Death Education in Malaysia: From Challenges to Implementation

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Abstract— The paper aims to provide a glimpse of the importance of death education, proposed strategies to be implemented and proposed model for death education programs in the Malaysian context, taking note of the new norm during the pandemic. By reviewing the literature and the trend of death education nationwide, the paper attempts to respond to the current trend of death education and what should be included to increase its efficacy in the local Malaysian context. It was found that there are some challenges in implementing death education, mainly due to the stigma, limited resources, willingness of the participants to sign up and participate, and the lack of a more comprehensive series of death education that will solidify the learnings and increase the efficacy of death education in Malaysia. In conclusion, to enhance the benefit of death education, it is encouraged to implement it in a sequential series encompassing theoretical, experiential and reflective components, consisting of religion and spiritual wisdom, immersive activities, and a participant-and-trainer engagement friendly medium, to provide a more holistic experience to encourage for a more positive attitude towards death education and conversations.

Keywords—Death education, Grief, Bereavement, New Norm, Malaysia

I. INTRODUCTION

Death and dying are inevitable in a human's life, and grief is a universal but highly personalized response to the loss. Bereaved individuals experience grief – the psychological, behavioural or physical reactions towards losing a loved one (Boerner et al., 2015). The bereaved experience negative emotions such as anger, sadness, yearning, guilt, and regret, which impact the lives of bereaved individuals after the death of a loved one. Moreover, several studies associate grief with severe physiological and psychological consequences such as somatic symptoms (Utz et al., 2012), major depressive disorder (Kulathilaka et al., 2016), post-traumatic stress disorder (Dai et al., 2016; Sanderson et al., 2013), and prolonged grief disorder (He et al., 2014; Tang & Xiang, 2021). Existing literature has shown that non-pathological grief reactions decelerate across time and have no long-term impacts on the bereaved (Boelen et al., 2003; Bonanno et al., 2004; Jonsson et al., 2013). However, bereaved individuals who have been diagnosed with the prolonged grief disorder – a persistent chronic grief reaction for at least six months after the loss causing physical and mental impairment (Treml et al., 2020), might require interventions or treatments to avoid detrimental impacts, e.g., health issues, all-cause mortality, and suicidal thoughts (Szuhany et al., 2021).

The harmful effects of grief reactions on bereaved individuals have attracted much attention to the studies that aim to shed light on the various approaches to cope with grief and bereavement. Death education has been proposed to help individuals deal with grief reactions towards death and loss. Death education is regarded as education about death, dying and bereavement. The primary purpose of practising death education is to assist individuals in reconstructing the meaning of life and death, reducing negative feelings and fear of death, and developing self-understanding on the values and attitudes towards life and death by providing rich knowledge about death, grief and bereavement (Wong, 2017).

Death education has been widely explored and practised in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Western societies. Nonetheless, very little is known about the

practice of death education in the Malaysian context. In addition, the recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused 5.45 million recorded deaths worldwide and 31,513 recorded deaths in Malaysia (as recorded on January 1, 2022). The awareness of inevitable death during this pandemic generates death anxiety. Thus, death education comes into people's minds to prepare individuals to manage the fear of death and deal with death and anxiety. In addition, the pandemic has changed people's normal ways of living and how they grieve. Therefore, individuals have to adapt to the new norms. This paper attempts to discuss death education in the Malaysian context and how death education can be practised in the new normal.

II.   DEATH EDUCATION

A. Overview of death education

Researchers and practitioners have realized the need for specific training related to death, grief and bereavement for health professionals. Later, death education has developed and refined to focus on planning content, setting goals, implementing and evaluating (Wass, 2004). Today, death education is offered to various groups of people such as health professionals, grief counsellors, university or college students, school students and the general public. Normalization and the awareness of death are critical concerns in death education. Therefore, the content of instructions in death education focuses on the conceptualization of death and grief and the coping strategies to deal with death and bereavement. Martínez-Heredia et al. (2021) proposed the content of instructions that can be applied in death education:

> 1. Death: knowing how death is being conceptualized from biological, psychological and social perspectives considering cultural and religious aspects.
> 2. Grief: knowing the conceptualization of grief and coping strategies to deal with grief.
> 3. Health education: knowing its function, purpose and the perspectives of palliative and preventive measures as a means to deal with death.

