

## Death in the Scottish curriculum: Denying or confronting?

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### ABSTRACT

The important role of schools in supporting children experiencing bereavement is established, yet less is known about how school curricula include death as part of life and this limits our understanding of the systemic structures that shape children's knowledge and experience of death. To address this gap, this paper discusses an analysis of the Scottish curriculum to explore the extent to which death features in compulsory education for children aged 3 to 15 years. The findings show that whilst death is present across the curricula, certain types of 'knowing' death are promoted, largely situated across religious teaching, which may limit children's engagement with the multiple and complex ways in which death features across individual, social, physical, and relational domains. By integrating the concepts of death systems and death ambivalence, the paper develops new knowledge on the interplay between curricula and sense making around death in children's lives that has practical utility.

### Introduction

Death is a feature of school life. It can enter through a significant event that impacts the whole school community or via individual bereavement experiences of pupils and staff (Jackson & Colwell, 2001). Bereavement experiences during childhood are common: in Scotland, by the age of 8, estimates suggest that 50.8% of children have experienced a bereavement of a close family member (Paul & Vaswani, 2020) and 73% of children in secondary school report exposure to the death of a family member, friend, or someone close to them (del Carpio et al., 2020). Death is also a characteristic of children's everyday life, featuring in history lessons, popular literature and film, the news, computer games and so on (Lee et al., 2009; Paul, 2019). It cannot, therefore, be separated from school communities but is instead part of the fabric of school (and human) life. Although there is an existing, and growing, body of research on the important role that schools can play in providing bereavement support for children (e.g., Costelloe et al., 2020; Duncan, 2020), less is known about the nature and impact of school curricula in shaping how children come to 'know' death. Indeed, it is argued

that the focus given to schools in relation to bereavement has culminated in an individualized approach to support which fails to recognize and embed these experiences in the wider social environment (Rowling, 2010). This is problematic given that death and grief are social experiences, shaped by structural, cultural, and relational factors (Kellehear, 2005). The small body of research that exists concerning the presence of death in school curricula is positioned within pedagogical theory and there is a need to expand this conceptualization further to explore how the inclusion of death in curricula systematically shapes children's relationship with mortality. This paper addresses this gap. It draws on the concepts of death systems and death ambivalence to develop a sociological framework from which to empirically and theoretically examine the presence of death in Scotland's national curriculum. In doing so, the findings show that death is predominantly indistinct across the curriculum, embraced largely via religious teaching, which may restrict and neutralize children's individual and collective engagement with mortality. This paper thus expands the scholarly field of death education by illuminating the interconnections between school curricula and the place of death in children's lives to inform

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a more holistic understanding of children's encounters with death and grief.

### Death education and schools

Since the 1920s, in English-speaking countries, research into education on, and for, death has been approached through the construct of *death education*, particularly in the field of health sciences (Sánchez-Huete et al., 2022). While the primary source of death education is the family (Fonseca & Testoni, 2011), the term is mainly used to mean the “variety of educational activities, intentionally organized by institutions in order to facilitate understanding of death and bereavement” (Testoni et al., 2020, p. 179). As such, death education is related to ideas of coordinated death preparation and death awareness activities, and is part of a public health approach to palliative care that promotes wellbeing at end of life and into bereavement (Kellehear, 2005; Kellehear, 2014). Death education is also viewed as a key tool in developing death and grief literacy, whereby individuals and their communities are equitably equipped with appropriate knowledge and information about death and grief to support themselves and others at times of illness, caregiving, death, and loss (Breen et al., 2022; Noonan et al., 2016; Paul, 2019).

Death education has different relevance across the lifespan, for example according to development and cognition, as well as in relation to individual and social experiences. For children, in the 1970s, an approach based on pedagogy and the curriculum developed (Moseley, 1976) and the construct of the “Pedagogy of Death” has since been progressed and studied, defined as the discipline that examines all formal education encompassing death (Rodríguez, Herrán & de Miguel, 2022). In recent decades, research in the area has grown considerably, as evidenced by some bibliometric studies (e.g., Martínez-Heredia & Bedmar, 2020), and has shown promising outcomes for children in relation to reducing death-related fear and anxiety, increased spirituality, and increased self-efficacy and empowerment in dealing with death and dying related issues (Raccichini et al., 2023; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018, 2023; Testoni et al., 2020).

Death education has two complementary approaches: a curricular focus, which recognizes death and grief as universal and collective experiences; and an educational counseling approach, which responds to specific experiences of death (Corr et al., 2018; Herrán et al., 2000). Death education can also be

undertaken through different paradigms that relate to: pragmatism, in preparation for death-related events (Wass, 2004); education in social justice and critical awareness, arising from the observation of how death is treated in society and in the media (Mantegazza, 2014); and as an essential foundation of an education for a more conscious life, which should embrace an awareness of death (Affifi & Christie, 2019; Herrán et al., 2019). The topics investigated are diverse. One focus of attention has been to determine the education community's perceptions of death education, including the views of teachers (e.g., Engarhos et al., 2013; Rodríguez, Herrán, Pérez-Bonet, et al., 2022), families (e.g., Herrán et al., 2022; Kennedy et al., 2021; McGovern & Barry, 2000) and students (e.g., Herrán et al., 2021; Yang & Chen, 2009). These studies identify that death is frequently a taboo subject in schools, impacted by a variety of emotional (e.g., link with personal experience) and structural (e.g., a lack of training and curricula focus) factors, yet simultaneously indicate the education community's favorable attitude toward including death as a habitual topic. The educational impact of resources such as cinema (Tenzek & Nickels, 2019), literature (e.g., Colomo & Oña, 2014) and analysis of and reflection on historical examples of barbarism and death (e.g., Zembylas, 2011) has also been studied. These investigations, among others, have outlined an expanding map of the field that, although still excessively limited, is contributing to scientific progress in unveiling the educational opportunities for, and potential of, death education.

