

# Compassionate School Communities

Embedding a culture and practice  
of grief education and bereavement  
support in educational settings



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Homeless Love by Emma Papaconstantinou

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### Homeless Love

Everyone loves love;  
They love a companion's embrace,  
They love a mother's soothing touch,  
They love a sweet note.

But what about love with nowhere to go?  
This abandoned, derelict adoration.  
Love that is a river rushing and gushing  
and flushing  
With water filled to the brim threatening to  
flood the banks  
Hoping and pleading for the open waters  
Yet there is no place for it to go.

I hate this  
I hate it  
I hate EVERYTHING about it  
I hate how everyone's love is like the  
warmth from the sun on your face after a  
gruelling day  
And mine is like a persistent drizzle of rain  
However there is one thing I do not detest  
One lighthouse in a storm of overwhelm  
A sign in the haze of confusion  
Oh how I love my homeless love  
Oh how I love ... to love you

**Emma Papaconstantinou**

14 years old

# Acknowledgments



**T**HIS report is the culmination of a significant body of work and was drafted in consultation with a wide range of stakeholder groups and organisations from across the education and health sectors. Our thanks to everyone who has contributed by giving their time, effort and input.

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# Foreword

I want to commend and thank Marie Curie for carrying out this vital work that clearly highlights the importance of supporting our children and young people that experience loss through improved grief education and bereavement support in schools. This report provides valuable insight and evidence on attitudes towards grief and makes a series of recommendations which it is hoped will establish bereavement and loss as a core aspect of pupil wellbeing to be grounded within the education curriculum. This is very welcome.

Bereavement is ultimately something that we will all experience. Unfortunately, for some, this may happen at a young age. This can be traumatic for the child or young person, with significant consequences. It is crucial that our children and young people are equipped with knowledge and skills to manage and understand their grief, are supported by confident and engaged teachers, and are assisted by schools that have clear, child-centred policies in place.

There are a wide range of resources and organisations, including CCEA and the Education Authority, that can help schools and staff support their pupils. Understanding bereavement and grief is important for everyone on a personal level, not just professionally, and the Northern Ireland bereavement website “Bereaved NI”, launched earlier this year by the Health Minister is a very helpful starting point for everyone to learn more about bereavement and grief.



From personal experience, I know how important dedicated school staff are to supporting our children and young people, ensuring they are all happy, learning and succeeding in education. I encourage school leaders to continue to ensure that those age and stage-appropriate discussions on bereavement and grief are happening with pupils as part of curriculum delivery. It is also important that all school staff continue to avail of training opportunities, and that school leaders have policies and programmes in place that support a whole-school approach to emotional health and wellbeing.

**Paul Givan MLA**  
Education Minister



# Executive summary

**Make every school a compassionate community which has the culture, practice and policies in place to support pupils to prepare and cope with bereavement.**

**A**s a society there remains a discomfort around talking about death and bereavement, particularly when talking with children and young people. Statistics show that most young people will experience a bereavement before they leave school, and that primary and secondary school age is the most common age to experience bereavement during childhood.

The Schools Bereavement Programme has looked at grief education and bereavement support as two distinct but connected elements of bereavement information and support for children.

*Grief education* is used to describe school-based learning to support all pupils to better understand the emotions that can come from a bereavement, to provide sources of support and to help with coping strategies. This should be available for all children and young people as part of their education.

*Bereavement support* is the information and support provided to a child or

young person when they experience the death of someone important to them. This should be available to all bereaved children and young people as part of the pastoral care work of a school.

The Marie Curie Schools Bereavement Programme provides previously lacking evidence of the views on and experiences of these issues from children and young people, parents and guardians, and teachers. The wider education and public health sectors have also contributed views.

## **Key messages: Teacher training evaluation**

- Training on supporting bereaved pupils can significantly increase the confidence and knowledge of teaching staff.
- Staff confidence following training can avoid pupils' bereavement going unaddressed, and lead to more open conversations and subsequent person-centred support for the pupil.
- Training can positively impact a school's wider culture and practice such as the

presence or content of a bereavement policy, and staff awareness and use of such a policy.

- Given the significant role that teachers have in a child's formative years, adequately trained school staff can result in positive lasting impacts on a child's educational outcomes and social and emotional development following a bereavement.

### **Key messages: Public and parent/guardian views on grief education and bereavement support in schools**

- Just under a third of parents of bereaved children highlighted inadequacies in the support provided in educational settings.
- Both the public and parents supported the inclusion of grief education in the curriculum/school setting. This support was strongest for secondary school-aged children and older primary school-aged children (age 7-11).
- Parents recognised the range of potential benefits of grief education at both primary and secondary school level. There was also recognition of the potential for causing distress to children, especially for primary school-aged children.
- Nearly all respondents, including parents, emphasised the need for adequate training of staff in both primary and secondary schools to ensure they have the skills to engage in conversations about bereavement and grief in a sensitive and age-appropriate way.

### **Key messages: Young people's views on grief education and bereavement support in schools**

- Young people expressed a strong sense that bereavement is hard to deal with and hard to talk about, but that it was much harder for others than it was for themselves.

- Nearly nine in ten 16-year-olds, whether bereaved or not, felt it was important for schools to offer support to bereaved pupils.
- Sensitivity in school and flexibility with schoolwork were the main types of support respondents felt were important.
- Eight in ten young people felt it was important or very important for schools to offer grief education.
- Eight in ten young people felt that understanding grief would allow them to better support others, although half felt that bereavement is not something that can be taught.

### **Discussion**

As a society, there is a need to normalise conversations about grief and bereavement. Bereavement is something we will all experience at some point in our lives and the first experience most commonly happens during school years. Every child's bereavement experience is different. This should be respected and the support offered tailored to individual need.

Teachers are asking for information and guidance so they can feel more confident and competent when supporting their pupils. Parents/guardians generally support educational settings doing more but stress the need for teacher training and preparation. Children and young people also want to be informed about, and involved in developing the bereavement information and support available to them in school.

The following critical issues need to be considered to give every school the best chance of becoming a compassionate community:

### ***Prioritising children and young people’s wellbeing and voice***

Pupil voice, prioritisation of wellbeing, and a child-centred approach must be central principles underpinning all other actions. Bereavement can have an impact on a pupil’s development and readiness to learn. Young people and the adults that support them see grief education and bereavement support in school as important.

### ***Leadership and collaboration***

Leadership at multiple levels is very important in progressing this work, and must be demonstrated from policy planners based in departments, education authorities and through school leadership within schools across governance and operations. This leadership needs to come in the form of communication, engagement, knowledge and practical support.

### ***Embedding supportive practices and school policies***

Standalone teacher training can make a very positive difference to individual teacher competence and confidence in covering the topic as a classroom exercise and in the way they react and respond to a bereaved child. However, the impact of the training can be even greater if it is consolidated and reinforced by wider school policy and practice.

### ***Breaking the taboo and wider cultural change***

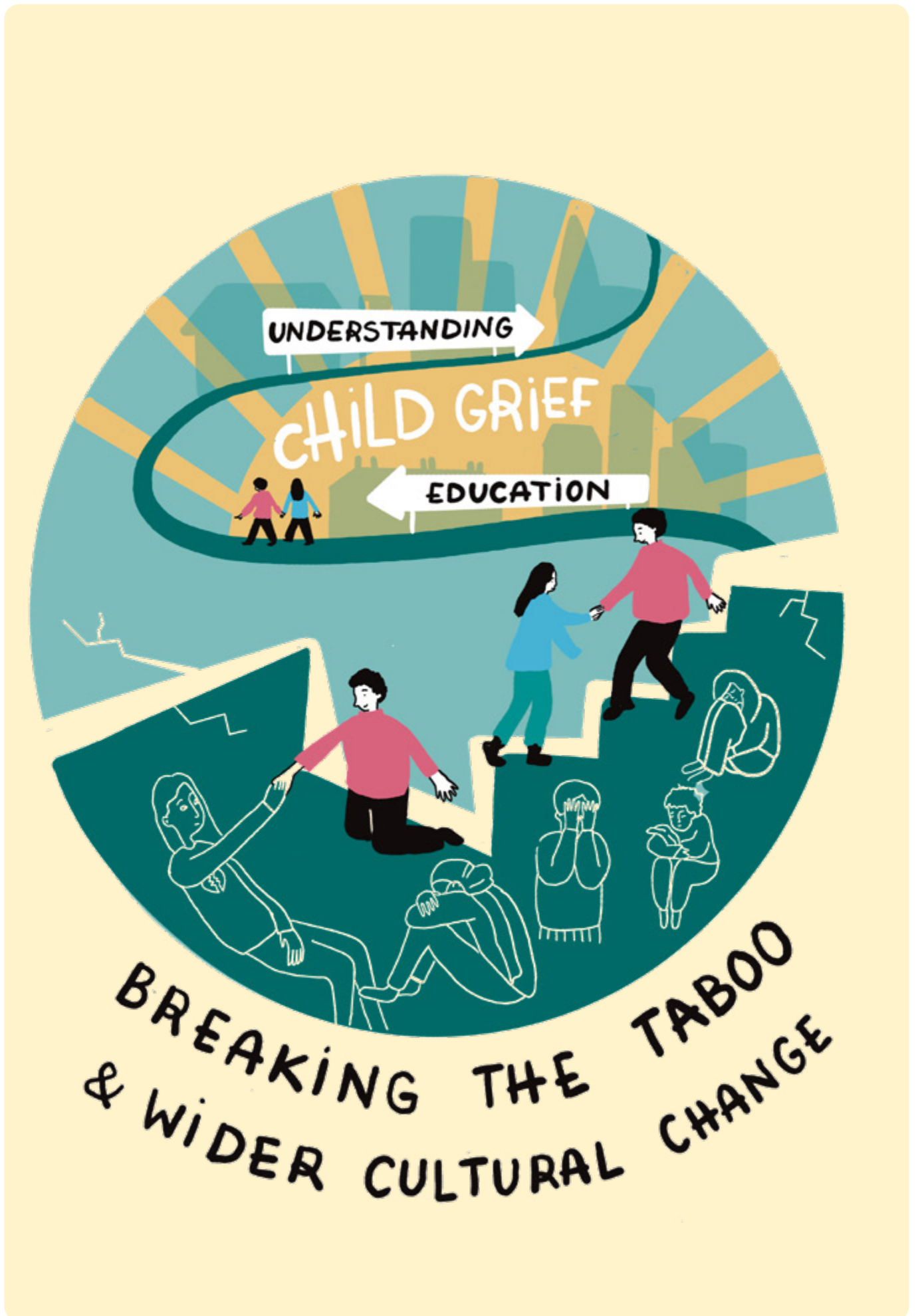
Wider public education on child grief is needed to develop understanding of how death impacts and is processed by a child, and the type of support they can benefit from.

### **Summary recommendations**

**The recommendations set out below aim to make all schools a compassionate place, where all children are given preparation for this life event and where bereaved children and young people feel safe and able to learn and develop while they grow around their grief.**

- 1.** Strengthen Department of Education-led policy guidance on grief education and bereavement support.
- 2.** Require every school to have bereavement policy.
- 3.** Give all teaching staff a range of opportunities to receive bereavement training.
- 4.** Ensure the education curriculum offers a range of opportunities for pupils to discuss bereavement and grief.
- 5.** The health and education sectors should build on good practice by identifying all opportunities for collaboration that would strengthen wider societal understanding of how children experience grief and how to support them.





# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Societal attitudes

As a society we find it challenging to talk about death and dying in any meaningful way. This is confirmed in adult surveys which has found most adults in the UK have not had conversations – even at a very basic level – about their plans or wishes should they die, even though most say they would be comfortable talking about it (Nelson et al. 2021; Goss et al. 2024:1). Interestingly, the recent attitudinal survey with 16 year olds in Northern Ireland commissioned by Marie Curie NI and discussed in this report, shows that young people felt that talking about bereavement was harder for others (79% agreed it was hard or very hard) than it was for themselves (46% agreed it was hard or very hard). This points to a specific barrier around perception of other people’s response (see findings section).

Unsurprisingly, there is limited large scale research in the UK or Ireland on children and young people’s views on death, dying or bereavement. Until the UK Commission on Bereavement (UKCB) established an inquiry seeking public views, there had only ever been smaller scale studies published. In Northern Ireland, the Marie Curie Schools Bereavement Programme provides previously lacking evidence of the views and experiences of children and young people as well as parents and guardians, teachers and the education and public health sectors.

