



St Mary's
University
London
School of
Education

Love and Loss: Children using picture books to learn about bereavement

“Death is
normal”

Year 5 pupil



Research Team



From left to right: Alka Townend, Emma Marfleet, Anna Lise Gordon, Kerry Assemakis, Karen Fox, Jo Head, Olivia Richards

Professor Anna Lise Gordon brought together a unique group of experts (within and beyond St Mary's University) in the field of bereavement, primary education, literacy and PSHE development for a research project entitled *Love and Loss – Children using picture books to learn about bereavement*.

The project received some funding towards resources, data analysis and dissemination activity from the Research England Policy Support Fund.

Thanks



Thank you to Richard Cranefield Photography for giving freely of his time to support the project's dissemination event and providing some of the images in this report.
www.richard.cranefield.com

Thank you to The Alligator's Mouth, a bookshop for children and young people close to St Mary's University, who provided a wonderful display of relevant resources.



Thank you to research team colleagues who gave freely of their expertise and time to contribute to this project.

And a special thank you to the five participating primary schools and their wonderful children for their enthusiastic and thoughtful engagement with the project.



Introduction

St Mary's University is known for its collaborative research, policy and practice work on bereavement across the education sector. In June 2024, I had the privilege of hosting a large and successful Bereavement in Education Summit, bringing together bereavement charities, funeral directors, counsellors and health experts, researchers, chaplains, teachers, support staff and school leaders. We considered policy, curriculum and training for teachers as part of a determined effort to open and normalise conversations about death, grief and loss in educational settings.

Bereavement in Education Summit report:
[BEREAVEMENT IN EDUCATION SUMMIT REPORT.pdf](#)



Some key themes emerged from participants at the Bereavement in Education Summit regarding CURRICULUM which have been the springboard for the Love and Loss research project:

- **Opportunities to talk**

More than teaching, it's important to create opportunities to talk consistently about the spectrum of death, grief and loss; talking helps to normalise conversations about bereavement; 'space' for questions - not just teach but ask!

- **Power of stories**

Draw on stories, poems, drama, music and art to introduce death literacy in an appropriate way; visuals and graphics may be useful prompts for discussion for some children and young people

- **Language matters**

Use of clear, consistent and unambiguous language to talk about death in an age-appropriate way; deepening conversations and learning about the 'reality' of death

- **Training for teachers**

Explicit and expert training and bespoke resources for teachers to increase confidence in talking about sensitive issues; guidance on how to use high-quality resources

Missing voices

The vital voices of children and young people were missing from the Bereavement in Education Summit and became a priority for the Love and Loss research project in 2025. Our overarching aim has been to explore how picture books can support children's understanding of bereavement, grief, and loss. Research increasingly shows that schools can provide a safe and supportive environment for children to engage in conversations about sensitive topics, and we wanted a better understanding of how picture books might help children to learn about bereavement, grief and loss, and to offer tailored support in difficult times.

A key element of the study has been to amplify the voices of children—to better understand their perspectives and emotional responses. The research team was deeply moved by the children's eagerness to engage with the picture books and to express their thoughts and feelings.

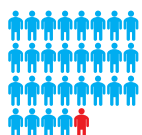
The loss of a loved one is a universal human experience, and discussions around bereavement must have an important place in education. As one year 5 pupil said: 'Death is normal'. The Love and Loss research project underscores the vital voices of children in our ongoing endeavours to normalise conversations about death, grief and loss for the benefit of everyone.

Professor Anna Lise Gordon
School of Education, St Mary's University

Setting the Scene

Did you know?

1 in 29



children aged
5-16 experience
the death of
a parent

One child is bereaved
of a parent every

22 mins

in the UK



80%

of teachers receive
no training
in bereavement



Impact of bereavement is acute in areas of
disadvantage with significant educational
and social consequences

Working with bereaved
children with special
educational needs is an
underdeveloped area
of research



In this context, there are powerful reasons for incorporating reading on death, grief and loss in our work with children in schools. Stories and picture books:

- Create emotional distance and safe spaces for talking about personal experiences and emotions in a low-risk environment
- Encourage empathy and understanding of more difficult abstract concepts
- Facilitate rich discussion and deep reflection which, in turn, provides comfort and builds confidence

And, of course, they promote the development of literacy and critical thinking skills, too!

What can we learn from research?

A few reflections from the Love and Loss research team:

Books are important starting points for 'meaningful discussion, existential questioning, deepening comprehension of various situations, and creating a secure environment to address complex issues of life' (Eklund, 2024).

Readers can engage in imagined fictional worlds in the same way that they engage in real-life contexts (Bezdek et al., 2013). Even though the content of the story is not real, the social interactions and conundrums mirror what is happening in real life (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

Picture books bring the world to children in a way that makes sense to them and are a safe way of dealing with difficult challenging issues (Dolan, 2014; Nikolajeva, 2015).

Teachers' use of picture books is known to increase their own use of emotional language (Garner and Parker, 2018), thereby helping children to relax and regulate their mood,



develop empathy, as well as support their imaginations and enjoyment (Reading Agency, 2015).

The metaphor of books being windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors is useful, exploring how books are a portal into another world. If the book provides a mirror for one's own experience, then feelings of self-worth and acceptance are enhanced; or the book can be a window into someone else's experience allowing the world to be viewed in a different way; or a book can be a sliding glass door that allows you to enter the world and empathise with the characters even though their experiences may be different from your own (Sims-Bishop, 1990).