In recent years, in Western countries, research aimed at tracing and understanding the inclusion of death in school curricula has been growing. In Spain, the presence of death in the national (Herrán et al., 2019) and regional (Rodríguez, Herrán, & de Miguel, 2022) curriculum has been studied, and a historical analysis has been conducted (Sánchez-Huete et al., 2022). The first two studies concluded that there is content related to the topic at all stages of the Spanish education system (e.g., the study of wars, genocide, and loss of biodiversity), but that there is no conscious aim or planning to include the awareness of death in an education for life. Nor is educational counseling for bereaved students envisaged within the framework of tutorial action. In Turkey, a study on the inclusion of death in the curricula of 17 elementary and secondary schools and in 18 school textbooks found that teaching related to death only took place in the subjects of religion and ethics (Sonbul & Çelik, 2023); this finding coincides with the historical

analysis of death education in Spain (Sánchez-Huete et al., 2022). Research on the inclusion of death in school curricula is, however, currently limited to these countries, Spain, and Turkey, and as mentioned previously, is predominantly positioned within pedagogic theory. Although this theoretical positioning offers an important contribution to understanding if, where and how death is included in curricula, there is an absence of research that investigates such knowledge from a sociological perspective that explores the ways in which curricula mediates children's encounters with death. This is significant given that sociological knowledge has pedagogical significance (Halasz & Kaufman, 2008): understanding *how* death is present in curricula from a sociological lens can inform and guide pedagogy. Drawing on theory related to death systems and death ambivalence addresses this omission and develops new knowledge on the extent to which school curricula shapes certain types of relationships with death.

### Death systems, death ambivalence, and death education

The concept of death systems was developed by Robert Kastenbaum in 1977 to draw attention to the multiple ways in which individual experiences of death are shaped by the wider network of relationships, that is: “the interpersonal, sociophysical, and symbolic network through which an individual's relationship to mortality is mediated by society” (Kastenbaum & Moreman, 2018, p. 102). The death system consists of five interrelated components: people, places, times, objects, and symbols/images (*ibid*). These components serve seven functions of death preparation: “to warn or predict threats to life; to prevent death; to care for the dying; the disposal of the dead; social consolidation after a death; to make sense of death; and to sanction the killing of certain people for certain reasons” (Kastenbaum & Moreman, 2018, p. 81). From this perspective, death systems help individuals and society make sense of, and manage, death. They are not fixed, but dynamic, responding to material and social conditions which evolve and change over time (Corr, 2014). Although developed in America, the concept of death systems has relevance across different countries and cultures and offers an important, but often missing, framework, to explore how understandings of, and encounters with, death are systemically shaped (Corr, 2014; Kastenbaum & Moreman, 2018; Kroik et al., 2020; Noonan, 2018). Concerning death education, death systems brings

attention to the different components which serve to suppress or strengthen particular ways of knowing death (Kastenbaum & Moreman, 2018). For children, this highlights the role of formal education in death preparation, and in doing so situates school communities as part of a child's death system, which influences how children know death. In relation to the components of the death system, school can thus be understood as a *place*, teachers and classmates as *people*, and curricula as an *object* (i.e., the curricula document which informs education about and for death) which also relates to *time* (i.e., when teaching delivered), and *symbols* (i.e., how teaching is delivered, including the content, method and language used to share information), that shape children's knowledge of, and engagement with, death.

Death systems is necessarily broad in its focus, reflecting the multiple contexts which people learn about and engage with death. As such, it is not specifically focused on children and to-date there has been limited use of death systems as a conceptual tool to explore children's encounters with death. While it is worthy of exploration with children in its own right, the concept of death ambivalence offers a constructive lens to build on the theoretical underpinnings of Kastenbaum's death systems and embed it within childhood studies. Developed from children's experience of death, dying and bereavement, death ambivalence identifies the presence and absence of death in children's lives but situates these as opposing experiences due to the interplay between individual needs, social norms and relationships (Paul, 2019). Death ambivalence thus recognizes children as death facing, an experience shaped by the presence of death in everyday life as well as their curiosity about death and grief issues, and a desire to support others at such time; and death avoiding, influenced by “death being unacknowledged (by the people they had relationships with and in their education), the desire to contain their own and others' emotions, and an awareness of their status as child” (*ibid*, p. 567). It draws attention to how a lack of systematic attention to death education in school settings conflicts with children's desire for information and education on death that results in a “structurally created contradiction” (Connidis & McMullin, 2002, p. 559) that shapes children's interactions with death and grief in school and beyond. From this perspective, children are viewed as partners in how death is experienced whereby death education has dynamic and transformative powers to shape how death is culturally and structurally experienced. For example, recent evidence identifies how the

introduction of a death education program developed children's conceptual and emotional understanding of death and loss which, in turn, supported their capacity to engage in death related conversation (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2023). Combining death ambivalence with death systems thus brings attention to both the presence and absence of death in children's lives while acknowledging how children make sense of death (a function of the death system) through formal school curricula. This provides a useful framework from which to explore how school curricula may serve to sanction certain types of knowing death and in turn consider how death is mediated in children's lives.

## Methods

A documentary analysis methodology was employed to explore the presence of death in Scotland's national curriculum. It specifically sought to identify and explore, quantitatively and qualitatively, relevant search terms which relate to the inclusion of death related teaching. It replicates a Spanish study by Herrán and colleagues (2019) within a Scottish context; however, this study diverged from the original study by adopting a commentary context analytical strategy (Miller & Alvarado, 2005). This methodological approach recognizes the agentic role of documents in shaping social activities, providing insight into individual and collective actions which shape social reality (ibid). It fits well the conceptual frameworks for this study, whereby curricula documents are viewed as objects within a death system that has transformative powers in relation to how children engage with death. The research was approved by the Department of Social Work and Social Policy Ethics Committee, University of Strathclyde (Approval number: Paul 5-7-22).

