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# Supporting primary teachers to address loss and death in the classroom: a case study of an interdisciplinary, creative pedagogical intervention using education, children's literature, architecture/design and the arts

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## ABSTRACT

Schools inevitably face difficult discussions with children about loss and death, irrespective of whether it is factored into formal teaching. A range of societal factors in many countries, not least a lack of training, compound to leave many teachers unprepared to manage these sensitive issues. Whilst resources and guidance are widely available, there is a gap in generating pedagogical tools which are underpinned by solid theoretical grounding. This article addresses that gap, reporting on a case study of staff ( $n = 12$ ) working in an infant school in England, where an interdisciplinary project was implemented to explore whether creative pedagogies could empower staff to address these difficult topics with young children. Contextualised within thanatology, (the study of death and its social practices), an intervention was designed and co-created with teachers synthesising education, literature, architecture/design and the arts. The paper details its theoretical and practical development, and the participants' responses to it. The article concludes that despite initial ambivalence among some school staff about using creative pedagogies, responses at the end of the study were positive and confidence had increased. The need for theoretically sound approaches is supported as part of the long-advocated calls for mandatory death/life education, although the potential dissonance between academics and practitioners' views about the value of theory is acknowledged. However, the paper argues that co-created interdisciplinary projects such as this can help bridge theory-practice divides. Furthermore, they can offer practical spaces for reflection and confidence building in time-effective ways to benefit teachers and children.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

Death is an ever-present reality in children's lives. They encounter it through multiple, often inescapable means such as the media's (constant) reporting of the deaths of high profile figures, local murders, war, tragedies or natural disasters. Death is also part of TV programmes, films and video games which can be extremely graphic, and of course, most children will at some point experience the death of pets and family members, acquaintances, and sometimes even classmates or school staff. As Talwar (2011) observes, given that children spend a large amount of time in school, it is inevitable that the topic will arise in educational settings, irrespective of whether it is factored into the curriculum.

Research shows that many teachers recognise the importance of addressing loss and death in the classroom (Holland, 2008). However, they face significant challenges in managing the topic. In England, a recent survey showed that many primary teachers are apprehensive about tackling the subject (NATRE, 2020). Similar findings are mirrored across different cultural settings, with common concerns including social and cultural taboos around talking about death, especially to children (Bowie, 2000; Dawson et al., 2023; Kennedy et al., 2020; Puskás et al., 2023; Ramos-Pla et al., 2023; Talwar, 2011). The situation is particularly compounded by a lack of training, which again is reported in different countries (see Dawson et al., 2023; Lynam et al., 2020; Ramos-Pla et al., 2023; Talwar, 2011). This absence of mandatory training leaves school staff unprepared for difficult conversations, whether they be initiated by children's questions, a child's bereavement or an issue arising as part of the formal curriculum. Yet, teachers' apprehension contrasts with children's natural curiosity about death (Puskás et al., 2023; Ramos-Pla et al., 2023). Young people's reflections can be profound, sometimes relating to personal encounters with the deceased (Adams, 2010; Adams et al., 2008; D. M. Thomas, 2023). Nonetheless, teachers are in a difficult position given the sensitivity of the topic, which they might be uncomfortable with on a personal and/or professional level despite the inevitability of being faced with it in school.

### *Support for schools*

Calls for children to receive mandatory education about loss, death and grief are not new. These propositions are aligned to thanatology, the study of death and its social practices. Thanatology is an interdisciplinary field, which Fonseca and Testoni (2012, p. 159) describe as a 'scientific field of study that touches on other realms of interest, such as philosophy, psychology, medicine, sociology, anthropology, nursing, bioethics, history, architecture, education, archaeology, and law'. Doka et al. (2016) also

include social work, health education and religious studies in their description of the field. A significant contribution of thanatology is Death Education, stemming from the work of Herman Feifel, which was developed in the 1960s in the USA. Since then, many programmes have been created for practitioners including health professionals, grief counsellors and educators in schools (Doka et al., 2016; Fonseca & Testoni, 2012). However, Dawson et al. (2023) note that in UK schools, there are no mandatory elements in curricula, despite calls for this spanning two decades.

As Dawson et al. (2023) observe, resources are freely available, particularly on bereavement, which are often produced by charities. (See their paper for a compilation of useful resources). However, Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) argue that despite the availability of such resources and guidance, there is a gap in generating pedagogical tools which are underpinned by solid theoretical grounding. They argue that implementing professional development in this area is two-fold. First, it is theoretical or conceptual, e.g. there is a need to conceptually ground the teaching of such difficult issues. Second, it is also practical, in that specific, pedagogical practices are required as opposed to generic guidelines.

This paper addresses the gap in theoretically-underpinned pedagogical tools which Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) identify, set in the context of teachers' lack of preparedness in England and the rest of the UK, where there is no statutory requirement to teach about loss and death in any of the four nation's devolved curriculums (i.e. England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) (Dawson et al., 2023). Hence, there is no mandatory training. The article reports on a case study of an infant school in which staff welcomed support in managing loss and death. The project offers originality by developing an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining education, literature, architecture/design and the arts. It adopted a co-creation, participatory philosophy to explore how creative pedagogies might be used to empower staff to address these difficult topics with young children with diverse cultural backgrounds and varying proficiencies in language(s).

### **An interdisciplinary theoretical framework**

Theoretically, the work is framed by thanatology, acknowledging the wide range of disciplines through which death can be understood. Within this broader umbrella, an interdisciplinary team was formed, comprising: Education, including pedagogy and educational research methods (Adams); children's literature (Erle); architecture/design (Ungerer); and the arts (Sossi).

