

# ‘The one thing guaranteed in life and yet they won’t teach you about it’: The case for mandatory grief education in UK schools

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## Abstract

Nearly all British children are bereaved of someone close to them by the time they turn 16 and, with the Covid-19 pandemic and world humanitarian crises across the news and social media, they are being exposed to more anxiety about death than ever before. Learners need to be taught about grief and death to prepare them to manage bereavement and support others. As it stands, although teaching resources exist and some curriculum guidance documents mention loss or death, there is no statutory requirement for schools anywhere in the UK to cover grief or bereavement and many pupils have no classes about these difficult topics.

This article consolidates the case for grief education in schools. We discuss six key questions to examine evidence that children benefit from talking about grief, death and loss; the current provision for grief education in UK schools; the obstacles to teaching these topics and ways to overcome them; and the potential further implications of a policy change. Following the lead of child bereavement charities, research and new national reports on UK bereavement support, we demonstrate the need for mandatory grief education in all four countries of the UK and offer evidence-based recommendations for its implementation.

## Implications for practice

- Discussions of grief, death and loss should be a mandatory component of primary and secondary education, not left until a death occurs. This will enable learners to talk about death and grief in a calm environment while preparing them to manage bereavement and support others. The core education programme can be supplemented with additional conversations when appropriate.
- Grief education should be integrated into relationships, sex and health education in England; the health and wellbeing curriculum areas in Wales and Scotland; and personal development education in Northern Ireland. Discussions related to grief, death, and loss should also be incorporated into subjects like English, Welsh or Gaelic, science, religious education and history and supported by wider school initiatives, allowing learners to explore different personal, religious, and cultural responses to bereavement and understand death as a natural part of life.
- Teachers and other educational professionals should be offered training on how to start conversations about grief, death and loss, and integrate these topics into their teaching. This training could also give them confidence to support bereaved pupils more effectively, a widely acknowledged need amongst teachers.
- Grief education should make use of the wealth of resources and expertise which already exists in the UK.

'It's kind of ironic because [death]'s the one thing guaranteed in life and yet they won't teach you about it'.

'They could talk to you about death [...] and you could have like a discussion with your class about it. That would prepare you for it in a way'.

Two of the bereaved teenagers who participated in Childhood Bereavement Network's Video Talkshops Project in 2002 (Childhood Bereavement Network & St Christopher's Candle Project, 2002)

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK Childhood Bereavement Network estimated that 1 in 29 school-age children had been bereaved of a parent or sibling, an equivalent of one child in every class (Childhood Bereavement Network, undated b). New figures released in November 2022 suggest that a parent of children under 18 dies every 20 minutes in the UK, which equates to around 26,900 a year and leaves 127 children and young people newly bereaved of a parent each day (Childhood Bereavement Network, undated b). Many more children have been bereaved of a grandparent, other relative, or close friend, with the majority of young people having experienced the death of someone close to them by the time they leave school (Harrison & Harrington, 2001). With an estimated 15,600 UK children experiencing the death of a parent from Covid-19-associated causes between March 2020 and November 2022 (Imperial College London, undated)<sup>1</sup> it is now more urgent than ever that we equip young people with the tools, knowledge and attributes that will help them to cope with grief and understand others who have been bereaved.

The idea that children should learn about grief and death has a long history, with thanatology, the study of death and its social practices, usually traced back to American psychologist Herman Feifel's *The meaning of death* (1959) and more specific conversations about death education emerging in the 1960s (Doka, 2015). Since then, researchers and educational professionals from across the world have argued for the psychological and social benefits of teaching children about all aspects of grief, death and bereavement (Aspinall, 1996; Work Group on Palliative Care for Children, 1999; Stevenson, 2000; Select Committee on Health (UK), 2004; Lynam & McGuckin, 2018). UK charities, organisations, academics, teachers, palliative care workers, parents and others have been advocating for grief and death education to be embedded into school curricula for more than 20 years.<sup>2</sup> They have also provided a wealth of resources and expertise for teaching these topics, responding actively to the Covid pandemic by releasing new materials and increasing the training provision for teachers.<sup>3</sup> Both released in Autumn 2022, the final reports from the Scottish National Childhood Bereavement Project (2022) and the UK Commission on Bereavement (2022) have renewed calls for mandatory grief education in schools. As it stands, however, there is no specific requirement to teach children about grief or

bereavement anywhere in the UK (see Appendix 2 in the supplementary file).

This article consolidates the case for mandatory grief education by examining six key questions about the benefits of helping children discuss bereavement and death, the current provision of grief education in UK schools, the obstacles to teaching the topics and ways to overcome them, and potential further implications of a policy change.<sup>4</sup> We follow Australian psychologist Hall (2014, p7) in defining grief 'as the response to the loss in all its totality – including its physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and spiritual manifestations' and focus on responses to bereavement. We use the term 'grief education' – rather than 'death education' – because it includes individual responses to death as well as the fact of our mortality. While an exploration of life and death can help some learners process bereavement, children and young people also need opportunities to explore the emotional and social aspects of how it affects us when someone we love dies. Pupils should understand that there are many different ways to grieve, be able to discuss bereavement confidently and compassionately, and develop a variety of strategies to manage their emotions, relate to bereaved people, and access further support. It is important that the words 'death', 'grief' and 'bereavement' are specifically referenced in the core curriculum to ensure these topics are covered; however, as the England-based PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) Association (2022) observes, learning about bereavement and grief can also help learners who are affected by other types of losses (including parental separation or changes in friendship groups): 'Children and young people can experience a range of significant changes and losses before they reach adulthood. So it's essential that we support them to explore change, loss and grief safely and effectively, and to seek support when needed'. For this reason, we often describe grief education as teaching about 'grief, death and loss'.

