Should Values Clarification be a Goal of Death Education?

By: James M. Eddy, and Penelope E. Duff

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Abstract:
Values clarification is often cited as a goal of death education. Related research has shown this process to be an effective educational methodology. Nonetheless, some distinct philosophical and practical problems have been associated with the values clarification process. This manuscript identifies some of these problems and outlines guidelines for the effective use of value clarification in the death education curriculum.

Article:
The clarification of one's personal values is often listed as a goal of death education. Knott (1) views the goals of death education as a triad of the overlapping areas of focus labeled: information sharing, values clarification, and coping behaviors. Knott believes that death education programs should encourage the examination and clarification of personal values which impact upon the dying and death decision-making process. This manuscript will identify some of the problems associated with the values clarification process and discuss guidelines death educators may wish to consider when using values clarification educational strategies.

In today's complex society, the decision-making process is complicated by the lack of clearly defined, universally accepted standards of behavior to guide individual behavior. Consequently, there is general concern among death educators about helping people develop personally meaningful approaches to making value decisions.

One educational approach to help students make values decision is the values clarification process outlined by Rath (2). Rath's process of values clarification is but one method to help people identify values or make moral decisions. Values Clarification Process Rath believes that every decision or choice an individual makes is based upon his beliefs, attitudes, and values. Valuing activities allow the individual student the opportunity to identify a personal set of beliefs that aids in the decision-making process.

According to Rath, students need a systematic approach for the development of values. We should be less concerned with the individual value a person selects and more concerned with the process used to arrive at that value. Rath assumes that educators know what processes are most effective in helping students develop their individual system of values. His 7-step process is listed below:

1. *Choosing Freely.* Students must be able to select values without coercion from others. The facilitator needs to develop an environment which is conductive to allowing participants to express and choose their values without peer pressure or ridicule.

2. *Choosing from Alternatives.* As with any decision-making process, there must be at least two options (or in this case, values) from which to choose. Obviously, if there is only one value to choose from, there is no choice involved.

3. *Choosing after Thoughtful Consideration of the Consequences of Each Alternative.* This calls for careful consideration of the risks and benefits of each alternative. The consequences of each alternative must be identified before an intelligent decision can be made.

4. *Prizing and Cherishing.* If a person has truly developed a value, he/she should be willing to respect that value. A value is only meaningful if the person believes that the value is worth prizing and cherishing.

5. *Affirming.* If a value has met the aforementioned criteria then the person should be willing to publicly affirm and support that value position when appropriate.

6. *Acting upon Choices.* The value position one has selected should provide guideposts for behavior. If the value is prized and cherished and selected from alternatives after weighing the consequences of each alternative, the person is likely to exhibit behaviors congruent with the value.

7. *Repeating.* A value position which serves as a guidepost for behavior tends to be applicable in a variety of situations. A value position which influences ones behavior tends to form a pattern in one's life.

According to Rath, the process of values clarification is more important than the actual value selected. Unless a person satisfies all the criteria listed in the seven-step process, the results or position cannot be considered a value. This method of defining a value, although somewhat concise, eliminates a variety of beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and opinions from consideration as values. Instead, these terms have been labeled values indicators. They include goals, aspirations, attitudes, interests, feelings, beliefs, activities, and worries.

Values indicators have meaning in a person's life even though the seven-step model was not used to choose or arrive at these value indicators. Much has been written in support of the values clarification process. The potential benefits of including value clarification instructional activities in death education curricula are closely linked to the basic tenets of the humanistic education movement. These advantages tend to be of a theoretical or philosophical nature and subsequently are very difficult to prove or disprove. Nonetheless, a variety of interrelated problems have developed with the use of the values clarification process.

Problems and Concerns

It is difficult to clearly categorize all of the problems and concerns introduced by educators regarding the values clarification process. For the purpose of this discussion related problems and concerns will be loosely categorized into practical and philosophical issues. Suzerka (3) discussed some of the practical concerns associated with the values clarification process. Although there are a variety of ways to define values and values clarification in this process, there are no clear operational definitions for these terms. This makes it difficult for death educators to evaluate the impact of values clarification activities. Death educators who sense the need for accountability may find it difficult to justify the use of valuable instructional time on educational activities in which the potential benefit to the student cannot be demonstrated in specific and measurable terms.

A second practical concern relates to the common attitude among students which may discourage open communications. The free exchange of ideas (public affirmation) is an essential component of the values clarification process. However, the creation of a classroom climate conductive to true open communication may be an illusive goal. No matter how sensitive or caring the teacher is with regard to the problems, needs, and interests of the students, a variety of factors may inhibit the free expression of thoughts and feelings.

Such factors include the belief that death is a taboo subject, a fear of public speaking, a low self-concept, or peer pressure. These conditions may preclude the public affirmation of thoughts and values. A third practical concern is the uncertainty on the part of the teacher with regard to self-disclosure of values. Many valuing and values clarification activities related to dying and death place the teacher in a situation where the student would want to ascertain his or her values. This is especially true in a public school setting. Such an inquiry may cause conflict for two reasons. First, the teacher may believe that by disclosing a personal value position, he/she may influence the students value selection process. The values clarification process calls for the student to choose freely, but the identification of a values position by a teacher may consciously or unconsciously influence

the student's thinking. Although a teacher may explain his or her value position as being his or her personal one, the teacher's authoritarian position may lend an air of rightness or wrongness to the subject of discussion. The other problem related to self-disclosure is that the teacher may not want to publicly affirm a personal value position.

