefore, it is a must to stop the deterioration of Taiwan’s media by adopting WHO’s rules for reporting suicide cases, certified as effective to decrease the suicide rate by foreign researches (Roach).

To sum up, the aforementioned reasons that necessitated Death Education in Taiwan’s schools are the family and social failure on Life and Death Education. Nevertheless, the double failures also indicated room for improvement and rekindled my belief that Death Education should be implemented thoroughly in Taiwan’s schools. As the Chinese saying goes; “Failure is the impetus and the mother of

success,” in the next section I will introduce some successful implementations and researches concerning Death Education as my support of the profitability of Taiwan’s Death Education.

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