Drawing on evidence, we argue that grief education should be a mandatory component of the central curriculum of wellbeing and relationships education in each UK country. The legislation should mandate that children and young people return to grief-related topics at each stage of their education, allowing them to build their understanding of these concepts in age-appropriate

steps. As American-Canadian psychologist Leviton (1977, p41) explains, 'formal and informal death education, like education about human sexuality, should be developmental and systematic'. Schools can use the kind of policies that are already in place for sex education and religious education to communicate with parents and carers about the content of classes and initiatives, working with them to ensure that learners are supported appropriately at home and at school. They should teach sensitively with an awareness of religious and cultural diversity and draw on the grief education resources and expertise already made available by charities and other organisations. The requirement to teach about grief and death in wellbeing classes will enable educational professionals to make use of 'teachable moments' which arise naturally (Carson, 1987, USA)<sup>5</sup> integrate discussions about the topics into other subjects<sup>6</sup> and facilitate extracurricular events, partnerships with grief-related organisations and other grief awareness initiatives.

## Why include grief, death and loss in the core curriculum?

Studies from across the world have demonstrated that children and young people who take part in dedicated grief education programmes are more able to understand, manage and communicate their feelings about death, bereavement and grief (Lee *et al.*, 2009; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018a)<sup>7</sup> often exhibiting less death anxiety (Glass, 1990)<sup>8</sup>. Researchers recommend that grief education should be proactive, allowing pupils to learn about grief, death, and loss outside of the context of a traumatic event (Aspinall, 1996; Work Group on Palliative Care for Children, 1999; Holland, 2001). Although it is natural to want to shield children from upsetting truths, even very young children have a concept of death and benefit from talking about it (Paul, 2019; Martinčková *et al.*, 2020; Menendez *et al.*, 2020). The Work Group on Palliative Care for Children (1999, p460) concluded that 'children and adolescents are always better off when they confront death and other difficult challenges in life from a foundation of proper preparation'. The Scottish National Childhood Bereavement Project (2022, p27) agrees: 'We should prepare for grief like we prepare for a fire in schools, proactively preparing people for the possibility that they are bereaved instead of being reactive when it's too late.' Grief education can contribute to this goal, ensuring all

young people are as prepared as possible for a death in their lives.

Furthermore, evidence generally suggests that children and young people are keen to learn about grief, death and loss in school. Although some raised concerns (see 'Is grief too sensitive a topic for the classroom?' below), most of the 99 bereaved young people who reported to the UK Commission on Bereavement (2022) and many of the 31,000 others who took part in the accompanying VotesforSchools (2022) survey supported the idea of grief education in schools, often recognising that death is a universal experience and that it would be helpful to learn skills to cope and support others even if the topics can be difficult to discuss<sup>9</sup>. When a 2012 Ofsted survey asked 11–18-year-olds in England 'which PSHE education topics they would like to learn about in school but currently did not', 'coping with bereavement' was the most popular response, suggested by 37% of the 178 young people in the sample (Ofsted, 2013, p10). Younger children also want more opportunities for grief education, with every one of the 32 9–12-year-olds who took part in Paul (2019, pp565–6) asserting that adults should talk to them about these topics and many demonstrating curiosity about both the physical aspects of death ('How long does it take to die?'; 'Do you still feel or see?') and the emotional aspects of grief ('How can you help other people?'; 'Why does the pain keep coming back like a swarm of bees all the time?'). These recent studies reinforce earlier findings: for example, nearly three-quarters of the Scottish primary school children surveyed in Bowie (2000) thought about death, while most of the British teenagers who took part in Jackson and Colwell (2001) believed that death and loss should be integrated into the curriculum, starting in primary school. Although parents and carers will always be the primary educators of their children, school can provide opportunities to reflect on bereavement, death and grief.

As Ribbens McCarthy and Jessop (2005, p69) explain, 'death education needs to be much more widely and systematically included in schools, as a key aspect of general education for life, and as a way of equipping individuals to help both themselves and others through mutual support and understanding in relation to bereavement experiences'. This kind of wide and systematic learning can only be guaranteed with clear legislative guidelines that require schools to provide

learners with opportunities to think and talk about grief, death and loss in developmentally appropriate steps. Evidence suggests that the most effective personal development teaching programmes usually operate through a 'spiral curriculum' which allows learners to revisit topics and build on their previous learning (Ofsted, 2013; PSHE Association, 2017). Some individuals and government bodies have advised against overly prescribing the personal development curriculum (House of Commons Education Committee (England), 2015). However, the National Association of Head Teachers (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), the National Union of Teachers (England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man), Ofsted (England), PSHE Association (England) and others have linked non-statutory status to poorer quality of provision (PSHE Association, 2016) and optional topics (especially those that could be sensitive or controversial) are sometimes avoided (Ofsted, 2013). It is important that grief, death and loss are included in the curriculum of each country of the UK to ensure all children and young people receive adequate grief education.