## Scottish context

The Scottish education system includes around 2500 schools, 96% of which are publicly funded (OECD, 2021). In 1999, devolution provided an opportunity for Scotland to review its educational approach, distinct from the rest of the UK and, in 2004, the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was launched, and nationally implemented in 2010 (Humes & Priestley, 2021). CfE moved away from prescribed curricula toward a model that identifies teachers as active agents in curricula design to best meet the needs of local school communities (Priestley & Humes, 2010). It provides central guidance and national standards,

via a "developmentally staged sequence of Experiences and Outcomes," which aim to develop students across four, future-orientated, capacities: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors (Farrar & Stone, 2019, p. 336). As such, CfE directs classroom content and is worthy of exploration. Moreover, the future-orientated approach to curriculum design and focus on teacher autonomy separates Scotland's educational context as distinct from previous curricula studies.

Of importance is also the broader setting that CfE sits within, which shapes the school environment. Policy relating to child welfare (Scottish Government, 2022a) and youth employment (Scottish Government, 2014) are viewed as key pillars of the Scottish Education system and the 2023 National Improvement Framework for Scottish education (Scottish Government, 2023) identified children's rights and needs, health and wellbeing, attainment, equity as main priorities. Although these policy frameworks do not mention death education specifically, they place emphasis on the rights and needs of children, which, should include education for life and death. Moreover, a recent government-funded report on childhood bereavement in Scotland recommended that bereavement should be part of the core school curricula (The National Childhood Bereavement Project, 2022), and in 2020, a parent-led petition was launched to the Scottish Parliament to include bereavement education in the curriculum (Scottish Parliament, 2020). There is thus interest in providing death and grief education in Scotland, which parallels international calls for its mandatory inclusion in school settings (e.g., Dawson et al., 2023; King-McKenzie, 2011; Sonbul & Çelik, 2023), but to what extent this is supported by national curriculum guidance is unknown.

## Participants

Twenty-seven professionals involved in education at local and national levels (including curriculum design and teaching), bereavement care for children, or research and/or policy relating to public health approaches to death and bereavement were invited to be part of an 'Expert Group' to inform the document analysis. Potential participants were known to the researchers or recruited via snowball sampling. Seventeen individuals consented to participate. Of these 12 were based in Scotland, while the remainder were from Spain ( $n=2$ ), Australia ( $n=2$ ), and Canada ( $n=1$ ). Nine participants worked in education

settings, four were involved in research related to death education, and four worked in related third-sector organizations. Fourteen individuals were female and three were male. The recruitment process was via email invitation, with consent forms returned digitally.

### Units of analysis

Members of the Expert Group took part in two phases. Phase 1 involved identifying key search terms to inform the document analysis. Participants were sent the following instructions: *Please generate a list of 10–15 words or phrases which relate to the inclusion of death in education. This can include terms which are relevant to death and grief, as well as broader terms which are relevant to raising awareness of, teaching on, and/or supporting death, dying, loss and bereavement in school communities.* This instruction was intentionally broad to capture the range of approaches used in death education, such as according to cognition, experience, and cultural norms.

Participants were asked to provide their terms within a two-week time frame. This generated sixteen separate lists of terms (two individuals collaborated on one list). These were summarized into lists with items that were mentioned with a frequency of three or greater, a frequency of two, or terms mentioned only once across all participants. Additionally, the unique search terms employed in the study by Herrán et al. (2019) were also collated in a final separate list.

Members of the Expert Group based in Scotland were then invited to take part in Phase 2, which involved a meeting to discuss and confirm the final search terms from those generated in Phase 1 and identify the documents to be analyzed. Nine participants attended (eight in person and one virtually). Individuals were given a list of the collated terms and asked to consider which should be included in the documentary analysis and consider any other terms which had not already been noted. Participants worked independently and then in pairs before feeding back to the wider group to discuss and agree on the final list of terms. No defined quantity of items was specified in advance, and a final list of 35 search terms (including some with alternative word endings) were agreed (see Table 1).

### Identifying curricula documents: objects of analysis

During the Phase 2 meeting, attendees discussed the documents that should be included in the study, given

**Table 1.** List of search terms.

Death; decease	Genocide	Trauma	Terminal	Support
Grief	Heaven	Compassion	War	Hospice
Bereavement	Illness	Feelings	Cancer	Old age
Loss	Memory	Funeral	Mental health/ wellbeing	Palliative care
Emotion	Mourning	Pain	Nurture	Pass
Coping	Change	Religious	Relationship	Tradition
Euthanasia	Life	Ritual	Suicide	Holocaust

their knowledge of and expertise in education in Scotland. There was agreement on the inclusion of the three key CfE documents: Experiences and Outcomes (commonly referred to, and used hereafter, as Es&Os) & Principles and Practice, Benchmark Statements, and Statement for Practitioners. However, there was discussion as to whether this list was sufficiently inclusive, or whether additional documents should be included which support the national curriculum. Discussions were continued after the meeting via email with group members working in education to further consider and confirm the documents for inclusion.

Following further discussions with Expert Group members as well as additional feedback sought from two Senior Education Officers from Education Scotland, the final list of documents was established. The documents included were selected on the basis that they define Scotland's curriculum for Broad General Education. Curriculum in this sense refers to Scotland's national educational framework for everything which should be planned and designed for children and young people, aged 3 – 15 years, including children in early learning, primary, and lower-secondary levels. The Senior Phase of CfE, which includes three years of upper secondary, was not included as students choosing to stay in education select their own learning pathways. Practitioner resources which support CfE, available via Education Scotland (the executive agency responsible for supporting quality and improvement in Scottish education), were also not included given they are not core curricula documents and rely on individual schools and/or staff searching and selecting them for use. The final list of documents is described in Table 2.

