

My Grief: My Choice

Young people's attitudes to grief education and bereavement support in schools

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Introduction

COVID-19 brought death, directly and indirectly, into the lives of people around the world on a scale most could never have imagined. In Northern Ireland (NI), between March 2020 to the end of 2022, over 4,000 more deaths occurred than would normally be expected for that period (NISRA, 2023). However, it was not simply the number of people who were dying that was so distressing, but also the circumstances in which they had to face death and the impact that had on the grieving process for their family and friends. The inability to be with loved ones in their final hours, to attend a funeral, to experience the physical support of family and friends had a profoundly negative impact on the bereaved. Children and young people were arguably the forgotten generation at this time, including with respect to bereavement (NICCY, 2021). Under normal circumstances, primary (41%), followed by secondary school

(35%) is the point at which a child is most likely to experience a death of someone significant in their lives for the first time; most commonly through the death of a grandparent (71%) (Goss et al. 2024). However, it is also estimated that each year 1,600 parents in Northern Ireland die leaving dependent school aged children (Childhood Bereavement Network, 2022).

Bereavement is complex and each person's experience unique - age when bereaved, relationship with the person that has died, and the circumstances of the death will all have an impact on the grieving process. As a society there is much that we can do to support each other through bereavement, and the landmark report published by the UK Commission on Bereavement following the pandemic drew these out, including making a number of recommendations about the role of schools and colleges

(UK Commission on Bereavement, 2022). It said that all education providers should be required to have a bereavement policy, provide staff training, have processes for supporting bereaved pupils and provide age-appropriate opportunities for children and young people to learn about coping with death and bereavement. In NI, we have progress to make to realise these recommendations in full.

With funding from Marie Curie as part of its Schools Bereavement Programme, the 2024 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey included some questions asking 16-year-olds how they feel schools could or should prepare and support young people to deal with death and grief - a life event they will face at some point. This is the first time questions about bereavement have been covered in YLT.

2024 YLT survey

The 2024 YLT survey was undertaken as an online survey in April and May 2024. The random sample for the survey was drawn from the Child Benefit Register among 16-year-olds who celebrated their 16th birthday in the period from December 2023 to February 2024.

Names and addresses of eligible 16-year-olds were provided directly to ARK by HM Revenue and Customs who administer the Child Benefit payments. YLT was run as a split survey, which means there were two different survey versions to accommodate the large

number of questions included and to reduce the response burden on 16-year-olds. 1,146 16-year-olds took part in the survey version that included questions on bereavement and grief education. This represents a response rate of 37% for this survey version.

Experience of Bereavement

Over half of respondents (54%) stated that they had personally experienced the death of someone close to them. While this was mostly grandparents, some respondents listed other relatives, including aunts, uncles, parents, siblings or cousins. Some named friends, and a very small number of respondents also listed pets. Around one third of respondents (34%) stated that they had not experienced a bereavement, whilst 12 per cent preferred not to say.

Respondents were asked how hard or easy they felt most people would find it to talk about bereavement and how hard or easy they would find this. Figure 1 shows that there was a very significant difference in the response to these two

