

**WHAT DO ROMAN CATHOLIC CHILDREN TODAY  
UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE CONCEPTS OF DEATH AND THE  
AFTERLIFE?**

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# Summary

## Background

The researcher's motivation was the question 'What's next?', frequently heard when providing pastoral bereavement counselling. People want to know that there is 'something' after this life for the one they have lost. Many experience spiritual struggle, challenged by their understanding of the afterlife and failing to gain comfort from religious or spiritual beliefs to help them cope.

The research examined causes rather than effects of spiritual struggle to understand why this condition exists. Investigating what children in primary school are taught and understand about death and the afterlife, 'that part of theology concerned with judgement, and the final destiny of the soul and mankind', it asked whether it adequately prepares people to cope with loss.

Two concepts were explored: a) A 'Golden Thread' linking the adequate teaching of death and the afterlife to the ability to call on beliefs to cope; b) 'Afterlife Belief Conflict', an inability to reconcile taught beliefs with the actual experience of loss.

## Aims

Four separate studies were undertaken on the teaching of death and the afterlife:

Study 1 examined its effectiveness through the outcome of what is taught. Bereaved young people provided recollections of being taught, their understanding of death and the afterlife, and its contribution to their coping.

Studies 2-4 considered the flow between the stages of its delivery to explain the findings in Study 1.

## Findings

A hypothesis that the teaching of understandings about death and the afterlife is inadequate in preparing people for loss is supported. The research finds that with no specific focus on the subject in Religious Education, its inadequate teaching is ultimately a cause of Afterlife belief Conflict – cause and effect. With this finding, the research makes an original contribution to the knowledge of the teaching of understandings about death and the afterlife, adding to existing theory on the development of policy and practice of death and afterlife education to meet the needs of children, and faith- and school communities.

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# CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

This thesis explores what Roman Catholic children understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife from being taught religious education in primary school. The premise of the thesis is that adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife enables people to call on learned faith in the afterlife to cope with loss. As Walsh (2019, p.25) said

The Christian faith presupposes certain truths of reason and of history. Without these it cannot make sense. First of all, the Christian faith presupposes that there is a God: it is no use telling people that Jesus is the Son of God if they do not believe in God in the first place.

The thesis engages critically with wider contemporary issues that impact on the teaching of children's understandings of death and the afterlife such as pluralism and atheism, highlighting the complex relationship between church and state, and school and society.

A 'Golden Thread' and Afterlife Belief Conflict ('ABC') are two novel concepts explored in this thesis. The Golden Thread describes the ideal of a successful link between the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife and the ability to call on faith to cope with loss. If the Golden Thread is not achieved because of inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife it can result in ABC, an inability to be able to reconcile afterlife beliefs with the actual experience of loss. In this thesis the reasons for non-achievement of the Golden Thread are termed 'Challenges'. No attempt is made to substantiate the effects of a lack of faith to call on to cope with loss, which are well-rehearsed in the Literature Review. Rather, the thesis posits that inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is a cause of ABC.

This leads to the third concept to be explored, 'Prevention not Cure'. Nothing happens without a reason, namely inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. The thesis examines this reason – cause – and frames inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife as an area worthy of attention, so that it can be prevented or limited to mitigate the effects of ABC.

In summary, adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife will enable the bereaved to call on faith to cope with loss – the Golden Thread. Inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife can lead to an inability to call on faith to cope with loss – Afterlife Belief Conflict, which can be avoided or mitigated by adequate teaching and understanding – Prevention not Cure.

Beyond exposition of inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife as a cause of ABC the research has a specific aim of informing pastoral bereavement counselling

of its existence, such that it improves understanding, education, and practice. It also seeks to change the focus of pastoral bereavement counselling from the effects of ABC to its causes.

Teaching children to understand death and the afterlife is a challenge. 'Unlike "hard" science, what happens when we die [death and the 'Last Things' - judgement, heaven, purgatory, hell, referred to in this thesis as 'the afterlife'] cannot be measured, tested, verified, to defend what is said' (Phan, 2014, p.2). That is not its intention:

The purpose [of the Last Things] is to arouse and nurture human hope about the future so that driven and energised by that hope, we can work toward a better life for all humanity.

Phan (p.3) said that "most misunderstandings of the afterlife arise from mistaking the imaginative language and understanding of death and the afterlife for a factual description of what happens after death". Walsh (2019, p.35) agreed:

Some people regard the Bible's truth, from Genesis to Revelations, as something that should be read like a newspaper report: literally true, word for word.

In the context of children's education, Watson (1992, p.166) explained

The most important priority for the teacher is to address the problem of naïve literalism which plagues the development of religious understanding. This needs to come first.

## **1.2 Why does this research matter?**

The first twelve years of the author's bereavement counselling practice was in a secular setting where death and its effects were the natural motivation for people to seek counselling. The instinctive interest in ontological issues and the 'big questions of life' were 'in the room', but the willingness of clients to discuss concerns and understanding of death and the possibility of life after death for themselves was rarely in evidence. The question 'What's next?' was frequently heard, but only in relation to the deceased. As Jupp and Rogers (1997, p.122) said,

[Death] is the fundamental experience of human insecurity, and from it there springs that sense of existential dread which forms so potent an ingredient of our human psyche: the fear that, at the last, we shall be left totally alone with "darkness, [our] one companion left" (Psalm 88:18).

Most clients asking the question sought consolation rather than understanding. Many seemed uncomfortable with the realisation that they might have had a lifetime of disbelief, scepticism or denial, yet when someone close to them died, they wanted answers.

The paradox of our age is that while not wishing to tangle with death, many are significantly curious about it. A society that fails to reflect on “the Last Things” earns and deserves the label *superficial*.

(Thurston Dyer, Hagedorn, 2013)

The contradiction between avowed and actual concerns about death was illustrated by the words of Irvin Yalom, emeritus professor of psychiatry at Stanford University, and a universally acknowledged expert on counselling and existential psychotherapy. Cited in Way (2010, p.18) Yalom said he rejected “religious consolation”, saying “my work is rooted in a secular, existential world-view that rejects supernatural beliefs”. Later, in an interview (BACP, 2021a, p.28) following the death of his wife of 65 years, Yalom said:

There are times when I think, when I die, I’ll be joining [her], and that thought always gives me comfort. And that is so bizarre, because I am a committed atheist: I always have been. So, the thought that I’ll be joining [her] is totally absurd. But still, the idea of it gives me some comfort and I am sure that it is a big part of the comfort that religion has offered people all through the centuries – those religions that offer some kind of continuity.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that of Freud, whose work has presented a challenge to religion and spirituality for many years. Fr. Peter Marsden, a psychotherapist and Catholic priest, in BACP (2021b, p.16) citing Berke (2015), pointed out that

Freud’s life and struggle to leave behind his Hassidic background managed to establish an apparently new secular religion. But he organised his own death so that he died on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, the day when the soul has the best chance of being accepted and returned to the fold of the righteous for eternity. Food for thought.

The author’s move to an exclusively Catholic faith-based practice marked a change from secular to pastoral bereavement counselling. ‘What’s next?’, so often heard in secular counselling, was more personal and of greater significance, and often fundamental to the bereavement-related effects being experienced. Clients struggled with the idea of ‘a black hole’ or ‘nothingness’; they wanted, needed, to know that there was something after this life for themselves and the one they had lost. Many were challenged by their pre-existing understanding of death and the afterlife, and failed to gain comfort from any religious or spiritual beliefs held to help them cope. Many more were unable to reconcile their grief with what they were experiencing, asking ‘Why?’ not in a theodical sense but in confusion or anger. As Badham (2013, p.14) explained, their paradox was that “Christianity came into being as a religion offering the assurance of eternal life after death”, but for many the comfort this brought was not enough to assuage the effects of their loss. The conflict between expectation and reality was described by Jupp and Rogers (1997, p. xix):

[there is a] paradox of the life-affirming nature of the Christian faith being challenged profoundly by the experience of personal bereavement. The experience of death is not only painful but also undermines our self-assurance.

In exploring the link between teaching about death and the afterlife and resultant spiritual struggle ('ABC'), this research examines what children today understand about the concepts, and asks whether what they are taught is adequate in helping them call on their faith to cope with loss. Adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife and investing children with faith is at the heart of this thesis, premised on Aristotle's claim, 'give me the child and I will show you the man', or, from the perspective of children's religious education,

Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

(Proverbs 22:6)

This is seen to be achieved by 'planting the seeds' of faith to call on when needed:

The seed is the word of God, Christ the sower;

Whoever finds the seed will remain for ever.

(John, 15:15)

In a more recent exhortation Pope Francis (2014, p.68) said,

Let us spare no effort in the formation of our young people! St Paul [said] "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be informed in you" (Gal. 4:19). Let us embody this also in our own ministry, to help our young people to discover the courage and joy of faith.

This research explores whether this embodiment of faith happens or whether children are kept in relative ignorance of what awaits them, leaving them unprepared for the effects of loss.

Due to Covid, from a societal perspective this research is timely. At a time when death is ever-present there are thousands of children and young people experiencing death and grief, many for the first time. Bereavement support services are experiencing waiting lists ranging from 6-12 months and there is an increasing call for support ('Covid bereavement: Call for greater support for those left behind', *BBC News* 13<sup>th</sup> November 2020. Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2021). The statistics explain why there is a need to help them:

<b>STATISTICS (UK)</b>	<b>SOURCE</b>
<b>Every 22 minutes a child is bereaved of a parent - 5% of children, 63/day, 23,000/year</b>	<i>ONS 2010; Childhood Bereavement Network 2016</i>
<b>1 in 29 5-16 year olds has been bereaved of a parent or sibling, around 3.5%, equivalent to one child/class</b>	<i>Child Bereavement UK, 2019; Winston's Wish, 2020; Fauth, Thompson and Perry, (2009)</i>
<b>500 children age 4-11 died in 2018</b>	<i>Deaths - 2017 &amp; 2018. ONS; National Records of Scotland; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency</i>
<b>23,600 parents of a child under the age of 18 die every year</b>	<i>Childhood Bereavement Network 2016</i>
<b>70-80% of schools have a bereaved child in their school at any one time</b>	<i>(Shipman, Kraus, Monroe, 2001)</i>
<b>By the time the average child leaves primary school, he or she will have witnessed at least 8,000 traumatic deaths</b>	<i>'Death and dying, life and living': (Corr, Nabe, Corr, 1980)</i>
<b>And now Covid: at 9<sup>th</sup> November 2021</b>	
<b>Deaths UK 142,250</b>	<i>Data.Gov.uk</i>
<b>Deaths Global 5,050,000</b>	<i>CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), WHO (World Health Organisation), ECDC (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control)</i>

Death is on the social and religious agenda in a way that has not been seen for decades. A day does not pass without hearing about its psychosomatic effects on children and on education and religion. Sadly, some of the opportunities presented during this research came about as a consequence of Covid, summarised in Appendix 4 *Covid Impact Statement*. The author's bereavement counselling and support experience was used to develop a *Schools Covid Pack* – see Appendix 3b *Schools Covid Pack* for an extract of the pack.

Covid also comes at a time when a UK census is being conducted, in which respondents are asked about religious and spiritual beliefs. The last census (2011 – see Appendix List of *Tables and Figures*) reported falling numbers of respondents declaring themselves as Christian (59.3%), a reduction of 12% from the previous census. The 2021 census is anticipated to report a further reduction to below 50%. Meanwhile, research (see e.g. The National Centre for Social Research, 2019a) shows that levels of 'spiritual' beliefs are being

maintained and are even increasing, suggesting there is a belief in 'something else' beyond death. The effects of Covid may well impact positively on responses to the new Census questions about both religiousness and spirituality. Research undertaken by the author (see Appendix 3a *BACP Publications*) showed an increase in religious practice and spirituality after 9/11. It will be interesting to see if this is replicated in the results of the 2021 Census as a result of Covid, though this will not be known until analysis is published, probably in 2025. This will be the subject of future research.

The significance of children's increased exposure to death is that conditions arising from the experience, starting in childhood and left untreated, have a profound effect on people in later life. As McLaughlin, Lytje and Holliday explained (2019, p.8)

It does seem clear that [experience of] bereavement in childhood might be a contributory factor for later vulnerability in some children.

Grief following loss is recognised as a medical condition with serious health implications including anxiety and depression (DSM-V, APA, 2013). Burke, Neimeyer et al (2014) report that 7% of people who suffer a traumatic loss experience Complicated Grief. A contemporary example would be experiencing a close death or witnessing the deaths of others through Covid. Research and recent Covid-related evidence confirms that the symptoms of Complicated Grief parallel secular conditions which include psychosomatic and social symptoms: depression, anxiety, stress, suicidal ideation, and an impact on life-satisfaction, happiness, and self-esteem.

Physical and mental effects associated with 'Spiritual Struggle' and resultant 'Complicated Spiritual Grief' (See Appendix 2 *Glossary*) have been identified. Appel, Park, Wortmann et al (2019, p.2) reported studies of belief violations that indicated that they have strong associations with Post Traumatic Stress symptoms (Wortmann and Park, 2008; Steger, Owens and Park, 2015), In the context of this research, symptoms of Spiritual Struggle are significant to this thesis and include attributing the stressful event to punishment from God, concluding that a cruel or absent higher power is responsible, feelings of anger, abandonment, mistrust in and by God, and directing these beliefs and feelings towards God. (Wortmann, Park, Edmondson, 2011)

There is nothing good about death, and this thesis does not attempt to make it more than it is, a dreadful experience. As Moreman (2010, p.2) said, "Death: the word itself invokes fear". Yet despite death being unavoidable, many try to ignore it, or pretend it will not happen to them. Kubler-Ross (1969) said "In our unconscious, death is never possible for ourselves". Becker (1973) suggested that we live in terror of finitude [the complete end of life] from the beginning of our life, Mitchell and Anderson (1983, p.31) agreeing: "We do not want to be reminded that someday we shall die. Every loss and separation in life is an intimation of

mortality". C.S. Lewis (1960, p.16) struggling to cope with his wife's death, wrote "She died, she is dead, is the word so difficult to learn?".

Douglas Davies, in Jupp and Rogers (1997, p.122) put it eloquently:

Death robs us of those we love. But it has a still more awesome power: it can destroy our world. [It] strikes a deadly blow against the very idea that human existence has meaning. [It] knocks away one of the foundation pillars on which our world stands.

Acknowledging the sadness and pain of death, this thesis researches one way of coping with it: being able to call on one's faith. Research evidences that faith offers a powerful coping mechanism following the loss of a loved one:

Results indicate that avowed religious belief is associated with somewhat lowered grief and increased grief-related growth, as well as greater positive acceptance of death.

(Feldman, Fischer, Gressis, 2016)

Religion is one of the most common and powerful sources of meaning, present throughout history and thriving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

(Park, Edmondson, 2011)

This echoes Bowker (1991, p.86), who said "here is the root and foundation of the Christian understanding of death; it does not evacuate the factual reality and pain of death", describing instead an alternative: "something compensatory and wonderful, a belief in the Resurrection and being reunited with God". John Heywood Thomas, in Jupp and Rogers (1997, p.64) said,

[The] concreteness of Christian hope is what makes bereavement Christian. There is so much more to it than the comforting thought that "they've gone to a better place!" Such thoughts do not impinge on the awful sense of loss.

The New Testament portrayed death as defeated. II Timothy 1:10 speaks of it as "abolished", and 1 Paul 15:54 says "Death has been swallowed up in victory". Bowker (1991, p.100) described it thus:

Death, which was final in the process of the universe, is now, and is now known to be, after the Resurrection, the base from which we are transacted into that "quantum leap", into a new disposition and alignment of a relationship.

This can however be a difficult message to convey to young people. Saint Pope John Paul II (1994, p.104) described the conundrum:

"To find life, one must lose life; to be born one must die; to save oneself, one must take up the cross. This is the essential truth of the Gospel, which always and everywhere is bound to meet with man's protest.

Though challenging, the message is an essential one if the seeds of faith are to be planted in young minds and hearts. As to 'Where is this message at present?' there is likely to be a mixed response, as Feldman, Fischer and Gressis (2016) described, "Mortality and death



are unavoidable aspects of human existence. People face these realities differently, some using religion as comfort, some not” (p.531). This research aims to bring closer the understanding of how and why some people are failing to gain comfort from faith to help them cope with loss.

The essence of the faith discussed in this thesis is described by the most universal statement expressed in the Nicene’s Creed’s final lines,

I look forward to the resurrection of the dead,  
And the life of the world to come.

Messages of faith and hope in an afterlife are declared extensively throughout the Bible and literature across centuries. As Badham (2013, p.14) said, “One could carry on quoting such texts almost indefinitely”, for “belief in a future world is taken for granted”(Davies, 2005, p.205) in all the New Testament documents. Pope Francis (*National Catholic Reporter*, 2015), helpfully distinguished between faith and hope: “Christian hope is the expectation of something that already has been fulfilled and that certainly will be attained for each one of us”, that is, knowing Christ died and rose again so that all humanity may gain the Christian belief in life after death:

Christian hope and faith in an afterlife mean the sting of losing a loved one does not have to leave behind a poisonous venom in our lives. Our loved ones have not disappeared into dark nothingness.

Ross (2021, p.93) expanded on this in the context of the pain of loss:

There is something about pain and suffering that is at the heart of love and pushes us towards a hope based on the reality of Christ’s death and resurrection that pushes us towards the new.

The distinction is important: as Mitchell and Anderson (1983, p.165) said

Christian approaches to hope have informed our approach to loss and grief. Theological assumptions have been preceded and flowed from our considerations of grief. Because creation is limited, and because we cannot live alone, to be human is to grieve.

Phan (2014, p.3) attached similar value to hope, saying “it is hope that is at the heart and understanding of death and the afterlife”, while Keys (2015, p.8) explained that

It is our hope which sustains us when we undergo painful trials, it is hope that provides certainty, meaning and direction in a world that is oftentimes awash with cynicism and futility.

Faith and hope matter.

Belief in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of Christianity. As such it would seem axiomatic that there is a link between the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife and calling on faith to cope with loss.

RE can be one of the most dynamic and exciting areas of the curriculum to teach, for it is here that children can gain an understanding of the rich world of faith and explore some of those questions which are fundamental to human existence [such as] “What will happen after death?”.

(McCreery, Palmer, Voiels, 2008, p.2)

Yet despite Christianity and all major faiths believing in the afterlife in some form, the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is limited in primary schools, failing to provide the belief, faith, to call on to cope with loss. This research explores the deficiency of this key component of religious education; Corr, Nabe, Corr (1980, pp.24-5) said “Human beings cannot magically make death, loss and sadness disappear from their lives, but they can study these subjects and share insights with each other as a way of learning to live richer, fuller, and more realistic lives”.

There has long been scope in the National Curriculum for teaching about death and the afterlife. The aims of religious education, summarised in Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (2000, inside cover), reiterated by QCA (2004) stated that:

RE develops pupils' skills of enquiry and response [and] encourages pupils to reflect on, analyse and evaluate their beliefs, values and practices. [RE] enhances their spiritual development.

These aims provided the opportunity for the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, its importance explained by McCreery, Palmer and Voiels (2008, p.7):

Underpinning the idea of learning from religion is the fundamental idea that religions are an expression of a desire for meaning and purpose in life. People seek answers to questions such as “Why do good people suffer?” or “Is there a God?”.

With justification for, and opportunity to, teach about death and the afterlife, it is not done to any extent. As will be seen in later chapters there is a cycle of ignorance from an early age leading to spiritual struggle later in life, the limited teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in primary school contributing to this. If the cycle of ignorance is to be broken, its root causes need to be identified and addressed - as the law of cause and effect describes, “every cause has an effect, and every effect becomes the source or cause of something else”. Limited teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is posited as a cause of ABC, ABC in turn becoming the cause of life-affecting consequences.

The research addresses a gap in existing knowledge by examining this root cause of ABC. It does this by robust testing and challenging of the hypothesis that ‘We do not teach our

children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss' such that when death occurs people are unprepared for its effects or are not armed with what is needed to cope with any consequent spiritual struggle – ABC. By asking the question 'What do Roman Catholic children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife?' this research explores whether unpreparedness is a cause, the reasons for any unpreparedness, and what opportunities are presented to break the cycle of ignorance.

What is meant by adequate? Webster's New World College Dictionary, (4th ed., 2010) defines it as:

Enough or good enough for what is required or needed; sufficient; suitable.

While one would wish for a higher standard of understanding, 'adequate' would help in determining the reasons for inadequacy, the 'Challenges'. In a spirit of practical theology these challenges and identification of any possible mitigation of their effects form part of this thesis, assisting in the understanding of obstacles that stand between what is wanted to be taught about death and the afterlife, and what is actually taught and understood.

If the hypothesis put forward is proven it would demonstrate that the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is part of the problem, as well as the potential solution, to people's ability to use their faith to cope with loss. In doing so it would achieve the further objective of contributing to the practice of pastoral bereavement counselling by promoting a change of focus from the *treatment* of ABC to its *mitigation* or *mediation*: prevention not cure.

Recent research published by Cambridge University supports the approach. 'Self-harm warning signs can appear decade earlier' (*BBC News*, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2021) reported the findings of a study on self-harming. They claimed that the current model of treatment – "wait until it happens, and then react" – is "broken", advocating intervention strategies be implemented in childhood. Their use of the phrase 'prevention not cure' aligns their strategy for mitigation of issues in later life with the premise of this thesis and in particular with the approach adopted in bereavement counselling, addressing effects not causes.

There is no suggestion that adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is the sole panacea to helping people cope with loss. Such understanding is one of a number of variables shown to have an impact on the relationship between religion and adjustment to bereavement, but

The important thing is to contribute, humbly and as intelligibly as possible, to the living conversation that makes up the world of hopes. It is a matter of proceeding "with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet. 3:16).

(Kelly, 2006, p.22)

In researching the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife Clough and Nutbrown (2007) suggested that “social research should be persuasive, purposive, positional and political”. *Persuasive* in its endeavour to demonstrate to church leaders and policymakers the value of teaching about death and the afterlife to young children, as anticipatory bereavement support – prevention not cure. *Purposive* and *political* in calling for the empowering of educators through appropriate training and support. *Positional* in representing children, one of the ‘hidden populations’ referred to by Iwaniec and Pinkerton (1998, p.143), through the development and strengthening of an advocacy role on behalf of bereaved children. Children constitute such a hidden population, despite their emotional struggles sometimes “manifesting in remarkably visible behaviour”. These principles have been applied to the conduct of this research.

In examining the contribution that teaching about death and the afterlife makes to helping people cope with loss, the research explores two issues: 1) What is delivered through the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, and how?; and 2) If it is not adequate, what are the consequences? These describe the two primary themes of this thesis – teaching about death and the afterlife to help people cope with loss; and contributing to pastoral bereavement counselling.

### **1.3 Background of research interest**

#### **1.3.1 Motivation**

During twenty years of bereavement counselling and psychotherapy the author has counselled and supported over a thousand people of all faiths and none, young and old. The experience of working with this large cohort has been drawn on to support the thesis’ hypothesis about the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. During the author’s counselling career there was a continuous effort to find more and better ways of counselling and supporting the bereaved, which included the establishment of a bereavement support charity which helped hundreds of people to cope with their loss, leading to the establishment of two further bereavement support charities; training and leading several ‘befriender’ groups; and establishing a number of bereavement support groups. The author has also published, and presented at conferences – see Appendix 3d *Conferences and publications*.

The author, in moving towards a clearer understanding of what was wanted to be achieved, undertook a ‘Masters’ degree in Counselling and Psychotherapy (Coombes, 2015) titled ‘*An exploration into whether and how belief in the afterlife inhibits the grieving process*’. On reflection it was evident to the author that all the above achievements were reactive to the

effects of loss and did not examine their causes, the main theme of this thesis. This realisation led to the current research, putting the experience gained to practical use: “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). This reflects the view that while science is about exploration it is also about application, a description that applies to this research which is seen as being in the tradition of Practical Theology, described by Swinton (2020, p.164) as

Determined by the practical, as opposed to the conceptual use of the term theology. [it] emerges from the actions that are performed in any given context. Practical theology is thus seen to be action-oriented and action-dependent.

The research is characterised as the applicability of practical theology to the needs of society today, when the need for pastoral bereavement counselling and support is ever-increasing. In the spirit of words being preceded by deeds, the author’s practical experience has been used as the basis of this research; as Blessed Pope Paul VI observed, people in today’s world are “more likely to listen to witnesses than to teachers” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41).

Continuing with the theme of practical theology, while an afterlife as propounded by Christianity cannot be ‘proven’, it can be demonstrated that a belief in it helps people cope with loss. Conversely, as this research seeks to demonstrate, without such a belief coping can be compromised. As Williams (1973, p.9) said “No claim is made here to ‘prove’ faith. I am attempting rather, to remove some of the hindrances to it”. Kenny, (2003, p.4) wrote

Belief in God is a matter of faith, not of reason. So, it is not the sort of thing we should be arguing about – the whole point of belief in God is that you should believe it without needing any evidence or arguments.

And as Saint Pope John Paul II (1994, pp.10-11) explained, “A profession of faith ‘you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God’ ... is definitive; one can only accept it or reject it”.

Both Kenny and St. Pope John Paul II made sound arguments but perhaps miss an important point: where does that belief, faith, come from? We are not born with it and it is not an instinctive understanding; it needs to be taught, formed, in some manner.

We await our personal experience of death for the final affirmation of our faith and hope, but that is not the premise of this thesis. All that can be done during our earthly lifetime is to use whatever resources are available through religion and education to gain what Moreman (2010, pp.24-25) described as a “best guess scenario for what might be expected at the end of this life”.

### 1.3.2 Vocation

I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know; the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.

Albert Schweitzer

The spiritual and vocational motivation behind this research is acknowledged, a call to use one's talents to help others, as 1 Cor. 12:3-7 on Pentecost Sunday explains,

There is a variety of gifts, but always the same spirit; there are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord. The particular way in which the Spirit is given to each person is for a good purpose.

The words of Saint Pope John Paul II in particular describe the author's vocation:

[It] is always very personal, connected to work, to one's profession. It is an account rendered of the talents each person has received.

(1994, p.180)

The author's bereavement support is particularly inspired by the prayer of St Francis,

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love,

Where there is injury, pardon,

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

And finally,

It is in dying that we are born to Eternal life.

St Francis' prayer is the foundation of this research.

## 1.4 Parameters and boundaries

### 1.4.1 Parameters

The scale and scope of the subject being researched required the setting of parameters and the imposition of boundaries if its aims were to be achieved. This was the case from the outset, but Covid impacted on the original objectives of the research such that ultimately it focused primarily on Roman Catholic teachings. In this context the terms 'Catholic', 'the Church', and 'Church leaders' refer to the Catholic church. Reference to other religions and beliefs is made where appropriate to provide a broader context.

The operating paradigms of the research are teaching about death and the afterlife in primary school, and pastoral bereavement counselling. The thesis is written from the perspective of a person-centred pastoral bereavement counsellor.

### 1.4.2 Catholic teachings about death and the afterlife

Given the revised focus on Catholic teachings, it is appropriate to articulate current Catholic theology about what happens when we die, to establish the basis on which research participants contributed their data and to distinguish Catholic teaching from other Christian denominations and other faiths. Chapter 6 *Data Presentation and Analysis*, provides Church leaders' and Policymakers' interpretation and application of the teachings.

Traditionally in Catholic belief there are 'four last states' of afterlife following death: Judgement, Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell. **Death** marks the end of earthly life and the separation of the immortal soul from the body, with, specifically, no reincarnation. Death is presented in several ways in Catholic teaching but chiefly as being the end of man's period of 'probation', the event which decides his eternal destiny.

**Judgement** takes place immediately after death, when each will appear before the 'judgement seat' of Christ to receive an immediate judgement based on the deeds of their earthly life. From this judgement comes the reward for deeds done in life – Heaven, Purgatory or Hell. A further 'final judgment' will bring an end to human history and mark the beginning of a new heaven and earth 'in which righteousness dwells and God will reign forever'.

**Heaven** is 'a time of glorious union with God and a life of unspeakable joy that lasts forever'. Seen as the ultimate achievement for the dead, there are infinite degrees of glory corresponding to degrees of merit, but 'all are unspeakably happy in the eternal possession of God'. Only the perfectly pure and holy can enter heaven.

**Purgatory** is a temporary place for the purification of souls who, although saved, are not free enough from sin to enter directly into heaven. It is a state requiring penance and purgation of sin through God's mercy aided by the prayers of others, the souls in Purgatory being assured of their ultimate salvation. Those who die imperfect, but not in unrepented mortal sin, undergo a course of purification to qualify for admission into heaven.

Finally, those who freely chose a life of sin and selfishness, who were not sorry for their sins and had no intention of changing their ways, go to **Hell**, characterised importantly as an everlasting separation from God. The Church teaches that no one is condemned to hell without freely deciding to reject God and his love. Catholicism teaches that God's mercy is such that a person can repent even at the point of death and be saved. In the narrower sense in which the term is ordinarily used, hell is the state of those who are punished eternally for unrepented personal mortal sin.

### **1.4.3 Theological boundaries**

Further to the distinguishing of Catholic teaching from that of other Christian denominations and faiths, there is also a distinction to be made between Old Testament and New Testament teaching. This thesis primarily uses New Testament biblical references. While not suggesting that there is little of relevance to this thesis in the Old Testament, rather it takes the position that “there are ‘two ages’ that point to a difference between the time and writing of St. Paul and the eschatology [judgement, heaven and hell] of the Jewish apocalypses” (Pitre, Barber, and Kincaid, 2019, p.72). Christianity is grounded in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and most writing on the afterlife derives from his death and resurrection.

This is what I [Jesus] meant when I said that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets and the Psalms, has to be fulfilled. So, you see how it is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead’ (Apostles 3:13-15).

Archbishop Ramsay (1963) suggested “the Resurrection is a true starting point for the study and meaning of the New Testament”. For further clarification, the thesis does not engage with the debate over immortality versus resurrection; rather, it adopts the view of the Resurrection held by the Catholic Church handed down through the Church Fathers and later theologians such as Aquinas. It also subscribes to the opinion expressed by Badham (1998, in Moreman, 2010, p.69) that the two [immortality and resurrection] are not so much incompatible as having evolved into new usage to reflect modern sensibilities.

The writings of St Paul have been chosen as the main source for this thesis, though within practical limitations. As Pitre, Barber, and Kincaid (2019, p.6) said,

We do not have space to take up the many literary, historical, biographical, and chronological issues that appear in more comprehensive studies on Paul. Instead [this is] a very modest attempt to contribute to a few of the major debates on Pauline theology.



Life after death was so integral to St Paul's understanding of the Christian message that without it "faith is futile" (Badham, 2013, p.14). St. Paul influences Catholic beliefs, helping in the understanding of what the afterlife might be like by explaining that there is a difference between earthly bodies which are physical, and our heavenly bodies which are spiritual:

The body is perishable, and it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15).

St. Paul in many ways was the bridge between the Old and New Testaments, demonstrating "continuity between St. Paul's teaching and his early Jewish context [of an apocalyptic worldview]" (Pitre, Barber and Kincaid, 2019, p.66). Pannenburg (1970) in Badham (1976, p.42; 2013, p.70) insisted that "the basis on which the understanding of Jesus rests is always linked to the apocalyptic framework of Jesus' earthly life", while Moule (1968) said "If this [apocalyptic] framework is removed, then the fundamental basis of faith is lost".

St. Paul was also chosen because of similarities between the obstacles he faced and those that face today's society. Cor.1:15 shows that St. Paul had to deal with rivalries among church leaders, disputes between theologians, factionalism, different preferences concerning the liturgy and church roles, and more besides. In attempting to live the Gospel in the multi-ethnic and cross-cultural city of Corinth, issues arose that are being encountered in similar multi-racial societies today.

St. Paul's writings, as well as being generally accepted as the main source and understanding of death and the afterlife, are also the most-researched of all writings on the subject. A.N. Wilson (1998, p.258) even claimed

Paul, not Jesus, was – if anyone was – the "founder of Christianity", on the basis that while there were many individuals involved in the evolution of Christianity, the aspects which distinguish it from Judaism were Paul's unique contribution.

St. Paul was a figure of great interest to philosophers and understanding of death and the afterlife such as Heidegger (see e.g. Delahaye, 2013; Wolfe, 2013), whose re-interpretation and understanding of death and the afterlife in St. Paul's letters from the perspective of the genuine religious experience underlying them "has been very influential and has influenced all of the contemporary philosophical thinkers on St. Paul" (Delahaye, 2013, p.3). Dunn (1988, p.1) cited in De Villiers (2008, p.1), commenting on St. Paul's "revelation" which formed the new perspective from which he would henceforth read the holy scriptures, remarked that

[it is] of major importance to appreciate the sense of eschatological newness which transformed and continued to sustain St. Paul's theology and not to let it be wholly discounted in favour of theological convictions easier to translate into modern terms.

## 1.5 Research questions

### 1.5.1 Background

By 'starting at the end' the first study established a baseline or benchmark of the contribution that teaching and understanding death and the afterlife makes to peoples' ability to cope with loss. Studies 2-4 describe the delivery of religious education, evaluating the effectiveness of each stage of the process against the outcomes in study 1.

#### Studies

Study 1: What is the outcome of what has been taught

Study 2: What do faith leaders and policymakers want taught

Study 3: What is delivered through Religious Education

Study 4: What do children know and how is their knowledge acquired

The title of this thesis 'What do Roman Catholic children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife?' was purposely worded to challenge the thesis' hypothesis that 'We do not teach our children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss'. It led to the development of two research questions, which governed the structure of the thesis:

**Question 1** *Is the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife effective in helping people cope with loss. If not, why not, and what are the consequences?*

Study 1 'What is the outcome of what has been taught' was designed to address the first research question. Twelve bereaved young people were interviewed to obtain their recollections of the religious education they had received about death and the afterlife, and their views of whether it was of help to them in coping with their loss. The study explored any psychosomatic and spiritual effects of loss arising.

**Question 2** *What is delivered through the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, and how?*

This question was addressed in Studies 2-4. The aim was to identify any fractures or disconnects between the stages of delivery and their causes, namely, how the findings in Study 1 were arrived at. This also served to identify potential areas of contribution to pastoral bereavement counselling.

*Study 2: What do church leaders and policymakers want taught*

For this study a Director of Religious Education, a priest, a Canon and a pastoral chaplain were interviewed to determine what was wanted to be taught about death and the afterlife in primary schools.

*Study 3: What is delivered through formal Religious Education*

Two headteachers, two Religious Education coordinators, and four teachers contributed their understanding and experience of what is taught about death and the afterlife.

*Study 4: What do children know about death and the afterlife and how is their knowledge acquired*

The final study involved thirty-six children in Key Stage 2, primary school years Y5 and Y6, aged 9-11. The Focus Groups they participated in helped to determine what they knew about death and the afterlife, and how they learned it.

## **1.5.2 Summary of chapters**

The following is a synopsis of each chapter of the thesis.

**Chapter two**            *Religious education in Britain*

This chapter expands on the boundaries of the research, contextualising the delivery of religious education in Britain and the teaching of death and the afterlife from a historical and legislative perspective. It describes the changing paradigms for teaching Religious Education, focusing on the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in faith schools.

**Chapter three**            *Research literature Question 1 Is the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife effective in helping people cope with loss. If not, why not, and what are the consequences?*

This is the first of two Literature Review chapters. Aligning with the research questions, the separation of literature reviews reflects their different demands. The Process and Search Terms used for both reviews are provided in Appendix 6 *Literature Review Process and Search Terms*.

Chapter three describes ‘the bigger picture’ in which this research is set, referencing children’s religious education, the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, bereavement, and counselling. From the great body of literature about death and the

afterlife, reference is made to the Latin Fathers of the Church including St Augustine (e.g. Bourke, 1974) and St Thomas Aquinas (e.g. Kenny, 2003; Glenn, 2011), theologian thinkers and writers who did much to interpret the maze of thinking and theory about death and the afterlife. Reference is also made to contemporary writers on the subject and understanding of death and the afterlife e.g. Kelly, 2006; Moreman, 2008, 2010; Badham, 1976, 1998, 2013; and Phan, 2014.

**Chapter four**                      *Research literature Question 2 What is delivered through the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, and how?*

This chapter reviews the framework for delivery and understanding of death and the afterlife, encompassing the stages of church direction and guidance, policymaking, and educator delivery.

The literature reviewed relates to a variety of fields of professional work including religious education, theology, and bereavement. It identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the reviewed literature, using the findings to refine the research questions and issues for investigation in this thesis.

**Chapter five**                      *Research methodology and Ethics*

The four studies in this research required the adoption of different methodologies to obtain the information sought on what Catholic children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife, and to test the thesis' hypothesis. Chapter six explains why the methodologies used were selected, and what other methodologies were considered.

The chapter describes the methodological approaches used, the research design, and the methods used to collect data. Recruitment literature, questionnaires and consent forms are detailed, together with the aids provided to children during interviews.

Having evaluated each study's requirements and objectives four methodologies were selected. *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). was used in study 1 for the interviews with twelve bereaved young people. *Qualitative Research Interviews* were used for Studies 2 and 3 because of their characteristics of being flexible and open-ended in style, and their focus on people's actual experiences rather than general beliefs and opinions (King and Horrocks, 2010, p.3). Finally, *Focus Groups and Grounded Theory* were used for Study 4. The intention was to hear from children themselves, to ensure that any understandings constructed were 'grounded' in the lives and experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2014).

## *Ethics*

The Ethics section reflects on ethical issues associated with the capture of research data. The ethical protocols adopted are described, with particular emphasis on considerations of working with children and young people. The researcher's reflexivity and positionality are described in relation to the context in which the researcher is operating – as a faith-inspired and motivated pastoral bereavement counsellor.

Principles and responsibilities are determined. Using these as the basis for assessing ethical requirements, a number of questions are asked, leading to the development of a schedule of 'Key Pointers' of ethical engagement, describing what ethical considerations need to be taken into account when addressing any hypothetical risks. Each Key Pointer is considered individually as to any risks associated with it, e.g. non-provision of informed consent, and how these risks are addressed ('Response') in the research.

## **Chapter six** *Data Presentation and Analysis*

This chapter analyses the findings of the four studies undertaken. Challenges to teaching children about death and the afterlife adequately were identified in the studies, and were categorised under general headings or themes, which included 'Policy and statutory duties versus practice' e.g. curriculum pressures; 'Educational' e.g. teacher skills and motivation; 'Parent/family and community influences'; 'Sociocultural and socio-economic'; and 'External pressures' such as secular and science.

Counselling-specific challenges were also identified and used as themes for presenting and analysing the data, including 'Peoples' ability to use religion and faith to cope with loss'; 'Religion in the counselling room'; 'Understanding the effects of spiritual struggle on health and well-being', and 'Meaning-making' and 'Continuing bonds'.

The Data presentation and Analysis is provided separately for each study, reflecting the distinctiveness of each research area.

## **Chapter seven** *Discussion*

This chapter provides an assessment of the outcome of what is taught and understood about death and the afterlife in primary school. It considers how the outcomes are arrived at, examining the 'flow' of delivery of teaching about death and the afterlife, and whether and how there has been any dilution of the intended teaching and understanding of the subject across areas covered by the studies.

The chapter discusses the findings of the research in relation to the hypothesis that we do not teach children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss. Using the qualitative analysis adopted in each study, challenges and obstacles to effective delivery are used to illustrate the findings.

In considering the findings the chapter examines their relevance, and any justification for the greater inclusion of death and the afterlife in the teaching of religious education. The implications for this thesis' research to contribute to the method and content of teaching understandings about death and the afterlife, and to informing pastoral bereavement counselling, are discussed.

## ***Chapter eight***      *Conclusion*

The conclusion to the thesis reflects on the findings of the research. The chapter reviews the limitations of the research, many of which arise from Covid, and the opportunities presented for future research. Drawing implications from the research's findings and from the wider implications for academic and policy debates identified, the chapter offers suggestions for the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in primary school, and for informing pastoral bereavement counselling.

It is hoped that the findings will help direct those who have the means and the will to address the challenges to adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife – Church leaders, Policymakers and Educators.

### **1.6 Conclusion**

Beyond the researcher-imposed practical and theological boundaries, this thesis is also bounded by the historical and political background to the teaching of Religious Education in Britain, and the educational paradigms that have evolved therein. The next chapter covers these areas, positioning faith schools and in particular Catholic schools within the broader educational system. The 'Challenges' to the effective teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife are introduced, their origins being seen in the context of Religious Education in Britain.

## **CHAPTER TWO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN BRITAIN**

### **2.1 Historical background**

The history and place of teaching about death and the afterlife in the British primary education system foregrounds this thesis' research, contributing to many of the challenges faced in Religious Education today. To explain the terminology used in this chapter, State schools are fully maintained by the state, hence the term 'Maintained State Schools' or, since 1998, Community Schools. These are established and operated by local authorities (County councils). Voluntary-aided schools are jointly funded by the state and a religious body, and are called Voluntary-aided Faith Schools. Most Faith schools are Christian church schools, mainly Church of England (CofE) and Roman Catholic, though some are long-established Jewish schools and those of other faiths.

### **2.2 Legal and political background**

The provision of Religious Education in Britain is enshrined in law, with a number of Acts of Parliament relevant to this research:

- The 1944 Education Act
- The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), establishing a National Curriculum
- The 1996 Education Act
- The 2002 Education Act
- The 2004 Children's Act
- The Curriculum for Wales 2022 (The 'new Welsh Curriculum', Welsh Government, 2018).

The 1944 Education Act made Religious Instruction and collective worship compulsory in all English and Welsh state schools, with the right of parents to withdraw their children enshrined in law. The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA, DfES, 1989, Chapter one, section 8) mandated the teaching of Religious Education in all maintained schools (to be known as Community schools from then on). A continuation of the 1944 Act, under ERA children had an entitlement to religious education unless their parents exercised a right enshrined in the Act to withdraw their children.

Following the 1988 ERA, in England and Wales religious education and collective worship were excluded from the new National Curriculum, but retained as separate elements: Religious Education in its current form has been part of the 'basic curriculum' in both England and Wales since ERA. For Community schools the statutory curriculum for

Religious Education is a Local Agreed Syllabus, determined at local authority level by a Standing Advisory Council for Religious education (SACRE). Faith schools did not follow the Local Agreed Syllabus, instead following the religious syllabus set by the school or the funding body. The Roman Catholic Church and CofE have Diocesan syllabuses. The decision to exclude religious education from the National Curriculum (ERA, 1988) resulted in there potentially being as many syllabuses for religious education in Community schools as there were local authorities.

One difference between the 1944 and 1988 Acts was that an Agreed Syllabus was required to reflect that the religious tradition in Great Britain was in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of other principal religions represented in Great Britain (DfE, 1994, p.45). Christianity was not mentioned in the 1944 Act, the assumption being that Religious Instruction, as it was then called, would be Christian. This came about because from the early 1970s onwards syllabuses embraced an increasingly multicultural, pluralistic society, and rather than being a sharing of one faith, some syllabuses became the examination of world-views. Triggering a reaction that children were failing to understand Britain's Christian cultural and religious heritage, and fearing that a national identity would be lost, lobbying led to an explicit reference being made to Christianity in the 1988 Act.

Pluralism and diversity have had an impact on the delivery of religious education, Chadwick (1997, p.87) seeing pluralism as a challenge to Faith schools:

An increasingly pluralistic British society, resulting from the growth of immigration in the 1950's and 1960's, raised issues about the understanding of non-Christian faiths. Pluralism and diversity have played an increasing part in religious education within the British education system, supported by legislation such as the Equalities Act 2010 (Legislation.Gov.uk, 2010), which protected individuals from discrimination in a number of areas including religion and belief. Guidance for religious education in England argued that it: "contributed to community cohesion by promoting mutual respect and tolerance in a diverse society" (Department for Children, School and Families 2010, p.7).

A broad curriculum requirement was the promotion of spiritual development, initially through SMSC – Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural development. Featured in the Education Act (2002) this was "particularly relevant in the case of religion and belief" (Hemming, 2018, p.8). The new National Curriculum in England (Department for Education, 2014a) retained the focus on diversity and the commitment to pupils' spiritual and cultural development, and it is included in the new Welsh Curriculum (Welsh Government, 2018; 2019; 2020 a-c). In Wales, guidance states that

Religious Education in the twenty-first century [should] focus on understanding humanity's quest for meaning, the positive aspects of multi-faith/multicultural understanding and pupils' own understandings and responses to life and religion.

(Welsh Assembly Government 2008a, p.3).



Summarising the legal requirements established for the teaching of Religious Education (see e.g. NATRE, 2018), “every state-funded school must offer a curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical ([SMCMP] developments of pupils”. As Hemming commented (2018, p.8) “health, wellbeing and citizenship are central to the proposals, offering early indications that diversity of religion and belief will also be valued highly in the new framework”.

School policy also impacted on teaching Religious Education. School policies varied depending on whether the school had a religious character or not. Faith schools had the freedom to teach religious education in accordance with their particular faith tradition, but had to include multi-faith material as part of their curriculum, offering pupils the opportunity to develop understandings of diversity of religion and belief (e.g. Church of England Education Office, 2016; Catholic Education Service, 2018). Wilson (2015) described how many faith schools adopted a policy of “positive pluralism”, in which the rights of minority pupils to hold differing beliefs were respected.

Community schools were required to reflect the diversity of the wider community within the context of a broadly Christian culture. They were expected to teach a Religious Education curriculum that reflected the predominantly Christian nature of many of the religious traditions in Britain, while also teaching about the beliefs and practices of the other principal religions represented in Britain (Education Act 1996, s.375, p.3). A High Court ruling determined that this provision should also include teaching about non-religious worldviews in order to comply with existing law (*R (Fox) v. Secretary of State for Education*, 2015).

With regard to current legislation and the status of Religious Education, Lundie (2018, p.348), acknowledging that “progress has been made towards a shared conception of the meaning and purpose of the subject [Religious Education]”, referred to “confusion as to the contested status of Religious Education as a rigorous subject in the academic humanities”. Pointing to an increasing interest in the subject, Lundie (ibid.) documented the “plenitude” of legislation and reports that had arisen in the eight years between his reports, including a revised (though still non-statutory) National Curriculum Framework (Religious Education Council, 2013); revised requirements for subject content in Religious Studies examinations (Department for Education, 2015); the All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (2013): APPG RE; Butler-Sloss (2015); Dinham and Shaw (2015); and Woodhead and Clarke (2015).

The reports made proposals for the subject’s development including changes to statutory requirements, the APPG report having “signalled a significant divergence from the Religious Education Council” at a time when the Council was preparing a Commission on the future of

Religious education. Lundie reported the call (p.350) for “statutory national determination of the Religious Education curriculum for England, ‘normalising’ the subject within the National Curriculum”.

Lundie (2018, p.350) reported improved opportunities for professional development and the sharing of ideas since his first report (2010). NATRE’s *StrictlyRE* conference, and resource sharing banks such as *CatholicRESouce.co.uk* had stimulated “innovation in the absence of strong central guidance”. However, as Lundie reported (p.354)

a revised focus on political and security concerns has seen this focus [on the spiritual dimension of school life] shift away from RE, towards Citizenship, PSHE and the wider pastoral life of the school.

Death education in the curriculum did feature. By the 1970’s there was a recognition of the effects on health and of changing patterns in bereavement, leading to ‘Loss and Death Education’ becoming a part of the School Curriculum (National Curriculum Council, 1973). Section 1 of the Education Reform Act (1988), promoting pupils’ Personal and Social Development (PSD), stated that all schools were required by law to provide a broad and balanced curriculum which promoted the spiritual, mental and physical development of pupils. However, by 1987 there was no recognised scheme for teaching the subject, and in particular the subject and understanding of death and the afterlife, in Britain. This was despite ‘Loss and Death Education’ being included in the content of many Personal, Social and Health Education and Religious education courses.

The cross-curricular elements described by the National Curriculum (National Curriculum Council (NCC), 1993) made a contribution to PSD and the teaching of Loss and Death, as did the guidance laid down in the National Curriculum Council’s guidance ‘The whole curriculum’. In addition, the NCC Curriculum ‘Health Education’ included ‘Feelings, Loss and change, and Death’ in every Key Stage, and the subject was included in all key stages of Religious Education for both State and Voluntary schools. Potts (2013, P.97) reported that there had been, at that time, a promising increase in the number of publications addressing the needs of children experiencing loss, corresponding with the introduction into the UK school curricula as standard the subject of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). Many schools utilised the SEAL programme (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning , DfE, 2010), which included a component on loss issues, though only fleetingly did it address loss through bereavement, and made no mention of religion or spirituality.

The subject’s inclusion in principle in national curricula continues to this day, but as this thesis demonstrates, it is not being implemented. In further evidence, the Welsh Youth Parliament (2019), made up of young people in secondary education in Wales, reported the results of a survey of young people in Wales (11-25 years of age), highlighting an

inadequacy and inconsistency in the delivery of Life Skills: only 12% of those surveyed had any education in dealing with grief. This echoed the findings of a major project titled 'The World-views' (Erricker Erricker, Ota et al 1997), which made reference to the areas children regarded as important: these included death, loss and family separation, God, and heaven and hell – the Last Things. Davies (2017, p.2) said,

Death and the study of death are now increasingly popular, with death studies emerging as a field shared by a variety of academics and healthcare professionals across many formal disciplines, from the social sciences to more medical and service-user points of contact (Moreman, 2008; Cottrell and Marx, 2014).

However, as will be seen in the Literature Review it seems that for primary schools the situation has not changed substantially over subsequent years, with a continuing failure to teach the subject and understanding of death and the afterlife.

### **2.3 The place of Catholic faith schools**

This section looks at the distinctive nature of Catholic faith schools, identifying further challenges to delivery of religious education. While using Catholic schools as the basis for this research, much of what is described relates to other faith schools and to schools generally.

The report of The Archbishop's Council (2001) emphasised the maintenance of the "Christian character" of Church schools through the selection of faith-educated and practising teachers. In faith schools it was the governing body rather than the education authority that had responsibility for the appointment of staff. Governing body appointments that led to a diversity of beliefs among the staff were seen as likely to alter the ways in which the school could provide an environment of spiritual enrichment, and also potentially an indifference to belief that may be more limiting:

The presence of staff who do not worship regularly with the church community may present greater difficulties than the presence on the staff of teachers from different religious traditions. (Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1997, p.20).

In Catholic Faith schools, Volunteer Governors determined what constituted 'a practising Catholic', following Archdiocese-set guidelines. This policy established the boundaries of how far this should influence their choice of candidate for a teaching post, within the terms of equal opportunities legislation. While a notable ambition, it failed to reflect certain realities: Religious Education is not a mainstream subject in the curriculum, and as such carries less weight in the selection of teachers than subjects such as mathematics and English. Teaching religious education, and in particular death and the afterlife, does not feature highly in teacher training, and there are fewer teachers of the school's avowed faith available for recruitment.

**Challenges identified:** *Teacher recruitment and training; Teacher attitudes and beliefs; Legislation versus practice*

The Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales (1997, pp.19-20) suggested that a distinctive yet inclusive identity for Catholic schools could be found using a model that combined a high quality academic education with the nurturing of the faith, to promote the spiritual and moral development of every person attending the school. As the need to promote community cohesion became a statutory requirement upon schools, the relationship of the school with the wider community came into sharper focus, though Short (2003, p.129) pointed out that “the most serious practical criticism of faith schools was that they were likely to lead to a fragmentation of society”.

**Challenges identified:** *Church guidance and direction; School leadership and ethos; Legislation versus practice; Pluralism; Community; Societal changes*

Changes in the Church and society have had an impact on religious education. Post-war, changes in the Church and in society generally compelled the Catholic community to address how its schools served the body of the Church. Over the following decade change took place that re-defined the kind of religious education to be delivered, from what Cardinal Heenan (1905–1975), cited in (Konstant, 1966, p.7), described:

‘The chief method of teaching Christian doctrine in Catholic schools was to make children learn the Catechism and Bible history’.

Heenan’s description was as good a definition of ‘Religious Instruction’ as one can get, with it being described colloquially as ‘learning without understanding’. After 1966, there was a change of emphasis to the current, more nuanced Religious Education, a means of teaching which looked at the understanding of the words and not just the knowing.