The Marie Curie Schools Bereavement Programme aims to build on the work done through the UKCB which in its landmark report following the pandemic concluded that wide-ranging changes were needed across public, workplaces and educational settings to better support bereaved people, and would be best addressed

within an overarching cross-departmental Bereavement Strategy.

*The Covid-19 Pandemic and the mass bereavement experience that resulted from it placed a “spotlight on this universal human experience, presenting an important opportunity to consider how well-equipped we are to support people through a bereavement and how we can work together to improve that support both now and in the future.” (UKCB, 2022).*

In setting out the important role of schools in pupils’ emotional and social development as well as academic learning, UKCB made several recommendations to educational settings, which were also endorsed by key stakeholders in NI: (UKCB, 2022).

- All schools and educational settings must be required to provide age-appropriate opportunities for children and young people to learn about coping with death and bereavement as part of life (Rec 1:1).
- All educational settings must be required to have a bereavement policy, including staff training and a process for supporting a bereaved child or young person and their family (Rec 2:3).

For many children and young people, school can be a “home from home” and their teachers can be important adult figures in their lives. Research literature, while consistently highlighting the importance of parent-child communication for bereaved children, acknowledges that opportunities to talk about bereavement with people outside of family, such as with other significant adults and friends, is also important (McLaughlin et al. 2019:2).

Children spend a considerable proportion of their time at school, and most will experience their first bereavement while they are still at school. As these are

also the most important developmental years socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively, the role of schools and teachers cannot be under-estimated, nor the need to support teachers in this work, and for services to work together.

For most children, their first bereavement experience will come from the death of a grandparent, or a relative or family friend of an older age (see findings section). However, a small percentage of children will be bereaved of an immediate family member such as a parent/guardian or sibling. It is estimated, as no official statistics exist, that around one child in every class is bereaved of a parent or sibling across the UK and in Northern Ireland, 1,600 under 18s are bereaved in the same way each year (Childhood Bereavement Network, 2022).

**Table 1. Key Northern Ireland statistics on bereavement in childhood 2022**

Statement	Quantity
How many parents die each year leaving dependent children?	900
How often does a parent die, leaving dependent children?	Every ten hours
How many children under 18 are bereaved of a parent each year?	1,600
How many children are bereaved of a parent each week?	30
How many children are bereaved of a parent each day?	4

Source: Childhood Bereavement Network

The diverse needs of bereaved children mean that a broad range of both universal and targeted information, as well as support should be available. Informal support networks will be sufficient to support most children through a bereavement. However, a traumatic childhood bereavement such as a sudden or unexpected death or the death of an immediate family member involving an accident or terminal illness, may require the support of formal counselling or specialist intervention (Marie Curie, 2019; UK Trauma Council).

Traumatic bereavement in childhood is associated with higher risk factors for a range of social, emotional and educational difficulties compared to their peers, as demonstrated in the table below (Cruse, 2022; McLaughlin, 2019:1; Elsner, 2022 and Lundberg, 2018).

**Bereaved children and young people are also at higher risk of facing other adversities in comparison to their peers, for example:**

- 60% more likely to have been excluded from school at some point
- 55% more likely to have had a diagnosable mental disorder
- 80% more likely to have a parent with a serious mental illness
- 41% of young offenders experienced bereavement as a child.

Children rely on adults to support and guide them through their grieving process and as a child's capacity develops, they may also lean on their peers or friends for comfort and support. However, ultimately, it is adults who have a duty

and responsibility to both prepare (where possible) and support children and young people as they navigate significant and difficult life events. Unfortunately, even though the statistics show that most young people will experience a bereavement before they leave school, and that primary school age is the most common age to experience bereavement, there remains a general reluctance to talk to children about death or dying. Of course, there are genuine concerns and fears which drive this reluctance, but there is also a false assumption held by some adults that children don't understand or grieve like adults do (see findings section). Adults also have varying levels of understanding and knowledge about grief themselves, the differing ways it can manifest, the supports that are available and how to access them – this is sometimes referred to as “grief literacy” (Breen et al. 2022). In the context of bereaved children, it is important to recognise that some adults in their support networks may be dealing with their own grief and may not be emotionally available to support them (McLaughlin, 2019:1). One of the most important aspects of grief literacy when speaking with children and young people is acknowledging that a significant death affects them too, and to use clear and unambiguous language (Weber et al. 2019; Dalton et al. 2019; Marie Curie, 2019).

Teachers can be among the most significant adults in a school aged child's life, and it is critical that they are supported to help their pupils. There are many examples of good practice in how schools can achieve this. However, building on the existing body of research in this area, the Marie Curie Schools Bereavement Programme highlights the need for further action to ensure all schools are meeting a minimum standard. This must include

equipping teaching staff and the wider school community with confidence and competence to support bereaved pupils, and a policy and practice framework which creates a culture of openness in which school can become a safe space for conversations about dying, death and bereavement.

## 1.2 Marie Curie Schools Bereavement Programme

Marie Curie has undertaken a three-year programme of work aimed at:

- promoting a compassionate schools culture in NI by strengthening school-based loss and bereavement information and support for pupils through the provision of teacher training and lesson materials
- undertaking research to increase awareness of the need to better support children and young people in schools and the need for grief education to be more embedded in the curriculum.
- considering options for embedding grief education and bereavement support in all schools in NI through wide stakeholder engagement.

**This report reviews the three-year programme, focusing on the following elements:**

### 1.2.1 Teacher training on supporting bereaved pupils

A full day in-person interactive training session was conducted with classroom teaching staff (including whole school training). The content was developed by an independent child bereavement counsellor (Ann Scanlon; BFree Counselling) and delivered in partnership with Cruse NI.



Marie Curie also commissioned Votes for Schools to draft content for a lesson on grief and loss. This was piloted in a small number of schools who had undergone the teacher training. All teachers found the materials useful and easily adaptable to their class. They also said being given training in advance of delivering a lesson on this subject was extremely helpful. Marie Curie plans to make the lesson plan available to schools and offer it to CCEA for their web-based resources.

### 1.2.2 Survey of parents/ guardians and young people

A set of questions were commissioned on attitudes to grief education and experience of bereavement support in schools for two surveys run in Northern Ireland: Public Attitudes to Death and Dying (adult survey which included targeted questions for parents or guardians); and ARK Young Life and Times Survey (cohort of 16-year-olds).

### 1.2.3 Options for embedding grief education and bereavement support in schools

A significant amount of evaluation data and key stakeholder feedback has been collected and used to present evidence-based options to fill gaps in support in schools. This policy influencing phase of the programme is the one in which Marie Curie will be focusing on following the publication of this report.

## 1.3 Programme board and youth advisory group

The programme has been supported by a programme board made up of Marie Curie staff, Cruse, Public Health Agency,

Education Authority, Ann Scanlon, bereavement counsellor, primary and post-primary teaching staff, Childhood Bereavement Network staff, parent(s) and young people, some of whom have experience of bereavement.

A young person advisory group has ensured the views of children and young people are central to all phases of the programme. The group includes representatives from the Secondary Schools Students Union (SSUNI), the Cancer Fund for Children (CFFC) and Cruse. The Programme has also engaged with other youth organisations, including the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly. Respect for children and young people's rights has been a core principle applied during all phases of the school bereavement programme.

## 1.4 Structure of the report

The remainder of the report will be structured in the following way:

- 1. Current context:** Overview of current legislation, policy and practice which relates to grief education and bereavement support in schools.
- 2. Findings:** Evidence gathered from each phase of the programme.
  - a.** Evaluation of teacher training on supporting bereaved children.
  - b.** Parent/guardian views of grief education and bereavement support in schools.
  - c.** Young people's views of grief education and bereavement support in schools.
- 3. Discussion:** Rationale and the need for change. Informed by workshops and meetings with a wide range of key stakeholders.
- 4. Recommendations**



### **1.4.1 Scope and reach of the programme**

The Schools Bereavement Programme has been open to engagement with all schools. The teacher training has been delivered to teaching staff across Northern Ireland from all school types (see Appendix 2). However, for both practical and ethical reasons, other parts of the programme such as the lesson plan pilot, youth survey and youth advisory group membership have primarily focussed on post-primary age children. The terms “schools” and “educational settings” will be used interchangeably throughout this report, and the recommendations should be viewed as relevant to all educational settings, such as primary, post primary, special schools and EOTAS provision (Education otherwise than at school).

This work has considered bereavement in its most general sense. However, we recognise that anticipatory grief which starts before someone has died is a very specific type of bereavement, and we hope much of the good practice derived from this work will remain relevant and of benefit.

## 2.0 Current context

**T**HE Schools Bereavement Programme has looked at grief education and bereavement support as two distinct but connected elements of bereavement information and support for children.

Grief education is used to describe school-based learning to support all pupils to better understand the emotions that can come from a bereavement, and to provide sources of support to help with coping strategies. This should be available for all children and young people as part of their education.

Bereavement support is the information and support provided to a child or young person when they experience the death of a loved one. This should be available for all children and young people as part of the pastoral care work of a school.

### 2.1 Grief education in curriculum

In Northern Ireland, there is a statutory requirement at both primary and secondary school level to provide personal development learning for pupils throughout the 12 years of compulsory education. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) have developed a range of resources to support the delivery of the personal development targets set within the curriculum. Loss and bereavement is not a specific learning outcome, but it does fall under the broader learning outcomes required under the current Personal Development and Mutual Understanding curriculum that include “feelings and emotions” and “managing change”.

CCEA provides some teaching resources for the topic of loss and bereavement, however, there are gaps in resources for certain age groups and for children taught

in special schools. Appendix 1 provides a more detailed outline of learning activities related to loss and grief in the current curriculum for primary, post-primary and special schools. CCEA resources are a non-statutory aid for teachers. Therefore, teachers are free to be flexible in how they use them, including using them outside of the year group they are targeted at, if deemed appropriate. Schools can also buy in services or training from external organisations or use other external resources to support the delivery of personal development curriculum learning.

It is unclear how often teachers choose loss and bereavement as a topic to achieve personal development requirements, and the barriers and enablers to picking this topic are not clearly understood. Loss and bereavement is not currently part of the initial teacher training, is not a specific area of competency required of newly qualified teachers, nor is it specifically identified in ongoing teacher professional development.

### 2.2 Bereavement support in schools

#### 2.2.1 Teacher professional competencies: Training

Teaching in Northern Ireland is underpinned by a set of professional competencies which provide a framework for the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes delivered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Northern Ireland that are accredited by the General Teaching Council ([gtcni.org.uk](http://gtcni.org.uk)). In addition to Initial Teacher Training Programmes, there are a range of other points at which teacher knowledge and experience can be augmented or refreshed. This includes

induction, early professional development and continual professional development.

The wider professional framework within which these competences sit aims to:

*“assist with the process of (...) identify ‘professional development need’; ‘provide the basis for collaborative planning around identified needs (...); and ‘inform important aspects of school development.’”*

These aims resonate strongly with the need to better support the teaching profession and pupils by strengthening grief education and bereavement support policy and practice.

Supporting bereaved children is not currently explicitly referenced or recognised within any teacher professional guidance as necessary to achieve the goals set out within the existing professional competencies framework. Competency 9 and 12, are just two examples which appear extremely relevant:

*Teachers will have developed a knowledge and understanding of the factors that promote and hinder effective learning and be aware of the need to provide for the holistic development of the child (competency 9).*

*Teachers will have developed a knowledge and understanding of the interrelationship between schools and the communities they serve, and the potential for mutual development and well-being (competency 12).*

The Education Authority (EA) provides a half-day online training session on pupil bereavement as part of a wider two-day course titled *A Whole School Response to Bereavement and Critical Incident Training*, targeted at school leaders or senior managers within schools.

## 2.2.2 Bereavement policy in schools

A Bereavement policy, like any other policy of a school, acts as a guide for how a school will respond to a key issue. With respect to bereavement, it should set out an agreed way of responding to a bereavement which impacts a school, this includes the support available to a pupil who has been bereaved. As a pre-agreed plan, it should act as a guide and support to the school community, including teaching staff, pupils and parents/guardians.