## How would mandatory grief education help bereaved learners?

Grief is a natural response to bereavement, but studies from the UK and the rest of the world suggest that unresolved grief can affect a child's emotional and physical wellbeing (Fauth *et al*, 2009; Akerman & Statham, 2014; McLaughlin *et al*, 2019), leaving them at higher risk of depression (Harrison & Harrington, 2001; Gray *et al*, 2011; Bylund-Grenklo *et al*, 2016)<sup>10</sup>, anxiety (Worden & Silverman, 1996; Bolton *et al*, 2016), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Stoppelbein & Greening, 2000), low self-esteem and social withdrawal (Worden & Silverman, 1996), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Bolton *et al*, 2016) and conduct disorders (Kaplow *et al*, 2010)<sup>11</sup>. Although all young people respond differently, childhood bereavement has also been associated with struggles with concentration and lower academic outcomes (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004; Elsner *et al*, 2022), alcohol and substance misuse (Sweeting *et al*, 1998; Hamdan *et al*, 2013)<sup>12</sup>, teenage pregnancy (Sweeting *et al*, 1998), unemployment (Parsons, 2011), violent criminal convictions (Wilcox *et al*, 2010) and suicide (Gulldin *et al*, 2015; Bolton *et al*, 2016)<sup>13</sup>. As Ribbens

McCarthy and Jessop (2005, p42) observe, 'for all young people experiencing a significant bereavement there is the potential for both short- and long-term consequences, particularly where general resources (personal, social and material) are low, or other stressors are high'. These findings demonstrate the significant and lasting impact of child bereavement and the need to equip children and young people with the knowledge and support mechanisms that might help them cope. All four countries of the UK have committed to teaching about mental wellbeing at school<sup>14</sup> and learning about grief, death and loss should be part of this provision.

While mandatory grief education cannot take away the pain of a bereavement and many children will need further support, it could ameliorate some of the difficulties for some bereaved children by providing them with a vocabulary and framework to understand and express their feelings (Duncan, 2020). It could also prepare other pupils to understand and support bereaved friends and classmates, normalising the varied and volatile emotions that follow the death of a family member or friend and benefitting all involved (Paul, 2019; Duncan, 2020)<sup>15</sup>. Holland's research (2004) on schools in Hull, England, reports that bereaved children can feel excluded if no one in their class ever talks about death and grief, or acknowledges that someone they love has died. Findings from the USA and Denmark suggest that young people can also be isolated by peers asking insensitive questions or treating them as if it is strange to have been bereaved of a family member (la Freniere & Cain, 2015; Lytje, 2018). Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Lytje (2020, p96) note that supporting a bereaved pupil's return to school 'includes supporting classmates and friends on how to welcome the bereaved child back, how to talk about the loss and how to be a good friend when someone is mourning'. Although adults often expect that bereaved children will only seek support from family and school staff, 65% of the 31 Scottish 12–18-year-olds who responded to Scott *et al's* (2019) survey reported that they turned to friends in difficult situations, with 20% suggesting they would look to boyfriends or girlfriends. It is essential that we equip learners with the knowledge and skills to have these kinds of conversations with each other, and also to relate to bereaved peers 'like normal' when appropriate. As researchers such as Ribbens McCarthy (2006) have noted, some young people like to maintain a

separation between their home and school lives, so learners should know that it is okay for a bereaved person to say they do not want to discuss their bereavement, either on a particular day or on any day, and that these wishes should be respected. By normalising different reactions to bereavement, grief education and grief awareness initiatives could help ensure that all children and young people are prepared to relate to a bereavement with compassion and understanding.

## What is the current provision for grief education across the UK?

Each country of the UK sets its own curriculum expectations, but none currently requires schools to teach about grief or bereavement (see Appendix 2 in the supplementary file). In England, there are statutory and non-statutory components of PSHE education. The mandatory components are legislated by the government, and there are also guidelines produced by the PSHE Association, a government-funded membership association and charity. Since September 2020, it has been compulsory to teach relationships education at all primary schools; relationships and sex education (RSE) at all secondary schools; and health education at all state-funded schools (Department for Education (England), undated). However, grief education is not included in the new statutory guidance, which only references bereavement as one of the common 'adverse childhood experiences' teachers should be aware of when they teach (Department for Education (England), 2019). In its response to the government consultation about this guidance, Childhood Bereavement Network suggested several small additions to ensure schools provide opportunities for young people to learn about these topics (Childhood Bereavement Network, undated c). However, none of the proposed changes to the teaching recommendations were implemented. Even when the Department for Education released additional guidance alerting primary and secondary schools to PSHE topics that children and young people may need to discuss following Covid lockdowns, they do not mention bereavement (Department for Education (England), 2021a, 2021b). The PSHE Association programme of study references 'death' or 'bereavement' at each key stage until pupils are 16, scaffolding learning into age-appropriate chunks to create a spiral curriculum (PSHE Association,

2020). However, these guidelines are not mandatory and may not be widely used as only 50,000 teachers are members of the PSHE Association (PSHE Association, undated) while 512,000 were working in England during the last school workforce census in November 2021 (Teachers and Teaching Statistics Team (England), 2022). In October 2022, John Adams, the President of the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD), launched a petition to integrate compulsory death, dying and bereavement content into the curriculum (Adams, 2022).