### Procedure

Following Phases 1 and 2, the 35 selected terms were searched throughout the documents using NVIVO 12 software. The Text Search tool was used to search for root words with the use of truncation symbols, and varied word classes were searched (for example, searches of the term *death* also found results for die,

**Table 2.** List of curriculum documents included and summary of contents.

Document	Purpose
CfE: Experiences and Outcomes (Es&Os) & Principles and Practice (Education Scotland, 2023)	1 document covering 16 sections, including a section emphasising the responsibilities of all practitioners. The eight curriculum areas highlighted include: expressive arts, health and wellbeing, languages, mathematics, religious and moral education, sciences, social studies, and technologies. Es&Os consist of a series of first-person statements that identify what children should experience and achieve as they progress through each curriculum area, to help plan learning and assess progress. Progression is indicated through curriculum levels: Early level refers to preschool years and Primary 1 (ages 3 to 5); First level is to the end of primary four (ages 6 to 9), Second level is to the end of Primary 7 (ages 10 to 11); and Third and Fourth level refer to Secondary 1 to 3 (ages 12 to 15). The progression levels are viewed as a general guide and children should progress at their own pace. Principles and Practice sections complement the Es&Os, describing the purposes of learning, how the Es&Os are organized, effective learning and teaching, assessment, and connections with other curriculum areas.
CfE: Benchmark Statements (Education Scotland, 2017a–p)	16 documents; set of statements which detail the standards expected across each curriculum area to achieve each level of education.
CfE: Statement for Practitioners (Education Scotland, 2016)	1 document; provides advice for teachers and practitioners to help plan learning, teaching and assessment, and guidance on what to avoid.
CfE: Refreshed Narrative (Education Scotland, 2019a)	1 document; updated guidance relating to the CfE for teachers and practitioners, with a focus on the core principles of CfE and developing practices fit for purpose.
CfE: Building the Curriculum Series (Scottish Executive, 2006, 2007, 2008; Scottish Government, 2009, 2010a–d, 2011)	9 documents; provide advice, guidance and policy relating to different aspects of the CfE, including: curriculum areas, active learning approaches, frameworks for planning learning and teaching, developing, and applying children and young people's skills for learning, life and work, and frameworks for assessment.
Milestones to Support Learners with Complex Additional Support Needs (Education Scotland, 2019b)	1 document; set of milestones with guidance to support practitioners to identify and track progression of learning for learners with complex additional support needs.
Realizing the Ambition: Being Me (Education Scotland, 2020)	1 document; guides and supports primary school teachers and educators working in early learning and childcare (and early years of primary school).

died, dies, dying, dead, etc.). The presence of terms was considered relevant if they met the following criteria: *term is associated with death and grief, as well as normalizing or raising awareness of, teaching on, and/or supporting death, dying, loss and bereavement in school communities.* To avoid instances of ambiguity where terms were present, but death, grief, or bereavement was not the specific focus of the passage, it was decided that mentions of terms must direct schools to provide education or awareness around death, grief, loss, trauma, and/or lifecycles, lifespans, or life events to be considered relevant. For example, the following passages were considered too ambiguous:

I [pupil] understand that people can feel alone and can be misunderstood and left out by others. I [pupil] am learning how to give appropriate support (CfE, p. 13 and p. 80);

Members of staff are often best placed to identify even minor changes of mood in a child or young person which could reflect an important emotional, social, or mental health issue with which that child or young person needs help or support. (CfE, p. 9)

A quantitative analysis assessing the frequency with which each term was present in the curriculum was then carried out. This was followed by a qualitative analysis of the contents and interpretation of each term in the context of how it relates to death or grief awareness. A final analytical step was then applied using death systems and death ambivalence as a

framework to deepen our understanding of death in the curricula and present the findings. Similar to Kroik and colleagues' (2020) use of death systems in their research with Indigenous Sámi people, these theories did not direct the analysis, instead they were applied later in the data analysis to provide a cohesive framework to understand the data. This involved recoding and reorganizing the data under the key components of death ambivalence (*death facing: presence of death*, and *death avoiding: absence of death*), and the relevant death systems categories, whereby *symbols* was used to explore where death features in the curricula by subject, and *time*, by educational level.

## Results

### Quantitative analysis

Twelve of the 35 terms were found to be present across the 30 documents which met criteria for inclusion. The total frequencies of all terms are presented in Table 3, and the frequencies by document and education level are presented in Table 4. It should be noted that the Benchmarks documents often restate Es&Os from the main Es&Os document alongside the corresponding benchmarks; therefore, these have been counted as separate, additional mentions within the Benchmarks document, given that they appear

multiple times to teachers and practitioners referring to the document.

### Qualitative analysis

#### *Death facing: Presence of death in the curricula*

The term *death* (or *dead*) primarily featured in the curriculum as part of religious education, and notably in Benchmarks and Es&Os for Religious Education in Roman Catholic Schools (RERC) across all levels. This included teaching about the “Easter story” and that “God raised Jesus from the dead to be with us” in Early level (p. 243), the “Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus and... the Catholic meaning of eternal life” (p. 243) in First to Fourth levels, and beliefs about life after death (Fourth level). Out with Roman Catholic curricula, the term *death* featured in a Religious and Moral Education (RME) Benchmark for Second Level, in relation to “belief in life after death” (p. 9), and at Third Level in an appendix within the Es&Os for this subject which defined ‘ultimate questions’ as existential issues that include, “What happens after death?” (p. 228). The term *death* only appeared out with religious subjects once, and this was under the Sciences (SCN) benchmarks for Second level, concerning the process of decomposition; that is, of dead material or decay.

The term with the highest frequency of mentions relating to death and grief awareness was *life* (or *live*, *living*) and, as with the term *death*, this was predominately in the context of RERC, across all levels. This related to the *life*, death, and resurrection of Jesus, including the “Easter story” and Jesus rising from the dead, understanding of Jesus’ life on earth, the meaning of eternal life or beliefs about life after death, and the significance of the Sacraments, which included the importance of the Eucharist for Christian life. Likewise, *life* (or *live*, *living*) also appeared in RME Benchmarks but for First to Fourth levels, relating to how different religions mark major life events (p. 26); in this case, it was assumed that death and funerals could be considered to fall within this context, and thus were coded as relevant. In addition, these Benchmarks covered beliefs in life after death, as discussed above.