Through the work of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II: Appendix 2 *Glossary*), the Church undertook a rigorous re-evaluation of the relationship it had with the faithful. The Council produced a number of constitutions and doctrines that looked at the Church’s teaching and guidance that to a large degree prevail to this day, though updated to reflect changes in education and society. Figiel (2013, p.23) described the Church’s response to societal changes:

The decrees of the II Vatican Council are the clear response to the new pluralising social reality, ... i.e. coexistence of the multitude of independent social beings: groups and co-communities, beliefs, behaviours, cultural phenomena.

Vatican II identified the theological ideal that Catholic education should try to meet, “the complete formation of the human person with respect to [the] ultimate goal of resurrection” (Abbott, 1966, p.639). The ‘Declaration on Christian Education’ (ibid.) challenged schools to shape this ideology into a practical theology that would direct the ethos of a school. In England and Wales this process did not take place in vacuum but was part of the many changes in education and society that have fundamentally altered how schools operate.

Did it work? It changed the way the Church operated for many years, with it looking outwards rather than inwards, but perhaps the best measure of its success is that in October 2021 Pope Francis was moved to launch another ‘renewal project’, described as the most ambitious change in sixty years. One can consider this as a further moving with the times, though Pope Francis suggested it was instead a response to the lack of change, warning against the Church becoming a “museum” and calling for “a ‘different church’ which is able to listen, becomes immersed in peoples’ lives, and avoid the ‘poison’ of complacency” (*The Tablet*, 9<sup>th</sup> October 2021).

***Challenges identified:*** *School leadership and ethos; Church guidance and direction; Societal changes; Pluralism*

As to the status of Faith schools today, the number of children enrolling in them continues to grow, and they form a significant proportion of the state sector. While the faith school system evolved to serve the young of its own community, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they cannot be categorised solely by their faith membership and practice, with pupil numbers reflecting the increasingly pluralist society.

As with all faiths operating their own schools, the Catholic Church, in providing education to the community it serves regardless of the make-up of its population, has a legal obligation under the terms of its voluntary-aided school status to do so. Schools can find themselves with a body of children who are not of the school’s declared faith by adhering to the requirements of the minimum number of places to be made available to children not of that faith, or the need to reflect the demographic make-up of their catchment area. In geographical areas where the Catholic population has been largely replaced by those of other faiths or no stated faith, schools are faced with the need to admit children in order to secure budgets, diminish in size to serve a smaller faith group, or close (Walbank, 2012). Walbank suggested that there is a danger that without a clear understanding of how to engage with this “other” in their midst, there might be a fragmentation of the understanding of what makes a faith school faith-focused.

***Challenges identified:*** *School leadership and ethos; Pluralism; Secularism; Demographics*

## **2.4 Conclusion**

Since the founding of faith schools in Britain society has changed. Schools can struggle with their obligations and the aspiration of a dedicated faith-based religious education taught by faith-educated and practising teachers. In trying to articulate their vision, challenges arise. Legislation and the demands of an increasingly pluralistic and secular society require the admission and nurturing of those who are not of the school's faith.

The Church has also changed, evolving in an attempt to be relevant for today's society. At the same time the Church strives to hold on to the essence of what it sees education to be. Reconciling its religious aims and societal changes is one of the greatest challenges faced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As we move on to the Literature Reviews we will see how the challenges highlighted in this chapter are supported by research. Their origins, validity, and impact will be assessed as to whether they are obstacles to the effective teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife.

## CHAPTER THREE QUESTION 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Introduction

The two Literature Reviews in this and the next chapter reflect the structure of the research, which has four different studies. The reviews highlight strengths, limitations and deficiencies, using the findings to refine the research questions and issues for investigation. This chapter reviews literature on the outcome that the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in primary school has on peoples' ability to cope with loss. Literature was identified using the process and search terms detailed in Appendix 6 *Literature Review Process and Search Terms*.

The two reviews, taken together, demonstrate that "although independent(ly) conducted, [they] are connected by the overarching umbrella of the research topic" (Ridley, 2008, p.7). The separation of literature reviews was guided by the research's questions:

1. Is the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife effective in helping people cope with loss? (Study 1)
2. What is delivered through the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, and how? (Studies 2-4)

For each question the literature review determined whether, at each stage of the cycle of teaching about death and the afterlife, the ultimate intention of helping people cope with loss through faith had been realised, or whether something of what was desired had been lost.

In seeking out key research articles and literature the review encompassed context and history. Key authors and researchers were identified who had contributed to an understanding of the issues in the areas of study. The literature from these sources was extensively reviewed, and included well-researched articles, subject-defining books, and debates amongst professionals in journals and magazines.

Please refer to Appendix 2 *Glossary* for an explanation of terms used.

### 3.2 Question 1

The first literature review explored the topic of 'Challenges', barriers to peoples' understanding of death and the afterlife and the use of religion/spirituality to cope with the effects of loss. Challenges identified demonstrated the ever-present tensions between religion and other factors, such as between religious education and science.

This first review purposely 'started at the end' of the cycle of teaching about death and the afterlife by examining its outcome - whether bereaved young people were able to call on their faith to cope with their loss. In doing so it established the existence of a 'Golden Thread' between the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife and the

ability to call on faith to cope. It also identified challenges to its achievement. The findings provided a benchmark against which all subsequent research findings were measured, sharpening the focus of the research.

The first literature review considered the models developed to identify and address spiritual struggle under the umbrella of Afterlife Belief Conflict (ABC), a term conceived by the author to encompass the concepts of Spiritual Struggle, Complicated Spiritual Grief, and variants of these conditions. The primary coping models of Meaning-making and Continuing Bonds were also reviewed.

### **3.2.1 Review of current models of coping**

#### ***Introduction***

Society has a responsibility towards children and young people to make sure they are prepared for the losses that most will experience during their lives, and are able to cope with them. Ribbens, McCarthy and Jessop (2005, p.7) explained:

As a society, we need to understand that bereavement is a general feature of most young peoples' lives, without necessarily seeing bereavement as an issue for "experts" to deal with.

This may be a strong argument for the inclusion of "death education" in schools.

Religious models of coping have consistently failed to capitalise on opportunities to investigate causes and not effects, confirmed by Pargament, Desai and McConnell (2006, p.133) who found that most research focused on the negative effects of loss. They advocated moving from psychological treatment or intervention to equipping people through religious education to "draw on their spiritual resources before they encounter serious problems", but did not explore religious education beyond this, or the challenges faced by religious education.

The literature reviewed would not be characterised as flawed, but rather it would be described as misdirected towards effects and not causes, with findings and recommendations not being more deeply investigated, progressed or implemented. Another theme that will be seen throughout this literature review is that little has changed over time: misdirected or insufficient research compounded by a lack of action on findings.

There is a considerable body of research on the effects of grief, a general term for the response to loss. Grief can be seen as a spectrum varying from an experience that many people respond to resiliently, with substantial grief symptoms lasting only a few weeks (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001) to, more typically, acute responses with symptoms that ultimately subside after one to two years (Bonanno and Mancini, 2006).

Evidence suggests that a significant minority of bereaved people struggle profoundly and for a protracted period. Approximately 10-15% (Bonanno, 2009; Burke and Neimeyer, 2014) of



the bereaved population suffers from acute psychosomatic symptomology known as Complicated Grief (CG), or Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) (Boelen and Prigerson, 2007; Prigerson, Horowitz, Jacobs et al, 2009; McLaughlin, Lytle and Holliday, 2019). This is often due to the death being caused by or leading to stressful situations, or being traumatic, unexpected, or violent. CG/PGD is now categorised as a significant health condition, sharing many symptoms with depression and anxiety and accepted as a psychiatric condition in DSM-V (APA, 2013).

The desired outcome from the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is the ability to call on faith to cope with loss, which is called Positive Religious Coping (PRC). There are many reasons why PRC may not be achieved, one being religious or spiritual struggle, also termed Complicated Spiritual Grief (CSG). The definitions and links between conditions are important:

Understanding the relation between CG [and CSG] is necessary to inform researchers, clinicians, and spiritual leaders in developing and evaluating relevant psycho-spiritual interventions.

(Burke, Neimeyer, et al. (2013, p.2)

Shear, Dennard, Crawford et al (2006) were among the first to identify this “less obvious, yet troubling form of bereavement distress called Complicated Spiritual Grief”, a variation of Complicated Grief. Burke and Neimeyer (2014, p.259) described how traumatic loss can violate mourners’ basic assumptive worldviews and precipitate a spiritual crisis or struggle with disassociation from God, conflict with previously held doctrines, and spiritual disequilibrium. Spiritual struggle was described by Edmondson, Park, Chaudoir and Wortmann (2008):

Distressed individuals experience religious struggle when they sense that they are at the mercy of a controlling yet indifferent God who lacks compassion ... or, perhaps worse yet, forsaken.

The spiritual struggles that lie behind CSG are varied but significant in their symptomology. Salient to this thesis’ focus on educating children about death and the afterlife, Coleman, McKiernan, Mills, and Speck (2007) explained that conflicted belief was related to previous, and especially early-life, religious experience, which in turn led to present-day religious and spiritual attitudes and problems. Harris, Currier, and Park (2013) described “religious upbringing conflict”, with the bereaved person’s worldview being compromised by what was learned as a child. These are two of the few references in the literature reviewed of possible causes of ABC linked to early years upbringing and education, but are not elaborated on. While research focusing on symptomology and resultant coping mechanisms has great merit, little attention had been given to detailed examination of what causes CSG. Ano and

Pargament (2013, p.419) reported that “as yet, ... very few studies have investigated how and why people develop spiritual struggles”, and quoted “only one published study [that] has examined factors that predict spiritual struggles”, referring to Johnson and Hayes (2003). Burke, Neimeyer, et al. (2014) confirmed the deficiency, describing “the disproportionate emphasis on the how and not the why”.

The situation remains that more extensive exploration of causes or predictors of spiritual struggles is needed in a relatively new area of research, as supported by Burke and Neimeyer (2014, p.1089) who claimed to have been among the first to report narrative responses of individuals who suffer from CSG to identify why spiritual distress occurs, and not focus just on its consequences. Significantly, Burke and Neimeyer said (p.1097) “there may be another variable that causes [CSG] that was not examined in this study”. This literature review, which explored one specific cause of CSG – inadequate education and understanding of death and the afterlife – seeks to exploit this opportunity and position the finding as one such ‘variable’, putting it at the forefront of research in the field.

### **3.2.2 Models for coping**

The most recognised model for coping is Meaning-making. Hall (2011) wrote that “death assaults the survivor's notion that life is predictable or that the universe is benign”, Higgins (2002) explaining that death causes a situation in which the bereaved seeks to attach meaning to the loss in order to reorganise their lives in the absence of their loved one – meaning-making, described by Davis, Wortman, Lehman et al (2010) as

coming to see or understand a situation in a different way and reconsidering one's beliefs and goals in order to regain consistency among them.

Kelley and Chan (2012, p.201) explained how, in coping with grief, “many people turn to religious resources, perhaps in part because these resources can offer something beyond the limits of this world as people confront crises of meaning” (Pargament, 1997; Pargament and Abu Raiya, 2007). Wortmann, Park, and Edmondson (2011, pp.2-3) said that “most often, religious meaning symptoms provide a helpful vehicle for making sense of seemingly random, nonsensical, or tragic events by seeing them as part of a larger, more benign plan”. Park (2005, p.709) referencing Willig (2001, p.9) explored the applicability of meaning-making to coping with loss “and how people manage certain conditions”:

Appraising the meaning of events such as a loss, threat or challenge, all of which can occur with a bereavement, will determine the extent to which the event is “discrepant” with one's global system of meaning, and decisions regarding what can be done to cope with the event.

Meaning-making is a major contributor to peoples' ability to cope. However, the literature reviewed on meaning-making is predicated on a belief in life after death. As Pargament Olsen, Reilly et al (1992), in Hays and Hendrix (2008, p.338) said, “people do not face stressful life events without bringing with them a system of general beliefs and practices that

affect how they deal and cope with the situation”. Which brings us to the crux of the problem: where does belief in the afterlife come from? It is not instinctive or naturally-occurring, and so must be acquired or formed in some way. The literature adequately addresses the effects and coping mechanisms, but without asking this question and relating the effects of loss to their causes, in particular examining why peoples’ beliefs are discrepant with their experience of loss, there is no evidentiary basis, no starting point for research on coping with loss, and is incomplete.

Another major coping mechanism is Continuing Bonds, described by Pam (2013) as

the emotional connection a grieving individual retains with others long after they're passed.

Meert, Eggy, Kavanagh et al (2015, p.454) identified Continuing Bonds as one of the main coping mechanisms, manifested by reminiscence of the bereaved, sharing of photographs, linking objects, and memorialising the dead person in some way. Field, Gao and Paderna (2005) citing Neimeyer, Baldwin, and Gillies (2006) suggested that “Continuing Bonds are associated with complicated grief only when the bereaved person is unable to make sense of the loss”. As opposed to attempting to explain or justify death “to attach meaning to [their] loss in order to reorganise their lives” (Higgins, 2002), the purpose of Continuing Bonds is to maintain a connection with the person as a means of solace and comfort. As Davies and Park (2012) described, “It is both normal and healthy for the living to maintain their relationship with the deceased after death”, explaining that the task of grieving is to renegotiate a relationship that changes but continues after death. Hughes (2010, p.68) referenced Rahner (1975) in explaining the use of Continuing Bonds to cope with loss: “We meet the living dead in faith, hope and love, when we open our hearts to the silent calm of God’s own self, in which they live”.

Death does not destroy the reality of relationships. Through divine remembrance ... our loved ones are present and accessible to us continually. Dead loved ones remain in our lives as an ongoing presence.

Mitchell and Anderson (1983, p.29) pointed out that “Continuing Bonds are theologically as well as physiologically true. Our attachment to people and things of this world is a continuation of God’s love for creation”. One memorialising device was described by Moreman (2010, p.57) who wrote of loved ones being ‘angels’, perpetuating existence beyond this mortal life, with the ‘angels’ often being ‘sent’ or seen by those left behind.

The angels are spirits, ... they become Angels when they are sent, for the name Angel refers to their office not to their nature.... An Angel is a spirit; in as far as he acts, he is an Angel.

(St. Augustine, in Parente, 1973)

Continuing bonds lie at the heart of Western Christianity, where earthly death is the first step to everlasting life: as Phan (2014) said, “life goes on even after mortal death”. They are an essential component in teaching and understanding death and the afterlife, meeting the objective of inspiring the young with faith and hope in order to cope with loss. For Continuing Bonds as a coping mechanism for dealing with the effects of loss to be effective, a belief in life after death must be held. As Davis (1989, p.42) said, only in the context of such a belief is it possible “even to sketch a theodicy which could conceivably reconcile belief in an all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful God with the manifest evils of earthly existence”. If a belief does not exist a grieving person cannot conceptualise maintaining a bond with the deceased. As with Meaning-making, the literature does not ask the question ‘where does the faith come from?’, leaving the very notion of Continuing Bonds incomplete.

### **3.3 Counselling**

One of the aims of the research is to inform the practice of pastoral bereavement counselling. This section reviews the literature on its contribution to calling on faith to cope with loss.

The challenges to the provision of supportive pastoral bereavement counselling in many ways parallel those of teaching about death and the afterlife, in particular training. Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough and Sandage (1996, p.448) in their empirical research on religion, psychotherapeutic processes and outcomes, described the focus on effects rather than causes.

The acceptance of some role of religion in counselling has ... exploded into the mainstream of counselling and clinical psychology over the last decade.

They described how “training programs [had] produced substantial numbers of religious therapists, who see religious as well as non-religious clients”. Contemporary research shows their 1996 claim to be unsupported: twenty-five years later there remained a deficit in encompassing the role of religion in counselling, despite West (2004, pp.142-153) reporting the emergence of “a new type of psychospiritual practitioner”.

Cashwell and Young (2005, p.3), cited in Thurston, Dyer and Hagedorn (2013, p.71) said “all counsellors, including those who work in secular settings, have an ethical responsibility to use every approach available ... including interventions oriented to promote spiritual development”. Notwithstanding, the literature reviewed showed that a lack of training has contributed to counsellor’s unwillingness or inability to address religious issues in the counselling room, with their being ‘religion-blind’. This has denied the culturally unique experiences of all faiths, and failed to recognise the impact of beliefs on clients' problems.

Feltham (2005, p.35) believed that part of the problem was in “persuading ... accrediting bodies and counsellors themselves to prioritise this [religious/spirituality] learning”. Jafari (2016, p.264) concurred that “there was a ... lack of systematic training offered to trainees. In most cases, training was implemented infrequently”. Jafari reported (p.262) that only a minority of training programmes included a specific training course on religious and spiritual issues.

Davis (2007, p.67) suggested that the lack of inclusion of religion and spirituality in training contributed to what Shafranske and Maloney (1990b) described as “the on-going difficulties experienced by therapists in terms of incorporating their own or clients’ beliefs into practice”. Scott (2013, p.279) also suggested that training courses “could benefit from looking at the belief systems of trainees and how this might affect the counselling process”.

Trainees themselves highlighted a deficiency of education on religious issues or psychological disorders related to religious or spiritual issues (Schulte et al, 2002). They reported not being instructed on how to integrate religious and spiritual interventions into their therapeutic work (Vogel, McMinn, Peterson and Gathercoal, 2013). Florence, McKenzie-Green and Tudor (2019, p.332) citing Barnett and Johnson (2011) agreed: “It has been widely acknowledged that education in R/S [religious/spirituality] issues is lacking in therapist education/training programmes”. As Woodhouse and Hogan (2019, p. 179) said:

Trainees suggested that more training around spirituality would have provided a greater sense of being equipped to deal with the spiritual nature of client explorations.

Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough and Sandage (1996, p.457) encouraged researchers “in the next decade” [from 1996], to determine *why* religion sometimes has positive effects, providing some “tentative answers” including that “religion may stimulate hope” (Scheier and Carver, 1987), and “may also be a spiritual boost that cannot be measured phenomenologically” (Bergin and Payne, 1993). The recommendation aligns with the premise of this thesis, that teaching about death and the afterlife ultimately helps people cope with loss, and mitigates spiritual struggle. However, the research in this subject area demonstrated that little has changed over decades, and a deficiency in training counsellors in religious/spirituality matters remained.

### **3.4 Preparing young children for loss**

The connection between children’s learned faith and using it to cope with loss is the Golden Thread running through this research. This section examines the historical context of spiritual struggle and afterlife beliefs. It was over fifty years ago that Glaser and Strauss (1965, p.3) wrote

Death has been described as a taboo topic for us, and we engage in very little abstract or philosophical discussion of death.

Thirty years later Hemmings (1997, p.31) described the continuing and prevailing taboo of death as it related to children: “it is only natural for caring adults to want to protect [them] from the emotional pain”. The need for protection is unsupported: there is consensus that children are able to learn about death. Papadatou and Papadatos, (1991) reported that “living in the world even as a child exposes one to death-related events, whether or not that fact is recognised by adults or society”. Grollman (1977) maintained that a child is “all too aware of the reality of death. A pet is killed, a funeral procession passes by, a grandfather dies, TV nightly bombards us with death in many forms in glorious colour”. Wells (1988, p.88) similarly reported that:

Most [children] happily accept the concept of heaven. Today, a tiny child can be quietly comforted by imagining a precious parent being in a ‘happy place’ rather than in a hole underground.

The importance of teaching children about death is two-fold: without being taught about death, children cannot be taught about the afterlife. Further, as explained by Corr, Nabe and Corr (1980, p.318) citing Nagy (1948) “The specific forms of any child’s attitudes towards death will relate to the nature of the child’s involvement that helps to shape the child’s interpretation and response to a given experience”. Despite well-evidenced research showing that children can ‘deal’ with death effectively if it is clearly and honestly explained – taught – to them, the prevailing literature retains a focus on insulating them from the realities of life in a worthy but mistaken belief that it is in their interests.

Ridgely Bales (2005) and Miller-McLemore (2006) explored this further, highlighting another deficiency in much of the research on children’s religious education: children being taught from adults’ perspectives and using adults’ views, thoughts and feelings, with little recognition that children have their own perspectives and their own voices. As Corr, Nabe and Corr (1980, p.317) said “children may not always think of death in ways that are identical to adults. This does not mean that such children have no concept of death”. Most literature reviewed has followed this erroneous path, exposing a gap in much of the research that had gone before, and laying it open to challenge. This is made clear in the next section.

When considering bereavement support for children Harrington and Harrison (2001, p.159) found that despite evidence of children’s bereavement support needs “there has been surprisingly little research on bereaved young people”. Ribbens, McCarthy and Jessop (2005, p.2) agreed: “There is a dearth of research on the actual extent of bereavement and its impact on young people at what may be a particularly vulnerable time”.

Ward and Associates (1996, p.3), advocating teaching children about loss and death, pointed out that “the earlier we start dealing with the pain of loss and death the less likely it is to affect [the child]”. While their emphasis was on the general theme of helping children cope with loss from a young age and was not specifically related to religion, they reinforced this

thesis' hypothesis that we do not educate our children adequately to help them cope with loss in later life. This has highlighted a gap in children's education: the inadequacy of general death education preparatory to being taught about the afterlife. In one of the few examples of considering causes and not effects and the contribution of religious education, Ward and Associates (1996, p.4; p.22) said

It is generally accepted that the ability we have to deal with any crisis depends on our preparation for it. The intensity of the grief reaction will depend on their [children's] religious and cultural background.

Higgins (2002, p.188), supported the call to deal with the causes of grief, saying "It is important to identify factors which influence the impact of the loss as well as factors that influence their ability to achieve resolution". The consequences of doing so can be profound: the literature review demonstrated a strong association between religion and health (e.g. Hannay, 1980), with positive effects on factors such as life satisfaction and happiness if faith can be called on to cope (Ellison and Gay, 1990; Poloma and Pendleton, 1990).

The dates of the research referenced in this section tell their own story: calls for death and afterlife education and research on causes as well as effects date from thirty years ago in some cases, but little has been done to move their findings forward.

### **3.5 Afterlife Belief Conflict**

What a person believes or chooses to believe depends greatly on whether "certain religious teachings" allow for an acceptable reconciliation of beliefs with the fact that a loved one has died (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2006, p.112). As the literature review showed, this presented several problems, firstly that many people are unfamiliar with their own religion's specific teachings about the afterlife, even if they consider themselves to be quite religious. Similarly, many people misinterpret teachings, sometimes influenced by social factors such as the popularity of communication with the dead or near-death experiences. Further, these teachings may aim to provide or expect a level of acceptance or reconciliation with the loss which cannot be reconciled with the actual effects felt by the bereaved person.

The conflict between beliefs and reality was found to be common, described by Walters (1997, p.140) as "creating havoc in the bereavement process of any Christians whose faith ought to be a resource and not a complicating factor in their grief":

Such a belief system is likely to create a predisposition to complicated grief: the effect of that system cannot be ignored as an element in the process of grief.

Conflict and denial have been features of coping with loss: pre-existing hopeful, positive beliefs can be challenged by bereavement. Shear, Denny, Crawford et al (2006, p.175) suggested that after a bereavement questions abounded, and faith “swings on a pendulum between belief and doubt”. The Catholic theologian and writer C.S. Lewis (1960, p.5) struggled to integrate the painful experience of his loss with his beliefs:

Meanwhile, where is God? Go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.

C.S. Lewis’ experience describes ABC. In his case, Meaning-making and establishing Continuing Bonds was the path ultimately followed to reconciliation of his loss with his beliefs. C. S. Lewis’ experience of transforming the understanding of the divine from a loving, all-powerful Being to a loving, but limited God, is not untypical. Kushner explained the problem he had encountered:

I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason. We can turn to Him for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are.

(1992, p.134).

Walters (1997, p.170) explained that “In Lewis we find that a belief in death and resurrection is perfectly compatible with the full expression of grief”, showing that despite the challenges presented, the Golden Thread could remain intact, once beliefs had been adapted to fit the need. The experiences of Lewis and Kushner suggested that it is possible to address the misunderstandings that exist between expectation and reality, though for them to do so required the causes of their conflict to be understood and resolved.

A literature search has revealed little published material relating to whether challenges to a bereaved person’s established or ‘learned’ system of afterlife belief are contributing factors to ABC. Chapple, Swift and Ziebland (2011, p.3) alone made an indirect reference to the Golden Thread when explaining the importance of non-compromised afterlife beliefs: “Beliefs may be central to bereavement and coping: what people believe about the possibility of an afterlife or continued attachment will inform the meaning of death for the bereaved”.

Burke, Neimeyer, McDevitt-Murphy et al (2011, p.290) highlighted the deficiency in current research. They made reference to the “prospect of divine solace or spiritual reunion with loved ones after death”, pointing out that any compromise to this such as a conflict between beliefs and the reality of the loss can result in “acute separation distress that could undermine one’s relationship to God and to one’s religious community”. This raised several issues typical of the literature reviewed, one of which was that the ‘prospect of divine solace’ pre-supposes belief in the afterlife without considering the source of that belief. Lewis and



Kushner were able to call on their faith to ultimately cope with their loss through Meaning-making and Continuing Bonds, presumably what Burke et al term 'compromise'. Their research reported the effects of ABC, but made no mention of any possible causes of "acute separation distress".

As Park and Benore (2004, p.40) wrote "There is essentially no research literature to inform us as to even the most basic issue of whether beliefs do indeed influence appraisal, coping, and adjustment processes". The literature review suggests the situation is unchanged.

### **3.6 Challenges to the effective teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife**

This section focuses on the taboo nature of death and the afterlife, revealing what lies behind some of the modern-day attitudes surrounding the subject.

#### **3.6.1 Taboo - background**

F. Mitterand (1916-1996), president of France from 1981 to 1995, wrote:

How should one die?

We live in a world which dreads the question, and which turns away from it. Earlier civilisations looked death straight in the face. ... Never perhaps has our relationship with death been so poor as in these times of spiritual barrenness, where human beings ... seem to sidestep the mystery.

(Preface, in M. de Hennezel, *La Mort intime: Ceux qui vont mourir nous apprennent a vivre*)  
(1995, p.9)

In many ways, death is hidden or removed from the lives of most people, having been gradually moved out of the family home and out of the mainstream of life, demonstrated by peoples' unwillingness even to name it. Corr, Nabe and Corr (1980, pp.86-87) described the use of euphemistic language: "In contemporary Western society people often go to great lengths to avoid saying words like 'dead' and 'dying'. Terms such as 'passed away', 'lost', and 'gone', are commonly used when discussing death", McConnell, Moules, McCaffrey and Raffin-Bouchal (2012) suggesting this was designed to conceal the reality of death. Lakoff and Turner (1989) meanwhile noted that references to death as departure were common:

Life is conceived as a journey where birth is arrival, life is being present here, and death is departure e.g. "She passed away", "He's gone", "She's left us", "He's no longer with us", "She's been taken from us".

The remoteness of death and unclear use of language can make the grieving process difficult for children to understand, and can strengthen the 'unmentionable' nature of death, establishing attitudes towards death that often influence future encounters. Use of avoidant language and the insulation of children from death can be influential in the teaching of death and the afterlife to children and can affect their understanding. For those with a faith,

perhaps even a need, to believe that there is an afterlife, having an inadequate education in the subject would only compound this.

The 'death' word itself is a taboo, defined by Walter (1991, p.295) as "referring to something prohibited, forbidden by custom rather than law". The emphasis in this section on the taboo nature of death and the afterlife is because, as Gorer (1965), cited in Badham and Ballard (1996) said, it is "rapidly being recognised as being of central human significance". Gorer claimed (p.171) that death had replaced sex as the taboo subject of the twentieth century, becoming "an aspect of human experience that is treated as inherently shameful or abhorrent, so that it can never be discussed or referred to openly".

The taboo nature of death and the afterlife is seen as one of the main obstacles to the successful teaching and use of faith for coping with loss. It is ironic that society can talk openly about almost any subject, yet the one thing that we all share – that we die – is the one most avoided. As Phan (2014, p.15) said, it is "one of the deep ironies of our time that medically, we now have more scientific information than ever on how dying occurs as a physiological process, and yet culturally, we also are more than ever reluctant to talk about it". Kennedy, Gardner and Farrelly (2020, pp.138-9) agreed: "in Western societies any explicitness about death, dying and bereavement is silenced or sequestered" (McGovern and Barry, 2000; Galende, 2015; Kellehear, 2014). Death instigates fear and social avoidance and people "commonly view death education as a morbid affair" (Kellehear, 2014, p.221). Schoemaker and Tetlock, (2012) observed that the avoidance of taboo subjects leaves people underprepared when they are faced with connected situations, the main premise of this research .

Death is a particularly taboo subject for children. Corr, Nabe and Corr (1980, p. 317) said "many messages tell children that death is not an acceptable topic for discussion and they are not permitted to take part in death-related events", regardless of the fact that death and bereavement are experiences that all children encounter from a young age. Elias (1985, p.18) wrote "Nothing is more characteristic of the present-day attitude to death than the reluctance of adults to acquaint children with the facts of death". Taking a different perspective, Puolimatka and Solasaari (2006) and Jackson and Colwell (2001) suggested that because adults often think discussing death and the afterlife with children would encourage them to think about it, causing unnecessary upset, it becomes a closed subject, resulting in many people's knowledge and understanding of it being determined by the protection offered to children. As children learn from adults, if these issues are not talked about they perpetuate the taboo around death, passing from adult to child and continuing across generations.

This point was supported by Adams and Deveau (1995) who suggested that because children have limited exposure to death until older age due to increasing life expectancy, children were not being armed with the tools and experiences they needed to help them cope with loss. Jackson and Colwell (2002) and Adams and Deveau (1995) agreed that because the death taboo was being maintained, it was affecting children's ability to cope when someone dies (Smith and Hunter 2008; Monroe and Kraus 2005).

If children are not allowed access to information or rituals surrounding death and the afterlife they cannot develop a full understanding of what they mean, and so death becomes not a normal experience but abnormal and fearful. Exclusion of children from the topic of death has also led to *their* exclusion, for the most part, from research on death and the afterlife, leading to a gap in the understanding of how children interact with the taboo nature of the subject.

### **3.6.2 Societal changes**

The teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife cannot be seen in isolation of societal changes that play an influential role in its delivery. What is perceived as an increasingly secular society in the UK brings particular challenges which are reviewed in this section.

The Catholic Church's position on atheism and secularism foregrounds the literature review on atheism, as set out in Second Vatican Council (1965) 1: 19-22 – see Appendix 2 *Glossary*. The Council's Constitution is foundational for many of the challenges identified. Atheism is an obstacle to the successful use of faith to cope with loss: this section reviews literature on its origins and impact on teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife.

The general dearth of sociological research on atheism, understood here in the general sense of 'a lack of belief in a God or gods', is well documented. As Bainbridge (2005) said "Any wide-ranging theory of religion needs to be tested with evidence not only about religion itself, but also about its absence. By learning more about the lack of faith, we can understand better the role of faith in modern society". Calling for more research on the subject, Bullivant (2008, p.363) said: "Historically, atheism has been neglected by the social sciences. This is particularly unfortunate".

In the absence of research of the topic, the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife have been compromised, leaving space for religion itself to be challenged. Rey (2000, p.4) typified such a challenge. "Many of otherwise outlandish religious claims derive an air of legitimacy from their reliance on a specific set of usually archaic tests, whose claims are presented dogmatically. The texts standardly serve as the sole basis for various claims that are regarded as essentially un-contestable". Adams (2003) echoed the view:

Here is an idea or notion that you're not allowed to say anything bad about: you're just not. Why not? – Because you're not!

Religion, atheism and philosophy have been strange bedfellows for almost a century, sometimes (almost) in agreement. Delahaye (2013, pp.2-3) said,

Religion has always been an important topic for philosophers. Both for Kierkegaard (1941) “whose philosophy would be unthinkable without religion” as well as for Marx, who was one of the first critics of religion, religion is on the philosophical agenda.

Ducasse (1961) cited in Moreman (2010, pp.2-3) surmised that there was no *a priori* reason to disregard the possibility of some form of survival beyond bodily death:

Some form after death is *theoretically possible* since analysis of the supposition of such persistence finds no contradiction implicit in it; and *empirically possible* since that supposition is not inconsistent with any definitely known empirical fact.

Heidegger (2004) in Wolfe (2013, pp.4-5), whose view was that “death must be understood as ‘pure’ possibility”, modelled the idea of ‘being unto death’ on theological descriptions of original sin, coined in line with Kierkegaard’s (1941) ‘sickness-unto-death’. Kierkegaard (1941), said

the Church should not try to prove Christianity or even defend it. It should help the single individual to make a “leap of faith”, the faith that God is love and has a task for that very same single individual.

It is a confusing and inconsistent picture, and one that makes teaching understandings about death and the afterlife more difficult than perhaps it should be. It is not helped by religion’s persuasiveness that has seen atheists move between an atheistic stance and one that instead accepts and believes in religion and the afterlife, or at least attempts to understand it. Flew (2009), preceding Dawkins (1993, 2006) as ‘the most notorious atheist in the world’, moved from atheism to theism, saying “if a cradle Roman Catholic believes that the universe has a beginning, then acceptance of the big bang surely does provide empirical confirmation of that belief”. Some years later Flew announced that he had come to believe in God: he “simply had to go where the evidence leads”, confirming that to him “the case for God is now much stronger than it ever was before”. Dawkins (2006, p.125) was compelled to point out, “There are some genuine specimens of good scientists who are sincerely religious in the full, traditional sense”.

Bullivant (2008, p.364) pointed out that “atheists rarely constitute more than a small, diffused proportion of a given population”. Nevertheless, while in the minority, atheism offers a strong challenge to the effective teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. Because of ongoing and well-publicised debates, children today are faced with contradictory theological and philosophical arguments that influence even Church leaders, Policymakers and Educators. As Davies (2017, p.242) pointed out,

the very fact that the British Humanist Association happily furnishes ritual performers is of profound significance for the study of death, ritual and belief. It shows that death is something that cannot be left without comment and attention, irrespective of whether people adhere to religious views of the world or not.

Secularism too is a challenge to religion. Davies (2017, p. 242) explained the relevance of increasing secularism to this thesis' research:

Secularisation is one background factor that makes the relationship between death and established forms of religion of compelling interest, for if death and religions have been inextricably associated within the majority of cultures, what is to be said about contexts in which secularisation influences increasing number of individuals?.

Dawkins (2006, pp.49-50) saw religion as being in unfairly high regard in comparison to secularism in Britain. He wrote "I am intrigued and mystified by the disproportionate privileging of religion in our otherwise secular societies; what is so special about religion that we grant it such uniquely privileged respect?". Badham (2013, p.12) suggested that "the dominance of a naturalistic understanding of life is a primary reason why the idea of life after death is simply a non-starter for many secular thinkers". As Moreman (2008, p.2) pointed out, in an increasingly secular and materialistic world, religious ideology has in fact come to be viewed in many circles with utter contempt.

Concerns about secularism were substantiated by the National Centre for Social Research (2019a), which commented (p.1) "trust in religious institutions is waning; there is indeed a crisis of trust in Britain today". Statistics on religion in Britain support secularism's increasing presence. The National Centre for Social Research (2019b, p.21) reported "compelling evidence that the process of secularisation continues unabated. Britain is becoming more secular". They pointed out however (ibid.) that "secularisation should not be interpreted as a growth in intolerance, indeed the reverse appears to be true".

The '*Religion losing faith?*' survey (National Centre for Social Research, 2018) evidenced that the decline of religious beliefs and affiliation over the past three decades is likely to continue. It found that half of respondents do not regard themselves as belonging to a particular religion, and that nearly two-thirds (64%) of those aged 18–24 do not belong to a religion. The survey found that more than half (56%) of those who belong to or were brought up in a religion never attend religious services or meetings, and that one in three (31%) in 1983 did not belong to a religion, compared with one in two (50%) now. Affiliation with the Church of England has halved since 1983 (from 40% to 20%). This change – which is likely to continue – was explained by the survey as due to generational replacement, with older, more religious, generations dying out and being replaced by less religious generations.

'Generational replacement' is a worrying development – if parents do not set an example by taking their child to church or supporting lessons learned in Religious Education, that child

will be 'lost', as will their children be in turn. In support of the survey's findings, media reports have documented moves away from traditional religious education:

- 'Humanists given voice in shaping Religious education' (*BBC News*, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2018) reported that bodies such as humanists felt excluded.
- 'Religious education needs overhaul to reflect UK' (*The Guardian*, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2018) 'Significant shifts in the UK since the Education Act 1944 mean changes to the way religion and belief is taught in schools to reflect modern Britain are long overdue'.
- 'Nicky Morgan's Trojan Horse could lead to collapse of Religious Studies' (*The Telegraph*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2015) reported moves by the British Humanist Society to include humanism in the study of religious education. Some success was achieved by those lobbying for its inclusion, for example the High Court ruled that the Education Secretary had unlawfully excluded atheism from a new GCSE.

Religion has to contend with tensions between religion and science, which contribute to the growing secularism in modern society and are an obstacle to the effective utilisation of faith to cope. The National Centre for Social Research (2019a), in the latest survey available at the time of writing, reported (p.3) that "the majority of the public believe that science and technology are a force for good both now and in the future, in contrast to faith and religion". This supported a report by the Wellcome Trust (2009), on peoples' sense of the relative importance of science.

Moreman (2008, p.2) reported that "Materialism denies any form of a life after death, arguing vehemently against all notions that seem to contradict present scientific theory, or that cannot be somehow tested in a strict laboratory setting". Phan (2014, p.29) agreed: "Belief in the afterlife, though well-nigh universal among religious people, is being severely challenged by our contemporary mindset, which is inclined to reject anything that cannot be scientifically tested and unified". The search for 'answers' has gained momentum in an increasingly secular society. Kelly pointed out (2006, pp.68-9) that in a world of rapidly growing technologies, new psychological and sociological insights were being gained, and that an understanding of "matter and energy, space and time, and the web of relationships in which we exist" has developed significantly. Kelly saw these developments as contributing to the evolution and understanding of death and the afterlife for years to come, requiring inclusion in its teaching.

Moreman (2008, pp.7-8) agreed:

It is hoped through the analysis of scientific investigation and centuries of philosophical thought on the topic that some synthesis might be formed that will bring us closer to an understanding of what lies beyond the threshold of death while we remain in the world of the living.

Moreman (2008, pp.2-3) countered the science argument, saying that “regardless of scientific scepticism, or perhaps due to the hollowness of it, billions of people worldwide embrace established religions and hold strong beliefs in such abstract concepts as life after death”. A survey by the National Centre for Social Research (2019a, p.10) confirmed this:

It is tempting to argue that we have become a secular nation. [In fact] religion may be declining, but it is also diversifying and deepening.

It is a difficult area to navigate. Badham (2013), described how

advances in scientific and medical understanding of the physical basis of personality had influenced belief in life after death, challenging faith by analytical philosophy and from modern astronomical findings about the vastness of the universe.

Religion has never rejected science: rather, it challenges it when it denies the existence of God and religious teachings. As Saint Pope John Paul II (1994, p.13) explained, there are “a multitude of situations in which man searches for the significance and the meaning of his own existence”. Saint Pope John Paul II accepted that “the intellect is the most marvellous of God’s creations, but that does not mean that we must give in to a unilateral rationalism”. He recognised the challenge, the opportunity for man to take a different path, and for philosophers and psychoanalysts to come up with alternative theories and approaches. Acknowledging that man had come to rely more on science, Saint Pope John Paul II (p.34) argued that

If God is a “knowable” object, he is so on the basis of man’s experience, both of the visible world and his interior world. But contemporary man has rediscovered the sacred, even if he does not know how to identify it.

Watson (1992, pp.145-164) similarly argued that science owed a debt to religion, making an argument for their co-existence in education, which seemed to be the way the debate was moving: “Physical explanations of the origins of the universe are not alternatives (logically) to explanations of divine activity and purpose. They are of different types, and may in principle be compatible with each other”. Watson also linked religion and science, saying “facts, interpretations and beliefs arise within both science and religion, making the popular view, ‘science is facts, religion is faith’, simplistic. ‘Interpretation’ does not license just *any* view; it must be consistent with the data”.

Notwithstanding the arguments for their co-existence, science presents a challenge to religion and consequently to teaching children about death and the afterlife. Whereas, as Madge (1965, p.106) said, “a sense of the mysterious should surely present opportunities for

the integration of religious and scientific attitudes”, in reality science continues in its long-standing contest with religion. Children are confronted with, and confused by, the arguments put forward under the banner of science, and clarity is needed if the eschatological message is to be effectively delivered.

The literature supported a dualistic, co-existing approach to better serve the Church, Policymakers and Educators, and align with the use of non-religious education subjects as a means of teaching the subject. Hughes (2010, p.91) attempted to strike such a balance between the competing camps of religion and science, supporting the idea of ‘planting the seeds’ of faith:

With recent psychological and social scientific research detailing how altruistic actions have a close relationship with our wellbeing and happiness, perhaps we can begin to reclaim something of the “reap and sow” principle; evidence suggests that religious people are generally happier and more fulfilled than those with no faith.

Badham (2013, p.vii) also sought a compromise between religion and science, proposing a “contemporary dualism of mind and body that can fully accept all the modern science, telling us about the ways our thoughts and feelings are correlated with physical factors”, maintaining that belief in God was consistent with modern physics. Taking a similarly inclusive approach, Phan (2014, p.6) said, “[Religion] expands and enriches scientific knowledge and human reason with new insights and understandings”. Phan supported the inclusion of science in the debate, saying (ibid.) “A different kind of knowledge, no less important and useful than empirical knowledge, is needed, one that comes from the so-called human sciences such as, above all, religious studies and theology”. Phan (pp.6-7) said “religious knowledge is not to be seen as a competitor to science”, while acknowledging (p.29) that “belief in an afterlife, though well-nigh universal among religious people, is being severely challenged by our contemporary mindset, which is inclined to reject anything that cannot be scientifically tested and unified”. Phan suggested that with a sound argument religion/spirituality and science could allow the benefits and advantages of both to be gained, without the denigration of one by the other.

Badham (2013, p.13) concluded that “to succeed in making sense of immortality, one must not only show why Christian hope matters, but also how the challenge of this naturalistic world-view can be met”. Moreman (2008, pp.2-3) meanwhile countered the perceived challenge of ‘hard science’ when he said, as previously reported “regardless of scientific scepticism, or perhaps due to the hollowness of it, billions of people worldwide embrace established religions”.

A challenge to children’s teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is ‘medicalisation and sanitisation’, first described by Aries (1981) as the “medicalisation of



death in Western society". Gawande (2015), said "in the past few decades, medical science has rendered obsolete centuries of experience, tradition, and language about our mortality and created a new difficulty for mankind: how to die". The medicalisation and professionalisation/privatisation of death, together with the associated 'sanitisation' where death is distanced from society in general and the family in particular, are all part of the shift in the way contemporary society deals with death. Badham and Ballard (1996, p.11) claimed,

The medical professions, through their skills and the structures of modern medicine, are caught up in and contribute to the shaping of modern attitudes to death.

The marginalisation of death where funeral practices are now more typically undertaken by funeral directors who 'manage' the entire process from death to burial, further distances the grieving from the bereaved. Gorer (1965) called this the privatisation of death, Phan describing it more vividly (2014, p.16):

Death is safely tucked away from society, invisible and unthreatening, at best an inconvenience for the living, at worst an interruption of our frantic endeavour to secure our "unalienable rights such as Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness".

Potts (2013, p.104), describing the issue of medicalisation of death and bereavement in the context of bereaved children, found that "the role of [bereavement] support [was directed] towards the school nurse. This typified the medicalisation of bereavement issues where the inclination to pathologize grief conveniently absolved other professions of responsibility".

### **3.7 Summary of chapter**

By identifying theories, trends and gaps in the literature, justification is established for a study into one cause of Afterlife Belief Conflict – inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife as a means of coping with loss. The author has sharpened the focus to clarify and confirm the research proposition, and defined the areas of study.

The literature review established that the majority of research undertaken to-date, while worthy and well-executed, was mis-directed and failed to delve further into findings, focusing on symptoms – effects - rather than predictors or causes of ABC. This perpetuated a misbalance in research. It also showed that little has changed: identifying possible solutions to issues raised has not led to their implementation. In its undertaking, the review identified reasons for non-achievement of adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, though not for lack of action on the implementation of solutions.

The review concluded with the elaboration of challenges faced by people in being able to call on their faith in resurrection and eternal life, challenges that also applied to the effective delivery of bereavement counselling. These demonstrated a consistent tension between religious education and other competing factors such as science, atheism, and pluralism, tensions that in some cases had their roots in centuries past. Each challenge was supported

by relevant literature, providing clarity on why they presented obstacles to the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. In seeking to determine what religion contributes to addressing spiritual struggle arising from a loss, extensive evidence was identified as to its potential to address effects. However, no research was located that identified the inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife as a cause of Afterlife Belief Conflict.

The literature review had three findings, firstly, that the focus was almost exclusively on the effects of loss, and not its causes. Secondly, the literature reviewed did not ask why effects arose, regardless of whether the outcome had been positive or negative. In not doing so, it failed to connect cause and effect by tracking the outcome back to its source or cause. Finally, by not connecting cause and effect it failed to consider an approach of 'prevention not cure' through provision of adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. The purpose of this review was to support the notion that inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife to cope with loss is an undiscovered or underdeveloped area of research. Given the findings of the review this is believed to be confirmed, differentiating teaching understandings about death and the afterlife from other causes or contributing factors to ABC.

To conclude, alongside the exposition of the Golden Thread, what makes this research unique is the consideration of its challenges in totality, with their interactions with each other taken into account, whereas the literature reviewed focused on a single such challenge. Without this overarching view of all challenges their real impact cannot be seen objectively.

As this thesis demonstrates, the Golden Thread exists – or can exist, if obstacles can be mitigated or overcome. The obstacles - challenges - described in this chapter will be elaborated on in the next chapter, covering the process of teaching and understanding death and the afterlife in primary school. The chapter will contextualise the challenges faced in the stages of delivery: what the Church and Policymakers want taught, what is actually taught by Educators, and what children learn and understand. In doing so, the thesis will move towards answering the research question 'What do Roman Catholic children today know and understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife'.

## CHAPTER FOUR      QUESTION 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 4.1 Introduction

**Question 2:** *What is delivered through the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, and how?*

In the spirit of practical theology, attendant to the identification of the Golden Thread is determination of what is needed to establish and maintain it, by addressing the challenges identified in previous chapters. This review examined literature on the challenges' origins and characteristics, identifying opportunities for mitigating or overcoming them. The chapter places the challenges in the context of the 'process' involved in the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in primary school. It covers a wide spectrum encompassing the contemporary political scene that Church leaders and Policymakers operate in, what is taught and how the subject is delivered, and what children understand.

In an approach untypical of literature reviews, this chapter does not focus on strengths and weaknesses of individual works, whether books, journal articles or research findings. The focus is instead on fractures between the stages of delivery of religious education, showing how the aims and objectives of church leaders are not fully enacted by policymakers. In turn, policy directives are compared and contrasted with what is delivered by educators. It is in the 'process' that it is believed any shortfalls or deficiencies will be identified.

### 4.2 Study 2 literature review: What do church leaders and policymakers want taught?

This section examined the aims of Church leaders and Policymakers in teaching about death and the afterlife. The terms religious education and the teaching and understandings of death and the afterlife are conflated such that where religious education is discussed, it encompasses the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife.

The section comprises three parts: direction given by Church leaders; translation by Policymakers of church guidance and legal requirements into an operable policy/curriculum; and 'Policy versus practice': identification of tensions and variations between what is required and what is implemented.

#### 4.2.1 Direction by Church leaders

While the majority of what is described in this section relates to policy on the delivery of Religious Education in Catholic faith schools, much can be generalised to other faiths.

The direction on the content of Religious Education curricula in faith schools comes from Church leaders, the starting point being the overarching message of faith in death and resurrection. In Community schools, curricula are determined at Local Authority level, with church input into the faith aspect of Religious Education. Hemming (2011, p.1063) explained that:

Britain, and many other European countries ... maintain an official link between church and state, and allow religion to play a role in the education systems.

Belief in death and resurrection sits at the heart of Religious Education. As Kelty (1999, p.17) explained, “belief in the world to come is one of the most enduring and powerful forces in the belief system”. This belief is shared by the majority of faiths represented in Britain. Pasco and Redford (1988, pp.258-261) stated the essence of Catholic belief:

Christian Faith professes much more than simply the survival of the soul after death. First, we believe in the resurrection of the body, that is, of the whole person.

Badham and Ballard (1996, pp.168-9) generalised this message beyond Christianity:

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, human life is precious because these religions hold that human life is ultimately the creation of an all-powerful and all-loving God whose loving purpose cannot be defeated by death. Life is seen as the first stage on our journey towards God.

The Church has been faced by challenges and tensions for many years, both internal and external. Walsh (2019, pp.22-23) described how “rigidities in Catholic theology ... persisted for decades and were finally addressed only through the Second Vatican Council”. One motivation for holding the Council was that “there is no moving on from a locked-in mental attitude unless we wholeheartedly embrace the notion of historical conditioning”. The church recognised the need to modernise, to move with the times, while not losing the essential message of the Resurrection. St Pope John XXII, in his opening address to the Council,

made a distinction between *what* the Council believes and *the manner* of its expression: “One thing is the deposit of faith, which consists of the truths contained in sacred doctrine, another thing is the manner of presentation, always however with the same meaning and signification”.

(Walsh, 2019)

The Church acknowledged that its beliefs were being challenged and its position as leader to over one billion Catholics was under threat. Saint Pope John Paul II (1994, p.31) though he was not Pope at the time said at the start of Vatican II “The Pope recognises the challenge, the opportunity for man to take a different path, for philosophers and psychoanalysts to come up with alternative theories and approaches”, and that (p.34) “man has come to rely

more on facts and evidence, on science, cognitive realism". He nevertheless remained confident that faith would ultimately prevail and call people back to the central message of salvation, despite the decline in the numbers of people describing themselves as Christian (see e.g. Bullivant, 2018, pp.3-5).

The Church does not hold the moral high ground it once had, for reasons such as secularism and atheism. Its role as spiritual and moral leader has been threatened by controversies that have occurred over recent decades, primarily the abuse of children. As Lofton (2017, p.2) reported,

In 2017, Pope Francis wrote "An awareness of sin helps us to acknowledge the errors. The crimes and the wounds caused in the past allow us, in the present, to be more open and committed along a journey of renewed conversion".

Reporting of children's abuse persists, continuing to undermine the Church's ability to be seen as an valid body to deliver the message of faith. At the time of writing this thesis the *BBC News* reported (5<sup>th</sup> October 2021) that 'French Catholic priests abused 216,000 victims since 1950'. Lofton (p.5), cited Orsi, a leading figure in the exposure of the abuse scandal (see e.g. Orsi, 2019; Orsi and Davis, 2019) saying

It is in such hot cultural moments when old orders give way and what is ahead remains unclear—that we see what matters most in a religious world.

The significance of this is as Groome (1996) described: "the spiritual and moral are inseparably allied to each other and to religious belief". Lofton (2017) explained that "'religion' as a category has no meaning if it is merely saved to designate ideal practice; it is a term that summarizes failure and fulfilment of prescribed relations". This truism affected the ability of faith schools generally to establish and maintain moral and religious standards. As Hemming (2011, p.1074) concluded, "the role of religion in public life [is] a contradictory and contested process".

It is understandable that given the major challenges facing the Church, attention to individual problems such as the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife assumed a lower priority, strengthening the obstacles that contributed to its inadequate delivery.

#### **4.2.2 Policymaking**

Hemming (2011) cited Berger (1999) saying "religion and state politics are often intensely intertwined, even if they are not presented as such". There has long been a tension between the policy objectives of the church and those of the state, a balance between meeting legislative requirements and accomplishing the avowed aims of church leaders being difficult

to achieve, and affecting the delivery of religious education. As Watson (2006, p.255), citing Charis (1996, p.v) said

Somewhere, the pupil as a whole person is in danger of getting lost beneath the demands of all these outside constraints.

One difficulty in reconciling the competing demands was the legislative separation of religion and spirituality. The National Curriculum Council (1993) declared that it “had no expectation that the spiritual and moral development of children was predicated on religious or any other particular belief system”, effectively side-lining religion as a formative factor in children’s development. This was challenged by the Church who saw them as inseparably tied to each other. Johnson and Castelli (2000, p.78) reported,

This understanding of the nature of Catholic education rests on one of the fundamental aspects of the Church’s teaching. It is the insistence ... that the human and divine are inseparable.

(Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 1995, p.10)

The moral code enshrined in the Catholic Bishops’ Conference document on spiritual and moral development (1995) implicitly understood that its leadership played a key role in it. Taking its direction from the Second Vatican Council, the Conference made clear that “leadership within a Catholic school is defined by a particular faith tradition and a distinctive culture” (Flannery, 1996). This had to be reconciled with legislated policy such as Ofsted’s (1995, 2015) which identified pupils’ Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development as an area for inspection, enabling external judgements on the quality of education provided. As reported by Johnson and Castelli (2000, p.80) the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales (1995) directed how Catholic schools should interpret this:

Religious education is not just one subject among many, but the foundation of the entire educational process. The beliefs and values it communicates should inspire and draw together every aspect of the school.

This established the foundation of policymaking for Religious Education in Catholic schools. More generally, supporting the role and importance of religious education, Jackson (2001, pp.5-6) made the point that any increase in the number of faith schools

ought to be balanced by a stronger and clearer recognition that religious education in state funded Community schools, where the vast majority of pupils are taught, plays a key role in promoting religious literacy and inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding.

With regard to content in Religious Education, Walshe and Copley (2001, p.32) citing Brown (1992), pointed out that “agreed syllabuses for RE have in recent years looked at the practices of Christianity ... with a marked lack of any theological exploration of the beliefs that underlie these practices”. They argued that “a broader understanding of Jesus is needed, one which takes more careful account of his significance for Christians and for members of other world faiths”. This acknowledged the legislative requirement (Education Reform Act, 1988) that primary schools had a legal obligation to provide daily collective worship that is ‘wholly, or mainly, of a broadly Christian character’. Walshe and Copley

(2001, pp.33-34) reported, however, that many syllabuses “did not do justice to what must be considered some of the most basic Christian beliefs” and “were noticeably absent from (almost all) syllabuses”. Watson (2006, p.253), citing White (1988) agreed:

Spiritual development is routinely presented as being about protecting a set of educational values seen as vital for holistic human development, and perceived as having been devalued or *ignored* in the National Curriculum.

Watson pointed out (*ibid.*, pp.260-1) that “[Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004a, 2005a-b)] raised concerns about future attentiveness to children and young people’s spirituality”, a concern that was to be realised. Hemming (2015, p.50) reported that “despite [this] legally enshrined place for religion and spirituality in schools, more recent government messages have taken some of the emphasis away from these elements of school life”. Hemming reported that many schools “shy away from providing overtly religious assemblies, in spite of their legal obligations, instead focusing on ethical values”.

Policymakers’ attempts to strike the balance in religious education content between church and state were not helped by the absence in key legislation (Children Act 2004; UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [United Nations, 1989]; Every Child Matters [DFES 2005b]), of any explicit reference to children and young peoples’ spirituality or religion (Schweizer, 2005, cited in Watson 2006, p 260). As Watson pointed out (2006),

Stating that spirituality is important is not the same as stating what spirituality is; this is an educational concept that has been notoriously vague and characterised, for instance, as “conceptually adrift” (White, 1994, p.369) and an “ill-defined holdall” (Copley, 2000, p.9).

Hemming (2018, p.154), on the tensions between church and state, said

One theme that has been relatively unexplored in the literature on children’s rights and education is religion and the role it plays in everyday school life, an issue that has relevance [to] religion.

Such tensions have contributed to the fluid and inconsistent content of religious education in Britain, ultimately reflected in the religiosity of educators and parents and, consequently, children. This had far-reaching implications for teaching and understanding death and the afterlife, and the ability to call on faith to cope with loss: individuals who received inadequate education lost that ability.

### 4.2.3 Policy versus practice

In this section challenges are described that explain the gap between the policy and practice of teaching about death and the afterlife. Hemming (2018) reported

Values in church schools do not always match how they are enacted in practice, with narrow academic and behavioural goals sometimes trumping wider religious concerns.

Tensions between state and church are not the only contributors to a gap between what was planned and what was achieved. Jackson (2001, p.4) introduced another factor:

Church schools [require] the establishment and maintenance of their Christian character, partly through the selection of teachers and a tightening of admissions criteria (Archbishops' Council, 2001).

Recruitment of teachers against the criteria set by the Archbishop's Council - being of the same faith as that of the school - and having qualifications suitable for teaching the faith to the standards set, had become increasingly difficult. The numbers of people practising religion had declined dramatically, and teaching of religious education in training colleges fell short of what was required, making it difficult to "maintain the distinctive ethos and atmosphere of the school's religious foundation" Jackson (2001, p.5). Walbank (2012, p.175) explained its significance:

in contemporary times, it is how a school proclaims the nature of its Catholicity that makes it distinctive.

In conclusion, having reviewed the literature for Study 2 'What do Church leaders and Policymakers want taught' it can be seen that there is a complex historical, societal and legal framework within which direction and policy has to be enacted, making aims difficult to achieve. Taken in combination with the challenges expanded on in this section, achievement of aims and objectives by church leaders and policymakers are at times severely restricted by the challenges presented. Notwithstanding, Church leaders and Policymakers continue to fight for their place in the delivery of religious education.



### **4.3 Study 3 Literature review: What is delivered through formal religious education?**

This is the last of the studies designed to show the 'flow' of teaching about death and the afterlife in primary schools, from church directives, through Policymakers, to those delivering education. Literature was reviewed on the teaching of formal Religious Education, enabling a comparison to be made between what Church leaders and Policymakers wanted taught, and what was actually delivered.

#### **4.3.1 Teaching and understanding death and the afterlife: How and what to teach**

When considering how to teach about death and the afterlife, McCreery, Palmer and Voiels (2008, p.7) explained that several factors influenced pedagogies for teaching the subject:

Discussions about the best way to teach RE draw on research in the area of religious studies as well as research in the classroom, but the resultant pedagogies often reflect the particular understanding of faith and interests of the proponent.

Chater and Erricker (2013, p.37) wrote of how *not* to teach Religious education, saying "it has long been known that a content-led approach simply induces boredom, apathy or hostility. ... However, many local syllabuses, and therefore many lessons ... repeat this pattern". They recommended (pp.49-50) that

it is absolutely necessary for teachers to understand why they are doing it – not just the aims for a lesson, not even the overall aims of the subject, but its rationale. The commonest version of this rationale is in the national framework for RE.

Cush (2007, p.217) took a broader view of teaching Religious Education, saying that a separate subject, taught by specialist teachers, "is the most likely to achieve the aim of ... mutual understanding and peace between diverse religious and cultural traditions". Cush (ibid., pp.224-5) pointed out weaknesses in Religious Education's current location in the curriculum where it had the potential to become separated from the rest of the curriculum in an "RE ghetto". Cush believed (p.226) that research and experience

demonstrated that the best way in which religious education can respond to the increasing impact of religious plurality [is] to provide discrete religious education within the compulsory school curriculum – addressing religion within the context of other school subjects will always be second best.

Madge (1965), however, advocated for a broad range of subjects to be used in primary school to teach religious education, instead of it being a standalone subject. This was some years ahead of educationalists such as Hargreaves (1994, cited in Jackson, 2004), who proposed that in an increasingly secular society, where religion was a minority interest in the

21<sup>st</sup> century, religious studies did not merit a whole curriculum subject to itself. Holland (1993, p.45) similarly proposed an approach of 'preparation not cure', describing a proactive approach of incorporating death in a diversity of topics such as life cycles. Holland explained that this would help children "reach a greater understanding of death and loss [and] achieve better coping mechanisms in preparation for their own inevitable losses later on in life". Madge (1965, p.80) focused on the association between science and religion, describing younger children's "compulsion to make personal discoveries". As Madge explained (p.105), in doing so they "may enter into the kind of problems encountered by a scientist in attempting to unveil mysteries", which was seen as an opportunity to sense the religious significance of a scientist's work. Citing Richardson (1950, pp.9-10) Madge wrote

The scientist by his patient search for and devotions to truth ... is really witnessing to the being of God, and to the fact that there is purpose and meaning in human existence.

Foreseeing the pressures that would be faced by children in years to come, Madge (p.106) pointed to the "modern's child's environment [being] far more crammed with such things as television, aeroplanes, satellites", but saw this as a further opportunity for the integration of religious and scientific attitudes.

Interviewing children who had moved on to secondary education Madge (1965, pp.112-3) reported that "a few students had vivid memories of how, during the junior years, Jesus took on a fresh significance", later confirming that "a time lag between life's encounters and the grasping of meaning must be anticipated" (Madge, 1971, p.31). Lundie (2010, p.167) alluded to this when describing a "second model" encompassing "conceptions of RE which aim to nurture a predefined set of values through religious teachings", where "they [young people] can connect what they've learned with life". This described the Golden Thread, planting the seeds by teaching about death and the afterlife from an early age and being able to call on learned faith when needed.

One issue identified in the literature was that of naivety, or 'sugar-coating'. Yalom (1980) suggested that a child, even at the age of eight or nine, "knows little and hence fears little about death". Despite this, the reviewed literature demonstrated that a naïve and simplistic approach to teaching about death and the afterlife was common. Madge (1965, p.111) described the effects of 'sugar-coated' teaching: "the general feeling among the junior children [in the research] was one of boredom and a sense of unreality marred by constant repetition [and] unrelated to life today". Madge (1971, p.23) advised "It is essential to attempt to assess the kind of image which is being fostered", pointing out that "the danger that early distorted impressions may become fixed and difficult to erase in later years is a very real one, particularly in a secular society". Madge (p.31) recommended avoiding "sentimentalising the 'purity' of the early stages, remembering that maturity, not naivety, is

the goal”, seeing naivety as planting the ‘wrong’ seeds in early years. Madge offered an example (p.38):

Children pass through a phase when they believe death to be a reversible state. Sometimes this may be apparent in their belief that the dead person may come back as “something else” such as a pigeon because the dead person kept them.

Madge (p.5) identified scepticism in children from the age of eight years onwards, suggesting that it was likely to be “increasingly prevalent”. Allying this to children’s intellectual development, Madge (p.23) suggested that “a contribution to later rejection is the emphasis in earlier teaching on the miraculous elements about Jesus, which encouraged ‘a sense of unreality about what manner of man Jesus was’”. Watson (1992, pp.142-3) agreed: “it is necessary to help children to move beyond the naïve literalism which serves to prevent them (and many adults too) from thinking any further about religion or developing more sophisticated concepts”. As Watson explained,

Without [this] there can be little hope of children becoming aware of the spiritual dimension which lies at the heart of religion, or of being able to relate this to their own experience.

(1992, pp.142-3)

A challenge identified in the literature was knowing when to teach about death and the afterlife. Higgins (1999) highlighted areas of the legislation wherein its teaching would reasonably fit, such as the space provided by the Education Reform Act (1988) which referred to the “promotion of spiritual development of pupils”, and an Ofsted discussion paper (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, 1994) which proposed “spiritual development [that was] concerned in part with whether life has a purpose”. Ashton (1992, p.166) had recommended beginning dialogue about what children understood early in their education, since “reservations about the whole area of religion nearly always stem from misunderstandings”, and that

such ideas as a transcendent power being an old man in the skies, white-bearded and dressed in a long white robe, as well as being ludicrous, are extremely unhelpful for serious reflection upon the subject of religion.

Watson (1992) posited that the assumption that children were unable to think theologically was unsupported, that the whole area of theological enquiry was thereby opened up for the junior school child, and the prospects for the classroom work that may be carried out was extremely exciting. Watson concluded (p.171) that “failure to develop this aspect of the human psyche results, in all probability, in the individual not being adequately able to refine emotion and see human mortality in the light of eternity”, a sentiment that lies at the heart of this thesis. As Higgins (1999) reported, children were “capable of discussing the afterlife and thus of thinking abstractly”, and “capable of discussing an abstract concept”. Research by

Bowie (2000, p.24) confirmed that young children do think about death, with almost 75% indicating this to some extent. Additionally, 33% revealed that this was a subject which caused them concern, and that they would like it to be taught in class.

#### **4.3.2 Teacher ability and willingness to teach about death and the afterlife**

To teach understanding of death and the afterlife teachers themselves need to be taught. Wells (1988, p.3) explained the challenge faced by teachers:

[They] are expected to teach children the facts of life, yet few ever consider teaching them the facts of death. Due to inexperience, ignorance or fear, such an idea is dismissed.

Corr, Nabe and Corr (1980, p.16) suggested that this can cause teachers difficulties, and potentially influence their attitudes towards the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. Yet as Stuber (2001), cited in Lowton and Higginson (2003, p.719) reported

Despite extensive searching, we were unable to locate research that addressed specific difficulties experienced by British teachers in the classroom and teachers' perception of their role in the management of bereaved children.

Following the Education Reform Act (1988), teachers were expected to teach Religious Education but sometimes with the minimum of preparation. McCreery (2005, p.267) cited Foster (1999) in reporting that on many Initial Teacher Training programmes limited time was given to preparing teachers to teach the subject. Research by Eiser, Havermans, Rolph et al (1995) found that "only 6% of students questioned undergoing Initial Teacher Training had received any information about dealing with bereavement in their course". The problem was also highlighted that "once teachers qualify, there appears to be rather patchy provision for in-service training for religious education (Hanlon, 2000), possibly due to the greater profile of other curriculum subjects".

McCreery (2005) had reported in earlier research (McCreery, 2000) that "many teachers had ambivalent feelings about teaching Religious Education, [struggling] with their own views about religion and how they dealt with it in school". McCreery made the point (pp.25-6) that "any effective preparation of trainees needs to recognise the diversity of their starting points and allow them opportunity to reflect on their views of religion and religious education". This included (pp.268-270) "[identifying] any prejudices they have developed along the way and preparing themselves for the encounter with [views] that arose from particular life experiences including death, life changes and experience of God":

Teachers' attitudes towards, and beliefs about religion, had a direct effect on how they taught religious education. For some ... personal commitments guided their approach.

Fancourt (2010) agreed, saying that when approaching the task of teaching about Christianity, the teacher's approach may be informed by their own religiosity and beliefs,

educational experiences, length of career, and their “wider pedagogical goals”. Chater and Erricker (2013, p.46) explained:

Pedagogy is a complex set of forces acting on every teacher, whether they know it or not. These forces include the curriculum but also the surrounding culture and the life-worlds of the children – and above all, the depth of the teacher’s own understanding of all these.

Chater and Erricker suggested that these ideas, theories and values in the surrounding culture and the quality of the teacher’s grasp of these items, “all converge in the classroom and impact on the quality of planning and teaching”.

Warwick University’s *Biblos* project (2010) reported that resources for teaching Religious Education were often found to be selected on the basis of the teacher’s pedagogical choices, and that denominational differences were “often skated over or over-simplified” so that Christianity was portrayed homogeneously. The “contested pedagogical debate”, linked by Fancourt (2007, p.22) to teachers’ attitudes to the national attainment targets ‘Learning about religion’ and ‘Learning from religion’ (QCA, 2004), contributed to the complexity surrounding the teaching of Religious Education. The significance of this, as Chater and Erricker explained (2013, p.49), was that

ill-thought out or “slightly dishonest” pedagogical models can result in avoidance of difficult questions, or “happy ending” lessons that can produce an incomplete or poor pupil understanding.

McCreery, Palmer and Voiels (2008, p.5) explored other aspects of teachers’ preconceptions and feelings such as teacher’s lack of beliefs and the religious backgrounds of children in their classes, which affected to a degree whether and how Religious Education would be delivered. McCreery (2005, p.272) reported that 25% of their research participants (teachers) had specific concerns about teaching Religious Education, the most common being remaining neutral, not passing on their own beliefs, and not offending those from other religious traditions. Fancourt (2010, pp.12-14) reported that “some teachers are clear that they do not wish to impose, or uphold, any particular values or ethical religious claim, [while] others are equally clear that their job is to offer pupils a distinctive and concrete moral frame”. The debates about the extent to which teachers are able to adopt a neutral stance in their explanation of different religious/non-religious worldviews are on-going (e.g. Jackson and Everington, 2017), and contribute to the challenges faced in teaching about death and the afterlife.

A particular issue is faced when training Religious Education teachers. Fancourt (2009, p.11) attributed a lack of training in part to students’ selection of subjects. Reporting research on the study of Christianity at university, Fancourt found that “the least common theological topics were Christianity and science, and Christian worship”. The religious education expertise ‘pool’, Fancourt reported, was further diluted by the influx into teaching in the

previous decade (to 2010) of graduates from a wide variety of subject areas, in particular social science and philosophy. Fancourt suggested that “their academic perspectives [would] contribute to religious education generally, but [would] probably differ from those of a graduate of theology or religious studies”. Conroy’s (2016, p.174) research reached a similar conclusion:

As formal religious belief itself comes under increasing strain, RE teachers feel increasingly exposed and begin to turn to Philosophy and Ethics.

Conroy (p.172) argued that “non-specialists teaching [Religious Education] contributes to the growth of illiteracy as they often have a modest grasp of theological concepts or history”. Perhaps more significant was the claim that

we noted many instances of non-specialists feeling themselves that their lack of knowledge proved to undermine their own sense of professionalism.

Cush (2007, p.224) also argued for specialist teachers of Religious Education:

It was the training in the methodology of the subject that prepared teachers to handle religious material. This would be part of the training of a specialist teacher, but not necessarily of a teacher in another subject.

The literature identified the issue of avoidance by teachers of the subject of teaching death and the afterlife. As Corr, Nabe and Corr (1980, p.57) explained, “the attitudes that one holds may tend to encourage one to withdraw or become remote from encounters with death”, with the risk that such a stance can be imparted to children. Corr, Nabe and Corr (p.317) citing Nagy (1948, p.27) wrote

To conceal death from the child is not possible and is also not permissible. Natural behaviour in the child’s surroundings can greatly diminish the shock of its acquaintance with death.

In support of openness, McCreery, Palmer and Voiels (2008, p.9) stated that “drawing out the similarity in a religious practice to something that the children have experienced can help the children gain some sort of grasp on it”. However, Bowie (2000, pp.24-5) pointed out that when supporting bereaved children “teachers need to first address their own fears and feel totally comfortable about this subject before they broach [it] in the classroom”, a view supported by Way (2010, p.17): “practitioners working with bereaved children may find their own personal or professional understandings and beliefs challenged”. As Erricker, Erricker, Ota et al (1997, pp.9-10) commented

We cannot impose a narrative upon them [teachers] which does not engage with their own, nor a rationality which does not make sense in terms of the way they have constructed meaning from their own experiences.

Higgins (1999, p.80) took up the point, pointing out that lack of training is “not the only legitimate reason why teachers are reluctant to talk about death in the primary school”. Higgins maintained that it was also a reflection of the teacher’s own fears, perhaps owing to some unresolved grief that the teacher was experiencing – a personal loss leading to a lack

of confidence or discomfort to self-disclose. This had to be seen in the context reported by Higgins, citing Candlin (1987), that “teachers are frequently cited as the most stabilising factor in the lives of many children”. Lowton and Higginson (2003, p.718) made a similar point, citing Coggan, Patterson, and Fill (1997) and Holland (1993):

An educational institution itself is a place where the majority of young people spend a large part of their lives, and what they learn may have far reaching effects.

Several factors were believed to contribute to avoidance of the subject of death and the afterlife. McGovern and Barry (2000) found that teachers, particularly men, were uncomfortable talking to children about death. Lowton and Higginson (2003, p.717) meanwhile believed that pressures on staff “[feeling] they had to be strong, even when they were distressed” was a contributor, reporting findings (p.731) that “many school staff [were] apprehensive about talking to pupils about death and bereavement, despite children initiating the discussion of these issues”. They found that “many staff voiced the dilemma of wanting to show support for the child and family but [were] unsure whether they were acting in an appropriate role” (p.724).

Lowton and Higginson (2003, p.727) drew attention to a lack of skills, confidence, and negative attitudes towards bereavement support when reporting that participants in their research “voiced their impression of not being ‘expert’ in their supervision of bereaved pupils, and uncertainty over whether they had ‘done the right thing’ in attempting to respond to these children”. In apparent contradiction, McGovern and Barry (2000, p.326) found that teachers were generally supportive of death education in the curriculum and the need for further teacher training to undertake its delivery, though advised that “personal attitudes and anxieties concerning death significantly influenced their level of support”. McCreery (2005, p.274) reported that “trainees appeared, on the whole, to be positively disposed towards teaching Religious Education”. As McGovern and Barry (2000) highlighted, a contributing factor was personal experience of bereavement: 62% of respondents in their research reported this as the most influential of their personal attitudes to death.

#### **4.4 Study 4 Literature review: What do Catholic children understand about death and the afterlife and how is their knowledge acquired?**

This section reviews literature on the last of the four studies, what children know and understand about death and the afterlife. Its aim is to examine the contribution that understandings about death and the afterlife make to being able to call on faith to cope with loss, and how outcomes were arrived at. It provides the final opportunity to assess the effectiveness of teaching about death and the afterlife by measuring its achievements against its aims.

##### **4.4.1 Why does it matter?**

To reiterate the hypothesis of this thesis, 'We do not educate our children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss'. As evidenced by the literature review for Study 1 'What is the outcome of what has been taught' the adequacy of teaching children about death and the afterlife contributes to the outcome to the extent that it can mediate or prevent spiritual struggle, or conversely can trigger profound adverse reactions.

Much is dependent on the school's ethos, environment, and approach to supporting bereaved children. Holland (1993) said that "school may be viewed as a secure second family": schools are invaluable to children's wellbeing, are a place of safety and support, and have the potential to be a safe haven. Stuber (2001), cited in Lowton and Higginson (2003, p.719) reported that "an explanation regarding death from a schoolteacher is useful for children". Badham and Ballard (1996, p.173) meanwhile saw being taught about death and the afterlife as a stepping-stone on life's path:

The soul-making theodicy is not required to suppose that the necessary growth is completed within this life. It merely claims that this life provides a good environment for spiritual growth which may well need further development beyond the grave as the person journeys into God.

##### **4.4.2 Children's understanding**

Frangoulis, Jordan and Lansdown (1996, p.16) set the scene:

One child recently drew a picture of a beanstalk and postulated that her father had got to heaven by emulating Jack.

The age of the children participating in their research corresponds with those of this thesis' research, 9-11, an age by when, as Lansdown, Frangoulis and Jordan (1997) said, one can reasonably assume "that children of normal intelligence would have a fully developed idea [of the afterlife]". This 'idea' would not necessarily correspond to that of adults who, as Way



said (2010, p.20) “might say ‘that’s not how it works’ and draw a distinction between the ‘real’ and the spirit world”. Bluebond-Langner (1978) explained that “children resist [adults’] stereotypes by formulating and acting on their own interpretations of the world around them”, a view supported by Ridgely Bales (2005, pp.8-9) who claimed that children are distinct individuals with experiences of their own.

Frangoulis, Jordan and Lansdown (1996, p.16) pointed out that “there has been little attempt to discover what children think heaven is like, where it is, how one gets there and so on”. The literature reviewed showed that little has changed in the intervening 25 years, with the exception of a move away from a reliance on Piaget’s ‘stage’ theory of child development. Cited by Way (2010, p.19), Frangoulis, Jordan and Lansdown (1996, p.122) said “the Piaget-based hypothesis that [the] younger children would tend to declare a belief in an afterlife more than the older ones was not borne out”. They argued that it was not the child’s development age but individual cognitive development that mattered, and that “their worldviews play a part too”, explaining that it would be easy to read into children’s ideas about ghosts and others coming back to say that those who put forward this view are denying the finality of death, or that they do not really comprehend the notion. Frangoulis, Jordan and Lansdown (ibid.) suggested it would be “better to let the words speak for themselves and not to try to read into them”.

The research undertaken by Lansdown, Frangoulis and Jordan (1997) suggested that variations in children’s belief in an afterlife were relatively constant and not a factor of whether they attended a faith school or not, though the nature of the afterlife was likely to vary. Reporting that most children talking of an afterlife mentioned heaven, 25% also spontaneously mentioned hell, and in many cases linked the two, aligning heaven with ‘good’ and hell with ‘bad’. This would relate to most faiths’ teaching of ‘live a good life’ if one is to be judged worthy of achieving a place in the afterlife. The research of Lansdown, Frangoulis and Jordan had been intended for use by those counselling bereaved children and by their parents; they recommended that “we should not assume that ‘Gone to heaven’ is an answer in itself. It may raise many problems which would need some time to unravel”. Ridgely Bales (2005, p.13) supported this view:

Scholars almost never challenge adult first-person accounts found in diaries and autobiographies before using them to construct arguments about children.

### 4.4.3 School ethos

Stock (2005) in Hemming (2015, pp.53-4) reported the guidance issued to Catholic schools in establishing their ethos:

A Catholic school should put Christ at the centre of everything it does by integrating Gospel values and the teachings of the Catholic Church into every aspect of learning, teaching and the totality of school life.

Hemming (2011, p.1064) referenced Hopkins (2007) and Sergiovanni (1994) in explaining that school 'ethos', 'culture', or 'climate' were much discussed subjects in political and educational circles, referring to the core shared values, beliefs and practices of a school. While not easy to define, 'ethos' was generally seen as a school having a particular 'feeling' or atmosphere experienced by staff and visitors, while Stevens and Sanchez (1999) defined it as "the heart and soul of the school". Hemming (2015, p.45) said that "given the widely accepted need to socialise and prepare the child for the 'adult world' it is unsurprising that the school is viewed, alongside the family, as a means to achieve this". Jelfs (2010), in Hemming (2017, p.158) "valued school values", including the development of a warm and caring 'family' atmosphere. Arweck and Nesbitt (2011, p.36) found that for parents, the school's ethos was more important than its status, reporting (p.41) that

despite the parents' religious, ethnic and cultural diversity, there was considerable unanimity regarding their criteria for selecting a school (academic calibre and inclusive ethos) and the key role that school would play in providing teaching on religion.

Hemming (2015, p.68) cautioned against assuming that an acceptable school ethos was only, or mostly, achieved by schools with a faith designation. As Hemming's research found, there were "challenges for some of the simplistic discourses about school ethos". The faith schools in Hemming's research were both Catholic and Anglican, generalising the issue of "simplistic discourses" beyond Catholic schools to faith schools generally. The author's discussion with Anglican priests has suggested that in some instances Anglican schools' Christian ethos is not distinguishable from that of Community schools, observing that some Community schools have more of a Christian ethos than Faith schools.

Taking the point further, Hemming's research found no clear distinction between the participant religious and secular schools' desire to provide a meaningful and healthy school ethos, with both schools attempting to cultivate similar values and having similar ideologies about childhood. Conversely, as Hemming (2017, pp.159-160) reported, while some parents explicitly linked the ethos values to the Christian character of the schools in the study, believing that church schools were particularly good at promoting positive values, "there were also examples of parents who felt that the school values were generic humanist values and could not be viewed as exclusively religious".

#### 4.4.4 Parents and families

Malcom (2010, pp.53-4) believed that the content of children's beliefs was shaped by their culture and society. Guided by Coles (1990) who said "even the youngest among us are pilgrims who seek answers to questions of life and death", Malcom wrote

As with all pilgrims, the answers that children find are shaped by the cultural narratives and texts and by the testimonies of others, such as parents, teachers and religious leaders (Gilbert, 2002; Harris and Koenig, 2006).

Higgins (1999, p.83), citing Garbarino and Stott (1992), believed that "children's interaction with parents and other significant people in their environment play a vital role in the development of their thinking". Hemming (2015, pp.7-8) agreed, referencing a study by Hopkins, Olsen, Pain and Giselle (2011) which found that young people responded to their parents' religious nurture in a number of ways, demonstrating "a variety of active subject positions in relation to their parents".

Holmes (2017, p.288) claimed that parents were committed to intentionally passing on their faith to their child, concluding that the approach to nurture was "important and critical in encouraging the wholeness of the child's developing faith". The literature review did not support the commitment reported. As Way (2010, p.20) observed:

Some families offer children clear frameworks of belief to shape their thinking. Others are less focused, or family members may hold differing views.

Corr, Nabe and Corr (1980, p.48), explained why this should be so:

When families were smaller, more scattered throughout the country or the world in their living arrangements, and less imbued with a feeling of connection or solidarity ... then death was encountered in a very different way.

The change over time that this implied had affected what Corr, Nabe and Corr (p.82), citing Kastenbaum (1989a, p.130) called "the death system in society", whereby "every society works out, more or less formally and explicitly, a system that it interposes between death and its citizens" (Fulton and Bendiksen, 1994). This change in family structures meant a major adaptation for children to the way death was presented and handled, guided by parents and families who also had to adapt to the change. This was and is problematic, with 'religiosity' being diluted through the generations, and the 'taboo' nature of talking about death and the afterlife prevailing (see e.g. Crase and Crase, 1982). However, the influence of parents and family was still seen as a contributor to ensuring adequate teaching of religious education. McGovern and Barry (2000, p.326) cited Jones, Hodges and Slate(1995):

Greater knowledge of death and grief has been found to relate to greater support for death education. They also suggest that increasing parental knowledge will help to increase parental support.

The literature identified a debate over where the responsibility for teaching about death and the afterlife lay – with parents or with school. Ridgely Bales (2005, p.128), researching children's preparation for 'the Big Day' (First Communion in a Catholic primary school) wrote

Only the parents could demonstrate the importance of Catholicism to their children each day by praying with them, modelling their behaviour in keeping with the beliefs of the Church; only they could model what it meant to be a good Catholic for their children.

Notwithstanding what defines 'a good Catholic', Ridgely Bales' view of parents spending such time with their children is not wholly supported by other research, though is still to be found in mostly immigrant families where traditional practices have been maintained. More typically, as Arweck and Nesbitt (2011, p.32) reported, "most parents had had little or no explicit religious nurture at home during their own childhood, and school was sometimes the only context for religious learning", which explained in part the theme of 'passing back responsibility' – parents and family may not have had the knowledge or experience to impart to their children. Arweck and Nesbitt expanded on this point:

The parents' views on how their children should be educated about, and nurtured in, religion reflected their expectations of RE lessons. Generally speaking, they expected school to provide their children's grounding in religion(s).

Hemming (2015, p.65) also found a reluctance on the part of parents to teach religion, reporting that "some of the less religious parents were reliant on the school to teach religion; they would rather not continue this at home". The parents interviewed by Hemming felt that "some religious input would provide their children with a good foundation for life even if they themselves did not wish to take on the job of promoting them".

The situation was amplified by Hemming (pp.79-80): "problems arose when values from home did not match those being taught in school". For Hemming, this raised the question (pp.124-5) of "whether it was the responsibility of parents and communities to teach religion and value to children, or the responsibility of the state". Erricker, Erricker, Ota et al (1997, pp.9-10) had placed the responsibility for teaching about death and the afterlife in the hands of both teachers and parents, citing Wells (1986):

For those of us who are more knowledgeable and more mature ... the responsibility is clear: to interact with those in our care in such a way as to foster and enrich their meaning making.

However, and more realistically, they commented (p.22),

As so often happens, we, the teachers and parents, are too busy or preoccupied to spare the time to respond and encourage their thinking. As a consequence, their thoughts lie buried and the effect can be that we do not discover until later in life in certain cases, what damage may arise as a result of neglect.

Like Erricker, Erricker, Ota et al (1997), Arweck and Nesbitt (2011, p.32) did not see it as a binary 'either/or' choice, reporting that "most parents regarded home and school as complementary, as school filled gaps, [and] stimulated interest in religion or triggered discussion at home". Their research did however, confirm that "overall, our interviewees indicated that family discussion about religion was limited".

The declining contribution of parents and family to the nurturing of children's beliefs was due in part to the societal changes taking place in Britain, as reported by the National Centre for Social Research (2019a-b): "Most [people] were simply not brought up with a religion, with a smaller minority having lost a childhood faith".

Religious decline in Britain is generational; people tend to be less religious than their parents, and on average their children are even less religious than they are (Voas and Chaves, 2016).

Hemming (2015, p.6) suggested that "the maintenance of religion from one generation to the next is a key concern for the field of research on childhood, youth, and religious identity, and the family is an important arena in children's ... everyday lives". The literature review demonstrated that despite the importance attached to its maintenance, it is increasingly under threat.

#### **4.5 Summary of chapter**

This second literature review explained and confirmed the research's hypothesis that 'We do not teach our children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss'. This cause of Afterlife Belief Conflict was directly related to challenges to the delivery and understanding of death and the afterlife by Church leaders, Policymakers and Educators. Challenges can co-exist: the review showed that the focus of most literature on individual challenges failed to consider the interaction and consequences when two or more present at the same time.

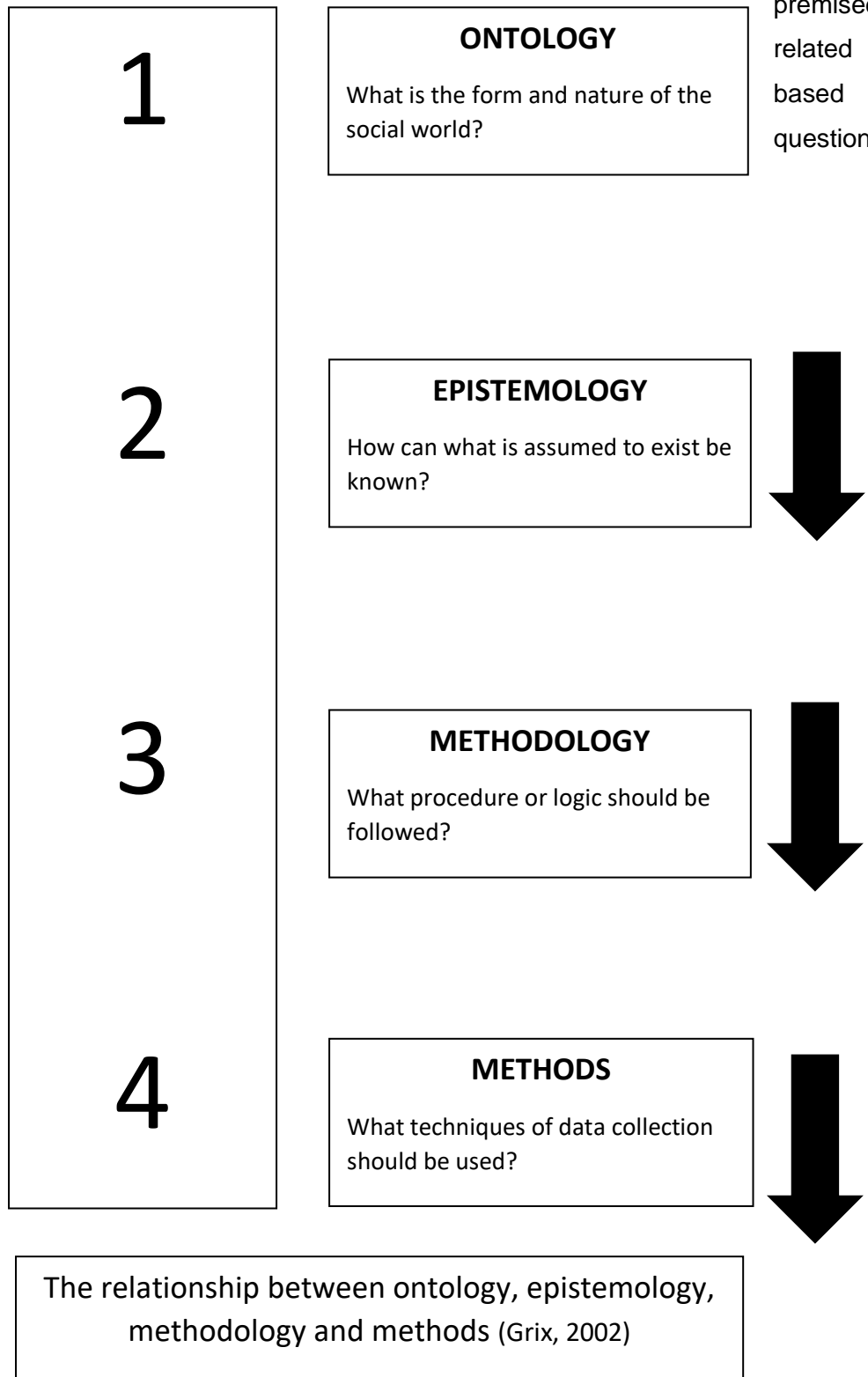
By predominantly addressing effects, the primary paradigm in pastoral bereavement counselling for spiritual struggle, the cycle of cause and effect, was seen to be perpetuated: an effect in turn becomes a cause, which has an effect, and so on. This cycle could be broken by attention to the reasons why ABC occurs, in this case the inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. In supporting the hypothesis this research hopes to provide bereavement counsellors and the wider medical profession with a better understanding of the potentiality of this issue, ultimately contributing to improved diagnosis and support.

The thesis continues with a description of the research methodologies used for the four studies that constitute the research. The chapter will describe the ontological and epistemological positions that support the selection of methodologies and data capture and analysis methods.

# CHAPTER FIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ETHICS

## 5.1 Introduction

This research is premised on a series of related assumptions, based on four key questions.



### 5.1.1 Key sociological assumptions

At every point in our research ... we inject a host of assumptions ... about realities encountered in our human world. Such assumptions shape for us the meaning of research questions, the purposiveness of research methodologies, and the interpretability of research findings. Without unpacking these assumptions and clarifying them, no one ... can really define what our research has been or what it is now saying.

(Crotty, 2003, p.17)

**Ontology** asks, 'what is the form and nature of the social world'? The researcher adopted a social constructivist ontological position which established the starting point for the research, that reality is socially constructed.

**Epistemology** questions "what we regard as knowledge or evidence of things in the social world" (Mason, 1996, p.13). It asks how we know what we know, to establish what counts as knowledge. The researcher's epistemology, interpretivism, did not see direct knowledge as possible. Rather, it was the accounts and observations of the research participants' world that allowed knowledge to be developed through a process of interpretation.

**Methodology** reflects the ontological and epistemological assumptions, asking what procedures or logic should be followed. Four methodologies were adopted: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Qualitative Research Interviews (QRI), Focus Groups (FG), and Grounded Theory (GT).

**Method** describes the techniques or procedures used to gather data. In this research they took the form of recorded interviews and Notepads.



### 5.1.2 Qualitative research

Qualitative research, and in particular the social constructivist ontological position adopted by the researcher, explores the world 'out there', not in specialised research settings such as laboratories. Acknowledging that quantitative studies have a place in human sciences, they were not seen as the best approach for meeting the research's aim of exploring people's experiences. Qualitative research was preferred, seeking as it does to understand and describe phenomena from inside a person's world. It unpicks how people construct the world around them and what is happening to them, focusing on the meaning and sometimes the explanation of the insight they bring. Participants in qualitative research are seen to actively and freely interact with, rather than react to, their social environment, constructing situations by bringing their own meanings.

Given the contribution that the researchers' personal experience, views and attitudes can make to the conduct of qualitative research and the interpretations of results, the author made every effort to avoid 'confirmation bias', interpreting what was found as evidence of what the author wanted to believe.

### 5.1.3 Methodologies chosen

Justification for selection of the adopted methodology is provided in each of the four studies' sections. A number of alternative methodologies were considered for the research, being ruled out as not being appropriate given the objectives of the research, though some had general characteristics that could have suited one of the four studies. In some cases the characteristics of different methodologies overlapped, such that the final selection came down to previous experience.

***Ethnography.*** In this qualitative research methodology a researcher—an ethnographer—studies a particular social/cultural group to better understand it. An ethnographer actively participates in the group in order to gain an insider's perspective of the group and to have experiences similar to the group members. The characteristics of this methodology were similar to IPA and it was considered for study 1, but it required a closer involvement (the 'insider' view) than was practicable, and an individual participant approach was seen as preferable to a group format.

***Hermeneutics*** is the theory and methodology of interpretation, the study of how interpretive processes come to bear on the phenomenon of understanding. More than interpretative principles or methods, hermeneutics include the art of understanding and communication, and is a method of taking into account the phenomenon of meaning-making and its resultant impact on individual and group identity formation. The characteristics of hermeneutics made

it a candidate for use in Study 1, the decision ultimately coming down to the researcher's previous experience of IPA.

**Action research.** This methodology was particularly attractive given its definition as 'an approach in which the action researcher and a client collaborate in the diagnosis of the problem and in the development of a solution based on the diagnosis'. One of the characteristic traits of action research is the collaboration between the researcher and a member of an organisation in order to solve organizational problems. This would likely lend itself to future research and action, when findings are considered by those they may benefit: hopefully the author will have the opportunity to participate in this research.

#### **5.1.4 Educational research**

The intention of the research was to contribute to the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, and to pastoral bereavement counselling, aiming to 'make a claim', in line with Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p.1) definition of educational research,

The systematic and scholarly application of the principles of ... behaviour to the problems of teaching and learning within education, and the clarification of issues having a direct and indirect bearing on those concepts.

Educational research is described by Arthur, Waring, Coe, and Hedges (2012, p.9) as

... grounded in observation. It takes phenomena [things that exist or happen], or at least our perceptions of phenomena, as its starting point, and attempts to represent them as data which can then be analysed. [It] aims to represent, describe and understand particular views of the educational world.

Particular collections of philosophical and methodological preferences for educational research are often described as paradigms. This study adopted a qualitative/interpretative/social constructivist paradigm for the four studies undertaken. Characteristic features of educational research were demonstrated in the research, with experiences, interactions and documents being accessed in their natural setting. Material was gained from everyday knowledge, accounts and stories based on observing or recording the interaction and practices of individuals or groups. Context was important for understanding what was studied, while hypotheses emerged in the course of researching, and were critically tested and refined against data and theory. The researcher was integral to the research process through personal background and experience, and reflexivity. Understanding the values and beliefs of the researcher was crucial to understanding claims made.

### 5.1.5 Overall study design

A combination of four methodologies was used to produce data which illuminated differences in focus or emphasis. No claim is made for this being a 'mixed methods' study: rather, there were four studies that "happen to be about the same topic" (Bazeley, 2002, p.3).

The data collection steps include setting the boundaries for the study, collecting information through unstructured or semi-structured observations and interviews ... documents, and visual materials, as well as establishing the protocol for recording information.

(Creswell, 2009, p.278)

An analysis of data from the first study with bereaved young people was used as a benchmark against which data from the other studies were analysed. Interview data from Church leaders, Policymakers, and Educators were used to compare and contrast what is actually taught with what is wanted to be taught. Finally, focus group data was used to determine what is understood by children participating in the research. The data from the final study was tested against the data from the first study with bereaved young people to provide the ultimate assessment of whether what children are taught and understand is adequate to help people cope with loss.

The research used a sequential design approach keeping the different elements separate, and allowing each element to be true to its own paradigmatic and design requirements. The outcome of each study was bracketed to maintain the integrity of the next/subsequent studies. 'Triangulation' was used as a means not just of validating the results of the first study of bereaved young people, but also to 'tease out' any differences that existed between participants in the first and subsequent sequential studies. Triangulation took advantage of the value of looking simultaneously at the same issue from a variety of different angles (Richardson, 1994); insights were gained from using the views or attitudes of different participants in different studies on subjects such as teacher training. Their accounts were used as data to illuminate the different situations in which they found themselves and the different concerns they had. Qualitative research thrives on such differences, termed in this research fractures. As Morgan (1993) argued,

If research finds differences between the results from individual and group interviews, then the methodological goal should be to understand the *sources* of these differences.

(1993, p.232. Author's own emphasis).

## **5.2 METHODOLOGY - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

### **Study 1 What is the outcome of what has been taught.**

#### **5.2.1 Introduction**

This section describes the methodological approach taken in this study of primary school teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. With no pre-conceptions as to whether the education received had caused or contributed to any adverse effects, ABC, the determination was whether the education received was adequate in helping participants cope with loss. Theory was allowed to emerge from the data, with two possible outcomes for the grieving process: a) It had been helped by what was taught; or b) it had not helped, for reasons that constitute the cause of ABC.

Ano and Pargament advocated use of qualitative research to capture the experiential data of people telling their own stories:

Future studies might assess spiritual struggles with qualitative interviews or more descriptive, narrative measures. Such qualitative data might provide rich information about the phenomenological process of spiritual struggles.

(Ano and Pargament, 2013, p.431)

The use of qualitative research to investigate causes of ABC is relatively new, positioning this study at the forefront in this field and supporting its choice:

There is a gap in the qualitative bereavement literature in relation to the topic of spiritual crisis following loss ... to understand phenomenologically the experience of spiritual crisis in the lives of grievors through the qualitative analysis of participants' narratives.

(Burke, Neimeyer, Young et al, 2014, p.269)

Burke and Neimeyer highlighted the need for research on causes:

The refinement of both assessment and intervention is likely to benefit from systematic qualitative research ... to yield a richer depiction of the distinctive themes that define such mourners' challenged beliefs [and] relationship with God.

(Burke and Neimeyer, 2014, p.1099)

## 5.2.2 IPA: Theoretical methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is concerned with understanding personal lived experience and thus with exploring persons' relatedness to ... a particular event or process.

(Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.40)

Smith's qualitative paradigm Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 1996) was chosen for its interpretative emphasis and inductive approach. IPA's founding principle is that experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and on its own terms (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.12). The research was a dynamic process with an active role for the researcher, who strived to take an 'insider's perspective' within the boundaries of personal experience and interpretations.

Gathering detailed descriptions of participants' life-worlds and of particular phenomena as they had experienced them was achieved by exploring, describing, and interpreting how participants made sense of their experiences, and their personal perceptions or accounts of an event. The research had meaning only within its phenomenally set context: the meaning of a unique experience for the individual participant.

The world exists without our conscious knowledge of it, and only becomes a world of meaning when meaning-making beings impose meaning on it.

(Etherington, 2004)

IPA assumes a connection between what people say and what they think and feel, which raised several considerations that had to be taken into account: People can struggle to express what they are thinking and feeling; they may not wish to self-disclose, or be able to vocalise thoughts and feelings; and they may say what they think you want to hear. With these considerations in mind the researcher had to interpret people's mental and emotional state from what they said. Bereavement counselling experience aided this task.

## 5.2.3 Why IPA was chosen

In anticipation of participants holding contradictory views reflecting the complexity of their experiences, for study 1 an approach was taken that could not be easily represented with rating scales or standardised measures. Analysis of individuals' own accounts of their experiences was seen to be more meaningful, using a methodology that gave their accounts expression. IPA identified itself as the most appropriate methodology:

[it] endorses social constructivism's claim that socio-cultural and historical processes are central to how we experience and understand our lives.

(Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.184).

Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg (1992, p.2) said “the choice of research practice depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context”. The first study’s question ‘what is the outcome of what has been taught’ contributed to the choice of methodology (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.42). Implicit in its formulation was an assumption that the data could say something about participants’ involvement in the world, and how they made sense of it, IPA taking the view that human beings are sense-making creatures, and that participants’ accounts reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience (Lyons and Coyle, 2007, p.36). IPA also

seeks to describe rather than to explain ... start[ing] from a perspective free from hypotheses or pre-conceptions.

(Husserl, 1970).

What the participants had in common was that their experiences were of significance to them, and they had engaged in thinking and feeling as they worked through what their experience of loss meant. In analysing the study data, the aim was to gain an understanding of what each participant thought about any effect education about death and the afterlife had on this experience.

#### **5.2.4 Ontology, Epistemology and Methodological Approach**

This chapter’s constructivist ontological orientation understood reality as being socially constructed (Robson, 2002) with phenomena and their meanings created by social interaction between individuals. At different times and places there would be different and often contradictory interpretations of the same phenomena:

The ways in which we understand the world and ourselves are built up through social processes ... there is nothing fixed or necessary about them: they are the products of particular cultural and historical contexts.

(Lyons and Coyle, 2007, p.16)

King and Horrocks (2010, p.22) described how social constructivism rejected the idea that human beings can somehow remove themselves from the process of active engagement in knowledge production. As Burr (2003, p.152) said, “No human being can step outside their humanity and view their world from no position at all”. Also rejected was the view that there is an objective truth waiting to be discovered. Instead, meaning was believed to come into existence out of an engagement with the social world. Accordingly, the study’s epistemological position was to “study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of ... the meanings people bring to them” (Greenhalgh, 2001, p.166). IPA is not concerned with producing an objective statement of an experience but rather with obtaining an individual’s personal perception or account of the experience (Lyons and Coyle, 2007, p.161).

Willig (2001, p.9) noted that qualitative researchers “aim to understand ‘what it is like’ to experience particular conditions, and how people manage certain conditions”, a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2010, p.3). The researcher was committed to the detailed examination of the particular case, wanting to know in detail what the experience for *this* person is like, what sense *this* particular person is making of what is happening to them (Lyons and Coyle, 2007, p.36; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.3). It was appreciated that in the context of the data collected, any epistemological assumptions or findings were limited by the inevitable subjectivity of the participant and/or researcher (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.414). Any insights gained could not be treated as ‘truth’ or ‘fact’ but thought of epistemologically more as examples of current interpretation and belief. Banister, Burman, Parker et al (1994) suggested that subjectivity may be valued and viewed as a resource rather than an obstacle. Qualitative researchers bring cultural and personal values into the research process, seen throughout the research process in the generation of research questions, data collection, and in the analysis and interpretation of results. This was acknowledged and reflected upon, the aim being to increase transparency of the research process and help readers to understand and evaluate the research. Coyle (1996) argued that giving researchers a legitimate space to be transparent about subjectivity added to the integrity of the research: researchers who acknowledge an ‘insider’ approach to research topics may use their positioning to increase the quality of research. Henwood and Pigeon said:

Research that seeks to reveal rather than obscure the hand of the researcher and social bases for knowledge, by this account, has some claim to providing more adequate knowledge.

(2006, p.116)

Understanding the context in which the research was conducted was important, Lyons and Coyle (2007, p.16) describing it in terms of “the social systems in which an individual is embedded and through which they make sense of construct and are constructed by their worlds”. Their reference (p.16) to “particular cultural and historical contexts” in describing social constructivism is relevant to this study: the over-arching influence of the Western Christian Church’s history, teaching and practice, and in particular, the Roman Catholic Church. Covid has also had an impact, challenging peoples’ beliefs. The participants’ knowledge and understanding of the afterlife, and any conflict between that and the reality of their grieving, will have been derived from and developed in these contexts. The research aimed to identify whether these contextual considerations had any impact on the participants’ experience. Instead of being mere ‘background’, context became a central aspect and constituent part of this research, contributing to the choice of a qualitative

method that provided the researcher with the opportunity to attend to context “in all its complexity and fluidity”. (ibid., p.16).

### **5.2.5 The case study**

The case study was used as a framework for the operating paradigm of social constructivism. Considered an appropriate methodology for the sensitive, emotive subject of loss, Stiles explained that case studies

use empathy and personal understanding, rather than detached conversation, place observation in context, rather than in isolation, focus on good examples rather than representative samples, and sometimes seek to empower participants, rather than merely observe them.

(Stiles, 2009, p.7)

The case study has become a widely used approach that can offer insight that might not be attained through other approaches (Yin, 2009). Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001, pp.2-3) documented a number of benefits in its use as demonstrated in this research: enabling a focus on significant idiosyncrasies across multiple studies; showing the processes involved in causal relationships; and facilitating rich conceptual/theoretical development. Though sometimes viewed as lacking rigour, validity and objectivity when compared to other research methods (Hyett, Kenny and Dickson-Swift, 2014, p.1; Seale, Gobo, Gubrium and Silverman, 2004, p.7), these perceived issues figure in all case study-based research (Hyett, Kenny and Dickson-Swift, 2014, p.1; Merriam, 2009). To counter them the researcher worked assiduously to ensure the research’s integrity, ensuring it met the tests of internal and external validity and reliability (Hyett, Kenny and Dickson-Swift, 2014, p.8).

Triangulation was used to “secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2010, p.5), and to enhance confirmation validity (Hyett, Kenny and Dickson-Swift, 2014, p.8). Flick described how

The combination of ... perspectives in a single study is best understood as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any enquiry.

(2007, pp.102-104)

Triangulation was achieved through the adoption of four separate studies all asking ultimately the same question: ‘Do we teach our children adequately about death and the afterlife to prepare them for loss?’.



## 5.2.6 Sampling

“Sampling must be theoretically consistent with the qualitative paradigm of social constructivism in general, and with IPA’s orientation in particular”

(Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009, p.48).

A characteristic of all four studies, IPA research is typically conducted on smaller sample sizes aiming to say something about the perceptions and understandings of a particular group of participants, committing to the detailed analysis of cases rather than making more general claims. This is described as an idiographic, case study-based mode of inquiry (Eatough and Smith, 2008, p.37), concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts, and making specific statements about those individuals. Use of the IPA methodology that “lends itself to the idiographic” was supported by Storey who commented:

IPA ... when aiming for a group-level analysis, begins with the analysis of an individual case and moves from there to the analysis of further cases.