Overview of Research Project

‘Love and Loss’ - The power of picture books and stories to support conversations about death, grief and loss with primary school children

Rationale

The project aimed to explore how picture books might help children to learn more about bereavement, grief and loss, as we know that schools can be good places to engage in conversations about sensitive topics in a safe space. This research was intended to contribute to a growing body of knowledge about bereavement in education and we were particularly keen to hear the voices of children to better understand their perspectives on the topic.

Research team

The project brought together a unique group of experts in the field of bereavement, primary education, literacy and PSHE development, and professional development for teachers.

Kerry Assemakis

Senior Lecturer Primary English and Research Assistant

Karen Fox

Senior Lecturer Primary English

Anna Lise Gordon

Professor of Education, St Mary's University and Research Project Lead

Jo Head

Lecturer Primary English

Emma Marfleet

Former primary teacher and founder:
www.themarfleetfoundation.org

Olivia Richards

PhD student and founder: www.story-project.co.uk

Alka Townend

Emeritus Professor, University of Sussex; Founder - ‘Lessons in Loss’: Building emotionally literate classrooms through grief-informed training for schools



Research Project in 10 steps

1. Colleagues with relevant expertise and experience were invited to join the project team and received bespoke bereavement training.
2. Ethics application approved by St Mary's University Ethics Committee. Given the sensitivity of the topic, careful consideration was given to working with children and their teachers, as well as seeking permission from caregivers for children to participate in the focus group discussion.
3. Seven classes (in five primary schools) accepted the invitation to be involved in the project. Headteacher permission was received, and teacher participation was voluntary.
4. Members of the research project team worked alongside each setting throughout, including preparation with the class teacher to lead a picture book session on the theme of death, grief and loss with the children.
5. The research project was explained to the children in an age-appropriate way and participant information shared as part of consent process.
6. As children responded to the picture book session with their teacher as part of their usual work in class, a team member observed the children and gathered field notes and examples of responses from children for whom we had parental consent and who had given their own consent to participate in the research.
7. Following the session with the whole class, the project team member met with a small group of children to explore their learning in more detail in a focus group discussion.
8. Finally, the project team member conducted a semi-structured interview with the class teacher.
9. Initial findings of the project were shared at a dissemination event at St Mary's University in July 2025.
10. Next steps include:
 - Further in-depth analysis of data and publication of research project findings in an academic journal article
 - Continued collaboration with schools as they strive to be 'bereavement aware' settings

The Circles in the Sky

– Year 5

Children: Aged 9-10, Year 5. We knew of two children in the class who had experienced significant bereavements.

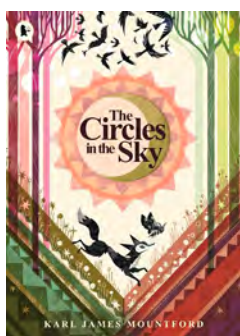
Teacher: Enjoys using picture books across the curriculum but was a little apprehensive about teaching a lesson on bereavement.

Researcher: Lecturer in Primary English

School: Catholic Primary School in Southwest London

Lesson Overview: The artwork in the picture book 'The Circles in the Sky' was a source of inspiration for the lesson which aimed to develop children's knowledge of bereavement vocabulary, the feelings associated with grief and loss, and children knowing how to support a friend who is feeling sad (after a bereavement).

The book



'The Circles in the Sky' is a beautifully crafted picture book about grief, loss and hope, following Fox and Moth. One morning, Fox finds Bird, silent in the forest. Confused and upset, he wonders why Bird does not move or sing. Moth gently helps him understand the bird has died, and that it is okay to feel sad. Using the symbols of the circles in the sky, the sun and moon, to offer comfort and suggest that even though the bird is gone, it will be remembered. In the end, Moth speaks plainly: Bird is dead.

The lesson

The artist's beautifully crafted text and images in 'The Circles in the Sky' presented the opportunity for children to explore the themes of bereavement, grief and loss through the creation of artwork.

The class teacher explained that the children enjoyed using picture books as part of guided reading in year 5, and was confident they would enjoy discussing the text and the artwork in 'The Circles in

the Sky'. Teaching a lesson about bereavement was important to the class teacher; she explained:



I was brought up that I shouldn't cry and show emotion, and I don't want to pass that onto the children. I kind of wish I had been taught to understand that it is okay to cry and that those emotions are completely normal and it's part of being human'.

The class teacher carefully planned for beyond the actual lesson by placing a 'bereavement' question box in the classroom and ensuring an additional member of staff was available to support children in the classroom, just in case anyone got upset. The lesson was planned to take place just before the morning break to provide a relaxing space for the children after discussing intense emotions.

The teacher related the learning to other aspects of the school community which really helped to ensure the children did not see the lesson as out of place in the school day. The teacher connected the book to the collective worship they had participated in that morning and related to theme of 'love' and how we can feel sad when someone we love dies.

When the teacher read the book aloud at the start of the lesson, the atmosphere was calm and positive, and the children were engaged with the picture book. The opportunity for the children to reflect on the term 'bereavement' was helpful because some children seemed a little uncertain. One child suggested it was to do with breathing, but then others related bereavement to feeling low, for example. The class teacher explained what bereavement was and reassured the children that there was no right or wrong way to feel and that feelings are all natural.



In response to the book, the children then created their own piece of artwork to explore and demonstrate the feelings and emotions around bereavement, using a similar style to the illustrations in the book. They were encouraged to think about their use of colour, shape and the positioning on the page, as well as what message they wanted to give to the audience. The drawing activities seemed to create a safe space for children to talk about bereavement, and it seemed that because the teacher was not afraid to use words like die, dead, or dying, the children then naturally used this vocabulary within their conversations too.