The SCN Benchmarks (for all levels apart from Third level) also included references to *life*, such as in relation to the lifecycles of plants and animals (or organisms) and learners being able to recognize stages of growth and development, which were coded as relevant given death being part of the lifecycle. However, death was not explicitly mentioned in these

cases, and as such may not necessarily be interpreted or taught as part of this subject. In addition, SCN Benchmarks covered being able to “[sort] objects as living, non-living or once living” at Early level (p. 6), and similarly “[explain] the difference between living and non-living things” at First level (p. 10). The survival or extinction of a species was discussed at Second level (p. 15). One additional mention of *life-cycles* was found in Building the Curriculum 4: Skills for Learning, Skills for Life and Skills for Work, which presented a case study of a school which developed children’s knowledge and understanding of the life-cycles of “mini-beasts” (p. 3). This document was intended for all levels, however specific links were made to Es&Os for Early level in HWB, SCN and Literacy (LIT) subjects. Other mentions of the term *life* were seen in the Es&Os and Principles and Practice sections which reflected the above mentions, coming under religious subjects and SCN.

The term *bereavement* featured once across the documents as part of Realizing the Ambition: Being Me aimed at Early level, where the impact of adversity and trauma on mental and physical health and well-being were discussed. *Bereavement* and *loss* were among the “broader issues” that “can have a detrimental effect on children’s capacity to learn and develop” (p. 39). In addition to the mention of *loss* here, *loss* was mentioned a further two times consisting of a repeated statement within the Es&Os for HWB which applied to pupils across all levels: “I am learning skills and strategies which will support me in challenging times, particularly in relation to change and loss” (p. 13 and p. 80).

The development of *coping* strategies featured in the curriculum as part of learning to deal with stressful and challenging situations or coping with adversity or change more generally; yet, only one statement, repeated twice, specifically related to being able to cope with “uncertainty and recover more successfully from traumatic events or episodes” (p. 18 and p. 98), under Es&Os for HWB across all levels. Likewise, the term *change* was also mentioned several times, but rarely related to death. For example, it was discussed in terms of changing needs through life, bodily changes as one grows, or topics such as societal, technological, or environmental changes. However, only two instances of *change* were determined to be related to death and grief, which were repeated mentions of the phrase, “I am learning skills and strategies which will support me in challenging times, particularly in relation to change and loss” (p. 13 and p. 80,

**Table 3.** Frequencies of the presence of terms across the 30 documents.

Original Term	Searched Items	Total Search Results	Relevant Presences	% Relevant Presences
Death; decease	dea*, die*, dying, decease*	18	16	88.89
Grief	grie*	0	0	0
Bereavement	bereave*	1	1	100
Loss	loss, lost	20	3	15
Emotion	emotion*	164	0	0
Coping	cop*	24	2	8.33
Change	chang*	318	2	0.63
Life	life*, *liv*	1154	45	3.90
Trauma	trauma*	10	5	50
Compassion	compassion*	26	0	0
Feelings	feeling*	203	0	0
Funeral	funera*	0	0	0
Mental health/Mental wellbeing	mental*	96	1	1.04
Nurture	nurtur*	46	0	0
Relationship	relation*	319	0	0
Suicide	suicid*	0	0	0
Support	support*	1511	2	0.13
Euthanasia	euthanasia	1	1	100
Genocide	genocide*	0	0	0
Heaven	heaven*	0	0	0
Illness	illness*, ill	0	0	0
Memory	memor*	8	0	0
Mourning	mourn*	0	0	0
Pain	pain*	0	0	0
Religious	religio*	470	15	3.19
Ritual	ritual*	12	0	0
Terminal	terminal*	0	0	0
War	war*	1	0	0
Cancer	cancer*	3	0	0
Hospice	hospice*	0	0	0
Old age	"old age," old*, age*	0	0	0
Palliative [care]	palliative*	0	0	0
Pass [away]	pass*	16	0	0
Tradition	tradition*	118	3	2.54
Holocaust	Holocaust	0	0	0

Note: Due to some passages mentioning a term more than once (e.g., within the same sentence), the total search results have been adapted to reflect this double counting. The 'Searched Items' column shows the root word, with the truncation symbol (\*), used to search for all word variations, e.g. grie\* = grief, grieving, grieved, griever, griefs, grieffully.

Es&Os, HWB), noted under the discussion of *loss* above.

Dealing with *traumatic* events or episodes, which was assumed to include death (although it is acknowledged that this may not always be the case) and the term *trauma* appeared in two documents: *Realizing the Ambition: Being Me*, and the Es&Os for HWB. Aimed at Early level education, *Realizing the Ambition: Being Me* contained a section on dealing with adversity and trauma (also noted above under *bereavement*). This section described more generally how any child or family may experience adverse or traumatic experiences and stressed the need to "prevent difficulties and build resilience for everyone" (p. 39). Likewise, the Es&Os for HWB contained two (repeated) explanations, aimed at all levels, in appendices stating that "a resilient child can resist adversity, cope with uncertainty and recover more successfully from traumatic events or episodes" (p. 18 and p. 98).

*Mental health* or *mental wellbeing* were mentioned frequently throughout the documents, however, only one instance was considered relevant to this analysis.

This arose in *Realizing the Ambition: Being Me* for Early level in the discussion of adversity and trauma impacting mental and physical health and wellbeing, as discussed above. Likewise, the term *support* had the highest frequency of total search results, yet only two (repeated) mentions of support were deemed as relevant to death or grief, and these have also been highlighted under mentions of *change* and *loss* discussed above in relation to the statement, "I am learning skills and strategies which will support me in challenging times, particularly in relation to change and loss" (p. 13 and p. 80, Es&Os, HWB).

The term *euthanasia* appeared once in Es&Os for RME which discussed moral issues within the context of Christianity and other world religions, for Third level only. As part of a footnote, moral issues are defined as "any view/belief about morality around which there is debate and discussion – for example, euthanasia, abortion etc" (p. 15).

Benchmarks and Es&Os documents for RME, and for RERC, contained several mentions of the search term *religious* (or *religion*) relevant to death across all



**Table 4.** Quantitative analysis of terms and their relationship with death awareness by document and by education level.

