



# Child Bereavement UK

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## Summary Research report

### Improving bereavement support in schools

This research was commissioned by Child Bereavement UK (CBUK) and funded by the True Colours Trust and carried out by External Research Consultant Joy O'Neill, and Dr. Katie Koehler and Dr. Ann Rowland from Child Bereavement UK.

## Introduction

### Background

Research suggests that 1 in 29 school age children has been bereaved of a parent or sibling and 1 in 16 has been bereaved of a close friend - this is one child in every class (Childhood Bereavement Network 2015). Up to 70% of schools have a recently bereaved pupil on their roll at any given time (Childhood Bereavement Network 2015). Grief impacts on concentration, learning and achievement (Childhood Bereavement Network 2015). Whilst schools have a rich opportunity to support children and young people in their grief, many teachers are unsure of how to do that and research suggests that up to 80% of teachers report never having received bereavement training (Child Bereavement UK 2013).

Child Bereavement UK's mission is to ensure the accessibility of high quality child bereavement support and information for families and professionals. One of the ways the charity delivers its mission is by providing training and support to a range of professionals including those in schools. To date the charity's suite of training and support packages have reached 4,000 schools; however, this is only a small fraction of the 34,000 schools and half a million teachers in the UK.

In order to gain a better understanding of the drivers and barriers for schools and teachers in accessing training and effectively supporting bereaved pupils in schools, Child Bereavement UK carried out an extensive research project, with two main aims:

- To understand teachers' attitudes to support for bereaved children
- To identify the drivers and barriers to schools effectively supporting bereaved pupils.

This research project was conducted within the wider context of national policy and guidance including the mental health agenda.

### The impact of childhood bereavement and how schools can help

Experiencing bereavement in childhood is immense and means life will never be the same again. Research shows that bereaved children are more likely to experience anxiety, isolation, poorer mental health (Fauth et al 2009) and lower school attainment (Abdelnoor and Hollins 2004). Child Bereavement UK recognises that by intervening early and providing holistic support for the child and their family which involves the child's wider community, particularly school, can reduce the risk of such negative outcomes.

Schools can make a tremendous difference in helping children feel supported; most grieving pupils do not need a "bereavement expert", they need familiar trusted adults. Teachers and other school staff can provide a listening ear, information, advice and guidance, yet few teachers feel comfortable with this subject (Childhood Bereavement Network 2017) and many report being inadequately prepared to cope with bereavement (Reid & Dixon, 1999) because of a lack of training (Rowling & Holland, 2000), yet feel obligated to display strength and provide support even if they themselves are distressed (Lowton & Higginson, 2003). Teachers report feeling uncertain about how to respond to bereaved adolescents particularly in relation to talking about the bereavement. Prior experience of personal bereavement, working with a bereaved student, and training

increase their ability to manage their uncertainty and accept their own emotional reactions, and support them in being able to listen to student's needs (Lane et al 2014).

In June 2016, Child Bereavement UK commissioned YouGov plc to carry out a survey of the bereavement experiences of adults in the UK<sup>1</sup>. 100 respondents who were bereaved as children offered their opinion when asked "How supportive or unsupportive was your school at the time of your bereavement?" The most common response from respondents who offered an opinion was "Very unsupportive", with 40% of responses. This evidence supports the many individual pieces of feedback received from families supported by Child Bereavement UK as well as the education professionals who attend Child Bereavement UK training, which is that schools do not prioritise bereavement awareness, and the support offered to bereaved children by schools could be significantly improved.

In 2013 Child Bereavement UK carried out a survey of pastoral care at schools across the UK to gain knowledge of the policies, procedures and personal views of school staff, when faced with bereavement in the school. The key findings showed that, overall, respondents did not think that enough was being done to prepare them for bereavement or death in their schools.

### The Education policy agenda

The policy agenda varies across the UK. For England and Northern Ireland, whilst there is evidence that practice as policy exists in some areas at a local level, analysis of relevant national policies indicates that bereavement in schools at a macro system level is not considered. In Scotland and Wales, policy analysis suggests that bereavement in schools is being considered at a macro system level. In Scotland, there is an understanding of the need to support children and young people at the time of bereavement and Education Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence includes a Health and Wellbeing priority. This priority includes a strand related to bereavement and teachers and school staff understand that this is the responsibility of everyone in schools. In Wales, consideration of bereavement in schools at a macro system was initiated in 2010 when Baroness Finlay commissioned the mapping out of bereavement services in Wales. One of the key findings was that there was very little training and education support and Cruse Wales then began the task of reviewing bereavement support and designing a strategy for the future, funded by The Welsh Government Palliative Care Board (Fitz 2010).