Two methodological approaches have been applied in death education: didactic, focusing on the formal lecture presentations in teaching and learning of death and loss, and experiential, concentrating on the sharing of personal feelings or experiences related to death and loss (Cacciatore et al., 2015).
Death education has proved its efficacy in changing individuals' attitudes towards death. Wong (2009) conducted a study to explore the efficacy of death education in a Hong Kong local university, which found that students who attended a life and death education curriculum in the university had a more positive attitude towards death. Wong (2017) later conducted a more elaborated study on the efficacy of death education in four other universities in Hong Kong, confirming that death education positively impacts the students' perspective of death. Together, these studies show the efficacy of death education in normalizing death.

B. Death education in Malaysia

There has been no detailed investigation of death education in the Malaysian context. According to Mohamed Hussin (2016), the lack of professional training for health professionals and grief counsellors has caused the difficulty of bereaved individuals to get grief support in Malaysia. Professional training or death education is offered to the practitioners in a short-term voluntary workshop, seminar and talk by the university and non-government organizations, particularly Hospis Malaysia. Furthermore, the death education practised in the university is often a general subject or an optional subject focusing on a brief conceptualization of death and grief for the social work and psychology students. However, the training given is not comprehensive. Similarly, the review on how grief training looks like for medical practitioners specifically in America, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Germany, Greece, Denmark, Spain, Ireland and South Africa revealed that the training revolving around grief support for medical practitioners comes with its challenges when it is a relatively short course. The challenges are the resources to implement quality training and the drive for the practitioners to sign up and participate in the training (Sikstrom et al., 2019).

Hence, death education is proposed to be included as the core subject in university for social work, psychology and counselling. Researchers outside the Malaysian context also recommend implementing death education in the curriculum. Doughty and Hoskins (2011) suggested that it is beneficial to include death education in the curriculum of the helping professions' training and include the multicultural aspect to build a foundation for competency in working with the bereaved populations (Doughty & Hoskins, 2011). It is also further recommended by Sikstrom et al. (2019) to encourage ongoing studies in the field of death and dying, especially for professionals working closely with death, as to increase the comfort and competency in the field and to stay up to date with the conceptualization of grief (Sikstrom et al., 2019). This view is supported by Chan (2015), who conducted a study to look into the training provided for Malaysian Chinese funeral directors, which provided a glimpse of how relevant training applies for the profession that works closely with the bereaved population in Malaysia (Chan, 2015).

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As the training was prepared to focus on implementing the knowledge into work, it emphasizes engagement and encompasses the basic skills, knowledge, emotional management, and self-care (Chan, 2015). A point worth noting from the study is how the training provided a solid foundation for the funeral directors to communicate and work with the intense emotions that revolve around the nature of their work, which boosts their confidence in their competency (Chan, 2015).

Besides the training and death education provided to professionals or students, the general public can also access death education through activities or programs hosted by organizations. For instance, Malaysia Death Fest presented by Xiao En Memorial Park includes interactive exhibits, workshops related to life and death, and talks and sharing by professionals working closely with death (My Death Fest, 2019). Kasih Hospice Foundation also hosts regular Hospice Volunteer Training Courses, targeting anyone interested in equipping relevant skillsets and developing a more positive perspective on transitions and death (Kasih Hospice Foundation, 2020). In addition, Death Café events adapted to the Malaysian context to facilitate conversations revolving around life and death for anyone interested to frankly talk about life and death with like-minded people to appreciate life more (Lee, n.d.). Aside from this, several short-term experiential activities such as human library events, picture book storytelling events and handcraft activities organized by Xiao En Memorial Park allow for some interactive and immersive experiences for the general public (Xiao En Life Story House, n.d.).

III.   CHALLENGES OF DEATH EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

Despite the uniformity of death, the grief expression and how one perceives the experience can be unique and different (Doughty & Hoskins, 2011). This uniqueness was further supported by Boerner et al. (2015), as they noted that it is detrimental to label one's grief as a uniform experience. In addition to the uniqueness of the grief and bereaved experience, the taboo and stigma around death and dying challenges the implementation of death education, even amongst the helping profession (Doughty & Hoskins, 2011). The expression of death and dying is essentially a taboo subject for various reasons revolving around emotions, beliefs, and behaviours (Kirshbaum et al., 2011). It is more so when there are some public expectations on how one should grieve that is based on individual private experience that may be realistic and suitable for some, and may not be as such for others (Penman et al., 2014), which may further contribute to the avoidance of death-related discussions. Furthermore, since voluntary

participation is encouraged in most death education activities, especially for the general public, avoiding talking about death might hinder their participation in death education programs.