Storey (2007, p.52)

The aims with regard to sample size were for depth not breadth, and quality not quantity. Given the complexity of most human phenomena, IPA studies usually benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases. Smith and Osborn explained that,

sample size ... depends on several factors: the degree of commitment to the case study level of analysis and reporting, [and] the richness of the individual cases. ... IPA studies have been published with samples of one, four, nine, fifteen and more.

(2007, p.56)

IPA’s commitment to a detailed interpretative account of cases included in the research could only realistically be achieved with a relatively small sample providing

sufficient cases for the development of meaningful points of similarity and difference, ... but not so many that one is in danger of being overwhelmed by the amount of data generated.

## 5.2.7 Participant recruitment

Initially six participants were involved in the study. On completion of the first study, and given that its results were intended as the ‘benchmark’ against which the results of the three remaining studies would be measured, a further study was considered beneficial. Six more participants were recruited, the total number of participants still being within Smith and Osborn’s (2007, p.56) recommendation.

A homogenous sample was sought for whom the research question ‘What is the outcome of what has been taught (about death and the afterlife)?’ would be meaningful. Maximising the groups’ uniformity made it possible to examine patterns of convergence and divergence. The

participants were purposively selected to provide a particular perspective on the phenomena under study, theoretically consistent with IPA's qualitative paradigm, "A closely defined group ... for whom the research question will be significant" (Lyons and Coyle, 2007, p.40). The samples had to be selected 'purposively' to offer the study an insight into the particular experience of bereavement by young people who had been taught about death and the afterlife in primary school.

Potential participants received an information sheet and consent form (see Appendix 8b *Information sheets, Interview schedules/guides, Consent Forms: Other Participants*). All twelve individuals approached agreed to take part. The names of the participants were changed for confidentiality. A list of participants can be found in Appendix 9 *Study Participants*.

### **5.2.8 Semi-structured interviews**

Used in the first three studies, semi-structured interviews are described by Smith and Osborn (2007) as the 'exemplary' method of data collection:

In IPA ... semi-structured, one-to-one interviews have tended to be the preferred method of collecting data which elicit detailed stories, thoughts and feelings from the participants. They ... allow a rapport to be developed and give the participants space to think, speak and be heard.

(Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.57)

Undertaken efficiently the interview elicits and records for subsequent analysis the variable and sometimes contradictory issues that arise. In describing participants' perspectives, feelings, and experiences, the interview was an appropriate method to adopt, being flexible and open-ended in style, focusing on people's actual views and experiences rather than general beliefs and opinions, and where the intimate relationship between interviewer and interviewee was crucial to the study.

The interviews consisted of several open-ended questions to "prompt or encourage participants to elaborate" (Patton 2002), allowing participants freedom to say as much or as little as they wished, without the imposition of the researcher's own ideas. There is no stipulation on the number of questions to be asked in semi-structured interviews, other than the more questions, the more structured the interview would become. Asking too many questions risked the researcher determining the agenda, inhibiting the process of discovery, and what was important to participants not being revealed.

A potential limitation of interviews is the need for them to be interpreted within their context. Unlike ordinary conversations, the recording of interviews means the interviewee understands that 'private' conversation will be replayed and reread, possibly by other people

(Hull, 1985). With this in mind, interviewees can make assumptions as to what the interviewer is seeking, and adapt their response to provide a meaningful response, regardless of any guidance given by the interviewer. Briggs (1986, p 25) comments on this “phenomenological construct”:

Each query presents them [interviewees] with the task of searching through their memories to see which recollections bear on the question and then fitting this information into a form that will be seen as answering the question.

### 5.2.9 Interviews

The researcher and participant engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants’ responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise.

(Smith and Osborn, 2007, p.57)

Used in the first three studies, Smith and Osborn recommended the interviewer use as little non-explicit questioning as possible, to get as close as possible to the participant’s thoughts and concerns without being led by too many questions. Good interview technique dictated using no more than an encouraging prompt. For Interview questions see Appendix 8b *Information sheets, Interview schedules/guides, Consent Forms: Other Participants*.

The intention was to explore participant’s experiences flexibly and in detail, with no assumptions made: the questions were framed broadly and openly, were expansive, non-directive, and exploratory not explanatory. The questions were designed to encourage the participants to talk at length (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.47; King and Horrocks, 2010, p.37), focusing on the identification of any cause of ABC. They ‘funnelled’ the interview from the primarily narrative or descriptive initial question to the more analytic or evaluative (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, pp.5-9): prompts such as ‘can you tell me more about that?’ were used to elicit deeper responses about feelings, thoughts and beliefs.

The interview schedule construction (see Appendix 8b *Information sheets, Interview schedules/guides, Consent Forms: Other Participants*) was particularly challenging, given its core themes of personal loss and the afterlife. Its production enabled the researcher to consider potential difficulties when discussing sensitive topics (King and Horrocks, 2010, p.35), and to consider how these might be handled (Smith and Osborn, 2007, p.59).

The schedule was designed to facilitate “an atmosphere where the individual felt able to relate subjective and often highly personal materials to the researcher” (Woods 1986, p.87). Using the schedule flexibly enabled the participants to have shared ownership over coverage and the opportunity to co-author their experiences. In this way “a story could unfold, and a relationship could build up” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.59).

The schedule was used to indicate the general area of interest and to provide cues when difficulties arose, while allowing sufficient scope for the participant to influence the direction of the interview. This followed Smith and Osborn's (2007, p.64) recommendation that "the respondent [should be] allowed a strong role in determining how the interview proceeds ... hearing the interviewee's voice".

Due to Covid all except the first two IPA interviews were held using the online platform Zoom: participants were familiar with it and it presented no barriers to its use. Any potential disadvantage of not being face-to-face and not having the opportunity to observe body language was negated by the interviews being audio- and video recorded, the participants' permission having been obtained through the consent forms, and by an apparent loss of inhibitions.

The interviews were held on a one-to-one basis of up to an hour's duration and were used to "go back to the things themselves" (Husserl, 1970) to obtain a fuller description of the subject under study. Participants brought their unique phenomenological stories into being by talking in their own words about their experience of bereavement, and any contribution that being taught about death and the afterlife made to coping with their loss. The interviewer's role was to facilitate and guide: the focus was on what the respondent was saying, with occasional monitoring of the coverage of the scheduled topics.

### **5.2.10 Concluding remarks**

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009, p.55) described the underlying qualities needed of an IPA researcher as "open-mindedness, flexibility, patience, empathy, and the willingness to enter into, and respond to, the participant's world". As this study showed, particularly in the context of Covid, determination, persistence and curiosity were also needed. Appreciating that there is no such thing as a 'perfect' data collection event, and no version of events fully represents 'the truth', the researcher simply aimed to understand the participants' perspectives as well as possible.

## 5.3 IPA: Practical methodology and design

### 5.3.1 Introduction

IPA's feature of being "an iterative and inductive cycle" (Smith and Osborn, 2007) is characterised as a set of common processes which move from the particular to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretative, "applied flexibly, according to the analytic task" (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). IPA's authors (Smith and Osborn, 2003) encouraged innovation in the adoption of the processes to analyse data and develop analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.80). Their advice was followed in this research: line-by-line analysis of participants' experiential claims, concerns, and understandings; identification of the emergent patterns/themes in the data, highlighting "convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance"; formulation of a structure or frame illustrating the relationships between themes, allowing analysed data to be traced through the entire process; and finally, development of a fully evidenced narrative, with a detailed commentary on data extracts.

(Smith and Osborn, 2007).

### 5.3.2 Data analysis

Smith and Osborn said

The assumption ... is that the analyst is interested in learning something about the respondent's psychological world. This involves the investigator engaging in an interpretative relationship with the transcript.

(2003, p.66)

A number of data analysis steps were undertaken. Firstly, *reading and re-reading*: the researcher was immersed in and actively engaged with the data, undertaking the process of "entering the participant's world" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.82). Following this step, *initial noting* was undertaken. The initial level of analysis was the most detailed and time consuming, examining content and language use on an exploratory level, while keeping an open mind and noting everything of interest within the transcript. This process identified ways in which the participant thought, understood and talked about the themes arising.

The final step was *developing emergent themes*. While the interview transcript retained its central place as primary data, exploratory commenting meant the data set grew substantially. It was this larger data set that formed the focus of this stage of analysis. The aim was to examine in detail how each identified theme applied to each participant. With considerable variation in how this might be presented it was decided to take each theme in turn and present participant evidence to support it (case within theme), as opposed to an idiographic presentation where the participant was prioritised and themes for each person presented together (theme within case). The evidentiary base was transparent, such that a

reader could check the evidence for any claims made, or the meanings of what the respondents said. Those meanings were not initially transparently available but were obtained through a sustained engagement with, and interpretation of the text.

Thematic coding of some kind as seen in the four studies is employed by virtually all researchers in their analysis of qualitative data (Braun and Clark, 2006). Producing a coding framework enables patterns to be systematically identified, though making sense of qualitative data through assigning and developing a coding framework is a complex and inherently 'messy' process. The application of a thorough and systematic approach to developing coding frames and documenting the steps taken throughout the process of analysis was required. Rigour was achieved through a systematic interactive process whereby coding categories were continuously (iteratively) subjected to review in the light of disconfirming examples or exceptions to patterns identified. This analytic approach hinged on the 'Constant Comparative Method', where each participant or group's data takes the researcher closer to a position where no new data could be identified. It involved constantly comparing and contrasting participants' comments, looking for – and seeking to explain – differences between individuals and groups; distinctions that individuals or groups made; justifications advanced; and arguments pursued.

The coding framework pulled together all the codes and sub-codes and showed linkages between these. More predictable codes were meaningfully linked with *in vivo* codes to form part of an over-arching coding frame. Although not offering definitive advice, Barbour (2019) said, "I would generally expect projects to generate no more than around 20 broad themes". The labels used for coding categories inevitably "reflect the researcher's own disciplinary background" (Barbour, 2014a). Barbour (2019, p.131) advised the researcher to be "always on the lookout for tensions or dilemmas to which participants may explicitly refer", which might be implicit. Theme titles transformed the initial notes into concise phrases capturing the essence of what was found in the text, and moved the response to a higher level of analysis. The participants' words needed to be traced back to the researcher's initial interpretation. This necessitated finding expressions which were at a sufficiently high level to allow theoretical connections within and across cases, but which were still grounded in the particular of what had been said. This process - initial notes into themes - continued through the whole transcript.

The next stage involved a more analytical ordering as the researcher interpreted the connections between themes. Some themes clustered together, others emerged as 'superordinate' concepts. As the clustering of themes developed, they were checked in the transcript to make sure the connections worked for the primary source material – the actual words of the participant. This identified clusters which captured most strongly the

respondent's concerns on a particular topic; these were given a name to represent the superordinate themes e.g. 'School leadership and ethos'. Repeating patterns were identified across interview transcripts. New themes emerged when working through these transcripts, highlighting convergences and divergences in the data, and ways in which accounts from participants were similar but different.

### **5.3.3 Presentation**

Results of analysis must be presented in a full narrative account which is comprehensible, systematic and persuasive to the reader who is coming to the study for the first time.

(Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p.109)

Chapter six 'Data Presentation and Analysis' reports the interpretative account of what the participants said, without reference to the extant literature. This is substantial, with a large proportion consisting of transcript extracts, the remainder being the detailed analytic interpretations of the text. The purpose is two-fold: to give an account of the data, and to communicate a sense, interpretation, of what the data were like, making a case for what they meant.

The table of themes recording the results of all participants' responses takes the form of a narrative argument interspersed with verbatim extracts from the transcripts to support each theme. The final Presentation activity moves from the final table of themes to a writeup outlining the meanings inherent in the participants' experience, translating the themes into a narrative account. During this stage some themes dominated while others faded, re-prioritising the findings that had emerged during analysis. Some extracts were richer or more illuminating and more was needed to be said about them.

## **5.4 METHODOLOGY – Qualitative Research Interviews**

**Study 2 What do Church leaders and Policymakers want taught.**

**Study 3 What is delivered through formal Religious Education.**

### **5.4.1 QRI: Theoretical methodology**

This section describes the methodological approach taken. ‘What Church leaders and Policymakers want taught and understood about death and the afterlife’ is explored, followed by a study of what Educators actually teach.

The interview approach relies heavily upon respondents being able and willing to give accurate information.

(Breakwell, 1990, p.81)

Kvale (1996, p.1) said “If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk to them?”. He suggested that, in order to use the interview as a “construction site of knowledge”, the researcher should develop a rationale that is methodologically sound, King and Horrocks (2010, p.7) saying “this is the crux of everything”. Qualitative interviewing in this research aimed to uncover detailed accounts from participants’ particular vantage points. Conversing with people enabled them to share their experiences and understandings.

Through qualitative interviewing the researcher became increasingly aware of “the constructive nature of social interaction and the part played by active subjects in making sense of their experiences” (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003b). Speaking with people in order to explore their social experiences and interpreting the findings would be consistent with the ontological and epistemological positions adopted by this research. This study’s constructivist position considers there to be as many knowledge systems as there are people or groups discursively negotiating them. All knowledge is considered local and fleeting, negotiated between people within a given context and time frame - what constitutes knowledge one day may change the next, based on shifts in social surroundings and currently accepted interpersonal boundaries.

The researcher was a ‘co-producer’ of knowledge and was required to be reflexive and critically aware of language. Willig (2001) identified two kinds of reflexivity: epistemological reflexivity, with the researcher reflecting upon assumptions about the world made in the course of the research, such as how the research questions were defined, and the analysis



undertaken; and personal reflexivity, giving consideration to the ways in which the researcher's beliefs, interests and experiences may impact upon the research.

#### **5.4.2 The Interview Study**

Framing the research question needed to avoid establishing general trends in the phenomenon under consideration. The research's focus was not on the general but on the specific – 'at this point in time, today, what do you understand' - for a particular group of participants. In, say, ten years' time, the answer might be different to that established today. QRI's were chosen because it was determined that individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were best suited, due to the several 'levels' at which participants would be recruited. The information to be collected at each level varied, so a 'group' or any other interview format would not be appropriate.

Unlike the homogenous selection needed in IPA, when defining QRI samples and recruiting participants the criterion was diversity, representation of a variety of positions in relation to the research topic, to throw light on meaningful experiential differences. Participants were representative of a cross-section of views and perspectives, the effectiveness of the sampling strategy depending on two factors: the researcher's knowledge of the academic literature and personal knowledge, and information provided by those with working experience in the subject area. Gerson and Horowitz argued that:

By choosing a sample that controls for one consequential aspect of lived experience (e.g. age or generation) ... the aim is to discover how similar social changes are experienced by different social groups.

(2002, p.205)

As Church leaders and Policymakers were to be recruited, access required approval of 'gatekeepers' in large and complex organisations – a Roman Catholic Church Archdiocese, and Education Authorities. Using a 'top-down' approach (described in 5.4.3 Study design and sampling) permission was sought from the highest level of hierarchy down to each subsidiary level. An interview guide (See Appendix 8b *Information sheets, Interview schedules/guides, Consent Forms: Other Participants*) was used to record "questions that highlight key issues" (Holloway, 1997), the main topics to be covered. If these issues did not arise spontaneously the researcher addressed them; such questions would be important in developing the emerging theory. Issues that lacked relevance to the emerging theory were not pursued.

Flexibility was seen as a key requirement (King and Horrocks, 2010, p.35). The interviewer had to be able to respond to issues that emerged during the interviews in order to

understand the participant's perspective. The guide was flexible in the phrasing of questions and the order in which they were asked, allowing the participant to lead the interview in any chosen direction. Considerations for its development were the types of questions asked, how the questions or topic areas in the guide were formatted, and the use of probes.

### **5.4.3 Study design and sampling**

When framing the research question several issues were considered: the type of question to be used, based on the knowledge sought; the scope of the question, which took into consideration how broad or narrow a range of experience was the study seeking to examine; and avoidance of pre-suppositions that might distort the research process. For the first question 'What do the Church leaders and Policymakers want taught' selection criteria were the Christian faith represented – Roman Catholic; and that participants were involved in policymaking for teaching children about death and the afterlife, or delivering policy handed down from a higher regulatory or religious authority. For the second question 'What is delivered and how' there were two groups of participants: those translating the curriculum handed down by Church leaders and Policymakers – school management and RE-coordinators - and Educators who teach understandings about death and the afterlife.

Avoiding pre-suppositions was an important consideration, given the research's hypothesis that 'We do not teach children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss'. This could be considered as constructing a leading question and influencing the research to the point that it would seek to support the hypothesis. The interview questions were designed to counter this potential by stimulating engagement with the general subject of teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. In doing so they led to an exposition of what the participants actually felt and thought, sometimes supporting the hypothesis, and sometimes not.

The research examined how people differed in relation to a particular phenomenon as much as what they had in common. The sample used in these studies needed "to relate in some systematic manner to the social world and phenomena that [the study seeks] to throw light upon" (King and Horrocks, 2010, p.28). The focus was on establishing meaning and experience for a group of participants and on recruiting the 'right' people for the studies. This was achieved, and the information sought, both factually and interpretatively, was obtained.

As described, when recruiting participants the research took a 'top-down' approach to obtaining permission to proceed, the starting point being at the highest level of the hierarchy ('gatekeepers'), where approval was sought to approach those at the next subsidiary level:

<b>Level 1</b>	Archbishop	Catholic Archdiocese
<b>Level 2</b>	Directors of education/Religious Education	Catholic Archdiocese
<b>Level 3</b>	Church leaders, Policymakers	Priests, Canon, chaplain
<b>Level 4</b>	Educators	School heads, Teachers, RE-coordinators

Gaining access was a primary consideration. Participation in an educational research study involving children and young people raised issues of permission, ethics, and safety, considered separately in Chapter Five in the section 'Ethics'. This, together with the study's core themes of death and the afterlife, however that might be conceptualised by people, made access problematic. Death remained a taboo subject for many, which made overcoming resistance to engaging in the study challenging at all levels. As such, gaining access was complex, time-consuming, and sensitive. Participants may have had opinions about for example protecting children by not exposing them to the subject. They may have their own faith or beliefs that did not align with the content of the subject being delivered.

The interview questions were used to solicit opinions about whether the subject content and delivery was felt to be appropriate, adequate, and well-supported. Knowledge questions were used to determine what the participant believed to be a 'fact' (epistemological position) and not whether it was true in any objective sense (ontological position). This was of importance in the study, going to the level of knowledge and understanding the participant had of the topic. To avoid leading questions or endorsement of participant opinions, which can "happen if the interview drifts into a style that is too conversational" (Willig, 2008), a 'full question' format was adopted. Lending itself to a more specific style influenced by the questions asked being more fact-gathering than those in other chapters.

## 5.5 QRI: Practical methodology and design

This section describes the methods used, and how the QRI research was designed and carried out.

### 5.5.1 Data collection

Chong and Yeo said,

To ensure rich data, the data collection stage is a critical stage to obtain different kinds of sources as an endeavour to develop explicit theories.

(2015, p.258)

In preparing for the interviews the steps Creswell recommended (2009, pp.178-183) were followed, commencing with the purposeful selection of participants and locations. The researcher's prior knowledge was of benefit in this area, with conscious reflection needed to avoid introducing bias. An exercise of determination of the types of data to be collected was undertaken. The researcher collected multiple forms of data (video, audio, written), spending time in the participants' natural settings, gathering information to inform data analysis. The final step was the collection of documents including historical and contemporary legislative policy and guidance on the teaching of death and the afterlife, such as the new Welsh Curriculum 2022.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, as described in 5.2.9 Interviews. Interviews are arguably the most frequently reported method of data collection (Egan, 2002), together with diaries, autobiographies, letters, and historical accounts (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The latter were significant in understanding the history of religious education; relevant legislation for its provision dates back to the 1940's and was a factor in the development and delivery of religious education today.

Acknowledging that the researcher was an integral part of the research process, it was at this stage of the research process that having knowledge and experience of the topic would facilitate data collection (Strauss, 1987). Pidgeon (1996) commented that without some prior knowledge, sense could not be made of any research data. Smith and Biley (1997) acknowledged the tension that existed between bracketing preconceived ideas and using knowledge and experience to facilitate the development of theory: reflexivity helped with this. In reality, most interviews become semi-structured because as the key issues emerge, there is a need to focus on them to facilitate theory development.

### **5.5.2 Conducting the interviews**

The interviews spanned the onset of Covid, the effect being that the interview with the Director of Religious Education was conducted using the online Zoom platform. The majority of interviews with Educators in both schools were held using the Zoom and TEAMS online platforms. Covid impacted on the overall project timetable, but was not detrimental to the research, participants being familiar with use of such media platforms. The remainder of the interviews were conducted face-to-face. All interviews were recorded and analysed.

The success of the interviews depended heavily on decisions made at the start of the research process when the study was being designed, which had a major impact on the outcomes of the interviews. Of equal importance was attention to the researcher's theoretical position and underlying philosophical assumptions, and the researcher being pragmatic about what could be achieved with the resources available.

## **5.6 METHODOLOGY - Focus Groups and Grounded Theory**

### **Study 4 What do children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife, and how is their knowledge acquired.**

#### **5.6.1 Focus Groups (FG): Theoretical methodology**

Focus Groups were chosen for this study to capture data on what children today know about the concepts of death and the afterlife, and how their knowledge was acquired, the data collected being analysed using Grounded Theory. The choice of these methodologies came from weighing up the pros and cons in relation to the study, and taking into consideration the advice of Crabtree Yanoshik, Miller and O'Connor:

The choice of research style for a particular project depends on the overarching aim of the research, the specific analysis objective, its associated research question, the preferred paradigm, the degree of desired research control, the level of investigator intervention, the available resources, the time frame, and aesthetics.

(1993, pp.139-140).

This section outlines the considerations that underpinned their selection. Powell Single and Lloyd defined a focus group as

A group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research.

(1996, p.499)

Stewart, Shamdasani, Rook (2007, p.163) claimed that focus groups were among the most widely used research tools in the social sciences, representing “a remarkably flexible research tool ... that can be adapted to obtain information about almost any topic, in a wide array of settings, and from very different types of individuals” (ibid). Located between observational fieldwork and one-to-one interviews, they have been described as involving ‘structured eavesdropping’. Focus groups best met the requirement of eliciting a multiplicity of views within a group context rather than individual or group interviews. Glaser (1998) said

In the context of educational research this [focus groups] approach [has] great potential to succeed in explaining relevant behaviour in the educational setting.

The emphasis was on choosing a method that privileged children as the subjects of research, and which would be effective in encouraging young children to ‘cooperate’ with the research and talk about themselves. Illustrating the success of this approach Connolly wrote (Interdisciplinary Conference on Children and Social Competence. University of Surrey, 1995):

Almost without exception, once a question has been asked the children would take control of the discussion and draw it off onto a number of different tangents.

Focus groups rely on group interaction based on researcher-supplied topics, their key characteristic being the insight and data produced by this interaction, allowing observations of how and why individuals accept or reject others' ideas. Complexities, inconsistencies and contradictions arising within a group interaction are much better suited to being dealt with by focus groups, which treat 'messiness' as data rather than as 'noise'.

Much of the power of the focus group as a method of enquiry grows out of the spontaneity and synergy of the group dynamic. ... The spontaneous interaction ... often produces insights that are not readily, if ever, obtained in individual surveys or experiments.

(Stewart, Shamdasani, Rook, 2007, p. 164).

Focus groups are designed to obtain specific types of information from a clearly identified set of individuals. Participants must be representative of the population of interest: the selection and recruitment of participants for a focus group is a critical task. If a group is too heterogeneous, e.g. in terms of gender, class or perspectives, the differences between participants can have an impact on their contributions. Alternatively, if a group is characteristically homogenous, diverse opinions and experiences may not be revealed.

It is argued that a maximum of eight participants in a single focus group is generally challenging enough. The requirements on the researcher to identify individual voices, seek clarification, and further explore any differences in views that emerge make larger groups demanding to moderate (manage) and analyse.

Many qualitative projects build their samples incrementally, which allows researchers to take advantage of new insights developed along the way, until the point of 'saturation', an aspect of the iterative process involved in Grounded Theory, where researchers eventually reach the conclusion that their coding categories have stopped evolving and are becoming repetitive or 'saturated'.

### **5.6.2 Possibilities and limitations of focus groups**

Focus groups encourage greater candour (Krueger and Casey, 2000) and give participants permission to talk about issues not usually raised. If groups have been convened to reflect some common attribute or experience that sets them apart from others, this provides "security in numbers" (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999).

The group setting has frequently been employed by researchers to discuss delicate or sensitive topics such as death with participants, in a wide range of difficult situations and with potentially vulnerable groups (Seymour, Bellamy, Gott et al, 2002; Farquhar, 1999; Morgan, 1997, p.15). Interaction enables participants to question each other and to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences. Focus groups elicit information in a way which allows researchers to find out why an issue is relevant, and why (Morgan, 1988).

Limitations to the use of focus groups tend to be similar to those of other research techniques that employ human beings: non-representative samples, interviewer bias, and demand effects. These are likely to result from the composition of the group, the presence of a particularly dominant member of the group, or other moderator- or group-related factors.

As focus groups are not fully confidential or anonymous, with material being shared with others in the group, focus group discussion can discourage some people from trusting others with sensitive or personal information.



## 5.7 Focus Groups: Practical methodology and design

Acknowledging that there can be no 'right or wrong way' to conduct a focus group, Kelly said

No "cookbook" formula should restrict the way a focus group is run, as there are strengths and weaknesses in the various approaches.

(2013, p.81)

Choices for the research design depended on a number of factors including the research question, the data being sought, theoretical frameworks and epistemological assumptions, the research setting, participant recruitment and availability, and participant demographic characteristics. Additionally, it was necessary to consider at the outset the level and method of analysis. Transcribing, note-taking, sampling, and approaches to generating data, could all potentially derail the study.

Particular attention had to be given to conducting focus groups with children as participants. Krueger advised,

The nature of the focus group questions may need some special thought when working with young people. ... Moderators should avoid questions that threaten the independence and freedom of young people.

(1988, p.p.167-8)

Focus groups are generally considered more appropriate for young children than one-to-one interviews (Mauthner, 1997, p.23), which may be considered invasive or threatening. Children as young as six can provide useful information (Gibson, 2007), and by seven most children are able to actively participate in focus groups (Gibson, 2012; Krueger and Casey, 2009). However, Hoppe et al (1995, p.110) advised that group moderators be watchful and astute in assessing the degree of comfort and group cooperation, and that they must be skilled in working with children. Notwithstanding, Hoppe et al (p.112) found that using focus groups to collect information on sensitive topics from children was, overall, positive. This view was shared by Erricker and Erricker (2000, p.x), who emphasised the role of listening when conducting focus groups with children:

Children, including young children, are perfectly capable of being active participants in their own social and spiritual education.

### **5.7.1 The moderator**

The quality of data obtained from a focus group discussion is directly related to how well the moderator carries it out. In this research the moderator role was undertaken by the researcher, who was constantly alert as to the demands of the role: every group had a unique identity, and no two groups behaved in the same way, even when discussing the same topic with the same questions. The moderator had to determine the appropriate level of directiveness, structure, intimacy, and use of discussion aids consistent with the purposes of the research. Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robson (2001, pp.28-29) described the moderator's role as facilitating discussion, not to control it, advising that they "take a backseat", refraining from asking questions or making comments, unless the discussion went "off-track". The moderator ensured that everyone participated and had the opportunity to actively contribute to the discussion, while managing the potential for participants to be coerced by fellow-group members into making revelations that they may later regret.

Hoppe, Wells, Morrison et al (1995, p.111) found that it was only when the group as a whole felt comfortable with a sensitive subject could the discussion go forward in a non-evaluative and non-threatening atmosphere, in which group members felt free to express themselves openly and without concern for whether others in the group agreed with their opinions. The moderator role was critical in providing clear explanations of the purpose of the focus group, helping participants to feel at ease, and facilitating interaction between group members. 'Ground rules' were established at the outset of the discussion, and control maintained thereafter.

Key to collection of rich insights from participants and to the success of the focus groups were the moderator personal characteristics, having "the unenviable task of balancing the requirements of sensitivity and empathy, on one hand, and objectivity and detachment on the other" (Stewart, Shamdasani, Rook, 2007, p.69). Moderators can sometimes find it difficult dealing with silence, being tempted to foreclose discussion while participants might still be thinking about the question and formulating their response (Barbour, 2014a). In this study silences were generally found to be illuminating. Managing silence was a skill in itself: the researcher's experience of bereavement counselling was an advantage in this aspect of moderation.

### **5.7.2 Recruitment**

The goal was to undertake only as many groups as were required to provide a trustworthy answer to the research question, with consideration given to the additional effort of further recruitment, data collection, coding, and analysis if a larger number of transcripts was generated. There is a “rule of thumb” (Morgan,1997, p.43) that studies should consist of three to five groups, arguing that more groups seldom provide meaningful new insights. This describes the Grounded Theory goal of “saturation” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), where the collection of data is halted when the moderator anticipates no new data being generated. In this study there was a high level of interest from children in the two participating schools; in total seven focus groups were held. No child who volunteered and fitted the criteria was excluded.

‘Gatekeepers’ had the authority to grant or deny access to potential participants, for example headteachers enabling access to schoolchildren and parents. Gatekeepers were provided with a range of information to ensure recognition of their ethical obligations, above all the need to protect children’s safety, anonymity, and compliance with the principle of ‘do no harm’. Once access was gained, gatekeepers’ ‘insider’ assistance had particular advantages, especially that if the request to potential participants came from a known and trusted source such as someone in a position of authority, people were more likely to give it serious consideration.

Risks in using this method of recruitment were considered reflexively. Overt bias was possible in consciously choosing participants likely to hold or not hold certain views. There might also have been an unintentional distortion stemming from reliance on personal networks within the organisation.

Further risks were identified and considered reflexively to mitigate their impact: the possibility that the researcher may be looked on more favourably than a stranger, with an attempt to please that overrode concern and caution; and that insiders may have their own views on the teaching of death and the afterlife which might affect their participation.

### **5.7.3 Conducting the focus group**

Kelly (2013, p.79), consolidating the advice of experienced child focus group moderators, reviewed generic, proven strategies, highlighting the need for extensive planning, with “a clear understanding of research goals, and well-devised questions” (Gibson, 2007). It was

the added emphasis on planning to accommodate working with children that set this client group apart.

Use of a topic guide required particular attention. Moderators are required to “think on their feet”, remembering that the topic guide is a flexible guide rather than a tightly structured protocol (Murphy, Cockburn, Murphy, 1992, p.38). While appearing brief, a few short questions and well-chosen stimulus material were considered sufficient to provoke and sustain discussion, brevity masking the amount of work involved in its development. The key was “to anticipate the discussion, imagine possible responses to conversational gambits, and, ideally, to pilot topic guides before using them in the focus group” (Morgan, 1997, p.16). This was done with a pilot group of children of the same age from another school to confirm ‘readability’, and ‘understandability’.

Question style was important. Murphy, Cockburn, and Murphy (1992) recommended the use of unthreatening general questions, seeing abstract questions as potential discussion stoppers, whereas concrete questions, particularly those to which the children can bring their own experience to bear, could be catalytic. Questions were age appropriate and carefully crafted, with the script and all other material used in the focus groups being reviewed by the pilot group. A benefit was gained from the addition of a ‘Question and Answer’ session at the end of the formal session, based on children’s inquisitiveness that was identified in the first two focus groups.

The duration of children’s focus group discussions, while age-determined, was largely dictated by participants’ attention span and was typically less than one hour. At the end of the formal session recording equipment was kept running to capitalise on the relaxation of the environment, capturing comments, observations and opinions that would not otherwise have emerged during the session. The focus groups generated lively discussion and rich data as participants reformulated their views, debated, and expressed and explored shared understandings. Use was made of child-centred methods of communication and data capture in particular Powerpoint and Notepads, methods familiar to children and which were non-verbal and unthreatening. Post-session, debriefing of the participants took place to determine any adverse effects that may arise from the discussion.

During the sessions the moderators committed to paper their own thoughts, ideas, and observations - Fieldnotes. Post-session, data from the media used along with this written information recorded by the moderators was collected and collated. They included aspects of the context of the study, or facial expressions and gestures that could not always be evidenced by the video recording. Descriptions of participants and perceptions of what was happening in the setting were also important.

During data gathering coding and analysis ideas were generated about potential themes, codes and relationship between codes, and questions needing further investigation (Arthur, Waring, Coe, and Hedges, 2012, p.89). These ideas were written down as memos: analytic, conceptual or theoretical notes which were, according to Glaser, “the theorising write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding” (Glaser, 1978, p.83). Transcription and initial analysis was a key element of the research. The researcher began to analyse the data even as it is being generated, becoming “swept up in the discussion” (Brinkman and Kvale, 2018). Immediate analysis after each session was undertaken, capturing ‘*in vivo*’ and ‘*a priori*’ codes.

A fuller explanation of the analysis method used, Framework Analysis, can be found in 5.3.2 Data Analysis. The focus groups produced rich data: some data generated was not what the researcher had originally anticipated when drawing up the sampling ideas but this is not uncommon with Focus Groups - unexpected similarities between groups can be as illuminating as differences.

## 5.8 Grounded Theory (GT): Theoretical methodology

### 5.8.1 Introduction

Glaser (1978) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained the objective of Grounded Theory as “seeking to construct theory about issues of importance in peoples’ lives ... through a process of data collection that is often described as inductive in nature”. As Mills, Bonner, and Francis, (2006, p.25) said,

The researcher has no preconceived ideas to prove or disprove, ... issues of importance emerge from the stories that they tell about an area of interest that they have in common with the researcher.

Constructivist Grounded Theory derives from the work of Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1994, 1998), underpinned by their belief that researchers construct theory as an outcome of their interpretation of the participants’ stories. Since first developed in the 1960’s, Grounded Theory has become one of the most commonly used qualitative research approaches. Researchers are advised to choose a research paradigm that is congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality, “consciously subjecting their beliefs to an ontological interrogation to illuminate the epistemological and methodological possibilities that are available” (Mills, Bonner, Francis, 2006, p.26). This researcher’s constructivist ontology positions the research as a reconstruction of experience and meaning, assumptions shaping what is done and how it is done (Mullender, Everitt, Hardiker and Littlewood, 1993; Gitlin and Russell, 1994; Crotty, 2003).

Grounded Theory was seen as an effective research strategy for topics which have been subject to relatively little research and about which there is a paucity of knowledge (McCann and Clark, 2003a; Payne, 2007), which describes this research. Arthur, Waring, Coe and Hedges’ description of Grounded Theory expanded on this:

Grounded Theory is a particularly useful research approach when we want to investigate ... social, psychological or social processes without being limited to a certain pre-existing theory.

(2012, p.92)

The idea that theory emerges from data is central to Grounded Theory. It “constitutes a catalyst for the development of a method that could generate theory from data obtained in the real world” (Dunne, 2011, p.112). Strauss and Corbin proposed that the complex coding strategies used in Grounded Theory were “designed to enhance the effectiveness of this methodology” (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p.273). Conceding that the process may appear complicated, they argued that this was appropriate because “human life is complicated” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

### **5.8.2 Use of literature**

While a contentious issue in Grounded Theory, it is noted that “specifically, the crux of the matter is not whether a literature review should be conducted ... but rather when it should be conducted and how extensive it should be” (Cutcliffe, 2000; McGhee, Marland, Atkinson, 2007). Strauss and Corbin encouraged the appropriate use of literature at every stage of the study, discerning the difference between an ‘empty head’ and an ‘open mind’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Kelle, 2005), the position adopted in this research. They argued that the analyst’s previous experience, seen as an asset if used properly, along with exposure to a wide variety of literature, could be employed throughout all phases of the research, from conception to conclusion (Charmaz, 2006, Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.37). Strauss and Corbin’s claims for engaging with the literature included it being used as a source for making comparisons; that it enhanced sensitivity; and that it could be used to confirm findings, and, conversely, findings could be used to illustrate where the literature is lacking, incorrect, simplistic, or only partially explains a phenomenon, characteristics demonstrated in this research.

Strauss and Corbin did not recommend an exhaustive and comprehensive prior review of all relevant literature before embarking on research. They warned that “we do not want to be so steeped in the literature as to be constrained and even stifled in terms of creative efforts by our knowledge of it” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.50).

### **5.8.3 Possibilities and limitations of Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory is seen as having contributed greatly to the credibility and rigour of human enquiry. Unique to Grounded Theory, according to Bryant (2002), it “takes researchers’ perceptions into account in the research process”; Grounded Theory offers opportunities to the researcher to use their values and understanding in order to generate a new theory for a complex phenomenon. In the context of the educational research being undertaken, this approach, conducted in close conjunction with people and practice, helped to develop theories that have great potential in explaining behaviour and practice in the educational setting (cf. Glaser, 1998).

Grounded Theory’s drawbacks needed to be taken into account “in order to select the most appropriate research methods for their educational inquiry” (Chong and Yeo, 2014, p.263). These included the significant time it takes to conduct research, and the amount of data generated and processed, which included planning, data collection, recording, transcribing, line-by-line coding, writing and analysing memos, and identification of categories.

## 5.9 Grounded Theory: Practical methodology and design

### 5.9.1 Introduction

When analysing Focus Group data there is no one 'best' or correct approach; it is determined by the research question and the original purpose for which they are collected.

A "pragmatic version" of grounded theory is proposed for analysis of data generated from focus groups (Flick, 2018b; Gibbs, 2018) with individual approaches and learning styles acknowledged, exploring the difference between researchers' '*a priori*' codes and '*in vivo*' codes, where the latter are derived from the data.

Barbour (2019, p.123)

### 5.9.2 Analysis

The analysis and interpretation of focus group data was as rigorous as that in the other studies, though the amount of analysis required was of greater volume given the number of participants and the complexity of the research design. Adopting the most common analysis of focus group results, a transcript of the discussion and a summary of the conclusions drawn was produced. While the iterative process of qualitative data analysis was time-consuming and intellectually demanding, the aim was to transcend the purely descriptive and provide a more analytic account. For this research the key to systematic analysis was the identification of patterning in the data through employing a form of counting, and then seeking to formulate explanations for these patterns and, as appropriate, for any lack of specific patterns in some cases. A fuller explanation of the Framework Analysis used can be found in 5.3.2 Data Analysis.

Focus groups can overemphasise consensus (Sim, 1998). Not only may an apparent consensus mask important gradations or emphasis, but Waterton and Wynne (1999) commented that many discussions fail to reach a coherent position. It was necessary therefore to avoid operating with the implicit assumption that each group would reach consensus. This, in turn, provided definitive grounds for comparison. Several devices were used to ensure the integrity of the data:

*Reliability* involved the researcher checking for the accuracy of the findings, and following Yin's (2003) suggestion that, to ensure the approach is consistent and reliable, the procedures and as many of the steps of the procedures of the case studies were documented as possible.

*Validity*, one of the strengths of qualitative research, is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Guided by Creswell's



recommendations (2009, p.191) the researcher incorporated multiple validity strategies into the study including triangulation of different data sources of information; using member-checking: taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants to confirm accuracy; using rich, thick description to convey the findings; clarification of the bias the researcher brought to the study; and presenting discrepant information that ran counter to the themes.

*Generalisability.* That Grounded Theory analyses are typically conducted on a small number of selected participants can be problematic. To compensate the researcher extended the generalisability of identified theories by systematically comparing a series of contrasting groups, selecting participants from each group until saturation ensued.

In addition, 'intimacy', a close relationship, was sought with the phenomenon. The object was to create new theory directly tied to the reality of individuals, not to verify the theory so generated beyond the verification yielded by saturation of categories.

## **5.10 Methodologies: Conclusion**

The chapter has described the ontological and epistemological positions of the researcher that supported the selection of the four methodologies used in the four studies in this research. It has described the practical application of the methodologies, and the methods used for collection and analysis of data.

The thesis next considers the ethics that underpin the research and which are fundamental to its integrity. A particular focus of the ethics chapter is on working with children, a sensitive area requiring particular attention.

## **5.11 Ethical practice: Working with adults and children**

### **5.11.1 Introduction**

The researcher's profession as a pastoral bereavement counsellor established the context of the ethical practice, is in turn influenced by the spiritual and vocational motivation behind this research, as described in chapter 1 Introduction. For the researcher this means the provision of the best possible support to the bereaved, and, for this thesis, an understanding of why many people struggle with their understanding or beliefs in an afterlife and how it affects the grieving process.

It is to this end that the research question was formulated, 'What do Roman Catholic children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife?' in an attempt to identify causes of spiritual struggle along with any potential mitigation. The question was deliberately formulated to test the hypothesis that 'we do not teach our children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss'. The data captured in the research is used to analyse and interpret children's understandings. Together with data collected from those involved in the delivery of religious education about death and the afterlife and from an initial study of bereaved young peoples' experience of and ability to call on faith to cope with loss, it seeks to support or challenge this hypothesis.

Given the context and the sensitivity of the subject – death and afterlife understanding and beliefs - and the involvement of young children and bereaved young people, the ethical standards for the conduct of the research were of particular importance. In bereavement counselling ethics understandably assume a high priority, and required additional consideration alongside the standards demanded when undertaking research of any kind. Section 5.11.4 describes specific action taken to meet ethical requirements when working with children and young people.

Throughout the researcher's bereavement counselling and support career of 20 years, standards for ethical practice have been directed by their counselling professional body BACP. These mirror those of Cardiff University and other standards bodies including BERA. Guidance for the research was also taken from the DfE and the Information Commissioner's Office.

### 5.11.2 General ethical guidance

Reference information can be found in Appendix 11 *Ethics Reference information*. The *Singapore Statement on Research Integrity* (2010) and other legislation were used as a framework to determine principles and responsibilities applicable to the research undertaken. The ethical principles included beneficence or attempting to do good; aiming to do no harm; honesty, truth and justice; and respect for each person's autonomy (as far as they are able to exercise that) and their personal integrity.

Reflecting on the ethical demands of working with children and young people, in assessing these principles and responsibilities a number of questions were asked of the research such as how common and how serious is the problem of lack of knowledge being researched, and whether the involvement of children is justified.

### 5.11.3 Key pointers

Arising from the assessment of responses to these questions a schedule of Key Pointers of ethical engagement with the research was developed and utilised, framed in response to identification of any hypothetical risks. Where 'participants' refer to children, this would include their parents/guardians. For each Key Pointer the risk is described together with the researcher's response as to how the risk can be mitigated.

***Key pointer:*** *Informed consent must be obtained from the participants*

*Risks:* Informed consent will not be obtained, the participant will be unduly influenced or not have sufficient/accurate information on which to make a decision as to participation in the research, and/or the right to refuse or withdraw.

*Response:* The researcher gained freely given informed consent from participants before approaching them for data collection. The informed consent was obtained from children and parents/guardians separately. Participants were told about their rights to ensure informed and unpressured consent or refusal, and to avoid misunderstandings or invisible pressures such as shame or embarrassment at saying 'no'.

Principles of consent applied to any reuse of data. This covered two possible future uses: secondary data analysis by the same researcher to address new research questions, or the sharing of the dataset for use by other researchers.

Recruitment was initiated with all participants by provision of a 'General Information Sheet'. This was given to each pupil in selected Y5 and Y6 classes, and to parents/guardians either by hand (delivered by pupils) or by the schools, which had agreed to distribute them.

***Key pointer:*** *Children must be allowed a 'voice' in the research and in their participation*

*Risks:* It is recognised that children are among the groups that have been most excluded from research – traditionally, ethics have tended to exclude children from having a voice.

*Response:* The research gave the participants a voice through its promotion of ethical low-risk research, ensuring that their thoughts, views and opinions were captured, and that the researcher responded appropriately. The researcher ensured that the potential outcomes of participation, to have one's views taken seriously and to influence future policy and practice, were achieved. The methodology used for data capture from children – Focus Groups – was seen as an appropriate vehicle for ensuring participants were able to give voice to their personal thoughts and views.

***Key pointer:*** *Timely access to appropriate support is to be provided if participation cause anxiety or distress*

*Risks:* The sensitive nature of the subject being studied may result in distress to participants.

*Response:* Albeit that this risk was seen as very low, during the Focus Groups the researcher was alert to signs of distress or reluctance to continue, and responded to these appropriately. The researcher would immediately reconsider any actions occurring during the research process that appeared to cause emotional or other harm, in order to minimise such harm. The researcher ensured timely access to counselling should the sensitive nature of the questions cause distress or trigger re-emergent grief.

Two bereavement counsellors experienced in supporting children had indicated their willingness to participate. The bereavement counsellors were not directly involved and did not participate in the research itself, but rather provided support post-research if wanted by participants or by the researcher and co-moderator. This was not called on. All counsellors (including the researcher) were 'DBS enhanced' checked.

The focus groups were undertaken with a responsible person present as co-moderator in addition to the researcher, who acted as the moderator. These were the only adults present during the focus group discussions. The co-moderator was a senior teaching assistant. The

school's own staff would preferably not have been used but Covid dictated otherwise. The school's headteacher was close at hand if needed.

Guidance was given to participants as to how they could indicate their wish to suspend or end their participation.

***Key pointer:*** *All participants including researchers and other involved parties must be kept safe.*

*Risks:* Inadequate attention to safety issues resulting in harm to an individual.

*Response:* Safety in the research was ensured through utilisation of several devices including risk assessments and taking account of any relevant safeguarding issues; taking into account any vulnerability of participants; fulfilling any duty to intervene to prevent harm to others; discussing with research participants where or how they could be supported if the research left them feeling vulnerable or in need of therapeutic input; considering appropriate support for the researcher and/or participants; and paying attention to self-care of the researcher and co-moderator.

***Key pointer:*** *Participant information should be provided, including statement of research aims and methods*

*Risks:* Participants receiving inadequate or inaccurate information will be unable to make an informed decision as to consent or non-participation.

*Response:* The researcher provided and explained detailed and age-appropriate information in media relevant to the participants involved. A General information Sheet was provided to all participants and everyone associated with the research such as school staff and general enquirers. These helped to overcome ignorance, resistance and even fear of e.g. the idea of discussing death and the afterlife with children. At the start of each Focus Group session a Powerpoint presentation was held, reiterating all key points.

***Key pointer:*** *Consideration of cultural or other barriers must be practiced*

*Risks:* Participants may be excluded or treated differently for a variety of reasons such as gender, race, or physical or mental health.

*Response:* Codes of Ethics requirements as referenced in Appendix 11 *Ethics Reference Information* were strictly followed. Should a participant be excluded for any reason it would be documented and if necessary, discussed with an appropriate person or body such as a supervisor or ethics committee to confirm the action. Consideration would also be given as to sharing the decision and rationale with the participant, if appropriate. No participants were excluded.

***Key pointer:*** *Personally-sensitive information must be protected – confidentiality, data security, anonymity*

*Risks:* These were two-fold: confidentiality of data, anonymity, and protection of participants may be compromised; and participants might be identified from the data, either that reported in the initial outcome of the research or subsequently if the data is re-used for additional, secondary research.

*Response:* The researcher followed relevant legislation, particularly the UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research (Version 3.3, 2017); and the Data Protection Act (2018). These stated in turn, that ‘*Particular attention must be given to systems for ensuring confidentiality of personal information and to the security of those systems*’, and the requirement of ‘*rights to confidentiality in both manual and computerised/electronic data*’.

An explanation of key aspects of GDPR was given to participants to reassure them about longer-term anonymity and disguising features (of places, people, organisations). Duration for retention of data was also provided.

***Key pointer:*** *Exercise of power in the researcher/participant relationship must be appropriate*

*Risks:* Inappropriate actual or perceived exercise of power by the researcher can impact on the conduct and outcome of the research.

*Response:* Consideration was given to the risks associated with exercise of power and associated emotions within the relationship between the researcher and participants. Children in particular are generally taught from a young age that they must obey adults, making it difficult for them to refuse researchers. The researcher made it clear that their voices were wanted to be heard, and that there would be no adverse consequences for them if they refused to take part.

***Key pointer:*** *Efficient and adequate communication should be exercised throughout the research study*

*Risks:* Failure to communicate correctly can impact on the research at a number of levels and points throughout the research.

*Response:* Communication in all its forms was seen as important for creating a relationship of trust and respect. There was a two-way information exchange throughout the research study, with all participants having the opportunity to talk to the researcher about any misunderstandings, doubts, fears, and about how the research could be improved.

For children, as UNCRC (2012) points out

[They] have a right to be “properly researched” and in research terms this translates into children being participants in research, using methods that make it easy for them to express their opinions, views and experiences and being protected from harm.

Effective communication was seen as the best way to respond to any concerns of participants, to counter any difficulties in obtaining their consent. Listening was central to achievement of this, along with use of appropriate media for disseminating information at the relevant time e.g. Information Sheets, and Powerpoint presentations.

***Key pointer:*** *Respect for all involved in the research study will facilitate effective practice research and successful completion*

*Risks:* Failure to attend to the aspect of respect of all participants can impact on the research at a number of levels and points throughout the research.

*Response:* Respect of participants’ rights, views and concerns was exercised to reduce the possibility of coercion of resisting or resentful children, and the risk of complaints. Participants’ active cooperation and contributions supported more efficient and effective research - they were less likely to withdraw from a study if they felt respected.

The researcher endeavoured to establish mutual trust and rapport in order to obtain the required information. A balance was struck between professional and business-like behaviour and friendly relations, and appropriate techniques were adopted to achieve this. It was important to acknowledge and respect children’s reluctance to express themselves in whatever way they choose, e.g. about withdrawing from the focus group at any stage, stop a focus group or not answer a question.

**Key pointer:** *Social aspects should be taken into account*

*Risks:* Some participants, in any social group, may need extra care and respect: for example, in groups where there are dominant characters participating, or who speak limited English. These characteristics may be found in particular in the early stages of Focus Groups when children will be talking about their experience of death and the afterlife.

*Response:* Particular attention was given to the emotional needs and support of any participant so affected. Each participant's needs were recognised, and each individual treated appropriately without being over-cautious and potentially ignoring valuable contributions to the study. In the Focus Groups, dialogue between the moderator and co-moderator aided in achieving this.

#### **5.11.4 Specific action taken to meet ethical requirements for children**

The researcher acted as the moderator in Focus Groups, accompanied by a second moderator, a senior member of the school staff, whose dual role was to supervise proceedings and ensure children's wellbeing.

The researcher did not exercise any exclusion of participants due to learning or communication difficulties, or those for whom English/Welsh was not their first language. In the event that participants were recruited with these characteristics the ethical approach taken was to make every process throughout the study as inclusive as possible. Guidance was taken from the work of Children in Scotland (2002), committing to equal opportunities believing that "all children are of equal worth, whatever their ability, colour, ethnicity, gender, health, religion, sexual orientation or social class" (In Alderson and Morrow, 2011, p.51). Guidance was also taken from "Interviewing children and young people with learning difficulties: guidelines for researchers and multi-professional practice" (Lewis and Porter, 2004) to ensure compliance with UNCRC guidelines (2012).

No direct questions were asked about any understanding of death and the afterlife in a general, abstract sense. Rather, the discussion were based on topics, ideas and concepts which the children had already discussed at school in Religious Education.

Gender can play an important role in determining dominant voices in focus groups involving children. Most researchers working with young children advocate holding single-sex groups to guard against the tendency in mixed gender groups for boys to "talk more, more loudly and determine the conversation topics [and] to overshadow girls" (Mauthner, 1997, p.23).



The small class sizes of the participant schools did not allow this, and attention was paid to ensure no dominance was established by any gender or individual.

When considering the make-up of Focus Groups with children Litosseliti, (2003) and Henninck (2014) suggested that groups of friends were found to create an atmosphere more conducive to talking than do groups of strangers, as children seemed to feel safer and more willing to express their opinions within a group they already knew. This advice was followed, participants needing to feel comfortable with each other. Meeting with others whom they thought of as possessing similar characteristics or levels of understanding about a given topic would be more appealing than meeting with those who are perceived to be different (Morgan, 1988).

Participant children in Y5/Y6 (age 9-11) were recruited, an age at which children are considered mature enough to be able to contribute in a meaningful way to the research. Each focus group was made up of 4-6 participants, the optimum number recommended, to avoid potential problems with adult-to-children power relations. Individual groups of children were recruited from within the same school, making knowing other children in each discussion group a certainty. Two schools participated.

