

# Where grief education goes to die? A response to making learning about grief, death, and loss mandatory in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence

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## Primary reference

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## Abstract

This rapid response raises challenges to Dawson *et al*'s (2023) recent proposals for mandatory grief education in schools; in particular, it considers curriculum crowding, the limitations of legal mandates and initial-teacher education. It proposes collaborative working between specialist groups as a way forward.

## Introduction

In a recent issue of *Bereavement*, Dawson *et al* (2023) suggested that grief education should become a mandatory aspect of the curricula of all four nations of the United Kingdom. The overarching vision they put forward is for grief education to be an aspect of curricular provision mandated via legislation, to be delivered in a developmentally appropriate manner, with upskilled teachers at the helm who can make connections across areas of learning. While education about grief and death is vital for all children and young people, the proposed approach may not be as effective as hoped. This short response will highlight the barriers to these suggestions, focusing on Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (Education Scotland) and will also consider a positive way forward for the discussion.

## A crowded curriculum

Dawson *et al* (2023) envisage that grief education would be located within the Health and Wellbeing (HWB) curriculum area of CfE and rightly acknowledge the limited but possible connections to possible learning as articulated in the experiences and outcomes. The main concern here is that this aspect of HWB is often delivered, certainly in secondary schools, as Personal and Social Education (PSE). There are considerable limitations for grief education as a result of this. First, this usually has less than one hour per week in school timetables and is already

overcrowded. PSE is often where education on a whole variety of life issues occurs, including substance misuse, sex and relationships, careers and skills development, anti-bullying initiatives, social media and online safety, and human rights, to name a few. Second, PSE is often delivered by busy practitioners who hold promoted posts relating to Guidance or Pupil Support, which is a demanding role when combined with teaching across these complex areas. Alternatively, programmes are delivered by non-specialists who have the teaching time available within their allocated timetable (Wallace, 2018). The overcrowding of PSE and the lack of time for those who teach it to do it well may also partially explain some concerns about the quality of PSE (Wallace, 2018; Tevendale, 2018; Education Scotland, 2013).

## The problem with mandatory

The second issue is the proposal to mandate the provision of grief education in law. As Dawson *et al* (2023) note for Scotland, CfE is not a statutory curriculum, with Religious and Moral Education (RME) in non-denominational schools and Religious Education – Roman Catholic (RERC) in denominational schools being the only legally required areas of the curriculum to be delivered in schools (Scott, 2018; Scott, 2003). The provision of RME is an excellent case study of the challenges that befall a vital aspect of learning despite legal prescription. In short, a combination of legal statutes and government guidance means that all state-funded non-denominational schools should offer RME to all learners (even those in the later stages of secondary, where qualifications are the usual priority (Scholes, 2020)). As I have shown elsewhere, there is a considerable lack of provision in RME, questions over the quality of existing provisions and significant inconsistencies in official oversight from HM Inspectors of Education concerning the legislative demands (Scholes, 2022). Thus, making an aspect of the curriculum legally mandatory is no guarantee of the 'kind of wide and systematic learning' envisaged by Dawson *et al* (2023: 4). Indeed, the law is no guarantee that grief education will be delivered, delivered well, and checked on for quality via mechanisms such as inspection.

## The role of teachers

A central pillar for achieving the positive and proactive provision of grief education was rightly argued to be knowledgeable and upskilled practitioners and, in this case, teachers.

There are, in short, two ways to become a teacher in Scotland. A four-year undergraduate degree with a combined teaching qualification or a one-year Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). Given competing priorities, the challenge is simply one of time in both routes. A survey of the General Teaching Council for Scotland's (GTCS, 2021) standards for provisional registration – the benchmark for completing one of the above routes – quickly reveals that the breadth of priority areas is already extensive. There are complex issues and areas of knowledge and practice that beginning teachers must become and remain conversant with, including learning for sustainability, social justice, digital literacy, and outdoor learning. All of this in addition to the day and daily demands of classroom practice, teaching, and assessment. Admittedly, an argument could be made that any training in grief education would become part of the beginning teacher's toolbox. However, there is a danger that such tools might get rusty.

## A way forward?

I think grief and death education could be a powerful and reorientating aspect of learning for children and young people in a world that leans too much toward the material and the immediate. Thus, the intention of highlighting the challenges of PSE, the weaknesses of legal mandates and the busy nature of initial-teacher education is not to argue against the advocacy of Dawson *et al* for a clear place for grief education in the curriculum. Instead, it is to note that their proposals may meet substantial barriers in practice in the Scottish context.

The ubiquity of death, grief and loss and the central importance of understanding it and responding to it would suggest that it is worthy of substantial and serious consideration by the education system. To this end, and to close with a suggestion for a way forward, I would propose that a more fruitful avenue could emerge from partnership working between experts across grief studies and education to navigate these persistent and substantial challenges.

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