Term	Document	Number of Relevant Presences	Education Level					All
			Early (age 3 to P1)	First (P2 to P4)	Second (P5 to P7)	Third (S1 to S3)	Fourth (S1 to S3)	
Death; decease	Es&Os: RERC	5			2	1	1	1
	Es&Os: RME	1				1		
	Benchmarks: RME	1			1			
	Benchmarks: RERC	8	1	2	2	1	2	
Bereavement	Benchmarks: Sciences	1			1			
	Realizing the Ambition: Being Me	1	1					
Loss	Realizing the Ambition: Being Me	1	1					
	Es&Os: HWB Across Learning, Responsibilities of All	1						1
	Es&Os: HWB	1						1
Coping	Es&Os: HWB Across Learning, Responsibilities of All	1						1
	Es&Os: HWB	1						1
Change	Es&Os: HWB Across Learning, Responsibilities of All	1						1
	Es&Os: HWB	1						1
	Building the Curriculum 4: Skills for Learning, Skills for Life and Skills for Work	1	1 <sup>b</sup>					
Life	Es&Os: RME	4			4			
	Principles and Practice: RERC	1						1
	Es&Os: RERC	7		2 <sup>a</sup>	3 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>a</sup>	3 <sup>a</sup>	1
	Es&Os: Sciences	2		1	1			
	Benchmarks: RME	7		1	4	1	1	
	Benchmarks: RERC	13		3	5	2	3	
	Benchmarks: Sciences	10	2	2	5		1	
	Realizing the Ambition: Being Me	3	3					
	Es&Os: HWB Across Learning, Responsibilities of All	1						1
	Es&Os: HWB	1						1
Mental health; mental wellbeing	Realizing the Ambition: Being Me	1	1					
	Es&Os: HWB Across Learning, Responsibilities of All	1						1
Support	Es&Os: HWB	1						1
	Benchmarks: RME	1				1		
Euthanasia Religious	Es&Os: RME	4			1	2		1
	Es&Os: RERC	1		1 <sup>a</sup>	1 <sup>a</sup>			
	Benchmarks: RME	8	2		2	3	1	
	Benchmarks: RERC	2		1	1			
Tradition	Benchmarks: RME	3			1	1	1	

Note: Es&Os: Experiences and Outcomes. RERC: Religious Education in Roman Catholic Schools. RME: Religious and Moral Education. HWB: Health and Wellbeing.

<sup>a</sup>Term mentioned as part of more than one education level simultaneously, so counts do not add up to total number of mentions.

<sup>b</sup>Term not explicitly applying to any particular level, however reference relates to Es&Os at Early level.

education levels. These overlap with quotations provided above, in relation to the terms *life* and *death*; specifically, “understanding of Jesus’ life on earth” (Es&Os, RERC, p. 242) is included at First and Second level under RERC (both in Benchmarks and Es&Os). RME Benchmarks covered: belief in a soul at Early level, ways of marking major life events in different religions at First, Second and Fourth levels, and moral issues including euthanasia and abortion at Third level. The Es&Os for RME similarly covered questions about the nature and meaning of life, beliefs about deity and the human condition, and explaining beliefs about “ultimate questions” (which are

explained to include “What happens after death?”, p. 228, at Third level), and ways of marking major life events. Overlapping with instances of *religion* and *life*, *tradition* was mentioned in one phrase repeated three times within RME Benchmarks, aimed at Second to Fourth levels: “a tradition, a practice, a ceremony, a custom, a way of marking a major life event in Christianity” (p. 11).

#### **Death avoiding: Absence of death in the curricula**

Of the 35 search terms, 23 resulted in no relevant appearances throughout the various documents. The Statement for Practitioners, Refreshed Narrative, and

Milestones to Support Learners with Complex Additional Support Needs contained zero appearances of any of the selected search terms. Of particular interest is the lack of reference to *grief*, despite *bereavement* and *loss* appearing briefly within the Es&Os for HWB and Realizing the Ambition: Being Me. The terms *loss* and *change* appeared in relation to developing the skills to support oneself as discussed above, however, this was not linked specifically to loss through death or in relation to supporting others at such times.

Despite the inclusion of death in religious contexts, the term *heaven* and *funeral* did not appear. Attention was given to supporting children to “understand and appreciate significant aspects of other Christian traditions and major world religions” (Principles & Practice, p. 231, Es&Os, p. 238; RERC); however, there was no direct focus given to death traditions. Nevertheless, beliefs in eternal life after death were mentioned within religious subjects.

Teaching on *lifecycles* was included in SCN, as discussed above, however where *life* was mentioned in other documents, the focus was largely concerned with new life and living, such as in relation to describing “how human life begins and how a baby is born.” (Es&Os, HWB, p. 97), and equal attention was not given to the end of life. Similarly, the term *illness* and *old age* were also absent across all documents.

The term *suicide* was also missing from the documents. Several documents mentioned the importance of mental and emotional health and wellbeing, dealing with challenges and building resilience and coping skills, managing risks and risk-taking behavior, and reducing the potential for harm, but no links were made between these experiences and suicide risk, or dealing with suicide loss. Likewise, the documents identified the impact of adversity or challenging home lives on children’s education, the role of schools in supporting children through these experiences, and children being aware of the “number of ways in which I can gain access to practical and emotional support to help me and others in a range of circumstances” (Es&Os, HWB, p. 13 and p. 80); however, other than the document Realizing the Ambition, this was predominantly nonspecific and did not directly relate to death and bereavement. Additionally, the terms *war*, *genocide*, and *Holocaust* were not present within any subjects or documents, although one mention of learning about “conscientious objectors during wartime” is noted at Second level in relation to understanding how people’s beliefs and attitudes impact behaviors (RME, Es&Os, p. 226).

### **Symbols: Presences and absences by subject areas**

As can be seen from Table 4, and in the discussion above, only four subjects from the main CfE documents (Benchmarks, and Es&Os and Principles and Practice) contained relevant mentions of search terms, and most often these were religious in focus. Specific subjects included: RERC, RME, HWB and SCN. None of the terms appeared in any language subjects (Classical Languages, Gaelic, Literacy and English, Literacy and Gàidhlig, and Modern Languages), expressive arts, numeracy and mathematics, social studies, and technologies subjects.