There is a range of advice and support available online on developing a bereavement policy, this includes templates and example policies. The EA training outlined above for school leaders also provide some guidance around developing a bereavement policy. However, it is not a statutory requirement to have a bereavement policy in place in Northern Ireland. Schools are not monitored with respect to whether they have one, whether it is fit for purpose, or if it is adequately implemented.

## 2.2.3 Education policy for Northern Ireland

At a public policy level, the Children and Young People’s Strategy 2020-2030, Department of Education Corporate Plan 2023-2028, the Mental Health Strategy for NI 2021-2031, and the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework are examples of government documents which demonstrate clear strategic intent, including at cross departmental level, in promoting and nurturing positive emotional and mental wellbeing of children. These plans all have a prevention and early intervention focus, as it is recognised that



intervention at an earlier stage can prevent more complex problems that are harder to address and can create a long shadow into adulthood from developing.

The implementation plan for the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework jointly published by the Departments of Education and Health includes a “Being Well, Doing Well” programme in which bereavement training and resources for teachers is specifically mentioned (Department of Education, 2021).

The Department of Education published the Independent Review of Education in December 2023. The review set out to understand the changes needed in how education is delivered in NI to make it fit for the 21st century. One of the main principles underpinning this work was “placing the needs of children and students ahead of all other considerations.”

The wide-reaching review looked at learner support, inclusion and wellbeing, supporting the education workforce and a review of the curriculum. This review could act as an important vehicle for the policy changes required on bereavement learning and support. For example, a number of recommendations made by the review team, which are set out below, relate to the

need to prioritise pupil wellbeing and review the curriculum to bring a greater focus on teaching life skills and promoting well-being:

#### **Independent Review of Education in NI Recommendations**

Emotional health and wellbeing should be prioritised in the curriculum, from early years right through to post-16. All learners should have the opportunity to acquire crucial life skills. (Department of Education NI, 2023. Volume 1: p36)

Undertake major reform of the curriculum and keep it under continual review. Including developing new approaches to teaching life skills (including digital skills and financial literacy), promoting creativity, and supporting wellbeing, mental health and resilience. (Department of Education NI, 2023. Volume 1: 4.2.4 p44-45)

Education must invest in professional development of its entire workforce to ensure a culture of continuous improvement and sharing of best practice. This requires an increase in resource and ensuring teachers have the necessary time to undertake professional development. (Department of Education NI, 2023. Volume 1: p.71)

## 2.2.4 Education systems in other places

Across the UK and Ireland it is now standard, expected practice for education policy to clearly stipulate the education system's role in pupil social and emotional development and promotion of wider health activities. Unfortunately, this high-level commitment has not led to a requirement for schools to teach grief or bereavement as part of a child's broader personal development (Dawson et al. 2023:2; Lynam and McGuckin, 2018). Previous research conducted by Sally Paul (University of Strathclyde) has referred to "death denying curriculum and polices" in the Scottish education system (Paul, 2019). England has come closer than any other UK nation in addressing this gap in pupil teaching. A public consultation on the statutory guidance for Relationship, Sexuality and Health Education (RSHE) in England was published by the Department for Education (DfE) in May 2024 (Department for Education, 2024). The draft statutory guidance included specific reference to grief and bereavement. Unfortunately, a change in government meant this consultation was shelved. The new Labour government has published a call for evidence to inform a review of the curriculum and assessment process in England, this brings another opportunity to lobby for grief and bereavement to be included (Gov.UK, 2024). In the Republic of Ireland, the SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) curricula from primary, post-primary and special schools is under public consultation. While there is a strong focus on social and emotional wellbeing, grief or bereavement are not referenced in the current drafts and despite lobbying for this, newly published frameworks are starting to be released without mention of

grief or bereavement.\* Furthermore, unlike child protection, there is no requirement on schools across UK or Ireland to follow a specific set of guidelines for bereavement support that fall outside of critical incidents. However, it is acknowledged that some education authorities, including in Northern Ireland, strongly advise that all schools have a bereavement policy. Internationally, Denmark and Australia are referenced as the only two countries which have nationwide school bereavement response systems (Abraham-Steele & Edmonds, 2021).

## 2.2.5 Bereavement policy for Northern Ireland

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department of Health established the Covid Bereavement Workstream to analyse the psychological impact of the pandemic and produce supporting recommendations to address this. The recommendations also led to the establishment of the Northern Ireland Bereavement Network, which is responsible for developing and leading the strategic bereavement plan in NI for the next ten years. These plans include a Bereavement Strategy and a Children and Young People Bereavement Charter.

Importantly, the Network also produced a Northern Ireland Briefing, echoing and endorsing the suite of recommendations made by the UK Commission on Bereavement, which included the need for improvement in the support provided to bereaved children in the schools setting as described in the introduction of this report (UKCB, 2022).

\*Accurate as of June 2024.





# 3.0 Findings

## 3.1 Evaluation of teacher training on supporting bereaved children

Marie Curie, in partnership with Ann Scanlon (an independent child bereavement counsellor), developed a one-day, pilot training course targeted at school staff across Northern Ireland and delivered in collaboration with Cruse Northern Ireland. The aim of the pilot training was to demonstrate and meet the needs of teaching staff, while offering an alternative format for training. The training was novel in that it was in-person, held interactive group exercises, and used role-play scenarios and anonymised real-life case studies.

Between 2022 and 2023, training was delivered to 374 teaching and school staff across 162 schools in Northern Ireland. A breakdown of school types involved is available in appendix 2. The impact of the

teacher training on teaching staff, pupils, and schools was evaluated through semi-structured interviews and survey feedback from training attendees. From the survey, a total of 293 baseline responses and 65 follow up responses were received. In addition, 28 interviews with school staff were carried out. Fuller detail on the methodology is described in an associated paper (Crooks et al., 2024).

### 3.1.1 Key findings – teacher confidence and knowledge

#### Teacher confidence in supporting pupils affected by bereavement

Teacher feedback through surveys and interviews indicated that confidence improved significantly following the training. Table 2 shows an increase in teacher confidence, from pre and post training, in being able to recognise and respond appropriately to a bereaved child and to support others to do so.

**Table 2. Teacher confidence in supporting bereaved pupils**

Statement	Baseline (n = 293)	Follow-up (n = 65)
I can recognise when a young person is grieving	53%	89%
I know when a conversation around grief is needed	37%	89%
I have conversations around grief with young people	37%	89%
I can recognise when it is appropriate for a young person to be referred on for further bereavement support	41%	91%
I know how to support my colleagues in talking to a young person who is grieving	19%	89%

“Very confident” and “confident” as proportion of all responses

**Table 3. Teacher knowledge of ways to support bereaved pupils**

Statement	Baseline (n = 293)	Follow-up (n = 65)
I have access to a bereavement policy	23%	31%
I have the tools and resources needed to appropriately support a young person through their grief	15%	66%
I have the information I need to support a young person through their grief	14%	80%
I have a good understanding of supporting young people through their grief	21%	83%
I am aware of how many children in my school are affected by grief	41%	55%
I can recognise when I need to take a step back from supporting a young person with their grief	26%	85%
I know where to refer a young person on for further bereavement support	33%	86%

“Very confident” and “confident” as proportion of all responses

**Post training, teachers felt they could now approach the subject of bereavement and have open, honest conversations.**

“I don’t know that I would ever have acknowledged it, but for the youngster I think it’s important that you do. And I would do that now. I would let the child know that I’m aware that they have had a bereavement, and I would talk to them.” (SENCO).

Prior to the training, teachers felt:

“frightened of doing or saying the wrong thing.” (SENCO).

**Some teachers also reflected that post training they felt less pressure to fix a situation and learned that they didn’t always need to have the answers.**

“I feel confident and reassured that a lot of it is just listening – it’s okay not to have answers. If a situation becomes beyond my remit, I know that I would be able to refer a pupil onto further support.” (Pastoral class teacher).

“I think before I would have been very like mollycoddle... [Now], I try and get them to guide what they want to happen. You know, do they want counselling? Do they want you to tell their friends for them? Do they want a home pass because they can’t focus on anything?” (Class teacher).

**Teacher knowledge of ways to support pupils affected by bereavement**

Teacher feedback through surveys and interviews indicated that their knowledge improved following the training. Table 3

highlights that post training, education staff stated that they had a better understanding of supporting a pupil through bereavement, and had tools and resources needed to appropriately do so. They also felt more confident that they knew where to refer a pupil on for further support, where necessary. The change was smaller with respect to the school policy and procedures. Awareness of the number of pupils in the schools affected by bereavement or information about the school's bereavement policy was low.

**Teachers, including very experienced teachers, reported developing a deeper understanding of children and young people's behavioural responses within school following a bereavement, and a new appreciation of how children often display grief differently to adults.**

*"I have a better understanding of the many different ways that grief can be expressed by young people and feel better equipped to both recognise them and deal with them effectively." (Class teacher, head of year).*

*"I'm a teacher of over 30 years' experience. I went into the course thinking what can they really tell me that I haven't already experienced? But no, I left there with many more tools for my toolbox." (Senior teacher).*

*"I was guilty of this before the training... you get a bit frustrated with the child who hasn't done their homework, or who hasn't brought this in or hasn't brought that in, and you forget that there's a bigger picture there." (SENCO).*

**As teachers became more confident and knowledgeable about how to support bereaved pupils in a person-centred way.**

*"It's ensuring that those children are in control. One size doesn't fit all, but allowing them that control and having those discussions with them... do you want me to tell the class, or do you want to? Do you need extra time for homework." (Vice principal).*

**Where schools already had a bereavement policy, the training provided up-to-date knowledge they could use as part of a policy review. Within other schools, the training bought their attention to the need for a dedicated bereavement policy. For some this meant separating bereavement from their schools existing critical incident policy.**

*"We had the bare bones before, but we were able to use a lot of what I had learned at the course and padded it a bit more... So a new version of the policy is now in place." (Senior teacher).*

*"I think it just emphasized it and made it very clear this is a key document to have." (Pastoral vice principal).*

Some participants also reported challenges in developing or updating a bereavement policy due to other demands on their time and the need to have additional support to develop one. There was a desire for a model policy to be provided by the training providers. Although there is currently an Education Authority-provided template, this was described as *"long and complicated..." (Special needs teacher).*

### 3.1.2 Wider benefits

A number of wider benefits were noted by the teachers that received training, this included the impact of the training on pupil perception of school and the particular benefit of whole school training.

**Teachers felt that for pupils, knowing that their teachers had attended the training, meant that they were aware and confident in having a point of support within school:**

*“There is an increased awareness by young people as to teachers maybe being there for them and as someone that they could potentially engage with.” (Senior teacher).*

**A reported benefit of whole school training was the feeling of teamwork and solidarity, particularly considering the sensitivity around a bereavement:**

*“At the time of the training we had just lost a colleague and friend. So, in that instance it was positive because I didn’t have to explain that the training was going to be difficult, and we were there for each other.” (Vice principal).*

*“I definitely would value [whole school training], and certainly if there was potential going forward for whole school training, I definitely would encourage my staff to do it and would invest in it.” (Teaching principal).*

**Schools indicated that they would be happy to attend whole school training alongside other schools or as part of a dedicated staff development day for their own school:**

*“If only if there was funding to make it available where the facilitators would be able to come, even in a cluster of schools. It would be really worthwhile.” (Vice principal).*

*“I think it would be brilliant to have, maybe on a teacher training day. It would be absolutely fantastic to have that as a whole school thing.” (SENCO).*

### 3.1.3 Conclusions

Every school has and will continue to be touched by bereavement. This can happen through children experiencing the loss of a member of their school community such as a teacher or peer, or through the death of a family member. Given that school and the adults in them are a big part of a child’s life, it is essential that staff, particularly teaching staff, are adequately trained and equipped to provide flexible, child-centred support. The results of this evaluation strongly support widespread endorsement and rollout of school-based bereavement training programmes. The feedback from school staff also shows that this impact could be further strengthened where training is consolidated and supported through wider school culture, policy and practice.