### The mental health in schools agenda

Outside of home, school is often the most important consistent influence on the development of children and young people. There are therefore significant opportunities to promote resilience and wellbeing. Children's mental health has a high profile. 'Future in Mind' (Department of Health 2015) made recommendations for the future development of support services which included teacher training and evaluating mental health promotion and prevention in schools.

The Government's response (Department of Health and Social care, Department for Education, 2018) to the Green Paper consultation Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision (Department of Health, Department of Education 2017) outlines three core proposals to be trialed in trailblazer areas, to commence operation by the end of 2019. The first of these core proposals is of key relevance "To incentivise and support all schools and colleges to identify and train a Designated Senior Lead for mental health". The government response advocates a whole school approach and recognizes the need for substantial, high-quality

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<sup>1</sup> Total sample size was 2036 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 29th - 30th June 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

training, and, if necessary, the commissioning of additional provision. The commitment is to identify a Designated Senior Lead for mental health and offer appropriate training in at least one-fifth of schools by the end of 2022/23, commencing September 2019, and to be implemented in every school by 2025. In addition to the core proposals there is additional commitment to ensuring that “children will learn about mental health through the curriculum”.

Schools are very aware of the pressing needs of children and young people in their care who are showing signs of significant emotional distress, however teacher knowledge of mental health is often low (Rothi et al 2008) as is their confidence in responding effectively to such difficulties (Kidger et al 2010).

Teacher training both pre and post qualification has been perceived as inadequate in preparing teachers to understand and respond to young people’s mental health needs (Andrews et al 2014) but there is evidence that training teachers in mental health awareness can improve knowledge and confidence in responding to concerns (Jorm et al 2010).

### Child Bereavement UK’s work supporting schools

Child Bereavement UK’s mission is to ensure the accessibility of high quality child bereavement support and information to all families and professionals by increasing the charity’s reach and plugging the gaps that exist in bereavement support and training across the country and embedding standards in the sector. Improving the bereavement awareness of school professionals has been a strategic priority for Child Bereavement UK for many years. Support and training is provided in a variety of modalities including workshops, inset days, national conferences, awareness sessions, online learning programmes, and twilight sessions. In addition, Child Bereavement UK provides a wealth of free information to support school professionals facing bereavement, through a variety of resources. These include a dedicated schools section on the Child Bereavement UK website, a downloadable schools information pack, ‘Elephants Tea Party’ – a bereavement awareness programme for KS1, KS2 and KS3 pupils, a national helpline and school liaison.

The current research project arises from Child Bereavement UK’s mission to increase access to bereavement training and support for school staff across the UK to ensure that all bereaved pupils receive the support they need. In order to best support school staff it was felt crucial to examine staff’s experience, training and priorities in a wide range of settings across the nation.

## Methodology

The key aims of the project, as outlined above, were to further understand teachers’ attitudes to support for bereaved children and to identify the drivers and barriers to schools effectively supporting bereaved pupils.

### Design

The project was designed to include several different methodologies to best capture the information required and included the gathering of both quantitative and qualitative data. Background information was gathered through a comprehensive review of current Child Bereavement UK resources for schools, a detailed review of the literature and policy context surrounding bereavement training and support within schools and direct contact with key stakeholders.

Data was collected through the conducting of:

- Case studies: 7 participants
- Semi-structured one to one interviews: 17 participants

- A questionnaire administered online: 1022 participants

Data gathered from the case studies was used to construct areas of questioning for the semi-structured one to one interviews. Results from the interviews, were in turn used to construct the questionnaire items which were administered online in order to gain the maximum number of participants. Issues covered related to initial teacher training, priorities and policies, ongoing training, death and dying within the curriculum and both mental health and bereavement support offered in school.

## Key findings

The investigations surrounded four main areas of enquiry: experience of death within the school community, bereavement training, bereavement support and the inclusion of death and bereavement in the curriculum.

