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Death Education Courses are a Tragedy

Of all the psychological experimentation that takes place in the public school classroom, courses in depth and dying are the strangest and often the most secret. A courageous father and mother in suburban Chicago, whose sone was a victim of one of these death courses given without prior parental knowledge or consent, recently went public with their story in order to alert other parents to the danger.

Mr. and Mrs. Ed Garvey are convinced that a death and dying course given at Schaumburg High School triggered the suicide of their 15-year-old son Scott Garvey. The high school sophomore, took his life last year just three days after his teacher in a mandatory *Health* class distributed a book called *Coping With Death and Dying* by Russel and Purdy (Scott, Foresman Publishers).

Coping asks students how they would choose to die. The section on euthanasia states: “Committing suicide may represent a last attempt to make an independent, personal decision.” Another “health” textbook used in the same class tells students to role-play a telephone call in which one teenager threatens suicide.

The school denies that the two-week course had anything to do with the suicide, but the “timing is chilling,” according to the local newspaper which just published a series of three feature articles on the case. The parents found the book *Coping* neatly placed in Scott’s room in such a special way that they believe it was Scott’s last message to his parents.

The Garveys’ repeated attempts to deal with the school after the tragedy were met with stonewalling, delays, and prevarications. Neither the principal nor the death course teacher has ever told the Garveys what was actually taught in Scott’s class, and school officials have declined to talk to the press at all.

The school claimed that the compositions Scott wrote for his English class on immortality and death were subjects “of his own choosing.” Actually, the list of topics provided by the teacher included “Active euthanasia for deformed infants – right or wrong?” “Death – do the hopelessly ill have the right to die?” “End of the world – coming soon or not?” “Reincarnation – can we come back from the dead?” and “Infanticide – right or wrong?”

It took the school a year to set up a committee to study the case. The committee concluded that the death course and its textbooks should be retained, conceding only that, henceforth, parents should be notified what topics are included in the *Health* course.

Death courses have become rather common in public schools, and the variations of activities are macabre. At one, a funeral director took cremated remains to class to show the students. At another, students were assigned to write a paper on "What I Would Do On My Last Day." Many classes are taken to tour funeral homes and learn how bodies are embalmed and cremated. Students plan their funerals, write their own epitaphs, make their wills, and sometimes lie in a coffin.

Most schools teach death and dying as a one- to two-week unit in a required health class. It can also be presented in elective psychology, sociology or family living courses. Sometimes it crops up in English composition (as it also did with Scott) or in literature, such as classroom discussions of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.

In March this year, a second-grade boy in Canton Township, Michigan killed himself the day after watching a film about suicide in his class. The teacher had not even previewed the film before showing to her class.

In 1987 a 17-year-old girl and an 18-year-old boy at O'Hara High School in Kansas City, Missouri, killed themselves while they were taking a nine-week death education course.

Those who defend death and dying classes say you don't commit suicide because you talk about it. Others dispute that, and several "cluster suicides" are a matter of record.

Dr. Davis Shaffer, professor of child psychology at Columbia University in New York, warns that "suicide can be subject to imitation" and that since, in any group, an unknown number of teens is pre-suicidal, talking about suicide could be "playing with fire." Telling them that "almost everyone has thought about suicide" tends to legitimize it.

Like most psychological courses, the death and dying courses are non-judgmental. They do not say "suicide is wrong." They tell the student he can decide questions of life and death.

The teachers assigned to teach death courses seldom have any more training for this task than a one-day or even a half-day seminar. These courses have no place in the public school classroom because they are really group therapy by unlicensed psychologists.