



# Is death and grief in the Scottish Curriculum?

A research briefing paper

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## Overview

Death and bereavement are part of everyday life for children. It features in the news, history lessons, video games, literature, film, and television aimed at children, as well as via personal, familial and community experiences when someone they know dies. In Scotland, it is estimated that, by the age of eight, more than half of all children have experienced a bereavement (Paul & Vaswani, 2020) and that their experiences are shaped by the social conditions and environments in which they live. For example, children born into the lowest income households are at greater risk of experiencing the death of a parent or sibling (Paul & Vaswani ). When adults include children by sharing age-appropriate information and education about death and grief, children are less anxious and more prepared to cope when someone dies (Testoni et al., 2020; Wardecker et al., 2017).

Existing research suggests that awareness of, and education for, death and grief is both useful and positive for children. Experiencing open and supportive environments, such as in schools or at home, can help children to

acknowledge death and grief as part of the lifecycle and also understand how to look after themselves and others in the future. Moreover, research has found that children want to learn about death, and that school environments can provide a safe place to do so (Paul, 2019). However, such learning and teaching is not regular practice within formal education and several barriers have been identified in relation to doing this. These barriers are concerned with emotional factors (such as the link with personal experiences of bereavement), a lack of training on managing death and bereavement in the classroom, and limited curricular focus (Rodríguez et al., 2022).

In Scotland, in 2020, a parent-led petition was launched that asked the Scottish Parliament to specifically include bereavement education in the curriculum (Scottish Parliament, 2020). In 2022, a government-funded report on childhood bereavement also argued that bereavement should be part of the core school curriculum (The National Childhood Bereavement Project, 2022). The UK Commission on Bereavement (2022) and Scotland's Bereavement Summit in 2023

further identified the importance of schools in providing education and support concerning death and bereavement (Patterson 2023). This clear interest in providing death and grief education in Scotland, parallels international calls for its mandatory inclusion in school settings (e.g. Dawson et al., 2023; King-McKenzie, 2011; Sonbul & Çelik, 2023).

The Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) aims to develop pupils' knowledge, skills, and attitudes as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors for the 21st century (Education Scotland, 2023). It provides central guidance and national standards relating to curriculum delivery but identifies each school and its teachers as active agents in developing their own curriculum to best meet the needs of their school community (Priestley & Humes, 2010). From this perspective the Scottish curriculum provides the flexibility to engage children in conversation and education around death and grief, yet it is not known to what extent national curriculum guidance promotes the inclusion of death and grief education.

## The Research

We conducted research to explore the range of opportunities that exist within the Scottish curriculum to support the inclusion of death and grief education. We wanted to better understand the variety of factors that inhibit or support such practice and, in turn, consider how these opportunities influence children's understanding of, and engagement with, death and grief.

We recruited a group of professionals to the project who were involved in: i) education at local and national levels (including curriculum design and teaching); ii) bereavement care for children; or iii) research and/or policy relating to public health approaches to death and bereavement. We asked them to prepare a list of key words and phrases concerning death and grief that would prompt or promote its inclusion in education. We also asked the group to identify curricular documents that direct what is taught in schools.

Thirty-five terms and 30 curricular documents were identified (see Table 1). The curricular documents were selected on the basis that they define Scotland's curriculum for Broad General Education, that is, Scotland's national educational framework for everything that should be planned and designed for children and young people aged 3 – 15 years. We searched the documents to see if the identified terms appeared, and if so, how each term related to the inclusion of death or grief education. The presence of terms was considered relevant if they met the following criteria: *term is associated with death and grief, as well as normalising or raising awareness of, teaching on, and/or supporting death, dying, loss and bereavement in school communities.*

We then drew on the theories of death systems (Paul, 2019) and death ambivalence (Kastenbaum & Moreman, 2018) to provide a framework to deepen our understanding of the presence and absence of death- and grief-related terms in the curriculum, across subjects and educational level, and the associated implications.

