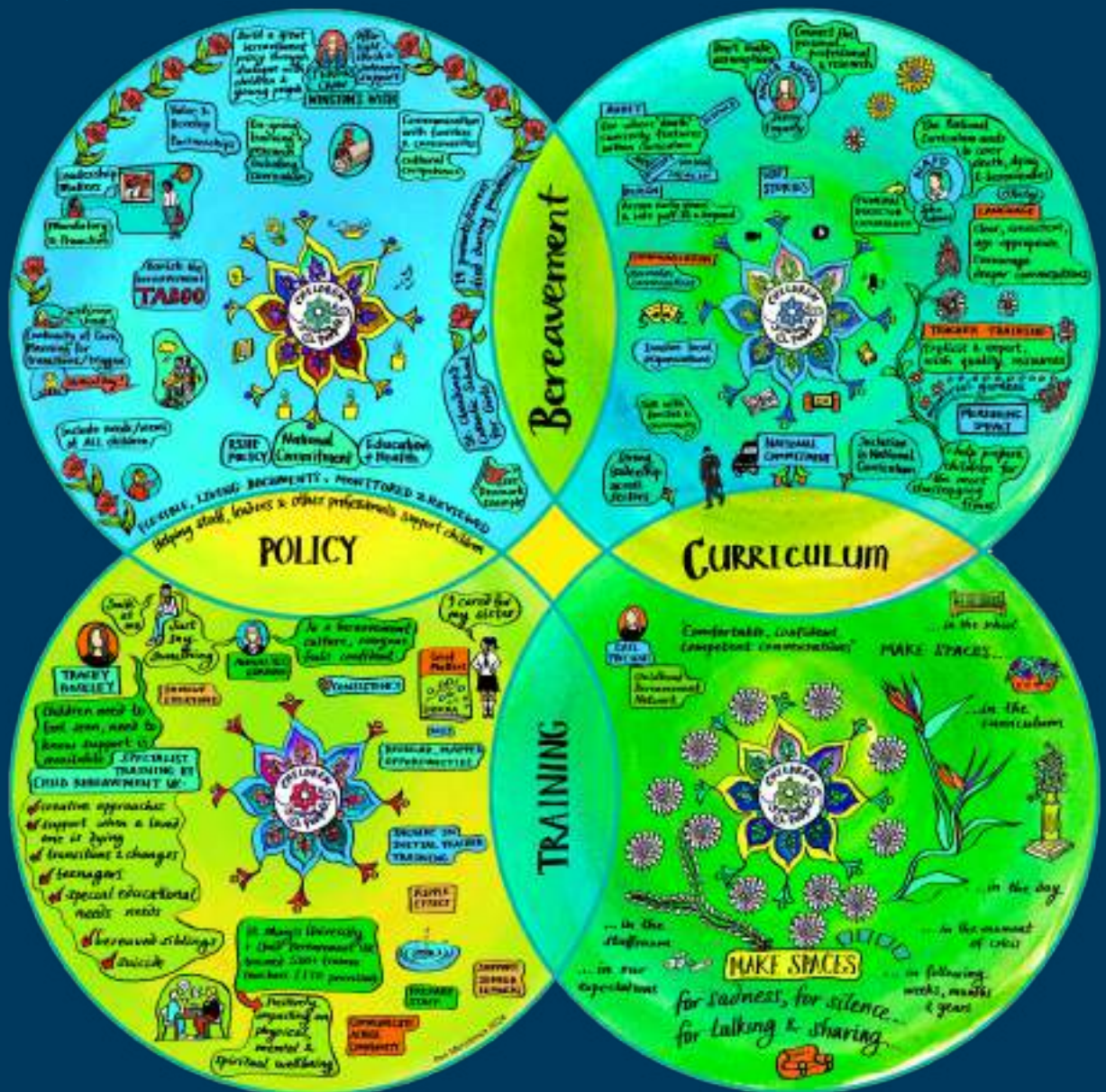




# Bereavement in Education Summit Report

St Mary's University  
Twickenham London





## We welcomed a number of charities to the Bereavement in Education Summit, including speakers from:

Child Bereavement UK: [www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org)  
Winston's Wish: [winstonswish.org](http://winstonswish.org)

