

Exploring the Value, Practical Challenges, and Implementation Pathways of Life Education for Young Children

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Abstract: ***Objective:** To explore scientifically grounded approaches for implementing death education for young children and to analyze the practical challenges involved. **Methods:** Utilizing literature analysis and theoretical construction, this study investigates existing issues in early childhood life education and proposes practical pathways for its scientific implementation. **Conclusions:** 1) The core obstacle to death education lies in the disconnect between traditional views of life and the modern educational system, which gives rise to multiple difficulties including cognitive biases, conceptual confusion, and a scarcity of resources. 2) The scientific implementation of death education holds significant value for fostering sound personality development in young children and enhancing the functions of modern education. Its ultimate purpose is to guide children toward an understanding of life's finitude, thereby helping them learn to cherish and revere life.*

Keywords: Young Children; Life Education; Challenges; Pathways.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the growth of young children, encounters with the death of others—such as pets, plants, or family members—inevitably enter their lived environment, compelling them to begin confronting and understanding death as an essential aspect of life. However, when children become curious about death and raise questions, parents often resort to protective avoidance strategies due to their own limited understanding of death and unresolved grief. This avoidance stems both from concerns about children's psychological resilience and from adults' own death anxiety and lack of communication skills, frequently manifesting as denial, euphemistic idealization, or even deceptive responses. Concurrently, death education within school settings faces challenges of methodological monotony and insufficient resources. The prolonged absence of death education not only fails to contribute to the cultivation of individual mental health and a well-rounded personality, but also tends to foster a taken-for-granted attitude toward the continuation of life, thereby diminishing the awareness of life's finitude. This cognitive bias may give rise to a unidimensional perspective on life development, which hinders the full realization of individual vitality and may even impair the sustainability of one's life force. Consequently, exploring practical approaches to death education for young children that align with China's national context, and addressing the social issues arising from its neglect, has become an urgent and significant task in the field of early childhood education.

2. THE VALUE IMPLICATIONS OF DEATH EDUCATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Scholars both domestically and internationally have offered varying definitions regarding the essence of death education. The foreign scholar Leviton posits that death education is the process of imparting knowledge about death to individuals, aiming to help them confront death directly. Fruehling suggests that death education should be approached from multiple dimensions, including psychology, economics, and law, to enhance people's understanding of death, while also recognizing it as a form of preventive instruction [1]. In the "Dictionary of Medical Ethics," domestic scholars define death education as a specialized form of guidance that teaches people to correctly understand and approach issues of life and death, both their own and others' [1]. Despite these different formulations, scholars generally agree on the core components of death education, which encompass understanding the nature of death, confronting the emotions triggered by death, and cultivating a positive attitude toward life.

Early childhood death education refers to an instructional process that employs developmentally appropriate methods to help young children accurately comprehend the nature of death. It aims to effectively address negative

emotions such as fear and anxiety arising from encounters with death, prevent potential psychological and behavioral issues, foster a positive outlook on life, and ultimately lead to a profound understanding and appreciation of the meaning and value of life. Its significance is primarily manifested in the following three aspects:

First, death education helps young children understand the nature of death. Death education must first enable children to comprehend what death is. The development of children's conceptual understanding of death does not stem from a sudden realization at a specific moment but is gradually constructed through continuous experiences and cognitive deepening in daily life. Therefore, death education can begin with the phenomena of death that frequently occur during children's growth. Secondly, it is essential to inform children about the truth of death. Research indicates that children's knowledge of death and dying originates from direct experiences with death, communication with parents, and depictions in media and art. Without proper guidance during this process, children may easily form misconceptions such as "death is like sleep," "death is a temporary separation," or "the dead can come back to life." Finally, it is essential to help young children understand that "death signifies separation, yet remembrance endures in the heart" [2]. In the animated series **Big Ear Tutu**, Junjun tells Tutu, "Death is not an end; just as Hans Christian Andersen lives on through his enduring work, **Fairy Tales**, and continues to accompany us forever."

Second, death education helps young children confront the emotions triggered by death. Death is often accompanied by negative emotions such as sorrow, fear, and anxiety. Prolonged suppression or avoidance of these feelings may increase psychological burdens and even elevate the risk of depression. When discussing death with young children, emotional comfort should take precedence over theoretical explanations. Educators must first understand the specific sources of a child's fear and emphasize the role of nonverbal communication. Physical contact, such as hugging or holding hands, can effectively convey understanding and acceptance, thereby enhancing the child's psychological sense of security and alleviating their anxiety about death.