Table 1: List of search terms and selected curricula documents

Search terms	Documents
<p>Death/decease; grief; bereavement; loss; emotions; coping; euthanasia; genocide; heaven; illness; memory; mourning; change; life; trauma; compassion; feelings; funeral; pain; religious; ritual; terminal; cancer; mental health/wellbeing; nurture; relationship; suicide; support; hospice; old age; palliative; pass; tradition; holocaust.</p> <p><i>Note: we searched for root words and varied word classes to locate word variations of each term across the documents (e.g., searches of the term death/deceased also found results for die, died, dies, dying, dead, deceased, etc.).</i></p>	<p>(1) Curriculum for Excellence (CfE): one document covering 16 sections, including a section emphasising the responsibility of all practitioners, Experiences and Outcomes (Es&amp;Os) &amp; Principles and Practice, covering eight curriculum areas: expressive arts, health and wellbeing, languages, mathematics, religious and moral education, sciences, social studies, and technologies (Education Scotland, 2023); (2) Building the Curriculum Series (Scottish Executive, 2006, 2007, 2008, Scottish Government 2009, 2010a—d, 2011); (3) Statement for Practitioners (Education Scotland, 2016); (4) Benchmark Statements (Education Scotland, 2017a-p); (5) Refreshed Narrative (Education Scotland, 2019a); (6) Milestones to Support Learners with Complex Additional Support Needs (Education Scotland, 2019b); (7) Realising the Ambition: Being Me (Education Scotland, 2020)</p>

## Findings

As shown in Table 2, only 12 of the 35 terms were present in the documents as relevant to teaching on death or grief.

These terms were in 'Religious Education for Roman Catholic Schools', 'Religious and Moral Education', 'Health and Wellbeing and 'Science' subjects, across all levels of education.

The terms *death*, *life*, *religious* (or *religion*) and *tradition* mostly appeared in 'Religious Education for Roman Catholic Schools', concerning teaching on the life and death of Jesus, but also in 'Religious and Moral Education' as part of teaching around religious beliefs on major life events, life after death and the meaning of life. 'Religious and Moral Education' also included the term *euthanasia*, as an example of learning about moral issues within the context of Christianity and other world religions. The term *dead* and *life* also appeared in 'Science'. Here, the term *dead* related to understanding the process of decomposition (*dead* material or decay, at level 2) and *life* in relation to learning about the lifecycles of plants and animals and the difference between living and non-living things (at early, first, second and fourth levels).

The terms *loss*, *change*, *coping*, *mental health/wellbeing*, *support*, and *trauma* were included in 'Health and Wellbeing' (HWB). *Loss*, *change*, and *support* appeared as part of repeated statement, across all levels of education, around students learning "skills and strategies which will support [them] in challenging times, particularly in relation to *change* and *loss*" (Education Scotland, 2023, p. 13&80). The term *trauma* appeared as an appendix in HWB that discussed how a student or family may experience adverse

or traumatic experiences experiences, and the need for staff to "prevent difficulties and build resilience" (Education Scotland, 2023, p. 39). The term *coping* appeared a further time in HWB in relation to learning to "cope with uncertainty and recover more successfully from traumatic events" (Education Scotland, 2023, p. 18&98).

Outside of the HWB subject area, the terms *loss*, *bereavement*, *trauma*, and *mental health/wellbeing* appeared in a document which focused specifically on early level learning and recognised these experiences as some of the broader issues that can impact on a child's capacity to learn.

Of the 35 search terms, 23 did not appear at all, or *did* appear but not in relevant contexts. Ten of the 23 terms were present but were not used in contexts specifically associated with death and grief. These terms were: *emotion* (n=164 across the documents), *compassion* (n=26), *feeling* (n=203), *nurture* (n=46), *relationship* (n=319), *memory* (n=8), *ritual* (n=12), *war* (n=1), *cancer* (n=3) and *pass* (n=16). The remaining thirteen terms were not present at all. These included: *grief*, *funeral*, *suicide*, *genocide*, *heaven*, *illness*, *mourning*, *pain*, *terminal*, *hospice*, *old age*, *palliative*, and *holocaust*. The absence of terms impacted how present terms could be interpreted. For example, in HWB, although the terms *loss* and *change* were mentioned in the documents, this was not explicitly related to the experience of *grief* or *loss* through death. Likewise, despite the curriculum giving attention to religious traditions and beliefs, there was no direct focus given to death traditions, for example, by using the term *funeral* or *heaven*. None of the terms appeared in any language subjects, expressive arts, numeracy and mathematics, social studies, and technologies subjects.

## Discussion and Key Points

Opportunities exist in the Scottish curriculum to engage children and young people in education about death and grief, at all levels of education. This is supported by a flexible curriculum and policy context that encourages schools to respond to the individual needs of their pupils and wider school community.

