

Supporting suddenly bereaved children and young people in schools

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Sudden Seminar: SUPPORTING SUDDENLY BEREAVED
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Session overview

- Introductory comments
 - Sudden bereavement
- The research context
- Summary of the key findings that are (hopefully) relevant and formative – **participants' voices**
- References and contact details
- Q&A



Aims and context

- Personal and professional contexts
- Hull's L&B context
- Research gap
- Interested in how 'informed schools' support bereaved pupils and if/how they enable pupils to learn about death



The study

- Conducted in 8 ‘informed’ inner-city primary schools, 2014-15
- Varying levels of **economic disadvantage** (but not necessarily *social* disadvantage...)
- Diverse communities
- In-depth interviews with 8 HTs and 9 wellbeing support practitioners [‘NTPs’]
- Foci: bereavement support (approaches/values etc) and ‘death education’
- All schools had at least one member of staff trained in loss and bereavement support (so ‘informed’ schools)
- Predominantly qualitative data from ‘richly-informed’ participants.

MRQ: *What are the perceptions of key actors with respect to the nature of ‘informed’ bereavement support and death education within selected English primary schools?*



Key findings

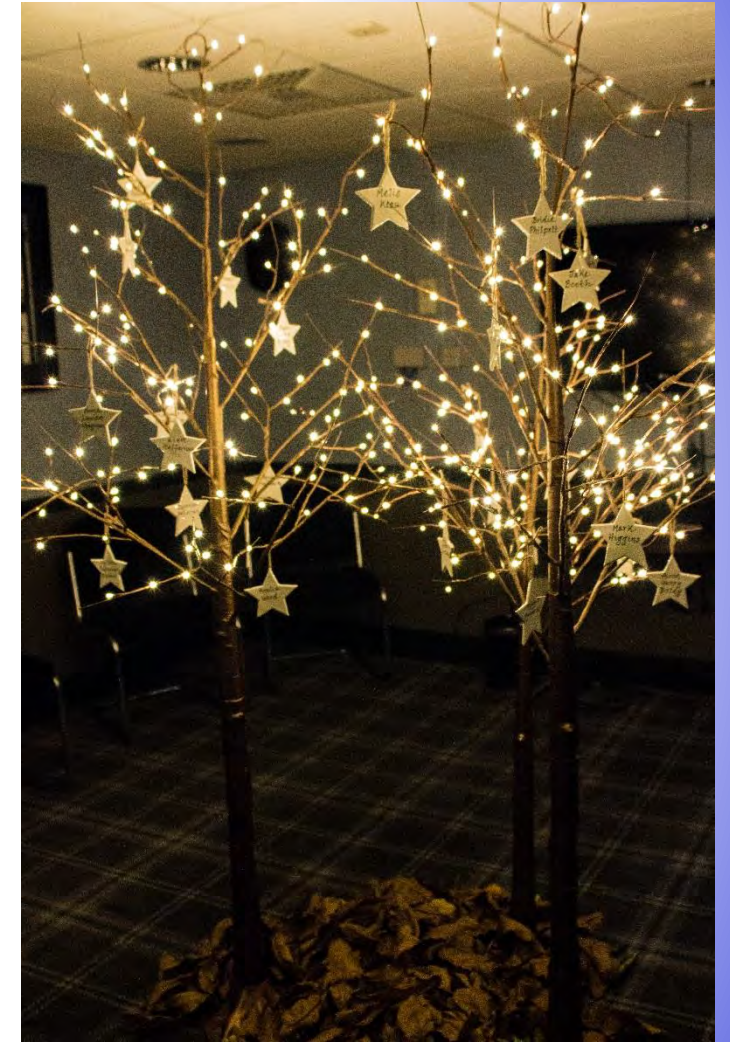
A) Bereavement support

- Compelling evidence from the literature for proactive loss and bereavement support in schools, and for children and young people to 'have voice/ agency'
- 7 out of 8 schools actively gave bereaved pupils agency*
- Schools are aware of the 'nested relationship' between attachment, wellbeing, behaviour and learning
- The 8 selected schools were 'real communities' (Stern, 2001; 2002), facilitating meaningful, holistic learning experiences
- Only 1 of the 8 schools had engaged in whole-school training
- All 8 schools embedded PSHE, SEAL, etc, in their curricula, and 2/8 schools utilised P4C



Key findings continued...

- Bereavement support by ‘non-teaching practitioners’ (NTPs) (one per school)
- NTPs critical that
 - bereavement support is not a whole-school approach: teachers need training too;
 - schools/ children are vulnerable with one NTP
 - excluded from curricular planning, etc
- Majority of schools do not have a **bereavement policy** – concern for didactic tick-box policies/red tape
- All 8 schools were led by ‘emotionally coherent’ headteachers
- Bereavement support in the selected schools is nurturing, compassionate, and informed – but ‘**compartmentalised**’



Death education: key findings

Death education:

- Bereavement support literature recommends death education
 - Can also enhance emotional wellbeing, resilience and social/emotional capital
 - PSHE...
- **Death taboo** appears to be slowly dissipating
- Tendency to protect/hide children from death
- **Paradoxical:** by 'Disneyfying' childhood (Giroux, 1994), death anxiety is more common



'Opportunistic death education'

'Just as young children need formative, inclusive support to grieve, they also need more generic opportunities within the curriculum to explore death as a natural event and concept. Keeping pets such as hamsters is not as popular as it used to be in educational settings [...].