During the focus group, the children were keen to talk about their artwork. This child talked of the theme of friendship, for example, explaining how she drew the branches joined because they are trying to keep each other company after Bird has died. She explained how she decided to represent sadness by showing the animals with their heads down and wilting flowers, and that she chose colours green and red to represent there is life and death.



I did the branches joined because they're trying to keep each other company because the bird's died.'

The six children who participated in the focus group all talked openly and freely about the role of picture books in understanding grief and loss. Experiencing bereavement through the death of characters in books seemed to be significant to some of children in the group. Some children said they felt sad when reading a book where there is a bereavement, but that the book they read in class helped because it is a reminder that loved ones will always be in your heart. Several children seemed able to normalise death because characters in other books sometimes die.



I'm actually fine with it, because in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, someone just died at the beginning, and then in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* someone almost died.'

There were some children in the group who had already experienced a bereavement, and these children were able to express their understanding of how time heals.



It's normal because four years ago now my granddad died...yeah. So it was kind of a hard time for me, but I didn't really understand at that point because I was quite young. So now I've grown older and away from it...death is normal, it's something I can handle.'

The children talked of how support from friends and family can be a comfort when someone is feeling sad after a bereavement and some children talked of the importance of knowing how to help a friend when they feel sad. This particular child expressed views on the importance of talking to people when you feel sad after a bereavement.



I think it's good, like, to talk about if someone is dead, it's good because if you're sad because someone passed away like yesterday, then you can tell your friend, and they'll give you a hug.'



was surprised at how insightful some of the children's comments were, such as:

“ I think it's really good to talk about some people dying, because some people, they keep it in and it sticks with them for a long time and when you talk about it with other people, you sort of let parts of it go very slowly, and it really does affect your everyday life when you talk about it.”

Summary

In this year 5 class, 'The Circles in the Sky' was a successful resource for a lesson about bereavement, and the images in particular were a useful starting point for discussion around the feelings and emotions associated with grief and loss. Subsequent discussions with the class teacher revealed she had been surprised at how many emotions the children had

inferred from the picture book, emotions such as curiosity, sadness, disbelief / denial, calm, happy, relief, positivity, uncertainty, anger, frustration, confusion, worried, concerned, fear.

“ I don't think it actually ever names an emotion in the book, or if it does very rarely, so there isn't a word anger or frustration, but the children still managed to pick that up ... that was quite impressive.”

The teacher explained that, although she had been a bit nervous about reading the picture book in front of the children and teaching the lesson because she did not want the children to get upset, she was actually fine and would feel more comfortable teaching a lesson on bereavement next time.

All the children who were part of the subsequent focus group agreed it was important for children to talk about bereavement at school, and that picture books were a helpful way of doing this. The children's voices are especially important in this project, and therefore it is fitting to finish with their words:

“ I think it's good to talk about it because, like, if you don't talk about it, you might feel depressed and then you will, like, keep on thinking about them, so you'll be, like, scared and all that. But when you talk about it with other people, they'll comfort you, and then you might just forget about it, and then you'd be okay.”



Bear Shaped – Reception

Children: aged 4-5, Reception. One pupil in the class has recently experienced significant bereavement and another is living with a close family member who is terminally ill.

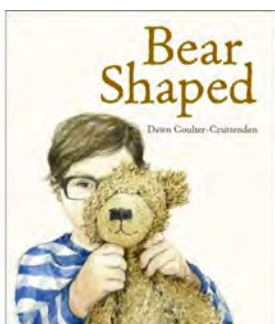
Teacher: Uses picture books regularly but was initially nervous about addressing such a 'big theme' with such young children.

Researcher: Lecturer in Primary English

School: Large, diverse community school in northwest London

Lesson Overview: The lesson focused on key vocabulary within the book which enabled children to express empathy for the main character who had experienced the loss of his favourite comfort teddy bear. Continuous provision engaged children in a range of child-led activities which developed comprehension of the story and drew on children's personal experiences.

The book



'Bear Shaped' tells the story of Jack, an autistic boy whose beloved teddy bear, Bear, goes missing. The story, inspired by a real-life incident, follows Jack's initial devastation and the public's outpouring of support, including the arrival of many new bears. Ultimately, Jack chooses to share the new bears with others, realising that Bear's memory will always be with him.

The lesson

The lesson began with a recap of key events in the story and a discussion of key vocabulary from the story. This followed a structure that the children were familiar with and encouraged children to use carefully chosen language from the text when sharing their own thoughts and experiences within the whole class input and during free-flow activities.

The teacher focused her questioning on key events from the story, carefully using this to relate to children's own experiences of loss and sadness. Children connected with the main character, Jack, and spoke freely about times when they had felt sad, the different ways that people may express sadness and how the class could help someone who was sad by showing kindness.



“ Sometimes when we're feeling sad, we have tears.”

“Jack was so sad because he loved Bear so much.”

The teacher admitted that she was a little worried about what the children might say as she was aware that two of the children were currently witnessing intense grief at home:



Young children have no filter, and they just say the facts as they know them.'

Classroom provision was set up across two classrooms and the outside area so children could continue their learning through a range of well thought-out, play-based activities which linked to the story and extended the learning.

- **Bear Hugs notes:** on bear shaped paper, children wrote a kind message
- **Memory Bear drawing area:** Children drew a picture of someone they love or miss
- **Comfort Bear:** Make a paper bear with felt to give to a friend who is feeling sad.
- **Bear shaped feelings:** Make a bear with different emotions
- **Lost and found role play:** Children can find or return lost toys
- **Comfort stories:** reading area with teddy bears and blankets
- **Wooden blocks:** large construction blocks to build a home for lost bears



During the focus group, the children were keen to talk about their activities. Some referred to the story and others chose to talk about their own memories and experiences. They showed confidence using the vocabulary from the story and demonstrated empathy and understanding of Jack's feelings. Several children demonstrated thoughtful reflections around their own needs when they feel sad.