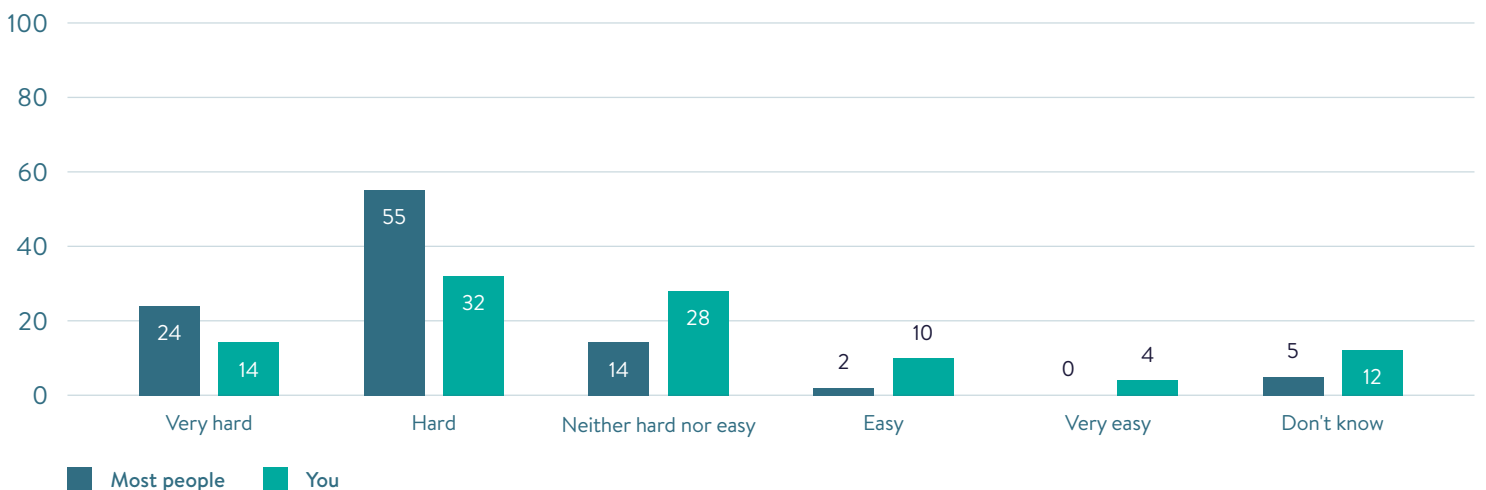
questions. Whilst almost eight in ten 16-year-olds (79%) felt that most people would find it very hard or hard to talk about bereavement, less than half (46%) felt this would be the case for them personally. These results did not vary substantially between those who had experienced bereavement and those who had not.

The results in Figure 1 could suggest a number of things. Firstly, whilst only 14 per cent of respondents felt they would find it easy or very easy to talk about bereavement, less than half said they would find this hard or very hard (46%). Whilst this is a substantial proportion of young people, these results suggest an openness to talking about death, while

highlighting the wariness that still exists for some young people. Importantly, the perception that the vast majority of other people, including other young people, would find it very hard or hard to talk about bereavement points to a possible key reason why we tend not to have meaningful conversations around death, dying or bereavement.

These findings would support the introduction of grief education in schools that could ensure young people become more comfortable talking about bereavement, and, as a consequence, more confident in opening up to others, including their peers if they experience a bereavement.

Figure 1: How hard or easy do most people/do you find it to talk about bereavement? (%)