Scotland has very little curriculum legislation<sup>16</sup>; however, the Curriculum for Excellence (introduced in August 2010) provides a national framework for teaching which details the expectations for learning and achievement at each curriculum level from pre-school to around 14 or 15 years old (S3) (Scottish Government, 2008). This curriculum prioritises pupils' personal development, including health and wellbeing (HWB) as both a dedicated curriculum area and part of the skills for learning, life and work which should be embedded 'across learning' as the responsibility of all school staff (Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), 2006; Scottish Government, 2009). The key document in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence is the Experiences and Outcomes, a list of statements which set out the expected learning. These include a requirement to teach about loss: 'I am learning skills and strategies which will support me in challenging times, particularly in relation to change and loss' (Education Scotland, 2009, pp13, 80). However, there are no specific references to grief, death and bereavement within the HWB sections of this document. Thus Professor Sally Paul has observed that many Scottish schoolchildren only have more generalised discussions about non-death-related 'loss': 'Children will talk about transitions to different classes, talk about that as loss and change which it absolutely is – but that's an easier conversation to have than loss and change through death' (Wilson, 2020). Furthermore, as the same statement applies to all levels of education, it does not enable a spiral curriculum and is not referenced in the other key document for school curriculum planning in Scotland, Benchmarks (National Improvement Hub (Scotland), 2022). The frequently asked questions for the Benchmarks explains that 'they do not assign levels' parts of HWB because 'progression in HWB is neither linear nor coherent' (Education Scotland, 2008,

p5); however, the Experiences and Outcomes already encourage flexibility to allow learners to develop at their own pace (Scottish Government, 2008), and it seems that not scaffolding learning for learning about 'change and loss' could potentially leave some teachers uncertain about what to cover. Sameena Javed's 2020 petition for 'compulsory bereavement education' was rejected by the Scottish Government because the Curriculum for Excellence is not statutory and the National Childhood Bereavement Co-Ordinator, Denisha Killoh, was developing a plan to better support bereaved children (Scottish Parliament, 2021). The final report of the National Childhood Bereavement Project (2022) recommends that sensitive, multicultural bereavement education is embedded into the school curriculum as part of a whole-school approach to grief and death which requires universal bereavement training for school staff and an accessible bank of grief-related resources. We have yet to see whether these recommendations will be integrated into the key documents for Scotland, including the Curriculum for Excellence.

Wales is currently transferring onto a new Curriculum for Wales, which was introduced in primary schools in September 2022 and will roll out to all years of mandatory education by 2026 (Education Wales, undated). The old Personal and Social Education (PSE) Framework contains two references to 'loss and change' and one reference to 'the mysteries of life and death' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008, pp12, 23a, 13). However, these together are not sufficiently specific to ensure adequate grief education; the 'loss and change' requirement could be interpreted in terms of non-death-related loss (as Paul observes of the similar clause in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence) and the 'mysteries of life and death' does not necessarily prescribe a discussion of bereavement and grief. Furthermore, neither the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience nor the RSE Code for the new Curriculum for Wales references 'grief', 'death', 'bereavement' or 'loss' (Welsh Government, 2022; Welsh Government Hwb, undated b). Thus, while the curriculum lists supporting learners to become 'healthy, confident individuals' with a range of skills to manage feelings and relationships as one of its four purposes (Welsh Government Hwb, undated a), it marks a step backwards for grief education in Wales.

The Northern Irish curriculum implemented in 2007 mandates for some form of personal development education from early years settings to the end of mandatory education aged 16: it is part of 'Personal development and mutual understanding' (PD&MU) in primary schools and 'Learning for life and work' in secondary schools (Department of Education (Northern Ireland), undated c)<sup>17</sup>. The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order 2007 and the Education (Other Skills) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 which set out the minimum content that all pupils must be taught at each stage of their education do not mention grief, bereavement, death or loss, despite the strong focus on emotional and social learning and self-expression (Department of Education (Northern Ireland), 2007a, 2007b)<sup>18</sup>. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) provides schools with non-statutory guidance for implementing the minimum requirements and includes 'loss' among the example topics 'from which teachers may wish to select' for Key Stages 1 and 2 (which cover all of primary school) and Key Stage 3 (the first three years of secondary school); 'bereavement' is referenced in the introduction to the Key Stage 3 guidance, and 'the death of a relative/friend' appears in the discussion of personal development at Key Stage 4 (the final years of mandatory schooling) (CCEA (Northern Ireland), 2007, undated c, undated a). The freely accessible primary progression grid and teaching resources for primary and secondary schools explicitly consider issues related to grief (see CCEA (Northern Ireland), n.d.-b and Appendix 1 in the supplementary file). As CCEA is a public body with a large scope and none of its materials are behind a paywall, it is possible that its guidance is more widely used than the PSHE Association guidelines are in England; however, grief education remains non-statutory.