Comfort means snuggling'



Comfort is sitting on the sofa by myself'



I'm hugging him (a teddy) to stop him crying because he's sad.'
(Role-play area)

To move the conversation from emotions around losing a special object to feelings of sadness when a loved one dies, the teacher took the brave decision to share her own experience of losing her father. This piqued the children's interest and highlighted the wide range of prior knowledge that the children had on the subject. From not knowing that someone who has died won't come back, to wanting to know where someone goes when they die, and one child linking the explanation that the teacher's father had been very 'sick' to a concern that he too had once 'been sick', showed the need for clear policy and guidance in the teaching of loss and bereavement, beginning with the youngest children.

The teacher felt passionately that:



We cannot shy away from the conversations, just because they are young.'



Summary

In this Reception class, 'Bear Shaped' was a successful resource for a lesson about loss and sadness and a gentle way into introducing the theme of dying and grief. The children were able to identify with the main character's love of his teddy bear and the sadness felt when it disappeared.

The class teacher expressed her surprise at the children's mature responses and recognised that they were more capable of understanding difficult themes than we, as adults, often give them credit for.



They feel the loss, but we often think they don't understand. Their feelings are no less valid than adults.'

Following the lesson and focus group discussion, the teacher explained that she felt a lot more equipped and confident in using picture books to teach children about love and loss.



I would like to have a 'set text' for each year group to build up to deeper understanding; to help the children to navigate their emotions and to give teachers something to draw on.'

The Memory Tree

– Year 2

Children: Age 6-7. Three children across the year group had recently experienced the death of a grandparent or pet.

Teachers: This lesson was taught to two Year 2 classes as part of their PSHE curriculum. The teachers knew first-hand how vital a lesson on love and loss is for children this young and how challenging it can be having previously taught bereaved children in school.

Researcher: Teacher, widow, mother to 3 bereaved children and founder of The Marfleet Foundation, which supports schools working with bereaved children.

School: A two-form entry community infant and nursery school in Southwest London

Lesson Aim: To open conversations about death, grief and loss, and to explore healthy coping strategies.

Learning Objectives:

- I can explain what a memory is and how it connects us to someone who has died
- I can describe how sharing memories can make us feel happy or comforted after someone has died

The book



'The Memory Tree' tells the story of Fox, who dies peacefully at the beginning of the book. As his woodland friends share their memories of him, a tree begins to grow where he lay. As time passes and the animals share more stories, the tree becomes taller and stronger, symbolising the enduring nature of love and remembrance. Eventually, it provides shelter and comfort for the whole forest, buzzing with new life. This beautifully illustrated book offers a gentle, comforting message about how those who have died continue to live on in our hearts and memories.

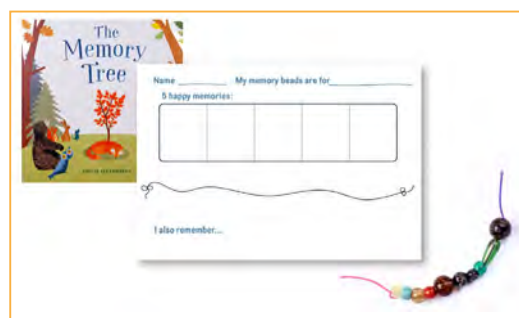
The Lesson

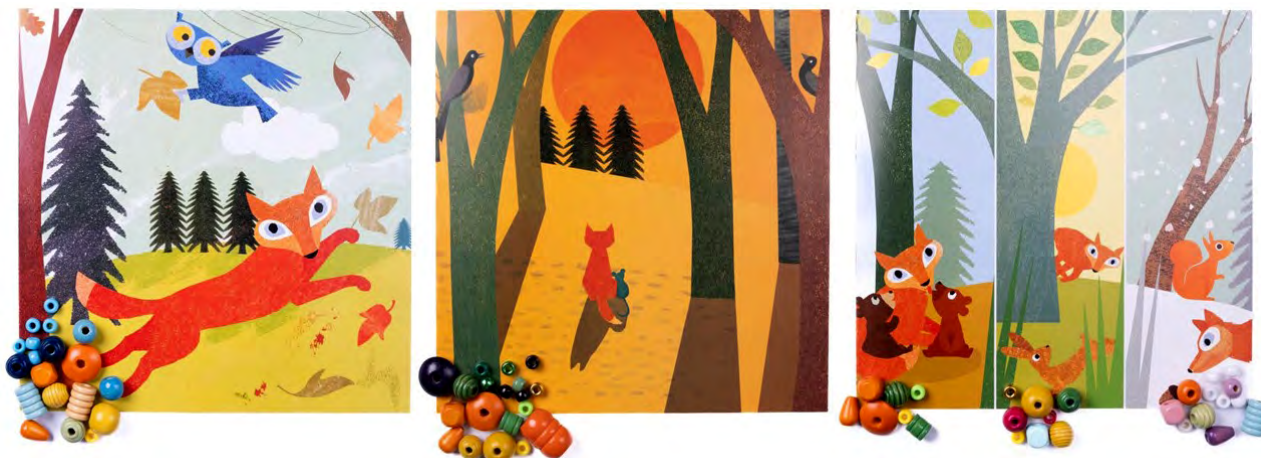
Both Year 2 teachers began the lesson by setting a calm, respectful tone and revisiting behaviour expectations. The children had just come in after their lunch break and were eager to explore a new picture book, already a familiar learning tool in school. The front cover prompted a settling exercise where the children imagined themselves in The Wilderness, a small woodland area frequently used by the school.