Presences in religious subjects primarily included references to the term *religion* or teachings on Jesus’ life, religious deaths, and celebrations of life. HWB considered strategies to cope with hardship and deal with change, including *loss*, although the terms *death* or *bereavement* themselves were not covered in this subject. SCN contained discussions of death and life, which were used to teach about biodiversity and interdependence of species, understanding concepts of survival or extinction, as well as decomposition and lifecycles of species. This teaching was supported by the document Building the Curriculum 4: Skills for Learning, Skills for Life and Skills for Work: as discussed previously, here the term *life cycles* was used within a case example of a primary school carrying out an outdoor learning activity to develop knowledge and understanding of insects and their life cycles. This was the only document of the nine Building the Curriculum series documents that included a relevant search term.

In addition to the above subjects, Realizing the Ambition: Being Me aimed at Early years contained mentions of bereavement, loss, trauma, and mental health or wellbeing in a single passage (Section 3.5) which discusses issues of adversity and trauma having a lifelong impact on individuals. This section covered several adverse events including abuse and neglect, unstable living conditions, exposure to drug and alcohol use, mental health problems, poverty, as well as “broader issues such as bereavement/loss, bullying, homelessness or violence” (p. 39). This section stressed the need to keep children safe from harm and staff being aware of policy and procedures if intervention is required, to prevent difficulties and build resilience among children.

### **Time: Presences and absences by education levels**

All education levels (age 3 – 15) included some relevant presences of the search terms, although a few noteworthy observations can be made. The terms

*bereavement* and *mental health*, in relation to death, only featured at Early level within the same section of a single document. *Euthanasia* is only covered at Third level in a brief footnote providing examples of moral issues which receive debate and discussion. The term *tradition* (deemed relevant when relating to ways of marking major life events) is only covered at Second to Fourth levels, although synonyms (e.g., ceremony, celebration) are used to cover similar teaching points at First level.

Overall, the presences of search terms were somewhat more apparent in higher levels, particularly with religious teaching concerning Second to Fourth levels (although the curriculum content was similar across First to Fourth levels). Additionally, there were a greater number of references relating to *death* and *life/life cycles* (mostly in religious subjects) at Second level compared to other levels, although such terms were apparent across all education levels.

Finally, with regards to presences within SCN, there were no references to any search terms at Third level. Early and First level teaching considered differences between living and non-living things, while Second level teaching included survival and extinction of species and decomposition, along with plant and animal lifecycles, and Fourth level also considered lifecycles of organisms.

## Discussion

The findings suggest that, overall, death is present in Scottish curricula documents, across all levels, although to a limited extent and predominately in the context of religious education. That death also featured in SCN and HWB subjects, albeit to a lesser extent than in RME and RERC, supports calls for an interdisciplinary approach to death education (Sonbul & Çelik, 2023). From this perspective, the Scottish curricula can be seen to offer multiple avenues from which children can engage with death, supported by a flexible curriculum and policy context that encourages schools to respond to the individual needs of their pupils and wider school community. Yet, by adopting death systems and death ambivalence as a framework to consider the place of death in the curricula we can begin to critically observe the cultural and structural implications of what is and is not included in the curricula and, therefore, the extent to which it promotes a holistic understanding of death and grief as part of life.

In recognizing school subjects as symbols within a child's death systems, the findings suggest that children primarily come to 'know' death through religious

education. The role of religious studies in death education mirrors similar studies (Sánchez-Huete et al., 2022; Sonbul & Çelik, 2023), suggesting that this subject provides discrete opportunities for increasing children's awareness of death. However, the historical, social, and cultural landscape necessarily shapes religious education across countries (von Brömssen et al., 2020) which may shape how death is included. For example, in Scotland's curriculum, there is an emphasis on Christianity from a 'cultural heritage perspective' (ibid, p. 141) and this focus was reflected in relation to how death was included in the documents. Yet, Scotland is increasingly secular (Hinchliffe et al., 2015) and research suggests that death education can support people to find meaning in existential questions about life and death that were previously found in religious beliefs (Doka, 2015; Testoni et al., 2020). Although the RERC and the RME curriculum gave focus to developing knowledge of world religions and views independent of religious belief, which may include attitudes and values relating to death, explicit direction to include an awareness of death was predominantly located within religious frameworks. As such, while religious subjects might provide a discrete opportunity for children to learn about death, the extent to which such opportunities accurately mirror how death is understood, experienced, and managed in contemporary Scottish society is unclear. Moreover, that death features predominately in Roman Catholic school curricula, which only account for 14.6% of Scottish schools (Scottish Government, 2022b), identifies potential inequity in access to education on and for death.

An interdisciplinary approach to death education is asserted as enabling a broader knowledge and understanding of "the biological, sociological, psychological and spiritual effects on humans" (Sonbul & Çelik, 2023, p. 12). Yet, although death and bereavement appeared across three subject areas (RME/RERC, HWB and SCN), the extent to which this offers opportunities for a holistic awareness of death and grief is dubious. For example, the Spanish paper found a role for death education in history lessons, in relation to war, genocide and the Holocaust (Herrán et al., 2019) but this was not explicit in this study. Likewise, arts-based subjects have also been identified as an opportunity to approach awareness about and education on death and dying (Tsiris et al., 2011), but, in these subjects, death, and the related search terms, were missing. This absence of death arguably promotes what Kastenbaum refers to as "denial by acceptance" whereby death is present in "culturally convenient forms" (1977, p. 86). Death is thus

neutralized and narrowed to that which is a 'safer' experience (ibid), which, in this case, is predominately via religious frameworks. Similarly, it is notable that suicide was absent from the curriculum despite evidence that suicide is a leading cause of death among young people globally (World Health Organization, 2021) and in Scotland (Public Health Scotland, 2022). Illness and aging were also missing. How people die, including the universality of death was therefore not explicit. From this perspective, the curricula can be seen to promote particular ways of 'knowing' death but denying others, "that which is so difficult to face in the first place: death as absence, death as annihilation, death as the "un," "non" or "anti" of virtually everything else in our individual and collective experience" (Kastenbaum, 1977, p. 91).

