

I say yes, but doubt that it can be done value-free. The NYT 6Mar78 article [below] NEA statement that this in "an area where no final answers exist" is false: many final answers, mutually irreconcilable, exist. The epistemology from which the NEA statement derives is scientific, a 19th-c. philosophy continuing to plague USA public education.And what is the metaphysical status of "normal" in the statement "'Grief is a normal process'"?.....The issue is a good one for raising the question *Whence the PS?*

Schools Take Up Study of Death

By GENE I. MAEROFF

Nine high school students on an field trip gathered one day recently in the burned-out hulk of a church in Washington, D.C., to describe the kinds of funerals their parents had told them they wanted.

One girl's mother had been particularly eager to help her daughter with the class assignment, selecting a poem to be recited at her funeral and telling her that she wanted to wear a pink gown and pearl earrings in her coffin.

Such scenes are being played out in classes across the country every day as youngsters of all ages study death, a subject that only now is beginning to be discussed openly in schools.

"The study of death is probably the last of the old taboos to fall in the schools," said a publication of the National Education Association. "It is certainly not surprising that the subject should be one of the more recent arrivals in the cur-

riculum, given Americans' distaste for consideration of it."

Visiting cemeteries and funeral homes, reading novels and essays about death and even taking turns lying in coffins, students are exploring death in ways that allow them to cross the disciplinary boundaries of literature, sociology, religion, history and art.

In Overland Park, Kan., they take rubbings from tombstones and in Manchester, L.I., they meet with elderly people who are measuring their lives in weeks and months.

In Manchester, Conn., even economics has entered the picture. A teacher whose students were reading Jessica Mitford's "The American Way of Death" was approached by local funeral directors who asked that a rebuttal be provided to Miss Mitford's criticisms of their business.

Despite the proliferation of courses
Continued on Page A8, Column 4

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Continued From Page A1

on death, however, many school districts remain reluctant to incorporate into their curriculums a topic that they consider even more controversial than sex education.

"It is not a fit subject for the curriculum," said Mary Lauderdale, executive director of instruction for the public schools in Jefferson Parish, La., outside New Orleans.

Moreover, the strong possibility that the study of death might lead students into such prickly questions as religion, euthanasia and abortion has dissuaded some school systems from the subject.

A motivation for those schools that do weave the study of death into their curriculums is the wish to help prepare students to deal with a reality that sooner or later will impinge on all their lives.

David Cohen, a senior at Yorktown High School in Westchester County, was uneasy about accompanying his class on a field trip to a funeral home. But he now agrees with his teacher, Janet Wedge, that exposure of that kind makes it easier to talk about death.

"How strange it is that people make fun of older people when they will be that way themselves some day," said Mr. Cohen, who wrote a paper on care of the elderly. "Maybe people are trying to avoid the reality that they are going to die one day too."

A Classmate's Death

Robert M. Hamm, a junior high social studies teacher in Waco, Tex., started his elective course on death after a 14-year-old student was killed in an accident, the kind of event that seems also to have been significant in the creation of courses elsewhere.

"We are trying to impress upon students that grief is a normal process," said Jo Ann Schumann, a nurse in Overland, Kan., who works with teachers at Prairie School in an elementary level program dealing with life cycles.

This is the sort of approach that is guiding Public School 115 in Washington

Heights in developing a model program on death for New York City elementary schools. The effort is being undertaken in conjunction with the Foundation of Thanatology, an affiliate of Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center.

In the past, teachers often dealt with death when a child became upset over the loss of a pet. Some schools that have not formalized the study of death still use a pet's death as a vehicle for a spontaneous discussion of the topic, perhaps more candidly than in the past.

When Samson, the resident guinea pig in a San Francisco classroom, died, Roni Howard had her fifth graders place the animal in a coffin fashioned from a cardboard box and write epitaphs to him. The children dug a grave in the schoolyard and buried Samson in an eucalyptus service in which they sang the folk song "Shenandoah," simply because it was the only tune to which they all knew the words.

Crawling Into a Coffin

Not many of the classes go so far in trying to gain empathy as the one in Washington, where students crawl into a pine coffin, but most teachers agree that death should be taught without many value judgments.

The National Education Association said that if a teacher "is at ease in an area where no final answers exist, where he or she is not an authority but rather a fellow learner, where both the teacher and students are emotionally involved, where their emotions actually constitute part of the subject matter and where disciplinary lines are blurred, then such a teacher may find death and dying education an exciting and rewarding experience."

Sometimes, though, teachers feel compelled to offer at least one bit of advice to students. For instance, Brenda Fronberger, whose students at West Charlotte High School in North Carolina met a mortician, repeated a warning before the meeting that many of her colleagues around the country say they also pronounce: "Don't call them undertakers. It's like calling the police 'fuzz.' Call them funeral directors."