The seven case studies represented a geographic spread from the South West of England, Southern and Northern England, Wales and Scotland, and a mix of ability levels and demographics of the catchment areas. Five primary/junior and two secondary schools took part.

Of the 17 who took part in one to one interviews, 10 had a management, support, outreach or pastoral role in schools, although many had a teaching background, 5 were in a teaching role, and 2 were teaching assistants.

Online questionnaire responses were collected from 1022 participants representing a range of settings, covering early years, primary, and secondary education, a range of teaching experience (0-15+ years) and a wide geographical spread across the UK.

In summary, the findings indicate that although the vast majority of respondents had experienced a death within the school community, many felt ill-equipped to manage it. Almost a third had experienced the death of a pupil and over a fifth had experienced the death of a member of staff. Nearly three quarters reported teaching pupils affected by the death of someone significant. Many respondents felt training would have made the situation easier to manage and the vast majority felt schools should prepare ahead for potential future deaths within the school community.

A minority of respondents had received any bereavement training at all and almost half the time this was either fully or partly in response to a death. However, those that had received training had found it helpful in managing the issues that arose as a result of a bereavement. Ninety-five per cent of respondents indicated that they would like to receive bereavement training, preferentially face to face, but few felt that bereavement support and training were a priority within their school. The most commonly cited impediments to receiving training were financial considerations and time pressures. The Senior Leadership Team or the headteacher were identified as those who set priorities within school and few mentioned any wider staff involvement.

Whilst most schools reported offering some kind of mental health support, and indicated that this included bereavement support, this was not the case in a sizeable minority. The data showed that there is a wide range of options provided, ranging from within school provision to a variety of external agencies. When asked what kind of support they would like within school, 40% wanted face-to-face support, over a third wanted support in terms of helpline and advice, and a third wanted support in the form of a website.

Just over half the respondents reported that death and bereavement was covered within the curriculum in their school, mostly within RE, PSHE, English literature and science lifecycles, but few identified a clear focus on bereavement rather than talking practically about the concept of death.

## Discussion

The research methodology enabled views to be obtained from a wide range of school staff undertaking a variety of roles, with varying lengths of experience and representing a very wide geographic spread. Views were obtained from participants in all four countries in the UK and positively from a wide range of counties within the UK. This included counties where Child Bereavement UK has an active service offering but also many where this is not the case.

From the analyses conducted, key areas of interest were identified as:

- Priorities for schools and training
- Mental health and bereavement in schools
- Death, dying and bereavement in the curriculum
- What teachers want

### Priorities for schools and training

Results show that for the vast majority of schools, decisions regarding priorities for the school are prescribed by the senior leadership team and governors. In Scotland this is also guided by and must include the national standards on health and wellbeing. Few mentioned wider staff involvement or governors.

In terms of training, the key focus for the majority of schools who took part in the interviews or case studies appears to be the main curriculum subjects and the challenges of OFSTED which is mentioned by several schools. Only 20% of respondents to the online questionnaire results said bereavement support and training had been a priority in their school.

The pressures of time or funding were mentioned by many respondents. Results from the online questionnaire identified 68% who listed budget, 33% who listed the pressure of time, 10% who listed availability and awareness, and 7% who listed school priorities as a barrier to accessing training.

The online questionnaire indicated that only around 10% had received bereavement training during their initial teacher training (ITT) or professional training and only a third had received bereavement training either in their current or previous roles.

### Mental health and bereavement in schools

Taking a whole school approach, the key focus for many schools is the main curriculum subjects and the challenges of OFSTED, which were mentioned by several schools. In both Scotland and Wales, the focus on emotional health and wellbeing is given more priority. In Wales there is a national target to reduce the impact of deprivation on attachment and bereavement is included within this.

Overall, the data from all parts of the study show that the majority of schools offer some kind of mental health support to pupils and that many include bereavement support amongst the mental health support provided. However, there is great variety in terms of the nature and form of that provision.

Half of those interviewed and just over half of those responding to the online questionnaire said they covered death and bereavement in their curriculum. For many it was covered in specific subjects including English literature, Theology and Ethics, PSHE, RE and science lifecycles. Only a small minority mentioned a clear

bereavement focus, rather than talking in more practical terms about the concept of death. Concerns were raised about teachers' confidence in raising this subject and barriers to teachers sharing personal views.