## 3.2 Public and parental views of grief education and bereavement support in schools

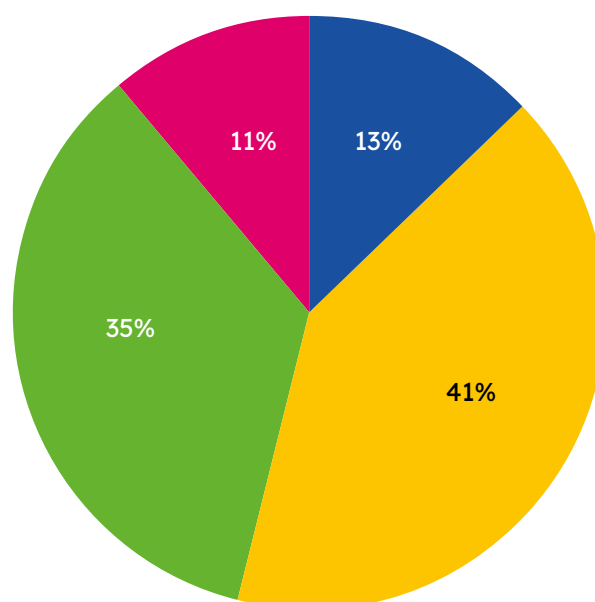
In 2023, Marie Curie commissioned a large cross-sectional survey on public attitudes to death, dying and bereavement in the UK (PADDUK 2023). The survey included 500 responses from adults living in Northern Ireland. Just under half (45%) indicated that they were a parent to a child(ren) up to the age of 25 years, and of these parents, 65% had children of primary and/or secondary school age.

Both the public and parents were asked their views on incorporating learning about grief and bereavement into the school curriculum. Parents and carers of bereaved children were asked about the support provided to their child(ren) by their school.

### 3.2.1 The bereavement and support experiences of children and young people

Among parents, just over half (53%) reported that their child(ren) had experienced the death of a person close to them. Most commonly, children had lost a grandparent (71%) or another family member (20%). 11% had experienced the

**Fig 1. What age was your child when this bereavement occurred?\***



- Before primary school or equivalent (e.g. under 4 years of age)
- Primary School or equivalent (e.g. aged 4-11 years)
- Secondary School or equivalent (e.g. aged 12-18 years)
- University, college or equivalent (e.g. aged 19 and older)

\*Parents/guardians with more than one child were asked to respond with their oldest child in mind.

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding to nearest whole number.

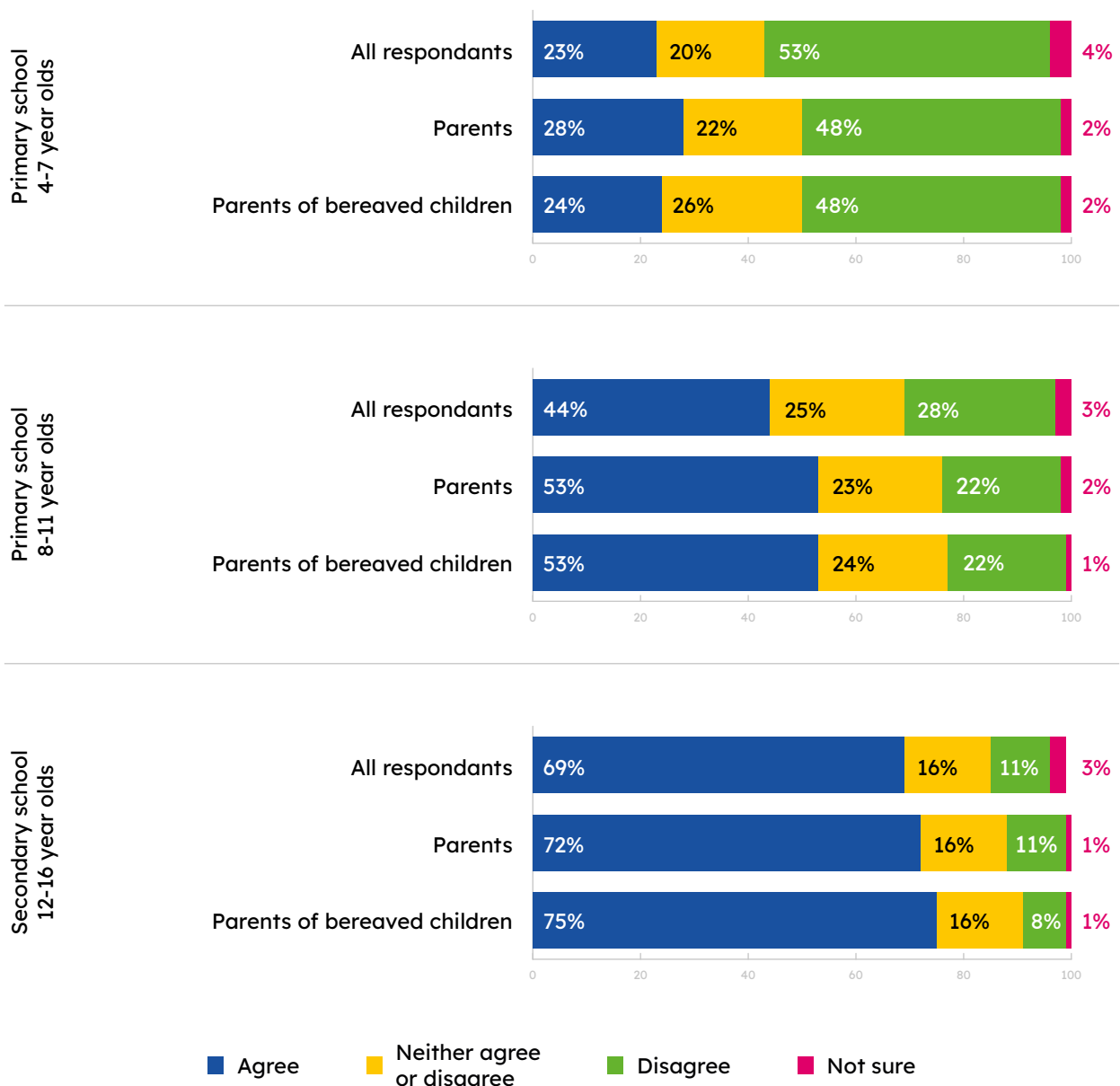
death of a parent or sibling. A further 8% had lost a friend.

The age at which the children experienced a close bereavement was most commonly either primary (41%) or secondary school age (35%) (see Figure 1).

When asked to rate the support their child

had received in their educational setting (e.g. nursery/school/college/university) at the time of their bereavement, experiences were mixed. Half of parents described teaching staff (51%) and peers (48%) as supportive. A fifth (19%), however, felt that teaching staff and peers had been neither

**Fig 2. To what extent do you agree that learning about grief and bereavement should be included in the school curriculum for the age groups below?**



All respondents: n=500; parents: n=223; parents of bereaved children: n=119

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding to nearest whole number

supportive nor unsupportive following their child's bereavement while around one in ten thought that staff (9%) and peers (11%) had been unsupportive. Only 8% of parents felt that their child had not needed support in their educational setting at the time of their bereavement.

*“Teachers were amazing and let him talk about it.”*

*“Support could've been offered but because it was a grandparent, it wasn't.”*

### 3.2.2 Attitudes to grief education in schools

Survey respondents were asked to what extent they agreed that learning about grief and bereavement should be included in the curriculum in both primary and secondary schools. Across the different age groups, respondents who were parents tended to be particularly supportive of school-based grief education, with support being strongest for older children (see Figure 2).

- 72% of parents and 75% of parents with bereaved children were supportive of school-based grief education for secondary school-aged children. This compared to 69% for all respondents.
- 53% of parents, including parents of bereaved children expressed support for including learning about grief and bereavement in the curriculum for older primary school children (eight years and older). This compared to 44% for all respondents.
- 28% of parents, and 24% of parents of bereaved children were supportive of grief education for the youngest primary school children (aged 4-7 years). This compared to 23% for all respondents.

### 3.2.3 The perceived benefits of learning about grief and bereavement at school

Northern Ireland's public were also asked to what extent they agreed with a range of potential benefits of learning about bereavement and grief at primary and secondary school age.

At primary school level, the potential benefits of grief education were appreciated by most, although agreement was generally lower and more varied for the younger age group (see Figure 3). At primary school age, the highest levels of agreement related to benefits of grief education for children who have already experienced a bereavement:

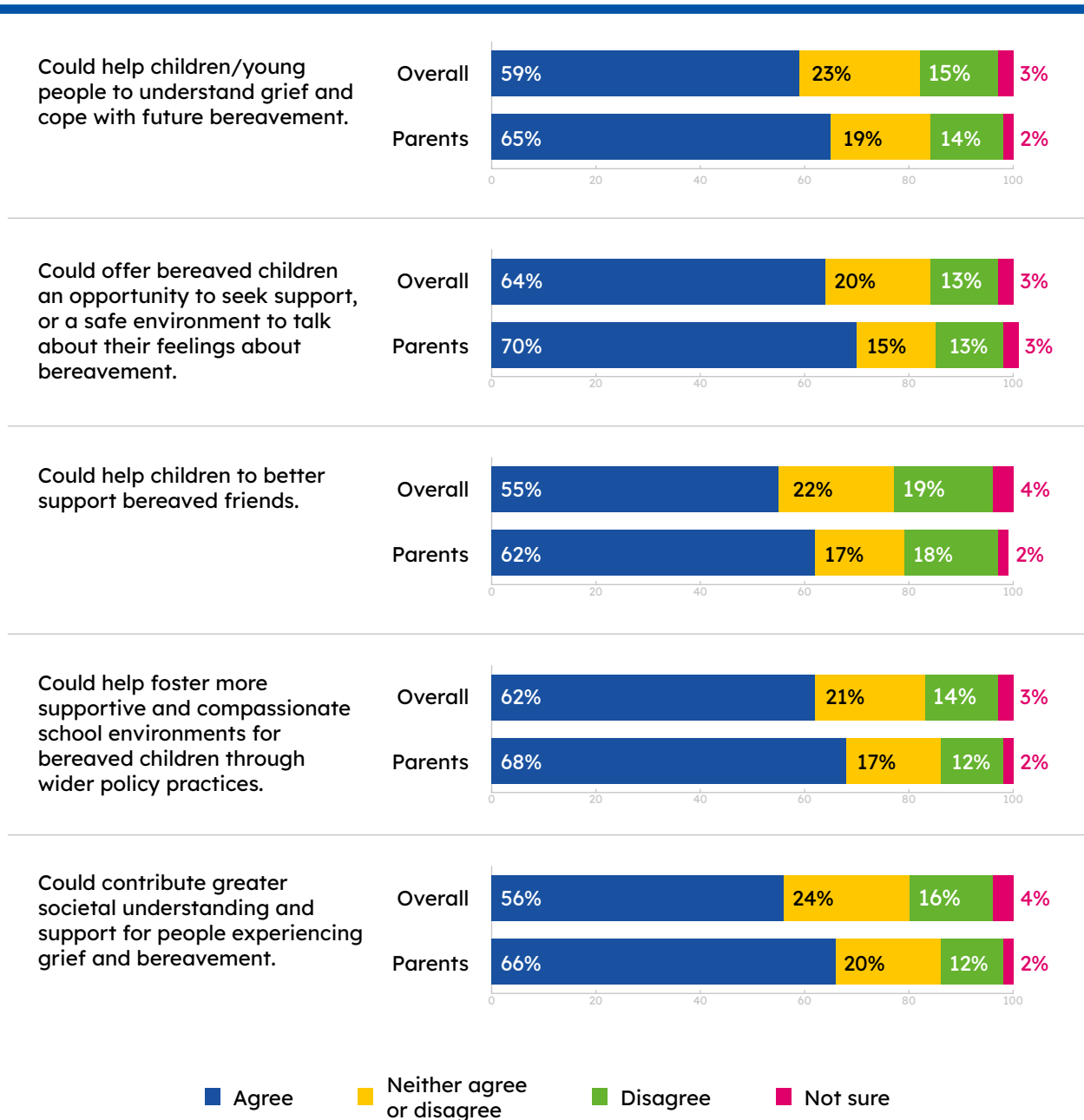
- 64% of the general public agreed that grief education for children could help provide a safe space for bereaved children to seek support and talk in school, with agreement levels for this statement rising to 70% amongst parents.
- 62% of the general public and 68% of parents agreed that it would promote more compassionate school environments for bereaved children through wider policy and practice.

*“The main reason children should have this spoken about in school is that one of their peers might lose someone before they do and it will help them understand what they are going through.”*

*“I feel children would develop better coping skills by learning about grief and bereavement.”*

At secondary school level, both the general public and parents recognised in similarly high numbers the potential benefits grief education could have for both bereaved children and children in general (see Figure 4).