After sharing the lesson objectives, one teacher read the story straight through to her class. A few children glanced around at the phrase, "fell asleep forever," but quickly refocused on the story. After finishing the book, the teacher asked, "What's happened to Fox?" All hands were raised and one child replied, "He died." When asked how Fox's friends felt, the children responded thoughtfully: "At first they were sad because Fox died, everyone knew him, they were his friends, but then they got happier."

In the other class, the teacher paused often while reading the story to check understanding. This approach prompted mini discussions which touched on hibernation, ghosts, Jesus, and food chains. After the story, children shared responses ranging from, "It's called 'The Memory Tree' because when you share memories the tree gets bigger," to "The story reminds me of my great nan."

During planning the lesson, both teachers considered how best to support the children, aware of the emotional demands of discussing death and grief. Although the school's SENDCo and ELSA were available, they chose to lead the session themselves, using gentle storytelling to focus on the animals' feelings and memories.





The follow-up activity was to make a memory bead chain for Fox, selecting beads to represent the memories shared by the animals. The aim was to create a lasting, tactile object to support conversations about someone who had died. Whilst we had discussed offering the children the choice to make one for someone they knew who had died, the teachers chose to focus on Fox. If a child wished to make a personal version, they were encouraged to do so at home.

The children were highly engaged in designing and creating their chains. They chose beads to represent both objects from the memories and characters in the story.

Bracelets became a popular adaptation in one class, while in the other, some children quietly took extra beads. A child later explained they had taken the beads to add to a chain at home in memory of their grandma.

Name _____ My memory beads are for Fox

5 happy memories:

One memory: He raced to see who could get the most falling leaves as wind to his back.	One memory: When Fox and Sue were playing in the forest.	One memory: When Fox and Sue were playing in the forest.	One memory: When Fox and Sue were playing in the forest.	One memory: When Fox and Sue were playing in the forest.
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I also remember... That Fox was a very nice person.

Children in my focus group demonstrated a strong understanding of the book, with one saying:

I liked it because Fox had a very good life, and everyone could say lots of good stuff about him."

Another reflected:

I like how the tree grew bigger and how the animals say their happy memories about the fox."

They also connected it to their own lives. One child shared:

When my grandpa died, we were all very sad. We think it's important to care about the people we love when they die."

Others used personal experience to explain the animals' emotions. One said:

Like, if Fox did a race and you're cheering him on... you'd feel more confident to do lots of stuff like him."

Another said it felt like seeing a show:

They felt excited because they could do all the exciting stuff that Fox did."



Summary

Working on this project has reinforced my belief that grief education has a place in primary schools, and not as a one-off, reactive response, but thoughtfully embedded within the curriculum. Normalising grief and exploring healthy coping strategies early on can shape emotional learning beyond a single lesson and for some children, may be needed sooner than expected. The Year 2 children I worked with were ready. They spoke openly and shared willingly, demonstrating the importance of creating safe spaces for these conversations.

In infant classrooms, picture books often introduce new ideas. It felt natural to use one to start the ultimate 'big' conversation about death and grief. In the lessons I observed, the well-chosen picture book acted as a bridge between author, teacher and child. 'The Memory Tree' offered gentle guidance for adults, providing the right tone and language to talk about death with young children and helping to open honest, age-appropriate discussions.

With thoughtful preparation, appropriate resources and a trusted adult, children can engage with these topics in creative, healthy, and meaningful ways. There's learning about the book, as one child noted when reflecting on the tree growing with the shared memories:

“When Fox died, they were really sad – they had a heavy heart. Then they saw the tree and their hearts felt lighter.”

And there is learning from the book, as another child added:

“Talking about my memories of my dog makes me feel happy.”

I hope this work encourages more schools to explore what is possible, because the impact can be lifelong.

Grandad's Camper

– Year 2

Children: Year 2. Some children had experienced the death of a grandparent in the class.

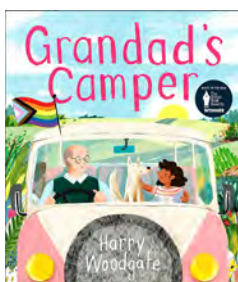
Teacher: Had experience of teaching through stories across PSHE, through using The Story Project*, so felt confident using a story to talk to her class about bereavement.

Researcher: Founder of The Story Project, a social enterprise that supports teachers to use stories in PSHE, and a St Mary's University PhD student researching teachers' perceptions of the use of stories and The Story Project as pedagogical devices in PSHE.

School: Church of England Primary School in Surrey

Lesson aims: The children had been exploring the book, 'Grandad's Camper', for a couple of weeks before the lesson observation and focus groups. They had previously focused on the objective: I can tell you some of the feelings associated with times of loss and change. In the observed lesson the objective was: I can tell you some strategies I have for dealing with times of change and loss.

The book



'Grandad's Camper' is a beautiful celebration of the relationship between a grandad and his granddaughter. The granddaughter notices that her Grandad is sad because he is missing his partner (Gramps) who has died. The grandad talks about the adventures he had with Gramps in their campervan. After hearing about the adventures, the granddaughter encourages Grandad to dust off the campervan and to take it out on the road again. The story perfectly captures the sadness of bereavement, the comfort of memories and the power of the support of loved ones.