In Scotland, health and wellbeing including loss and bereavement is covered by specific lessons and across the broader curriculum. Research in Northern Ireland (McGovern and Tracey 2010) identified the need to incorporate death education into the curriculum and, widely, support existed; however, caution was raised on two issues – concern that if schools took on this area it reduced parental responsibility and concern that if teachers were going to deliver this they would need further training and ongoing support.

Whilst almost 90% of questionnaire respondents had experienced a death in the school community only a third of respondents reported feeling that their school was equipped to manage a death when it occurred in their school community. In circumstances when there had been a death, respondents most commonly cited training as having been likely to have made the situation easier. Over 90% said schools should prepare ahead in case they experience bereavement. However, Potts (2013) in a study of 22 schools found that less than 25% had a bereavement protocol in place.

Taking results from the study as a whole, all methods of data collection indicate that the majority of schools appear to recognise the important role they play with regard to pupil wellbeing and mental health. (Department of Health and Social Care, Department of Education 2017). However, George (2018) suggests that Teachers risk being overburdened by new demands to help protect children's mental health. In addition, Shah (2016) showed that schools and teachers consistently report how ill-equipped they feel to deal with the increasingly-complex mental health issues in their respective institutions.

The Government's response (Department of Health and Social care, Department for Education, 2018) to the Green Paper consultation Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision (Department of Health, Department of Education 2017) is therefore much welcomed. Recognition of the need for a whole school approach, for the identification of a designated senior lead for mental health, and for substantial, high-quality training and the commitment to include mental health issues through the curriculum is to be celebrated.

### What teachers want

The need for training was identified overwhelmingly by respondents across the study. Only 10% of questionnaire respondents reported having received any during their ITT, with only a third receiving it subsequently. A number of school staff mentioned a lack of confidence in dealing with this subject, which is in accord with Andrews et al (2014) findings regarding feelings of inadequacy and lack of preparation for dealing with all emotional wellbeing subjects. Almost half the questionnaire respondents reported that they felt training would help a school prepare ahead in case they experience bereavement. Regarding preference for specific training methods, 59% put face-to-face training as a first preference, 21% put online as a first preference, and 10% put blended training as first preference. These results echo the findings of the Welsh study (Finlay 2010, Fitz 2010).

However, Falconbridge et al (2017) argues that, while enhanced training for teachers is recommended, "it is essential that training is not seen as a stand-alone solution" (page 20). Specifically, it is emphasized that the development of psychologically healthy schools requires psychologically healthy staff as well as students. This was reflected in the current results. Interview respondents expressed a wish for a mix of support methods. Three people mentioned training as being a key part of the support they would like. Six mentioned wanting outside support and both helpline and face-to-face to signpost to, while six mentioned that a specialist support worker to pop into the school would be helpful.

The need for the integration of training and ongoing support is evidenced in the strategy being delivered in Wales (Finlay, 2010). This identified three key elements: yearly face-to-face training; provision of free resources; and the provision of area support workers who were able to be freely available.

## Recommendations

As a result of the findings and in line with evidence from previous research, the following recommendations were identified as key areas for future development.

### Priorities for schools and training

- To develop links with key statutory organisations to influence future agendas and priorities.
- To engage with influential organisations to find alternative ways to disseminate information to Senior Leaders on the importance of bereavement support and planning in schools.

### Mental health and bereavement in schools

- In the light of the Government's response (Department of Health and Social care, Department for Education, 2018) to the Green Paper consultation Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision (Department of Health, Department of Education 2017), to work with Designated senior leads for mental health to ensure the inclusion of bereavement within the agenda.
- For Child Bereavement UK to work with the Life Matters Task Force to promote strategies by which the topic of death, dying and bereavement can be integrated within the curriculum.
- For Child Bereavement UK to work with the Life Matters Task Force to promote the importance of having a bereavement framework within schools.

### What teachers want

- To develop a suite of programmes aimed at those at different levels of their career, ranging from trainee teachers through to senior leaders and governors using a variety of training approaches.
- The integration of training within a consideration of the local offer to schools

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