**Thanks are due to the expert panel, welcomed by the Vice Chancellor of St Mary's University, for their insights on bereavement in education:**

John Adams National Association of Funeral Directors  
Fergus Crow CEO Winston's Wish  
Maggie Doherty Director, The Art of Living and Dying Well, St Mary's University  
Paige McCarthy St Mary's University alumna and Early Career Teacher  
Dr Louise McGowan Head Teacher, St Claudine's School for Girls  
Dame Alison Peacock CEO The Chartered College of Teaching  
Gail Precious National Children's Bureau and UK Commission on Bereavement



Panel members with the Vice Chancellor (left to right): Prof. Anna Lise Gordon, John Adams, Paige McCarthy, Prof. Anthony McClaran, Gail Precious, Dr Louise McGowan, Fergus Crow, Dame Alison Peacock, Maggie Doherty, Jenny Fogarty



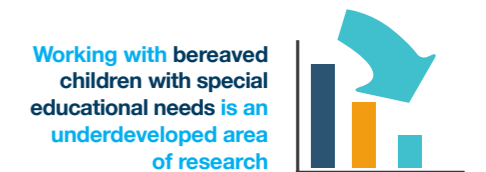
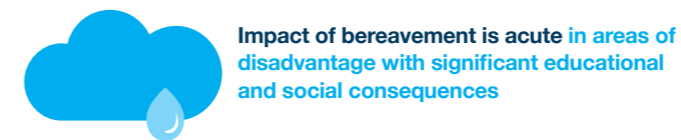
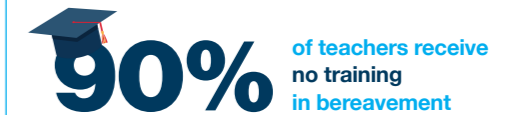
**Thanks are also due to Dr Pen Mendonça, live illustrator and co-researcher for the Bereavement in Education Summit: [www.penmendonca.com](http://www.penmendonca.com)**

# Introduction

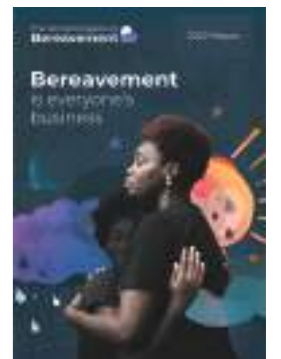


The Bereavement in Education Summit in June 2024 was convened by the Centre for Wellbeing in Education, in collaboration with the Centre for the Art of Living and Dying Well, at St Mary's University, Twickenham, London. Wellbeing and bereavement in education are inextricably linked as children, young people and adults in a wide variety of educational settings navigate the inevitable complexities of death, loss and grief in their communities.

Some years ago, a few stark facts (Child Bereavement UK, 2019) sparked a passion for me which has now been fanned (and accelerated by the experiences of the pandemic) into bright flames to develop a bereavement aware culture in education by working with experts in the field and many others with lived experience.



The stimulus for the summit was the UK Commission on Bereavement Report (2022) – Bereavement is everyone's business – and its recommendations for the education sector in particular. The report made recommendations about the inclusion of death in the curriculum, a meaningful bereavement policy in every school, and appropriate training for adults working with children and young people. The overarching aim of the summit was to take concrete steps to turn these laudable recommendations into action across the education sector, working in collaboration with charities, funeral directors, counsellors and health experts, researchers, chaplains, teachers and school leaders. The timing of the summit proved a pivot point in the debate about bereavement in education, coinciding with the Department for Education's consultation on RSHE guidance with a proposal to include bereavement, loss and grief in the curriculum for primary and secondary pupils. A focus on death and bereavement in education is a likely investment in public health and wellbeing as became evident in the engaging graphics created as a result of the event by our live illustrator, Dr Pen Mendonca.