Nearly all curriculum areas have a role to play in grief education; the Scottish National Childhood Bereavement Project (2022) report notes the importance of young people learning about end-of-life customs so they can support friends from different backgrounds. It also observes that foreign languages classes often ask learners to describe their families, but do not teach the words for death or bereaved, making it difficult for bereaved children to describe these aspects of their family if they want to. There are opportunities for discussions about grief, death and loss in the

curricula of all four countries of the UK (see Appendix 2 in the supplementary file). For example, all primary school science curricula teach children about lifecycles, and there is potential to explore themes related to bereavement in English, Welsh, Gaelic, and the humanities, although no curricula mandates the specific themes that must be studied (see, for example: Education Scotland, 2009; Department for Education (England), 2013, 2013, 2015; Department of Education (Northern Ireland) 2007a; Welsh Government Hwb, undated d, undated e). The legislation or guidelines for religious education sometimes require or recommend teaching about life and death, life after death, or death rituals (Education Scotland, 2009; Department for Children, Schools and Families (England), 2010; Department of Education (Northern Ireland), undated a; Welsh Government Hwb, undated c), perhaps enabling pupils to explore the spiritual and some of the social aspects of grief. However, grief and bereavement are not specified in any of these curriculum areas, and, without the requirement that pupils learn about grief, death and loss when they are learning about feelings and relationships, it seems less likely that teachers will incorporate the topics into their subjects.

Evidence demonstrates that grief education is not adequately provided in UK schools. Child Bereavement UK (2018) reported that just over half of the 1000+ British teachers who responded to its study reported that death-related topics featured somewhere in their curricula, but few mentioned teaching about bereavement specifically. The 9–12-year-olds who took part in Paul (2019, p563) reported that teachers glossed over the topic of death even when it was relevant, with several pupils recalling a time when a teacher stopped reading a story about parental bereavement 'because that story was a sadder story' so they read it on their own; a bereaved boy also remembered that his class had not been told about his father's death 'and therefore did not know how to respond to his absence in a way that was helpful': 'I remember Luke coming up to me and shouting "where you been?" And then a big big big big big crowd surrounded me'. Scott *et al* (2019, p6) also found that death-related topics are 'seldom taught', even to older children. These findings suggest that the current legislative provision for grief education in UK schools is insufficient.

## Is grief too sensitive a topic for the classroom?

Some research suggests that grief education should happen at home. In a small study by Scott *et al* (2019), most of the parents, students and staff from a Scottish secondary school asserted that families are the best people to have difficult conversations with young people. The respondents to a slightly larger study in the Republic of Ireland (McGovern & Barry, 2000) also believed that children should learn about bereavement and death at home. Some of the common objections to grief education in schools – from believing that the topics are too private or individual for the classroom to worrying that educational professionals might teach their personal or religious views – are also raised about sex and relationships education in schools (see, for example: House of Commons Education Committee (England), 2015). Teachers can be unwilling to teach grief education because they 'view death as a taboo subject' (Paul, 2019, p558), are worried about saying the wrong thing (Scott *et al*, 2019), or have their own painful experiences of bereavement (Rowling, 1995). 61.6% of the secondary-school pupils and 41.9% of the younger pupils who responded to the VotesforSchools (2022) survey as part of the UK Commission on Bereavement (2022) believed that grief and death should not be taught in the classroom, arguing that the topics are too personal and could trigger strong feelings. Some suggested that bereaved young people would be better served by other support services, especially if teachers were insufficiently trained.

However, both the UK Commission on Bereavement (2022) and the Scottish National Childhood Bereavement Project (2022) found general support for school-based grief education from both children and adults. A common concern among pupils who objected in the VotesforSchools (2022) study was that they might be forced to talk about their own emotions or experiences, not recognising that grief education in school would focus on generalised discussions rather than personal experiences, and that learners who have experienced a bereavement would be allowed to opt out (see 'Are there sufficient resources to support sensitive grief education?'). The support for school-based grief education is corroborated by other studies. When the YouGov (2021) 'daily question' for 16 March 2021 asked 'do you think the subject of death, and issues around dying,

should or should not be taught in schools?', 67% of 4028 British adults responded 'it should', while only 13% responded that 'it should not'; a greater proportion of younger adults were positive about the prospect of death education, with 74% of 18–24-year-olds and 71% of 25–49-year-olds responding 'it should' compared with 65% of 50–64-year-olds and 56% of people aged 65 or older. Similarly, 75% of the British adults who responded to the Childhood Bereavement Network (2017) survey reported that they would have liked to learn about death and bereavement in school.

Furthermore, even when studies identify the home as the primary place for death education, the participants do not necessarily object to learning about grief, death and loss in the classroom; all the teachers surveyed in Scott *et al* (2019) believed schools were also suitable places to have difficult conversations, and a high proportion of participants in McGovern and Barry (2000, p329) 'disagreed that death education in schools would interfere with parental responsibilities'. This evidence suggests that grief education should not be excluded from the classroom, but as with all challenging topics, should be integrated sensitively in collaboration with parents and carers, with an awareness of learners' and teachers' personal, cultural and religious circumstances and no requirement to discuss individual experiences.