Death ambivalence draws attention to the inconsistency in relation to the presence and absence of death and in doing so suggests that the inclusion of death in the curriculum is predominately indistinct. In this study, opportunities for teaching around life-cycles, trauma, religious ceremonies, loss, and change were assumed to be relevant to death awareness or education activities, yet their link was not always explicit within the language used. For example, it was assumed that learning about the sacraments in RERC included education on the eucharist despite this not being specified. Likewise, learning about change and loss was deemed applicable to death and grief awareness despite curricula documents not explicitly associating these terms with the experiences of loss and change via illness or death. This is significant given that research suggests teachers modify the curriculum to align with their own moral and educational beliefs (Wallace & Priestley, 2017). Given that death has been viewed as "a social and educational taboo" that is frequently "banned and avoided" (Galende, 2015, p. 91) the inexplicit nature of death in the curriculum is thus problematic: any ambiguity in relation to the inclusion of death related teaching provides scope for alternative forms of interpretation which may mean such topics are absent or ignored. As such, while the wider policy context encourages a flexible and tailored response from school communities when learners are curious about, or experience, death and bereavement, the extent to which the formal curriculum actively promotes awareness of and knowledge acquisition about death and bereavement is limited. This discussion, however, identifies a key limitation of the study, in that the curriculum only provides the structured context for teaching and, therefore, does not determine the meaning or method assigned by school staff

(Miller & Dingwall, 1997), or indeed, by children. For example, in Scotland, research suggests some teachers do talk about death and bereavement with children (Duncan, 2020) and children have noted the appearance of death in history and literacy lessons, despite this not always being acknowledged by school staff (Paul, 2019). Conversely, research also suggests, staff predominately feel ill-equipped, unprepared, and uncomfortable conversing with children about death, which limits their engagement (see for example, Galende, 2015; Kennedy et al., 2021; Papadatou et al., 2002). A lack of specific curriculum direction in relation to providing education around death and grief education may, therefore, compound averseness to death related teaching while also inadvertently promote inequity in access to such education. This identifies the structuring effects of curricula, which shape the cultural context in which death and grief are taught and experienced in schools and beyond.

The discussion above suggests that death and grief education is not present across the curriculum in a planned, holistic, and systematic way. For example, although explicit focus was given to educating children on new life this was not mirrored in relation to aging and dying: death and bereavement were therefore not included as a normal part of life's trajectory. Likewise, learning skills to cope with change and loss, and the impact of bereavement on learning, featured in the documents, yet this was narrow in focus, relating to individuals rather than acknowledging the relational experience of bereavement and the skills required to support each other at such times. The presence of death-related search terms was also limited to a small number of curricula documents and, in the counts reported, there was a lot of overlap in the appearance of terms. For instance, the terms *loss*, *change*, and *support* were highlighted within a single statement appearing in the Es&Os document for HWB but were counted separately under each term. Similarly, mentions of the terms *life* and *religion* tended to overlap and have been counted under both terms. Consequently, the number of separate mentions of the terms is lower than those reported above. There was also a lot of repetition among the documents, with whole sentences or phrases repeated across different documents or sections concerning the same subject. This was particularly the case between Benchmarks and Es&Os but also within the Es&Os across different education levels. This repetition could be asserted as reinforcing these terms as key elements of curricula, yet for the purpose of this study the frequency of terms should be noted with caution.

The lack of systematic attention to death education mirrors existing studies, which suggest the inclusion of death in the curricula should be planned and purposeful (Fonseca & Testoni, 2011; Rodríguez, Herrán, & de Miguel Yubero, 2022; Sonbul & Çelik, 2023). Doing so would ensure that death is understood within and across the natural scope of human experience which may serve to “replace a deeper fear of death with a greater love of life” (Sonbul & Çelik, 2023, p. 12). The conceptual framing of this study, however, expands on this research by recognizing the structuring effects of curricula which may shape how schools approach death and, therefore, children’s associated knowledge and engagement. Death systems and death ambivalence are, however, dynamic: death systems evolve according to changing material and social conditions of each setting and society (Corr, 2014) and death ambivalence recognizes that “limited opportunities within the school environment to support and foster openness about death” constrain children’s curiosity and willingness to connect and support others at time of loss, the curricula thus has transformative powers (Paul, 2019, p. 568). As such, this conceptual foundation suggests that rethinking how death features in the curricula may, therefore, renegotiate how death is understood and experienced in children’s lives, school communities and beyond. This would involve a more holistic and deliberate approach to the inclusion of death and grief in school curricula that situates aging, illness, death, and grief as part of life, from a biological, psychological, sociological, cultural, and spiritual perspective. Such an approach would recognize the rights and agency of children to explore and navigate their relationship to death, individually and relationally. Within the current Scottish educational framework, this requires recognizing, promoting, and supporting the integral role of teachers as agents of change (Priestley & Humes, 2010) and therefore curriculum developers and implementers in relation to death and grief education. This includes highlighting the relevance of death education for children and identifying opportunities for the inclusion of death related topics within CfE, alongside developing teacher capacity and confidence to use such opportunities. Teacher agency is, however, shaped by the wider environment, such as access to resources and expertise, leadership, and policy direction (Sinnema et al., 2020). Greater specificity within the curriculum on the inclusion of death may, therefore, further support teachers in including death related topics, and also promote equity. Such an approach would not require a radical reform of the curriculum but instead

including and integrating key terms, such as those missing from this analysis, across the existing curriculum to provide a further springboard from which teachers, and school communities more broadly, might engage with death and grief education.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the extent to which death and grief feature in Scotland’s national curricula. Building on the concepts of death systems and death ambivalence it developed new knowledge on the place of death in children’s lives by recognizing schools as part of the death system which structurally shape children’s encounters with death. The findings suggest that, although death features in curricula documents, it does so in a way that promotes certain types of ‘knowing’ death which may serve to neutralize or narrow the experience of death, sanctioning certain types of ‘knowing’ death and denying others. In doing so, the role of school curricula in mediating children’s engagement with death, and the associated effects, are brought to the fore that has important practical implications in relation to educating and supporting children in their individual and collective encounters with death and grief.

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