Elements of these four disciplines/fields combined to inform the methodology, commencing with the blending of education and children's literature.

### ***Education and children's literature: picture books on loss and death***

Children's literature was the pedagogical starting point. Its use across a range of curriculum subjects is a daily practice in schools, providing numerous benefits. Even before they can read, children can learn from books, and in particular, picture books. Their language acquisition is promoted, their stereotypes can be challenged, and social interactions are enhanced when adults are engaged with the reading (Horst & Houston-Price, 2015). In addition, fiction can be used for pedagogic, didactic and therapeutic purposes (Pulimeno et al., 2020). There have been numerous content analyses of story books, and some of picture books, with the themes of loss and death, which have included foci on: the characters, which may be people or animals (see Arruda-Colli et al., 2017; Poling & Hupp, 2008; Wiseman, 2013); comparisons between East Asian and Western European texts (Lee et al., 2014); how texts convey children's biological understandings of death, which psychologists classify as irreversibility, inevitability/universality and non-functionality (see Arruda-Colli et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2014); and the spiritual and/or religious dimensions (see Arruda-Colli et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2014; Malcom, 2011; Poling & Hupp, 2008).

Research has shown that literature is an important mechanism for helping children to understand loss and death, and also cope with bereavement. Termed 'bibliotherapy', there is wide agreement that books can support children to reflect on, understand and process practical, emotional, spiritual and social issues related to death and dying (Arruda-Colli et al., 2017; Wiseman, 2013). Children's fiction is particularly effective for enabling teachers to distance the learning in sensitive topics in general (Erle & Hendry, 2020; PSHE, 2018) and grief and death in particular (Dawson et al., 2023). In a research study of Death Education programmes which used books, teachers commented that the texts made the teaching and learning both meaningful and interactive (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021).

Given the pedagogic, didactic and therapeutic roles of children's fiction (Pulimeno et al., 2020), using a picture book was therefore an appropriate foundation, as all three themes are relevant to the topic. However, whilst books are valuable tools, loss and death are such multifaceted topics that rather than simply using a text with a follow-up activity such as questions or drawings, we intended to move 'beyond the book' in a deeper way, namely to weave interdisciplinary methods with children's literature, to offer a sound theoretical underpinning for a pedagogical tool.

## ***Creative pedagogies***

Research and practical interventions on loss and death in schools have taken varied approaches, with the arts often utilised; for example, St Christopher's Hospice in London runs a community arts programme providing short-term projects between pupils in primary and secondary schools and terminally ill patients (Dawson et al., 2023). Art therapy has been used in schools with children who have suffered traumatic losses, such as those in Sri Lanka after a tsunami killed over 30,000 people in 2004 (Chilcote, 2007). Our approach embraced and embedded the arts as part of the pedagogy. Creative pedagogies in education more broadly have received increased interest internationally, and have been characterised by: generating and exploring ideas; encouraging autonomy and agency; playfulness; problem-solving; risk-taking; co-constructing and collaborating; and teacher creativity (Cremin & Chappell, 2021). Aligned with these categories, the study embedded a co-creating, collaborative and participatory approach into its ethical design.

The full interdisciplinary methodology is detailed after the methods section, with parts being interwoven with the findings. This ordering of material provides a coherent, chronological narrative of how the study unfolded both before we entered the school, and during the collaborative workshops with the staff. Presenting information in this way will facilitate easier replication or adaptation of the process.

## **Method**

### ***Case study approach***

The study was embedded in educational research, adopting a mixed methods Case Study design, which facilitated an in-depth understanding of a real-life contemporary case (Cresswell, 2013). The bounded focus of the case is a community infant school in the south east of England which caters for children aged 3–7. It has approximately 300 pupils enrolled. In terms of the socio-economic background of pupils, the percentage eligible for free school meals was below the national average of 23.8% (Department for Education, 2023). The Head Teacher had expressed interest in the study, due to its particular relevance to the school, where children had been bereaved and the teachers welcomed support. Therefore, an instrumental case study (Cresswell, 2013; Stake, 1995) was adopted, with purposeful sampling. It focused on one situation (Litchman, 2010), namely how staff in this school setting addressed loss and death with children, and how an interdisciplinary intervention may or may not be useful.

The empirical phase comprised the following inter-related components as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The project's methods.