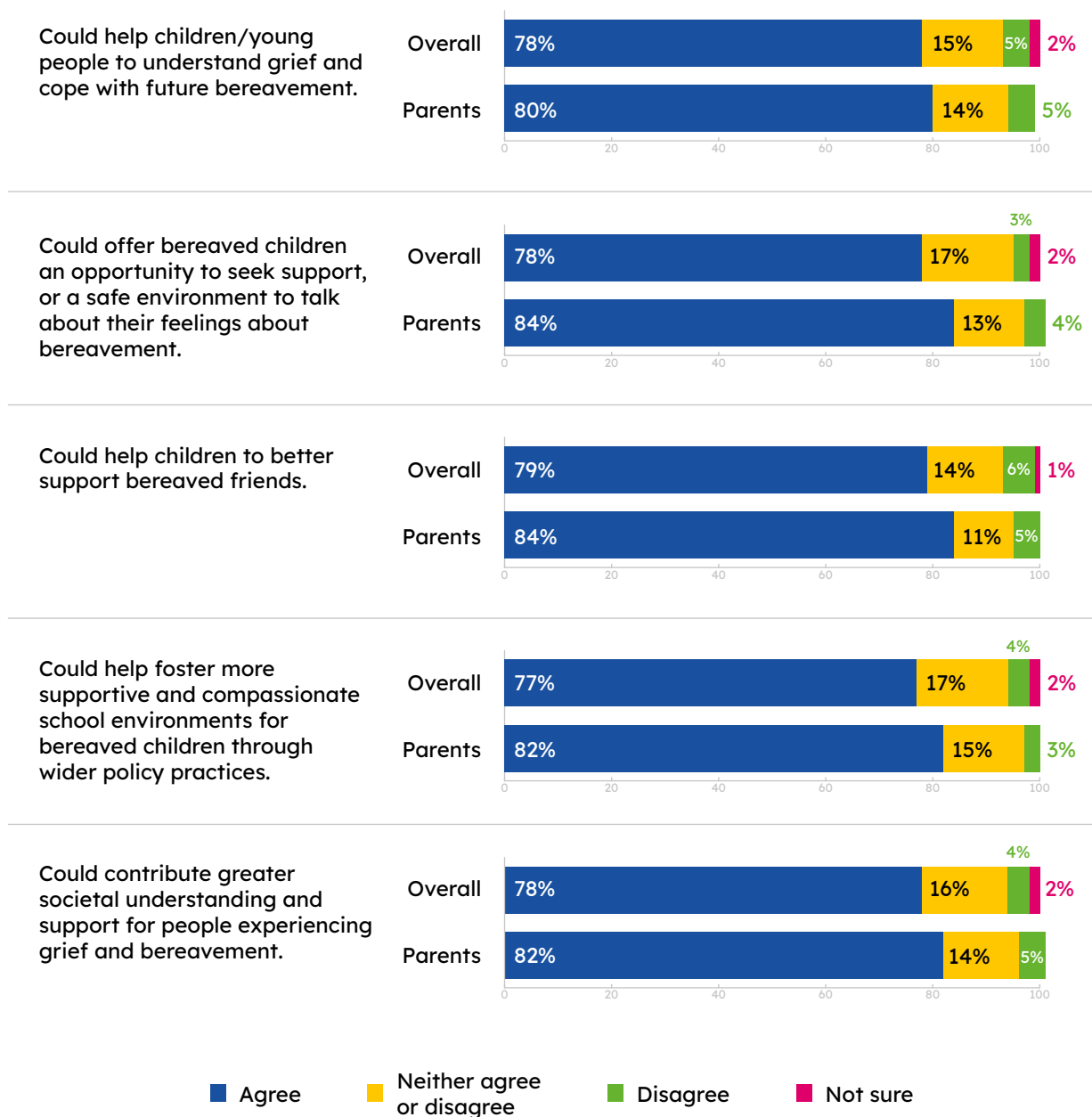
**Fig 3. To what extent do you agree with the following statements on grief education in primary schools?**



All respondents (n=500) and among parents (n=223)

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding to nearest whole number

**Fig 4. To what extent do you agree with the following statements on grief education in secondary schools?**



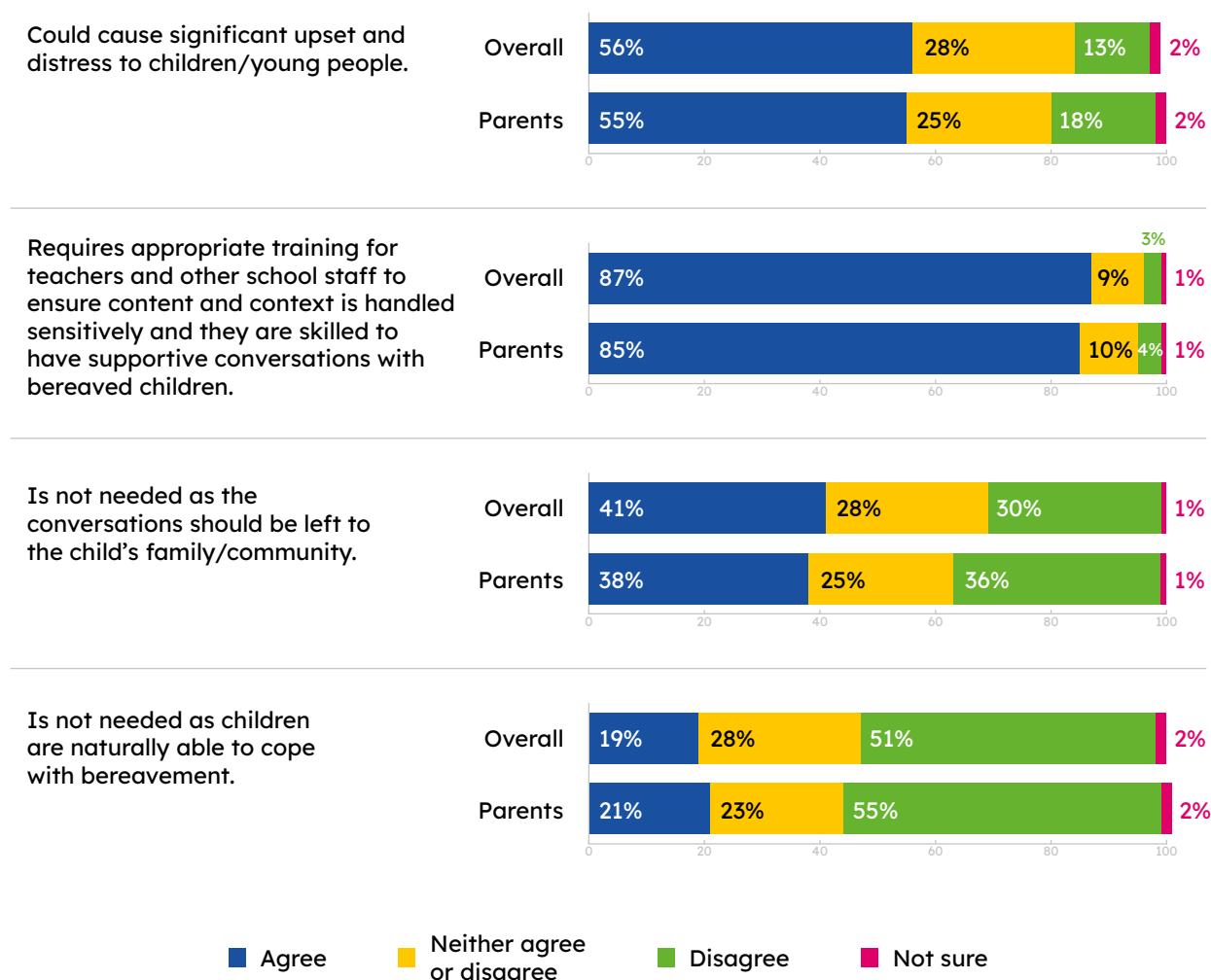
All respondents (n=500) and among parents (n=223)

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding to nearest whole number



- 77% of the general public agreed that grief education could help foster more supportive and compassionate school environments for bereaved children. Rising to 82% among parents.
- 78% of the general public agreed that proactively learning about loss and grief could help children cope better with future bereavements and enable them to better support grieving friends (79%). Rising to over 80% agreement for parents.
- 78% agreed that it could contribute to greater societal understanding for bereaved people in general. Rising to 82% agreement among parents.

**Fig 5. To what extent do you agree with the following statements on grief education in primary schools?**



All respondents (n=500) and among parents (n=223)

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding to nearest whole number

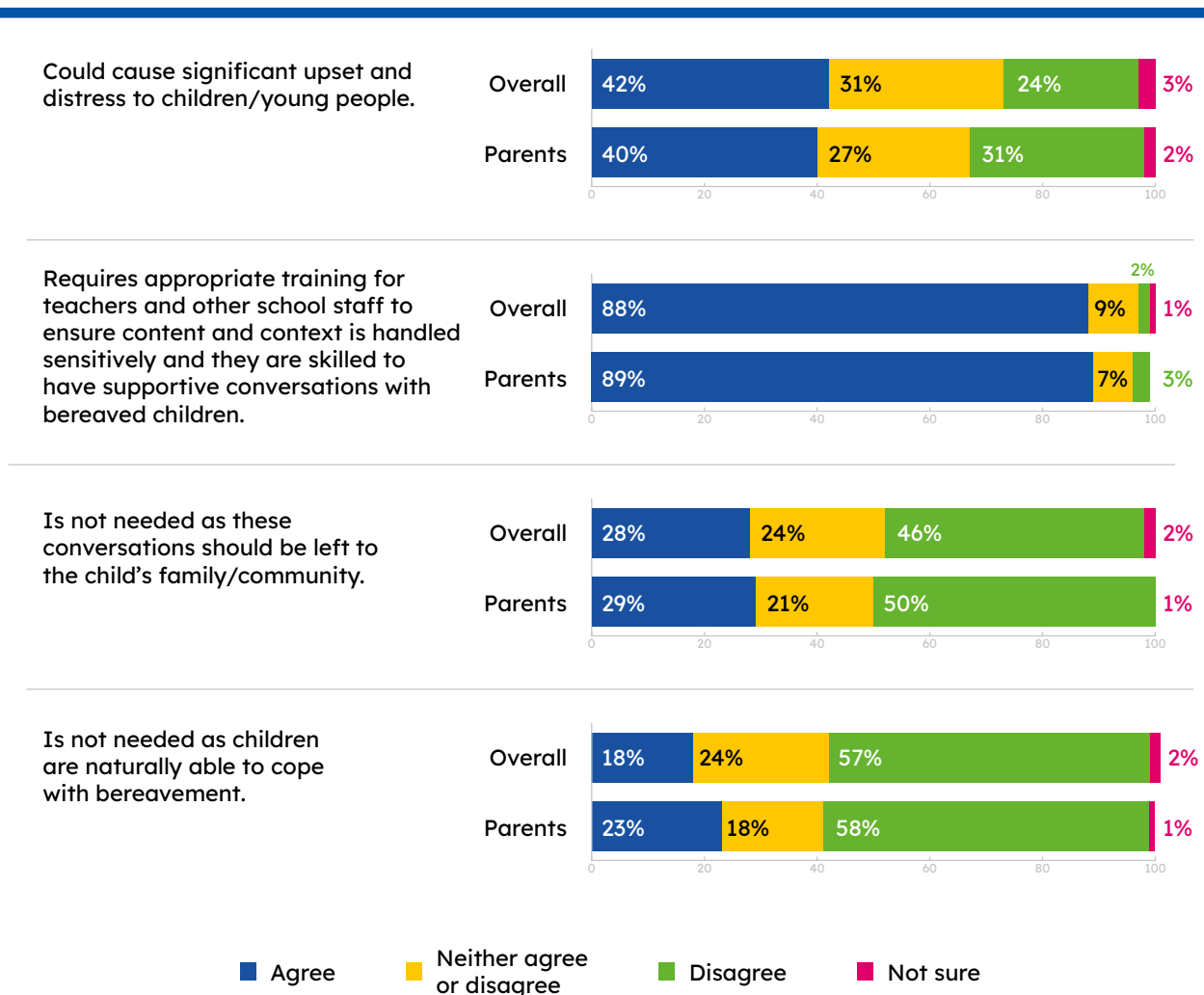
### 3.2.4 Concerns about learning about grief and bereavement at school

The survey also explored potential concerns related to grief education in schools and views on whether it is needed (Figure 5, 6). Many worried that engaging with the sensitive topic of bereavement and grief could be upsetting to children, especially in primary schools (primary

schools: 56%; secondary schools: 42%). Parents shared this concern in similar proportions for the two age groups (primary schools: 55%; secondary schools: 40%).