Seven Focus Groups were conducted, thirty-six children in total across the two schools. A pilot Focus Group was also held with children of the target age from a different school, to test the workability of the Topic Guide, questions, environment and general conduct of the Focus Group. This assured their acceptability and clarity.

Choice of venue was important. In general, the usefulness and validity of focus group data are affected by the extent to which participants feel comfortable about openly communicating their ideas, views or opinions. The venue influences efficacy of the group: a friendly, quiet, non-authoritarian, easily accessible, practical location is imperative for making participants feel comfortable (Krueger and Casey, 2009). The room size, lighting, temperature and seating arrangements affect the group atmosphere – sitting in a circle on the floor or on a lounge chair can make discussions more informal (Krueger and Casey, 2009). The venue, research team and set-up should be child-friendly and fun (Gibson, 2012) as it is essential to build rapport before launching discussions. Focus groups benefit if the environment is conducive to discussion, does not have the appearance of a test situation, and allows the participants to feel safe. The researcher needed to consider the potential for discussions to be overheard – this concern, actual or hypothetical, can influence the preparedness of participants to speak freely

Ultimately, the venues for the Focus Groups were dictated by Covid – they were all held online using the Zoom and TEAMS platforms. In both schools the staff common rooms were

used, the children sitting in a circle facing a large computer display. This addressed any concern of being overheard – no measures were needed to address any privacy and confidentiality concerns relating to location. The children were used to this medium of education and were comfortable with it – their enthusiasm in participating was heightened by the fact that they were in rooms that were usually out of bounds, so there was a sense of adventure and exclusivity

Subject to the identified measures being in place, the schools from which the participants were sourced were the preferred venues. Being in a familiar environment assisted in overcoming anticipatory anxiety and helped the participants to feel comfortable and relaxed. There was much that the researcher could do to compensate for this less than ideal setting, such as ensuring that specific questions and stimulus material were included in the topic guide to steer discussion away from the associations suggested by the chosen setting on to the topics most relevant to the research.

Finally, the issue of consent was addressed. Guidance was taken from 'Informed Consent with children and young people in social research' (Parsons, Sherwood and Abbott, 2016). Information Sheets were provided for participants. Following time for reflection, the researcher offered to meet with participants to discuss the research and answer any questions that had arisen since provision of Information Sheets. No participants took up this offer, though it is noted that when the Focus Groups were run a number of participants had questions that might have been asked at an earlier stage

Following the satisfactory outcome of the preparatory steps, Consent Forms were introduced, allowing the children and parents/guardians to opt-in to the research. These were discussed and, if acceptable to the participants, signed. These were confirmatory of the information provided on Information Sheets and during presentations and discussions. This approach allowed sufficient time between the initial proposal and Consent Forms for reflection, asking of questions, and providing reassurance on any issue of concern. All children who had expressed an initial interest signed the Consent Forms and took part in the research.

At the beginning of each Focus Group the researcher introduced the research project to participating children using the audio-visual aid PowerPoint. The opportunity was provided to enable children to ask questions. Recently bereaved children were not purposely selected. Any children identified as having experienced a bereavement *of any kind* (e.g. a pet) was carefully monitored should they have elected to participate. While the provision of counselling support and other support mechanisms were in place, the risks associated with

the focus group discussions were anticipated to be very low and were only designed as an 'in case' safety net – the discussions were not directed at topics that would be upsetting.

#### **5.11.5 Conclusion - Ethics**

Guided by the positionality of the researcher as a pastoral bereavement counsellor motivated by faith, and always conscious of the responsibility of supporting grieving people who are often struggling spiritually with their understanding of and beliefs in an afterlife, the ethical standards adopted by the researcher were of significance. Together with the sensitive and emotional subject being researched – death and the afterlife – and conscious of particular demands when working with children and young people, high standards were followed throughout, resulting in a successful outcome in which the ethical principles of beneficence or attempting to do good, aiming to do no harm, honesty, truth and justice, and respect for each person's and personal integrity were achieved.

## **CHAPTER SIX DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

### **Introduction**

Having described the methodologies adopted for the four studies undertaken and the ethics that underpin the research's conduct, this chapter presents and analyses the findings.

Study 1 demonstrates what happens when bereaved people have faith to call on to cope with loss. The research purposely starts 'at the end' of the process of teaching about death and the afterlife to highlight what can be achieved if the subject is adequately taught, and potential obstacles to its successful achievement. In doing so it establishes the benchmark against which all other studies' data is compared to test the hypothesis that 'We do not teach our children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss'.

Studies 2-4 describe the process of delivery of Religious Education in primary schools. They seek to show whether and why the standard set in Study 1 is not achieved, and the consequences of not having faith to call on in the event of a loss, collectively termed Afterlife Belief Conflict, 'ABC'.

The stated hypothesis would be supported if the bereaved young people who participated in Study 1 did not know enough about death and the afterlife to support them when they experienced a bereavement, and that this had a detrimental effect on their grief or the findings of studies 2-4 prove that there is a cause of peoples' inability to call on faith to support them in their loss – inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife.

## **6.1 STUDY 1 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

### **What is the outcome of what has been taught about death and the afterlife.**

#### **6.1.1 Introduction**

The data analysis of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study of twelve bereaved young people provides a close textual reading of the accounts given in the interviews. Consistent with IPA methodology new themes were allowed to emerge from participants' interviews through a rigorous attention to the systematic analysis process. 'Challenges' to the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife paralleled those identified in the Literature Review.

As all participants were Christian a baseline was decided on against which analysis could be measured, the Church's teaching of the Last Things – Heaven, Judgement, Purgatory, and Hell – as defined in Appendix 2 *Glossary*.

#### **6.1.2 Analysis**

A detailed description of the method of analysing data is provided in Appendices *Analytic Procedures*. Analysis of IPA Themes for bereaved young people can be found in Appendices *Tables and Statistics Study 1 Category Analysis*.

The author did not seek to validate or comment on the participants' contributions. Rather, they were used to establish context and as a measurement of accuracy and reliability of both the researcher's and participants' interpretations, to describe the 'world' that the participant was socialised by and in and of which they were trying to make sense.

The data analysis focused on meeting the study's aim, being to explore whether the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife that participants had received had helped when they experienced a bereavement; any challenges to the ability to call on faith to cope with loss; and whether what had been taught and understood had contributed to the practice of pastoral bereavement counselling.

All participants were open to discussing the actual effects of grief and declared an afterlife belief both prior to and post bereavement, though for some, what they believed afterlife to be, or mean, changed pre- and post-bereavement.

### 6.1.3 Beliefs

Regardless of pre-bereavement beliefs, all participants constructed new beliefs or adapted existing ones in order to cope with their loss through Meaning-making and Continuing Bonds (See 6.1.7 Coping Mechanisms). Participants sought simpler interpretations of the afterlife, described by one participant Annie as 'child-like', raising the possibility that these interpretations may afford short-term relief but compound participants' spiritual struggle longer-term if the solace found proved difficult to sustain.

Annie, in adapting her beliefs to meet her needs, described herself as a 'pick and mix' Catholic who took what she needed from her beliefs and teachings in order to cope - a description applicable to the majority of participants. Belief in an afterlife, re-constructed or otherwise, was foundational to people coping with loss, the desire for reunion with the bereaved figuring highly in participants' wishes.

Felicity described the rationale for turning to one's faith:

When something big happens in peoples' lives they turn to religion. It is human nature to seek out something that will give you hope. And without that, where do you find an answer?

Clarity of understanding was not always important. Emma described the confused nature of her understanding, which made no difference to her beliefs:

For me, it is just the next part of the journey, and whether that gives you blind faith, whether that gives you solace or whether that is pie in the sky for other people, I really don't care.

However, some participants' failure to understand how those who have died will 'be' when they were reunited 'on the Last Day' led them to develop their own interpretations.

Participants' understanding of the afterlife was variable. Four participants were not able to describe a heavenly image other than in human terms, suggesting a lack of education or understanding of how the dead might be perceived, which is at odds with the Church's teaching. This difficulty to conceptualise the dead compounded Annie's grief:

The image I have is that I'll see [the bereaved] as they were, whether I'm 82 or not. I can only think earthly things, human things. A being, an entity [becomes emotional].

This lack of clear understanding was also described by Huw,

I don't really know how I will meet [the loved one]. I don't think [we will meet] bodily, but we will know each other. And maybe they will recognise me before I recognise them.

Charlotte summarised the negative impact an unclear understanding might have, saying

There's got to be something, because nobody could ... just vanish and they wouldn't be there anymore.

The participants demonstrated a wide range of understanding and beliefs about Resurrection on the last day, from the simple (child-like) to the clearer understanding of what the Church teaches. Regardless of such a range, participants such as Laura saw resurrection as important for a grieving person:

You just want to know that everything is going to be okay. I think it very much forges a belief that there is something better for a person after death.

While there was great variety in what 'something better' was, participants worked out what they needed to understand. Jodie said

If you thought about that aspect of death, that someone is no longer there after death ... I think it is helpful to think that the person has gone to a better place, and I would like to think is at rest and at peace.

Lara offered the simplest but clearest understanding and understanding of death and the afterlife:

I think in essence as well the whole story around Jesus and his crucifixion and Resurrection is a story about dying and going to another place, that's the main crux of the story line isn't it?.

Levels of understanding ranged from this simple view to a more developed understanding. Such a broad range would be concerning for Church leaders, Policymakers and Educators alike as all participants had received the same religious education. Annie came closest to reflecting the Church's teaching when she said

I was told it's your soul that goes to Heaven, so you won't have earthly feelings, you will have ... it will be a spiritual sort of sense from your soul.

Jodie also expressed some clarity on the matter, some 'seeds' seemingly having been planted:

I still have a belief in God and that there is something after death. To me the "afterlife" is the transcendence of the spiritual part of you to a higher place to be with God.

All twelve participants had learned about and believed in Jesus' death and Resurrection but that knowledge did not extend to the resurrection of those on earth. Half of the participants demonstrated this misunderstanding:

I knew about people dying and being buried and all the rest but when it came to our own souls it seems completely different, you can't put the two [Jesus' resurrection and our own] together. (Cory)

Annie described the confusion around the afterlife and the resurrection of the body:

I believe in the afterlife ... but some people don't: they won't have their relatives cremated, they don't believe in cremation because they don't believe the body will rise to the afterlife.

Understandings of Purgatory, Judgement and Hell (see Appendix 2 *Glossary*), were also variable. As with all afterlife beliefs there were a variety of interpretations with confusion and upset contributing to participants' ABC. Felicity described the consequences:

I think it [Religious Education] brings questions rather than problems. Like for example what if he is in Purgatory? What if he is still there? What if he hasn't been let through the gates of heaven?.

Purgatory was not linked by all participants with judgement or 'living a good life', though it was clearly a fundamental element of their Religious Education, and the concept of 'living a good life' was foundational to participants' beliefs.

I actually talk directly to Jesus saying "please look after them because they deserve it, they are good people [tearful] - You've taken them, look after them". (Annie)

Felicity did suggest a link between living a good life and ascending to heaven when she said

I really believed that grancha [grandfather] was in heaven: he was a good guy, he never did any harm, he led a simple life.

While no longer practicing her faith the seeds of understanding and understanding of death and the afterlife seemed to have been firmly planted since Felicity said, albeit in a naïve expression of her understanding,

You need to be a good person in your life, and you need to follow the word of God and you will end up in this beautiful garden with all these fruits, and Jesus is there.

Cheri typified the belief that living a good life was important, though not with any reference to Purgatory and only indirect reference to Judgement. Cheri's simple belief reflected the Church's teaching:

I suppose in the Catholic church getting to heaven is a reward for being a good person [laughs].

Purgatory was occasionally seen in a negative way and was misunderstood by some:

I think if I remember rightly, you went to Purgatory if you weren't baptised. I think that's what we were taught. (Steve)

While Heaven and Hell were clear (though often misunderstood) concepts in participants' minds Purgatory was the least understood, despite a recognition that some form of judgement ('live a good life') took place. Annie said

there probably is a place that ... I believe that God is a loving God, so you've challenged me to think well what happens to the people who have done terrible things.

The understanding of Hell varied considerably among the participants, some reflecting Church teaching of distance from God, others seeing it as a physical location where one is punished. Generally, there was a belief in a struggle between good and evil, and that where one 'goes', Heaven or Hell, is linked to living a good life. Some participants demonstrated an old-fashioned idea of the devil and Hell:

We were taught that there is our guardian angel on this shoulder [points to right shoulder] and the devil on this shoulder (points to left shoulder] and there will always be a bit of a fight between them, if we live a good life hopefully we will be one of the people who goes to heaven, and not down to Hell. (Neil)

Darren characterised Hell as a fearful punishment:

You think of the best in people, so you try not to think about whether they were good enough to get into heaven, or did they actually go to Hell. (Darren)

What is interesting about these statements is not just that they were spoken by young people in their early twenties, but that they were repeated on a number of occasions by the children taking part in Study 4 – *What do children know about death and the afterlife and how is it acquired*, who were more than ten years younger: there had been no apparent development a decade later in their understanding of death and the afterlife. The concept of Hell taught in primary school would not be taught in the way characterised by the above quotes, suggesting that the ideas came from some other source. As the Literature Review



discovered, this could be parents and family, the community in which the person lived, or cultural influences.

Cheri summed up the most-voiced concept of Hell as physical punishment, positioning young peoples' understanding at some distance from what is taught:

I always understood that if you weren't good you would go to hell and eternal damnation. That was frightening, I suppose it helped to make you a good girl.

#### **6.1.4 Planting the seeds**

This is a main theme of this thesis, foundational to the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in primary school. This section describes its importance to the understanding of death and the afterlife. Four participants referred to the concept of 'planting the seeds', Neil setting the scene:

It is that conscience we learn about how we want to live our lives and so on. And over time, I think prayer also, the way we reflect on the words of scripture and the words of prayers, that cemented those foundations.

Felicity described how, at a time of loss, people turn to what they have learned,

They turn to it [faith] in times of need - you don't necessarily have to be a devout person of your religion, you can often implement it as you need it.

Felicity had experienced a very close loss, and found herself needing to call on her faith to cope. Felicity used an image of the bereaved person being a star or living on a star, an image seen again in interviews with children in study 4:

I always associate that kind of belief with what was taught to me in primary school, that heaven is above, and as a child I would always be looking above for the brightest star, and I still do that.

Like Felicity, Emma believed that people need to have something to turn to in times of grief, and described how this was taught her in primary school. She too was able to turn to her faith following a loss:

When I started primary school, it was like, faith was depicted as something to believe in and something that everyone needs in their life. Then as I got older it was like, it is human nature to have faith: everyone needs to believe in something or someone. [That] there will be a "tomorrow".

Emma believed that faith was present in "the vast proportion of the population", who just accept it for what it is.

This [faith] is something, one thing that a vast proportion of the population don't feel the need to prove. They just have it, it is just instilled in them you have faith.

The Literature Review, which reported declining religiousness and increasing secularity and atheism, does not support Emma's view. However if it is so, then the thesis' aim would be to capture in childhood those who don't have that faith, and to facilitate calling on faith to cope with loss for those who do, as Emma said, "accept it for what it is".

As someone who had reflected at length on the subject of the interview beforehand and on its relationship to her own bereavement, Felicity is given the last word:

They [educators] have definitely given me the foundation stones for me having a broader sense of knowledge around afterlife, heaven, grief and all that. At my fundamental core, I know that if anything bad happens to me I will turn to faith, and I know that because it is just an instinct for me now, I am, like, that is where I will turn to, it gives you a coping mechanism.

School leadership and ethos figured in participants' responses, the majority commenting on the importance of school leadership and ethos to effective teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. The view was that without 'good' school leadership and an ethos that reflected the legislative and faith demands of a Catholic education, then effective education was compromised. Jodie described the importance of school leadership and ethos best:

I certainly feel that it is not just life and death, it is the other teachings you have that are important in life, the values you are given. I feel that they are very positive, as you move into adolescence and into adulthood.

Neil, a primary school teacher, described the contribution strong leadership and an open attitude made to teaching about death and the afterlife:

Big burly boys who play football and have a scrap on the yard, when they were in class and they were talking openly about God, they weren't afraid to talk about Christ or about God's love for us. The environment definitely helped.

### **6.1.5 Causes**

All participants reported that ultimately what they had been taught about death and the afterlife had helped them in some way to cope with their loss. No participant claimed that they had *not* received any benefit from their Religious Education; however, there was variation in how this was achieved, when comfort and solace had been gained, and to what extent.

This demonstrated the potentiality of achieving the Golden Thread linking the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife to the ability to call on faith to cope with loss. It further demonstrated that any benefit gained can be impacted by a number of factors, 'Challenges', that constitute the cause of failing to establish and maintain the link.

All twelve participants foregrounded religious education as the dominant factor in determining the accuracy of their understanding, and consequently the degree of benefit gained. Felicity set the scene when she said:

I was thinking that better supply of religious education to children on bereavement will end up in reduced health issues later in life, because if they tackle it from the get-go, it won't plague them forever when they don't understand.

Understanding of the afterlife was variable and confused, with half of the participants struggling to explain the afterlife in any manner, typified by Steve:

We were never taught much about our resurrection. We may know it in a general way from listening to the Gospels, but we weren't taught it.

The inability to conceptualise or articulate what the afterlife was or what it meant was a cause of conflict:

I think it's hard to explain Heaven. I strongly believe that the soul goes to Heaven, but there are so many different ideas about it. When I think of all the people who have died I find it very hard to explain it. (Cory)

Two participants had 'blind faith' in what they had been taught, choosing to 'believe what they needed to believe' in order to cope:

I haven't got a clue [what the afterlife is], but I know they are not suffering. They are not suffering any more. (Lara)

It hasn't affected my beliefs - it has strengthened them, because I have a need, a belief, and a faith. (Annie)

Charlotte meanwhile demonstrated how heaven and the afterlife are conceptualised in mortal ways, showing that however heaven was perceived, belief in it was important:

I believe in resurrection - I don't know how it will work, I don't know how everyone will fit in who comes back, or anything like that, but I believe it, [and] if I didn't have that belief there is nothing else.

Darren came closest to the Church's teaching when referring to "the Trinity", that God is in three parts, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. His description supported the theme of 'planting the seeds' – this aspect of Religious Education had stayed with him.

So, whatever was taught me by school, by education, was paradise with no pain, no hurting, and you are with Jesus, the whole Trinity.

Limited education was identified as a factor. For some, a lack of clarity from teaching seemed to be at the root of participants' difficulties:

It wasn't actually said, well, everyone would be jumping around skipping, and that you would be as you were when on earth; they didn't actually describe the physicality of what it would be like, so whether it is a spiritual place I don't know. (Lara).

All twelve participants believed their religious education on the afterlife was limited:

Not a lot [was taught] about what happens after we die. We weren't taught about afterlife as such. (Huw)

Darren supported these comments, describing what he had been taught:

They definitely went through the crucifixion, not in sort of an in-depth look, rather that Jesus died and went to heaven and that is where people go when they die. I don't remember them talking much about hell.

Half of the participants referred to the taboo nature of death, suggesting that not teaching children about death and the afterlife was deliberate. Two put this down to the nature of the subject:

We don't seem to be teaching children what happens after death, and that creates this uncertainty. Perhaps it's because it's not a very nice story to tell children. (Steve)

Neil expressed concern about the consequences of protecting children from death:

I am all for protecting children, God only knows, you want to give them things at a time and place which is right, but there is no time or place that is right for everybody at the same point.

Annie reflected on her personal experience of being shielded from death, reinforcing the argument for early education of children about death and the afterlife:

My parents shielded me from hurt, which I don't think is a good thing. You have got to face it, you've got to ... For me, did I lack the tools that I needed to cope? If you have these tools when you are young, perhaps it might help you.

Felicity was similarly forthright about the facts of life – and death – and shielding children from death. In her words are the essence of this thesis: prevention is better than cure:

Death is still a taboo, which I don't understand - the moment we are alive we start dying. What do you do if you suddenly find that a family member has a terminal illness, how are you going to put provisions in place then to educate them?.

Five participants believed limited education had inhibited their grief:

I think in some ways more exploration of [grief] would be beneficial because I think you would be more inclined to turn to your faith at those times. (Lara)

Age-appropriate teaching also emerged as a factor to be considered. At primary level, it might seem obvious that teaching about death and the afterlife should not be frightening for children, and would need development as the children move through the years. What this research found is what Madge (1971, p.23) described: “the danger that early distorted impressions may become fixed and difficult to erase in later years is a very real one”. Felicity demonstrated the difficulty in finding the right balance in delivering the Church’s message in an age-appropriate way:

I think that [distance from God] is confusing for children, I mean what does it mean, being close to God? I think when you try to complicate it, it makes it difficult when you do have to deal with grief. Like, “whoa, is that person close to God?”.

Cheri described the typical confusion experienced by children:

We read in the Bible, my house has many mansions, rooms, but what does that mean? Who am I going to be placed with?.

This supported Watson’s (1992, p.166) view that “The most important priority for the teacher is to address the problem of naïve literalism which plagues the development of religious understanding”.

Even with ‘sugar-coated’ teaching, death and the afterlife can be frightening. Jodie, however, described an age-appropriate experience that suggested it could be done well if other factors such as teacher education and attitude allowed, through constant (‘subliminal’) reference:

Thoughts about life after death were very much embedded through the teaching process in a gentle, softly way. I don't remember being scared about it at the time but obviously subliminally it was writing the story in my head that when you lose people, this is what happens.

This was supported by Felicity’s experience:

Being in RE from the age of 5 to 17 you were always taught about heaven when people die: you don't know exactly what death means, but you know that when people pass they go to heaven.

Societal influences such as secularism and atheism played a part in participants' understandings about death and the afterlife, identified in the Literature Review as significant challenges to peoples' faith. They were mentioned by eight of the twelve participants, making them one of the primary challenges identified in this study. Jodie explained her problem:

I think it's family life really, life has got in the way. I think the biggest obstacle nowadays for young adults to being regular, active parish members is life itself: there is so much going on constantly that it is hard to reconcile to devoting yourself every week to something.

Neil had a similar view:

I think for teenagers these days, it's not "cool" to go to church sometimes, and there are other things that are a pull against it.

Felicity had a different but equally valid perspective:

How do you educate people on grieving when we are becoming more and more a politically correct society? It is so hard.

Emma had lived abroad for several years and was able to make a comparison between religious practice in Britain and a country where Catholicism was still 'strong':

It might be down to society itself, whether religion is alive and kicking, which you don't really have here, it has kind of gone.

External pressures also played a part in participants' understanding. Neil, a primary school teacher in a multi-cultural catchment area, confirmed findings of the Literature Review that the traditional bastions of Catholicism such as Ireland, France and Italy were weakening in their faith and religious practice (see e.g. Johnson, 2018), while other countries were retaining both:

When you go to church it is the Indians, Filipinos, Poles; as a priest said, the places we used to send missionaries to are now sending them to us, we are becoming the object of mission.

Comments on external pressures extended to the impact of social media and peer pressure, well documented in the Literature Review. Cheri commented on the influence of TV on children's conception of death and the afterlife:

In TV programmes and the like, the "afterlife" is ghosts, people appearing from places, so it is a funny expression, the afterlife, to me.

Peer pressure was mentioned by four participants. Neil had perhaps the closest insight into the phenomenon, as well as the effects of social media and TV on children's understanding of the concepts of death and the afterlife:

Definitely peer pressure, social media, image, we are peddling that image is everything, and I don't think that God can compete with that sometimes, it isn't whizzy enough.

This was a common view of the position, as Felicity said:

It is like, "why are you doing that, and why are you going to church, that is so lame". And it is not lame, I never thought that it was lame and something I wouldn't do.

A theme that emerged in the Literature Review was that of the contribution by parents and family, positive and negative, to children's Religious Education. Nine of the twelve participants commented on the subject, making it one of the primary themes of this study.

Cheri said

For me everything starts in the home, everything starts there, even from an early age.

Jodie expanded on the influence of her family :

There is a strong belief throughout [my] family that this is what happens at death, and no-one has ever proposed something different. So it was reinforced - I would say it came predominantly from school but it was reinforced by home as well.

The support for her faith and beliefs by her family and the community in which she lived figured prominently in Jodie's coping with her loss, reinforcing the message that what you are taught about death and the afterlife provides a support when loss is experienced.

It is testament to your family, and what help you get from those around that immediate family unit, that tends to strengthen your ideology and beliefs.

Neil described the support he had received when he was bereaved:

I feel that I was lucky, because of my upbringing, because of my love of God, because of the wonderful friends I had around me, it was like a little blanket really.

Neil's personal experience was not reflected in the children he taught, however,

It is to do with the family, how you are raised in the family, and I think that is much-changed.

Felicity made a telling contribution to the effect that parents and family can have on one's faith:

I think I started to understand faith when I was really young when I saw two close relatives behaving in a particular way about their faith, they always had something to believe in.

The findings show that children learn from others, whether teachers, parents, family or community. Conversely, each represent a potential obstacle to being able to call on faith to cope with loss.

### **6.1.6 Effects**

All participants commented that anticipated benefits from afterlife beliefs were compromised in the short-term by challenges to those beliefs. This section considers the effects of such challenges and the negative emotions they generated.

Questioning God arose in the interviews. A third of participants believed their loss was due to some divine plan, without which they could make no sense of what had happened. As

Annie said:

He has His plan for us, whether we like it or not.

The dominant negative emotion, however, was questioning why a loved one had died. While the Church does not teach that death brings no suffering or grief, that seemed to have been the expectation pre-bereavement, reflecting what they had been taught:

I find it hard to reconcile suffering with a God who is supposed to be all-knowing, all-loving, and all-seeing. I find that bit p\*\*\*\*s me off with the Man upstairs, to say the least. (Lara)

Cheri had questioned her beliefs when her loved one died:

Everyone blames God, "it is God's fault, why couldn't we keep him" and I did have a little thought about "Why?" "Why did you choose him, why didn't you choose me?".

Lara in particular exemplified the negative emotions associated with loss. In contrast to the taught joy of resurrection, she said

I have always struggled with that [good people dying], how you can separate innocent people who are caring and haven't a nasty bone in their body from the rest.

Negative feelings toward God were not seen in every participant. As Neil said

I know that there are people who say 'How can God do this?' but, I never ever felt that.

Emma was more pragmatic, taking a theodical stance: man was given the choice of living a good life, or to not:

There are lots of things in the world that happen, that you think "well, if God's all-knowing and all-loving why does He allow so much suffering"; but in another vein you have got to look at what human beings do, and you go through all of that stuff with free will. So, I don't think you could actually lay all of that at God's feet, because it is human nature.

Seven participants had difficulty reconciling their learned beliefs with their actual experience of loss - the solace expected from their beliefs was not realised. Annie went to the heart of the issue of ABC: an expectation from a learned set of beliefs that differs from the actual experience of loss. She was concerned that this was being perpetuated in the current teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, demonstrating a fracture in the process of delivery and understanding of death and the afterlife:

There's a gap between what we're being taught and the church's position on teaching, and if there is, where does that leave us in terms of our belief and our use of our belief to cope with a loss. What we are taught, or what we understand, can make a difference.

The interviews identified the impact on life that loss brings. All participants reported the effects of the loss of a loved one, best described by Jodie, who said:

It has a catastrophic effect on your life doesn't it, and I think the ramifications are far-reaching. When you lose someone your life changes so completely.

Neil had a similar, though perhaps more positive perspective when he said

Life was changed. And you begin a new normal. I suppose that is what was happening.

Cheri described not just the spiritual struggle that was experienced but the effect on a whole family where the bereaved person's wife, in her grief, turned against other family members, as well as God:

She shut herself off from the family, so in a way we lost them both. I questioned God really hard about that, and asked Him for the courage to accept life's unfairness.

Emma reported a similar experience which, though the two only represented a small proportion of participants, suggested it is not unusual:

[We] were talking about what things would be like now if he was still here, like, the family unit has imploded since he's gone.

Emma was moved by her loss to reflect on the existential nature of life:

I guess the older you get the more insight you have, that the chronological clock is ticking, you know, that time is going.

In seeing mortal death as the finality of existence Emma failed to take advantage of what is taught about death and the afterlife, that death is not the end, but 'the end of the beginning'.

### 6.1.7 Coping Mechanisms

'People need to believe'. All participants changed their beliefs to something that could be accommodated and that helped rather than hindered:

I honestly believe that my beliefs helped me to cope with my grief. If I didn't believe that [the bereaved] was where he is, in a spiritual or physical sense, then I couldn't cope with it. (Lara)

It was notable that three participants believed that any health condition the bereaved person had been suffering from was gone once they gained a place in heaven. This was consistent with Church teaching – and with their own needs:

I am comforted by the fact that he is not in pain. I'm thinking more of the illnesses [he had] when he was here, and he hasn't got them anymore. (Steve)

The theme of 'people need to believe' was one of the strongest to emerge from the interviews, illustrated by Annie:

It's the need to believe that they'd be there to welcome me and it wasn't just the end of our relationship. Since [they] died I've developed more of a belief in the afterlife.

Neil's beliefs were much clearer, while still serving the purpose of easing the pain of loss:

I believe in the words of a prayer I know, that "just as God gave them to us and didn't lose them in the giving, then we don't lose them in returning them to Him". I believe that they are not gone forever.

Eleven of the twelve participants used faith in the afterlife to cope with their loss, making it a primary theme of the research. Darren put it this way:

I think coping would have been harder if I'd thought of it any other way, thinking or worrying more about "have they gone to Hell", "are they still suffering now", rather than they are at rest.

Cheri strongly believed her faith had helped her through her grief:

My faith is strong and I do believe he [Christ] is there getting me through it. Because I believe so strongly in God and in Christ that I felt, it will all be okay in the end, at some time.

Emma was pragmatic about her faith, echoing Felicity's realistic assessment of living and dying:

I don't think it's [her loss] had a massive impact on my beliefs. I mean, what would be the alternative? No, death is part of living - it is as sure as taxes!. (Emma)

A new theme emerged when talking of faith for coping, a concern for others who don't have such a faith that they could call on. Cheri drew the comparison when she said:

Personally, I don't know how people cope without faith, having the strength that God is with you through all this. Because even though I was depressed or whatever, without God there, perhaps it might have been even worse.

Emma drew a similar picture:

I wouldn't say that I can cope any better than someone who thinks, well that's it, that's the end, of it, they might cope just as well as I do, but I find for me, it [faith] helps.

Emma continued the expression of concern:

It's hard to put yourself into the shoes of someone who didn't have that perspective, that belief or that ideology.



Meaning-making was identified in the Literature Review as a primary coping device. Questioning the loss in an attempt to create meaning was a consistent theme throughout the interviews, varying as to the validity, inevitability or relevance of asking 'why?'. Darren summed it up when he said

When you lose them you have to find meaning in that, don't you?.

Felicity had a similarly simplistic view of her loss, needing to find something meaningful in it:

You almost feel happy that he [grandfather] is up there looking down being a protector. I think that's really allowed me to deal with that grief.

For most, meaning-making was explicitly connected with their pre-bereavement idea of spiritual support, and reconciliation of its conflict with their actual experience. Huw typified the meaning-making undertaken by participants, though his comment had echoes of the cliched and not always helpful 'God doesn't give you more than you can deal with':

Perhaps a little counter-argument is that God made me, so perhaps He wants me to work my way through it, to bring me out of it. (Steve)

A variation of what would be the usual style of meaning-making was to reflect the responsibility for the death back on to the deceased themselves. Lara's loss was of a sibling who died of cancer, and had been a life-long smoker:

At the end of the day human beings have the choice to do what they do, God gives us free will, but you don't necessarily have free will to give yourself cancer or illnesses.

Huw had been bereaved for several years, and his emotional response had modified over that time:

You reconcile yourself in some ways that they are not suffering, that's the only way I can cope with it, not having [the deceased] around.

Meaning-making was not detrimental to the grieving process for any of the participants. As discussed in the Literature Review on the subject of Positive Religious Coping, research suggests that despite increased short-term distress, searching for meaning can be a healthy response in the long-term. The loss can be turned into something motivational for the grieving person, as Felicity demonstrated:

I channel it internally - I know he would love to see this and see me do better, and I direct that frustration and turn it into good: I want to make him the proudest he could ever be with me.

Unlike Meaning-making, there was surprisingly little mention of Continuing Bonds in the first cohort's interviews. One of the few references was by Cory, who said

It's very strange that now I'm talking to them, it's like they're there. If I'm lost or looking for something it's like she's pointing me.

Annie meanwhile demonstrated the purpose of Continuing Bonds as the need to establish and maintain a connection in order to cope with the loss, saying

I talk to my [names bereaved], to ... somebody. A being, an entity. Perhaps that's the right word, I don't know.

Of the second cohort's participants, Felicity offered the clearest expression of Continuing Bonds and the use of the Church's teaching about death and the afterlife, an exposition of the purpose of this thesis, when she said

As a child I took solace that my bampy [grandfather] was a guardian angel, and I think that actually really did allow me to cope because it's like he still has purpose even though he has passed. And I think that really allowed me to deal with my grief.

Bringing together 'planting the seeds' and Continuing Bonds, the image of an angel sitting in a garden is commonly used by both children and adults of all ages, and remains effective, as will be seen in the children's interviews in Study 4.

Counselling support was mentioned in several interviews, with three participants reporting having received counselling, Cheri supporting its availability:

I have had some counselling. It was good to lead me through the stages of grief, that it was okay to feel angry with him and the awful feelings that come with grief, and the missing.

Cheri highlighted the shortage of support, and the lack of appropriately skilled support in-school:

There were several children in my school who lost their parents, one committed suicide, and there wasn't anything like counselling available to help you get through it.

This view was supported by Jodie:

I don't remember there being a lot of advice about who you could speak to. No availability of counsellors.

Compounding the general lack of availability of counselling, supportive spiritual counselling was non-existent. Cheri described not being able to discuss one's faith with a counsellor:

I wasn't able to discuss my faith at those sessions, it was dealt with very quickly.

Explaining to the counsellor her spiritual struggle and feelings of anger toward God, Cheri described her experience:

The counsellor said "that's right, you get that a lot, that people are angry with God, and you just have to find a way to deal with that".

Asked whether having the opportunity to discuss her faith and her feelings would have helped, Cheri said

Perhaps it would have led me to a quicker healing, I don't know. I would say things but she wasn't allowed to say yes or no, that's right, that's okay. The counsellor would just say "well, you feel what you feel, you can't help that".

## **6.2 STUDY 2 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

### **What do church leaders and policymakers want taught?**

#### **6.2.1 Introduction**

Going ‘back to the beginning’, this section analyses the data from interviews undertaken with Church leaders and Policymakers, for comparison to the data from Study 1.

Study 2 starts the process of identifying any fractures in the links between what the Church and Policymakers want to be taught and what is actually delivered. In explaining the reason for inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife these fractures constitute the cause of peoples’ inability to call on faith to cope with loss.

#### **6.2.2 Analytic procedure**

The method of analysing data can be seen in *Appendices Analytic Procedures*.

Analysis of QRI Themes for Church leaders and Policymakers can be found in *List of Tables and Figures: Study 2 Category Analysis*.

As described in Chapter 6 Research Methodology, the interviews with church leaders and Policymakers used Qualitative Research Interviews (QRI). The objective, simply stated, was to gain facts rather than views, though as will be seen views were a natural by-product.

The author did not seek to validate or comment on the Church Leaders’ and Policymakers’ statements. Rather, the information provided was used to establish context and as a measurement of accuracy and reliability of the researcher’s and participants’ interpretations, and for comparison to the findings in Study 1 and subsequent studies.

#### **6.2.3 Analysis**

##### **Background information**

The interviews were conducted with two groups:

1. Church leaders
2. Policymakers

All participants demonstrated, and were open to discussing, their understanding of the subject. While not a planned aspect of the study participants were also prepared to offer

opinions, both supportive and critical, alongside the facts solicited. Participants' anonymised names can be found in Appendix 9 *Study Participants*. Consent forms can be found in Appendix 8b *Information sheets, Interview schedules/guides, Consent forms*

*For Church leaders* delegated responsibility for participating in the research was given to two Catholic priests by the Archbishop of their Archdiocese. The priest had an extensive knowledge of theology and was the author of two books on the subject; the other priest, a Canon, was working within a thriving Parish in South Wales with one primary- and one secondary school under his purview. On the advice of the priest a school chaplain was recruited to the research, providing a further perspective on the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife.

The *Policymaker* is the Director of Religious Education for a Catholic Archdiocese. He was given delegated powers to take part in the research by his Archdiocesan Archbishop and by the Director of Education for the Archdiocese. Fr. Brian described his responsibilities as being “the delivery of Religious Education, Catholic worship, ethos of the schools, inspection, and various things like that” for both the primary and secondary sectors in the Archdiocese, 80-plus schools in total. Fr. Brian was advising on the revision of the Religious Education Curriculum Directory (RECD, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2012) determining what is taught, and when, in Catholic Religious Education across the UK.

#### **6.2.4 Church leaders**

These are referred to as follows:

- Priest 1 – theologian and author Fr. Ronan
- Priest 2 – parish priest Canon Thomas
- Chaplain Claire

Asked about the Church's position on the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife Fr. Ronan referred to Vatican II's Pastoral Constitutional Decree (Second Vatican Council, 1965) on 'the Church in the modern world'. The Church's direction and guidance on the 'Rights of parents, and Catholic schools' (p.10) advised

Children of God have a right to a Christian education. A Christian education has as its principal purpose this goal: that the baptized become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received.

Fr. Ronan had gone to the heart of this research – turning to faith for support when needed. As the Decree continued,

Faith, presented with solid arguments, offers everything to a person, the answer to his questioning, including his destiny. At the same time, it enables him to be one in Christ with his loved ones, who have been taken away from him by death.

Regarding children's education about death and the afterlife, Fr. Ronan referred to a passage from *Guadium et Spes* (Second Vatican Council, 1965), in particular paragraph 18 on 'The Ministry of the Human Person'. While a lengthy missive, the section of interest was that:

Man is not only the victim of pain and the progressive deterioration of his body: he is also and more deeply tormented by the fear of final extinction. But he carries within himself the seed of eternity which cannot be reduced to matter alone by death.

This described the Church's position on death and the afterlife, and the basis of what is taught throughout the Catholic world. However, Fr. Ronan said "I don't think there's much of that being taught", a view supported by Canon Thomas who said "I think as a society as a whole we have retreated from death", anticipating the discussion on the taboo nature of the subject. When discussing teaching about death and the afterlife Fr. Ronan elaborated on the taboo nature of the subject, in doing so making the case for death and the afterlife to be taught:

We have got to accept that right now death and the resurrection is [taboo].

Supporting the original motivation for the research ('What's next?') Fr. Ronan said,

You can't expect to switch on some kind of positive aspect of life if they haven't been taught or developed faith. Particularly if they've experienced a loss, they often want to know, to find out, if there is something beyond this life.

Canon Thomas understood the difficulty in explaining challenging concepts to young children, and their predisposition to relate to things they know:

It is a difficult concept, death is ... what? "Well, you are never going to see them again". "Oh, well what am I going to do then? Because my aunty went away to Australia, and my mum said I am never going to see her again". It can be difficult getting that across.

He described the theological challenges of teaching about death and the afterlife to young children, and to reconciling them with the need for "the message" to be delivered:

It is partly that dichotomy we have. When we are talking about Baptism we are actually talking about the death of a child, and no-one wants to talk about it. Because we die with Christ, that is our Baptism, and that is fundamental to what is happening to us.

Claire agreed that explaining the message was difficult:

Yes, the paradox of dying in Christ, when you are baptised, to be born again when you die? You can understand why people get lost!.

The priest and canon had little to say about educational policy *per se*, and any effect it might have on the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. Confirming the findings of the Literature Review, Canon Thomas did reflect on the direction of travel of the curriculum on teaching about death and the afterlife towards a focus on morals and ethics and away from the importance of Jesus' death and Resurrection:

It [the curriculum] wants a Jesus that we can control. That's the problem. They all turn round and democratise it: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone". But it also says "sin no more".

The priests' lack of contribution was compensated for by Claire, whose work had been directly impacted by legislative and Church policies. She believed that the prescriptive nature of how Church guidance was translated and implemented lost much of what was intended in the process. She considered the main reason for this to be the attempt to "serve too many masters", particularly legislative demands for ever-increasing standards through inspection, targeting and testing (SATs). Claire also found the curriculum to be ever-changing to satisfy changing educational paradigms:

Schools have to impress those who hold them accountable and if that's Estyn [see Appendix 2 *Glossary*] or whoever, then they have got to jump to their requirements.

Claire's strength of opinion was noticeable, from a practitioner with first-hand experience:

A school would rather pay for a maths. teacher, because maths. is more of a priority for them, but why? In a Catholic school? Because they are under pressure, they are accountable to Estyn so they throw their money at where they are challenged.

Claire believed that this was because schools are not held accountable for Religious Education "why [should they] throw their money at it if there are no consequences if they don't?". Claire's main concern was the impact of such an approach on the ethos of the school: "It's a Catholic school, and that's the part that frustrates many staff". This criticism was to be heard again in the interviews with Educators in Study 3.

Claire was the first to use the phrase 'Observances' for fixed events in the liturgical calendar such as Easter, All Souls, and Christmas. She explained that:

Another consideration would be the constant observance of the liturgical year, and us being Easter people and that there is hope. It isn't just in the classroom doing RE that you would hear it; [death and the afterlife] was also in the observances through the year.

Canon Thomas supported the use of Observances to provide the main framework for teaching about death and the afterlife:

I think one of the best things we have in our armoury, for the schools anyway, is November [All Souls]. It is surprising how much the children respond to and open up to that.

He did, however, support the view that teaching about death and the afterlife only at times of observances was vulnerable to other factors that can affect it, for example

In the last two years the one area where you can get a run at anything, Holy Week, has ended up being in half-terms or school holidays. So to try and “do” Easter the week before [holidays] loses momentum, and equating it to the Resurrection is difficult because they haven’t been able to even vaguely experience it.

Reliance on times of Observances was also seen to fail to take advantage of opportunities that arose, leaving the subject deficient of what was needed. As Claire said,

It is important to respond to given opportunities, and to other events such as a bereavement.

She had used royal deaths such as Princess Diana as opportunities to discuss death and the afterlife. She said though “that was from me, not the school – what they would have got from school would have been the Easter story”.

Fr. Brian’s proposal for the curriculum to be extended to incorporate teaching about death and the afterlife in a broader range of subjects was supported by Fr. Ronan who said “This is what it needs, a sense of the Catholic faith pervading all subjects not in a direct way but an oblique way”. However, as he said in relation to the lack of focus on teaching about death and the afterlife, “this problem is as old as the hills” and was sanguine as to the likelihood of any alternative approach succeeding.

Planting the seeds was a consistent concept throughout the research. Fr. Ronan described the Church’s position on the early education of children about death and the afterlife: “We have the Catechism: giving them faith that they can deal with life, so they can face dying, death in their family”. The reference to the Catechism suggested it was not declining in use as much, or as quickly, as Fr. Brian was to suggest. Fr. Ronan went on to say,

We sow the seeds and if it is to God you are speaking to then it brings forth fruit. If, for whatever reason, the ground is stone, hardened, resistant, then so be it but if it is welcomed, is sought, it is rewarded, responded to. Ultimately it will bear fruit.

Fr. Ronan’s words provided a strong endorsement for this research’s main theme of early education about death and the afterlife to provide people with faith to call on when needed.

I think when you speak to children who have experienced losses in their life, it occurs to me that that helping children prepare would be very useful. That is where the proof of the pudding will be.

Canon Thomas was equally supportive of 'planting the seeds'. Asked what he considered children learned about death and the afterlife he replied,

I would hope that if nothing else they have the confidence that they are going to see that person again. And for them not to see it so much as, yes a loss in one sense, but as a separation. Loss means you won't ever find them again, whereas you *will* find them again, you will.

Canon Thomas provided a practical example of the effects of 'planting the seeds' when he described hospital visits to dying patients who were surrounded by their families. He explained

They may not have gone to church for years and years. You offer your condolences and start to say the Our Father, and you'd be surprised how many, straight away, want to say the prayer. Or they want a prayer of some kind. And it's always a prayer they knew as kids.

As was typical of Canon Thomas, he made a humorous but accurate assessment of people needing faith at a time of loss, even if they had had no religious or spiritual beliefs before. With echoes of Freud's desire to die on Yom Kippur he said

It's quite funny that the older generation will prepare, make sure they get everything that they want [at their funeral], but someone aged about 30 will say they want a church service because they don't want to tempt fate.

Claire provided a practical illustration of the theme of 'planting the seeds', as well as describing the challenge of maintaining faith and beliefs when children transition to secondary education:

If you plant all the ideas about dying and rising, through Jesus, or whatever it might be, that's what is important. In those intermediate years, 11-13, gradually it is going to drip away, and you want those seeds planted in their minds so they can grow as the children get older.

Claire concluded with the following words of hope: "It is okay if something happens. They have these messages that help them cope".

'Live a good life' as a precursor and condition to being with God after death figured in the interviews. Fr. Ronan described the Church's position on judgement:

Christian faith teaches that bodily death to which man would not have been subjected if he had not sinned, will be conquered. The almighty and merciful saviour will restore man to the wholeness that he lost through his own fault.

Canon Thomas expanded this theological statement to include the subjects of Judgement and Purgatory, and the difficulty in teaching children about the Last Things. He also explained the issue raised in study 1, about the relative ignorance of Purgatory:

You have the immediate judgement deciding whether we are going to Purgatory, or whether we are going straight up to Heaven, as with the saints; and the final judgement, which is



either Heaven or Hell. It is difficult for them [young children] to grasp, partly because people rarely speak on it, or even preach on it. Both in school and church.

Reflecting on changes over time in attitudes towards death, Claire confirmed the challenge of teaching children about Judgement and Purgatory:

The subject of Purgatory is so confusing to children: we have moved from the Old Testament vision of a stairway to a celestial heaven [where] we will all be meeting in a pub.

Claire described how, as the school chaplain, she had resolved the difficult subject of how to teach about Judgement and Purgatory to align with the Church's teaching about Hell being a self-chosen distance from God. She explained that it was a technique that varied from school to school, an argument for more consistency and direction as to how the subject should be taught to primary school. Using cushions as stages of distance from God, moving children further and further away from the centre (God) as they admitted 'sins', and closer and closer as they asked for forgiveness, Claire said 'If it's told the right way it isn't difficult to teach'.

The point is that you feel less good about yourself [doing something wrong]. Death, hell is distance from God, and we can choose to be close to him or to move away.

Canon Thomas believed the message ultimately came down to children being taught right and wrong. As he said,

From the age of 5 the church teaches that you should know the difference between right and wrong. By 7 you certainly do: it's not taught in isolation - it is taught as a Catholic education.

### **6.2.5 Policymakers**

Fr. Brian's contributions stated both the Church's position on teaching about death and the afterlife and his personal opinion on its achievement. He started with a reflection on his views of suffering and attendant ways of coping:

When we are in the midst of suffering and bereavement what usually occupies us is taking another look at more fundamental things. If we do that well enough, it can become a starting point for that human search for meaning.

Fr. Brian had a view on one reason why the expectations people have from Religious Education on faith and the afterlife do not always align with the experience of loss:

The reason it doesn't do that is because it isn't true, it isn't real. And in the end reality - loss, bereavement - brings us face to face with reality in a harsh way, and only certain things withstand that encounter with reality, and mere sentimentality doesn't.

This introduced Fr. Brian's main concern, that the reality of death had little to recommend it, and that few things – for which read faith and hope in the afterlife – 'withstand it'. Referring to "mere sentimentality" opened the door to another concern, that 'sugar-coating' the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife does not prepare children for the reality of loss.

Politics and policy-making figured helpfully in the interview with Fr. Brian, whose participation helped in understanding some of the main challenges to adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. He was particularly suited to contribute due to his involvement in several policy areas of Catholic education in Wales, both in the existing curriculum and in the new Religious Education Curriculum Directory (RECD, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2012).

Fr. Brian liaised with the Welsh Government on their proposals for Religious Education, in particular that there was no intention to prescribe the content of denominational RE:

There is a rather worrying intention to force Catholic schools to offer what they call pluralistic RVE, [Religion, Values and Ethics] which is really relativistic, and a sociological religious studies approach.

Fr. Brian was also concerned at the intention to remove from parents the 'right of withdrawal' of children from Religious Education, describing it as 'a "grab" by government, the state, on what is not their realm, and an area in which they possess no particular competence to address'. Fr. Brian was concerned at its potentiality:

It raises the threat of what a government would do that would seek to indoctrinate children of Catholic families into their ways. It is a deeply troubling and deeply misguided move.

Fr. Brian was forthright as to the potential weaknesses in the new Welsh Curriculum's plans for Religious Education, believing them to be open to at best misguided construction and content, and at worst, to abuse:

The new Welsh curriculum doesn't give you content. You can design a "wellbeing" curriculum that ignores [religious] questions entirely, or only treats them in terms of precisely therapeutic terms.

His concern was particularly related to a school's leadership and ethos, and teachers' ability and willingness to teach death and the afterlife

That might go well in some places where they are good, it might open opportunities that don't exist at the moment. But what happens to those opportunities in most schools depends on how well equipped the professionals at that level are.

When discussing the Catholic Religious Education Curriculum (RECD, 2012) Fr. Brian described its current construction and his views on areas where it could be improved to teach death and the afterlife.

Fr. Brian explained:

You will notice that there is a degree of disconnect between the two parts of it, and that relates to many topics, and among them to the question of 'the Last Things'.

He said "I don't think the resources and the curriculum guidance that exists [in the current RECD] actually ask schools to do it [teach about death and the afterlife]". The construction and content of the current RECD contributed to the difficulty of teaching about death and the afterlife:

Part 1 of the RECD which outlines the Last Things, where it [briefly] mentions the idea of death and our judgement by God and the Four Last Things, doesn't make it into the 2<sup>nd</sup> part, which has in practice guided most of what happens in schools.

Fr. Brian pointed specifically to the deficiency of instruction about 'the Last Things' in the current RECD:

What has guided most of the production of school curricula and resources has in fact been a document that doesn't pay much attention to the Last Things.

The lack of inclusion and understanding of death and the afterlife extended to primary school curricula: "The RECD doesn't raise the subject of the Last Things until you get to [age] 11-14. It doesn't raise it at all in primary". He highlighted an almost complete absence and understanding of death and the afterlife before this age:

It doesn't currently refer to Last Things much except that in life of Christ, that the suffering and death and Resurrection of Christ are a source of new life. That is about as far as it gets.

Fr. Brian said that the intention was to change this under the new Welsh Curriculum:

In the new curriculum there will be a greater opportunity to reflect on what these things mean.

Primary education currently precludes direct teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. While the new curriculum opened up opportunities to remedy this, of concern was that the "greater opportunity" might equate to its exclusion, unless an approach of linking understandings about death and the afterlife to other subjects such as science was successfully implemented.

The issue of Observances versus Opportunities to teach understandings of death and the afterlife was raised by Fr. Brian. He supported another theme that was to gain strength in this and subsequent studies, that the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife should be taught on the basis of 'Opportunity' as well as at times of Observances. He was unenthusiastic about the current situation where the teaching mostly took place at times such as Easter and All Souls Day. He believed that while these could still provide the framework for teaching the subject, they should not be used exclusively, and that opportunities such as when someone in the school, say a teacher or pupil, had a

bereavement, should be exploited. The current practice left large gaps in the school year when any form and understanding of death and the afterlife is not taught, which could be confusing for children, such as the short time period between Jesus' birth (Christmas) and his death (Easter), aged 33; the 'gap' is typically three months, not easy for a child under age 11 to comprehend.

Fr. Brian commented that the content and quality of what was delivered at times of Observance was also questionable, being dependent on school ethos, leadership, and teacher skills and willingness.

The observance will vary hugely. By and large, and so far as there will be an explanation for things like All Souls [see Appendix 2 *Glossary*], I don't think it will be terribly detailed.

Fr. Brian went on to say

With regard to observances, they will include some references to what we might term the afterlife, but that term will be universalistic in focus. In other words, it will not introduce the idea of Judgement: it will speak of the way in which the departed are with God.

He expanded on the incorporation and understanding of death and the afterlife into other curriculum subjects:

The proposal is to start the thinking in year 2: in a parallel loop when looking at the biological lifecycles of living things, we do the same and explore some of the meanings for life on earth with a beginning and an ending.