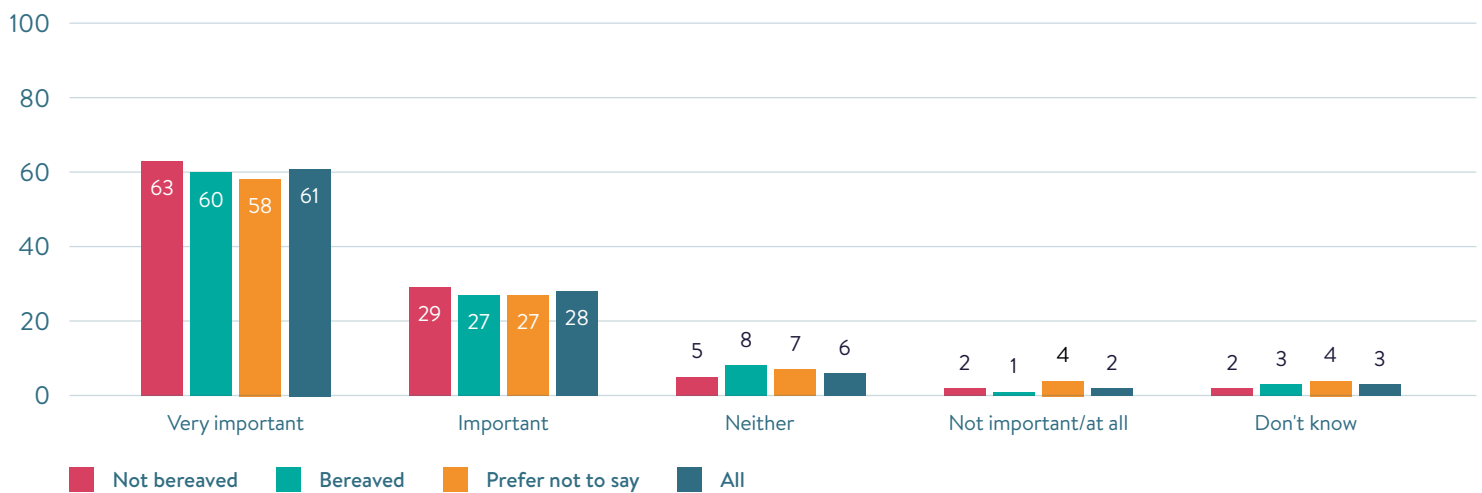


YLT respondents were asked how important they felt it was for schools to support pupils who have been bereaved. Figure 2 shows that around 90 per cent of 16-year-olds felt that this was very important or important, with very small

proportions feeling this was not or not at all important. Again, the views only marginally varied between respondents who said they had experienced the death of someone close to them and those who had not. These findings, as detailed

in Figure 2, can be seen as a strong mandate from young people for schools to develop and implement policies to support pupils who are dealing with bereavement.

Figure 2: How important is it for schools to support pupils who have been bereaved?



Respondents were then provided with a list of practical means of support and asked which, if any, they felt schools should offer to pupils dealing with bereavement. Table 1 shows the proportion of respondents in support of each measure. As can be seen, respondents were most supportive of schools offering a quiet space for young people to go when feeling overwhelmed (71%). Three other

measures were supported by over half of the respondents, namely, flexibility and sensitivity especially at important times, such as anniversaries or birthdays (56%); a specific person in school bereaved pupils can go to, if they need to talk (55%); and extra time to finish schoolwork (52%). As shown in Table 1, fewer than one in five respondents identified any of the other proposed practical mechanisms. These measures

all involved specific third parties inside or outside school, such as counsellors, or teachers sharing information about a pupil's bereavement. Importantly, Table 1 shows that only two per cent of respondents felt that it did not help to get the school involved, again showing not only a clear mandate for providing bereavement support in schools, but, also, the range of measures that schools could adopt.

Table 1: What practical support do you think schools could offer to pupils who have experienced a bereavement?

	%
A quiet space to go when feeling overwhelmed	71
Flexibility and sensitivity especially at important times (e.g. anniversaries/birthdays) i.e. leave class if they need to	56
Specific person/people they can go to in the school if they need to talk	55
Extra time to finish schoolwork	52
Help to access school-based counselling	19
Teachers talk to young person before sharing information about their bereavement	14
Give information/support to access help outside school	14
None - it doesn't help to get school involved	2

Respondents were invited to comment on other useful methods of support, and some did. The quotes from these respondents show that the most important step schools could take to offer support to bereaved pupils is to show sensitivity, compassion, and flexibility. The following quotes highlight the complexities inherent in supporting young people through their grief and bereavement. While some may want their grief acknowledged, others may not want to be the subject of additional attention, while others again could be wary of a school system involving parents/carers without their consent or before they are ready. The range of views highlights the need for schools to be prepared and have systems established that allow for individualised person-centred approaches.

'I think schools should have a better understanding of students' emotions, we're all young and still developing our emotions and teachers just don't seem to care about that as long as they win the argument and show their authority over you.'

'Not to make them feel different but to let them know there is help if it's needed.'

'Just acknowledge it. A form teacher should say - I am sorry to hear you lost your grandad - I hope you are ok. If you need anything please speak to me. They should not act as if it never happened.'

'The main reason teenagers don't like getting help in school is that normally the school is obliged to involve parents. Teens tend to not want parents to know what's wrong if they haven't told them already themselves.'