The lesson

The teacher created a safe and comforting environment in the classroom and the children were used to learning about different PSHE topics through stories, so the children seemed relaxed and familiar with the format despite the sensitive content. All the children sat on the carpet to listen to the story, and were fully engaged in the plot and illustrations. The children enjoyed coming up to the front to pick out details in the stories and asked thoughtful questions about the story content. The children showed understanding of the mixed emotions that accompany bereavement.

One child said:



Grandad is feeling sad and happy. He is sad because he missed Gramps, but happy because he can have a good time with his granddaughter.'

Another child said:



Grandad was sad because he was lonely and didn't have anyone to live with anymore'

suggesting that children are beginning to understand the complexity of different emotions associated with bereavement.

The focus on this lesson was for the children to leave with strategies to deal with times of change and loss. The children spoke openly about how they could help Grandad:

“ We could help Grandad by making him a cup of tea’.

They were then able to translate this learning to what they could do if they were experiencing change or loss themselves. The children said:

“ You could talk to a teacher if you were worried or sad’ , and

“ I can draw a picture and give it to the teacher or write a note that I am sad’.



The children then completed an activity where they were given an outline of a hand, and they privately reflected on who they would turn to if they were feeling sad.

In the focus group the children enjoyed the illustrations in the story, for example, ‘the sparkles’ on the camper and the ‘cute’ dog. In Year 2, this engagement in irrelevant details is to be expected (Narvaez, 2002) and makes it clear that the teacher needs to support the children towards the intended messages of the story as these could be completely missed by young children. The children suggested that they felt sad reading the story as they felt like the characters in the book, which suggests the children are experiencing empathy.

The children were a bit unsure about reading books about death as it might make them cry but, when prompted, all the children felt it was okay to cry. The children all knew who they could speak to if they were experiencing change and loss.

The teacher reflected that it was helpful to see children who had experienced bereavement processing their emotions as they read the story.

Summary



Overall, the teacher was impressed by the children’s insights into the mixed emotions that accompany bereavement. One child summarised the story by saying:

“ They show us in the beginning all the fun stuff that Gramps and Grandad are doing and at the end they do it over again, but with the little girl’.

The story has quite a complex message for Year 2, but the children have approached it with curiosity and empathy. Their understanding will need to be secured by approaching bereavement again in subsequent years, but it was exciting to see their understanding developing at a young age.

Narvaez, D. (2002). Does reading moral stories build character? Educational Psychology Review, 14(2), 155–171.

For more information on The Story Project: story-project.co.uk

Dadaji's Paintbrush

– Year 5

Children: Aged 10, Two Year 5 classes

Teachers: Both teachers were keen to use picture books and welcomed the opportunity to plan with the researchers.

Researchers: Both lecturers in Primary English. One also works as a trained counsellor for a bereavement charity.

School: Catholic Primary School in Southwest London

Lesson Aims: A creative approach to be at the centre as this is a central theme of the book, showing how through an English lesson, the themes of grief and loss could be explored in a way that is accessible and compassionate. The learning outcome was kept general to allow for this approach.

The book



Dadaji's paintbrush is a beautifully illustrated book that tells the story of a young boy and the bond that he shares with his grandfather - 'Dadaji'. They do everything together, and they bond over their love of painting. When Dadaji dies, the boy is heartbroken, and this picture book explores the protagonist's experience of grief in a gentle and accessible way reflecting how creative engagement with cherished memories can lead to healing.

The lesson

At the start of the lesson, the children were asked to make predictions about the book based on the cover. The teacher also asked them to look at the blurb to if there was anything that surprised or intrigued them. One of the children said that the blurb holds back some information and speculated that the bond between the two main characters 'might be broken in some way'.

During these initial discussions, the atmosphere in both classrooms was very calm and the children were keen to explore the story. A few children looked slightly anxious prior to the story starting but this soon dissipated as they engaged with the illustrations and discussions with their teacher. It later transpired that one child who was looking anxious had lost her grandfather the previous week. However, this child was still keen and willing to share her experience of grief and participate in all the linked activities as well as the subsequent focus group.

As the teacher read the story, the children were guided to look at the images and the colours in the book. Children were very engaged and studied the illustrations and commented on the use of colour to convey emotions. The teacher stopped at key points in the story, and the children were asked to share their perspectives. One of these key moments was when Dadaji died and, in his grandson's eyes, he broke his promise to never leave him. The author poignantly expresses this by saying, 'but one day he did'. Children were asked to talk to their partner and share opinions on what they thought had happened. They were also invited to then express their responses in one or two words.

During this point of the lesson some children looked sombre and were unsure how to articulate their emotional responses. However, use of a pedagogical strategy (emotion axis) supported them in articulating their feelings and they were able to appropriately correlate emojis with the protagonist's emotions and illustrations throughout the story.

One of the children responded by simply stating 'he died,' and the teacher asked, 'Who died?', and all the children acknowledged that the grandad had died. As a class, the children then completed a 'role on the wall' to show the protagonist's feelings on the inside and how he may be perceived by other people on the outside.

The word 'loved' was the most expressed feeling for the character internally and the word 'lonely' appeared most on the external feelings. As an additional literacy activity, children added synonyms to existing vocabulary as this helped with supporting them in expressing some difficult emotions.

The children were then given the opportunity to respond to the book individually by engaging in one of two activities that linked closely to the story.