Opportunities for education on death and grief mostly appeared in 'Religious Education for Roman Catholic Schools' and 'Religious and Moral Education' subjects. This mirrors existing research that suggests religious studies provide discrete opportunities for developing children's awareness of death (Sánchez-Huete et al., 2022; Sonbul & Çelik, 2023). Yet this subject alone cannot provide children with a full awareness of death and grief as part of human experience. Instead, an interdisciplinary approach is required that includes learning on the biological, sociological, and psychological aspects of these topics (Sonbul & Çelik, 2023).

Outwith religious education, the terms appeared in 'Health and Wellbeing' and

'Science' subjects. Here, however, the terms were used ambiguously, limiting their educational opportunity. For example, in 'Health and Wellbeing', learning related to *coping* with, and support around, *loss* and *change* was not explicitly related to the experience of *illness*, *death*, *bereavement*, or *grief*. Similarly, in 'Science', *life* was included as part of learning about lifecycles, but this focused on how life begins and on living, as opposed to aging and dying. Consequently, if staff are uncomfortable and/or lack training and/or confidence to engage children in conversations about death and grief, not being specifically required to include these topics inhibits related teaching.

Ensuring that death and grief is equitably taught across Scottish schools requires recognising the integral role that teachers play as curriculum developers and implementers (Priestley & Humes, 2010). Within the current curriculum guidance, this requires raising awareness of the importance of such education and the opportunities to do so, alongside ensuring that staff have the confidence and resources to engage with such topics. Greater specificity within the curriculum

on death-related topics would further support their inclusion in education. This would not require significant change. Instead, it would involve including and integrating key terms, such as those missing from this analysis, across the existing curriculum to directly focus on the inclusion of death and grief education. This approach recognises the rights and agency of children to explore their relationship to life and death, individually and socially. In doing so, it supports an open culture around death, dying and grief, whereby related support needs are more likely to be raised, recognised, and meaningfully addressed.

### Further Information

This briefing provides a summary of the research presented in the following paper:

Paul, S., del Carpio, L., Rodríguez, P. & A. de la Herrán, A. (2023) Death in the Scottish curriculum: Denying or confronting?, *Death Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/07481187.2023.2283450](https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2023.2283450)

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Table 2: Terms present in the documents that were relevant to education on death and grief by document and by education level.

Terms	Total number of appearances	Number of relevant appearances	Number of relevant presences by document	Education Level						
				Early	First	Second	Third	Fourth	All	
death; decease	18	16	Es&Os: RERC			2	1	1	1	
			Es&Os: RME				1			
			Benchmarks: RME			1				
			Benchmarks: RERC	1	2	2	1	2		
			Benchmarks: Sciences			1				
bereavement	1	1	Realising the Ambition: Being Me	1						
loss	20	3	Realising the Ambition: Being Me	1						
			Es&Os: HWB Across Learning, Responsibilities of All							1
coping	24	2	Es&Os: HWB							1
			Es&Os: HWB Across Learning, Responsibilities of All							1
change	318	2	Es&Os: HWB Across Learning, Responsibilities of All							1
			Es&Os: HWB							1
life	1154	45	Building the Curriculum 4: Skills for Learning, Skills for Life and Skills for Work	1**						
			Es&Os: RME			4				
			Principles and Practice: RERC							1
			Es&Os: RERC		2*	3*	2*	3*		1
			Es&Os: Sciences		1	1				
			Benchmarks: RME		1	4	1	1		
			Benchmarks: RERC		3	5	2	3		
			Benchmarks: Sciences	2	2	5		1		
			Realising the Ambition: Being Me	3						
			Es&Os: HWB Across Learning, Responsibilities of All							1
trauma	10	5	Es&Os: HWB						1	
mental health/wellbeing support	96	1	Realising the Ambition: Being Me	1						
			Es&Os: HWB Across Learning, Responsibilities of All							1
euthanasia	1	1	Es&Os: HWB							1
			Benchmarks: RME				1			
religious	470	15	Es&Os: RME (n4)			1	2		1	
			Es&Os: RERC (n1)		1*	1*				
			Benchmarks: RME (n8)	2		2	3	1		
			Benchmarks: RERC (n2)		1	1				
tradition	118	3	Benchmarks: RME (n3)			1	1	1		

Note: Es&Os: Experiences and Outcomes. RERC: Religious Education in Roman Catholic Schools. RME: Religious and Moral Education. HWB: Health and Wellbeing. \*Term mentioned as part of more than one education level simultaneously, so counts do not add up to total number of mentions. \*\*Term not explicitly applying to any particular level, however reference relates to Es&Os at Early level.

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