Grief Education

Eight in ten 16-year-olds (79%) stated that this was important or very important for schools to offer grief education. Only four per cent felt that this was not important or not important at all. Respondents were then asked if they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements in relation to grief education. The extent of agreement and disagreement with these statements is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	%		
	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Grief Education shows that bereavement is something that happens to everyone at some point	86	3	11
It makes young people more aware of the support that is available if they experience bereavement and need help	82	3	15
Talking about bereavement could make young people upset or cry in class	80	5	15
We can help others better with their bereavement if we understand it ourselves	80	7	13
Grief Education can help young people who have been bereaved to not feel so alone	79	6	15
It is not helpful to tell someone how they should or shouldn't behave if they have been bereaved	74	9	18
Grief Education might make it easier to talk about bereavement	71	9	19
Dealing with bereavement is not something that can be taught	51	25	23
Bereavement is a private matter that should be dealt with at home/outside of school	29	37	34

The responses to the statements overall suggest that 16-year-olds felt strongly that grief education in schools could result in a greater understanding of bereavement, which could make it easier to talk to others about death and could make death less of a taboo topic.

There was very little disagreement in relation to some of the likely benefits of grief education, such as the awareness raising element regarding available support (82% agreeing) and the capacity-building effect, namely that we can help others better with their bereavement if we understand it ourselves (80% agreeing). There was also strong agreement with the statements that it may help young people who have

experienced loss not to feel so alone (79%); that it can help young people understand that it is not helpful to tell someone how they should deal with their bereavement (74%) and that it may make it easier to talk about loss (71%).

As could be expected, respondents recognised the possibility that talking about bereavement might be upsetting for some people (80%). Together with the very mixed views expressed in relation to the last two statements - namely whether or not dealing with bereavement is actually something that can be 'taught' and if bereavement is a private matter that should be dealt with at home and not in school - these findings indicate the complexity and

sensitivity of bereavement and loss. However, with grief education in place alongside appropriate staff training, it could be argued that teachers and pupils would be practically and emotionally better prepared to provide support and understanding in such instances, and becoming upset would not be seen as negative or embarrassing, but as a normal, natural emotional response.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that everyone will experience death and bereavement at some point in their lives, at a broad societal level death continues to be regarded as a taboo topic, and barriers remain that inhibit meaningful discussions (Nelson et al. 2021). Interestingly, the YLT survey results highlight a perception from young people that talking is harder for others than it is for themselves. The results also show strong agreement for grief education and bereavement support being offered in schools. This support is mirrored in a recent survey of adults in NI, albeit, with some wariness raised about discussing such issues with younger primary school children (4-7 year olds) (Goss et al. 2024).

The YLT survey results also clearly show that young people appreciate that everyone deals with loss differently.

There was also a very strong sense that grief education, in helping to destigmatise death and grief could provide young people with a range of tools and practical support measures to help them cope with and understand their own bereavement, and a greater ability to support others.

As YLT shows, apart from opportunities to talk about grief in school, respondents wanted schools to be sensitive, understanding and accommodating to young people, while also accepting them as individuals who have the autonomy and capacity to deal with their bereavement in their own way without necessarily having parents or carers involved.

The current education system does not prioritise the wellbeing of pupils enough, and a lack of information and support

regarding grief and bereavement does not help to allay such concerns (DE, 2023). Clearly a greater focus on pupil grief and bereavement requires a strong policy and practice framework, and staff confidence and competency. However, the findings from the YLT survey should give those planning policy initiatives around bereavement and grief education encouragement that young people welcome such change and dialogue. And, as the Marie Curie Schools Bereavement Programme shows along with other examples (Booth, Croucher and Bryant 2021), young people also have the agency to play an active role in the development of education policy and school resources to strengthen information and support on this subject.

Key Points:

- Strong sense that bereavement is hard to deal with and hard to talk about, but 16-year-olds feel it's harder for others than it would be for themselves.
- Nearly nine in ten 16-year-olds, whether bereaved or not, felt it was important for schools to offer support.
- Sensitivity in school and flexibility with school work were the main types of support respondents felt were important.
- Eight in ten respondents felt it was important or very important for schools to offer grief education.
- Eight in ten respondents felt we can help others if we understand grief better ourselves, but half also felt that dealing with bereavement is not something that can be taught.

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The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey is carried out annually and records the opinions of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland on a range of social and political issues. YLT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. In total, 2,210 16-year-olds took part in the 2024 YLT survey. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt



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