## Are there sufficient resources to support sensitive grief education?

Schools in all countries of the UK already have policies to engage with families about the content of sex education and religious education, and some also offer parents and carers the right to withdraw their child from parts of the curriculum (see for example Education Scotland, 2009; Department for Children, Schools and Families (England), 2010; Department for Education (England), 2019; Welsh Government Hwb, 2022; Department of Education (Northern Ireland), undated c, summarised in Appendix 2 in the supplementary file). These procedures could also support grief education, allowing teachers to communicate what will be covered and parents, carers and young people to ask questions and raise concerns. It is important that bereaved children and young people are given a voice in which (if any) parts of grief education they would like to attend; their needs and feelings may be different at different times, so they should always be prewarned of grief-related

classes or events and given permission to opt out or leave if they become uncomfortable, even if their bereavement is a long time ago or they have previously chosen to participate in something similar (Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Lytje, 2020).

The PSHE Association (2021, p11) recommends that sensitive topics should be taught through 'distancing the learning' and allowing pupils to approach issues and ideas in general terms, rather than asking them to discuss personal experiences. One way to achieve this is through stories; researchers from across the world have suggested that grief education can make use of resources like children's literature, news reports, films and television programmes, or techniques like simulation games (see, for example: Klingman, 1983; Bertman, 1995; Jackson & Colwell, 2002; Magnet & Tremblay-Dion, 2018). As Ward and Associates (1996, p239) explain, 'books about death provide us with pegs on which to base our explanations to children, but they also enable both the children and ourselves to explore a potentially frightening topic in a less threatening way'. Stories can help children understand that everyone grieves differently, and teachers can also open up conversations about grief, death, and loss by encouraging pupils to research bereavement customs in other countries or different historical periods (Jackson & Colwell, 2002). Creative approaches can also provide a safe space for young people to explore these ideas: for example, Blake *et al* (2020) reported that secondary-school pupils in Norwich, England, were more confident in thinking and talking about death after taking part in a storytelling project about bereavement, and the St Christopher's Schools Programme ran 34 arts-based projects to bring together schools and hospices or care homes in London between 2005 and 2011 (Tsiris *et al*, 2011). Charities and organisations have created a variety of different lesson plans which help teachers 'distance the learning' through using stories (for example, Child Bereavement UK's 'Elephant's Tea Party' for learners aged 5–14 and many of the PSHE-Association-accredited Winston's Wish lesson plans for learners aged 5–16) or creative activities coupled with discussion questions (such as the online toolkit recently released by Child Bereavement UK in collaboration with Learning Grid for London, 'Having honest conversations about death and grief', for learners aged 5–16). There is some evidence that these resources reduce children's anxiety about death and bereavement by

building their knowledge about grief and ways to find support. A Year 5 teacher, Ellen Watson, observed many positive changes after using 'Having honest conversations about grief and death' with her class: 'I've seen from the children that they feel more calm when talking about death, they feel more ready if they were to experience a death in their life, of a loved one' (Child Bereavement UK & Learning Grid for London, 2018). A small evaluation of Elephant's Tea Party in a secondary school showed that the resource was 'accessible' for teachers and gave students 'a more nuanced understanding of how they could respond to and cope with bereavement both now and in the future' (Education Scotland, 2018, pp2–3). The charity sector has also produced guidance on extending learning beyond the curriculum, with Childhood Bereavement Network offering a free audit tool to help schools with 'Growing in grief awareness'. Schools may choose to collaborate with charities, local healthcare centres or other organisations when designing their grief education programme.

Evidence from the UK and the rest of the world suggests that grief education training courses greatly increase educational professionals' confidence in discussing death and bereavement with their pupils (Work Group on Palliative Care for Children, 1999; Lynagh *et al*, 2010; McManus & Paul, 2019; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021). These courses already exist in the UK in a variety of formats (see Appendix 1 in the supplementary file), but Child Bereavement UK (2018) reported that only 10% of the teachers who responded to their survey had received bereavement training during initial teacher training and only a third accessed it subsequently. Ideally, staff should be able to access training both before and after they qualify. The Scottish National Childhood Bereavement Project (2022) suggests bereavement training should be included in initial teacher training for new teachers and delivered to current staff like annual child protection training or through accredited programmes. UK charities and organisations have also produced a wealth of resources to help schools protect the wellbeing of staff covering these challenging topics, including peer support mechanisms (see Appendix 1 in the supplementary file).

Introducing new topics into the curriculum can be both costly and time-consuming, putting pressure on already limited resources. However, much of the infrastructure that would be required to teach

grief education is already available. We have collated a list of resources in Appendix 1 (in the supplementary file) to help schools identify suitable teaching plans, training programmes, and other helpful documents. Furthermore, evidence suggests that making a subject mandatory often encourages schools, local education authorities and teacher training providers to prioritise it, even if improved provision is not always guaranteed<sup>19</sup>. As grief education is often overlooked, adding grief, bereavement and death to the lists of requirements for health and wellbeing teaching could substantially raise awareness of its importance and of the resources that could help schools teach it sensitively.