Fr. Brian believed that the approach, as well as being easier for children to understand, would address the issue of 'Observances versus Opportunities'. Being part of the everyday curriculum teaching understandings about death and the afterlife could be a continuous theme, making it easier for children to learn. This would fit with the positive experience of Jodie (Study 1) who said "I don't remember being scared about it at the time but obviously subliminally it was writing the story in my head that when you lose people, this is what happens". Fr. Brian expanded on the proposed link between science and theology:

That would be a natural point to talk about the meaning of the existence of things, what is the meaning of the coming to be, and the ending to be, as it were, of living things. We don't do that at the moment. Well, accidentally perhaps, but we don't do it systematically.

Fr. Brian believed that schools were already well-resourced to take on this new approach. He suggested that the Youth Catechism YOUCAT (Catholic Truth Society, 2011) "would speak to the teachers more [especially] the younger teachers, it deals with this admirably well". Fr. Brian also referenced other support resources such as *Godly Play* (Berryman, 1991) and *Circle Time* (Mosley, 2014).

YOUCAT deals with the thing [teaching about death and the afterlife], and I think that really is a great starting point, saying how these things relate and seeking to give a more realistic hope.

Fr. Brian was the originator of the phrase 'sugar-coating', describing how he saw the subject currently being taught. He believed that a naïve style of teaching about death and the afterlife was of limited use in preparing people for loss, and that it could be counter-productive:

I think part of the reason why we have the current sentimental, therapeutic type of approach is that people think that that helps. People think that what is currently taught, and the reticence to talk about it, is precisely what people need, because it doesn't confront them with the harsh realities of this, it softens the edges, and I think most people think that that works.

He suggested that there was too much focus on "comfort and consolation", with little to no mention of key elements of the Last Things:

And one is left therefore with an impression of a not terribly well-examined understanding that all will be well for everyone. And that wellness has nothing to do with the way one lives one's life.

Firm in his belief as to the merits of teaching about death and the afterlife to the young, Fr. Brian went on to say

When they leave our schools they will have understood the Catholic teachings on the Last Things. They may not like it, but at least they will know it is not just a kind of therapeutic thing that so often people reject when they come to their late teens and early 20's; that is not the real world.

This related to a challenge that emerged in Study 1, the transition to secondary education, when the naïve, 'sugar coated' teachings in primary school were exposed as such, sometimes leading to disillusionment. 'Continuity' was a theme introduced in the interview with the chaplain. By this was meant that there would, ideally, be a logical flow between the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in primary and secondary education. Fr. Brian and the chaplain both felt there was a lack of such continuity in teaching. In his role as Director of Religious Education for secondary as well as primary schools, Fr. Brian was well-placed to make this observation.

Fr. Brian was concerned at the lack of teaching of 'Judgement', linked as it was to living a good life.

The idea of life to come is linked up closely with the idea of judgement, its integrity, and that it is a reflection on the nature of God. That is totally absent in this [RECD's] teaching.

Fr. Brian explained his own aims:

I hope that what they [children] will take away in future will be an understanding that there is a connection between our life, our receiving and responding to the love of God, whether we are those who say to God “thy will be done” and in doing so find eternal happiness, or those to whom God says “your will be done, you didn't want me, I am not going to force myself for you, and you are not made for this”.

This was closely aligned to contemporary teaching of judgement and Hell – not as a place where ‘the fires of hell are real and eternal’, but as a self-chosen distance from God – a “state of eternal separation from God” (see e.g. Badham, 2013, pp.66-7). Fr. Brian described the plan for covering ‘the Last Things’ in the new RECD, acknowledging that any approach should avoid confusing and worrying children by being delivered in an age-appropriate manner (Badham, 2013).

What we are going to do, from year 2, is introduce in parallel the idea of life on earth with a beginning and an ending; the idea of staying close to Jesus in his life makes us help in growing in goodness and respond to God's love, which is our vocation as human beings.

## **6.3 STUDY 3 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

### **What is delivered through formal Religious Education?**

#### **6.3.1 Introduction**

The data from Study 1 was used as the basis against which all subsequent studies' data would be compared. Study 1 concluded that the hypothesis 'We do not teach our children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss' had merit, by showing both the existence of the Golden Thread and the reasons for inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. One reason offered was education – what had been taught, and how. This chapter addresses this.

The term 'Educators' encompasses all participants in this study: head- and deputy-head teachers, teachers, and Religious Education coordinators, who provided in-depth coverage of all areas of the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. The participation of the two Religious Education Coordinators was particularly welcome as the role provided the link between the Policy Maker role (Study 2) and the Educator role. Please note that names of participants have been changed for confidentiality. Adopted names and roles can be found in Appendix 9 *Study Participants*.

The author did not seek to validate or comment on Educators' contributions. Rather, the information provided was used to establish context and as a measurement of accuracy and reliability of both the researcher's and participants' interpretations, and for comparison to the findings of Study 1.

#### **6.3.2 Analytic procedure**

The method of analysing data can be seen in Appendices *Analytic Procedures*.

Analysis of QRI Themes for Educators can be found in Appendices *Tables and Statistics Study 3 Category Analysis*.

The interviews with Educators used Qualitative Research Interviews (QRI) to gain facts rather than views, though views were a natural by-product. The author stayed grounded and attentive, bracketing ideas that emerged from each interview to ensure the integrity of the data: preconceptions and expectations of what the data might find; and themes and challenges that had emerged from the Literature Review and Study 1.

### 6.3.3 Analysis

The two schools taking part in the research fell under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Archdiocese from which participants in Study 2 were drawn, providing continuity between the studies. Participants had received delegated authority to take part in the research from the Director of Education for the Archdiocese. Consent forms are included in Appendix 8b *Information sheets, Interview schedules/guides, Consent forms.*

There was an honest recognition that when it came to talking to children about death, Educators did not know what to say or do. Daniel in school 2 said

You are so frightened: you have the best of intentions and you so want to help, but you are frightened of saying the wrong thing, of causing offence, and mentally scarring them.

Highlighting the lack of training on the subject, Daniel went on

We haven't had anything formal that helps us to support the children at all.

This was of particular relevance, as shortly before the interviews with the school two siblings had lost their father to Covid, and the school had an urgent need to know what they should say or do.

### 6.3.4 Detailed analysis

Being responsible for implementing Church guidance and legislative policy, the Educators were able to report first-hand on the merits and implications of the curricula they were given. Headteacher Daniel outlined the requirement:

It's the logistics of making sure we fulfil the Archdiocesan requirements of 10% of curriculum; the "Come and see" scheme that the Scripture is based on; and that all the statutory obligations are fulfilled.

Daniel explained the problem the school faced within teaching about death and the afterlife:

I think with the pressures on the curriculum and time, maybe we don't provide our children with opportunities to reflect and to make links [between RE and death].

Andrea described an anticipated challenge when the new Welsh Curriculum is implemented, which will replace the more directive style adopted in the 'Come and See' scheme:

The [new] RE curriculum framework is based on doctrine but doesn't tell you ... it tells you what you have to teach within the Catholic faith, but it doesn't tell you how you must teach it.

This echoed Fr. Brian's concern that the new Curriculum did not provide content, but left it to the school to devise the delivery of the curriculum.



The current curriculum was not without criticism. Brigid believed it had compromised the faith-directed teaching in the school:

I think those messages of experiencing loss but then of hope have got lost over the years with all the new initiatives we've had to develop. We need to get back to giving children more exposure to the New Testament where that message is.

There was complete support for more teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife to support people in loss. Brigid typified the response, but also the problems faced:

I think the curriculum is so overloaded that important aspects are getting lost or not given as much focus as they need. This is definitely something as a faith school that has to be our focus.

Andrea agreed that while the curriculum was challenging, space had to be found for teaching about death and the afterlife:

Curriculum time is so tight. But we need to prepare [the children] for loss in their lives, not just allow them to react to it [when it happens].

RE Coordinator Andrea advocated introducing a school policy for teaching children about death and the afterlife in a dedicated manner to address the problem. Typical of the constructive and supportive approach taken to resolving the deficiencies in teaching about death and the afterlife, this was consistent with Fr. Brian's proposal of integrating it into other subjects:

We as senior management have to make a policy so that we are prepared for it: so that everybody is informed and we can be supportive to the children.

David felt that Covid had added impetus to the incorporation of more teaching about death and the afterlife:

We haven't had to think about it too much, but now I think it will be quite a big part of things. They are going to have to change, and put it in more I think, because we don't know what they [the children] pick up.

Daniel was head of school 2 where two siblings had been bereaved by Covid. He described the difficulties the school had faced, and how the lack of guidance had left them unsupported:

You didn't know what was right, what was wrong. We had the best of intentions: I wanted to open a book and say, "right, it's been 5 days, now it's acceptable to give that family a ring". But you don't know if you are imposing.

This reflected the most-voiced concern that 'we do not know what to say or do' in the event of a child experiencing bereavement.

Andrea as RE Coordinator was usually among the first to receive and interpret changes to the curriculum. She lamented the changes that had taken place over time, in particular the additional pressures that had come with targets and inspections to the detriment of teaching about death and the afterlife:

When I first started it was very much curriculum and faith based, and now, it's ... it's just different. Sometimes you forget what it is all about when you are sat in that room with RE coordinators being told these are the levels, these are the assessments.

Andrea regretted in particular the loss of focus on faith:

We are supposed to be teaching a faith here, and I don't think you can measure faith in levels. If you could strip away so much and just get down to the basics of our faith, that would be good.

She felt that something had been lost, that the message had been diluted, and that there was sometimes 'change for change's sake', with undue pressure on an already busy curriculum:

At the end of the day it's not that we were doing things wrong and now we're doing things right: we've been doing it right, [but now] they're renaming it, and repackaging it.

When considering delivery of Religious Education Daniel, commenting on when the subject of death and the afterlife is taught and how, highlighted several challenges: it is mostly done at times of Observances; there is no specific time or place in the curriculum for teaching the subject; and what is taught is not fit for purpose:

Nowhere in any scheme of work do we teach our children how to cope [with loss], or how to deal with it. We don't give them an understanding of the emotional impact of death'

Daniel's view was echoed by Ann. She believed that opportunities arose that weren't always taken advantage of to relate loss to faith, and that the focus was wrong - when a child experienced a loss the attention was on the individual, and it was not used as an opportunity to educate the class:

I think that it's something that we need to talk more about because for lots of the children, and it's surprising how many have had losses ... it tends to be personalised to those children.

School 2 could be seen as a good example of how death and the afterlife could be taught, within budgetary and resource limitations. Teresa described their use of '*Godly Play*' (Berryman, 1991), which though expensive was highly regarded by the school management. This was used in conjunction with other schemes and practices such as 'Mini-vinis', 'the Mission Squad', ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant), and SEAL ('Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning', a school and community-based counselling toolkit, with a section on bereavement and the afterlife).

The full range of schemes was not seen to be available or used in both schools, suggesting lack of consistency, guidance and financial support from the Archdiocese across schools. There was also inconsistency within a school, for example Brigid referred to a scheme 'Death and new life' – "we look at springtime, the life cycles of chicks, tadpoles etc., leading them into using the 'Come and see' documents". Geoff proposed such a scheme, as if it was not currently available, yet they taught in the same school.

As with so many challenges identified they could not be considered in isolation. While reflecting on the delivery of Religious Education Geoff demonstrated the challenge of teachers' attitudes and beliefs, He had avoided the use of Archdiocesan-supplied material for teaching about death and the afterlife as it touched on his own experience of loss, with the result that the children were not taught it. In contrast, Ann used her personal experience as a vehicle for conveying the message of faith:

In one bit [of a video used to instruct children], his wife has lost her baby. That's personally very difficult for me, but that's the sort of thing we can teach about, life being a rollercoaster for everybody, that we all experience pain, and Jesus is here to help us, walking with us.

Age-appropriateness was a recurring theme, that what was taught and what materials were used should be relevant to the children's age and cognitive development. As Ann said,

I suppose it's about age and stage appropriateness: how you would talk about it at Foundation stage would be different to how you talk to Y6, going on to high school.

Andrea described how age-appropriate teaching was attempted, though not without difficulties. Her observations confirmed Fr. Brian's view of the 'Come and see' program's construction and content, with little being available for primary schools. They also supported Church leaders' view of the difficulty of teaching young children complex subjects:

I teach Reception children, so the only time I talk about death is Jesus dying on the Cross. The programme that we use, "Come and see", doesn't talk about it in any other way than Jesus's death and Resurrection, which in itself is really difficult for the children to grasp.

Gareth reinforced the point that teaching about the Resurrection is difficult:

You teach that Jesus comes back to life. A lot of them [children] don't understand why, when someone [they know] dies, they are not going to come back. They don't understand [that] it's not like a holiday, that they've gone away and can come back.

Geoff supported using age-appropriate material though he sourced his own, considering that what was provided by the Archdiocese was inadequate. Brigid meanwhile believed that material was available, again illustrating a situation of inconsistency and 'reinventing the wheel' across schools and even within a school. Geoff said

Some things I'll source off 'Twinkle' [online resource] and other places, where there are activities that you can do with the children.

'Teachers' own experience' emerged as a new theme during this study, with several references to personal experiences affecting teaching about death and the afterlife. This suggested that opportunities were occasionally taken advantage of, but not on a planned basis. Ann explained

I think a lot of it [teaching about death and the afterlife] is experience in teaching: you know what works for the children and it's about things that are happening, so you use those as a basis for talking about things.

Ann used her religious upbringing and faith as an example to the children, which linked to the recruitment of teachers familiar with the faith they are teaching:

I've been a Catholic since birth so I've always believed that there's an Almighty who looks after us. I think that sort of message ... what we do here and now, as Christians, is what matters.

Geoff was adversely influenced by personal experience, demonstrating how teachers' attitudes can be formed and can go on to influence the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife:

The second time I taught [death and the afterlife] was straight after my grandfather died. So I kind of refused to teach it: I couldn't, it was so raw for me still.

Brigid had had experience of teachers' personal experiences affecting children's being taught about death and the afterlife:

Some [teachers] are dealing with their own issues, and they are not ready to come forward with the support for the children, so often it's directed to [school management] to deal with.

Andrea had also had experience of teachers like Geoff being adversely affected. Her comments were supportive and understanding of death and the afterlife being taught as a routine curriculum subject, however that is done, to remove it from such influences:

Your own experiences of death and bereavement sometimes gives you the confidence to talk about it but for others it's too emotional, so if it's not personalised we can all talk about it without it affecting us too closely.

Confidence was a consideration for several participants, related to teacher training and experience. Ann said:

I think it depends on teachers and how confident they are. Some worry that they will say the wrong thing, whereas the more experienced teachers are most probably very comfortable and confident talking about it. So there will be variances within the staff.

Brigid went to the heart of the matter when considering how staff's personal experiences play a part in teaching about death and the afterlife, and the need to divorce the subject from such experiences:

I think we can all reflect on how we deal with death and the afterlife, as individuals, but this is different: this is us supporting staff, parents and children in how they need to deal with it.

The issue of recruitment was raised. A long-held ambition of the Church has been to recruit faith-inspired teachers to teach in faith schools, which would contribute to the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. Headteacher Daniel's explained how school 2 met the Church's ideal:

All of the teaching staff ... are practising Catholics, that is quite unique to Catholic schools in [this area].

Teresa explained why this mattered:

We are a very Catholic staff, we only have a minority of non-Catholic staff at any one point. But even those who are non-Catholic really try to teach it as if they were a Catholic, and they are very good at embracing the Catholic faith.

This contrasted with what may be the more typical school 1, demonstrating why the Church had a concern over non-faith teachers teaching in faith schools. Brigid said:

A[nother] problem we have in our school is that we have four non-Catholic teachers. They are trying to support our faith, [but] they haven't the experience that we have.

Brigid explained why this should be a problem:

We should not expect non-Catholics to feel how we feel; they can never understand, because it is part of us, our make-up. They've got to learn all of that, and try to understand it, and try to put it into practice before they start supporting the children.

Geoff, a non-Catholic, touched on the challenges facing non-Catholic teachers teaching death and the afterlife in a faith school:

I stick to the materials [supplied] because I don't want to be, as I am like a non-Catholic teacher, I don't want to get it wrong so I try to stick to the materials.

Accepting Brigid's point about the difficulties faced by non-faith teachers in faith schools, he recommended that they attend what is currently a voluntary training course, to learn at least the fundamentals of the faith they will be teaching:

When I joined [the school], I was very lucky that I was sent on a CAREC course. It's [run by] the Archdiocese, it was learning all about the Catholic faith.

Daniel agreed that it was good practice:

It's about upskilling, and the [new, non-Catholic staffs'] understanding of [Religious Education's] importance - it's a core subject and it needs to be treated as such.

This corresponded to the views expressed by Fr. Brian in study 2 about "the preparedness and willingness of teachers to teach about death and the afterlife". While the CAREC course did not focus on death and the afterlife but on the Catholic faith as a whole, Geoff saw the availability of a similar course being beneficial for teaching about death and the afterlife. They are not divisible: the comment suggests additional focus on the subject may be needed in the CAREC course:

I think it would be good if teachers could have some sort of course where they could go and be shown how they can help children understand death. I think something like that would be good, to give teachers an understanding that they are actually saying the right things.

Teaching about death and the afterlife was a particularly sensitive area of discussion. Daniel's view was that schools do not teach Religious Education in a way that gives people faith to call on when they experience a loss:

I don't think the RE scheme of work unpacks the emotions and the feelings around it, it's more to do with incense, the hymns, the physical nature of what happens at a funeral service. I think the teaching on death and the afterlife ... in a way, we address it, not teach it.

Daniel confirmed the view of participants in study 2, that the use of Observances as a framework for teaching about death and the afterlife, and the complexity of the story of the Resurrection, made it difficult for children to understand.

I always find it quite remarkable that we teach that Jesus was born in the December, and then he died in March or April, and then on the Sunday he came back to life.

Daniel expanded on the problems this caused:

We don't necessarily get the time to ... unpack that for them [the 'timing' of Jesus' birth, death and Resurrection, within three months], we expect them to understand it, that Jesus was a baby, and now he's thirty.

Covid had put the subject under the spotlight and showed what deficiencies there were in teaching about death and the afterlife. As Ann pointed out:

It just goes to show where the gap is doesn't it? The more you dig into what children know and understand the more you realise how big the job is. And [Covid] has made it worse.

Supporting the hypothesis that the current teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is inadequate as preparation for coping with loss, Ann went on

They think about death being a long way away for them; death is a concept [but] I think this [Covid] is affecting everybody, reality is staring them in the face now.

The headteachers, deputies, and Religious Education coordinators in both schools had received no training or guidance in supporting the bereaved, confirmed by Daniel who said "We've had no formal training, which is worrying". Exploring whether this extended to

teacher training, Ann was asked about what was taught on the subject in training college, replying

None! Put it this way, I am, as student mentor, in charge of teachers when they first come in. And monitoring them. Definitely no kind of teaching on how to deal with death and bereavement, as far as I know.

Children's understanding of death and the afterlife as solace and comfort was also raised. Ann believed that the subject was not always taught in line with Church guidance (currently guided by the 'Come and See' scheme):

I think that's down to the individual teacher. You need something that the children can relate to, that they can respond to, [not] just reading Scripture passages, it needs to be relatable.

Geoff agreed that Church guidance was not always followed, and, in support of Fr. Brian's opinion, teaching about death and the afterlife had become about solace and comfort:

They [children] need to understand that this is a natural thing that happens, and there's a way of dealing with it, of moving forward, to get them to understand that any death is upsetting.

However, in contrast to Fr. Brian's call for a more realistic teaching of death and the afterlife, Geoff had reverted to the 'safe' approach of avoidance of the taboo subject. Geoff's approach was typical of that described in the Literature Review:

We tied it in with them [the deceased] being in pain before they died; don't focus on the negative - it's sad but try and focus on the good times they've had, of spending time with them.

Daniel highlighted the contradiction between the policy and practice of teaching about death and the afterlife in primary school – that currently it was taught as a source of solace and comfort, which was not consistent with the Church's teaching:

It's quite bizarre within a Catholic school, because you've got death and bereavement as in a form of comfort, and then you've got it in the form of an academic, theological subject.

Teresa typified the view of most participants, that solace and comfort were the main aims when talking about death and the afterlife. While understandable when dealing with young children, her comments reinforced the point that as currently taught it provided no preparation for the pain and suffering that accompanied loss:

I think talking about Jesus, God, brings them comfort, without a doubt. They all think their animals go to heaven, and I don't want to argue with that [laughing], so, ... I think it offers them some comfort. I think they all believe there's an afterlife.

The educators were in a challenging position in attempting to reconcile policy and practice. Teresa appreciated that the aim was to explain that death happened, and to reinforce children's faith in a life after death, but believed it should be delivered in a gentle ('sugar-

coated') way. Such a naïve message, as this thesis' findings demonstrate, could be counter-productive:

They [the children] need to know that it happens, they need to know that there is hope that they will meet them again, that they are in a happy place.

Teresa believed that openness and honesty with the children was important, even at the expense of contradicting some of the more simplistic messages that were typically given to the children. Teresa felt that such an approach would help counter the naivety of most teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in primary school:

Every time we talk about it in my class I say I don't know: I just think that that type of conversation needs to happen more often.

Teresa's approach made for an interesting comparison with David's:

We tell them that because they [the dying] were so poorly we couldn't mend them down here, so they had to go up there, and now they are all mended and happy.

Characterising death and the afterlife in this manner, in contradiction of Church teaching, was found to be common among the interviewees, and was typical of that found in contemporary literature. The following is an extract from O'Reilly (2021) writing about the death of his mother, and the well-intentioned consolation offered by an aunt. This illustrates in a light-hearted but realistic manner the consequences of such delivery:

"Sometimes", croaked Margaret in a voice bent ragged from two days' crying, "when God sees a particularly pretty flower, He'll take it up from Earth, and put it in his own garden". Margaret thus reassured me that God was an avaricious gardener intent on murdering my loved ones any time he pleased'.

'Planting the seeds' was a recurring theme throughout the studies, with the understanding that they can be called on when a loss is experienced. Daniel put it plainly:

It's the cycle of it, it's about preparing children for what would be the inevitable.

Teresa related her own experiences, though describing a practice that is seen less and less:

I was one of those children who used to go to funerals in the summer holidays because they didn't have many family to attend the funeral [laughs], But as I was growing up I think that really helped me - I was able to understand death and cope with death a lot better.

Teresa was able to draw a comparison with her friends' experiences of practices such as funerals:

I think it makes you more aware. I can put my hand on my heart and say I can cope with tragedy a lot better than lots of my non-Catholic or non-believing friends.



Brigid also saw the merits of 'planting the seeds' in young minds, in anticipation of children's beliefs changing as they get older. The need for openness and honesty was raised again:

Hopefully when they mature they will have a different view of it, that's up to them, but it's about having those conversations, and being open and engaging in questions that they ask you.

While a laudable ambition, 'planting the seeds' was not always successful. As Gareth described, in support of Fr. Ronan's observation that "I don't think there's much of that being taught",

We can try and tell them [the children] about God, but a lot of them don't seem to get taught anything about the religious side of it. Some would say they've got an idea, but some would say they are not quite sure.

School leadership and ethos was raised as a factor in children's teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, and was seen as the creation of an environment suitable for teaching the subject. Headteacher Brigid defined her role in relation to the school's ethos:

[I am] the faith leader in the school. It is about leading acts of worship [to] develop that ability to ask questions, to challenge their thinking, along with their own beliefs, and creating that environment where they feel safe enough to do that.

Daniel, headteacher at school 2, expanded on the role:

As head teacher you facilitate others, and allow them to sparkle. It's like teaching your children a sense of right and wrong. You hope you've given them enough so that their moral compass points them in the right direction.

Developing strong relationships featured prominently in Educator interviews, with some success being reported. Andrea spoke for both schools when she said,

You may not talk about faith but you feel there is something, some connection there that they [the children] can come to us, that they trust us and they are open with us.

Geoff, a non-Catholic, spoke of the school's ethos and its positive effect on him:

I think the Catholic faith has strong beliefs, and it's ... being non-Catholic and seeing that, it's quite heart-warming, that there's that belief that it is not all doom and gloom, it's not all a sad situation, there is everlasting life, what is said at funerals.

Ann saw part of the school's role as establishing and maintaining children's connection with the Church's teaching. In describing this, Ann referenced the influence of parents and family on children's faith:

The children whose parents take them to church know a lot more about religion and the Catholic faith. Whereas [for others] we are almost here evangelising the children because we are their only link with God.

Brigid had the same view, though from the perspective of parents' lack of encouragement and support:

Some children, they don't go to Mass, they don't get the true meaning of the Mass, where they witness Christ's sacrifice and the forgiveness of sin; they don't really understand what this is all about and what it is leading to.

Daniel saw the school's leadership and ethos as central to the success of children being prepared for future life experiences:

I do believe that it is only by developing their inner faith, will they eventually come full circle with where they are.

The theme of 'Teacher training and attitudes' tied in with the concern about naïve teaching about death and the afterlife that children receive. Two teachers interviewed had had no formal training in teaching either Religious Education or supporting bereaved children, relying instead on their own self-developed beliefs and attitudes, or on what they learned in school from more experienced teachers. Being in a position to influence the children under their care, these untrained teachers passed on to children what they had learned or understood as 'facts'. Instead, they were often naïve, theologically incorrect, and inadequate for preparing children to cope with loss, as Gareth demonstrated:

'With the younger children, you say "it's okay, they've gone to heaven". I always try and make it a bit more positive than ... so as not to frighten them. It is not all done in a religious way.

One explanation for this was offered by Ann, supporting the existence of variable ability and willingness, and the problem of non-faith teachers teaching in a faith school:

We've a fair number of staff who are non-Catholic, and I think that goes for a lot of Catholic schools now, where there are less Catholic teachers around, so they have teachers of other faiths and no faiths.

Ann's explanation also supported the issue of teacher attitudes and beliefs, which featured regularly in different ways. It is to be noted that this interview took place in a faith school:

It's hard to teach - that's one of those questions that goes to your own personal beliefs, teaching the subject whether you believe in the afterlife or not. It might be quite difficult for certain staff.

Brigid's comments further reinforced the variable attitudes and beliefs prevailing:

Do we challenge that, do we encourage them to carry on: one teacher has one view on it, another teacher has a different view on it?.

Ann meanwhile, who described herself as a ‘cradle-to-grave’ Catholic, exemplified the value of having a clear and simple belief that did not ‘sugar-coat’ the subject, a belief that would be imparted to children:

It's quite simplistic I suppose, I don't have very sophisticated views about it, I do think you will meet with other souls you've met and loved throughout your life.

The issue of Church guidance was raised by Brigid who said:

We do what we think is right, but actually we need support.

Daniel highlighted the need for Church leaders to give direction and support on teaching about death and the afterlife, particularly when children are exposed to death. With the current Covid situation playing such a dominant part in the life of the school, Daniel referred to an experience ten years prior, suggesting the situation was unchanged:

In my previous school we had a couple of tragedies we had to deal with. We had a big gap [in knowledge] and the Archdiocese did not provide guidance on supporting children, staff or parents.

Daniel commented on the Covid situation (correct at the time of writing):

We didn't have anything from the Archdiocese [about Covid] with us having a bereavement. [sibling pupils losing a parent]. The family are still quite isolated. There was no guidance from the Archdiocese, that was a situation that the school had to address.

Brigid confirmed the situation regarding support for staff, parents and children during Covid:

We did not get any particular guidance or material from the Archdiocese to fill that gap [created by Covid]. No, nothing specific.

Regarding the exposure that Covid had brought, Brigid demonstrated that challenges could not be looked at in isolation – she brought together lack of support together with teachers' ability, saying

The willingness is there, definitely, with staff, they are willing, but they don't want to get it wrong. So they need guidance on knowing how to do it right - and then I know they will do it, but there is not that guidance out there.

As previously highlighted, Covid exposed a number of deficiencies and weaknesses in bereavement support and teaching about death and the afterlife. Brigid went on

I don't think we are prepared enough to deal with it. I don't think we've got the “crib sheet” of what exactly they [parents] want to know of what is right and what is wrong.

**Please Note:** Since the interview, the author's Schools Covid Pack has been produced and circulated to 80-plus schools in the Archdiocese.

## **6.4 STUDY 4 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

### **What do children understand about death and the afterlife and how is their knowledge acquired?**

#### **6.4.1 Introduction**

Having evaluated, in Studies 2 and 3, what Church leaders and Policymakers wanted taught and what Educators actually teach in an attempt to identify any fractures between them, this final study examines the conclusion of the process of teaching about death and the afterlife – what children actually know.

As with the previous three studies the aim was to identify any cause of peoples' inability to call on their faith to help them cope with loss. Alongside the identification of such a cause, the research sought to identify any areas that challenged the provision of pastoral bereavement counselling, and how these might be remedied.

#### **6.4.2 Analytic procedure**

The method of analysing data can be seen in Appendices *Analytic Procedures*.

Analysis of identified Focus Group themes for children can be found in Appendices *Tables and Statistics Study 4 Category Analysis*.

The author did not seek to validate the children's interpretation. Rather, the information provided was used to establish context and as a measurement of accuracy and reliability of both the researcher's and participants' interpretations, and for comparison to the data that was presented in Studies 1-3.

Consistent with the chosen methodologies of Focus Groups and Grounded Theory, the author bracketed themes and challenges that emerged from each focus group and any preconceptions and expectations of what the data might find, to ensure the integrity of the data.

#### **6.4.3 Analysis**

The two schools that took part in the research were those from which participants in study 3 were drawn, falling under the jurisdiction of the same Catholic Archdiocese as both previous studies, which aided continuity. Authority to recruit children for the research was received from the Director of Religious Education for the Archdiocese. Delegated authority Consent

forms can be found in Appendix 8b *Information sheets*, Interview schedules/guides, *Consent forms: Other participants*.

While the majority of the second school's focus groups were unable to be conducted (See Appendix 4 *Covid Impact Statement*), full participation was achieved in school 1, resulting in seven Focus Groups taking place in total, a total of thirty-six children, plus a 'pilot' group. This is at the higher end of the number of groups that would typically participate in a Focus Group research project, and was enough to achieve 'saturation', the measure of full attainment of data associated with Grounded Theory.

Participant names are anonymised. Adopted names are detailed in Appendix 9 *Study Participants*.

#### **6.4.4 Detailed analysis**

In normal circumstances, and despite children's limited life experience, by the age of 9-11 children are likely to have experienced some form of loss, typically a grandparent, though a pet would have equal significance. Covid has increased children's awareness of death dramatically, with daily exposure to thousands of deaths through the media as well as within their family, and even school. While it was a challenging time for children to live through, Covid provided a focus for consideration of children's understanding of death and the afterlife that would not normally be possible. The writings and drawings done by the children tell the full story of their understanding. Some are reproduced here, other examples can be found in Appendix 10 *Notepads*.

The subject of 'Live a good life' was a dominant theme in all Focus Group interviews, which may have been expected in faith schools where 'ethos' was important. There was a range of understanding of the concept, most children seeing it as a person's preparation for heaven, or as a happy ending after suffering during their lives:

Tomas: [Heaven] is a place for good people. I think there are very few people who are so bad that they don't go.

Macey: I would have said that you would be happy there [heaven], that you would be at peace. That you would be out of pain.

For some children the theme linked to that of Judgement:

Carole: If you were to do bad things now you need to ask Jesus for forgiveness.

Gary: You need to do good deeds in your life to get to heaven.

The theme was also linked, directly and indirectly, to the Church's teaching of Purgatory, taught as part of children's preparation for First Communion:

Carole: Every Friday I go to a place where someone teaches us, and they always talk to us about God, and they talk to us about how when you sin you won't go to Heaven.

Some children had a reasonable grasp of the concept of Purgatory, such as Steven:

What happens when you die is that you are picked to go to heaven or to hell. Or if you don't get picked you stay in Purgatory.

Most children however showed a lack of clear understanding, or even no understanding at all, concerning in the context of the children having had five to six years of Religious Education:

Amy: I always think that there are two places, heaven and eve? If you are really nice and kind you go to heaven, but if you are like a thief or something you go to eve?.

Lina: What happens in Purgatory?.

Children's inquisitiveness was a feature of the Focus Groups. Once Purgatory was mentioned it stimulated children's natural curiosity, leading to an in-depth conversation on the subject and also on death and the afterlife generally.

Toni: When you die do you go straight to heaven or purgatory?

Macey: So basically when you die you have another life?

Illustrating the natural inquisitiveness of children, Adele went on

This isn't really a question, but do you ever think about heaven and stuff when you lie in bed in the night time?.

And Celine asked

What do you [the moderator] think about the afterlife, what happens after you die?.

This inquisitiveness was to become so common in the first two Focus Groups that an additional 'Question and Answer' section was added to the Topic Guide, offering children the opportunity to ask questions of the moderator. This proved a fruitful exercise, though as is the nature of children's research the findings need to be seen through the lens of children's life and death experience, e.g.

Diana: When you go to heaven do you meet famous people who have died?.

Children's questions touched on several themes which were to be seen repeatedly during the Focus Groups, firstly that adults' inclination to protect children from talking about death and the afterlife because, in part, of its taboo nature, was not supported. Children were ready and able to talk about the subject and wanted to know more, suggesting they weren't being taught what they wanted or needed. It was also seen that children are resilient – they are able to discuss subjects such as death to a degree beyond that which they are assumed to tolerate.

'Mixed learnings' where children confused what they had learned from different subjects and sources was an obvious issue. Robert's question was an example of children mixing up, for example, Religious Education and history, or being taught about different faiths:

If you live a good life you go to heaven, but if you have sinned, like if you have murdered somebody you go to hell. But it may be that you get mummified, like in ancient Egypt.

The concern was that history had assumed dominance in the child's understanding of death and the afterlife, over what has been taught over a number of years in school. The Catholic message of resurrection had been diluted. Mixing and confusing learnings from different subjects was most clearly seen in John's response to the question 'what has been learned in school about dying':

We learn about Remembrance Day and Moses, where he went from the plague, and about the Israelites, and about Jesus sacrificing himself - the actual plague, like the Black Death.

Not all children had mixed up what they had been taught. Bryan showed the clearest and theologically correct interpretation of 'live a good life':

I think that God teaches you how to be like Jesus. And once you've learned how to be like Jesus I think you get another chance to live where everybody is really kind.

The naïve image of heaven portrayed by the great majority of children supported Fr. Brian's view of 'sugar-coated' teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife. Heaven was described in ways that though theologically correct were naïve, such as by Celine who said "When you go to like heaven, it's, like, a really nice place". This was the general view, the children pointing to teachers as the source of their understanding:

Judith: There's a Heaven, I've never been there but we are told it's this beautiful place, you know, the church says it's a beautiful place.

Jayne: Dying is the next adventure in life and there is new life every day.





A number of children failed to relate death and the afterlife to the Easter story of the Resurrection, instead linking to themes relevant to them personally such as the death of pets:

Celine: After death you go and see your family or your pets, and I think it's a very peaceful place.

The idea of 'going to see your family' introduced the concept of spirits and how they were represented, which was to become a common theme.

Macey: When you go to your family [in heaven] you can be a spirit and go down to see your family who are still alive.

John: Say if you did go back up to heaven, is there a way where you can like, is there a way you can go and see your family members again?.

Many of the following images suggested by the children were also frequently heard by the author from adult bereaved people, linked to Continuing Bonds:

Jayne: Do you believe that when you see a feather that a dead relative or an angel has come to visit you? Because my mum and dad believe it - after my granddad died we started seeing loads of feathers around our house.

Bryan: My auntie's favourite colour was yellow, especially butterflies, she was, like, associated with them. If you saw a yellow butterfly would that be a sign, like the white feather.

For some children the idea of a benevolent spirit looking after those on earth was significant, suggesting Meaning-making was taking place:

Will: Is there a spirit or someone to look over us when they're in heaven, or something?.

John: My grandad loved the seagulls that landed on the church roof. And my nan always says that they are him looking down on us.

Being able to recognise loved ones when the children themselves get to heaven seemed to be an issue playing on children's minds:

Virginia: I don't think [we will meet] as people, but we will know each other. And maybe he will recognise me before I recognise him.

Children's questioning highlighted concerns the children had, and the need for greater understanding:

Will: I can't describe it physically to you as to what I would look like, or what [the person who died] would look like.

Elizabeth: I don't know if physically you would be the same as you were down on earth.

What was seen in the Focus Groups was a considerable variation in children's understanding of death and the afterlife, despite all having been taught Religious Education for five-six years. While some understanding was accurately expressed, more often there was a degree of confusion and ignorance, and at times a completely erroneous understanding of the subject. As the co-moderator said on completion of the final Focus Group in school 1,

That, of all the sessions, shows how much work has to be done on what they are being taught.

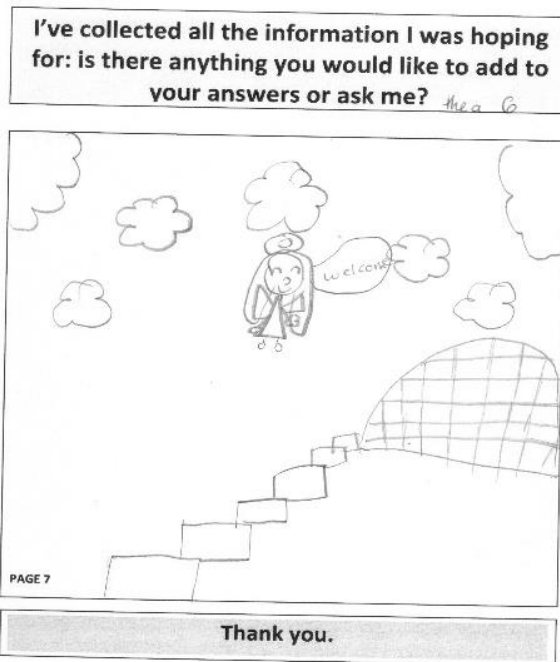
It was during discussion of the theme of 'live a good life' that a new concept of a 'stairway to heaven' arose. The co-moderator, a senior member of school staff, was not able to relate it to anything taught in Religious Education. Stairways also figured consistently in drawings of heaven that the children produced, as in the example below.

Diana: I've heard that you have to be kind and that if you do, you go up a stairway to heaven.

Jayne: I heard about you going up a stairway to heaven. I've heard it many times - I've heard it from my parents, and from my friends.

The moderator queried what a stairway or steps to heaven would be for. Jayne related it to judgment, and a means of 'going up', describing ascension in terms understood by children:

It depends on the choices that you've made. Like if they are really bad then you'll go to hell, and if they are really good ones you'll probably go to heaven.



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Perhaps the most striking image of a stairway to heaven came from Ann:

I think it is, like, maybe two really long stairways, and one will be black, and one will be white, and God will take you up the white one, but if you went to hell you went down the black one.

While expressed in dramatic terms the description again related to judgement and means of ascension. Ann conflated the stairway concept with an old-fashioned image of Hell:

If it was heaven you went up the white stairs. And if you went to hell you would find a devil there, and they would be trying to persuade you to do more bad things like you've already done. And if you didn't do what the devil wanted you to do, there's a big pit and he throws you in it.

One explanation for this image of a stairway or staircase might be as John said:

Well when I was watching the Simpsons [a cartoon programme] before, I sort of got an idea from them. It's like this great grey staircase and like, devils, and, I don't know, horrible things.

The co-moderator later confirmed that there had been a 'Simpsons' cartoon on the subject broadcast recently, which might explain this and other references to some kind of stairway. If so, this would be an example of an external influence or source taking precedence over what had been learned in school. It seemed John was more informed, erroneously, about death and the afterlife from a cartoon than from five-six years of schooling.

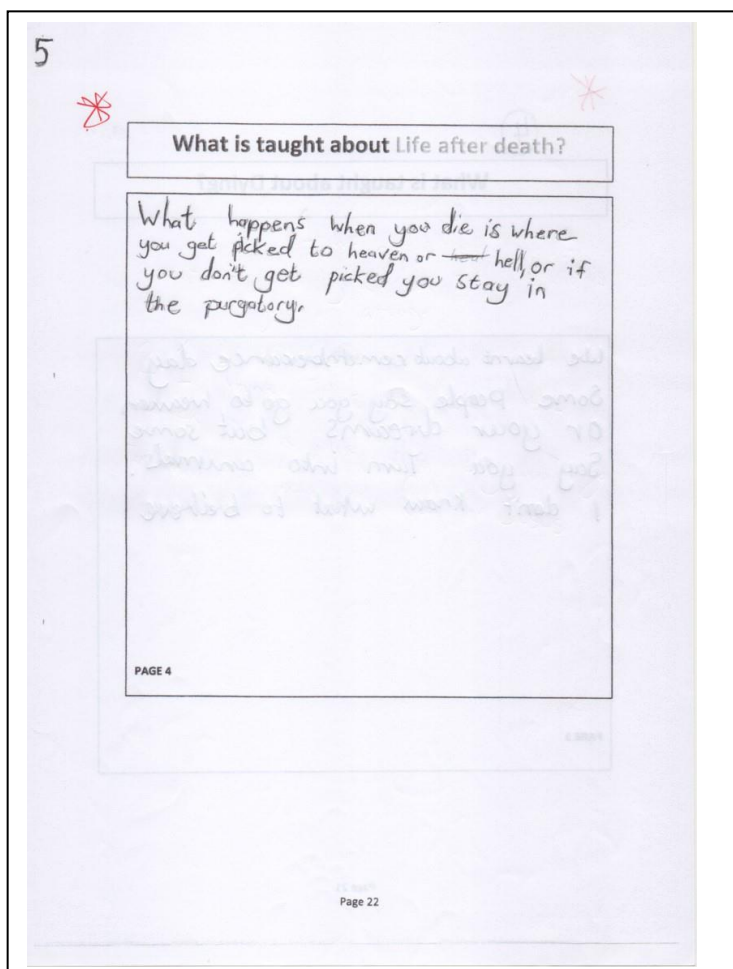
The concern at a lack of understanding about death and the afterlife after several years of religious education was heightened by the responses given by several children which regularly featured Hell. The concept of Hell as a place of punishment for not living a good life as described above by Ann was inconsistent with contemporary Church teaching of it being a distance from God, and more typical of previous generations' Old Testament-based teaching when Hell was used as a threat: if a child misbehaved, they were told 'You'll go to hell'. In the first Focus Group this idea was reinforced when one child refused to use the word 'hell', believing it to be a swear word, which linked the issue to the influence of families:

Steven: If you are bad and stuff and when you die, you will be picked and you go to hell.

Freddie: Hell is like a devil trying to control you.

Matthew: And hell, if you have sinned, you are tortured, that's what I think.

Matthew's comment is in line with traditional thinking of Hell as a place of fire and brimstone and eternal damnation. This may have come from the Church, from parents, or as discussed below, TV or social media. The lack of clarity was evident in this typical description:



The greatest lack of understanding was found in Focus Group 5:

Alex: 'I've heard that you go to heaven, or, it may sound strange, but you go to eternal damage or something, eternally damned.

Sophie: If someone is bad or they've done wrong things in the past like not listening to Jesus' commandments then they go to hell. There is fire and Satan, the devil.

Nina spoke in much the same way, moderating her thoughts by reference to Hell as a place of possible forgiveness and attainment of heaven:

I think that basically hell is where the devil and fire is, and I also think that it's where bad people go. I think sometimes they go there, but sometimes God forgives them and they go back to heaven.

'Judgement and choice' was a concept understood by most children. Children's views of judgement aligned with their understanding of 'live a good life' to achieve everlasting life. Their understanding was confused to the extent that they believed there was some tolerance, not in the sense of asking God for forgiveness as a way of gaining eternal life, but rather, as a human characteristic:

Will: If you do really bad things you'll go to hell, but if you do some good choices and they're not too bad you may get away with it.

There was little differentiation between Purgatory and Heaven, though it was implicit in the references to 'pray for forgiveness' and 'live a good life'. Children did not see it as a binary choice between heaven or hell, believing there was some way to influence the outcome:

Elizabeth: People go to Heaven, regardless of what they have done, if they are sorry.

Judith: It's not that God will be angry with you, but He won't like it. Do the good things, do the right things and be as good a person you can all your life.

In an unexpected variation of obstacles to ascending to heaven, Tina said:

I think that there are, like, there are these jobs you have to complete, and at the end you have to be weighed against a feather. If you are lighter than a feather you go to heaven and if you are heavier you go to hell.

Tina was not alone in her confusion:

Mary: I think that God asks you questions. If you answer them right you go to heaven, and if you answer them wrong you go to hell, like in a giant tornado.

Some children's understanding of the Church's teaching on judgement was reasonably accurate:

Matthew: So, basically if you do lots of sins you choose whether you go up to heaven and be forgiven, but if you've done really bad stuff and you don't deserve to be forgiven you go to hell.

Two other children were reasonably accurate in their understanding:

Lina: What I have written about dying is that your body doesn't go up to heaven but your soul does.

Judith: I remember talking to somebody, I said "when we do die ... and we go to Heaven will I miss people, will I do this, will I do that", and they told to me "well no, it's your soul that goes to Heaven".

In summary, there was little clear understanding of judgement and choice: ideas around 'feathers' and 'tornados' may have their roots in TV and social media, but the message taken away was that five-six years of religious education had not brought children to the understanding of death and the afterlife that the Church, Policymakers or Educators would have hoped for.

Children's resilience was an unexpected feature of the Focus Groups. Children seemed to recognise that they were being protected from the subject of death and the afterlife, but were still prepared to discuss it:

Virginia: Perhaps it's not a very nice story to tell children when they are growing up.

As a counter to many adults' view that children should be protected from the taboo subjects of death and the afterlife, at the end of Focus Group 2 the co-moderator commented on Celine being fairly quiet during the session. It was explained that the child

'has recently lost her granddad, and I know that things are quite raw for her. I thought it might be a struggle for her but she wanted to take part, and was fine.

Children's willingness and ability to engage with the subject supported both the Literature Review and Fr. Brian's suggestion that children were more than able to take on the realities of death, if supported by adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife.

From children's questions it was discerned that teachers and parents needed the knowledge and skills to answer honestly and openly, such as in response to this question:

Craig: This may not be a question that you can answer, but there are so many people dying, so how do they all fit there?.

This is not a 'children's' question, but one that was heard from adults by the author in his bereavement counselling practice— clear understanding had never been gained. This lack of understanding of how souls will 'be' in heaven was further demonstrated by Amy:

So basically, there's this space, heaven, is there enough room for everyone?.

There was no reticence or reluctance shown in any of the Focus Group sessions to discussing death and the afterlife. In a further example of children's willingness to take part in what, from many adults' perspectives, would be a subject that should be avoided, several children fabricated stories, sometimes based on what others in the Group had said, just so that they could participate. Tina was an example, when 'live a good life' was being discussed:

One day I was with my gran and my grancha [grandfather] and my mum and we went to have fish and chips, I went to a homeless man without asking permission because I didn't want them to say no. I knew he didn't have much so I gave him food.

It was when talking of their experiences of loss that the subject of loss of pets first came up. At the age of the study's participants, 9-11, there is little distinction made between losing a person and losing a pet. The experience, emotions, and effects are the same to such an extent that children would talk of a person's and a pet's death in the same sentence, showing that death was a normal event for them, despite being sheltered from it by well-meaning adults:

Freddie: When I was 3 my granddad died, and quite recently about a year ago, my nan's dog died, he had a tumour.

Josie: I lost my granddad a few years ago. Also, my nan's dog passed, when I was about 2 or 3, he had an infection I think. They were going to chop it off [the dog's leg] but he was too ill so he died.

Ann: 4 or 5 months ago my grandad died, and then about one and a half years ago my guineapig died.

Admittedly by the end of this discussion contributions may have strayed into fabrication or an over-zealous wish to participate such as with Mary, "I pray for my hamster - she didn't die, but we had to give her away because she bit my sister", but the point is made: children do not discriminate between people and pets when it comes to death and will talk openly on the subject.

Pets are often the first loss children experience, and if approached properly can provide a lesson in how to address and normalise the subject of death and the afterlife, the essence of the proposal by Fr. Brian to incorporate teaching about death and the afterlife into other curriculum subjects such as science. As demonstrated by this study's findings, children can be taught the subject often through their own experiences.

As seen from the responses, most children assume pets go to heaven, just as people do, though are not clear if it's the same heaven for animals and people:

Tina: Do animals go to a separate heaven, or do they go to the same one as humans?.

Badham (2013, p.4) pointed out that in Catholic theology pets don't have souls or go to heaven, and advised that the subject needed to be handled sensitively in Religious Education when using pet death to teach about the afterlife.

The subject of being taught about death and the afterlife was introduced by the question 'What do you learn about dying and the afterlife in school?'. Several children responded with reference to the Easter story, which by their age would have been taught five-six times over their time in school:

Mary: We learned in school that Jesus died for us. We've learned that on Good Friday Jesus died, and when people die they go up to heaven.

Simone: We've learned that Jesus was put on a cross.

As with most topics covered there was a variation in levels of understanding, with no single eschatological topic having a common understanding. At the one extreme children had a clear and wide-ranging understanding:

Morna: I was brought up believing that good souls go to Heaven and the soul never dies.

At the other extreme was the following, which was more typical.

Martina: I've never been taught about it [afterlife], so I don't know how to explain to you, or anybody, what the afterlife is, or what it means. We were never taught much about our [own] resurrection.

Language may have been a factor in children's understanding of death and the afterlife; whether it was called the afterlife, life after death, heaven, could have accounted for some of the variation in responses. In the interview with Fr. Brian it was mostly referred to as 'the Last Things' but this is not in common usage, and consistency of language would be helpful:

Morna: They didn't actually [call it] afterlife, after death or whatever, they just say good people go to Heaven. And that's the way I believe.

Virginia: We are not really taught anything at all: we are taught about death, but we are not taught about "after death".

Catechism continued to be the main method of instruction in Religious Education, with all Catholic pupils attending Catechism class. If the following statement is accurate, it may explain the 'old-fashioned' view of hell:

Paul: I have learned a lot in books about things like the Resurrection. So if you are good you go up to heaven, and if not you descend into hell. I learned it in Catechism.

Virginia: We learn it all from the priest in Catechism. If you were bad you went there [Hell] and you would burn for eternity there.

Morna: I go to Catechism. You learn by questions and answers.



Virginia's and Morna's comments demonstrated why the Catechism was revised after Vatican II to counter the 'eternal damnation' image that had been associated with Hell, and the way faith had been taught. Children's comments suggested this had not been completely successful, but may be due to several factors such as who was teaching Catechism:

In Catechism we are taught about being good ... when I made my first confession and learned about sin and doing wrong I didn't go out, in case I did anything wrong.

The issue of 'Sugar-coating' raised by Fr. Brian was supported by findings from the Focus Groups. In response to the question 'What do you think the afterlife looks like?' responses were consistently naïve, regardless of age and year group, with a variety of contributions and of maturity exhibited. One child talked repeatedly about such ideas as aliens, spaceships taking the person to heaven, and a dead person seeing black for three days. Talk of aliens was likely to have been due to exposure to media and its representation of the supernatural. Again, it was concerning that it had taken dominance in children's beliefs over five-six years' teaching. Clark's (2003) book *'From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the media, and the supernatural'* highlighted that such influences affected ever-younger children.

Without exception all children had a magical image of Heaven. Drawings (See Appendix 10 *Notepads*) of what the children thought heaven looked like were requested at the end of each Focus Group, accompanying comments such as:

Adele: A planet made out of clouds.

Izzy: When I think of heaven it is gold and yellow, anything you want. And then with hell I think it is like, red clouds pushed together so you can stand on it.

Some responses implied some knowledge of reincarnation, and were more closely related to other faiths' beliefs, which may have been related to recent lessons on pluralism, demonstrating the mixing-up of teachings:

Gary: I believe that if you die you just restart your life, it's like being reborn again.

Josie: You see black for one or two days, and then you rebirth like a baby and go through the stages again.

Nina: In school I learned about we've got four million personalities, and when my mum's granddad passed away my mum said I had his eyes and smile.

These and other comments typified a confused response to being asked what had been learned outside school. Ann provided the clearest example of confused eschatological understanding:

We haven't learned much about it [about death and the afterlife], but we have learned that they will see, like, black for a while, and I think that, like, God or Jesus will take them into heaven or hell, and then God frees us and takes us back to life as a different person.

The naïve and simplistic image of heaven was seen when the children were asked for three words to describe it: examples can be found in Appendix 10 *Notepads*.