*“We should definitely be talking about death more openly, both as a society, and from secondary school age. Perhaps then it would no longer be something to be feared in the future.”*

**Fig 6. To what extent do you agree with the following statements on grief education in secondary schools?**



All respondents (n=500) and among parents (n=223)

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding to nearest whole number

*“Death is a fact of life and should be treated as such. However, young children are sensitive and vulnerable and tend to take things very literally. Being taught about grief and bereavement could sow seeds of fear and concern for their loved ones and overshadow their education with unnecessary problems.”*

The vast majority of the Northern Ireland public, including parents (primary schools: 85%; secondary schools: 89%), agreed that appropriate training would be essential to ensure school staff have the necessary skills to engage with these topics sensitively and have supportive conversations with bereaved children.

*“[It] must be taught after teachers have had extensive training.”*

*“It is important children understand natural processes such as illness and death, but it should be done in a sensitive and caring manner. It should be carefully thought out and planned.”*

Some people did not think that grief education in schools was needed. 41% of all respondents and 38% of parents felt that, at primary school age, conversations about bereavement and grief should be left to children’s families. For secondary school-aged children, 28% of all respondents and 29% of parents thought that these conversations should be kept within families.

*“This is not a subject which should be talked about at school by teachers. It should be left to the parents or grandparents to handle it at home in the comfort of their home amongst family members who know their children better than any outsider.”*

Around a fifth felt that grief education was not needed as children are naturally able to cope with bereavement.

### 3.2.5 Conclusion

The survey results demonstrate that the Northern Ireland public, including parents, are generally supportive of including grief education in the school curriculum for all secondary school children, as well as older primary school children. This mirrors the views reported among the general public and parents across the UK as a whole (Goss et al. 2024:1). For younger primary school-aged children, views on the appropriateness of school-based grief education were more mixed. There was strong agreement from the public and parents that appropriate training would be essential to ensure school staff have the necessary skills to address this topic sensitively.

Findings also show perceived inadequacies from parents in how well supported bereaved children and young people are in educational settings, with a small but important minority of parents (just under a third) describing that their child was not well supported by teachers or peers following their bereavement. The possibility that discussing bereavement and grief could cause distress to children was a key concern among the public and parents alike, especially for primary schools. However, the findings also showed that children who experienced a close bereavement most commonly did so while at primary school, which indicates a need for age-appropriate support for this younger age group.

### 3.3 Young people’s views of grief education and bereavement support in schools

A module of questions on young people’s views and experience of bereavement support in schools and grief education were included in the 2024 Northern Ireland Young Life and Times Survey (a partnership between Queens University Belfast and the University of Ulster). In total, 1,146 16-year-olds took part, representing a response rate of 37%.

#### 3.3.1 Experience of bereavement

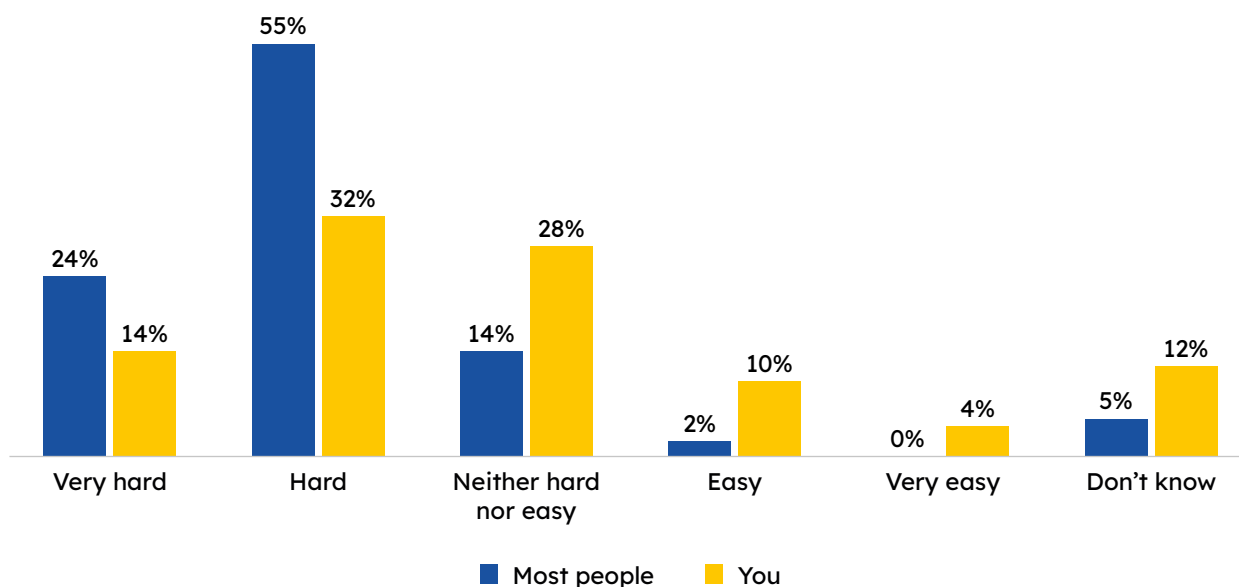
Over half of the young people surveyed (54%) stated that they had personally experienced the death of someone close to them. While this was mostly grandparents, some listed other relatives, including parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, or cousins. Some young people named friends, and a

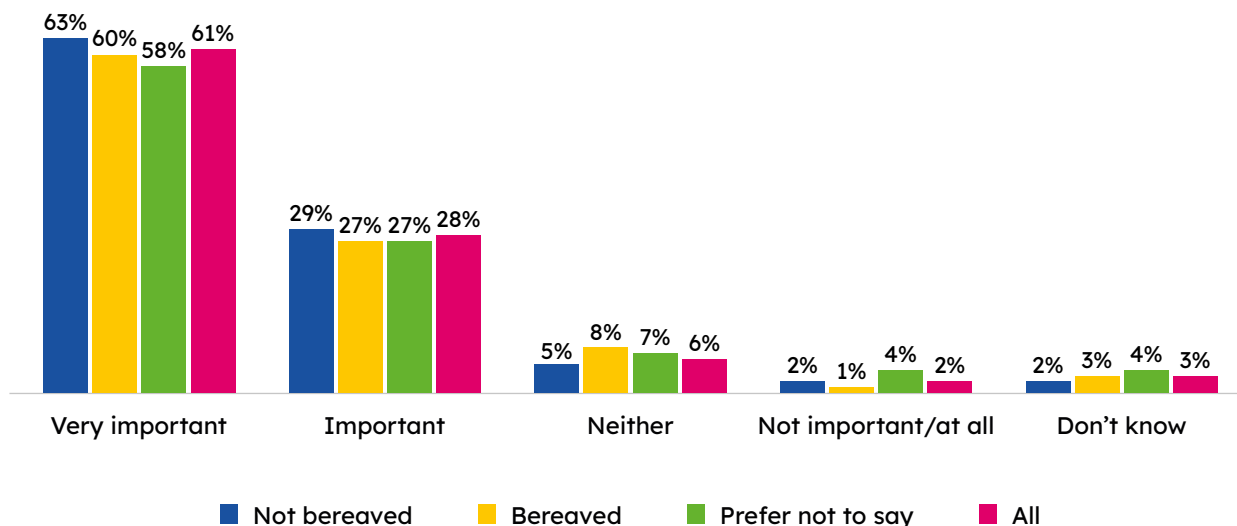
very small number also listed pets. Around one third (34%) stated that they had not experienced a bereavement, whilst 12% preferred not to say.

The young people surveyed were asked how hard or easy they felt most people would find it to talk about bereavement, and how hard or easy they would find this. Figure 7 shows that there was a very significant difference in the response to these two questions. While almost eight in ten 16-year-olds (79%) felt that most people would find it very hard or hard to talk about bereavement, less than half (46%) felt this would be the case for them personally. However, it is noteworthy that only 14% of the young people surveyed felt they would find it easy or very easy to talk about a bereavement. These results did not vary substantially between those who had experienced bereavement and those who had not.

Overall, these results suggest an openness to talking about death among the young people surveyed, with an acknowledgment that this would not be easy. Interestingly,

**Fig 7. How hard or easy do most people/do you find it to talk about bereavement?**



**Fig 8. How important is it for schools to support pupils who have been bereaved?**

the view that it is harder for others than it is for themselves to talk about bereavement could point to a possible key reason why we tend not to have meaningful conversations around death, dying or bereavement.

These findings would support the introduction of grief education in schools that could help young people to become more comfortable talking about bereavement, and as a consequence, be more confident in opening up to others, including their peers if they experience a bereavement.

Young people were asked how important they felt it was for schools to support pupils who have been bereaved. Figure 8 shows that around 90% of 16-year olds felt that this was very important or important, with very small proportions feeling this was not important or not at all important. Again, the views only marginally varied between young people who said they had experienced the death of someone close to them and those who had not. These findings, as detailed in Figure 8,

can be seen as a strong mandate from young people for schools to develop and implement policies to support pupils who are dealing with bereavement.

Young people were provided with a list of practical support options schools could offer pupils dealing with bereavement and asked which, if any, they felt schools should offer. Table 4 shows the proportion of young people in support of each measure. As can be seen, the young people surveyed were most supportive of schools offering a quiet space for young people to go to when feeling overwhelmed (71%). Three other measures were supported by over half: flexibility and sensitivity especially at important times, such as anniversaries or birthdays (56%); a specific person in school that a bereaved pupil can go to if they need to talk (55%); and extra time to finish schoolwork (52%). As shown in Table 4, fewer than one in five respondents supported any of the other proposed practical mechanisms. These less popular measures all involved specific third parties inside or outside school,



**Table 4. What practical support do you think schools could offer to pupils who have experienced a bereavement?**

Statement	
A quiet space to go when feeling overwhelmed	71%
Flexibility and sensitivity especially at important times (e.g. anniversaries/birthdays) i.e. leave class if they need to	56%
Specific person/people they can go to in the school if they need to talk	55%
Extra time to finish schoolwork	52%
Help to access school-based counselling	19%
Teachers talk to young person before sharing information about their bereavement	14%
Give information/support to access help outside school	14%
None - it doesn't help to get school involved	2%

such as counsellors, or teachers sharing information about a pupil's bereavement. Importantly, Table 4 shows that only 2% felt that it did not help to get the school involved, again showing not only a clear mandate for providing bereavement support in schools, but also the range of measures that schools could adopt.

Young people were invited to comment on other useful methods of support, and some did. The quotes below show that the most important measures of support schools could offer to bereaved pupils are sensitivity, compassion, and flexibility. The following quotes highlight the complexities inherent in supporting young people

through their grief and bereavement. While some may want their grief acknowledged, others may not want to be the subject of additional attention, while others again could be wary of a school system involving parents / guardians without their consent or before they are ready.

*“I think schools should have a better understanding of students’ emotions, we’re all young and still developing our emotions and teachers just don’t seem to care about that as long as they win the argument and show their authority over you.”*

*“Not to make them feel different but to let them know there is help if it’s needed.”*

**Table 5. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Grief education shows that bereavement is something that happens to everyone at some point	86%	3%	11%
It makes young people more aware of the support that is available if they experience bereavement and need help	82%	3%	15%
Talking about bereavement could make young people upset or cry in class	80%	5%	15%
We can help others better with their bereavement if we understand it ourselves	80%	7%	13%
Grief education can help young people who have been bereaved to not feel so alone	79%	6%	15%
It is not helpful to tell someone how they should or shouldn't behave if they have been bereaved	74%	9%	18%
Grief education might make it easier to talk about bereavement	71%	9%	19%
Dealing with bereavement is not something that can be taught	51%	25%	23%
Bereavement is a private matter that should be dealt with at home/outside of school	29%	37%	34%

*“Just acknowledge it. A form teacher should say - I am sorry to hear you lost your grandad - I hope you are ok. If you need anything please speak to me. They should not act as if it never happened.”*

*“The main reason teenagers don’t like getting help in school is that normally the school is obliged to involve parents. Teens tend to not want parents to know what’s wrong if they haven’t told them already themselves.”*

### 3.3.2 Grief education

When asked how important or unimportant it is for schools to offer grief education, eight in ten 16-year-olds (79%) stated that this was important or very important. Only 4% felt that this was not important or not important at all. The young people surveyed were then asked if they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements in relation to grief education. The extent of agreement and disagreement with these statements is summarised in Table 5.