Our aim is for St Mary's University to become known for its collaborative research, policy and practice work on bereavement across the education sector. We are delighted that participants contributed insights throughout the event as part of research data collection to inform next steps. Why is this important? Research indicates the potential longer-term negative impact of bereavement as a child or young person, both on academic outcomes and on social and emotional development. Working together, our collective aim is to improve outcomes, minimise risk factors and take a more holistic and interconnected response to nurturing children, young people and others in educational settings through periods of bereavement and grief. We all play a part, in different ways. We are part of the journey, and progress is only possible with research- and practice-informed engagement by people like us. After all, the loss of a loved one is a universal human experience, and discussions around bereavement must have an important place in education.

*Anna Lise Gordon*

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



# Policy

## Why does a bereavement policy matter?

Two poignant lived experience stories highlighted the need for a bereavement policy:

- [Sky News feature with headteacher and lay chaplain at St Claudine's Catholic School for Girls where 19 students were bereaved of a parent during the pandemic](#)
- [Interview with a trainee teacher at St Mary's University who was bereaved as a primary school pupil](#)



**Fergus Crow**  
CEO Winston's Wish

“Build great bereavement policies through getting into dialogue with children and young people and talking about the variety of support on offer from the most light touch to the most intensive.”

A bereavement policy will help teachers and other professionals to support children, families and staff in the event of a death in the school community. Many bereavement charities, including Winston's Wish, provide example policies for educational settings: [winstonswish.org/supporting-you/support-for-schools](http://winstonswish.org/supporting-you/support-for-schools)

## What should a good bereavement policy include?

- **Communication** – with the bereaved child, other pupils, staff, wider community
- **Knowledge of young people's grief** – supportive and well-informed teachers are vital to a grieving young person
- **Support available** – for everyone in the school community e.g. links to charities
- **Grief education** – well-planned across the curriculum, including PSHE
- **Return to school** – planned support in discussion with the bereaved young person
- **Transitions** – consideration of key events (e.g. events, anniversaries, changing school)

Bereavement policies should never be fixed or static documents. Contextualisation is key, including variations depending on the individual school and the individual child.

### DID YOU KNOW

In Denmark, bereavement response plans are used to support grieving students and have been implemented in 96% of schools, one of the best structured and most powerful school bereavement response systems in the world. Lytje (2017) identified that the bereavement response plans are very useful in ensuring initial support for bereaved young people but their impact reduces over time. This underscores the importance of the voice of the child or young person with lived experience of bereavement to inform policy as it is reviewed on a regular basis.

## Reflections from delegates at the Bereavement in Education Summit – POLICY

### Key questions

- What challenges do you foresee in developing and maintaining a meaningful bereavement policy in your school context?
- How do we ensure that voices of children and young people are heard in policy work?

### Points to consider when designing a bereavement policy

- Create a policy which includes students, educators, administrators, and parents
- Develop implementation guidelines
- Engage stakeholders

### Key themes which emerged from participants on POLICY

#### The need for a manageable and meaningful bereavement policy

- **Banish the bereavement taboo**  
Too many schools are afraid of embracing bereavement, often due to lack of confidence and training among staff, and the lack of a grief-aware society more widely. Build understanding of how to deal with death, and this may involve having to step out of our own comfort zone in order to face our own grief.
- **Leadership matters**  
Importance of a policy, championed by compassionate school leaders and governors, aligned with school's values, and with clear reference to key contacts in school and beyond (e.g. links to child bereavement charities).
- **Bereavement policy**  
Policy should be mandatory – “not too rigid as every scenario is unique” and pro-active, rather than reactive, reflective of the complexities of different bereavement scenarios; a real policy is a dialogue, a ‘living’ document that is reviewed regularly to monitor effectiveness.
- **Continuity of care**  
Recognition of grief as a longer-term concern; focus on key transition points in educational journey, including when a child returns to school after the death of a loved one; importance of creating time and space for staff to support a bereaved child or young person.
- **‘Lost’ voices**  
Need for particular guidance for children and young people with additional learning and complex medical needs, EHCPs etc.; importance of listening to the voices of children and young people with lived experience in the development of policy.
- **Partnerships**  
Importance of collaboration with local organisations for holistic approach to bereavement (including guidance and resources), such as charities, funeral directors, places of worship, hospices, etc.