|    | Method                                                                                                     | Aims and methodological detail                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. | Workshop 1. Focus group<br>(Hand written observational notes were taken)                                   | To discuss the enablers and challenges of the staff in addressing loss and death with children<br>To explore a set of children's picture books on death and loss and discuss their responses to them as potential resources (in preparation for use in Workshop 2), achieved through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An introduction to the picture book <i>Death, Duck and the Tulip</i> (Erlbuch, 2010)</li> <li>• Free-writing exercise commencing 'The great river ...'</li> <li>• Participants' extraction of 3–4 potent phrases from their writing</li> <li>• Sharing of some written pieces</li> <li>• Discussion about the enablers and challenges</li> <li>• Conversations in pairs about the books and whole group feedback discussion</li> </ul>                                     |
| 2. | Follow-up anonymous questionnaire collecting qualitative and quantitative data                             | To ascertain staff's self-assessed preparedness, experience and confidence in dealing with issues with loss and death in the classroom through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likert scale questions relating to the effectiveness of Initial Teacher Training and in-service training</li> <li>• Ranking exercise of the most frequently encountered situations in school where the topic arises</li> <li>• Open-ended question on the challenges encountered in school</li> <li>• Open-ended question on their feelings about using creative approaches in this area</li> <li>• Identification of their preferred children's book (for use in workshop 2)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                         |
| 3. | Workshop 2. Practical workshop: a co-created intervention<br>(Hand written observational notes were taken) | To co-create a temporary physical and emotional safe space in which to explore loss and death related to a children's picture book, through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading of the story <i>The Heart and the Bottle</i> (Jeffers, 2010)</li> <li>• Explanation of how the book was analysed to elicit the symbols of the chair and the Sky of Memories</li> <li>• Short, guided meditation</li> <li>• Timed free-writing exercise starting with 'I remember' and focusing on a person or animal who has died or 'we have lost'</li> <li>• Co-creation of the physical structure</li> <li>• Making of personal memory items and adding them to the structure</li> <li>• Inhabiting the structure <i>Looking up/Lying Down Space: A Sky of Memories</i></li> <li>• Discussion</li> </ul> |
| 4. | Follow up anonymous questionnaire collecting qualitative and quantitative data                             | To evaluate Workshop 2 through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliciting the most and least useful aspects and suggestions for changes to its design</li> <li>• Whether or not participation had affected their confidence levels in using creative methods to address loss and death</li> <li>• Whether or not it had helped them move beyond using a book to address this topic with an explanation</li> <li>• The likelihood of them using any of the techniques in the classroom and if so, which ones</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 5. | Email follow up                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agreement to email the Head Teacher at the end of the academic year to ask if any of the staff had implemented the ideas in the classroom, to ascertain whether or not the activities had brought longer term impacts</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

Twelve staff members (ten female and two male) participated in the initial workshop, a mixture of teaching assistants, teachers and senior management. Eight questionnaires were returned. Eleven staff (nine female and two male) were present for Workshop 2, with one of the original teachers being unavailable due to a prior commitment. Three questionnaires were returned.

Although this project did not involve children, the intention was for the teachers to use and adapt the methods in their own classroom practice as relevant, with children and teachers being the subsequent co-creators at all stages of the process. Whilst some of the more physical mark-making and building elements could be directly translated into the classroom, there was an understanding that the free-writing exercises might need to be adapted to suit the pupils' writing skills. i.e. that we worked with the teachers as adults, but recognised that there was scope for them to adapt activities to children of different ages.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was granted by the funding institution where the PI (Ungerer) was employed at the time – The University of Brighton. The approved application was subsequently received and accepted by the faculty ethics committee of the lead author's (Adams) institution, Leeds Trinity University. The team recognised that staff may be triggered by issues raised, and care was taken to advise them accordingly beforehand, as well as provide appropriate signposting for support, through the participant information sheet. On meeting in person for the two workshops, the team reiterated the scope of the initiative and each session, and the consent issues each time, and stated that none of us were qualified counsellors or therapists.

The research was designed with ethical issues at the forefront. For example, a participatory approach was utilised throughout, whereby staff and the research team co-created the intervention. This approach distributed contributions more equally and shifted to a more ethical approach of research with partners (Baumfield et al., 2013). The materials used for building the structure in Workshop 2 (Table 1, 1 & 3) were sourced using sustainable criteria where possible, and – alongside the set of picture books – were donated to the school for the intention of reuse and sharing with other local schools, thereby extending the collaborative ethos beyond the lifetime of this study.

The team was sensitive to the fact that teachers in England have high workloads and competing demands on their time. Allen et al. (2021) state that teachers in England work in high pressured environments with poor wellbeing and low retention, and work longer hours than their counterparts in other countries. Hence, the research design respectfully minimised the time requested of them (Sturrock, 2022). For efficiency, the Head Teacher set aside two regular staff meetings for the workshops to take place (Table 1, 1). Whilst opportunities for non-participation and withdrawal were made clear in writing and verbally, for both the workshops and follow up questionnaires, the team recognised that



the scheduling and the presence and participation of the Head Teacher may have had ethical implications for participation and withdrawal. i.e. some staff may have been reluctant to be involved but felt obliged to attend and/or reluctant to withdraw. Hence, the researchers were particularly mindful of body language and engagement levels during the activities.

During the workshops, photographs were taken, with permissions, of writing and artwork. No images of participants or identifying features of the school or staff, were captured. Hence, the only visible faces in the photographs below are those of researchers (Figures 1-5).

### **Methodology phase 1: synthesising children's literature and architecture**

Prior to visiting the school, Erle led on the selection of a range of picture books addressing themes of loss and death for children up to the age of seven. Erle applied elements of prior content analyses of texts on this topic, on the basis of their: overarching theme around loss and death; characters (humans, animals etc.); setting; use of language around loss and death (e.g. realistic, metaphorical); use of metaphors or symbols; and the information provided.

From these books, which we shared with the staff in Workshop 1 (Table 1, 1–2), the co-selected picture book was *The Heart and the Bottle* by Oliver Jeffers (2010). The book can be summarised as follows:

*The Heart and the Bottle* tells the story of a young girl who was curious about the world. An illustration shows an older man sitting in a chair indoors, reading with her about the wonders of the outside world – the sea, forests and star-lit sky: images of what would become her memories. One day the girl walked into the room to find that the chair was empty. She decided to put her heart in a safe place - in a bottle - as a temporary measure, but she began to lose her interest and curiosity and found that the bottle weighed heavy. The girl grew up. One day, she met a young girl on a beach and wondered if the child could help her. She realised that she needed to retrieve her heart from the bottle but she couldn't extract it. However, the little girl was able to do it for her. From that day on, the young woman reconnected the inner fascination she had previously enjoyed with the external world.