The responses to the statements overall suggest that 16-year-olds felt strongly that grief education in schools could result in a greater understanding of bereavement, which could make it easier to talk to others about death and could make death less of a taboo topic.

There was very little disagreement in relation to some of the likely benefits of grief education, such as the awareness raising element regarding available support (82% agreeing) and the capacity-building effect, namely that we can help others better with their bereavement if we understand it ourselves (80% agreeing). There was also strong agreement with the statements that it may help young people who have experienced loss not to

feel so alone (79%) and that it may make it easier to talk about loss (71%). There was also strong agreement that it is not helpful to tell someone how to manage their bereavement (74%). The young people surveyed also recognised the possibility that talking about bereavement might be upsetting for some people (80%). Together with the very mixed views expressed in relation to the last two statements – namely, whether dealing with bereavement is something that can be “taught” and if bereavement is a private matter that should be dealt with at home and not in school – these findings indicate the complexity and sensitivity of bereavement and loss. However, with grief education in place alongside appropriate staff training, it could be argued that teachers and pupils would be practically and emotionally better prepared to provide support and understanding in such instances and becoming upset would not be seen as negative or embarrassing, but as a “natural” emotional response.

### 3.3.3 Conclusion

The Northern Ireland Young Life and Times Survey results show that young people appreciate that everyone deals with loss differently, but there was a very strong sense that grief education can provide all young people with a range of tools and practical support to help them understand and be better prepared for bereavement. Young people also want schools to be sensitive, understanding and accommodating to bereaved young people, and accept them as individuals who have the autonomy and capacity to deal with their bereavement in their own way.

CONFIDENT & COMPETENT  
TEACHERS REQUIRE  
TRAINING & FULL  
SCHOOL SUPPORT

TOPIC:

GRIEF  
EDUCATION



EMBEDDING SUPPORTIVE PRACTICES  
& SCHOOL POLICIES

## 4.0 Discussion

**T**HE following section of the report has drawn out key themes from the data collected from the teacher training evaluation, surveys with young people and parents/guardians. Two workshops were held consecutively in June and August 2024 to share emerging findings, support the interpretation of the findings and inform the final recommendations. These were held with:

1. teachers and the wider education sector, and public health practitioners including school-based wellbeing and nursing teams
2. members of the Youth Assembly and the Marie Curie Youth Advisory Group.

The work being done in Northern Ireland has received considerable support and interest from our nearest neighbours in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. In fact, it has led to engagement with people doing similar work in countries across Europe, and as far afield as Australia and America. There is much that Northern Ireland can learn from other countries, but it is encouraging that we are also an exemplar for other places facing similar challenges on how to break down stigma and taboo around talking about death and dying. Together we collectively bring a much-needed focus on the needs of children and young people, including within a school environment.

We must also acknowledge that many of the recommendations made in this report echo those made by others who have been working in this area for many years. We have referenced a number of these in this report and it is wonderful that we now also have the evidence to support the need for change from children, teachers and parents/guardians from Northern Ireland.

The publication of this report is timely in

that the independent review of education in Northern Ireland, *Investing in a Better Future* has also been published. This review includes a list of recommendations on how to ensure that the design and delivery of children's education is fit for the 21st century. As expected, a need to prioritise pupil wellbeing has been identified by the expert panel alongside a major review of the curriculum (Department of Education, 2023).

### 4.1 Creating compassionate school communities

Overall, the extensive engagement with a wide range of key stakeholders provides clear endorsement for strengthening the support given to bereaved pupils, and the recognition that offering structured and unstructured opportunities to talk about grief and bereavement also prepares all children with coping strategies for themselves and tools to help others. While there is very good practice in some schools, it is also the case that many more schools would welcome further support and guidance. A strong framework of support for bereaved children and sufficient space within the school day for age-appropriate, sensitive and engaging grief education are foundational steps to growing and nurturing compassionate school communities. By doing so, a school is clearly demonstrating their commitment to the holistic development of pupils that goes beyond academic attainment. It also shows a commitment to being an active agent in addressing the wider societal taboo around talking about death and grief.

There are four critical issues that if addressed would give every school the



best chance of becoming a compassionate school- these are:

- Prioritising children and young people wellbeing and voice
- Breaking the taboo and wider cultural change
- Leadership and collaboration
- Embedding supportive practices and school policies.

The remainder of the report will discuss these critical issues before concluding with the recommendations.

## 4.2 Prioritising children and young people’s wellbeing and voice

Both the adults and young people engaged in the work of the Marie Curie Schools Bereavement Programme felt that pupil voice and a child-centred approach was essential. Providing space and time within the school day to support the emotional development and well-being of children is fundamental. It is important that schools can offer this space for growth, and is especially important for the most vulnerable children, for whom schools are potentially their only safe space. Bereavement is one of a range of social issues which can have an impact on a pupil’s development and readiness to learn. Balancing the need to focus on a child’s wellbeing and development as citizens, alongside their academic attainment, is a challenge the school system faces, and one that cannot be ignored.

Academic performance and wellbeing are inextricably linked, and there is a direct correlation between the two. Children and young people can have a wide and varied response to a bereavement. Children can

experience physical symptoms such as headaches. They can also experience emotional and mental problems such as shock, anger, anxiety and depression (Lytje & Dyregrov, 2019). Some may also experience difficulties connecting with family, friends or peers leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation (Cruse, 2024). A recent review of research on children’s experience and attainment at school after a parent died found much less focus being given to how children and young people’s wellbeing and relationships in school were affected after a bereavement compared to educational outcomes (Dyregrov et al. 2022).

Young people have shown resounding support for schools offering bereavement support (89%) and grief education (79%) (see findings section). A supplementary survey with 105 members of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly further supports this position (Youth Assembly, 2024). Young people want to be given opportunities in school to talk about bereavement and grief. They want to be better prepared and not have to wait until a bereavement happens before conversations are started. They also want to be informed and given the opportunity to be involved in developing and reviewing bereavement policy and practice within their school. Overall, the feedback from young people should give those planning policy initiatives on bereavement support and grief education encouragement that young people welcome such discussions and wish to have an active role in the development of policy and resources (Booth et al. 2021).

## 4.3 Breaking the taboo and wider cultural change

While the focus of the school’s bereavement programme was on

educational settings, it is apparent that wider public education on child grief, particularly with parents/guardians is needed to change attitudes and develop understanding of how death impacts and is processed by children, and the type of support they can benefit from.

There is general parental support for including grief education in the school curriculum for (older) primary school children and secondary school children. Nearly one in three parents in Northern Ireland agree that there are currently inadequacies in how bereaved children are supported in school. While a minority view, it is concerning that nearly 20% of the Northern Ireland public surveyed believe that learning about grief and bereavement in school “is not needed because children are naturally able to cope.”

At a professional level, there is a growing recognition of the need for a prevention and early intervention focus with child grief. The fact that primary school is the most common age at which a child will experience a bereavement, should highlight the need to seriously think about how we prepare and support this age group. (Goss, 2024:2) However, research has also shown greater support from parents of teaching grief education post primary compared to during primary school education. Therefore, there is a need for engagement between schools and parents/guardians on the value and approach taken by schools in addressing this topic, especially with younger children. Previous studies have also found that even when home is identified as the primary place for death education, there is not necessarily an objection to learning about grief, death and loss in the classroom as well (Dawson et al. 2023:1). Providing parents/guardians with information on teacher competencies, relevant training received by teachers and

other support structures a school has in place, may build confidence that the school can support their bereaved child and offer sensitive, age-appropriate grief education.

Adults bereaved as children bring an important and unique perspective to this subject – they tell us not to deny children the reality of death and that being honest and authentic is important (McLaughlin et al. 2019:2).

## 4.4 Leadership and collaboration

Leadership at multiple levels is very important in progressing this work, and must be demonstrated from policy planners and through school leadership across governance and operations. This leadership needs to come in many forms, including communication, engagement, knowledge and practical support.

At a high-level policy level, the importance of grief education and bereavement support should be recognised as a core aspect of children’s wellbeing, and for this reason should be referenced within all relevant policies and legislation across both health and education. The obligations placed on all government departments to work together as they deliver services to improve the wellbeing of children is already a statutory requirement as set out by the Children’s Services Cooperation (Northern Ireland) Act, 2015. Anchoring grief education and bereavement support within established strategic frameworks is important as it will drive implementation of good practice and identify gaps in current practice and policy at both system and individual school level. Policy, guidance and reports published by the Department of Education and wider education system in which emotional literacy, mental wellbeing,

prevention or early intervention are a focus should also include explicit reference to grief education and bereavement support. This includes evaluation and audit work conducted by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). The Department of Education has an important role in ensuring all schools are equipped to deliver effective grief education and bereavement support and being vigilant and responsive to barriers to achieving this. During the stakeholder engagement we heard about the need for adequate funding to support grief education initiatives, to include access to resources for schools to implement these programmes effectively.

**Best practice example: highlights need for system leadership and strong collaboration and communication**

The Operation Encompass domestic violence scheme was given as an example of a very sensitive topic in which schools and teachers have become involved because they have been given permission by “system leadership – backed up by guidance and a framework of support. Additionally, there has been clear communication and transparency with parents/guardians and pupils about the role of schools in this scheme.

Visit [operationencompass.org](https://operationencompass.org)

Teaching unions as membership bodies for the teaching profession are an important leadership group representing teachers. The need for training, support and dedicated time to address bereavement and grief with pupils has been raised by representatives of teacher unions. Teaching unions are an important source of support, advice and information to teachers. They

are also in an ideal position to voice the views and concerns of teachers as a collective group, and to be a vehicle for relaying information and support and sharing best practice.

Leadership from school principals and board of governors is also essential in developing a compassionate culture within schools, and one which must be driven by strong school-based policy and practice. The value of embedding supportive school policy and practice is covered in the following section.

## 4.5 Embedding supportive practices and school policies

A school bereavement policy is a key document for schools as it should prepare schools where a pupil is bereaved and offer a clear process to follow. However, it appears that it is not a well-known or understood policy of a school. The vast majority (77%) of teachers who registered for the Marie Curie bereavement training stated that they were not aware of their school’s bereavement policy, which would certainly not be the case for the child protection policy. Furthermore, a survey of 105 young people from the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly found that 84% had not seen their school’s bereavement policy, would not know how to find it and had never been consulted on it (Northern Ireland Youth Assembly, 2024). A bereavement policy should be given equal importance by the education system and schools. The school bereavement policy should also be referenced in other relevant policy and procedures such as safeguarding, pastoral care, wellbeing and mental health support. Embedding the topic across school policy would allow

for multiple opportunities to identify a pupil in need, support more flexible school responses and demonstrate that bereavement support is a significant issue for the school community.

Explicit reference to grief and bereavement within the personal development curriculum at both primary and post-primary schools would help to ensure this subject is given the time it deserves and requires. Studies suggest that non-statutory topics are less likely to be taught if they are seen to be sensitive or controversial (Lesel et al. 2023). Therefore, it is vital that teachers have the necessary competence and confidence to deliver a lesson on bereavement and grief.

The evaluation of the Marie Curie pilot teacher training shows how impactful supported learning can be on teacher confidence and competence. Effective preparation through training can address much of the concern teachers may have about facilitating a session on this subject or approaching a pupil who has been bereaved. Investment in teacher capacity and competence can also build confidence in both parents/guardians and pupils about a school's ability to provide support and teach about bereavement and grief. Professionals, including teachers, have made it clear that training should not be seen as an isolated one-off action but should be augmented by refresher training or email drops from trainers which include links to resources or training. Furthermore, training can be a catalyst for policy and practice change within a school which can strengthen the response to bereaved children. However, if learning is to be consolidated, schools must provide a supportive culture and practice within which to implement the new learning.

A child or young person will want to approach the teacher they are comfortable

talking to rather than being restricted to the teacher with a specialist role. For this reason, there was almost unanimous support for whole school training in which all teaching and non-teaching staff within a school receive basic training together. There was also support for a member of staff within a school to act as a point of contact or resource for teachers or pupils, particularly for pupils where external help or counselling may be considered appropriate, such as with a bereavement coordinator or lead.