- **Clarity of communication**  
Parents/carers to be involved at every stage; clear communication channels with the diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds within the school community.
- **Ongoing learning and research**  
Emphasis on time for learning from and with others, such as at the Bereavement in Education Summit and other professional development opportunities; more research and resources needed to underpin work on bereavement in education.
- **National commitment**  
Inclusion of death, grief and loss in RSHE policy is essential to raise profile, promote thinking and engagement; importance of education and health leaders working together locally, regionally and nationally in this vital area.



## Just Say Something!

“After attending the summit today I have come to the conclusion it's not that teachers didn't care, it's that they didn't know how to start the conversations. We all just need to say something.”

Participant, bereaved as a child

“Just say something!” is central to any meaningful bereavement policy: [www.bera.ac.uk/blog/just-say-something](http://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/just-say-something)

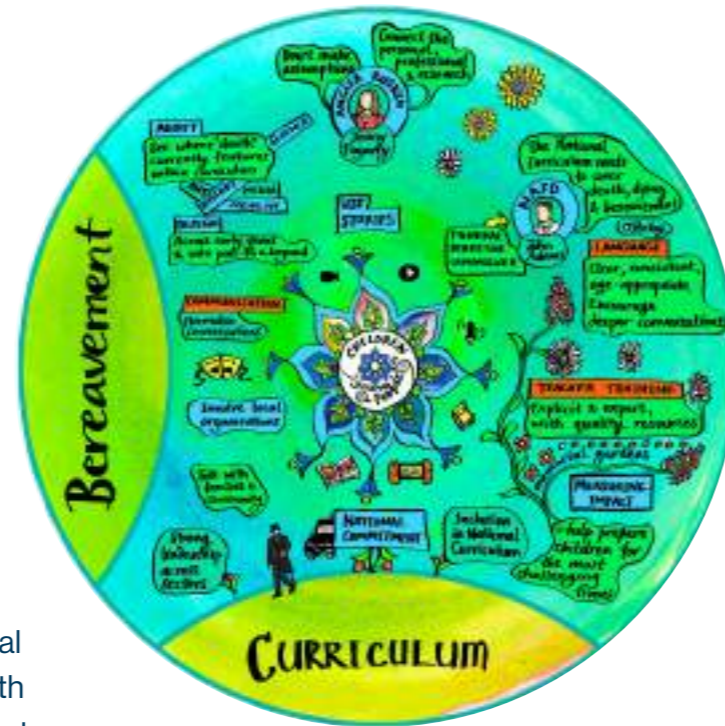


# Curriculum



**John Adams**  
Funeral Director

I am past President of the National Association of Funeral Directors and campaigner to add content on death, dying and bereavement into the national curriculum. I love working with schools and it's wonderful that St Mary's University is facilitating such important conversations."



**Jenny Fogarty**  
Anglia Ruskin University

I'm from Anglia Ruskin University and I'm here today for the Bereavement in Education Summit. This is a really important subject for me and it's something that I feel really passionately about.

Teachers are excellent communicators and they've got brilliant relationships with their children and they need to draw on those to hold the space when children feel sad and that will help them prepare for the most challenging parts of their life when a bereavement inevitably comes."

## Points to consider when embedding death literacy into the curriculum:

- **Promote** student voice – importance of capturing the voices and lived experiences of children and young people in curriculum design and development
- **Audit** of current provision across all subjects, including PSHE, RE, science, etc.
- **Curricular development** is never neutral and the aim is to normalise conversations about death, dying and loss
- **Progression** is essential in all curricular design across Early Years, Key Stages 1, 2, 3 and 4, as well as post-16 and beyond
- **Topics** that intersect with cultural/family beliefs receive high levels of scrutiny – a good thing
- **Engage** with educational publishers, charities and illustrators to create a resource bank

## The power of stories in the curriculum

There is a plethora of picture books, stories and graphic novels on the subject of death, grief and loss. These can provide a 'way in' to helping a young person understand their feelings and emotions, as well as a means to open up broader conversations about bereavement.