A fourth practical concern relates to the uncertainty concerning how deeply the teacher should probe into the private lives or personal feelings of students. Some values clarification activities related to dying and death are rather innocuous, posing little threat to students, while others may ask the student to disclose personal feelings, attitudes, and behaviors that may potentially create a personal threat, either real or imagined. The degree to which a student will disclose personal feelings, attitudes and behaviors may not be predictable. Because of this, it is often difficult to foresee a logical, sequential progression for the lesson.

A fifth concern similar to the first relates to the lack of reliable, valid and usable evaluative procedures and instruments for measuring the effectiveness of values clarification. Death education, as a relatively new discipline may be held more accountable for the use of instructional time. If valid and reliable evaluative procedures are not implemented, meaningful research on the effectiveness of value clarification activities cannot be conducted.

The values clarification process has also been criticized on philosophical grounds. Much of this criticism relates to its relative moral nature. To clarify this point, the opinions of one educator who has carefully scrutinized the values clarification process will be examined as a case study. Stewart (4) provided one of the first critical evaluations of the values clarification process. At the time of his publication, Stewart was Co-Director of the Values Development Education Program at Michigan State University, so he was familiar with the values education movement and the values clarification process. Stewart labeled the process as a fad with widespread acceptance. The "new process" was readily seized as an educational tool without much attention given to its worth or effectiveness. Stewart's criticism of the values clarification process fell into the following general categories The lack of an underlying cognitive logic upon which a developmental theory should be based. The work of other researchers in the theory of human development (i.e., Piaget and Kohlberg) have identified a universal pattern that forms the structure of cognitive thought and intelligence, including moral and value judgments. The values clarification process does not support such a universal pattern. It focuses on the context and content of a value, but does not provide a concrete developmental explanation of the human valuing process.

The heavy emphasis on public affirmation and subsequent action based on a recently identified value or value set is misdirected. Students who are forced to publicly affirm a values position and act accordingly may do so even though that value is not genuine or not carefully thought through. There is a tendency, especially among youth, to live by a publicly affirmed statement. To do otherwise would be to lose face. Although the values clarification process encourages actions according to values statements, it would not be educationally sound to ask a student to base his/her behavior on a prematurely drawn public affirmation.

The third concern is the basic moral relativism of the values clarification process. Its basic tents hold that values are individual and personal, and that there are no right or wrong values provided they were developed using the values clarification process. Under this assumption, it would be acceptable to engage in active euthanasia (legally defined as murder in most states) if you worked this through the values clarification process and determined that to be the most appropriate value position and subsequent course of action. In most circumstances, to kill is regarded as an inappropriate behavior and should be identified as such. Because that may be the selected course of action in this case does not make killing an appropriate behavior.

The thoughts of Stewart have been presented to highlight some of the philosophical concerns often associated with the values clarification process. Other authors (5-7) have voiced similar concerns. Because values clarification is often listed as a goal of death education, death educators must address these concerns effectively before including values clarification activities into death education curricula.

Guidelines for the Death Educator

Despite the problem associated with the values clarification process, this educational strategy can be useful in the death education class. In order to maximize the benefits, the educator must view the process in the total educational context. The following guidelines are presented as points to consider prior to the use of values clarification.

1. Develop operational definitions and appropriate educational objectives for values clarification exercises. This procedure will eliminate many of the evaluative and accountability concerns voiced regarding the use of value clarification activities in the classroom.

2. Integrate your values clarification activities into the death education content areas or conceptual framework- do not present values clarification as a separate unit. The major emphasis of the values clarification process is the "process" of the clarification of values. This process takes on added meaning if the student uses this process to examine dying and death related issues of personal relevance. From a life span developmental perspective, if the student is asked to make a personal decision on an issue of current or future relevance, then those value judgments may serve as guiding principles for future behavior.

3. Create a classroom environment conducive to open communication between students and faculty. The development of a classroom climate conducive to open communication may help to reduce some of the problems associated with the use of public affirmation. Reliable techniques have been developed *to* help educators develop a classroom environment conducive to free and open communication.

4. Do not coerce students publicly to affirm value positions. Students should feel free to ''decide not to decide'' if that is the appropriate course of action. Some value issues related to dying and death need to be carefully thought through over an extended time period. To force a student to prematurely identify a value position on such an issue is not an educationally sound procedure.

5. Develop a personal philosophical position to guide your behavior as a facilitator with regard to self-disclosure. Determine how to respond to personally sensitive questions or issue which call for self disclosure. Doing so will help the educator deal with this concern effectively and consistently.

6. Begin with simple (nonthreatening) activities, then progress to more complicated activities if appropriate. It is wise to use nonthreatening values activities initially and then progress to value activities of a personally sensitive nature. This procedure will enhance the development of a classroom climate conducive to open communication.

7. Avoid the overuse of this type of activity. The values clarification process should be viewed as just one educational tool. In a confluent approach to death education, values activities should represent one of a variety of possible educational methodologies.

Summary

Values clarification related research (8- 10) has shown that this process can be an effective educational strategy. Nonetheless, death educators need to be cognizant of the practical and philosophical problems associated with the values clarification process and to recognize its limitations. The process should be implemented in a planned systematic and educationally appropriate manner. In addition, the death educator needs to evaluate some of the critical ethical issues involved in the use of values clarification.

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