Third, the fundamental value of death education lies in guiding young children to develop a positive attitude toward life. The primary purpose of death education is not to emphasize death itself, but rather to use the understanding of death to help children cherish life, respect life, and establish a positive outlook on living. As Haruki Murakami stated, "Death is not the opposite of life, but a part of it." Through death education, young children can comprehend the finitude and preciousness of life, thereby forming behavioral patterns that emphasize self-protection and caring for others. The picture book *"Cry Heartily But Never Break"* also points out that death education helps people understand the value of life. Only by recognizing the meaning of death can one truly cherish the present, revere life, and achieve a more fulfilling experience of existence.

3. EXISTING ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEATH EDUCATION

3.1 Cognitive Biases and Cultural Taboos: Intrinsic Resistance to Death Education in Early Childhood

Young children's understanding of death is constrained by their level of cognitive development, displaying distinct age-related characteristics. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children aged 3 to 6 are in the preoperational stage, a period marked by pronounced features of "animism" (the belief that all things possess a spirit), "magical thinking" (the conviction that thoughts can alter reality), and "artificialism" (the view that all phenomena are human-made). At this stage, children often perceive death as a reversible and temporary state, akin to sleep or a journey, from which one might awaken or return at any time. This cognitive characteristic makes it difficult for young children to grasp the finality of death, thereby diminishing the practical effectiveness of death education. Adding to this complexity, the pervasive "resurrection" plots in contemporary children's animation and video games further reinforce such cognitive distortions.

The deeply ingrained cultural taboo surrounding death in traditional Chinese society poses a profound obstacle to contemporary death education for young children. The Confucian adage, "If you do not yet understand life, how can you understand death?" has historically marginalized discussions of death, rendering it a social taboo. Although Daoist philosophy, exemplified by narratives such as Zhuangzi "beating a basin and singing," presents a more detached perspective on death, this worldview has not become the dominant cultural paradigm [3]. This cultural aversion manifests in daily life through specific linguistic and behavioral norms. Within the family setting, direct terms such as "death" are considered inauspicious and are replaced by euphemisms like "passed away" or "fallen asleep." This linguistic avoidance not only impedes children's access to accurate knowledge but also conveys an attitude of fear and evasion. Consequently, it reinforces the sense of mystery and anxiety surrounding

death.

3.2 Conceptual Ambiguity and Content Confusion: The Theoretical Dilemma of Early Childhood Death Education

Early childhood death education faces the dilemma of conceptual ambiguity at the theoretical level. There is no clear consensus on its theoretical boundaries and core connotations, which often leads to questions regarding its status as an independent discipline and its educational necessity. Death education is not merely an appendage to life education; it possesses its own distinct subject of study and educational objectives, namely, guiding young children to understand the inevitability and finality of death and, on this basis, constructing an awareness of the integrity of life. Compared to life education, which focuses on exploring the value and meaning of life, death education concentrates more on the cognitive and emotional adjustment to the specific phenomenon of life's endpoint. Therefore, there is an urgent need within the theoretical community to precisely define the concept of death education to highlight its irreplaceable philosophical significance and value in emotional education.

In educational practice, death education often encounters issues of content confusion with life education and safety education [4]. First, its conflation with life education undermines its distinctiveness. Death education is frequently subsumed within the broad framework of life education, where its core themes become diluted and are sometimes reduced to utilitarian exhortations about "living toward death," failing to engage in a profound exploration of death itself. Second, its simplistic equation with safety education further narrows its educational scope. Teaching activities often focus on behavioral skills training such as risk avoidance and self-protection. While these have practical value, they remain at the level of behavioral norms. This approach sidesteps the philosophical interpretation of the nature of death, making it difficult for the educational content to reach the emotional depths of children or to effectively guide them in deep reflection on the finitude of life and the meaning of existence.

3.3 Monotonous Methods and Scarce Resources: Practical Bottlenecks in Early Childhood Death Education

The practical bottlenecks in early childhood death education are primarily manifested in the monotony of teaching methods and the systemic scarcity of educational resources. In teaching practice, educators excessively rely on one-way information delivery modes such as picture book reading and storytelling, lacking experiential and interactive instructional designs. This results in an educational process confined to knowledge indoctrination rather than fostering deep emotional experiences and value construction. The root of this predicament lies in a dual deficiency in the professional competence of early childhood teachers. On one hand, teachers generally lack a theoretical grasp of the philosophy of death and the developmental patterns of children's understanding of death. On the other hand, they also lack appropriate teaching strategies and the support of suitable curricular resources. This limitation in professional competence makes it difficult for educators to accurately gauge the appropriate depth and scope of the subject matter in their teaching. Consequently, they are unable to effectively address children's questions and exploratory needs regarding death, ultimately leading to the suspension or mere formalization of death education in practice.

