

Curriculum and Assessment Review

November 2024

Department for Education

13. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)

Bereaved children experience disproportionate negative impacts on their attainment, progress, access and participation.

A 2019 evidence review found that following a bereavement children can experience ‘psychological, physical, health, social, cultural and educational challenges.’¹ Research shows that children who have experienced a close bereavement have lower than average GCSE scores,² are over-represented in the prison system by the age of 30³ and are at increased risk of depressive symptoms and anxiety.⁴

Bereavement affects a significant number of children. Recent estimates indicate 127 children are bereaved of their parent or carer every day⁵ and most children and young people have experienced the death of a family member or loved one by the time they are 16.⁶

26. In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

Death and health literacy must be taught in schools to give people vital knowledge they need for life. Most of us will become ill in our lifetime and we will all experience the death of someone close to us.

Fear and stigma around death prevents people getting the help they need. For example, many are unaware of the care that hospices provide or are afraid of them, and therefore may not access hospice

¹ Consequences of childhood bereavement in the context of the British school system. <https://winstonswish.org/about-us/research/>

² Lower GCSE scores: Abdelnoor and Hollins (2004, UK) *The effect of childhood bereavement on secondary school performance* <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2004-13211-004>

³ Prison: Vaswani, N. (2014). *The ripples of death: exploring the bereavement experiences and mental health of young men in custody*. https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/138252087/Vaswani_HJCJ_2014_The_ripples_of_death_exploring_the_bereavement_experiences_and_mental_health_of_young_men_in_custody.pdf

⁴ Julie B. Kaplow, Ph.D., Jessica Saunders, Ph.D., Adrian Angold, M.D., and E. Jane Costello, Ph.D. (2010). Increased risk of depression: *Psychiatric Symptoms in Bereaved versus Non-Bereaved Youth and Young Adults: A Longitudinal Epidemiological Study*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2965565/>

⁵ Childhood Bereavement Network, n.d. Key Statistics <https://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/about/media-centre/evidence/key-statistics>

⁶ Childhood Bereavement Network, n.d. Key Statistics <https://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/about/media-centre/evidence/key-statistics>

care when they need it most. It is important that people's death literacy is improved and topics related to ill health are taught in school as anyone can be affected by these issues. For example:

- Estimates suggest that 26,900 parents die each year in the UK, leaving dependent children.⁶
- There are 120,000 carers aged 5-17 in England.⁷
- There are 49,000 children aged 0-18 living with a life-limiting or life-threatening condition in the UK.⁸

School aged children are being affected by terminal illness, ill health and death, so schools must play a key role in helping to equip students to cope with and understand these difficult topics.

The recent House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee report on Assisted Dying /Assisted Suicide⁹ recommended that the Government should establish a national strategy for death literacy. We support this recommendation and believe that educating people about how to cope with illnesses and death should start in school.

In order to achieve this, **the Death Literacy Index must be run in the UK**, and in particular in schools. According to the British Medical Journal this index 'can be used to determine levels of death literacy across multiple contexts, including at a community/national level, and to evaluate the outcome of different public health interventions.'¹⁰ This can identify specific gaps in knowledge and determine the content that it is most important to include in curriculums.

28. To what extent does the current primary curriculum support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

primary - broad and balanced

29. To what extent do the current secondary curriculum and, qualifications pathways support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

secondary - broad and balanced

Bereavement education should be a part of both the primary and secondary curriculum, and we welcome the fact that bereavement was included as an additional topic proposed to be added to the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education statutory guidance 2019.

It is essential that bereavement education is mandatory in all schools. A 2019 evidence review found that following a bereavement children can experience 'psychological, physical, health, social, cultural and educational challenges.'¹ The review found that supportive schools can play a key role in reducing these impacts, but few schools have planned responses to bereavement and teachers are unsure how to best support children. Additional research has revealed this lack of support, the 2022 UK Commission on Bereavement found that 49% of children who responded said they were only a little or not at all supported at school following a bereavement.²

Many students and parents believe that bereavement education is important and can be helpful.³ Polling from 2024 found that 61% of primary school parents and 76% of secondary school parents agreed that bereavement education 'could offer bereaved children an opportunity to seek support, or a safe environment to talk about their feelings about bereavement.'⁴

Ensuring that all schools teach their students about bereavement and that teachers are well equipped to talk about bereavement can help students to feel more supported and can help them to feel more confident in supporting their classmates.

Guidance around bereavement content must be developed. Across society many are not equipped to talk about grief, highlighting the importance of good guidance on bereavement education.

This guidance should mandate the following topics are included in bereavement education:

- how everyone can grieve in different ways
- how students can support someone who has been bereaved
- where bereaved students can receive support from
- how practices around death/ funerals/ bereavement vary from culture to culture.

Guidance must be co-produced with bereavement organisations and students who have experienced bereavement while at school.

The guidance must also signpost to the significant array of supporting assets that are available for teachers and educational communities to use when talking about grief and bereavement.