More generally, there is value in developing a wider culture and practice in schools which welcome and normalise conversations about grief and bereavement. There are a range of very practical things that can help to foster good practice and a number of these have been identified by others working in this area (Dawson et al. 2023:1, 2). These include the following:

- While the personal development curriculum and pastoral care programmes are the most obvious places for grief and bereavement to sit, there are a wide range of other learning opportunities through core subjects such as English Literature, History, Drama, Sciences, etc.
- Specific references should be made to grief and bereavement in teacher competencies and the initial teacher training programme.
- Induction packs for newly qualified teachers should include materials on supporting a grieving or bereaved pupil.
- Schools can develop a pupil bereavement register so staff may flag potentially vulnerable pupils during transition periods (such as moving from primary to secondary school) and



anniversaries.

- Teacher training can be delivered as a cluster of schools and/or as a specific topic covered during teacher professional learning or staff development days.
- The wealth of existing resources should be used to support pupil learning about bereavement and loss.

There are very simple, practical steps that a school can take to support a bereaved child. Our engagement with young people has highlighted some of these, which include a quiet space to go if feeling overwhelmed, extra time to finish schoolwork, a person to go to in school if they need to talk, and some flexibility and sensitivity at important times such as the initial return to school term, anniversaries or significant birthdays. In many cases, there are existing resources available that aid the development of individual support plans for bereaved children, that can be done in production with them (Cancer Fund for Children 2022).

A greater focus on bereavement should emphasise normalising conversations and embedding bereavement support into day-to-day practice. Teachers have told us they do not want it to lead to a lot of additional administrative tasks, such as recording, reporting and paper filling. Identifying a bereaved child should not be automatically seen as an incident or safeguarding issue, as there are very specific definitions, criteria and processes for such events. There are less well-established support structures for teaching staff and pupils which relate to “normative” or “non-critical” bereavements that are more common for children and young people, such as death of an elderly grandparent, family member or friend of an older age.

Existing HSC Trust school wellbeing and

nursing teams are a valuable resource available to schools, and their expertise should be harnessed to support bereaved children. Many schools also have vibrant local community infrastructures that can support them in developing compassionate schools; efforts to develop partnerships with those voluntary and community sector organisations with child bereavement expertise should be encouraged and supported. Many schools already share resources and learning opportunities with others in their area as part of area learning groups. There is value in considering how these learning networks could be used to further develop or strengthen compassionate school culture and practice.

## 4.6 Conclusion

Compassion, alongside respect and equality are part of the vision and values of most, if not all schools across Northern Ireland. The recommendations set out below aim to create the conditions where all schools can become compassionate places, where bereaved children and young people feel safe and able to learn and develop, while they grow around their grief. Furthermore, an emotionally regulated child is a child more ready to learn and to achieve their potential. Greater prioritisation of grief literacy as part of wider emotional literacy, alongside strengthened pupil bereavement support must be part of a 21st century education system in Northern Ireland. The need for endorsement and support for this approach from the widest range of stakeholders, led by the Department of Education and its relevant bodies cannot be overstated.





## 5.0 Recommendations

**There is great potential and opportunity to establish bereavement and loss as a core aspect of pupil wellbeing and for this to be grounded within the education curriculum. The need for leadership at political, policy planning, school governance and principal level is critical. It will be incumbent on the Department of Education (DE) to take responsibility for driving many of these recommendations forward. The response to the recommendations of the recent independent review of the curriculum could also act as a key delivery vehicle for this work (Department of Education, 2023).**

### 1. Strengthened education policy guidance and support:

- a. DE should establish pupil bereavement information and support as a core well-being priority for schools.
- b. Bereavement/child grief should be more explicitly referenced in education policy and guidance, auditing and reviewing practice.
- c. DE should support schools in raising awareness of the importance of pupil bereavement support and grief education within their school community.
- d. Schools should be signposted to existing resources to support best practice and the implementation of grief education initiatives or programmes. Address funding or resource gaps where these are identified.
- e. Information systems should be embedded within schools which record the names of pupils who have been bereaved or who are expected to become bereaved due

to a terminal illness. Key information should be passported with them throughout their school life, including the transition between schools.

### 2. Require every school to have a bereavement policy:

- a. Pupils should be involved in the co-design process for developing or reviewing a school bereavement policy, and any other related initiatives.
- b. The whole school community should have easy access to the bereavement policy which should also be made visible on the school website.
- c. Every school should have access to best practice guidance on drafting their bereavement policy, including its contents. This should include the need for an individualised support plan.
- d. Every school should have a dedicated staff member or Bereavement Lead who should act as a point of contact or support for teaching staff, pupils and parents/guardians.

### 3. Give all teaching staff a range of opportunities to receive bereavement training:

- a. All teachers should receive basic awareness training on supporting bereaved children as part of their initial teacher training.
- b. Supporting bereaved pupils should be referenced within guidance aligned to the delivery of teacher professional competencies.
- c. Refresher training on supporting bereaved children should be offered as part of the teacher professional development programme.
- d. Consideration should be given on how existing school cluster or area

learning groups could be used to share learning and good practice across schools on supporting bereaved pupils.

#### **4. Ensure the education curriculum offers a range of opportunities for pupils to discuss bereavement and grief:**

- a.** Grief, death and loss should be included in (at least older) primary and secondary school curriculums.
- b.** Ensure that bereavement is explicitly referenced as a topic in the personal development curriculum and within a school's pastoral care programme.
- c.** Schools should be provided with a range of age and developmentally appropriate teaching materials.
- d.** Identify opportunities throughout the wider school timetable to talk or engage on the topic of grief and bereavement where it can also arise, including within core subjects such as English Literature, History, Drama, Sciences, etc.
- e.** Pupils and parent/guardians should be encouraged to inform a school's approach to this topic. This could include through pupil forums, school councils, parent-teacher associations or through boards of governors.

#### **5. The health and education sectors should build on good practice by identifying all opportunities for collaboration, this includes the following:**

- a.** Roll out of bereavement training as part of the "Being Well, Doing Well" programme.
- b.** Review parenting class content and child development literature to ensure it references child bereavement.

- c.** The Public Health Agency should support schools to develop partnerships and relationships with local organisations and resources which specialise in bereavement.
- d.** Endorse and support the work coming out of the UK Commission on Bereavement and the Northern Ireland Bereavement Network, to include the Children and Young People Bereavement Charter and the development of a future Bereavement Strategy.

## 6.0 Appendix 1

**Table 6. Primary school age: Learning outcomes and activities on grief and bereavement**

Year group	Learning outcome	Learning activity on loss, grief or bereavement
<b>Foundation</b> (Year 1-2)	Pupils should be enabled to explore their own and other's feelings and emotions.	-
<b>Key Stage 1</b> (Year 3-4)	Pupils should be enabled to explore their own and other's emotions and how their actions affect others.	<i>It's ok to cry when sad: Adam's story (Year 3)</i> <sup>1</sup> <i>Difficult feelings: Sorry! (Year 4)</i> <sup>2</sup>
<b>Key Stage 2</b> (Year 5-7)	Pupils should be enabled to explore their management of a range of feelings and emotions and the feelings and emotions of others.	<i>Thinking and Feeling: Patrick's story (Year 7)</i> <sup>3</sup>

### Primary school age

At primary school level, statutory requirements for personal development – which is one of two strands of personal development and mutual understanding (PD&MU) – are covered by nine themes.

1. Self-awareness
2. Feelings and emotions
3. Learning to learn
4. Health, growth and change
5. Safety
6. Relationships
7. Rights, rules and responsibilities
8. Managing conflict
9. Learning to live as members of the community

Under the “Living. Learning. Together.” programme, CCEA provide a list of

resources in the form of learning activities or teaching strategies to help schools deliver the statutory requirements for PD&MU. Loss and bereavement is not a separately defined theme for primary school children. Rather, some learning activities around loss and bereavement are included in the feelings and emotions theme, as shown in the table above (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment).<sup>4</sup>

Additional non-statutory PD&MU resources are available on the theme feelings and emotions theme, and loss through bereavement is identified as an appropriate learning activity.

<sup>1</sup> Unit 2: Feeling Good, Feeling Sad.pdf (ccea.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Unit 2: Difficult Feelings.pdf (ccea.org.uk)

<sup>3</sup> (PDF) Living Learning Together, Year 7: Unit 2 (ccea.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> Living.Learning.Together. is a resource for exploring PD&MU with primary school pupils- Living. Learning. Together. | CCEA

**Table 7. Post-primary school age: Learning outcomes and activities on grief and bereavement**

Year group	Learning outcome	Learning activity on loss, grief or bereavement
<p><b>Key Stage 4</b> (Year 9-11)</p>	<p>Managing change (Year 9). Pupils should be able to identify, understand and manage change in relationships.</p>	<p><i>Understanding Loss and Grief Information Sheet</i>. Loss is the focus of the activity, and pupils are asked to think of their own examples. Examples provided in the resource include loss of friendship, favourite piece of clothing, etc.<sup>5</sup></p> <p><i>Life Goes On</i>: Susan’s mum has died.</p>

### Post primary school age

The statutory curriculum requirements for Personal Development strand of Learning for Life and Work (LLW) relate to three key concepts: self-awareness, personal health and relationships. CCEA provide a set of resources, through the Insync programme aimed at supporting teachers to interpret the statutory minimum requirements for personal development at Key Stage 3. The resource is comprised of ten themes (Year 8-10) (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment).<sup>6</sup>

1. Health and the whole person
2. Feelings and emotions
3. Managing influences and making decisions
4. Self-concept
5. Managing change
6. Morals, values and beliefs
7. Learning about learning
8. Safety and managing risk

### 9. Relationships and sexuality

### 10. Drug awareness

Loss and bereavement is not a separately defined theme for post-primary school children, very limited relevant learning activities are included in the managing change area, as shown in Table 7.

### Special school

Teachers in special schools adapt their teaching and learning so that pupils can access the curriculum appropriately. CCEA has adapted some of its Insync resources to support teachers of pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD). One activity on loss and bereavement is available from the CCEA resource hub for pupils with a mild learning disability (MLD).

<sup>5</sup> Understanding loss and grief information sheet-(PDF) InSync year 9: Unit 5 (ccea.org.uk)

<sup>6</sup> InSync is a resource for exploring Personal Development issues at Years 8, 9 and 10 InSync | CCEA



**Table 8. Special schools: Learning outcomes and activities on grief and bereavement**

Year group	Learning outcome	Learning activity on loss, grief or bereavement
<b>Key Stage 3</b> (MLD)	Managing Change (Year 9) Pupils should be able to identify, understand and manage change in relationships.	<i>Nothing Ever Stays the Same: Susan's mum dies</i> (adapted from Year 9). <sup>7</sup>

**Structure of delivery**

Oversight of the delivery of the personal development part of the curriculum typically involves the principal or senior manager within a school alongside a co-ordinator. Teachers then deliver the lesson to their classes.

<sup>7</sup> Thematic Unit: Nothing Ever Stays the Same | CCEA

## 6.1 Appendix 2

**Table 9. School demographics of training attendees**

School demographic	Number (%)
<b>School type</b>	
Nursery	7 (4.3)
Primary school	86 (53)
Grammar	29 (17.9)
High school	27 (16.6)
Special needs	3 (1.8)
Other	10 (6.1)
<b>School management type</b>	
<b>Independent</b>	1 (0.6)
<b>CCMS</b>	53 (32.7)
<b>Controlled</b>	69 (42.5)
<b>Integrated</b>	8 (4.9)
<b>Voluntary</b>	21 (12.9)
<b>Irish-medium</b>	1 (0.6)
<b>Other</b>	9 (5.5)

### Teacher training evaluation

A breakdown of school type and management type can be seen in Table 9.

### Limitations

Due to anonymity and methodology design, individuals pre- and post-survey scores were not paired: the results are based on group rather than individual means.

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Marie Curie is the UK's leading end of life charity. Whatever the illness, wherever you are, we're with you to the end. You don't have to go through bereavement alone.

If you're supporting a child or young person when someone dies, there is support available. We have more advice and signposting information on our website.

**Read the full report at**  
[mariecurie.org.uk/schools-bereavement-programme](https://mariecurie.org.uk/schools-bereavement-programme)

## November, 2024

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