The paucity of the teachers' time led to the research team undertaking preparatory work on the design of the physical structure ahead of Workshop 2, although ideally this task would have been co-created, and moving forwards, teachers could implement the collaborative approach with children. To inform the structure's design, an architectural approach was used, in which the different spatial configurations in the book were analysed. This process involved drawing out the atmosphere of the spaces (Seamon, 2022) as communicated by the book's illustrations and text, i.e. identifying the ambience of [the building] that makes it unique or unusual.

Analysed using this architectural-design approach, the book presents two key types of spaces: first, the exterior world (represented by the wonderful images of a beach, forest, and the star-lit night sky), which the girl explores and relishes as she collects her memories. The horizon-line in the images suggests an unlimited expanse of space, not restricted by enclosures. Second, the interior space which is the focus of the interaction between the girl and her elderly relative or friend. The depiction of the space is fragmented but framed by a series of objects: the opulent armchair (initially occupied by an older man, later claimed by the girl), a window to the outside, a table, a bookshelf. The girl's perception of the space changes and reflects her own interior emotions. It starts as a 'refuge' of conversation and learning, but once the chair is found empty, the interior space is lacking inhabitation and thus meaning. It is now devoid of bright colours, apart from a corner of the chair illuminated by the moonlight. In the final pages, the reader is returned to a version of the room, stripped back to the armchair (now occupied by the girl), the rug and a pile of books; and most importantly the tapestry/sky of memories, knowledge, facts and imagination created by the girl's re-discovered curiosity.

The exterior walls were not visible in the book, but the images suggest that the girl is once more safely tucked away in the corner of the house. In his *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard (1984) discusses the corners we seek to inhabit as 'havens'. Though not physically fully enclosed, they offer safe spaces created in part through our inhabitation: 'An imaginary room rises up around our bodies, which think that they are well hidden when taken refuge in a corner' (Bachelard, 1984, p. 137). To translate the project 'beyond the book', we used this architectural perspective to extract two key elements from the text. Whilst the most obvious symbols might have been, as the title implies, a heart and a bottle, this architectural approach led to less obvious but poignant elements, namely:

- (1) the 'safe corner' or inhabitable space, framed as a place of memory and imagination;
- (2) the 'chair' as the grounding, structural element holding the frame.

The purpose of the frame was to support an inhabitable space which, using ideas from the book, would be jointly completed with staff on the day of Workshop 2 (Table 1, 3), where it would be:

- (1) enveloped in a collaborative tapestry/sky of memories and ideas, echoing the girl's wonders of the world and her subsequent memories of her childhood fascinations;
- (2) inhabitable by lying underneath it, in a manner which would encourage a 'change of perspective', just as the book's protagonist readjusted her perspective on the world in order to rediscover and inhabit the 'safe space' of the armchair (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The frame, grounded by the chair(s).

## **Findings and analysis**

Data from the workshops were analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) because it is a flexible approach to analysing qualitative data. Its flexibility includes the identification of patterns within and across data sets with regards to people's experience, views and practice. As we used more than one method, it was important to triangulate themes (Biesta, 2012); hence we triangulated observations from the workshops with responses on the questionnaires where relevant. The findings answer the aims detailed in Table 1 and the most prevalent themes are identified and explored in the subsequent Discussion section.

### ***The school's context, enablers and challenges***

Data on the context, enablers and challenges were derived from a combination of Workshop 1 and responses to the first follow-up questionnaire (Table 1, 1–2).

In the workshop, staff explained that they did not include death in any formal planning, which resonated with Bowie's (2000) findings in a Scottish school. However, two respondents to the questionnaire stated that they incorporated it into both formal subjects and also in Personal, Social and Health Education or Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural development. It is likely that these two

teachers viewed death as extending beyond people, because one person in the workshop mentioned that they had covered vegetables dying in a lesson.

The majority of the discussions about loss and death in the school arose informally from child-initiated questions. These included responses to external events such as the media coverage of Queen Elizabeth II's death in 2022. The most frequent conversation-starters emerged outside of any formal session. The questionnaire asked participants to break these down into specific areas. All eight respondents (100%) reported children sharing narratives about the death of pets and expressing fears about the potential death of someone close to them. Seven (87.5%) respondents reported children sharing narratives about the death of people known personally to them, and children expressing fears of loss which excluded death. Where staff had ranked these in order of frequency, the most commonly encountered was that of children talking about the death of their pets. In the workshop, one teacher felt that managing the death of a pet was relatively easy compared to the death of a parent; Jackson and Colwell (2002) note that the importance of the death of a pet to a child is not always fully acknowledged by adults.