According to Mohamed Hussin (2016), western-oriented theories emphasize the technical aspect, where the death and grief conceptualization is strongly based on fitting and working around the theorized components, such as the stages, tasks and components, without taking into consideration the individual differences. This reduces the effectiveness in working with the Malaysian population, where religious and spiritual beliefs have a prominent role in the Malaysian's daily life practices (Shaw et al., 2018). Hence, the approach cannot be applied blindly to the Malaysian context. The problem arose when health professionals, especially the newbies, have limited knowledge about death concepts based on religious perspectives and cultural sensitivity. Without the solid foundation of death concepts from religious perspectives, it will threaten competency and effectiveness in delivering therapy and education to the public, especially while working with the general public in normalizing and accepting death. Moreover, since one-off activity or short course is often offered in death education programs, it is challenging to provide an in-depth cultural and religious understanding of death and grief to health professionals and the general public.

Due to the Malaysian government's implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) which prohibits mass gatherings, all educational institutions and non-government organizations were ordered to close. The nationwide lockdown has caused the disrupted teaching and learning process including the practice of death education offered to professionals and the general public in Malaysia. Therefore, online teaching and learning has become essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the implementation of online teaching and learning faces some challenges such as poor internet connection, lack of interaction among students and educators and lack of motivation (Zboun, 2021). The interaction and engagement issues learners face in the online platform need to be addressed to ensure the teaching effectiveness in death education programs. This is because learners tend to be motivated, active and engaged in their learning process if there is a good interaction among peers, students and educators. Usually, educators apply didactic and experiential methods in death education. The didactic method in death education focuses on the formal lecture presentations, while the experiential method concentrates on raising personal feelings about death and loss (Dadfar et al., 2016). Nevertheless, some challenges appeared in applying the experiential

method when death education is delivered online. For example, death simulation activities such as coffin lying and fake funeral cannot be carried out online. A limited online available experiential activities cause the death educators to find alternative online activities and change the instructions of death education to be aligned with distance learning and adapt it to the new norm.

IV. STRATEGIES IN IMPLEMENTING DEATH EDUCATION IN THE NEW NORM

Four strategies in practising death education in the new norm are proposed to cope with the challenges of implementing death education in Malaysia, as shown in Figure 1.
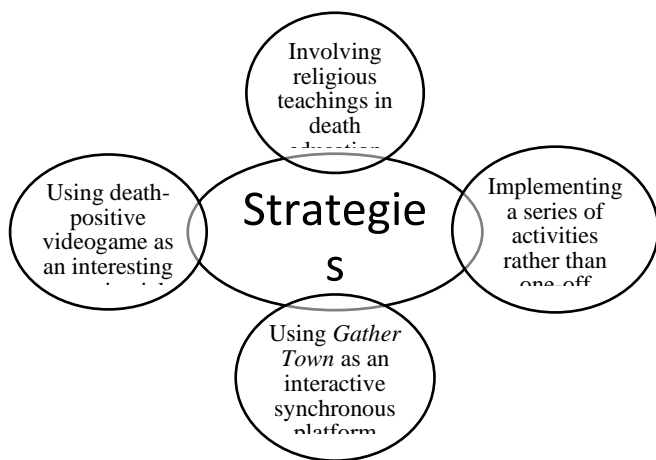

Fig. 1. Proposed strategies in offering death education in the new norm

With the understanding that religion and spirituality are embedded in Malaysian's practices, especially in death and grief, religious teachings and spiritual beliefs should be considered when planning the content of death education. For example, in Taiwan, numerous educational institutions offer life and death education programs with a slightly broader perspective encompassing the eastern-based religious teachings and spiritual wisdom, focusing more on appreciating life and approaching death in a more philosophical touch (Phan et al., 2020). This shed light on the use of religious teachings in death education in Malaysia. There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the use of religion and spirituality in coping with grief and bereavement. A study conducted by Mohamed Hussin et al. (2018) explored the impact of the Muslim community's religious practice towards coping with grief. It was found that the teachings brought numerous benefits to the bereaved to cope with their loss, namely the space to grieve and make sense of the experience. However, it was also found that religious teachings have negative impacts, as the unanimous religious beliefs contradict their needs and may prevent the bereaved from seeking professional help (Haque, 2005;

Mohamed Hussin et al., 2018). Mohamed Hussin et al. (2018) suggested that the normalization of grief as a natural response to death and the nonequivalence of grief and distrust in religion could be explained and emphasized to the bereaved. This could be delivered more effectively by the health professionals with adequate knowledge on death concepts from the religious perspective. In order to address the need for death normalization and acceptance, it is suggested that the curriculum be incorporated as a compulsory content, which includes more in-depth knowledge on Malaysia's mainstream religion and spiritual beliefs, where the philosophical aspects and wisdom related to death can be better studied altogether.