Another practical bottleneck in early childhood death education lies in the absence of a collaborative mechanism among the family, school, and community, which confines its educational impact primarily to the school setting [5]. At the family level, influenced by traditional cultural taboos surrounding death, parents generally avoid discussing the topic with their children, shifting the entire educational responsibility onto schools. This severs the natural continuity of children's understanding of death within the home environment. The societal level presents a more complex and contradictory picture. On one hand, mass media and social platforms either sensationalize death excessively or maintain complete silence about it, creating a confusing cognitive environment for children. On the other hand, public institutions such as communities and libraries fail to provide systematic support resources and experiential spaces. As scholar Wang Yifang has noted, the privatization and simplification of death rituals in modern society have deprived children of opportunities to naturally learn about death through observing funerals and other practices within traditional communities, thereby further exacerbating the scarcity of educational resources. The combined effect of familial avoidance, social contradictions, and the absence of public resources significantly undermines the effectiveness of school-based education, making it difficult for young children to develop an integrated and coherent understanding of death.

4. PRACTICAL APPROACHES FOR SCIENTIFICALLY IMPLEMENTING DEATH EDUCATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Contemporary educational systems exhibit a significant imbalance in their value orientation, placing excessive emphasis on life's growth and achievements while systematically avoiding the inevitability and finality of death. This educational gap leaves young children without the necessary cognitive framework and emotional coping skills when confronted with death, making them prone to irrational fear, anxiety, and potential psychological trauma. Consequently, the scientific implementation of death education for young children, involving the construction of a systematic and developmentally appropriate educational intervention framework, has become an urgent necessity for improving the function of modern education and fostering the holistic personality development of children. The core of scientific implementation lies in adhering to the laws of children's cognitive development, integrating resources from families, schools, and society, and establishing a collaborative educational network characterized by clear objectives, coherent content, and diverse methodologies. The implementation of this pathway aims to help young children develop a rational understanding of death, cultivate emotional resilience in confronting life's end, and ultimately achieve the ultimate goal of life education: living purposefully with an awareness of mortality.

4.1 Family Education: Laying the Emotional Foundation for Understanding Death

As the primary environment for a child's development, the family serves as the first classroom for death education. Parents' perspectives and behavioral patterns directly shape children's initial perceptions and emotional attitudes toward death.

First, parents need to establish a scientific view of death. Their own level of understanding regarding death constitutes the core prerequisite for family education. If parents avoid the topic of death or are filled with fear toward it, such emotions can be subtly transmitted to their children. Therefore, parents should proactively educate themselves to overcome their own anxieties and recognize death as a natural component of the life cycle—a universal, irreversible, and inevitable process that marks the cessation of biological functions. Only when parents cultivate a calm and rational mindset can they provide children with stable and secure emotional support, thereby serving as reliable guides in the child's exploration of the subject of death.

Second, employ appropriate communication strategies. Young children's thinking is predominantly concrete and imagistic, making abstract concepts like death difficult for them to grasp. Parents need to transform abstract topics into concrete, perceptible subjects for discussion. For instance, a metaphorical narrative approach can be used, likening life to a train journey with no return trip, where some people board (birth) and others disembark (death). This analogy helps explain the metabolism and finitude of life. Another effective method is parent-child shared reading of picture books on death education. The rich colors and vivid language in these books can interpret death in a lighthearted and humorous manner, effectively reducing the inherent oppressiveness of the topic. Through this child-friendly and caring approach, they convey reverence and love for life. Within a warm and harmonious reading atmosphere, young children can gradually come to understand that what a departed life leaves behind for the living is not merely fear and sorrow, but also cherished memories and enduring love.

Furthermore, creating ritualized practical experiences is essential. Mere verbal instruction is often insufficient to meet the cognitive characteristics of young children, whereas interactive practices can help internalize death education. Parents can appropriately guide their children to participate in activities imbued with a sense of ritual, such as holding a small funeral for a deceased pet or taking part in traditional memorial ceremonies during festivals like Qingming. Through these solemn practices, children can intuitively perceive that death is treated with respect and that life is worthy of reverence. Such ritualized experiences not only aid children in comprehending the finality of death but also provide a safe channel for processing and managing the complex emotions arising from separation, thereby preventing the accumulation of negative feelings.

4.2 School Education: Establishing a Systematic Curriculum Framework

As professional educational institutions, kindergartens should assume the responsibility of implementing death education systematically. Through scientific curriculum design and diverse activity formats, they can promote the deepening and development of young children's understanding of death.