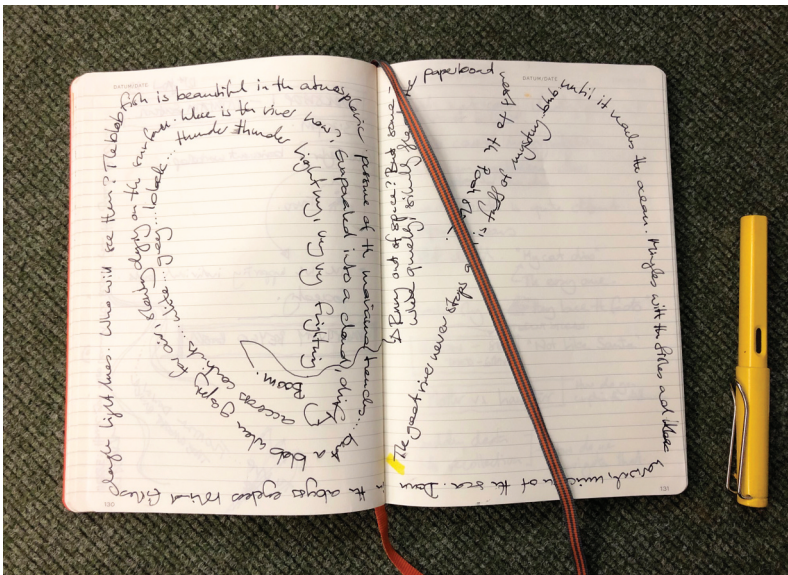
The conversation about the situations in which death arose in school was primarily focused on the death of a child's parent, and how the staff responded to it. A key challenge had been their lack of preparedness to deal with bereavement. In response to the statement on the questionnaire, 'My initial teacher training prepared me well to deal with issues of loss and death in the formal curriculum', 87.5% ( $n=7$ ) either disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the remaining one person (12.5%) stating, 'neither agree nor disagree'. The same results arose in relation to the statement, 'My initial teacher training prepared me well to deal with issues of loss and death raised by children'. Although a small sample, these findings mirrored other small and larger studies in which teachers reported having insufficient preparation during training (Ramos-Pla et al., 2023; Talwar, 2011).

There was a slightly more positive response rate to the corresponding statements pertaining to in-service training/Continuing Professional Development, with 37.5% agreeing ( $n=3$ ), 37.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, and 25% ( $n=2$ ) stating 'neither agree nor disagree'. In the case of this school, this training had been provided by a Charity, on request by the school following the death of the child's parent. This form of support had been invaluable. Overall, the school's situation reflected a recent study in England by Abraham-Steele and Edmonds (2021) who interviewed 11 members of staff from 10 schools in a local area about bereavement support. They identified four themes: an inconsistency in support; systemic limitations; a lack of policy and guidance;

and speaking to children about death, including some adults being uncomfortable talking about death with children.

### **Methodology phase 2: interdisciplinary methods for facilitating pedagogical tools and findings**

In workshop 1, Erle selected another children's book, *Duck, Death and the Tulip* (Erlbuch, 2010) which was read to the group. A theme of 'the great river' was drawn from the text, and arts-based creative processes were interwoven (Figure 2). Sossi conducted a guided meditation followed by a free-writing exercise based on the image; free-writing being a technique in which people write for short periods without stopping, correcting or reflecting, thereby enabling focus (Elbow, 1998). The timed element is also a crucial part of the discipline as it facilitates sustainable commitment to the writing (Goldberg, 2016). One teacher commented that the activity would translate well into the classroom.



**Figure 2.** Example of free-writing exercise on the theme of 'the great river'.

Staff chose a picture book from the selection we had purchased, and discussed their responses to it in pairs before feeding back to the whole group. The staff were clearly comfortable about the general proposition of using books with children to approach loss and death, but there was apprehension about using some of the texts for different reasons. For example, there was concern that:

- an image of children on the top of a step ladder in *Lost in the Clouds* (Tinn-Disbury, 2021) would encourage mimicking, dangerous behaviour;
- children might ask questions which the teachers were uncertain about how to respond to. In the book *Fox: A Circle of Life Story* (Thomas & Egneus, 2020), the phrase 'Death is a beginning' led staff to ponder how they might answer if children asked how death could be a beginning, especially as they would not always be aware of the families' beliefs;
- children might not understand the message where symbolism was used, such as *The Heart and the Bottle* (Jeffers, 2010) and;
- confusion could occur if messages were mixed or unclear, as they perceived them to be in *The Building Boy* (Montgomery & Litchfield, 2016).

These responses appeared to suggest tensions between the advice provided by the bereavement charity to always use straightforward language around death, with which the staff concurred, and the symbolism and metaphor used in some of the books. The latter seemed to be an issue particularly for those texts which do not explicitly state that a character has died, such as *The Heart and the Bottle* (Jeffers, 2010).

The questionnaire responses indicated some further ambivalence towards books, with only three participants responding to a question about any aspects of books which they would deem compelling. Further uncertainty/potential disinterest was demonstrated in the response to a question about whether they thought creative approaches might be useful, with four choosing not to answer the question, one stating unsure, and three stating yes. Hence, at this stage of the project, less than half of the staff were positive about using creative approaches to address loss and death.

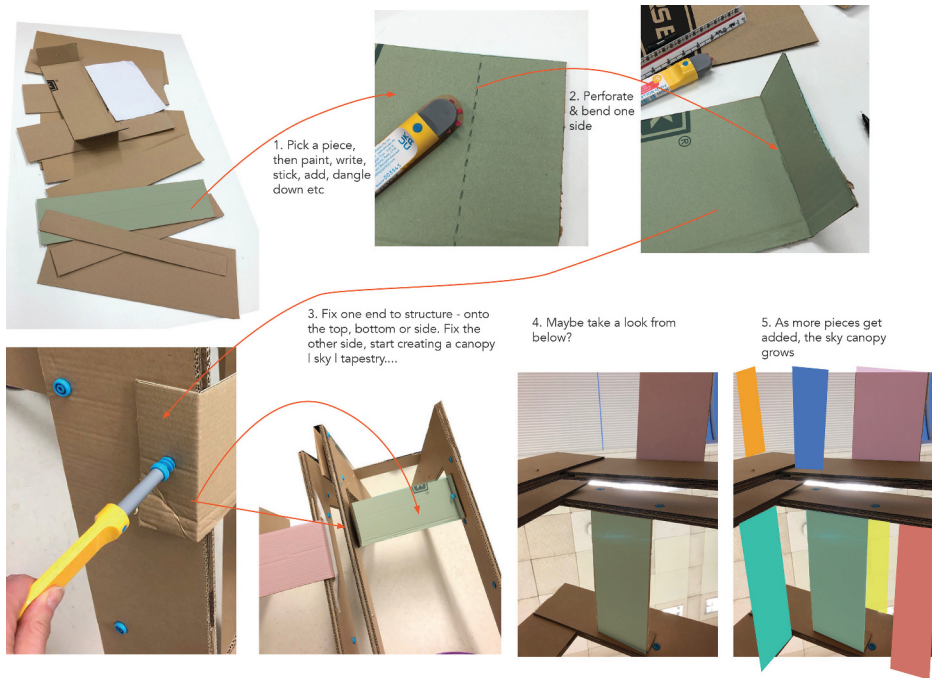
### ***Co-creation of the physical space: methodological components and findings***

