

Context and Implications Document for:

Death and dying: A systematic review into approaches used to support bereaved children.

David Duncan

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

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Author's Introduction

The experience of bereavement is common for children. Often coming unexpectedly, death interrupts everyday life and a child's reality becomes a social, emotional and developmental world of chaos. The potential impact of the death is highly unpredictable and complicated. There is no doubt, however, that the experience can be very memorable and stressful. Approximately 112 children are newly bereaved each day in the United Kingdom (Childhood Bereavement Network, n.d.); and, that only reflects those aged 0-17 who experience the death of a parent. Children will grieve deeply as they encounter many uncontrollable changes in, but not limited to: family structure; family finances; geographical location; school; friendships; academic competency; perspectives on life; and love and security. The impact a death is having on a child can relate to behaviour and academic performance, as well as having serious implications on physical and mental health (Funk, Jenkins, Astroth, Braswell and Kerber, 2018; Holland, 2008; Schlozman, 2003). Whether it's the death of a parent, brother, sister, friend, grandparent or other loved one, what truly matters is how the child is feeling and how they are supported. Bereavement may impact adversely over the medium and long term (Holland and Wilkinson, 2015); grief is an ongoing process (Mannarino and Cohen, 2011). Many people will offer their sympathy to children and families - expecting that time will allow them to 'get over it' and 'move on'. However, similar to adults, children learn to live with loss. The death becomes a part of who they are as they adapt to a new life without their loved one. When grieving, children require those around and close to them to help them cope. As a significant part of a child's life, this includes teachers and staff within schools. Yet, research does suggest that practitioners need support in approaching death and dying in the classroom. This review explores the literature on approaches used to support children who are bereaved. The intended audiences for this article are teachers, policy-makers, scholars and any other professionals who may work with bereaved children. The eight emergent themes that were identified in this study are not necessarily what adults *think* is best for bereaved children – but the evidence captures the voices of children who have directly experienced death and is a reflection on how they were (or were not) supported. Adults do have a key role in supporting children experiencing grief and this article outlines how this can be approached in a sensitive, meaningful and hopeful way.

Implications for Policy

The most important consideration for policy makers is that death and dying are considered part of the core curriculum. Children's voices are often missing from debates related to the idea that death has a place in the curriculum and this impacts on how children understand and experience grief. This review can be used to adopt approaches – specific for individual schools, children and families. The identified themes and approaches can act as a catalyst to bring about change in the classroom. The key implications for policy makers are outlined below.

Policy should provide an understanding of the particular difficulties associated with death and how this can impact on a child's attainment, achievement and, more crucially, their mental wellbeing. This issue needs to be influenced by broader policy contexts. There are very strong implications when policy – such as 'Every Child Matters', 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)' and 'Getting it right for every child' (GIRFEC) – draws heavily upon inclusion. Nationally, however, there is still an argument for 'absolute inclusion'. The impact that policy has on the recipients of it needs to

put the onus on schools to show them that they are not meeting the needs of all learners; many children and young people are going unnoticed as they silently grieve. Central to this inclusion debate is the impact of death, dying and bereavement on children's education. One area in particular which is concerning as it can often be non-existent or limited within inclusion and wellbeing policies, is the need to support children and young people who are dealing with significant loss or change. Policy does consider many factors surrounding child development, yet what it fails to show is how bereaved children can be disadvantaged. The concepts of inclusion and wellbeing are rarely a matter of urgency when the grieving process is considered. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that policy should now consider how bereavement impacts on achieving equity in education.

Furthermore, these implications for government policy makers are paralleled for those developing local policies for schools or clusters of schools. The evidence suggests inconsistencies across schools – with pupils better supported in specific areas. Attention needs to be paid to this matter and, consequently, school policies could be developed to improve practices. Teachers are not counsellors, but they need to be equipped with the skills and provided with guidance to tackle this matter. Effective professional development should build up teacher confidence and policy guidance should increase knowledge and understanding. A model where families, teachers and pupils work together needs to be developed. Not all children require professional help following the death of a loved one, but this doesn't mean they should be left to grieve alone and become 'unheard'. Teachers need support for agency to bring about change in their establishments. If death, dying and bereavement are not addressed then schools are failing to include *all* children through a lack of support and understanding (Holland, 2008; Lowton and Higginson, 2003). The unresolved issue of how to address bereavement in schools needs the full support of policy makers at all levels.

Implications for Practice

- Leaders should be fully aware that tackling death and bereavement in schools is not just a matter of pastoral support; it also includes opportunities to learn about life and death. This could develop as part of the curriculum.
- School staff should have an awareness of the potential impact that death may have on children so that they can understand and respond to the needs of their pupils. The review is clear about staff in schools working with families to take this topic forward in a holistic way. There is a need to look at contemporary research and consider the effects of bereavement and to rethink pedagogy appropriately. So, the curriculum should require teachers to teach change and loss and give children the opportunity to learn about the impact of death and how that may have an impact on their life. Teachers should also be equipped to act upon any bereavement which may be present in the classroom.
- A sensitive teacher who is able to acknowledge the needs of the pupil and help them through the mourning process is crucial. Equitable education for bereaved children is not initially about addressing any lower academic issues. Clear procedures need to be put in place to help children and young people with the psychosocial consequences following trauma and loss and the educational challenges that such an event presents. Schools are a place of learning; learning about death can help children belong. Teachers need to be committed to ensuring equity through the removal of barriers to learning which are consequential of bereavement. There is a need to enlarge the scale of focus in career-long professional learning to support teachers to implement approaches. This might include staff training, resource development and clear guidance. In this way, teacher confidence can be increased. Furthermore, the review reveals that bereavement services, such as charities, are willing to work with schools: and often, a community-based approach works well.