## What are the possible implications of integrating grief education into the central curriculum for each UK country?

While educational professionals often work incredibly hard to help their pupils, it is widely acknowledged that many staff at UK schools are insufficiently trained to support children and young people through bereavement (Holland, 2001; Holland & McLennan, 2015). Costelloe *et al* (2020) demonstrate that some teachers are currently risking their own mental health attempting to provide bereavement support without sufficient training. One teacher involved in the study reported: 'I don't think there is enough support or guidance for teachers in this area. It can be an uncomfortable thing to deal with and if you don't get it right, it could be quite bad. I know that I was worried about doing the wrong thing at the time' (p289). Both the UK Commission on Bereavement (2022) and the Scottish National Childhood Bereavement Project (2022) found substantial disparities in the level of staff training and bereavement support available in different schools and different areas, with about a third of the bereaved young people who reported to the UK Commission (2022, p58) saying they were 'not at all supported' by their education setting. These reports reinforce the findings of earlier studies (Tracey & Holland, 2008; Holland & Wilkinson, 2015). Child Bereavement UK (2018) reported that 90% of the British teachers who responded to their survey believed schools should be better prepared for a bereavement and Rowling and Holland (2000) found that only 15% of the 200 English schools they studied had a clear plan for coping

with a death in their school communities, compared with 94% of the 145 Australian schools in their sample. Children from the most socio-economically deprived areas often struggle most to access high quality bereavement support, despite being disproportionately more likely to experience the death of a parent or sibling (Penny, 2010; Abraham-Steele & Edmonds, 2021). Abraham-Steele and Edmonds (2021, p25) have called for a national bereavement policy which 'would help to equalise the quality of support available across the board and would act as a protective factor for bereaved children, increasing equality of outcome for all bereaved children, regardless of socioeconomic background'.

The teacher training that would be needed for mandatory grief education could support this national bereavement policy by increasing teachers' confidence in talking to bereaved pupils, their ability to create a grief-aware learning environment and their knowledge of other services. Duncan (2020) argues that the principles of good grief education often map onto the principles of appropriate bereavement support in schools: 'if teachers adopt a pedagogical approach, giving children the opportunity to explore grief and grieving with care and sensitivity, this will lead to an understanding of death in cultural and religious contexts which will help children manage emotional responses'. Dyregrov, Dyregrov, Pereira, *et al's* (2020) global survey of mental health professionals' views of 'early intervention' for bereaved children also suggested that combining talk and education can be one of the most effective methods of support. Drawing on scholarship which suggests early referrals for professional help can disrupt networks and pathologize grief, Australian researchers Kennedy *et al* (2017, 115) warn against schools trying to 'solve the issue' of a bereaved pupil by offering 'services' for bereavement, rather than compassion and community. Evidence demonstrates that empathetic and sensitive teachers can play a vital role in helping bereaved children manage their grief (Dimery & Templeton, 2021). Schools are often 'ideally suited to offer support at a time where bereaved families might not be able to, because family members are themselves in the throes of grief' (McLaughlin *et al*, 2019, p11) and young people can be more likely to welcome this approach 'when considerations around death, dying and bereavement [are] encouraged as part of the school curriculum' (Duncan, 2020, p12). The UK Commission on

Bereavement (2022, p67) observes that it can be beneficial for schools to have a 'bereavement lead, who might also be the key contact for bereaved pupils', but this does not replace the need for as many educational professionals as possible to access training. As vice-principal Judith Cracken notes when discussing a scheme offering bereavement training to over 100 schools in Northern Ireland in August 2022, 'You don't know who the pupil is going to turn to or feel closest to' (BBC News, 2022). Grief-aware teachers can also help ensure bereaved pupils are pre-warned of lessons that may touch on death. Increased knowledge about grief and bereavement may protect teachers too, helping them understand when a pupil needs more help than they can provide and facilitate appropriate referrals to educational psychologists (EPs), other professionals and support groups. Bereaved children require access to a variety of sources of support; a greater awareness of their needs could allow a team of people to work together for the best outcomes.

Mandatory grief education in schools may also help instigate a wider cultural change. Paul (2019, p568) noted that the children in their study 'restricted' grief-related behaviours partly because of 'socially-constructed norms' of 'when/how grief should be displayed', effectively learning the grief taboo from the adults that surround them. The organisations who reported to the UK Commission on Bereavement (2022, p48) 'highlighted the importance of looking forward when thinking about grief education, and how we can positively influence the next generation to offer understanding and compassion to those who will be bereaved'. The Commission noted that 'the pandemic has exposed a whole generation of children to death, dying and bereavement, and this presents society with an opportunity to change the conversation around this important topic' (p45).

## Conclusion

Mandatory grief education in UK schools is desirable, timely and actionable. Evidence from across the UK and the rest of the world demonstrates that learning about grief, death and loss at school has substantial benefits for both bereaved young people and those who are yet to experience a bereavement. Although there are challenges with dealing with sensitive topics in the classroom, there is general support for grief education among children and adults, and

sufficient resources to help schools implement effective teaching and grief-awareness initiatives. Additional training is needed to enable teachers to talk about grief, death and loss with confidence. Introducing grief education into the requirements for health and wellbeing learning in each country of the UK would make space for a topic which is so often overlooked or sidestepped. It could in turn help normalise and destigmatise bereavement, fostering the development of a more compassionate society.