On the second visit to the school, the team and the staff collaborated in Workshop 2 (Table 1, 3) which focused on the building of the physical space, developing the initial structure partially pre-built by Ungerer (Figure 1).

Preparation for this co-creation elements of the session used an arts-based approach. After reading *The Heart and the Bottle*, Sossi led a stilling, reflective activity in which participants undertook a time limited free-writing activity (Elbow, 1998) beginning with the phrase, 'I remember'. The 'I remember' technique, proposed by Goldberg (2016), was crucial here because it could encapsulate one or more memories, irrespective of whether they were recent or old, and enabled the memory to come to life again. As Goldberg (2016) also observes in relation to timed free-writing, people are able to write what their mind sees and feels, rather than what the mind thinks they should see and feel.

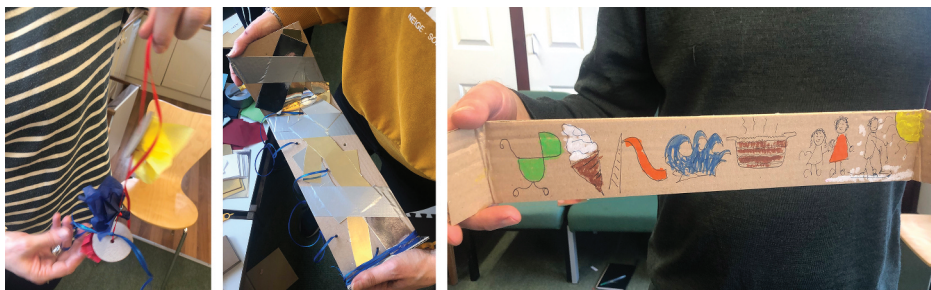
Simultaneously, one staff member assisted Ungerer in completing the frame, supported by instructions (Figure 3), commenting that it reminded them of their

childhood, when they used to build objects with their father. Another said that the act of building this space together was valuable. These situations reflect Vaajakallio et al.'s (2009) comments that one of the important aims of co-designing is that it facilitates people to think aloud and reveals their needs and desires. In contrast, others remained silent, focused solely on their personal depiction of their memory, with one describing it as being 'in a space away from the world'.



**Figure 3.** Workshop instructions shared with teachers.

The participants used a range of arts materials to create memories prompted by the writing exercise (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Participants sharing their individual memories.

The frame was then filled with the memories they had generated to form a sky when viewed from underneath by lying on the floor, thus merging art, spatial design and literature with the teachers' experience and personal memories; one teacher tore up the words they had written and pasted them onto a card; others wrote words and/or drew images; some used tissue paper to make shapes or decorate the words/images. They attached them to the interior and exterior of the frame. When inhabiting the space, by lying down underneath it (Figure 5), they looked up to see what one described as 'a ceiling of memories' (Figure 6); a mirror to the symbolic sky of memories depicted in *The Heart and the Bottle*. Now they had been personalised for and by the participants. This new vista represented the change of perspective which the protagonist of the book had acquired. In a classroom, it might also create a den – a safe space for children to inhabit.



Figure 5. An inhabitable safe space.



Figure 6. The view from underneath: details of the tapestry/sky of memories.



Despite the prior ambivalence towards using creative methods for the purposes of addressing loss and death in the classroom, these were well received during Workshop 2, with the exception of one participant whose body language suggested a reluctance to engage initially, albeit that they did contribute a memory to the structure. All of the comments about the creative approach were positive. Examples included:

- ‘We should make things in staff meetings’; ‘Yes, it is very therapeutic, isn’t it?’
- ‘I was curious about what others were making’.
- ‘It’s a cathartic, creative process. The writing was emotional but this was an outlet’.
- ‘We should create, not talk’.
- ‘I valued working creatively and collaboratively’.
- ‘Feel more open due to the creativity’.
- ‘I remembered the power of creativity’.

We were, of course, mindful that participants may feel uncomfortable in offering negative feedback in front of ourselves and/or their peers, including the Head Teacher. Therefore, the second follow up questionnaire invited an anonymous evaluation of Workshop 2 and the impact, if any, on confidence levels and planned use of creative methods (see [Table 1](#), 4). As noted earlier, only three questionnaires were returned. All three stated that their confidence in using creative methods had increased and they would be ‘likely’ applying the methods in the classroom. Similarly, all stated that the workshop had helped them move ‘beyond the book’. One wrote that the process was ‘a way to bring [a] book to life’ and another said, ‘It has given me the strength and belief in my own knowledge of death and bereavement and ability to communicate with young children.’