Charlie:	Angels, caring, amazing
Will:	Peace, calmness, angels
Jayne:	Clouds, peace
Diana:	Fluffy clouds, plants, creatures
Sarah:	Clouds, angels
Sophie:	Jesus with you
Paul:	Angelic and holy
Alex:	Holy, peaceful and graceful

Conversely, some descriptions of heaven could be viewed as quite alarming given the age of the participants and how long they had been taught religious education:

Lizzy: My dad told me that when you are in the grave your body is there, and then after a few weeks or months your spirit goes up there and all your skin comes down, and there are just bones and stuff.

Josie: I think that when they go to heaven, they go in the back of a taxi in a coffin, and then they go underground.

Josie: When you die and you go up to heaven, do you go in an alien spaceship?.

Josie continued in this vein. What was observed was that there was no contradiction by the other children, either directly or when talking together:

I think after death you see nothing, and then you see black. When they go in the ground they [the bereaved] bring flowers, and a year later they bring flowers again and talk to them.

The first part of the statement is concerning and likely to scare the child: the second part is probably a description of accompanying a parent to the grave of a deceased person. What followed indicated lack of guidance from the parent:

They talk to them and they imagine that the person who died responds to them, but they actually aren't talking. They pretend that the person who died is actually there, and talking to them.

Interpretation of these comments needs to be made in the context of children trying to describe their thoughts and feelings in words they know and understand, relating them to what they see and hear in their everyday lives. In this context, accompanying a parent to the grave of the child's grandparent and hearing them speak to the dead, or saying a prayer, would likely result in the above comments. The challenge for a teacher or a parent would be linking the child's understanding to the Church's teaching.

Children related what they said to things they knew and understood, for example "going up to heaven" - how? A spaceship? That is what children will have seen of people 'rising' on TV or video games. Children's perspectives played a part in their understanding and interpretation of death and the afterlife. From the responses it was clear that all children believed in an afterlife, though whether that was from being taught in school or from other sources was not always clear.

Two children expressed the view that death was reserved for old/older people, which would be a concern for children should they experience the loss of a young child or person. In Study 1 young bereaved people were interviewed, and as can be seen in the Childhood Bereavement Network statistics (*List of Tables and Figures*) children and young people experience death frequently.

Toni: I think that death's a time where your body doesn't work as it does when you are younger.

Parents and family were seen to have an influence, as identified in the Literature Review. An example of what children learn from their parents and family was given by Martina:

You see nothing, my mum and dad told me. You see like, black and I don't want to die because I don't want to see black.

The influence of parents and families on children's understanding of the concepts of death and the afterlife has figured in previous studies. The subject was addressed when the moderator asked what children learned outside school:

Elizabeth: My dad says if you were good and you led a good life, or lived according to what God and Jesus want you to do then you are going to be pretty much sorted in your afterlife.

Paul: I know things about the afterlife because of my dad, and I know lots of old-fashioned sayings, and that's why I really know all about the afterlife.

It was noted that the more informed responses were from children of immigrant families with a devout faith and regular religious practice; faith that had seemingly been imparted to their children. Post-Focus Group 5, the co-moderator commented:

You could tell whose families are practising Catholics and who live their faith.

Family influence extended beyond parents, particularly in Catholic families that had retained beliefs developed in pre-Vatican II times:

John: My nan told me that when you die you go to heaven, and you have a big party. That was my nan's way of looking at it.

Morna meanwhile showed the negative side of family influence, and the need for sensitivity when discussing death and the afterlife in the presence of children:

My grandmother keeps on and on at me: "where is granddad, is he in Heaven?". And my mother tell her to stop. They say that they don't want her to upset me.

There continues to be a great deal of interest in society in the paranormal (see e.g. Badham, 2013). It is not the intention in this thesis to comment on it; rather, the research seeks to identify whether it is a challenge to the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, or contradicts Church teaching:

Will: Sometimes my mum watches a medium. If you get picked then I think you can, like, they describe your family to you, and you can overhear conversations on TV as well.

A more appropriate influence was described by Lizzy, touching once more on the concept of spirits:

When my dad's mum passed away, my mum and dad said basically that she is always in here [beats her heart] and is always with you guys, and their spirit is always next to you.

After this particular Focus Group the co-moderator advised that Lizzy had had a recent bereavement, though had been keen to participate. Advising that the child's mother was not coping very well with the loss of the grandmother, the mother's behaviour showing anger or resentment towards God was believed to be influencing how the child was relating to the death:

She [the mother] had been very close to her own mum and I think there may have been some kind of, it's been hard, I don't think they've come to terms with it.

Declining religiosity over generations in church attendance and beliefs was described in the Literature Review (see e.g. The National Centre for Social Research, 2019a, p.2). The consequences are to be seen in the lack of guidance and direction given to children in their understanding of death and the afterlife. Some participants' parents were without the knowledge and skills to offer support, demonstrated by their attempts to offer solace and comfort to their children by saying their loved ones who have died are 'on a star', or are 'asleep':

John: My mum and dad told me that the stars are like dead people, and, like, ancestors watching over me.

Josie: The stars are people who have died. Every night I say goodnight to my family before I go to bed.

The moderator expressed a concern at the end of Focus Group 6:

A lot of them [the Focus Group participants] talked about their family telling them that their loved ones or ancestors are stars. That can be really frightening for some children.

The co-moderator broadened the issue to include the taboo nature of death, societal challenges, lack of regard to the consequences of what children are told, and to the challenge of educating parents. The co-moderator's response is qualified by them being a parent themselves, and is reported in full:

I think it's because some parents don't know what to say to their children, and want to say something nice. And of course they are trying to contend with living without someone [cope with their own loss] and have to explain to a child, when they don't understand themselves why that person is not there, that is one way of being able to explain it.

And also, it's a big thing, you can buy stars, have stars named after the dead person, it's nice for people to think the child can go off to sleep that night with nice thoughts. Children at that age don't get things explained to them because it's too hard for the parents.

As with many challenges identified in the four studies, it is rare to be able to look at any one factor in isolation: in this example we have the combined effects of parents and societal pressures.

Societal pressures were seen to influence children's understandings about death and the afterlife. It was during the first Focus Group when children were asked what they thought the afterlife was like that video games were first mentioned, going on to become a regular theme. Unsurprisingly, it was found that all the children played video games and watched videos, whether on their computer, games console, or on TV. The potentially detrimental effects of this had been raised by Corr, Nabe and Corr (1980), and was seen to be still prevalent forty years later. Given the online access to the internet that all children have in today's society, it is even more of a consideration. 'Kesgrave schoolboy shooting: Teen was obsessed with games and guns' (*BBC News*, 4<sup>th</sup> November 2021) reported the case of a 16-year old who killed a schoolfriend after becoming obsessed with guns and killing after watching violent videos and games.

Examples of the challenge to children's understanding of death and the afterlife through their accepting what is heard or learned on social media and generally on the internet as 'truth' can be seen in the following remark:

Craig: I've heard heaven called the 'aeher'? [Co-moderator checked the spelling with him] It's commonly used around the internet, people use it when using the internet.

It transpired that Craig was talking about 'the ether', an expression used to describe what today is more commonly known as 'the cloud', where data is stored in 'space' remote from the computer. Social media was influencing belief: 'ether' rather than heaven.

There were mixed messages about parents' monitoring of what children watch, which played into the finding of TV, video and social media having a strong influence over children's understanding of death and the afterlife. There was a wide range of experiences based on parents' own perspectives of what was appropriate, such as allowing the watching of over-18 rated films by children aged 9-11. At one extreme was Nina, who said

I am not allowed to watch horror films, or shooting or stabbing films and stuff like that. I don't like them personally, and my mum thinks they are going to get in my head.

At the other extreme, guidance on suitable videos to watch or games to play would not always be seen to be age-appropriate, showing the dilemma faced by parents as to what was 'right' for their child in today's society:

Lizzy: My dad normally likes watching stabbing videos and shooting, but I am only allowed to watch real-life war movies, because they want me to see what is in the world right now.

Watching videos and TV programmes was seen by two children as a potentially positive contribution to children's understanding of death and the afterlife, though this view was in the minority. Both comments coming from children with devout immigrant parents:

Craig: I think that you could learn more about death and the afterlife by watching videos, going to church, and going to other religious places.

Sophie: I've watched a documentary about the afterlife and I learned a lot from it.

More typical was Gary's opinion, reflective of the real-life example of their influence:

Some are particularly hardcore, where when you die you just ... die.

Even video games that were not 'hardcore' were found to affect children's understanding of death and the afterlife. As described earlier in this chapter, a Simpsons cartoon episode might have given an understanding completely at odds with what the child had been taught in Religious Education over their time in school.

Macey: In this game the character re-sets, and it looks like their soul is going to heaven.

Video games could be subliminally influential, appealing to one aspect of a child's wants and needs but then introducing them to inappropriate material:

Nina: I think that sometimes they are quite bad for you, but they are also good because you can play with your friends.

Asked directly whether the children could differentiate between fiction and reality, most claimed they could, but this is not supported by other findings in this chapter:

Toni: Even though people are real, behind the screens they are not real people.

Jayne: I think it's just completely different because it's a video game.

Other than guidance from parents about certain video games and films being inappropriate, the consensus seemed to be that the children could see a clear difference between video games and reality. This contradicted other research on the subject( e.g. Corr, Nabe, Corr, 1980). As the co-moderator astutely observed, in response to the moderator's comment that video games did not appear to have as great an influence as might have been expected:

I think more with video games [the point is] that they can contribute to aggression, but when it comes to the difference between them, for children who don't have other issues like behavioural or psychological they know the difference.

It was found that when challenged about video games' portrayal of death, children knew the difference between fiction and reality. While some of the video games were graphic and not age-appropriate, they were not seeing as overly influential. This raised the question of whether regular exposure to death, or stories and images of the afterlife, be a positive experience by normalising the fact. As an antidote to the protection of children from their taboo nature, the idea could have merit. There are caveats however, that might not be possible to overcome: the content would need to be age- and content appropriate, and require parental control and supervision of what children were allowed to see and hear. If managed appropriately, this would support Fr. Brian's view that children should not be insulated from the realities of life and death life. Benign or instructive exposure might be beneficial:

Amy: On the news I saw that somebody's sister died, and they showed her, on the bed.

More graphic but still instructive exposure might be

Craig: One time I saw on the news that someone in a church went on a rampage with a knife, and there were lots of people who died.

The same argument could apply to other media; books, TV, and social media could all be used constructively to aid children's understanding of death and the afterlife, if appropriate and moderated by knowledgeable adults:

Toni: I learn about people who died in war from books and things. And on Google I sometimes find out about what other people think heaven looks like.

Steven: I learn that people die in hospitals from coronavirus and other diseases in other countries. And I see people die on TV and in movies.

Much understanding came from school teaching. For example, the children in the Focus Groups had gained an appreciation of the meaning and significance of Remembrance Day, and the subject had been used to broaden the conversation to related subjects. This seemed to have had an effect on the children, demonstrating the potential for appropriate and adequate teaching about death and the afterlife:

Mary: Outside school I see war memorials and I see on the news people marching. And in parks and on benches there are plaques that say "in loving memory of..." and stuff. You see stories when you watch the news, you see stories about people who have died like with Covid.



## **6.5 Summary of chapter**

The hypothesis adopted in this thesis ‘We do not teach our children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss’ was tested using the findings of four individual studies. Reasons for inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife - Challenges - emerged, supporting those identified in earlier chapters. The Data Presentation and Analysis chapter evidenced that there was a link between the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, and the ability of participants in study 1 to cope with loss – the Golden Thread. It was also found that inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife was a cause of ABC and prevented the establishment and maintenance of the Golden Thread.

In ‘starting at the end’, Study 1 established the benchmark of what could be achieved with adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, while identifying what issues and problems were evident at that stage. The findings of the subsequent three studies were compared against this benchmark, to confirm or qualify Study 1’s findings.

Studies 2-3 explored the process of teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in primary education, from its foundations in what Church Leaders wanted taught, through the translation of Church guidance and direction into policy, and finally how that policy was enacted by educators.

The final stage of the process in Study 4 asked and answered this thesis’ question: ‘What do Roman Catholic children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife?’.

In examining the process of teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife and comparing it to the outcomes identified it was possible to identify fractures in the process. The objectives of each of the stages of delivery established by Church Leaders and Policymakers were compromised: something had been lost.

### **6.5.1 Study 1 What is the outcome of what has been taught about death and the afterlife**

While all participants reported that the religious education they had received about death and the afterlife had ultimately helped them cope with their loss, there was variation in how this was achieved and to what extent. Any benefit gained was impacted by a number of challenges. The data analysis demonstrated the consequences - ‘effects’ - of the participants not being able to use their taught beliefs for support, supporting the hypothesis that inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife was one cause of peoples’ inability to call on faith to cope with loss.

A central finding from the data analysis was that short-term, afterlife beliefs could compound grief, causes for the ABC experienced being identified as educational – what was taught about death and the afterlife, and how; a gap between the expectation of beliefs being a support, and the reality; and societal and secular pressures creating obstacles to having faith in resurrection and eternal life.

Longer-term, beliefs provided the hoped for support and relief, though for some of it necessitated undertaking a process of adjustment through coping mechanisms such as Meaning-making and Continuing Bonds, and not, solely, due to what they had been taught. Notwithstanding, the two main coping mechanisms were religion-based, suggesting that ‘planting the seeds’ had been successful.

As the hypothesis was confirmed by the findings, it can be argued that the supporting research undertaken in studies 2-4 had merit in determining how the outcome in Study 1 was arrived at.

### **6.5.2 Study 2 What do church leaders and policy makers want taught**

Study 2 confirmed the significance of a number of themes and challenges that had emerged in earlier chapters. Findings contributed to answering the thesis’ question ‘What do children know and understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife’.

#### **Teaching about death and the afterlife: when and what**

A number of considerations for improving the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife arose from the study, summarised as follows:

Observances vs opportunities. It was determined that capitalising on events occurring periodically throughout the year would normalise and contextualise death, aid teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, and help overcome the confusion arising from teaching about death and the afterlife only at times of Observances.

Incorporating the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife into other curriculum subjects such as science was seen as removing the barriers presented by the current method of its teaching, normalising the subjects of death and the afterlife. Care is needed to accommodate theological teaching that pets do not have a soul and cannot achieve an afterlife.

Provision of appropriate and compulsory Religious Education training for non-Catholic teachers, to include death and the afterlife *and/or* formulation of a course about death and the afterlife, for all teachers to undertake would mitigate the lack of understanding of the faith

of the school and the importance of teaching about death and the afterlife in line with church policy.

Continuity from primary to secondary. Preparation of children through age-appropriate and more realistic teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, addressing the harsh but necessary facts of death with less focus on solace and comfort.

The Church was positioned as being able to contribute to the practice of teaching about death and the afterlife through consistency of guidance across and within schools, to remove the lack of cohesion in policy and practice. This would require adequate resourcing and financial support.

### **6.5.3 Study 3 What is delivered through formal religious education**

In both England and Wales the incorporation and understanding of death and the afterlife in other subjects to 'normalise' it was seen to be the better option. The new Welsh Curriculum 2022 provides a model for incorporating death and the afterlife into other subjects, and for taking a more opportunistic approach to teaching about death and the afterlife. This comes from the flexibility afforded to schools to construct their own curriculum. Schools in Wales will be able to devise their own content and means of delivery and understanding of death and the afterlife, enabling a proactive approach to teaching the subject.

However, given the nature of the subject, and recognising the deficiency of knowledge ('we don't know what to say or do') guidance would be preferable through provision of a 'script' or framework for teaching about death and the afterlife, in line with the style of the current 'Come and See' model of instruction. Training in bereavement support for school management and of a dedicated person in each school, together with knowledge of available material and resources, was seen to be beneficial, enabling the devolvement of this role from individual teachers.

Other challenges identified were of the need to improve teachers' individual skills, beliefs and attitudes, and the need for education for parents on death and the afterlife, to provide continuity between school and home, and for support of their bereaved children. What emerged as the strongest challenge was that without addressing teacher training and willingness to teach about death and the afterlife, a comprehensive solution would be difficult to achieve.

In the two schools participating in the research there appeared to be much good practice such as memory gardens and trees, and memory boxes. Though not novel they would be

effective, but there was a lack of consistency and guidance as to what is available in the school, what works, and what is good practice. Archdiocese-provided guidance and resources together with financial support would facilitate the establishment of a cohesive approach.

#### **6.5.4 Study 4 What do children understand about death and the afterlife and how is their knowledge acquired**

The research demonstrated that expectations of children were often guided by adults' perspectives, which the Literature Review showed to be a flawed approach to understanding children's views and opinions. The study revealed children's resilience, inquisitiveness, and their willingness and ability to engage in the topic of death and the afterlife. Adele's observation, while it may be a worrying thing for a child to contemplate, nevertheless demonstrated her thoughts, knowledge, and willingness to discuss:

Sometimes I lie in bed and imagine what it feels like to die. I think it's a sad thing because I know that I won't be able to see my family.

There were identified opportunities for Church guidance for resolution of issues using age- and content appropriate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, the most significant being clarification of angels and spirits returning to visit you or look after you, which concerned some children, along with the standardisation of language used for the afterlife to avoid confusion. Additionally, clearer Church teaching on Resurrection and the Last Things, clear distinction between the death and afterlife beliefs of Catholics and other Christian denominations and faiths, and clarification that death does not happen just to older and old people would all assist in preparing children for exposure to the death of friends and other young people.

Of particular significance for this study would be education of parents. Attention was drawn in particular to the need for accurate and supportive guidance and advice about death and the afterlife, moderation of children's watching and playing videos, games, and TV, and children's exposure to parents visiting mediums.

### **6.5.5 Conclusion**

Certain challenges such as societal and legislative pressures are outside the influence of this thesis. It is hoped however that identification and clarification of the issues and challenges will contribute towards their consideration. Most challenges identified in this thesis *are* under the control and influence of Church leaders and Policymakers. It is to these that the findings of this thesis hope to speak – what is taught, and how.

The research distinguishes itself from the majority of research on ABC by examining its causes or predictors of spiritual struggle rather than its effects. It is believed to be unique in establishing a link between the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife and the ability to call on faith to cope with loss. The implications of the findings for the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife and the improvement of pastoral bereavement counselling are discussed in the next chapter “Discussion”.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## DISCUSSION

### 7.1 Introduction

The chapter considers the findings of the Data Presentation and Analysis, placing the research in a wider context and engaging in a dialogue between the research questions, findings, and the extant literature.

The research answers the question ‘What do Roman Catholic children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife’ and asserts that the findings add to the body of knowledge on teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife and the ability to call on faith to cope with loss, by establishing a link between the two, the Golden Thread. It also identifies challenges to the link that can cause Afterlife Belief Conflict (‘ABC’) through the fracturing of the link. The research’s central finding is this: that the inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is a cause of ABC.

Confirming the working hypothesis of the research that ‘We do not teach young people adequately about death and the afterlife to help people cope with loss’, supplementary findings are that Religious Education has no specific focus on death and the afterlife and preparing people for loss. Further, that the content and delivery of the subject of death and the afterlife taught are both the problem and the potential solution, while pastoral bereavement counselling faces particular challenges due to the unwillingness or inability of counsellors to allow religion and spirituality to be ‘in the room’.

### 7.2 The golden thread

Bereavement is part of life, and the majority of people emerging from this painful experience are changed but able to move on to live meaningful lives. Traumatic loss can engender different outcomes which, for some, can have a profound and long-lasting influence on their lives. People can experience psychosomatic, social, educational, and, of significance to this research, spiritual struggle, ABC, which this thesis argues can be avoided or mitigated by adequate education about death and the afterlife.

The “pathways to impact” identified by McLaughlin, Lytje and Holliday (2019, p.64) describe the challenges that can break the link between teaching about death and the afterlife and calling on faith to cope with loss. Addressing these challenges is key. Luecken and Roubinov (2013, p.171) said

Understanding the pathways through which adaptation occurs can help identify optimal areas or time points for intervention, maximizing the opportunity to promote positive adjustment.

In devising the Golden Thread the research establishes the rationale for alerting Church leaders, Policymakers, Educators, and bereaved individuals to the significance that the bereaved person's afterlife beliefs have on the outcome of their grief. The challenges to the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, if not addressed, can prevent the establishment and maintenance of the Golden Thread. McLaughlin, Lytje and Holliday (2019, p.65) advocated further research to identify 'mediators' to these challenges, which

Would help professionals to be aware of the risks for aggravation of mental health problems after loss.

(Stikkelbroek, Bodden, Reitz et al., 2016).

McLaughlin, Lytje and Holliday (ibid., p.64) characterised a mediator as a "facilitator of reduced vulnerability", which at an overarching level in this research is the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife such that faith that can be called on when needed. This research demonstrates that despite the "general difficulty of establishing a causal connection" (McLaughlin, Lytje and Holliday, 2019, p.65) one such link can be established, the Golden Thread.

A main aim of the research is to contribute to pastoral bereavement counselling through an understanding of this cause of ABC and how it can be a constituent part of a person's spiritual struggle. As with adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, challenges and their characteristics - causes - and mediators were identified for the effective provision of pastoral bereavement support.

### **7.3 Study 1: What is the outcome of what has been taught**

In Study 1 twelve bereaved young people were interviewed to obtain their recollections of being taught about death and the afterlife, and their views on whether it was of help to them in coping with their loss. All participants reported that ultimately what they had been taught had helped them in their grief. There was variation in how this was achieved, and when and to what extent comfort and solace had been gained. The study found that any benefit gained was impacted by a number of challenges. The central findings are summarised as follows:

*Short-term, afterlife beliefs generally compounded grief, with confusion, shame, disappointment and anger featuring prominently.*

This was mostly attributed to inadequate education, not just a deficiency but also the naïve teachings received that had left them unprepared for death's harsh reality. Participants were

left to find their own way of coping e.g. through Meaning-making, instead of being able to call on their faith. Secularism was also seen as a pressure in sustaining belief.

*Education – what is being taught, and how*

If [schools] respond appropriately to crises and trauma that affect the young, learning becomes social and emotional as well as academic.

(Rowling, 2008)

For schools to achieve what Rowling describes, loss and grief need to be addressed holistically linking spirituality, loss, and mental health. This encompasses dealing with both the cause (teaching about death and the afterlife) and the effects of loss. Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rudel (2003) emphasised connectedness in their concept of spiritual development; in practice this does not happen.

Steve: We don't seem to be teaching children what happens after death, and that creates this uncertainty. Perhaps it's because it's not a very nice story to tell children.

*A gap between the expectation of beliefs being a support, and the reality.*

This is a foundational aspect of the hypothesis that we do not teach children adequately about death and the afterlife, and it was proven in the research – taught and understood beliefs failed to provide the necessary solace and support:

Steve: There is a difference between our understanding of death and the reality when you suffer a bereavement. The message given is that if we are good we go to Heaven and all is well there, but the reality is a very painful experience.

*Societal and secular pressures as obstacles to faith in resurrection and eternal life*

While largely outside the influence of Church leaders and Policymakers, attention is drawn to the influence of these factors, which need consideration in development of guidance and policy:

Emma: Religion has kind of gone. I think it's just a reflection on how our society as a whole has kind of moved away from that.

*Longer-term, participants' beliefs provided the hoped for support and relief, though for most it necessitated undertaking a difficult process of adjustment.*

This was seen as a failure by those responsible for teaching and understanding death and the afterlife to instil ('plant the seeds') sufficient faith to fall back on. Techniques used were self-devised in the absence of readily-available faith or bereavement support. Faith was still seen as the major means of coping, and participants eventually found their way back to it: it was its immediate availability that was absent.

The ability to find a way back suggests that the 'seeds' had been planted, but took time to



grow and produce a harvest, with participants' beliefs being modified or created to fit their needs through the completion of Meaning-making, in order to find a reason and purpose for the death and a way of coping with it:

Jodie: Anyone can have faith that wavers and just falls on the wayside when something major like this [bereavement] happens to you in your life.

Darren: It was hard to think it was better for them, because they had been suffering before they went. And you sort of think of ... you think of them suffering before they go.

Continuing Bonds were ultimately established, keeping the bereaved person 'in touch' with the one they had lost.

Felicity: I do believe that he is up there looking down on us, whether that be heaven or whatever. I always ... if there is a lovely clear sky I look up and say "hiya bamps [grandfather], how is it going?".

Participants' reluctance to call on pastoral counselling for help with their spiritual struggle stemmed partly from the participants' own unwillingness or inability to articulate their needs or to appreciate that counsellors could help, but also from counsellors being unwilling or unable to engage with the spiritual effects of loss. In principle,

It is important to demonstrate God's suffering love by our willingness to listen to suffering and grief and not give in to the impulse to run from the pain. Living through grief requires an ability to tolerate unanswered questions'.

(Mitchell and Anderson, 1983, pp.137-8)

This was not the experience of the bereaved young people:

Annie: It was "I understand your feelings on faith but I can't talk about that in these sessions".

In most parts of the UK counsellors are available to every school. The Covid crisis has added impetus to the need for more school counselling, with the Welsh Government prioritising new investment in counselling ('Programme for Government 2021 to 2026: Well-being Statement', published 15<sup>th</sup> June 2021). While worthy, the counsellors provided to schools have a broad range of skills and areas to cover, and are not typically bereavement counselling-trained.

Reverting to the hypothesis 'We do not teach young people adequately about death and the afterlife to help people cope with loss', Study 1 demonstrates that it is upheld and has merit. The bereaved young people did not know enough about the Church's teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife to support them when a bereavement was experienced. The teaching received was inadequate in both content and quality and could not be called on to help them in the short- to medium term post-bereavement, which had a detrimental impact on their ability to cope with the loss.

Conversely, it demonstrated that faith was ultimately a major contributor to their ability to cope with loss, showing that 'planting the seeds' had been successful. However, it was only of benefit longer-term after significant life and belief adjustments to the loss were made and

not, at least in isolation, due to what they had been taught. In and of itself it was inadequate. This positions the inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife as a cause of peoples' inability to call on faith to support them in their loss. It is maintained that the remainder of the research has value in determining what is taught about death and the afterlife and how, such that the ABC identified in study 1 was arrived at.

#### **7.4 Study 2: What do church leaders and policymakers want taught**

Studies 2-4 answer question 2 'What is delivered through the teaching of death and the afterlife, and how. Is it delivered effectively in order to achieve the ultimate aim of aiding pastoral counselling and support?'.

Study 2 goes 'back to the beginning', evaluating the data from interviews undertaken with Church leaders and Policymakers against the data from Study 1. As study 1 is used as the benchmark for the subsequent three studies, challenges are only seen to have validity if they were first identified in that study; study 2 confirms the presence and significance of a number of such challenges. The challenges having the most impact on 'What do Catholic children know and understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife' are seen as those that affect children's understanding. This section considers teaching about death and the afterlife: when and what.

Capitalising on opportunist events that occur randomly throughout the year to teach about death and the afterlife would normalise and contextualise death and aid its teaching. It would help to overcome children's confusion arising from teaching about death and the afterlife solely at times of Observances, such as between the birth and death of Jesus when Jesus goes from being a baby to a man in his 30's in the space of three months.

This requires flexibility on the part of the school and individual teachers to respond to opportunities as they arise, which is not currently achievable for a number of reasons including curriculum pressures, teacher education, and teacher willingness. Further, when 'Observances' provide the main opportunity to teach about death and the afterlife, there is little content in the current curriculum:

Policymaker: [Observances] will include some references to what we might term the afterlife, but that term will be universalistic in focus. In other words, it will not introduce the idea of judgement: it will speak of the way in which the departed are with God. I don't think it will be terribly detailed.

*Incorporating teaching of death and the afterlife into other curriculum subjects such as science, or formulation of a course on teaching death and the afterlife for all teachers.* The Policymaker's proposal was to link teaching about death and the afterlife to other subjects such as science to regularise its teaching. This would complement the use of 'Opportunities', making it a continuous theme in the curriculum and easier for children to understand.

I would suggest that's a natural way of doing it, because we do talk about the meanings of these things, [they] play a role in the lifecycles of cells and so on. Both biologically, and in terms of the theological meaning.

*Lifecycle association for understandings about death and the afterlife to normalise death for young children* is already done in some Community and faith schools, as a means of teaching children about death. The Policymaker sought to take it a significant step further, using it as a vehicle to teach about death and the afterlife in its broadest sense, and as a means of introducing children to the concept of 'What's next? This is a more practical approach than introducing the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife as a standalone subject.

It is one of the things we are hoping to do in the new curriculum. It is in the RECD, the idea of life on earth with a beginning and an ending, that we do the same and explore some of the meanings for life and death.

Connecting science and theology, the Policymaker went on,

People have encountered the mystery: in other words, here was a person just now, and now although their body is still there, the "person" himself is no longer there.

Care would however be needed to accommodate theological teaching that pets do not have a soul and cannot achieve an afterlife.

The new Welsh Curriculum 2022 facilitates both teaching about death and the afterlife as a standalone subject and taking a more opportunistic approach, given the flexibility afforded to schools to construct their own curriculum around core subjects. Offering a less prescriptive approach, schools would be able to devise their own content and means of delivery of Religious Education, enabling a proactive approach to be taken in teaching the subject.

However, in the absence of Educators' knowledge on the subject ('we don't know what to say or do') a degree of direction and guidance is still needed to assist in the construction and delivery of a curriculum on understandings about death and the afterlife, and consideration has to be given to pressures on the curriculum that are unlikely to reduce. The Policymaker's alternative to the 'standalone' and 'Opportunistic' approaches, that of teaching about death and the afterlife within other subjects such as science, would fit equally well within the new Welsh Curriculum and the National Curriculum structures.

*Compulsory attendance on a course for non-Catholic teachers.* The voluntary nature of faith-specific training for Catholic school teachers entering the profession who have not been brought up in, or practised, their faith is seen as a missed opportunity. Some schools insist on attendance at such a course, or use training days to inculcate the faith in such teachers, but it is variable and inconsistent.

[Policymaker] It is voluntary of course, so the people who might need it most are probably not on the course. There is the possibility that this could be made compulsory for teachers who are non-Catholic and/or educated through Catholic training colleges.

*Educating teachers in teaching about death and the afterlife.* Some teachers are not only unwilling or unable to teach about death and the afterlife, but also to engage with the taboo subject and nature of death. Lowton and Higginson (2003, pp.717-8) pointed out that despite the high level of deaths to which a child is exposed or experiences, teachers' attitudes and ability to support the child is "patchy", as is the support they receive in this area. Potts (2013) reported "the detection of a wall of silence" which, "if encountered in early childhood, can have detrimental consequences for their personal social and academic development" (p.95).

Extensive searching of literature on the subject discovered very little research that addresses these specific difficulties, despite how Coggan, Patterson and Fill (1997) described school:

An educational institution is a place where the majority of young people spend a large part of their lives, and what they learn from staff and ... other students may have far-reaching effects. The teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in primary school is a low priority, and it is unsurprising that teachers are not trained in its delivery. This is compounded by the variability of teachers' attitudes and beliefs, and lack of focus on the subject in teacher training and on faith-specific courses. A further factor contributing to the shortfall in teacher education is the decreasing number of teachers who have grown up in or practised the faith of the school and/or have received training in religious education colleges, leaving teachers with a limited understanding of the fundamentals of that faith. The Policymaker described it thus:

The degree to which teachers feel competent and equipped to [teach about death and the afterlife] will vary hugely. The more confident and well-versed that teachers are in the teachings of the Church on the four Last Things, the more likely it is that it will play some sort of role in their teaching.

*Church guidance: consistency across schools, and the interaction between priests and schools.* Much is left to individual schools' leaders and teachers and to the local parish priest as to how death and the afterlife is taught in faith schools, leading to a high level of inconsistency. This is likely to worsen in Wales under the new Welsh Curriculum which leaves schools to effectively design their own curriculum. A decrease in the number of priests exacerbates the problem, often leaving the remainder to cover several schools.

The Policymaker made no comment on a claimed inconsistency in relationships between priests and schools. It has nevertheless been included as a challenge given its mention in interviews with Church leaders and Educators, the implication being that it is down to personal experience. Notwithstanding its origins, if there is a perception of such inconsistency it is a matter to be brought up for consideration.

I think it [the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife] would be incidental, and I don't think really that there is very much. I don't think that in a systematic way there is much teaching in many of the Religious Education resources that will raise the subject. It will depend on the school and it will vary quite substantially.

*Church guidance on teaching about the Last Things.* Commenting that little teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is undertaken in primary school, the Policymaker focused in particular on the failure to address the broader Church teachings, leaving children uninformed and confused when the subjects do crop up, e.g. with talk of Hell.

It [RECD] doesn't major on the last things, especially in early years. It isn't until pages 7-11 that the Sacrament of the Sick is mentioned but even there, it doesn't currently refer to Last Things much except that in the life of Christ.

*Continuity from primary to secondary school: preparing children in primary for the realities of death to be discovered in secondary.* This issue is seen to be due to the different treatments of death and the afterlife between the primary and secondary education sectors. A 'sugar-coated' attitude and approach is mostly adopted in primary education which is not sustained in secondary school. Acknowledging that "the reality of death is painful, horrible, and has little to recommend it", the Policymaker believed that shielding children from it is being taken too far, leaving young children unprepared for what is to come.

The idea of the afterlife gets introduced almost entirely as an idea of therapeutic value: it is comforting and it is consoling. And it is, but it lacks the integrity that is at the heart of the faith.

The Policymaker appreciated the importance of teaching about death and the afterlife, and that as currently delivered in primary school it does not provide a seamless link to secondary school. Supporting the need to 'plant the seeds' he foresaw the challenges children face over coming years.

I hope they will take that away [from primary school], and rediscover why we pray for the departed. That it is all linked up, the idea of Purgatory as the washing room of heaven and so on. [But] like so much of Religious Education, once young people grow up and recognise the complexity of the world, it gets discarded, as a childish thing.

The Policymaker saw the failure to 'plant the seeds' as down to both the school and the Church, saying it was needed to cope with loss in life as well as to prepare children for the exposure to the harsh realities they will be confronted with in secondary school:

They have not been given the tools in their RE or indeed in their reflection on these things often enough in their parishes, to understand the integrity and the complexity of these things, and it is a reflection of our need for comforting. These things I hope they will have an idea of, when they leave [primary education].

There is a great reliance on schools to teach about death and the afterlife adequately. Decline in church attendance suggests that schools have become significant disseminators of information about death and afterlife beliefs. As young people in secondary education realise the increasing complexity of moral issues, they typically start to find answers for themselves and dismiss the belief that absolute moral answers exist – as Felicity said in Study 1:

I learned as I got older about more diverse beliefs and, like, where a lot of people sort of come from, and I think that formed a very open-mindedness.

## **7.5 Study 3: What is delivered through formal Religious Education**

Continuing the examination of challenges to peoples' inability to call on their faith, Study 3 explores what is taught about death and the afterlife and how, to explain the outcomes of Study 1. The study identifies and considers fractures between what is wanted, described in Study 2, and what is delivered. Challenges to pastoral bereavement counselling are also identified: as with all challenges, mediators to their effects are considered.

The challenges start with teachers' inability or unwillingness to engage with the subject of death, whether because of lack of training, its taboo nature, or because of a challenging personal experience. Research suggests that teachers *want* the skills to support bereaved children: Kennedy, Gardner and Farrelly (2020, p.146) reported research participants' acknowledgement of the need for teachers to have grief information and training. McGovern and Tracey (2010) and Galende (2015) agreed, saying that teachers or university student

teachers needed or wanted specific training or procedures to appropriately respond to situations of bereavement.

As with this thesis' hypothesis that we do not teach children adequately about death and the afterlife, the research evidences that we similarly do not educate teachers adequately to support bereaved children. If the subject of death cannot or will not be entertained by a teacher it effectively closes the door to teaching about the afterlife. The ability to engage with the subject of death and to support bereaved children is seen as a necessary precursor to teachers' ability and willingness to teach about death and the afterlife. McLaughlin, Lytje and Holliday (2019, p.64) reported that "few British schools have planned responses to bereavement". This is a challenge for teachers, who often struggle with knowing what to do and fear doing more harm than good when encountering bereaved children.

Training in bereavement support for school management and of a dedicated person in each school would be a way forward. Training to counsellor level is not seen as needed, but knowledge of available material and support resources would have a number of advantages including the devolvement of this role from the wider school management and staff. This is not a new idea, but regrettably one that has not been implemented despite the recommendation of the Children's Commissioner for England, a role established under the Children's Act 2004, who said on stepping down that

Our vision is to make sure that in every community there will be someone for children and families to turn to, and in every school someone who is trained to understand how to support grieving children.

(Brody, 2010).

Some 10 years later McManus and Paul (2019, p.83) reported that

The role and expertise of schools in supporting bereaved children is underdeveloped. This is significant given that experiencing bereavement during childhood can result in immediate and long-term risks to physical, mental and social wellbeing (Palmer, Saviet and Tourish, 2016)'.

Through the lens of those teaching Religious Education Study 3 takes a more practical, pragmatic and objective view of teaching about death and the afterlife than that of the Church leaders and Policymakers in Study 2. What emerges is that a structured approach linking understandings about death and the afterlife to the teaching of lifecycles of animals and plants would be supported if supplemented with direction on content and delivery, providing a greater likelihood and understanding of death and the afterlife being taught adequately. However, without addressing teachers' training and willingness to teach the subject its chance of success would be limited.

A 'hybrid' scheme combining a more prescriptive approach with some flexibility to accommodate an 'Opportunist' approach is seen as preferable to, as under the new Welsh Curriculum, it being left entirely to a school to construct a curriculum, which would be open to

the risk of it being inadequately constructed or delivered. While it is outside the scope of this thesis, a way forward presents itself for such a hybrid approach as a paradigm for teaching about death and the afterlife that includes a continuing focus on the Liturgical year (Observances), particularly at Easter and All Souls, as a broad framework, to capitalise on the central message of Jesus' death and Resurrection, incorporating the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife into other subjects in faith schools to achieve regular, routine teaching of the subject throughout the year. The opportunity exists to take advantage of 'Opportunities' to relate what is learned about death and the afterlife to real life, supported by a script-based framework for the subject to be taught throughout the school year as opportunities arise.

The Policymaker's suggestion of incorporation and understanding of death and the afterlife into other curriculum subjects is already in progress in the revision of RECD (2012). The remainder of the suggestions would capitalise on this work and formalise the teaching of the subject, which collectively would constitute a new paradigm. The teaching content would be modified across year groups to make it age-appropriate to prepare children for transition to secondary school.

In the two schools participating in the research there appears to be much good practice such as memory gardens and trees, and memory boxes. There was a lack of consistency between the schools and no apparent guidance as to what is available, what works, and what is good practice – each school seems to 'reinvent the wheel'. This provides the opportunity for a cohesive approach to be adopted, guided by Church leaders and Policymakers, for distribution to schools along the lines of the *Schools Covid Pack* (See appendix 3a *Schools Covid Pack - Extract*).

These conclusions are drawn for several reasons: firstly, there is a deficiency of appropriate teacher training on the subject of teaching and understandings about about death and the afterlife. Further, teachers' beliefs and attitudes can be at odds with the demands of teaching about death and the afterlife, particularly with the ultimate objective of people acquiring the faith they need to cope with loss. Finally, 'sugar-coating' of death and the afterlife in primary school leaves children unprepared for discovering the hard facts of loss and grief as they get older. This does them no favours.



## 7.6 Study 4: What do children understand about death and the afterlife and how is their knowledge acquired

Study 4 concludes the series of studies designed to answer the thesis' question 'What do Roman Catholic children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife' It provides the final test of the research's hypothesis by interviewing children in the final two years of primary school, aged 9-11.

By this stage of their education the children have been taught Religious Education, and by implication death and the afterlife, for five to six years. The assumption could reasonably be made that, particularly in the Catholic schools participating in this research, the children would have a good understanding of the church's teaching. The findings do not support this assumption. As discussed at the conclusion of the Focus Groups:

[Moderator] It shows that in their minds it is not clear is it? Hell is a good example. There is still an old-fashioned idea out there [about going to hell if you are naughty].

[Co-moderator] It's having to contend with what they're getting outside school as well, so it's not just work that we [teaching staff] have to do but also their parents.

Several areas provide opportunities for resolution with age- and content appropriate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife:

*Angels and spirits returning to visit you.* A recurring theme in the Focus Groups, angels are consistent with Church teaching and a benign way of thinking about heaven. It brings in Continuing Bonds but does not consider judgement, and people not actually being in Heaven.

Mary: There are steps to heaven, and then God's angels welcome you and God welcomes you. You go to heaven when you make good choices in life.

Izzy: Mum said that people look down from [heaven], from the stars.

*Teaching about funeral practices, including cremation.* An area of confusion for a number of children, cremations in particular could be clarified as they are an obstacle to understanding. DVDs of funerals are apparently already shown to children as part of an Archdiocesan education scheme but teachers find it uninformative and focused on ritual rather than understanding.

John: So say if you go for a cremation, is that what it's called, when you are burned? What happens to your spirit then?.

*Church teaching on The Last Things.* A lack of teaching on this subject is a contributor to the 'sugar-coating' approach to understandings about death and the afterlife in primary school. In not covering Judgement, Purgatory and Hell children are ill-prepared for what they learn in secondary school. Some guidance was evident:

Steven: What happens when you die is that you are picked to go to heaven or to hell. Or if you don't get picked you stay in purgatory.

More typical was this comment:

Martina: There was a priest talking about Purgatory and he was saying you have to be in a certain ... I don't know if he used the words "state of grace". I am afraid of Purgatory.

*Death and the afterlife for pets.* The Church teaches contradictory messages about pets and a pet heaven. The Policymaker in study 2 proposed using the lifecycle of animals and plants as a vehicle for teaching about death and the afterlife, but the Church itself does not support animals having souls and ascending to heaven (Badham, 2013, p.4). Acknowledged as a difficult area to teach, especially with younger children who often have an attachment to a pet, a way of dealing with it sensitively is needed.

*Clear distinction between death and afterlife beliefs when teaching about other Christian denominations and faiths, and distinction between subjects such as Religious Education and history.* In the Focus Groups there were several examples of confusion arising from teaching about different faiths' beliefs, making a case for delineation between faiths and practices when teaching the subject.

*Clarification that death does not happen just to older and old people.* In this time of Covid with extensive media coverage one would expect that children would appreciate that young people can die as well as older people, but this was not seen to be the case. This might be a further example of the way adults insulate and protect children from the realities of death:

Macey: Death is like when you get older. It's not like when you are young, it's when your body doesn't function well, like normally.

Of particular significance for study 4 would be the challenge of educating parents to provide meaningful and supportive guidance and advice to children about death and the afterlife as a continuation of what is taught in school. Consideration could also be given to parental guidance on moderation of watching and playing videos, games, and TV; children's exposure to parents visiting mediums; and the language used in front of children.

## 7.7 Conclusion

The findings of the four studies describe the contribution that the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife makes to a person having the means to call on faith when coping with loss. The studies examined the process of delivery of Religious Education from Church leaders, through Policymakers, and finally by Educators, concluding with an exploration of children's knowledge and understanding of death and the afterlife. The main findings were that without adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife the link between it and having faith to call on after a loss - the Golden Thread - is broken. Challenges exist that cause fractures throughout the entire process of teaching about death and the afterlife, while pastoral bereavement counsellors face particular challenges in providing effective support for the effects of ABC.

Study 1 identified obstacles that limit or prevent the successful utilisation of faith, summarised as educational; a gap between the expectation of beliefs being a support and the reality; and societal and secular pressures. While the first two arise directly from the inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, the third represents a lack of depth of faith to counter such pressures.

The detailed examination of challenges in Studies 2-4 confirmed their contribution to the inability to utilise faith to cope with loss. Identification of the reasons for inadequate teaching being a cause of ABC was achieved by looking for fractures between the stages of church guidance and direction, educational and theological policy, and teaching. Collectively, the findings of the four studies lead to the assertion that inadequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife is a cause of Afterlife Belief Conflict.

From the four studies' findings, the thesis' question can be answered as to what children today know and understand about death and the afterlife – not enough to support them when they experience loss in their lives. The next chapter will draw conclusions from the Data Presentation and Analysis, and propose areas for consideration by those with the will and means to address the challenges identified to adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife – Church leaders, Policymakers and Educators. The chapter will also consider opportunities for future research in areas identified in this thesis.

**8.1 Concluding remarks**

To challenge the thesis' hypothesis 'We do not teach our children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss' the research undertook four studies, employing a range of methodologies and strategies that were a 'good fit' for the studies' demands. The research findings show that despite identifying an ideal of a Golden Thread linking the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife to the ability to call on faith to cope with loss, the current method of teaching about death and the afterlife fails to achieve and sustain it.

Further, it is shown that the focus in bereavement support on the effects of spiritual struggle has been to the detriment of research on its causes. Starting with the role of faith in coping with loss for twelve bereaved young people in study 1, the research was expanded in studies 2-4 to encompass the entire process of delivery of religious education, identifying the causes, effects and mediators of challenges to that delivery. In doing so, it joins a growing body of research on the relationship between religious education, afterlife beliefs, coping with loss, and the implications for wider society.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no study has previously been conducted in this manner, linking the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in early education to the ability to call on one's faith to cope with loss. There has been no identified examining of the interaction between co-existing challenges such as religious education and secularism, which rarely occur in isolation but are typically researched on an individual basis, nor of exploring the dilution of the eschatological 'message' over the cycle of delivery of Religious Education. Finally, there is no identified examination of the absence of religion/spirituality in counselling allied to these other findings.

On this basis the research makes an original contribution to the practical, theoretical, methodological and empirical knowledge of the fields of study: the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in Religious Education, and pastoral bereavement counselling. It adds to existing theory on the 'shifting paradigm' of teaching Religious Education, in particular the development of policy and practice of death and afterlife education to meet the needs of children, school communities, and the Church. It also contributes to the methodological knowledge on the use of Focus Groups in developing interactions with young children to determine their knowledge and understanding and understanding of death and the afterlife.

The current literature on individual challenges is extensive and thorough (e.g. Hemming, 2017). However, the literature does not consider the interaction and conflict between multiple challenges, for example, considering the introduction of more content in Religious Education, while dealing with the challenge of a curriculum that is already under pressure, or the inability or unwillingness of teachers to deliver it. Looked at in the whole, as this research does, a new perspective is achieved, with interactions and conflicts seen alongside each other so that they can be considered in terms of priority and achievability.

The next section considers the limitations within which the research was conducted, and the opportunities presented for future research.

## **8.2 Limitations to the research**

Notwithstanding the practical limitations brought by Covid, the fields of study - delivery of Religious Education, afterlife beliefs, and pastoral bereavement counselling - are large and complex, and much is outside the scope of this research. With respect to this research, Covid has led to a focus on Roman Catholic religious education.

The research participants were to a degree self-selecting and as a result may be those for whom religion or spirituality was particularly relevant; accordingly, it is not claimed that the studies are representative of the general population. The qualitative research methodologies chosen use small sample sizes, making no claim to generalisability. However, given the similarity in outcome of this research to others undertaken in the areas of 'Challenges' it is reasonable to generalise the results beyond this research and assume the picture is not dissimilar in other primary education and bereavement support settings.

The research samples in two studies were larger than in comparable research projects. Study 1 with bereaved young people was originally planned to have six participants. Given that it was the benchmark against which the remaining studies would be assessed an additional group was recruited. While six participants is the optimum, having twelve participants provided a richer level of detail. In similar vein, the number of Focus Groups undertaken in Study 4 was greater than the optimum suggested by the methodology's authors (IPA, Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) but within suggested limits. Reflecting the enthusiasm of children to participate, no child fitting the selection criteria who asked to take part was excluded. As the second school's participation was prematurely ended due to Covid only one Focus Group was conducted in the school, resulting in limited opportunity for cross-school comparison.

The gender-mix of participants in Studies 1 and 3 was marginally biased towards females. For Study 1 this may be due to males being less likely to be willing to participate in a study requiring the sharing of intense emotional experience; Study 3 reflects the make-up of staff in most primary schools.

While the focus was on confirmation of the Golden Thread, ideally the research would have also considered using bereaved young people who did *not* have faith to call on when bereaved for comparison to those who did, namely the participants in this research, which would have served to confirm and reinforce the evidence for the Golden Thread. Initially outside the scope of the research because of the scale of the exercise this was re-considered when the decision was made to recruit a second cohort. When prospective participants were approached they declined for the same reasons that some schools had withdrawn, namely the prevailing sensitivity around Covid. Further attempts to recruit such a cohort was stopped, being seen as inappropriate at the time.

### **8.3 Future research opportunities**

#### **8.3.1 The call for more research**

Following on from consideration of recruitment of bereaved young people who did *not* have faith to call on when bereaved, the opportunity is presented for this to form part of future research, for comparison with the findings of this research.

Acknowledging that the focus of the research was narrowed by Covid to include Catholic faith schools only, opportunities are provided for future research on other faith schools, Community schools, comparative analysis between the schools of different faiths and between faith- and Community schools, and secondary and further education establishments. The need for more research in this area has been argued extensively by leading researchers. In 2012 Kelley and Chan (pp.222-3) said “Further exploration of the rich territory of attachment to God may contribute greatly to our understanding of adjustment to difficult life events”. This resonates strongly with the aims of this research, and reinforces the argument for adequate education to mediate discrepant beliefs.

Other leading researchers in the field echoed the call. Burke, Neimeyer, Young et al (2014, p.278) called for a scale or measure “specifically designed to capture the range of experiences of spiritually-inclined bereaved individuals whose faith has been compromised by loss”. Ano and Pargament proposed that

Because spiritual struggles are complex phenomena future research should examine each type of spiritual struggle more precisely with more comprehensive measures.

(2013, p.431)

The benefits that could arise were described by Aldwyn, Park, Yeong and Nath (2014, p.18), who claimed that “the field is ripe for well-designed interventions that capitalise on individuals’ existing religious and spiritual characteristics”:

Refined measurements will allow researchers to examine questions regarding how very specific aspects of religiousness and spirituality such as specific theological beliefs relate to health outcomes.

Chapple, Swift and Ziebland similarly suggested

Additional research might shed further light on why “faith survives and sometimes thrives in an age of science” and how it continues to play a part in personal meaning-making in a secular age.

(2011, p.15)

### **8.3.2 Research on causes**

What is clear is that while the case for more research on the effects of loss is strongly argued, the call for more research on its causes remains largely unaddressed. Notable exceptions include Exline, Park, Smyth, Carey (2011, p.145) who pointed out the “limitations on research [including] non-analysis of predictors of anger towards God e.g. religious upbringing”. Park and Edmondson (2011, p.13) highlighted that “surprisingly little research has explicitly focused on how people evaluate the discrepancies between the global meaning and their appraisals of potentially traumatic events”, while Burke and Neimeyer (2014, p.1090) said

In the very few studies that have examined religious coping, most have focused exclusively on the benefits of spirituality in the wake of loss. Understanding how the condition of being bereaved might affect one’s spirituality is grossly under-explored.

Park and Halifax (2011, p.358) described how most studies on religion and spirituality’s contribution to adjusting to bereavement showed positive effects. However, they reported a lack of substantive evidence because of weaknesses in design and methodological flaws in the research examined, noting the difficulties and complexities encountered. They called for better research designs to more definitively address this critical question, which this research responds to through the careful construction of research studies covering the entire cycle of the delivery Religious Education, using appropriate methodologies for each study.

In 2008 Hays and Hendrix (p.332) reported a scarcity of empirical studies focusing specifically on how religious beliefs and behaviours mitigate the effects of human grieving. Little has changed, with the main proponents of research on loss continuing their focus on effects, and not causes. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, the authors referenced have not explored the causes of ABC further.

## **8.4 Potential areas of research**

It is not disputed that strategies for dealing with the effects of loss need to be identified and developed, but this ignores the principle that 'prevention is better than cure'. In the absence of preventative strategies, people will continue to be unable to call on their faith to cope with any consequent spiritual struggle: 'if you change nothing, nothing changes' (Joyce Brothers). Opportunities are presented for the utilisation of this research's findings as a foundation for future research in the fields of study. Of most significance would be consideration of a changed approach to teaching about death and the afterlife, encompassing its delivery, content and supporting materials, as well as addressing the primary challenges identified.

Other areas for consideration include the eschatological education taught in non-Catholic faith primary schools, and that taught to the leading non-Christian faiths. This would provide the opportunity for a 'compare and contrast' study on children's acquisition of faith. Reflecting their different beliefs and practices, exploration would contribute to a greater understanding of the effects of pluralism, parenting, and community in children's acquisition of faith. Secular and humanist education is an area of potential research - acknowledging their increasing influence in the education system, their impact on the delivery of Catholic religious education would clarify the effect they have on teaching about death and the afterlife and acquisition of faith.