## Endnotes

- 1 The methodology behind this estimate is described in Unwin *et al* (2022) and Hillis *et al* (2022) provides an updated report on the global picture. Children bereaved during the pandemic have experienced additional challenges (Harrop *et al*, 2022) which, like other mass death events, has had a significant impact on young people's mental health (Coombes, 2020).
- 2 Many of Childhood Bereavement Network's recent responses to national government and policy initiatives can be viewed on its resources page (Childhood Bereavement Network, undated a). The influential 'Grief Matters for Children' campaign also advocates for mandatory grief education in schools (Childhood Bereavement Network, 2017). There are also examples of individuals campaigning for grief education; Sameena Javed, for example, petitioned for policy change in Scotland when her son died and her daughter was not adequately supported (Wilson, 2020), President of the National Association of Funeral Directors John Adams launched a similar petition in England in 2022 (Adams, 2022) and the specialist palliative care team at Gateshead hospital worked with local schools to improve learners' understanding of death and dying (Orr & Henderson, 2020)
- 3 Child Bereavement UK, for instance, trained 16,000 educational professionals between April and July 2020 and added a pandemic section to the secondary school section of 'Having honest conversations about death and grief', an online grief education toolkit recently released in partnership with Learning Grid for London. Marie Curie and Cruse trained 120 teachers as part of a pilot scheme in Northern Ireland in August 2022 (BBC News, 2022). Michael Coombes produced a

- Covid-19 schools support pack which is freely available on request (Coombes, 2020).
- 4 This article focuses on the systems and requirements of UK schools, but some sections will also be relevant internationally; we refer to scholarship from elsewhere when it offers an insight or example of good practice which is relevant to the UK picture.
  - 5 Jackson and Colwell (2002) offer guidance on ways the death of a pet can become a 'teachable moment'.
  - 6 Jackson and Colwell (2002) suggest a huge range of ways to incorporate discussions about death, grief, and loss into different school subjects (from history and geography to maths and science). They recommend integrating topics related to death across the curriculum as an alternative to dedicated grief education. Nevertheless, many of their ideas could also form the basis of health and wellbeing lessons or follow on from conversations more specifically related to grief, death, and loss.
  - 7 Stylianou and Zembylas (2018a) compared the same class's attitudes and knowledge by conducting interviews before and after the educational intervention; Lee *et al* (2009) compared the learners who had participated in the educational intervention with a control group.
  - 8 The Glass (1990) control and experimental groups did not show significantly different levels of death anxiety after the study, but there was a major reduction in the experimental group's death anxiety from pre- to post-test. Studies which suggest grief education can increase death anxiety usually involve adult participants (Knight & Elfenbein, 1993; Maglio & Robinson, 1994).
  - 9 We are grateful to Gail Precious from Childhood Bereavement Network for sharing their initial qualitative analysis of the VotesforSchools data (Precious & Penny, 2022).
  - 10 Some researchers suggest that the incidence of depression in bereaved children reduces over time, and Harrison and Harrington (2001) caution that the association between the death of a family member and depressive symptoms may not be causal. However, Bylund-Grenklo *et al* (2016) found evidence of long-term depression in bereaved children and young people.
  - 11 Grief is a powerful emotion that is often felt physically as well as emotionally, but there has been less research into the long-term physical repercussions of childhood bereavement.
  - 12 Hamdan *et al* (2013) suggest that the higher rate of alcohol and substance misuse in the bereaved young people studied was explained by the higher rate of disruptive behaviour disorders.
  - 13 Other studies suggest that only children whose parents died by suicide are at greater risk of suicide (Wilcox *et al*, 2010).
  - 14 These commitments include: Department of Health & Department for Education (England), 2017; National Assembly for Wales, 2018; Northern Ireland Executive, 2020; Scottish Government, undated.
  - 15 Stylianou and Zembylas (2018b) studied the effects of a grief education programme in Cyprus which taught children the best ways to support bereaved peers.
  - 16 The only curriculum legislation in Scotland is the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 which requires that Gaelic is taught in Gaelic-speaking areas and expects schools to provide religious education, and The Education (National Priorities) (Scotland) Order 2000 which mandates five national priorities for education: achievement and attainment (particularly in literacy and numeracy), framework for learning, inclusion and equality, values and citizenship and learning for life (Kidner, 2010).
  - 17 Relationships and sex education sits within primary 'personal development and mutual understanding' and secondary 'learning for life and work'.
  - 18 The only amendment to these minimum content requirements was released in 2022: it requires that learners in the first few years of secondary school (Key Stage 3) are trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation and automatic external defibrillator awareness (Department of Education (Northern Ireland), 2022).
  - 19 As an example of the effects of statutory status, citizenship became part of the national curriculum for England at Key Stages 3 and 4 in 2002; according to Ofsted, there was 'considerable variation in schools' responses to the new requirements' by July 2002, but most

of the teachers that were leading on citizenship had accessed training and all had audited their current provision (House of Commons Education Committee (England), 2015, p51).

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