The issue of time – which had been restricted – also emerged in the responses. One person stated that if they could make a change, it would be to have ‘more time to explore ideas in the workshop’ and another suggested having ‘more from us about age appropriate discussions related to death’. One was unclear as to how they could apply the Workshop to the classroom, and another commented that the discussion about the books in Workshop 1 was not entirely applicable to their age group. (We had selected texts which spanned these ages, so it is possible that these had been taken from the table by teachers of other year groups). The limited time available with the teachers naturally restricted the length and depth of conversation we were able to have to explore concerns and queries.

As pre-arranged with the Head Teacher, the PI emailed them three months later to request informal feedback on post-project activities in the school,

including whether the teachers had implemented any of the activities in the classroom (Table 1, 5). We have kept the school informed of developments but have not yet received a response; this is likely due to changes in the senior management staffing at the time and we recognise the increased workload and other priorities involved in the transition.

## Discussion

This section initially focuses on the main aims of the research, namely to explore the implementation of theoretically grounded pedagogies, which were interdisciplinary and creative in nature to facilitate classroom discussions about loss and death. It then briefly highlights two additional arising themes and contextualises them with preceding literature, namely mandatory training/education and time.

### Theoretically grounded pedagogies: a divide?

The intervention's theoretical underpinning accorded with academic convention, drawing on theory and methods, while simultaneously addressing the school's practical needs (Groothuisen et al., 2020). In this way, it aimed to bridge the long-recognised gap between the worlds of academic research and the needs of education practitioners (Joram et al., 2020). In her Scottish study, Bowie (2000) observed that teachers' views about the place of Death Education is often at variance with academics' views that it should be embedded in the existing curriculum so that it helps to prepare children for loss. i.e. that schools take a proactive approach (with sufficient training) rather than having to adopt a reactive stance when faced with death(s). Reasons for this dissonance may include a lack of importance placed on research by some practitioners; Tavares de Sousa et al. (2020) found that student teachers in England and Portugal did not perceive research to be critical to their learning, believing that they learnt the most during teaching practice in schools.

However, as Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) argue, the theoretical components are important when developing pedagogy for loss and death, rather than relying on guidance. In this case, the latter would have consisted of us recommending the reading of a picture book followed by a making activity: this is a process which teachers frequently undertake in many subject areas. Instead, this project purposely drew on different disciplines to develop a novel, informed approach to using a picture book, moving beyond an initial reading and sharing of the book in the classroom, to facilitate a more in-depth engagement with the themes of loss and death. As Discovery (2023) notes, interdisciplinarity benefits researchers as they need to consider varied viewpoints and synthesise concepts from different fields. In this case, the architectural method of 'reading' the book's text and illustrations gave new insights into ways of selecting the symbols. The contributions of collaboration and creativity further enhanced the theoretical grounding, with

the arts-based tasks leading to practical outcomes of slowing down and reflecting on experiences of loss and death, and how those linked to their values and pedagogies. All parties learnt about the merits of considering different perspectives – resonating with the fictional child's journey in *The Heart and the Bottle*.

Whilst multi-agency working in the UK means that teachers are not expected to take on roles of other professionals such as social workers (Holland, 2008), they are often the first adult outside of the home faced with children's issues. As such, an understanding of theory can potentially empower them, allowing for empathy which can potentially decrease stress when the topic arises. A pertinent example is with the use of picture books. As described earlier, much research has been undertaken about the use of children's literature around loss and death, and texts and illustrations are valued as a pedagogical tool, particularly for helping children understand and process emotions, social, spiritual and practical issues (Arruda-Colli et al., 2017; Wiseman, 2013). Without training on using them in death/life related education (as is the case in the Cypriot programmes detailed by Stylianou and Zembylas (2021), this study encountered ambivalence and concerns about how children might react to books' content. There was also confusion about mixed messages around using direct, unambiguous language about death with children and the contradictory stance of some picture books which relied on symbolism and metaphors, as well as one also containing factual information. Here we see a separation between theory and practice, albeit one which could be addressed with appropriate training. If theory was addressed and discussed in training, and embedded in well-designed pedagogy, staff may be empowered to utilise books in more meaningful and impactful ways than they might otherwise have done.

### **Interdisciplinary creative pedagogies for loss and death**

As noted, the staff's initial ambivalence about using creative methods was superseded by more positive outlooks by the end of Workshop 2. One of the concerns raised in the literature about developing creative pedagogies is a lack of time (Cremin & Chappell, 2021), but while the researchers invested considerable time in the development of the pedagogy behind the scenes, as is necessary in interdisciplinary research (Discovery, 2023), the intention was for teachers to subsequently use and/or adapt the methodologies with the children in their classrooms. To do so would be through existing curriculum areas, rather than being an 'add on'. As Jackson and Colwell (2002) note, death arises naturally in many parts of the curriculum, such as teaching about the life cycle in science, or beliefs about death and mummification in a history lesson about Ancient Egypt. More recently, we can add subjects which tackle climate change, addressing loss of species, habitat and human lives. Teachers will inevitably use a variety of methods in these instances, but all curriculum areas are amenable to the type of creative pedagogies used in this study.