At the Bereavement in Education Summit participants benefitted from:

- *The Alligator's Mouth*, a bookshop for children and young people close to St Mary's University provided a wonderful display of relevant resources.
- *The Story Project* approach to using the magic of stories to inspire lifelong wellbeing, and helping children and young people explore and understand their emotions, including at times of loss and grief: [story-project.co.uk](http://story-project.co.uk)

## Reflections from delegates at the Bereavement in Education Summit – CURRICULUM

### Key questions

- What steps can be taken to embed death literacy into the curriculum effectively?
- How might collaboration with others help to de-mystify death for children and young people?
- What does a death-literate 16 year old look like?

### Key themes which emerged from participants on CURRICULUM:

- **Curriculum audit**  
Whole school review of where 'death' features in curriculum as a springboard to increase learning about grief and loss in a progressive manner through all phases of education; death (and not sex) is last curriculum taboo.
- **Curriculum design**  
Schemes of work with sequences of lesson plans and resources across the primary and secondary curriculum, e.g., life cycles in science, emotions in PSHE; focus on progression map for teaching and learning about death, grief and loss across key stages; involvement of local organisations, e.g., funeral directors, faith leaders, health professionals.
- **Communication**  
importance of consultation and communication with parents/carers and wider community. e.g., local charities, hospices; sharing beliefs and bereavement cultures across diverse communities.
- **Opportunities to talk**  
More than teaching, it's important to create opportunities to talk consistently about 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 effectively.
- **Measuring impact**  
Constant need to review curriculum provision to ensure that it is 'fit for purpose'; individual approach still needed beyond whole curriculum approach, e.g., lunchtime drop-in sessions, memorial garden.
- **National commitment**  
Establish national expectations for teachers, include death and bereavement in the national curriculum, and promote interdisciplinary working among education, health and social work professionals.



I was astounded today by the amount of people here and the diversity in the different delegates and their backgrounds, all the things they had to bring to the table. The speakers were phenomenal, the Q&A panel was really insightful, and I think this is going to be a way of opening up the conversations in schools ... throughout the UK."

Participant, Bereavement in Education Summit



# Training

## Initial Teacher Education (ITE) at St Mary's University

Inspired by some challenging experiences in our partnership schools, we began a journey in 2020 to ensure that all primary and secondary trainee teachers (500+ per year) at St Mary's University receive bereavement awareness training as part of their ITE provision. These early career teachers are part of a much-needed ripple effect over time to ensure that those working in schools are equipped and empowered to support children and young people through times of bereavement and grief.

Read more: [www.bera.ac.uk/publication/grief-matters](http://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/grief-matters)



**Tracey Boseley**  
Head of Education  
Sector Support  
Child Bereavement UK

“Training can empower those around a pupil who is grieving and help those professionals to feel they know what to say and how to access the training from our organisation and other bereavement organisations.”

### Points to consider when assessing training needs

- The use of technology in training preparation and delivery
- The possibility of collaboration with teacher training institutions
- The importance of support networks

### Who should be involved in bereavement awareness training?

Participants at the Bereavement in Education Summit shared their suggestions with a resounding ‘Everyone!’

An introduction to bereavement awareness training is vital for everyone working in schools. More specialised input is available for those with particular areas of responsibility. For example:

- Creative ways of working with bereaved children and young people
- Supporting bereaved children and young people with special educational needs
- Teenagers and bereavement
- Preparing and supporting children when someone is dying
- The impact of transition and change for bereaved pupils
- Supporting bereaved siblings
- Bereavement by suicide – supporting children, young people and families

Possible sources of training:

[www.childbereavementuk.org/training](http://www.childbereavementuk.org/training)  
[winstonswish.org/supporting-you/professionals-and-training/bespoke-training](http://winstonswish.org/supporting-you/professionals-and-training/bespoke-training)

## Sense of safety

“And if we’re able to have these conversations and have them confidently and competently and feel comfortable about doing them, then not only will the child feel safe, safer at school, safer to be able to engage with their lessons, but you’ll also feel safer.”