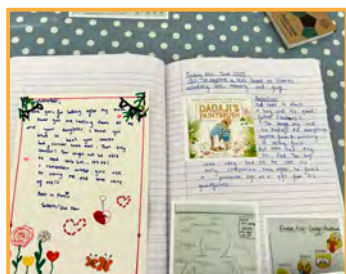
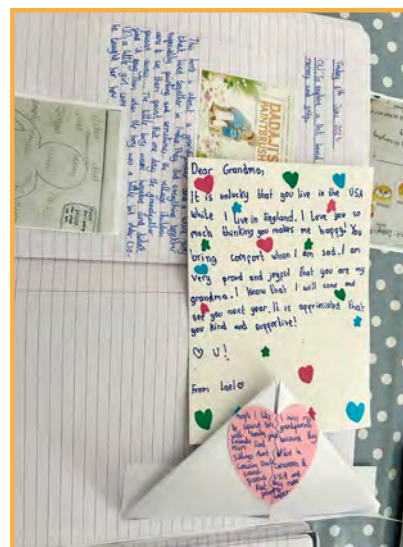
Boat making

Children made a boat and wrote names of people they would like to spend time with and/or people they miss spending time with (with a view to floating this in a local stream).

Letter writing

Children wrote a letter on seeded notepaper to someone they missed (with a view to planting this in the future).

The children could decide which activity they wanted to do. During this time, soft music was played in the classroom which created a calming and reflective atmosphere within the classroom.



There was a low murmur of chatter and sharing of memories or instructions on how to build boats and the children were completely absorbed in the activities.

Some children wrote to people/family who were distant from them geographically, while others wrote to family members who had died.

Summary

Both class teachers were really pleased with how the children responded to the lesson and the researchers were impressed with the children's thoughts and insights:

- “You can lose someone and be sad but then you think about the good things you shared with them.”
- “The book reminded me that you don't always have to be sad about them dying but you can be happy about their life.”
- “It is helpful to read these types of stories because you learn how to get over these problems when they do happen.”
- “It's a life lesson. You don't learn about this every day. It's very important that you can express your thoughts and feelings.”

The lesson gave the teachers confidence that they could plan a series of lessons based on a book like this. Having a creative approach allowed the children to explore their ideas and feelings in a supportive way. Both class teachers agreed that bereavement training should be offered to all teachers and having books like this should be on the curriculum.



I feel more confident in teaching about bereavement. It now feels easier. You must be able to adapt as you go along.”



From this lesson I learned that the children like to talk about these things, sharing these feelings is a relief for them.”



The children were all very positive about the lesson and expressed that they wanted to do something like this again and they were supportive of each other when they were expressing different views. More than one child expressed how safe the lesson environment felt to them, and this allowed them to share their ‘personal lives’.



I felt comfortable and safe this lesson.”

These children’s comments, however, really capture the essence of the lesson:



You can always find hope in sadness. Try and find a memory and do something with it.”



Lessons like this make it easier to express your feelings.”

Initial findings

Powerful Insights from the Children

A key element of the research project was to amplify the voices of children—to better understand their perspectives and emotional responses, and quotations from the children are in bold. The idiom ‘out of the mouths of babes’ rang true throughout the project as participating children, aged 5 – 10, shared so many wise and profound reflections, in a way that may surprise adults who have a tendency (albeit well meaning) to over-protect children when talking about death and grief.

“It really showed it’s okay to be sad and cry, and to talk to other people about things that have happened is really good.”

“I think it’s really good to talk about some people dying, because some people, they keep it in and it sticks with them for a long time and when you talk about it with other people, you sort of let parts of it go very slowly, and it really does affect your everyday life when you talk about it.”

Three strong themes emerged from the children’s responses:

“Death is normal. It’s something I can handle.”

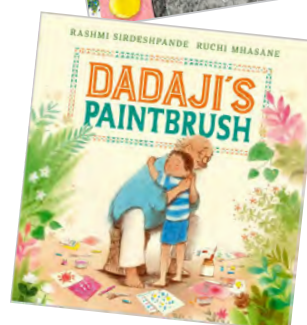
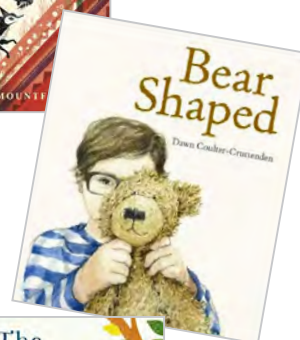
The children expressed almost no concern about a session on death, grief and loss. As one pupil expressed it: **“People have to die at some point”**. Indeed, children shared openly their lived experiences of death, including pets and family members, as well as in wider reading, films and computer games.

“Lessons like this can make it easier to express your feelings”

The children of all ages enjoyed the use of picture books – “picture books tell me more than words” as they are full of “hidden details” that help you “understand that’s how you might feel” and “know how to handle it if it does happen to you”.

“You don’t forget them because you love them”

Children grappled with the way that sadness and happiness can co-exist, recognising how many of the characters in the picture books had enjoyed a “good life” and that memories – “always live in my heart” – can sustain us when someone we love dies, commenting that there’s “You can’t be sad for the rest of your life” and there’s “always space for happiness”.



Teacher reflections

Initially, some of the teachers had been apprehensive about leading a session which focused on death, grief and loss with their class: “bit wary” and “don’t know how they’re going to react”. However, these concerns soon disappeared as the children responded thoughtfully in a well-prepared and supportive space with their peers and supportive adults, using the picture books as a springboard for sharing experiences, feelings and strategies to navigate challenging times. Teachers commented on the “importance of bonding over a shared experience” in the lesson.

The role of the teacher was pivotal: “It’s about normalising the conversation”. For example:

- Creation of a positive, trusting and safe environment in the classroom
- Knowledge of individual children in the class to support as needed: “mentally going through each kid in my class” as part of preparation
- Link to other areas of curriculum (e.g. life cycle in science) and assembly themes (e.g. kindness)
- Openness to children’s responses
- Importance of matter-of-fact speaking, using vocabulary like ‘died’ and ‘dead’ with confidence
- Commitment to nurturing children’s holistic development – “help children in future” as one teacher noted. And, as one child commented about the session: **“little bit like a life lesson”**.