- To take immediate action, teachers should address the ‘what ifs’, ‘perhaps’ and ‘maybes’ and integrate a bereavement policy into the classroom: transforming it into proactive pedagogical action. By considering children’s mental, emotional and behavioural development, school teachers will give children a voice.

Despite the fact that all children will experience change and loss, it still remains a taboo topic within schools. Too often it is easiest to turn away, particularly at times when educational pressures take precedence. But, education is about preparation for life and this includes preparation for change and loss. Teachers are best placed to use this research and think about what is most effective for their school staff, families and children. And, ultimately, teaching practices based on this research should place the journey of bereavement alongside the child’s journey of development.

Author Recommends

Holland, J. (2008) How schools can support children who experience loss and death, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 36(4), 411-424, DOI: 10.1080/03069880802364569

With a specific focus on research and curriculum initiatives, this article provides evidence on how schools in one region of England responded when a death occurred. It also explores how we can better prepare children and teachers for these situations and the associated challenges.

Mallon, B. (2011) *Working the bereaved children and young people* (London, SAGE).

This book provides an insight into theories around loss and bereavement – with a specific focus on practice implications for those working with children and young people who are experiencing death. The detailed discussions around resources, case studies and exercises encourage critical engagement with the topic and promote reflective practice.

Nabizadeh, G. (Ed.), Murray, C. (Ed.), Jindal-Snape, D. (Ed.), Vaughan, P. (Ed.), Gunn, A., Bradley, H., ... O'Connor, J. (2019) *When People Die: Stories from Young People*, *University of Dundee, UniVerse* <https://doi.org/10.20933/100001131>

This comic is designed to help young people, parents, teachers, counsellors and anyone who reads it to learn about different perspectives on grief and what grieving means for young people. The stories and scenarios have been written by young people and they capture how it feels to be in the position of a grieving young person.

Ness, P. (2011) *A Monster Calls* (London, Walker Books).

A book for young people and adults, it explores responses to family trauma and death – specifically around the difficulty in facing reality. It explores the themes of fear, loss, courage and trauma in a dark, imaginative way aimed at capturing the minds of young adult readers.

Paul, S. (2019) *Is Death Taboo for Children? Developing Death Ambivalence as a Theoretical Framework to Understand Children’s Relationship with Death, Dying and Bereavement*, *Children & Society*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd and National Children’s Bureau. DOI: 10.1111/chso.12352

This article draws on data from focus groups with children aged 9-12 years old. It explores how the death taboo misrepresents children’s experiences.

Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care. (2018) *A road less lonely: Moving forward with public health approaches to death, dying and bereavement in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Author.

This report discusses ways of moving forward with a public health approach to death, dying and bereavement. It explores what practical action might be taken at a national level to encourage and support open and supportive attitudes and behaviours relating to death, dying and bereavement in Scotland.

Stylianou, P., & Zembylas, M. (2018) Dealing With the Concepts of “Grief” and “Grieving” in the Classroom: Children’s Perceptions, Emotions, and Behavior, *Journal of Death and Dying*, 77(3), 240–266. DOI: 10.1177/0030222815626717

These authors carried out an action research study to explore children’s perceptions of grief and grieving. Two important findings following an intervention program are reflected upon: children can be better equipped to define emotional responses to loss and when talking about grief and grieving children overcome their anxiety.

Teckentrup, B. (2014) *The Memory Tree* (London, Orchard).

This picture book can be used to help children celebrate memories when someone dies. It explores death and its finality. The story captures the importance of telling stories and how this can provide comfort.

Useful Links

The following NHS Education for Scotland website aims to provide support to those directly working with children who are bereaved. The video in the following link is useful for understanding how children feel about death and dying <http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/bereavement/children-who-are-bereaved/>.

Good Grief, an Australian organization, has developed evidence-based loss and grief programmes. The details of these can be found at: <https://www.goodgrief.org.au/>

Richmond’s Hope is a Scottish based charity who value therapeutic play as a means for supporting bereaved children. The following link provides more information: <https://www.richmondshope.org.uk/how-can-we-help/working-with-children/support-a-child/>

A Whole School Approach to Supporting Bereavement and Loss (Scotland): https://www.seemescotland.org/media/8151/whole_school_approach_to_lossandbereavement.pdf
This is a reference toolkit which contains information, further reading and signposting to local and national organisations. It is aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding on the subjects of bereavement, loss and change.

This website is designed specifically for youths – providing a safe space to learn from other young people, explore how to cope with grief and feel less alone. The short film linked on the web page <https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/> reflects on personal journeys of grief, impact of support and the importance of being hopeful.

Focus Questions

1. What are the most important competencies that teachers might need to take forward death and dying as part of the school curriculum?
2. What skills do children and young people need to build up resilience to help them cope with death?
3. How can schools, families and communities work together to support a child experiencing death?
4. As an adult, what are the most important aspects to consider when supporting bereaved children and educating them around death and dying?
5. How can policy makers and practitioners work together to ensure death and dying are considered factors when supporting children’s wellbeing?

Seminar/Project Idea

In encouraging schools to consider how they support bereaved children and how they can include death and dying in the curriculum, prepare a presentation to deliver to teachers. Create a scenario where a child is bereaved and explore the role of the school in ensuring this pupil is supported. Highlight the 'death taboo' that could exist and how this may impact negatively on the pupil (and peers). In contrast, show how rethinking pedagogy and a shift in perspective can make a difference to this child's life. Provide evidence of clear approaches that the school can take to support this bereaved child.

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