Gail Precious, National Children's Bureau



## Power of professional learning

“... one of the best professional learning events of my career, gaining important insights and expertise around how we as educators can better support young people and their families experiencing bereavement and loss.”

Participant at Bereavement in Education Summit

## Reflections from delegates at the Bereavement in Education Summit – TRAINING

### Key questions

- In what ways do you think bereavement training could positively impact school culture and student wellbeing?

### ‘It’s an ‘all staff’ issue!’

### Key themes emerged from participants on TRAINING

- **Challenge taboo around death**  
High quality training for teachers would empower them to reduce fear and discuss emotions about death with children and young people.
- **Support for senior leaders**  
Educate senior leadership teams in schools and Multi Academy Trusts on the urgency in adopting effective practices around bereavement; support structures needed

– “as a headteacher it can be overwhelming when trying to deal with death and bereavement.”

- **Training opportunities**  
Regular and carefully mapped specialist input needed, at a variety of levels, for teachers who are often trusted adults for grieving children and their families; provision of strategies and signposting to guidance and resources for education settings to work with children and young people.
- **Initial teacher education**  
Increase confidence of new teachers to address grief in the classroom as part of a comprehensive approach to training that includes a focus on policy and curriculum as part of creating a more compassionate environment in schools.
- **Visible children**  
Children must never feel invisible; embrace open and honest conversations; children and young people also need guidance on how to support a bereaved friend or family member; instil confidence in students that we are a school/place/people that have the knowledge/skills to support in a time of need; positive impact physically, mentally, socially and spiritually enabling more positive outcomes for students.
- **Be prepared**  
Regular training minimises risk of panic when crisis happens and staff feel better supported and able to cope; pre-emptive not reactive, including for topics in the news, e.g., assisted dying, miscarriage, environmental grief.
- **Confidence**  
Create a holistic and empathetic bereavement aware culture where everyone has the confidence, skills and tools to talk about death; leading, over time, to a more death-literate society as building trust and confidence generates conversations.
- **Communication**  
Importance of bereavement aware culture across whole school community; meaningful conversations with parents/carers, governors and external agencies; words and gestures matter – ‘I’m here for you’, ‘you’re not alone’, etc.
- **Consistency**  
Coherent training gives all staff confidence around death literacy – as part of whole school approach to wellbeing – which, in turn, ensures consistency for pupils in need of some certainty; sense of safety and authenticity for everyone.







# Let's make space for bereavement in education!

## Reasons to be optimistic:

- Genuine commitment to ensuring that every educational setting has a meaningful bereavement policy. This is an essential starting point for a pro-active rather than a reactive approach to coping with bereavement in the community.
- Real desire to ensure that learning about death, grief and loss is embedded into the curriculum in an age-appropriate way. This is vital to reduce taboos around death and ensure a better understanding of the topic. Over time, this will ripple through schools and into wider society.
- Increased awareness of the importance of confident, empowered teachers and others working in educational settings. The potential impact of effective training is significant for the experiences of child and young people at times of bereavement.

## Next steps

- Active and sensitive collaboration with bereaved children and young people so that their voices shine through in policy, curriculum and training developments.
- Urgent engagement with policy makers and other educational leaders to build on learning from the Bereavement in Education Summit.
- Increased research, including collaboration with education settings internationally, to inform ongoing developments and share good practice in the field.
- Robust focus on the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of bereavement support and interventions (policy, curriculum and training) on the lived experiences of children and young people.
- A focus on diverse cultural and religious views on death, dying and bereavement.
- Wider exploration of the role of technology in providing information, guidance and support.

## Contact

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### Making space

"The overwhelming theme throughout has been 'making space'. Making space – for talking/sharing – for silence – in places (memorial gardens) – in the day – in the moment of crisis – in the curriculum – in our expectations; allowing the space for the child to be sad."

Participant at Bereavement in Education Summit



"Bereavement education is the heart of the community."

Participant at Bereavement in Education Summit