It is worth noting that none of the teachers in the research project, although experienced educators, had ever received specific bereavement awareness training. Many were also unsure if their schools had a bereavement policy and this remains an area for ongoing development.



I feel more confident in teaching about bereavement. It now feels easier.
You must be able to adapt as you go along.”

Recommendations

1. Embed bereavement education in the curriculum

This was a very clear message from the children who welcomed the opportunity to reflect on death and loss with others and wanted more lessons on the topic. Teachers agreed with one commenting: “We can’t shy away from the conversation because they’re young”.

This aligns with the recently published (2025) RSHE statutory guidance which now includes grief education. By the end of primary school, children should know: *That change and loss, including bereavement, can provoke a range of feelings, that grief is a natural response to bereavement, and that everyone grieves differently.* [Relationships and sex education \(RSE\) and health education – GOV.UK](#)

2. Embrace picture books as a resource for stimulating learning on sensitive issues like bereavement for primary school children of all ages. Schools might consider a ‘set text’ on death and grief for use in PSHE or English lessons each year, so that children revisit the topic in different ways through their primary school journey.

3. Acknowledge that **“Death is normal”** and equip teachers and, in turn, children in their classes to discuss grief and loss with understanding, empathy and appropriate language. This involves professional development for teachers to build confidence as we work together to normalise conversations about death, grief and loss for the benefit of everyone.



We can handle the loss better and we can think of good memories.”

Useful links

There are many child bereavement charities offering a plethora of valuable resources and support for schools. Some are large national charities, such as:

Child Bereavement UK: www.childbereavementuk.org

Winston's Wish: winstonswish.org

Rainbows Bereavement Support: rainbowsgb.org

And some are small charities serving a more local area, such as:

The Marfleet Foundation: www.themarfleetfoundation.org

Simon Says: www.simonsays.org.uk

Lessons in Loss: lessonsinloss.co.uk

Or some focus on a specific group of bereaved children. For example:

Scotty's Little Soldiers: www.scottyslittlesoldiers.co.uk



Advice for schools

Be pro-active. We cannot predict when death comes and must be prepared to talk about death, grief and loss in a variety of ways depending on the circumstances.

Spend time exploring the websites of national and local bereavement charities which offer specific support for children and young people and educational settings.

Ensure that useful links to sources of support are included in your school documentation, for example as an appendix to your pastoral policy.

Build relationships with relevant people and organisations who may be part of your wider bereavement awareness provision in school including inspirational speakers from charities, local faith leaders, funeral directors, children's hospice staff, and counsellors.

Interested in professional development for your setting about bereavement? Help with writing a bereavement policy? Embedding opportunities to open conversations about death, grief and loss in the curriculum? Supporting children and staff through times of loss?

Please contact us: www.stmarys.ac.uk/education/cpd/bespoke-sessions.aspx

Further reading

For teachers and school leaders

There is no shortage of useful reading to support schools in their quest to become 'bereavement aware' organisations. As ever, the challenge for busy teachers and school leaders is lack of time, and we share just FIVE documents which provide a firm basis on which to grow a school's understanding of bereavement in educational settings. These texts are accessible and freely available online.



Bereavement is everyone's business (November 2022)

UK Commission on Bereavement Report, available at www.mariecurie.org.uk/document/bereavement-is-everyones-business-full-report

Improving bereavement support in schools.

Child Bereavement UK report (2018)
Available at www.childbereavementuk.org/research-reports

'The one thing guaranteed in life and yet they won't teach you about it':

The case for mandatory grief education in UK schools – Dawson, L., Hare, R., Selman, L., Boseley, T. & Penny, A.
Available at www.bereavementjournal.org/index.php/bcj/article/view/1082/1121

Consequences of childhood bereavement in the context of the British school system – Winston's Wish report (2019).

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'I don't understand why you are upset': public and parental views on grief education and support for bereaved children in UK schools – Marie Curie report (2024). Available at www.mariecurie.org.uk/globalassets/media/documents/policy/policy-publications/2024/grief-education_uknations_charts_v5_22.02.24_final.pdf

For children



One of the joys of this research project has been the opportunity to explore the rich diversity of children's books dealing with death, grief and loss. We recommend that schools build up their own collections of age-appropriate picture books and stories. As the children in our research project highlighted, reading helps us to learn about bereavement and related emotions in a safe and supportive way.

In addition to the picture books featured in this research project report, here are another TEN favourites of the research team for a 'bereavement box' or bespoke space in the school library:

About Hedgehog – Dani Seatter and illustrated by Anna Stead
The Invisible String – Patrice Karst and illustrated by Joanne Lew-Vriethoff
The Hare Shaped Hole – John Dougherty and illustrated by Thomas Docherty
The Heart and the Bottle – Oliver Jeffers
This Letter Says I Love You – Lucy Rowland and illustrated by Sharon Rentta with a letter by Matilda Handy
Badger's Parting Gifts – Susan Varley
Goodbye Mousie – Robie H. Harris and illustrated by Jan Ormerod
Where Did She Go? – Cariad Lloyd and illustrated by Tom Percival
A Shelter for Sadness – Anne Booth and illustrated by David Lichfield
Rabbityness – Jo Empson

And there are many more!

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St Mary's
University
London
School of
Education

Contact

Professor Anna Lise Gordon
School of Education, St Mary's University

annalise.gordon@stmarys.ac.uk
[@AnnaLiseGordon](#)