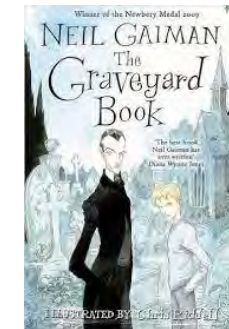
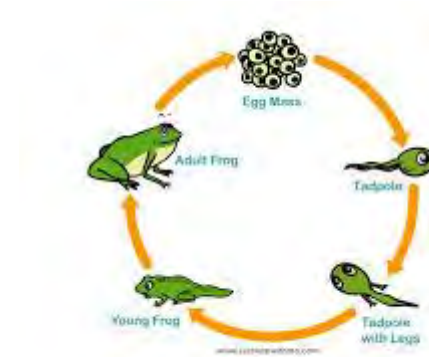
*When a hamster or goldfish dies, it may be tempting, possibly in deference to a belief in **children's inability to understand death 'fully'**, and/or **to protect their feelings**, to purchase a seemingly identical hamster or goldfish. A more constructivist alternative would be to explain to the children that 'Hammy' had sadly died overnight; to allow the children to look at and stroke Hammy (with the usual health observations); and to extend the moment into a wider learning opportunity, including child-centred ritual burial.'*

(James, 2012: 137).



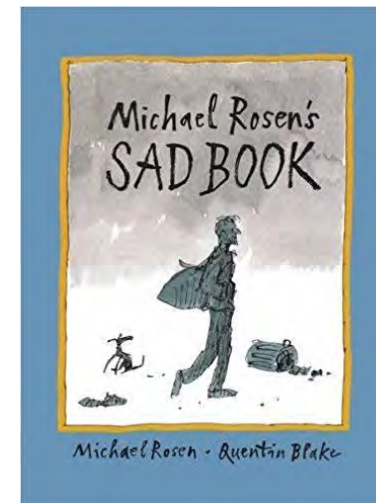
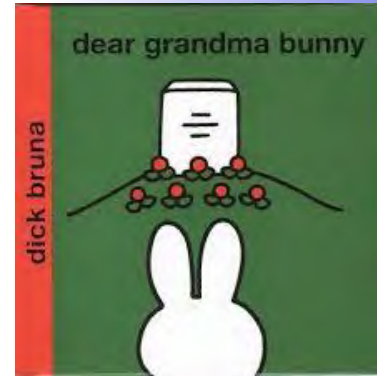
Research findings on DE in schools

- DE predominantly delivered through science PoS: life cycles
- P4C provided numerous opportunities for DE discussions
- Multi-cultural schools also utilised opportunistic discussions to learn from each other
- NTPs not involved in curricular planning, so bereavement support training is hidden.
- Several NTPs had self-identified death anxieties and believed children should be 'protected'



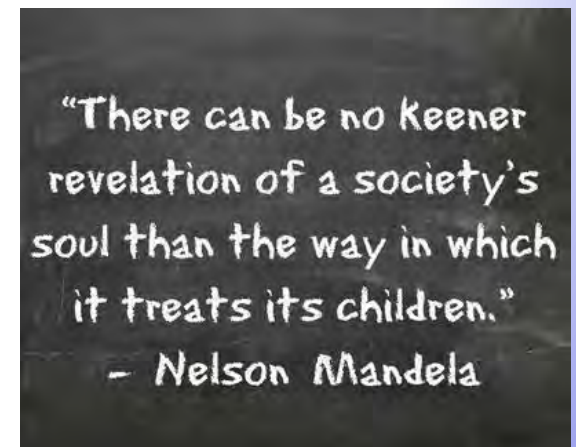
Humble recommendations...

- Statutory **whole-school CPD**, and in ITT/ TA courses
- Sustainability issues & staffing...
- PSHE, SEAL & P4C
- Opportunistic discussions – learn from and with each other: informal, dialogical learning
- ‘Normalise’ and explore death through the curriculum
- Host an Elephant’s Tea Party (CBUG)



Conclusions - and a call to embed a new, collective zeitgeist

- The wellbeing agenda has to be repositioned as a central societal and political imperative – and to be reinstated in education
- For schools, wellbeing intrinsically comprises a ‘nested relationship’ between attachment, loss, behaviour and learning
- In supporting bereaved children and young people, give them agency and voice, and be reflexive
- Emotionally-coherent leadership is essential – in our schools and communities: it’s time to act on what really matters, not what we are *told* matters.



References

Giroux, H.A., (1994). Animating youth: The Disneyfication of children's culture. *Socialist Review*, Vol. 94 (3), pp.65-79.

James, S. (2012) Loss, bereavement and ethics. In I. Palaiologou (ed) *Ethical practice in early childhood*. London: Sage Publications.

James, S. (2015) The nature of informed bereavement support and death education in selected English primary schools. EdD thesis. The University of Hull. Available online: <https://hydra.hull.ac.uk/resources/hull:13626> [Accessed 03/11/2016].

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