Moreover, a series of death education activities are proposed to be carried out rather than one-off activities to provide a comprehensive death education to professionals and the general public. Unfortunately, the death education programs offered in Malaysia especially to the general public, are usually one-off experiential activities focusing only on a particular aspect of death education. Hence, a series of activities such as Death Café, psychodrama, grief-related movie watching, and roleplay should be implemented in sequence, and each activity focuses on a specific aspect in death education so that the whole series can give a bigger picture to the participants. A study conducted by Sikstrom et al. (2019) discovered that most grief training studies measured the training outcome via participants' self-assessment, which focused on assessing the knowledge gained from the training and how it influences their well-being. A focus group discussion is suggested to be conducted in between the implementation of death education experiential activities to evaluate their effectiveness rather than self-assessment reported by the participants. Through focus group discussions, the host can better understand the participants' perception of the activities and their understanding of the particular topic of death education delivered in the activities. This will provide helpful insights for the host to plan the following experiential activities to achieve the goal of death education, which is normalizing and accepting death.

One of the challenges for online learning is learners' engagement. According to Laher et al. (2021), learners experienced difficulty understanding the course content due to the lack of interaction with educators and peers. Thus, an online gamified video-conferencing platform *Gather Town* has attracted much attention from educators beyond *Google Meet*, *Microsoft Teams* and *Zoom*. A study conducted by McClure and Williams (2021) discovered that learners and educators prefer to use *Gather Town* because of its ability to engage with educators and peers. In the same vein, Nur

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Fitria (2021) observed that the interaction between educators and learners is more spontaneous, guiding the avatar to approach people just like a face-to-face encounter. A unique feature of *Gather Town* is its ability to create avatars and move around in a pre-designed 2D map. Through the avatars, learners can feel an attachment to the virtual classroom and their online learning process. Another exciting feature of *Gather Town* is the pre-designed 2D virtual spaces such as classrooms, campfires, halls, and parks and its accessibility to private 'rooms'. *Gather Town* is suggested to conduct activities or discussions about death education since the experiential activities require intense participant engagement. Due to the uniqueness of death education, the engagement and connection between educators and learners and amongst peer-learners are of utmost importance. The features available at Gather Town increase its efficacy in approaching the needs, which includes creating an individualized avatar that brings the learners closer to the scene, having the function of setting up private conversations amongst the avatars to deepen the sharing of death-related experience.

Due to the limited availability of online resources for experiential activities, death-positive videogames are proposed as activity applied in online learning. Death-positive videogames focuses on the theme of death and loss and it can reduce the anxiety and fear of death (Nicolucci, 2019). As an example, "A Mortician's Tale", the first death-positive videogame. The videogame begins with introducing the job as a mortician through the tasks given by the superior, followed by the narratives explaining the professional tasks to take care of the deceased bodies and the funeral. In the videogame, players are exposed step-by-step to the process of embalming or cremation and managing different types of funerals. The interaction between the protagonist and non-player characters in written form helps players understand bereavement and the funeral industry. In managing each case, players listen to stories of the deceased shared by their loved ones. Players are exposed to the whole process of planning, managing and executing the funeral process and immerse themselves in the stories of the deceased and their loved ones. The core value of this videogame is to encourage an open discussion of death, embrace positive attitudes towards death and break the taboo surrounding death. Incorporating a videogame in the program helps promote fun and meaningful engagement as a form of experiential learning while approaching death concepts from a more positive and lighter perspective. However, it is crucial to have a discussion after playing the death-positive videogame to solidify the learning.

V. PROPOSED MODEL FOR DEATH EDUCATION PROGRAM

Due to the lack of in-depth learning opportunities in the current death education programs, a model inclusive of the theoretical, experiential and reflective components is proposed to be implemented in the death education programs, as shown in Figure 2.
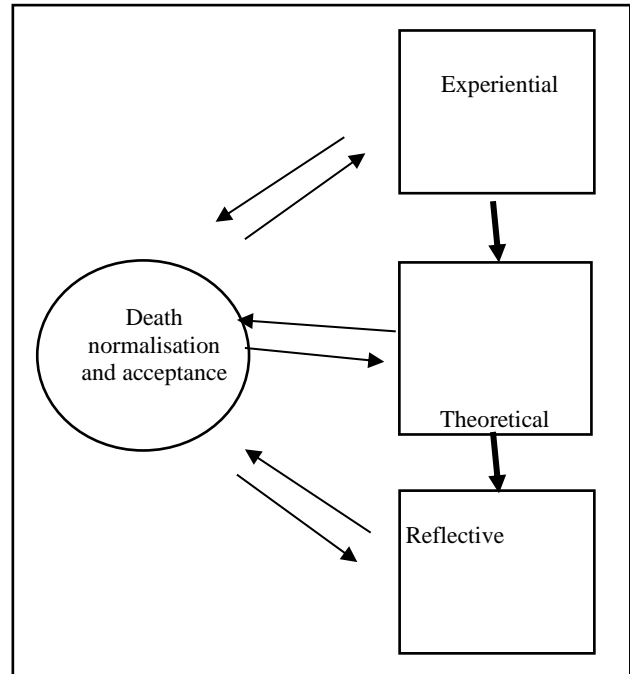