First, follow the cognitive development patterns of young children. Teaching students in accordance with their

aptitude is the prerequisite for death education in early childhood [6]. Research in child psychology has found that children aged 3 to 10 exhibit distinct stage-specific characteristics in their understanding of death. Therefore, death education must be implemented in a tiered manner based on the age characteristics of young children. For instance, for children aged 3 to 4, the educational focus should be on helping them comprehend the irreversibility of death, meaning that "what has died will not come back." For children aged 5 to 6, educators can further guide them to understand the universality of death, that "all living things will die," and initiate preliminary discussions on the meaning of life. This developmental stage-based approach ensures the scientific validity and age-appropriateness of the educational content, preventing cognitive confusion that may arise from content that is either too advanced or lagging behind.

Second, achieve the organic integration of curricular content. Death education should not exist as an isolated or abrupt course but should be integrated into the kindergarten's overall curriculum framework. On one hand, it can be combined with thematic unit courses. For instance, under a theme such as "Beautiful Autumn," children can be guided to observe fallen leaves and read the picture book **The Fall of Freddie the Leaf** together, thereby contemplating the cycle and end of life through natural phenomena. On the other hand, educators should seize teachable moments from daily life. For example, teachers at a kindergarten in Jiangsu Province utilized the death of a pill bug the children had been raising to organize a "special funeral," transforming an unexpected life event into a profound lesson on life education. This immediate form of education, grounded in authentic situations and genuine emotions, often yields enhanced outcomes with relatively modest effort.

Third, it permeates instructional activities across the five major learning domains. Death education can be comprehensively integrated through the domains of health, language, social studies, science, and art. In the science domain, by observing the complete life cycle of plants from growth to withering, children are guided to contemplate the conditions and significance of life, thereby cultivating a scientific mindset. Within the health domain, death education is organically combined with safety and self-protection education; activities such as fire and earthquake drills help children understand the fragility of life and learn to protect themselves. In the art domain, children are encouraged to express their understanding and emotions about life through drawing, composing nursery rhymes, or performing children's plays. In the language domain, picture books serve as a vital bridge, allowing children to safely encounter and discuss the topic of death within the context of stories.

Fourth, introducing specialized methods such as art therapy. For young children who have experienced traumatic events like the loss of a family member or the death of a pet, psychological intervention methods including art therapy can be introduced. For instance, the "empty chair technique" allows a child to converse with an empty chair symbolizing the deceased, helping them express unresolved emotions and longing, thereby achieving psychological closure and reconciliation. Other approaches, such as psychodrama and dance movement therapy, utilize role-playing and bodily expression to assist children in releasing stress, processing grief, and gaining emotional support through interaction. These professional methods provide young children with safe and effective channels for emotional release, serving as an important supplement to the prevention of psychological trauma.

4.3 Social Support: Fostering a Macro-Environment for Collaborative Education

The effective implementation of death education for young children cannot be achieved without broad social support and collaborative education. It requires the construction of an open, inclusive, and scientific social atmosphere.

On one hand, establish a community-based collaborative education network. This network should take kindergartens as the core, extending to families and communities, integrating multiple resources to form specialized educational and support institutions. This network can bring together educators, parent representatives, volunteer teams, and invite qualified medical professionals, funeral service personnel, and others to participate. The involvement of professionals can provide more scientific and authoritative guidance for death education, while the community-based organizational model makes the education more closely connected to daily life, facilitates deeper parental participation, and forms a synergistic educational force.

On the other hand, strengthen the positive guidance of public media. Mass media such as television, the internet, newspapers, and magazines play a crucial role in shaping public perception of death education. Media should shoulder their social responsibility by actively promoting the scientific concepts and correct methods of early childhood death education, thereby eliminating the social stigma and taboo surrounding this topic. For instance, traditional festivals like Qingming Festival can serve as opportunities to produce special programs or columns that

convey a proper view of death to the public and children, making death education a subject of common concern and active participation across society. Through widespread media dissemination, a socio-cultural environment that faces death squarely and respects life can be gradually fostered, providing strong external support for death education in families and schools.

5. CONCLUSION

At the theoretical level, this study clarifies the intrinsic value of death education for young children as an integral component of life education. It articulates the core logic of "reflecting on life through the lens of death," thereby offering a new perspective for the development of children's well-rounded personalities. At the practical level, by focusing on preschool education and integrating the Chinese cultural context, the research constructs a collaborative "family-school-community" educational pathway. This provides systematic guidance for advancing this form of education from a state of taboo to scientific implementation, representing a significant supplement and development to existing research. Nonetheless, the study has its limitations. Future efforts should focus on conducting empirical research to test and refine this pathway, as well as on developing localized curriculum resources and assessment tools. These steps will promote the scientific and professional development of death education for young children.

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