Any subsequent utilisation of the pedagogy in schools can also include the co-creator elements, with staff and children being the collaborators. Stevens-Ballenger and Jeanneret (2023) demonstrated that even very young children can be active co-creators in integrated arts performances. Birch et al. (2017, p. 257) showed how, when children worked with designers, a ‘third space’ was created ‘where rules are disregarded by one or other or both parties.’ This space allowed for improvisation and possibilities in which the children and designers learned from each other. Crucially, this intervention and its associated creative pedagogies, and any adaptations, can be used across the curriculum in flexible ways, for both proactive and reactive means. By using it as a proactive tool, it can assist in normalising conversations before children are confronted with the actualities of loss or death through personal experience (Kennedy et al., 2020).

## Arising themes

### *Mandatory training*

As observed in the analysis, some of the findings resonate with other research, notably the teachers’ lack of confidence and training (Dawson et al., 2023; Lynam et al., 2020; Ramos-Pla et al., 2023; Talwar, 2011). These factors contributed to the school having to take a reactive approach when children suffered a loss (Bowie, 2000). Being in this reactive situation is inevitable for most schools: in the UK, it is estimated that up to 70% of schools have a recently bereaved pupil on their roll at any given time (Child Bereavement UK, 2023). Furthermore, it is estimated that most British children will encounter the death of someone else close to them before they reach the age of 16 (Dawson et al., 2023). Our partner school also encountered themes identified by Abraham-Steele and Edmonds (2021) including lack of policy and guidance, and uncertainty about how to respond to a bereaved child.

Given this school’s situation of being unprepared and the emotional strain on staff which was evident in Workshop 1, our research supports the many previous calls for teachers to receive training, both pre-service and in-service, through forms of mandatory death-related education (Dawson et al., 2023). Lynam et al. (2020), in their study in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, argued that its inclusion at the pre-service stage is important because trainees are likely to encounter pupils’ experience of loss and death while they are on teaching practice. Additionally, given the reports of regular child-initiated queries in this school, and supported by wider research indicating children’s natural inquiries about death (Adams, 2010; Puskás et al., 2023; Ramos-Pla et al., 2023), we also note that these calls for training should be extended to non-teaching school staff. These colleagues play vital roles, either inside or outside formal lessons, offering a listening ear to children who want to talk to someone they trust.

## **Time**

Throughout the study, a recurring underlying theme was time. Initially, this focused on teachers' lack of it (Allen et al., 2021; Sturrock, 2022) – a circumstance which is also reflected in their ability to undertake research and/or be involved in others' research initiatives. In a study in England about teachers' engagement with research ( $n=1670$ ), attitudes to research were mostly positive. However, only 35% of schools made additional time available for teachers to engage with research (Walker et al., 2019). The Head Teacher with whom we collaborated clearly supported the staff involvement in research and had been resourceful by using two pre-scheduled staff meetings for this purpose, but this will not be the case for all.

However, the 'lack of time' discourse was counteracted when staff advised that they had welcomed the opportunity to work collaboratively together, and valued the (short) time they had to reflect on memories of loved ones. As they said, such opportunities for 'time out' were rare. Time is needed for thinking and reflection on many areas of pedagogy but especially around those for topics as sensitive as this. Creating time, in the context of high stakes accountability systems which are focused on meeting targets such as that in England, is extremely challenging but perhaps the apposite question should be: can we afford *not* to find time to address a topic as important as this?

## **Limitations**

Stake (1995) and Litchman (2010) note that the findings of single case studies cannot be generalised. However, it does facilitate particularisation of this school (Stake, 1995), in that we came to know its case well in relation to how this set of staff engaged with loss and death in the classroom. As we have shown, their situation is far from unique and the general principles of the co-creation project may be of interest to others. Given the lack of teachers' time, the amount of co-creation was also limited, which is a recognised difficulty in implementing creative pedagogies more widely (Cremin & Chappell, 2021). As noted above, ideally the physical intervention would have been designed and built collaboratively from the outset of its conception. Furthermore, there were other aspects which could have benefited from co-collaboration, including the analysis of the chosen book to determine which spatial elements were carried forward into the physical structure.

A final limitation lies with the lack of feedback at the end of the study, namely the low response rate to the final questionnaire, and staff not being available to reply to our follow-up communications. These may have reflected their workload pressures (Allen et al., 2021; Sturrock, 2022) and/or research fatigue (Clark, 2008).

## **Future research**

There is scope for implementing similar co-created, interdisciplinary projects in schools and researching the impacts (if any) on a more longitudinal basis. It would

be valuable to undertake studies in a wider range of schools with different socio-economic and cultural diversity compositions. Securing the longer term views of staff would be beneficial, particularly researching their experiences of implementing activities with children. At this point, children's perspectives on being involved in such a project are important to research, especially as there is evidence that many children want to talk about death in schools (Bowie, 2000).

Importantly, we are not suggesting that literature, architecture/design and the arts are a fixed combination for use in education; whilst the specific methodology and method in this paper can be replicated, we also encourage experimentation with different combinations of disciplines.

## Conclusion

This paper has contributed to the gap in the literature identified by Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) around the need for pedagogical tools which are underpinned by solid theoretical grounding for addressing loss and death in the classroom. This particular interdisciplinary approach offers an original means of bridging the gap between theory and practice, to support schools in managing the sensitive topics of loss and death, for which they usually have little or no training. This intervention, and any subsequent variations thereof, have the added benefits of being used both proactively and/or reactively; the former is essential, to help facilitate conversations around death between teachers and children so they become a natural part of daily interactions – before children meet with the inevitable loss of a pet or person, and despite the pressures inherent in everyday school life. In utilising the fundamental principles of collaboration embedded in this process, there is strong potential for school staff, children and researchers to co-create pedagogies which are personal to them, offering safe spaces to explore this inevitability of life.

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