Fig. 2.   Proposed model for death education program

With the awareness that it is of utmost importance for death education programs to include a solid theoretical understanding of death, grief, religion and spiritual concepts, the proposed model aims to incorporate the theoretical concepts in the program as the first part of the learning process. This learning component provides learners with a rich understanding of knowledge revolving around life and death. With adequate information, it will allow the learners to have a more objective stance in making sense of death, increasing their competency and comfort level in approaching death-related concepts, leading to death normalization and acceptance. This works around the connotation that the challenge to normalize and accept death is due to the fear of uncertainties that clouds the topic of death and dying; adequate knowledge will reduce the uncertainties.

The experiential component is fundamental as it is where learners are able to process and apply what they have learnt through their own experiences. Learners bring the experiences from the external world and integrate them with personal thoughts in the meaning-making process (Yardley et al., 2012). While participating in the experiential activities introduced in

death education programs, learners can connect the theoretical understanding of death and grief with their own experiences after interpreting, conceptualizing and gaining new ideas from their own experiences. Interaction is fundamental in experiential learning as it can be a collective process. Interaction among social actors (human-human) or between social actors and the environment (human-environment) can contribute to knowledge construction and meaning-making. Hence, after each experiential activity, learners need to have a discussion because different perspectives might be constructed from individuals' unique experiences.

The reflective component is the last component in the proposed model to allow learners to solidify their theoretical understanding and the experiential knowledge they have gained from the previous components. As compared to the usual one-off and short courses, this proposed model places a strong emphasis on this component, as it does not only focus on allowing the learners to evaluate the program and learning but also provides a space for the learners to evaluate their own experiences, observable changes and insights in regard to death normalization and acceptance. It is also important to note that as death is a unique experience, individuals may approach this from a varying perspective. Hence, despite the richness of the proposed death education model's content, it is still a must that the learners have to approach their own insights through self-awareness. Through reflection, one will be able to continue the learning process on a regular basis and gain more confidence in approaching their own sense of meaning-making (Wain, 2017).

As seen in Figure 2, the proposed plan for the death education model is structured in a series, beginning with the theoretical component to the experiential and lastly, the reflective component. This is suggested in order to emphasize building a knowledge framework before solidifying the knowledge with experiential learning, and lastly, to allow learners to make sense of the full learning experience within the reflection. In order to better address the objective of normalizing and accepting death, it is proposed that the educators and learners are to assess if they meet the main objectives while going through each component.

VI. CONCLUSION

Death education is essential for professionals and the general public because the professionals need grief training and death education to prepare themselves further to serve the hospice care and grief support, and the general public has to accept death as a part of their lives instead of taboo. This paper has discussed the current trend and challenges of practising death education in Malaysia. The lack of comprehensive training for professionals and the avoidance of discussing death by the general public cause difficulty in practising death education on a larger scale. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the development of death education in Malaysia. Death educators must change the usual way of conducting the death education activities and adapt it to the new norm. The main challenge is the limited availability and immersive experiences of online experiential activities applied in death educational programs.

Four strategies have been proposed to be implemented in death education programs in the new norm. First, since religious diversity is embraced in Malaysia, religious teachings should be considered in planning the content of instructions for death education. Next, a series of didactic and experiential activities should be carried out rather than one-off activities. Focus group discussions could be conducted to obtain participants' perceptions of death education programs. In addition, an enjoyable, interactive online tool *Gather Town* is suggested to be the online platform conducting the death education activities due to its capability of engaging with educators and learners. Last but not least, using death-positive videogames as an experiential activity can reduce the fear of death and death anxiety. A model inclusive of three vital components - theoretical, experiential, reflective, is proposed to be implemented in death education programs. The first component in the learning process concentrates on the theoretical understanding of death, grief, religion and spiritual beliefs to reduce the fear of death and normalize death. The second component - experiential, focuses on utilizing own experiences in the meaning-making process. Finally, the last component in the model - reflective, stresses on providing a space for learners to reflect on the death-related knowledge learned from various activities and assess the death normalization and acceptance level. This paper shed light on the implementation of death education, especially on planning and executing the content of instructions.

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