Alternative perspectives are worthy of consideration, including secondary and further education. This research has identified a dissipation in interest and commitment when children move from primary to secondary school and research into the retention of faith to call on in the event of a loss would add greatly to this foundational research. Longitudinal studies may also provide valuable information: this research examines the situation at a point in time, and not even a typical point in time given Covid's impact on education and society. Re-visiting the subject over a longer period to determine how original participants' views and experiences had evolved would qualify the findings and conclusions of this research.

### **8.4.1 Research on teaching death and the afterlife**

Before teaching children about the afterlife they have to be taught about death. Partly in response to children's increasing exposure to bereavement and lack of teacher training on their support, there has been a growing body of research into the impact of bereavement on young children, and how their needs might be met. Munroe and Kraus (2008) in McManus and Paul (2019, pp. 72-3) confirmed a growth in specialist service provision. While



significant in raising awareness, and with increasing support being made available for bereaved children, it is mostly reactive and not proactive – cure not prevention. McManus and Paul (ibid, p.73) explained

While around 70%-80% of schools have a bereaved child in their school at any one time [Shipman, Kraus and Munroe, 2001] “school staff do not systematically receive training related to childhood bereavement, and when training is accessed, this is usually after a bereavement has happened in response to a specific situation”.

(Paul, 2015)

Potts (2013), examining teachers’ confidence in supporting bereaved children, found a lack of specific bereavement support training within teacher education. Lowton and Higginson (2003, p.736) in Potts (p.95) concluded that “supporting bereaved children in schools is still an issue for the majority of school staff”. McManus and Paul (2019, p.73) reported that “research suggests that school staff feel that they lack the necessary expertise to engage with children around bereavement experiences” (Holland, 2003; Lowton and Higginson, 2003). Further research is needed in this area to contribute to improvement of the situation of death education. To reinforce the need for such research, the following statistic is reported again:

**1 in 29 5-16 year olds has been bereaved of a parent or sibling, around 3.5%, equivalent to one child/class.**

Children can be particularly vulnerable following the loss of someone close to them. With children of primary school age spending a large part of their day with individual teachers, “school may be viewed as a secure, second family” (Holland, 1993). Dr. Andrew Reeves, chairperson of BACP, said in 2017 “schools offer an effective access point to mental health support for bereavement”. While provision of general counselling support is increasingly available in schools, few counsellors are bereavement-trained, suggesting that the school itself remains the main means of bereavement support.

As an alternative, this research suggests that a whole-school approach to supporting bereaved children with training and support of staff would better meet bereaved children’s needs. This would justify further research into the establishment of conditions to enable a normalising and affirming environment that assists pupils as well as school staff. As Lowton and Higgins (2002, pp.731-733) explained, when support operates in this way, emotional support arises from actions such as personal acknowledgement of emotions. Doka (1989, p.10) used the term “disenfranchised grief” to describe loss that cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. Rowling (2008, p.244), supporting the ‘normalising’ of death, suggested that grief should be seen as a normal life event that can be managed by school communities with outside support, and not pathologized and seen as only the domain of outside experts.

#### **8.4.2 Research on pastoral bereavement counselling**

Research participants for whom religion and spirituality was important found the exclusion of their beliefs upsetting and detrimental to the therapeutic process. Research suggests that the most influential factor involved in helpful or unhelpful discourse and exploration of religious and spiritual issues in therapy is “the therapists’ ability or willingness to be open to the clients’ religious or spiritual frame of reference” (Jenkins, 2006). Clients “need to be listened to carefully, and what their beliefs mean for them to be ‘tenderly explored’” (West 2004).

Ideally, therapists would respond to clients’ expressions of religious and spiritual beliefs or practices in an open and empathic manner as to the meaning of these for the client. More research is suggested in the areas of clients’ experience of the exclusion or inclusion of religion and spirituality in counselling; and clients’ experience of therapist self-disclosure of religious and spiritual beliefs.

Further research is encouraged on the causes and not effects of Afterlife Belief Conflict. Looking at the reason why things happen, and not just their consequences, can contribute to improving the practice of bereavement counselling. Despite the majority of therapists agreeing that religion and spirituality are important areas of functioning and claiming to be willing to speak about these issues with their clients (Jenkins, 2006), there remains a silence that clients may interpret as a barrier or judgement, echoing the “wall of silence” found with teachers (Potts, 2013). Research that focuses on the processes involved when discussing religion and spirituality with bereavement counsellors would be beneficial. The sample in Study 1 evidenced deficiencies in pastoral bereavement counselling: as the sample size was small, research which replicates this study with larger samples would be useful in understanding how prevalent this challenge is in the general population of bereaved young people.

#### **8.5 Conclusion**

This research breaks new ground in the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, making a contribution to knowledge that can be used for the development of more sophisticated and meaningful responses from Church leaders, Policymakers, and education professionals. The knowledge gained can also inform pastoral bereavement counsellors about the cause and effect of ABC, to assist in diagnosis and support.

The research makes two novel contributions to knowledge:

*It evidences that causes of spiritual struggle are not researched to any significant degree beyond identifying the need to do so.* Almost the entire corpus of literature addresses the effects of loss, including ABC, regardless of the fact that the study of 'Cause and Effect' is a proven methodology. It also fails to consider 'Prevention not Cure' as a viable and valuable approach, despite it being a proven technique in tackling problems in other areas of mental health in young people.

This does mean to suggest that the effects of loss do not need attention given the potentially damaging consequences, but a place exists in the field of bereavement studies for looking beyond 'what is in front of you' to 'what is behind this'. Once a cause is identified, addressing its remedy or mediation can be given attention, as in this research by identifying the need for adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife and the informing of bereavement counsellors.

*It confirms the challenges identified as being contributors to inadequate teaching.* It is not the intention of this research to discover new challenges. Rather, it is to identify those challenges that impact on the adequate teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife and pastoral bereavement counselling, to define their characteristics, and to consider any potential remedy or mediation that can mitigate their effects.

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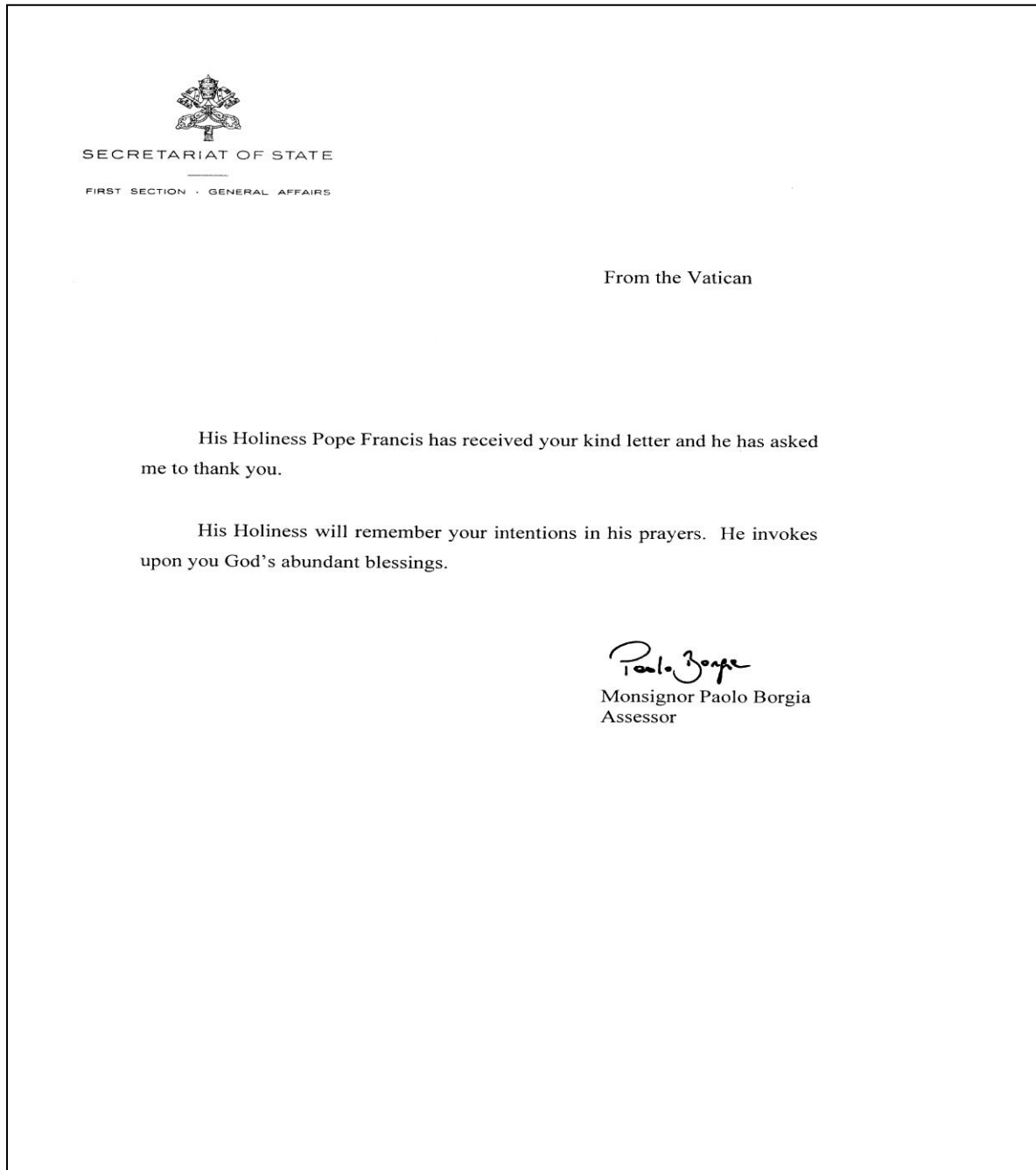
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## Appendices

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## Appendix 1      Blessing from Pope Francis

At the start of the PhD, prayers were asked for the endeavour from Pope Francis. The following letter was received.



## Appendix 2      Glossary of Meanings and Abbreviations

### Religion, religious, religiousness

Swinton's definition of religion resonates with many of the objectives of religious education and pastoral counselling and psychotherapy as described in this research:

Organised religion ... engenders its own narratives, symbols, and doctrines that are used by adherents to interpret and explain their experiences of the world. It provides a specific framework within which people seek to understand, interpret, and make sense of themselves, their lives, and daily experiences.

(2001, p.28)

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006, p.105) described the term 'religious' as "a component of the world-view that includes beliefs about some form of god or gods, and perhaps other supernatural elements, beliefs that, at least in part, address issues of life's purpose, how life should be lived, and what happens after biological death".

Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005, p.36) proposed a general working definition of 'religiousness' as "a search for significance in ways related to the sacred". This definition suggested the close link between religiousness and meaning, and is the definition used in this thesis.

### Spirituality

There are a variety of definitions of spirituality, reflecting its complexity and ambiguity. Context can be all. Given that this research involves two Catholic faith primary schools located in Wales, the Welsh Government's definition in the new Curriculum for Wales 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021), is helpful:

Spirituality is concerned with the human spirit and that which is beyond the ordinary. It can create meaning and purpose in life. Spirituality can, but does not necessarily, involve religion.

Spiritual development can result in a growth of awareness of self in relation to others, the world and, for some people, to a higher power or ultimate reality.

More general definitions are typically used in literature on education, sociology and counselling. Johnson and Castelli (2000, p.77) cited Hay's definition as "broad and yet substantial enough to have real meaning":

Spirituality is what goes on when a person becomes directly and sensitively aware of themselves as inextricably part of the continuum of reality. This raised awareness is of course never "raw", that is, detached from culture.

(1997, p.12)

Koenig, McCulloch, and Larson (2001) meanwhile defined spirituality as "the personal search for answers regarding life, meaning and relationship, and in association with the sacred or transcendent". Similar to religion, spiritual beliefs and experiences tend to serve as guides about how to live and the possibilities of what may, or may not, happen after death.

### Eschatology

Eschatology is the study or teaching about such events as the *parousia* (the coming of the Lord), the resurrection of the dead, the final judgement, heaven and hell (Still, 1999, p.195).

Phan (Phan, 2014) extended the definition to describe eschatology as "that part of theology concerned with death, judgement, and the final destiny of the soul and humankind – the afterlife". Eschatology is commonly referred to as 'the end of the world', 'end times', and 'the Last Things'.

### Theology, theological

Theology addresses the unique content of analysing the supernatural, but also deals with religious epistemology: it asks and seeks to answer the question of revelation.

The adjective 'theological', when applied to faith, hope, and charity, is used to point to the contrast to what is within the natural scope of human action. In line with Aquinas' description (Glenn, 2011) "theological hope is for *the good* – in fact, the supreme good of God".

### **Theodicy**

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, theodicy essentially takes the form of explaining how a righteous and all-merciful God can allow death, grief, pain, and tragedy to occur. Theodicy, vindication of God, is typically used to answer the question of why a 'good God' permits the manifestation of evil, thus resolving the issue of the problem of evil.

Some theodicies address the evidential problem of evil by attempting to make the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good or omnibenevolent God consistent with the existence of evil or suffering in the world. Unlike a defence, which tries to demonstrate that God's existence is logically possible in the light of evil, a theodicy attempts to provide a framework wherein God's existence is also plausible.

In the context of the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in order to help people cope with loss, Wilt, Exline, Lindberg et al (2016) explained:

The motivation to understand suffering might be greatest when suffering hits home, when one is personally affected by loss, trauma, or other forms of debilitating psychological or personal pain.

To explain the existence of suffering, monotheists believing in a benevolent and all-powerful God may turn to beliefs that reconcile suffering with the belief in a good and loving creator. Others explain suffering by endorsing an image of a God who is not completely benevolent or all-powerful.

### **Catholicism, Roman Catholic**

The word 'catholic' means 'universal'. The term 'Roman Catholic' (the Catholicism referred to in this research) came into use in Britain after the Reformation, used to describe those followers of Christ who worshipped God under the leadership of the Pope in Rome. Catholics trace their beliefs, practices and organisation back to the original apostolic church founded by Jesus.

Pitre, Barber and Kinkaid (2019, p.8) said,

What exactly do we mean by "Catholic"? After all, Catholicism is a rather large tent. Inside it one finds Jesuits and Carmelites, Dominicans and Franciscans, and a myriad of other distinctive spiritualities and schools of theological thought. Nevertheless, while there is variation, there remains a certain unity and continuity.

### **Vatican II**

The Second Vatican Council (colloquially known as Vatican II) addressed relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world. It was the twenty-first ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, formally opened under the pontificate of Pope John XXIII on 11 October 1962 and closed under Pope Paul VI in 1965. The Council became known for its renewal of Catholic doctrine in a modern timeline and perspective, integrating modern human experience with church principles based on Jesus Christ.

Pope Paul's opening address to the second period of the Council stressed the pastoral nature of the council, and set out four purposes for it including starting a dialogue with the contemporary world. It is this purpose that is of most relevance to this research.



## **Creed**

Reference in this thesis to the Creed is to the Catholic Nicene Creed which clarifies the key tenets of the Christian faith. Created in 325 it explicitly affirmed the co-essential divinity of the Son. It was amended in 381 to speak of the Holy Spirit as worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son, describing in much greater detail the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed is a Christian statement of belief widely used in liturgy. It is the defining creed of mainstream Christianity, used in preference to the Apostles' Creed which does not explicitly affirm the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Church belief is encapsulated in the Nicene Creed.

## **Resurrection**

"The Resurrection, without further qualification, refers to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ" (Williams, 1973, p.10). In the Christian tradition, Jesus' bodily resurrection was the restoration to life of a transformed body powered by spirit, as described by Paul and the Gospel authors (1 Cor. 15:44; 1 Phil. 3:11) that led to the establishment of Christianity.

For Christians, Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee that all the Christian dead will be resurrected at Christ's *parousia* (second coming). In Christian theology, the death and resurrection of Jesus are the most important events, the foundation of the Christian faith, as commemorated by Easter.

## **Catechism of the Catholic Church**

A 'catechism' is a summary of principles, often in question-and-answer format. Documents of religious instruction have been written since the beginning of Christianity and the catechism is typically an assemblage of these smaller documents into one large compilation of Church doctrine and teachings. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a source of expositions of Catholic doctrine. It explains Roman Catholic theology, comprising the teachings of the Catholic Church which bases its conclusions on Scripture, Divine Revelation, and Sacred Tradition.

## **Faith**

Faith is the wholehearted response to the love of Christ, believing in him and entrusting one's life to him. Through faith and baptism sins are forgiven and one is reborn as God's 'adopted children', sharing in God's own life. Faith is seen as a gift given by the Holy Spirit, something that must be freely chosen by accepting Jesus as Saviour and believing in his teaching.

The Catholic Church's faith and moral teaching is promulgated through the 'Catechism of the Catholic Church' (Catholic Truth Society, 2013, p.3). To quote Williams (1973, p.10) "As our main theme is the Christian faith, it is to this 'religion' I refer whenever I write 'the Faith'".

## **Christian hope**

Pope Francis, during his weekly general audience 1<sup>st</sup> February 2017 said that Christian hope isn't about believing in something that may or may not come true.

Christian hope is ... knowing Christ died and is truly risen so that all of humanity may gain salvation and live together with God.

St. Paul, he said, wrote words of encouragement, telling Christians to arm themselves against the onslaught of doubt and difficulties: "Christian hope ... is belief in a sure reality because it is rooted in the real event of Christ's resurrection and his promise of eternal life with him".

Marcel (1956) said that "hope seems to be a universal phenomenon, an expression of a spiritual need", which he describes as 'being for the soul what breathing is for the living organism'. While describing hope as sitting between faith and love, Marcel also suggested that "hope is nothing but the active struggle against despair", a definition appropriate for this thesis' hypothesis that 'we do not teach our children adequately about death and the afterlife to help them cope with loss'.

## All Souls Day

All Souls' Day, also known as the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed and the Day of the Dead, is a day of prayer and remembrance for the souls of those who have died. It is observed by Latin Catholics and other Christian denominations annually on November 2<sup>nd</sup>

## Pluralism

As used in this thesis 'pluralism' refers to 'cultural pluralism'. In a pluralist culture, groups not only co-exist side by side but also consider qualities of other groups as traits worth having in the dominant culture. Pluralistic societies place strong expectations of integration on members, rather than expectations of assimilation. The existence of such institutions and practices is possible if the cultural communities are accepted by the larger society in a pluralist culture and sometimes require the protection of the law. Often, the acceptance of a culture may require that the new or minority culture remove some aspects of their culture which is incompatible with the laws or values of the dominant culture

## Atheism

**Atheism** in the broadest sense is an absence of belief in the existence of deities. Less broadly, atheism is a rejection of the belief that any deities exist. Atheism is contrasted with theism, which in its most general form is the belief that at least one deity exists. For this thesis the main positions as outlined by Kenny (2003, p.2) on the question of the existence of God are used:

- **Atheism** is the belief that God does not exist.
- **Theism** is the belief that God exists.
- **Agnosticism** is not believing that God exists and nor believing that God does not exist.

The Catholic Church's position on atheism and secularism is set out in 'Gaudium et Spes - Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World' (Second Vatican Council 1965), Part One 19:22. It is against this document that all analysis and review of atheism is performed, and is foundational for many of the Challenges identified.

## Humanism

Humanists UK offer the following definition of humanism:

A commitment to the perspective, interests and centrality of human persons; a belief in reason and autonomy as foundational aspects of human existence; a belief that reason, scepticism and the scientific method are the only appropriate instruments for discovering truth and structuring the human community.

(Concise Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy)

Generally, humanism views humanity as responsible for the promotion and development of individuals, espouses the equal and inherent dignity of all human beings, and emphasises a concern for humans in relation to the world. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, humanist movements are typically non-religious movements aligned with secularism, and today humanism may refer to a nontheistic life stance centred on human agency and looking to science and reason rather than revelation from a supernatural source to understand the world.

## Secularism

Secularism is the principle of seeking to conduct human affairs based on secular, naturalistic considerations. It is most commonly defined as the separation of religion from civic affairs and the state, and may be broadened to a similar position concerning the need to remove or minimize the role of religion in any public sphere. The term has a broad range of meanings, and

may connote anticlericalism, atheism, naturalism, or removal of religious symbols from public institutions.

As a philosophy, secularism seeks to interpret life based on principles derived solely from the material world, without recourse to religion. It shifts the focus from religion towards 'temporal' and material concerns.

### **Grief and bereavement**

Grief refers to the deep or violent sorrow following significant losses, the experience of mourning. This sorrow is the psychological weight experienced by the loss of a loved one, or the loss of a relationship (Park and Halifax, 2011), a multifaceted response to loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something that has died, to which a bond or affection was formed. Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to loss, it also has physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions. While the terms are often used interchangeably, bereavement refers to the state of loss, and grief is the reaction to loss.

It is a profound and often complex response for those who have been left behind by the dying. Survivors are often broken by the knowledge that they cannot bring back that which has been lost. The sense of irrevocability leaves them often helpless, sad, and sometimes cognitively impaired (Park, Halifax, 2011).

### **Trauma**

Typically, an event is defined as 'trauma(tic)' when the individual's coping resources and meaning systems are overwhelmed (Joseph and Linley, 2005). The trauma survivor is tasked with re-creating a failing global meaning system. Pargament, Desai and McConnell (2006, p.127) suggest that the three determinants of the effects of trauma are a) event severity, b) initial stressfulness, and c) chronicity of the trauma. Traumatic loss brings additional effects of loss, which add to the grieving.

### **Coping**

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as "the ongoing transactional process between the person and his or her environment, a process impacted by both cognitive appraisal and coping behaviour". The individual assesses the person-environment relationship and appraises the relevance of the experience and the perceived threat, loss, or benefit of the situation.

Coping behaviours are selected by the individual in an attempt to manage, alter, or master the situation, regulate emotional response, or a combination of these (Bjorck, 1997). Wortmann and Park (2008, p.717) described the distinct concept of religious coping:

Religious coping is a dimension of religion/spirituality that refers to the use of religious/spiritual activities and beliefs to deal with stressful events. Increased frequency of prayer or attendance in response to an event can be considered an indicator of religious coping activity (Abeles et al, 1999) [as can] the use of supportive or favourable beliefs and activities to cope (Pargament, Koenig and Perez, 2000).

### **DSM-V - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders**

DSM is a comprehensive classification of officially recognized psychiatric disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association for use by mental health professionals to ensure uniformity of diagnosis. DSM describes symptoms and does not discuss the causes of the disorders. DSM-V is the latest edition (American Psychological Association, 2013).

### **PGD– Prolonged Grief Disorder**

PGD (Prigerson et al, 2009) is a syndrome consisting of a distinct set of symptoms following the death of a loved one that are so prolonged and intense that they exceed the expectably wide range of

individual and cultural variability. DSM-V has introduced it as a provisional category to identify a condition that will be subject to future evaluation with a view to including it in future revisions.

### **NRC – Negative Religious Coping**

NRC is composed of “spiritual discontent, punishing God reappraisals, interpersonal religious discontent, demonic reappraisals (attributing the event to the work of the devil), and reappraisals of God’s power” (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez, 1998, p.710).

NRC describes a maladaptive response to loss, spiritual or otherwise. Harris, Erbes et al (2008, p.19) reported on a meta-analysis of forty-nine studies on religious coping, concluding that in general “negative religious coping is associated with poorer adjustment to stress” (Ano and Vasconcelles, 2005), while Exline and Rose (2013) found in their research that negative aspects of religious involvement included religious doubts or perceived failures of faith, guilt associated with failures of virtue, and difficulty resolving conflict with God. Lee, Roberts, and Gibbons (2012) described psychological effects such as impacted emotion processes and patterns, with prolonged recovery, heightened reactivity, pre-disposition to psychopathology, anxiety, depression, and hostility, while Bjorck and Thurman (2007) described its effects as decreased psychological functioning and interactive effects on depression.

### **PRC – Positive Religious Coping**

PRC is part of a larger shift towards positive psychology and a recognition that life’s crises can facilitate positive changes as well as negative changes. Wortmann and Park (2009) argued that searching for meaning in loss, ‘Meaning-making’, may be a healthy response in the long-term, while McIntosh (1995) found that long-term wellbeing was indirectly associated with the importance attached to religion, despite increased distress in the short-term.

### **CG – Complicated Grief**

Losing a loved one to violent death has been associated with poor mental health outcomes, including posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and complicated grief. Burke and Neimeyer (2014, p.259) and Shear, Simon, Wall et al (2011) described CG as a “protracted, debilitating, and sometimes life-threatening reaction to loss”.

### **CSG – Complicated Spiritual Grief**

Traumatic loss can violate mourners’ basic assumptive worldviews, and can precipitate a spiritual crisis following loss, also known as complicated spiritual grief – CSG (Burke and Neimeyer, 2014, p.266). Shear, Dennard, Crawford et al, (2006) described it as “a sense of discord, conflict, and distance from God, and at times from members of the survivor’s community”. (Burke, Neimeyer et al, 2014) described CSG as

An association between complicated grief - a severe, prolonged response to the loss of a loved one - and complicated spiritual grief – through a spiritual [struggle or] crisis following loss [It is] an overarching narrative of resentment and doubt toward God, dissatisfaction with the spiritual support received, and substantial changes in the bereaved person's spiritual beliefs and behaviours.

### **AB – Afterlife Belief**

The afterlife (also referred to as life after death or the Hereafter) is the concept of a realm, or the realm itself (whether physical or transcendental), in which an essential part of an individual's identity or consciousness continues to exist after the death of the body in the individual's lifetime. For the purposes of this research the Catholic interpretation will be used, that the essential aspect of the individual that lives on after death is the entire soul or spirit of an individual, which carries with it and confers personal identity.

Belief in an afterlife is a part of many peoples’ basic belief or ‘meaning-making’ system, just as they hold other beliefs such as a belief in God. It is strongly connected to religious comfort: “The

expectation of literal immortality is a significant aspect of the comfort that religious worldviews provide” (Edmondson, Park et al, 2008, p.757). These worldviews can become sources of uncertainty, threat or distress if they become dysfunctional. As Stroebe explained:

As a belief system religion may offer potential condolence, for example in the knowledge that there will be a reunion with the deceased in Heaven. It is equally plausible that some aspects could work negatively, for example if AB was associated with very strong dependency and pining for the deceased person.

(2004, p.26)

### **Piaget’s theory of education**

A ‘mature’ view of death is seen to reflect an understanding of the universality, irreversibility, non-functionality and causality of death (Smith and Hunter 2008). Most discussion in relation to how children master these areas of knowledge is informed by developmental approaches and a vast amount of research and literature exists in this area. Piaget’s theory of cognitive development (1929) and Nagy’s (1948) research on children’s development of death-related concepts were key in developing the theoretical basis for conceptualising how children understand death. Piaget theorised that development occurs in four progressive stages in which thinking progresses from ‘concrete’, egocentric thinking that is strongly tied to physical experiences, towards ‘formal’, abstract reasoning that involves mental rather than physical manipulation of concepts and ideas. Each stage represents a fundamental, qualitative difference in ways of perceiving the world, processing and responding to information, and developing concepts.

The age norms at which Piaget’s stages were achieved were approximations, although Piaget believed that all humans undergo these stages, in this order, as they develop cognition and intelligence. Most literature and research on children’s educational development identify that between the ages of five and eight children will have developed a concrete understanding of death and dying (for example, Silverman 2000). Such research suggests that the age and stage of a child is an important factor in understanding death.

### **Estyn**

Estyn is the inspection body for educational establishments in Wales, the ‘education and training inspectorate for Wales’. Equivalent to the Ofsted inspection and training body, to quote their website (14/7/21)

- “We inspect education and training in Wales.
- Our vision is to improve the quality of education and training and outcomes for all learners in Wales.
- Our mission is to support education and training providers to develop a self-improving and learning culture through our advice, inspection and capacity building”.

### **CAREC**

CAREC is an acronym for the Cardiff Archdiocese Religious Education Certificate, a 2-day voluntary course for teachers new to teaching in a Catholic Faith school. It covers the history of Catholic education, spirituality and ethos, and coverage of the primary-level Religious Education curriculum.

**Covid-19**

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), or Covid as it is referred to in this thesis, is a contagious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The first known case was identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The disease has since spread worldwide, leading to an ongoing pandemic. In the context of this thesis, it appeared at the start of the interviewing stage of the research and led to disruption of the entire research process.

## Meanings

- The researcher's professional bodies are:
  - **BACP** - *British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy*
  - **BIAPT** - *British and Irish Association for Practical Theology*
- The term '**RE**' when used is shorthand for religious education.
- The terms **counsellor** and **psychotherapist** are interchangeable depending on context.
- The term **pastoral counselling** describes the practice of religious and spiritual counselling and psychotherapy.
- The term '**Church**' in this study refers to Western Christian Churches generally, and to the Roman Catholic Church in particular, depending on the context.
- The terms '**religion**' and '**spirituality**' although not synonymous, are used interchangeably in this study for sake of simplicity in reporting research, unless referred to in context.
- **Ministers/Ministry** (capital letters) relates to the clergy; **ministers/ministry** relates to lay persons offering pastoral care.
- The term '**(this) study**' refers to a section of the thesis relating to a research question.
- The term '**(this) research**' refers to the entire work unless stated otherwise stated.
- The term '**this thesis** research' refers to the entire work.
- The terms '**researcher**' and '**author**' refer to the author, Michael Coombes.
- The term '**child**' or '**children**' is used to distinguish those participants in the primary school year groups 5 and 6, aged 9-11. This is done for ease of reading and because it is the term most commonly used in their schools.
- '**Y(ear) 5**' refers to the UK primary school age band 9-10 in Key Stage 1 (KS1)
- '**Y(ear) 6**' refers to the UK primary school age band 10-11 in Key Stage 1 (KS1)
- The term '**adolescent**' is used to denote the age of transition from puberty to legal adulthood, or age of majority. The term is generally used in the research to distinguish those who have left primary school and are in secondary/further education, **adolescence** being a general description for those who have left primary school. Adolescence refers to the process or condition of growing up and that designates a **youth** or **person** in the growing age (Simpson and Weiner, 1989).
- The term '**Young people**' as used in this research denotes an age from 18 to 25. While this marginally overlaps with the age range of adolescence, it is not a formal definition but is used to categorise the participants in the first research study. Loosely, it describes post-secondary-level education.
- When referring to people who have been given bereavement counselling the term '**client**' is used.
- People who took part in the research are termed '**participants**', a generic term further defined by their role within each study e.g. Director of Religious Education or Headteacher.
- '**Challenges**' as used in this thesis refer to obstacles limiting the effective teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in religious education.

## **Appendix 3 Author publications, conferences, counselling support**

### **Appendix 3a BACP Publications**

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**BACP 'CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES' 1<sup>st</sup> December 2021**

#### **Coping with loss**

COVID-19 emerged while I was conducting research on religious education's contribution to children's ability to cope with loss, just when I was about to start interviewing children. The impact of the pandemic on children will now be included in my research, given that they are confronted with and have to cope with it daily. Facing death has become a very real concern, with significant mental health issues already being experienced including depression, anxiety, stress, and suicidal ideation. The impact on life-satisfaction, happiness, and self-esteem is clear.

This article takes two perspectives:

- Comparison with another world-changing event: the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 known as 9/11
- What can we do *now* to help children?

#### **Lessons from history**

Sadly, there have been many disasters we could look to in recent history. Aberfan in October 1966, was one of the first globally-reported major events of its kind, in which 144 people died, mostly children, following the catastrophic collapse of a colliery coal tip; and the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, which had a major impact across the world because of the scale of the disaster in which 228,000 people died. I chose 9/11 because death was witnessed in real-time, and there is a considerable body of post-event research and as such evidenced major physical and mental outcomes. The evidence gives an insight into effects over time and shines a light on issues we might face if reproduced post-COVID-19, pointing to the role of counsellors and psychotherapists in addressing these issues. While reading this, please reflect on what is currently happening with COVID-19.

#### **Statistics on 9/11**

17% of children knew someone bereaved<sup>1</sup>

41% of children saw a parent crying, and 32% had parents who witnessed the disaster.<sup>2</sup>

35% of children had one or more stress symptoms, while 47% were worried about their own safety or the safety of loved ones.<sup>3</sup>

The most common symptoms observed in young children were posttraumatic play, reexperiencing (including disaster-related dreams), and hyperarousal (including sleeping difficulty and irritability) (*ibid.*)



A high proportion of school children had a probable mental disorder 6 months later, suggesting that the pervasive effects of natural and man-made disasters on children can endure months and even years after the event.<sup>4</sup>

High levels of job losses had an impact on family cohesion and wellbeing, forecast to continue for a long time, significant given the high level of Covid-19-related job-losses.<sup>5,9</sup>

## **Effect on children**

9/11 left an untold number of bereaved children facing grief, complicated by the traumatic nature of the death,<sup>5</sup> as has COVID-19. It took a heavy psychological toll: children experienced chronic nightmares, fear of public spaces, severe anxiety, and other mental health problems.<sup>1</sup> Influential factors for prospective mental health problems were exposure to the event, perceived life disruption, loss or separation from family members, personal injury, and witnessing injuries or death.<sup>3</sup> Children from areas of lower educational attainment or limited economic resources were also substantially exposed (ibid.).

Claude M Chemtob stated, 'We know children don't ask for help on their own, and we know that parents and teachers are not particularly good at knowing which kids are hurting silently. We also know with children that when their problems are not detected they can continue to have problems for more than 20 years after'.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Spencer Eth agreed, 'Those kids affected and untreated will go on to have potentially lifelong difficulties directly related to 9/11: educational handicaps, substance abuse, and antisocial behaviour'.<sup>6</sup>

Hispanic students were disproportionately affected by psychological problems, researchers estimating that 13.8% suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), compared with 9% of non-Hispanic blacks and 9% of Asians.<sup>7</sup> This mirrors findings on COVID-19's impact on BAME people.<sup>8</sup>

## **Media impact**

The immediacy of people witnessing 9/11 unfold was a major contributor to consequent mental health problems. While playing an essential role in communicating disaster information, media coverage had the potential to powerfully affect those viewing.<sup>9</sup> Sufficient to produce symptoms in children, routine TV news was a significant source of fear reactions and sleep disturbances in preschool and elementary (primary) school-age children. In future post-disaster conditions, major school associations and paediatric organisations advised limiting young children's exposure to news about disasters through television and other media.<sup>3</sup> They said that parents should monitor children for dramatic changes in media viewing habits. Intense distress following viewing of 9/11, and identification with trauma victims, were seen as potential risk factors.<sup>10</sup> The increasing influence of social media and being constantly online, and the incidence (partly linked to social media) of bullying, may affect children's willingness to seek help, placing reliance on professionals to identify and address problems being experienced.

## **Counselling considerations**

Post-9/11 health care professionals' interventions varied widely and depended largely on their comfort zone, particularly in the areas of bereavement and religion, an echo of findings in research in the UK on counsellors and psychotherapists' experience.<sup>17</sup> Research suggested that they need to tackle this responsibly, especially in the aftermath of a disaster. Any professional involved with young children and their families should recognise that catastrophes can provoke serious negative reactions, including PTSD. To protect against possible functional impairment, early identification and treatment

of depression and strengthening of family resilience were recommended.<sup>11</sup> Teachers and school-based counsellors were advised to pay attention to young children showing signs of social withdrawal and regression,<sup>12</sup> as PTSD may manifest with subtle symptomology. Fear of ongoing threat affected both the severity and duration of psychological symptoms, which for COVID-19 could relate to the length of time it impacts on society. Counsellors and psychotherapists should be prepared to assist children with trauma-related symptoms of stress over the medium- to long-term.<sup>9</sup>

The availability of social support was significant in the aftermath of disaster.<sup>13</sup> The majority of parents had talked to their children about 9/11 for an hour or more, and the availability of a supportive parent or family member was the most important factor distinguishing traumatised children who had good developmental outcomes from those with who didn't (*ibid.*). This gives a pointer to counsellors and psychotherapists when advising parents or family members as to children's support during COVID-19.

Professionals involved with young children and their families should recognise and assess grief reactions in bereaved children and adolescents and examine the impact on their functioning. An understanding of *Continuing bonds*<sup>14</sup> is helpful in assisting bereaved children properly resolve grief and enable them to develop and maintain a continuing healthy bond with the deceased. Yielding positive benefits for children with traumatic grief, it recommends communicating about and maintaining an emotional connection to the person who has died, for example by talking regularly about them, and through the use of creative activities such as collecting objects for memory boxes.

### **Current COVID-19 research findings**

These map closely to the findings of 9/11 research. In a survey by the mental health charity YoungMinds of 2,111 participants up to 25 years of age, with a mental health illness history in the UK, 83% said the pandemic had made their condition worse; 26% said they were unable to access mental health support; peer support groups and face-to-face services had been cancelled, and support by phone or online could be challenging for some young people.<sup>15</sup>

Social distancing and school closures are likely to result in increased loneliness in children and adolescents, with social contacts curtailed by containment measures. With well-established links between loneliness and mental health problems in children and adolescents, research finds that social isolation and loneliness increase the risk of depression, and possibly anxiety.<sup>15</sup> The length of loneliness appears to be a predictor of future mental health problems, of particular relevance in the COVID-19 context as politicians in different countries consider the reimposition of restrictions following a resurgence, and the implementation of social distancing within schools.

When adults talk to children, the information provided needs to take into account the child's age and level of understanding. Sensitive and effective communication about life-threatening illness has major benefits for children and their family's long-term psychological wellbeing. Listening to what children believe about COVID-19 transmission is essential; providing children with an accurate explanation that is meaningful to them will ensure that they do not feel unnecessarily frightened or guilty. Honesty offers not only an understandable explanation for what children are observing, but also grants permission for children to safely talk about their own feelings. Normalising their emotional reactions and reassuring children about how the family will look after each other helps to contain anxiety.

'Empowering adults to communicate with children about illness and death has the potential to mitigate the short-term and long-term psychological effects. Sensitive and effective communication... has major benefits for children and their family's long-term psychological wellbeing'.<sup>16</sup>

## What we can do now

When interviewing teachers and headteachers for my research, two often-repeated statements stood out, 'I don't know what to say' and, 'I am scared I will do more harm than good'. Death remains a taboo subject for many reasons and talking to children about it is a problem shared by parents and teachers – and counsellors - alike.<sup>17</sup> While there is actually a great deal of very good and effective help available, many people don't know that, and/or don't know how to access it. Faced with a need to do something quickly for the schools taking part in my research I have compiled a *COVID-19 schools support pack*, guiding readers to some of the best resources freely available together with material I have developed over the years in key areas such as, 'What should I say?' and perhaps more importantly, 'What shouldn't I say?'. It has sections specific to children, staff and parents, and books that can be downloaded for children. While the pack is aimed primarily at primary schools, much of it is generic and can be used across the educational spectrum. It contains information sourced from a number of leading bodies who provide direct guidance and support on coronavirus in the area of education, bereavement care, and healthcare. These bodies are credited when their information is used: it is open-access information and website addresses are given should users wish to make direct reference to the material.

At the time of writing, children across the UK have recently returned to school and with that more issues will emerge around helping children cope with loss they have been confronted with directly or indirectly. For example, in schools with pupils who have a family member or acquaintance who has died of COVID-19, they, their fellow pupils, parents and staff, will all have been affected in some way, and will need an appropriate level of support. Whether and how they are affected, and what support they need, will only be known over time, but some immediate relief can be gained through using the information contained in the pack. We are constantly learning about COVID-19 and its effects on children, parents and schools and as such the pack is a work in progress which will be regularly updated. To help with this, I am seeking input from counsellors and psychotherapists: if you know of or have developed resources, I would welcome hearing from you so that they can be added to future issues.

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**Michael Coombes** is a PhD doctoral researcher at Cardiff University, using his 20 years' bereavement counselling experience to explore religious education's contribution to people's ability to cope with loss. With the onset of COVID-19, he is working with primary schools to provide advice on loss to children, parents and staff. To request a copy of Michael's *COVID-19 schools support pack*.

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## **Appendix 3b    Schools Covid Pack – extract**



# **Coping with Coronavirus/Covid-19**

## **A Starter Pack of guidance and support for Schools**

**Rel. 3.0 Feb21**

## Introduction

This '**Starter Pack**' has been compiled by Michael Coombes, a PhD graduate researcher at Cardiff University.

Its aim is to provide initial guidance and support to staff, parents, and children at Primary School level on issues arising from the pandemic coronavirus, also termed Covid-19. However, much of the material is generic, and can be used across the educational spectrum. The pack includes bereavement-related information and should be treated as **sensitive** and **emotional**.

The Pack contains information sourced from a number of leading bodies who provide direct guidance and support on coronavirus in the area of:

- Education
- Bereavement care
- Healthcare
- Religion and spirituality

Organisations are credited when their information is used: it is open-access information, and website addresses are given should users wish to make direct reference to the material. Where a website link is provided, it will be in blue and underlined: to open it, use Ctrl + Click when the cursor is positioned over the link

The Pack is not exhaustive; rather it is anticipatory of the needs in this area. Its production at this time is driven by the timetable of schools reopening, and as such reflects a lack of information on fact-based requirements which can only be gathered over time and through experience. A further release will be issued once a needs analysis has been conducted after the February 2021 term has started.

This release contains religious/spiritual guidance and support information. This comes from a Christian perspective: an appeal has been made through BACP's *Children, Young People and Families journal* for material covering other faiths, which will be included in a future release, but again, much of the material in this section is generic.

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# Religious and Spiritual guidance

## Introduction

The purpose of this section is to pull together into one place religious and spiritual references to death and the afterlife that can be used by school staff, parents and pupils alike, without having to go to multiple and varied sources. There are many biblical readings on the subject in the Old and New Testaments, and in providing this reference document relevant material can be easily accessed on an 'as-needed' basis.

## What the church advises

In the midst of Covid-19 children are confronted daily by death, sometimes directly but thankfully mostly indirectly, and have to somehow cope. If comfort is not gained from any religious or spiritual beliefs they might hold, which are mostly gained from school or home, they can have difficulty in understanding God's role - however they experience death, they can struggle spiritually in trying to reconcile what they are experiencing or witnessing with the beliefs they hold. This places great responsibility on schools and families to give age-appropriate guidance and advice on the church's message about death and the afterlife.

A good source of advice on what to say to bereaved people is the website *The art of dying well* – [www.artofdyingwell.org](http://www.artofdyingwell.org). The website content has been developed by the Catholic Church of England and Wales and gives the most up-to-date advice on both dying and death – a prayer is provided below. However, while much of what is written about 'the Last Things' – that part of theology concerned with death, judgement, and the final destiny of the soul and humankind - is driven by good pastoral intent it can suffer from a lack of clarity which can confuse children and young people.

This section looks instead to the Catholic funeral liturgies, which speak powerfully about the hope of heaven, but avoid making any assumptions about the mystery of the ultimate destiny of the deceased: they express hope and urge prayer, but acknowledge the reality of sin and its effect, and the reality of loss. In an increasingly secular and death-denying society it is important to establish the true message delivered by theological texts – death is painful, sad, and can even make the bereaved angry at God himself, but there is also a message of hope.

To that end, this section suggests readings from the primary Catholic funeral sources:

- 'Into your hands' *Order of Christian Funerals*
- 'Order of Christian Funerals' *Liturgy Office of the Bishop's Conference of England & Wales*

## Speaking to children

When you first speak to a child or young person who has been bereaved, it is important to understand that their grief is unique to them, so their emotions or reaction to you may not be what you expect. Try to be sensitive with how you approach the conversation and do not make assumptions as to how they will feel towards their faith, indeed towards God. Allow them to fully express themselves as they will have a lot of emotions that they need to talk about. You need to put your own awkward feelings, indeed your own beliefs, aside and simply be there for those who are grieving – the sensitive consoler soon learns that “what to say” begins in the language of silence – in “just being there”.

There is usually a “Why?” connected with death – when we ask why someone we love has died we are asking a series of questions that are not easily answered. The bereaved have to find their own answers to these questions. They often resent these answers coming from someone else, so caution is urged as to trying to provide ready answers to a difficult problem. Often it is about helping the person find the already lit light bulb of insight within themselves, which has been dimmed by the loss which has covered their inner light.

For some bereaved children and young people God can seem maddeningly absent in grief, but He is not. We may well be furious with Him. He can handle it. The bereaved have lost so much and have come so far, each struggling in his or her own way. Some choose to plunge into activity, others prefer to avoid all that. Everyone copes differently. But let us not deny the bereaved now what they need most: prayers, patience, love, and understanding.

## *The art of dying – a prayer*

Dear Lord,

We pray for those recently bereaved, whose lives have been shattered by the death of someone they loved dearly.

Be with them in their loneliness and comfort them in their sorrow. Grant them the strength and courage to seek you in their new situation and the faith to look beyond their present distress to Jesus, the One who conquered death and who lives for evermore.

Help us surround them with our love and help and to pray for the comfort of God for them.

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## Catholic funeral source: 'Into your hands' *Order of Christian Funerals*

### Final commendation

With faith in Jesus Christ, we must reverently bury the body of our brother/sister. Let us pray with confidence to God, in whose sight all creation lives, that he will raise up in holiness and power the mortal body of our brother/sister and command his/her soul to be numbered among the blessed. May God grant him/her a merciful judgement, deliverance from death, and pardon of sin. May Christ the Good Shepherd carry him/her home to be at peace with the Father. May he/she rejoice for ever in the presence of the eternal King and in the company of all the saints.

I know that my Redeemer lives, and on that final day of days, His voice shall bid me rise again: unending joy, unceasing praise! This hope I cherish in my heart: To stand on earth, my flesh restored And, not a stranger but a friend, Behold my Saviour and my Lord.

Into your hands, Father of mercies, we commend our brother/sister **N** in the sure and certain hope that, together with all who have died in Christ, he/she will rise with him on the last day. Merciful Lord, turn toward us and listen to our prayers: open the gates of paradise to your servant and help us who remain to comfort one another with assurances of faith, until we all meet in Christ and are with you and with our brother/sister for ever. We ask this Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

**Learning from the Past to Help Children Cope with Future Loss.**

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**2<sup>nd</sup> October 2021**

## **Abstract**

The coronavirus of 2020/2021 – Covid-19 – is having a major impact on the physical, mental, and spiritual health of children. This article reports on research comparing the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – ‘9/11’ – to Covid-19, exploring whether the experience of 9/11 can identify likely causes of adverse sequelae on children, and whether this experience can help address spiritual issues arising from Covid-19. The research looks at: a) Effects on children; b) Bereavement; and c) Religion and spirituality. Findings indicate similarities between the consequences of 9/11 and those of Covid-19, suggesting that recommendations made following 9/11 can give guide responses where similar sequelae are identified in Covid-19. While the full effects of Covid-19 will not be known for some time, the need to address issues that are surfacing demand attention. The research makes recommendations to protect and enhance children’s spirituality, and for future research as the consequences of Covid-19 unfold over time.

## **Keywords**

Covid-19; 9/11; bereavement; spirituality; children.

## Introduction

While the author was conducting research on whether we are teaching children eschatology in religious education adequately to help them to cope with loss, the emergence of Covid-19 relocated the question from the abstract, 'sometime in the future', to an issue of great significance. Children are being confronted daily with death directly or indirectly and have to somehow cope with the consequences. There is evidence that this is often not achieved: significant psychosomatic and spiritual health issues are being seen including depression, anxiety, spiritual discontent, and an impact on happiness and self-esteem. Millions of children throughout the world are being exposed to mass trauma resulting from parental death and the death of loved ones. Research shows that childhood parental death has a negative impact on children's mental and physical health, resulting in complicated or prolonged grief reactions, reducing their potential for normative development (Melham and Brent, 2019).

These psychosomatic symptoms are being compounded by religious/spiritual struggles. Grieving children have difficulty establishing a relationship with the bereaved - 'Continuing bonds' (Bowlby, 1980), an emotional connection with the one they have lost - because of the circumstances of the death, which are often traumatic and unexpected. Spiritual struggle and complicated grief are being seen to lead to Complicated Spiritual Grief, 'Resentment and doubt toward God, dissatisfaction with the spiritual support received, and substantial changes in the bereaved person's spiritual beliefs' (Burke and Neimeyer, 2014). Research shows that belief in an afterlife *can* help children cope (Feldman, Fischer and Gressis, 2016) though often only after a period of meaning-making, 'Coming to see or understand the situation in a different way and reconsidering beliefs and goals to achieve consistency among them' (Appel, Park, Wortmann and van Schie, 2019; Park and Edmondson, 2011). The relationships between life events and their resolution are mediated by how people appraise and handle these events (Pargament, Olsen, Reilly et al, 1992; Park, 2005).

Evidence suggests that pastoral carers – clergy, teachers, and others (grouped as 'Professionals' in this article) involved in the spiritual care and wellbeing of children are likely to be faced with these problems for years to come. To understand the problems confronting them and what can be done to help them, this research has compared another world-changing event, the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – '9/11' – to Covid-19, seeking to explore whether likely sequelae can be identified and what recommendations were offered following 9/11 that may help children today.

## Lessons from History

*What can we learn from past events?* Sadly, there have been many disasters involving children that we could look to in recent history. Aberfan, Wales, in October 1966 was one of the first globally reported major events of its kind, in which 144 people died, mostly children, following the catastrophic collapse of a colliery coal tip; and the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. 9/11 which had a major impact across the world because of the scale of the disaster in which 228,000 people died. 9/11 is chosen because death was witnessed in real-time, thousands of lives were lost, and there is a considerable body of post-event research which evidenced major psychosomatic and spiritual health outcomes.

This research shines a light on spiritual issues that might be faced by children if reproduced post-Covid-19, and points to the role of professionals in addressing them. The evidence of how the effects of 9/11 were addressed may be helpful to professionals when considering how children's spiritual wellbeing can be supported in the future.

## **Statistics on 9/11 Tell their Own Story.**

About 75,000 of the more than 710,000 public school students in grades 4 (age 9-10) through 12 (age 17-18) suffered symptoms of PTSD, and as many as 190,000 had mental health problems (Purnick, 2002).

17% of children knew someone bereaved (Goodnough, 2002), 41% of children saw a parent crying, and 32% had parents who witnessed the disaster (Stuber, Fairbrother, Galea et al, 2002).

35% of children had one or more stress symptoms, while 47% were worried about their own safety or the safety of loved ones (Phillips, Prince and Schiebelhut, 2004). The most common symptoms observed in young children were posttraumatic play, re-experiencing (including disaster-related dreams), and sleeping difficulties (*ibid.*).

A high proportion of school children had a probable mental disorder 6 months later (Hoven, Duarte, Lucas *et al*, 2005), suggesting that the pervasive effects of natural and man-made disasters on children can endure months and even years after the event. In a long-term 7-year prospective study it was found that bereavement was associated with an increased incidence of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and functional impairment a number of years later (Pham, Porta, Biernesser et al, 2018).

## **Effect on children**

Influential factors for prospective mental health problems in children included exposure to the event, perceived life disruption, and injury or death of a loved one (Phillips, Prince and Schiebelhut, 2004). Family exposure to the event was associated with probable mental health disorder, even more strongly than direct exposure (Hoven, Duarte et al, 2005), while the combined effect of continuing intrusive imagery and peritraumatic life threat was associated with symptom persistence (Holmes, Cresswell, and O'Connor, 2007).

Associations between trauma and stress responses were found to vary between different age groups. In New York City child age was the strongest predictor of risk for PTSD: 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders (UK Year 5 and Year 6 – age 9-11) were significantly more prone to stress symptoms than children in grade 9-12 (UK Year 10 and Year 11 – age 14-16) (Phillips, Prince and Schiebelhut, 2004). The possibility that very young children might be adversely affected received little emphasis and was not reflected in the array of services that developed in response to the disaster (DeVoe, Bannon Jr, and Klein, 2006).

The extent of parent/adult – child communication about the attacks increased with the child's age, and Schuster, Stein, Jaycox et al (2001) found an association between the length of parent/adult–child conversations and reports of children's negative psychological reactions and fears of being personally affected (Phillips, Prince and Schiebelhut, 2004).

We know children don't ask for help on their own, and we know that parents and teachers (professionals) are not particularly good at knowing which kids are hurting silently. We also know with children that when their problems are not detected they can continue to have problems for more than 20 years after.

(Claude M. Chemtob, in Purnick, 2002, p.1).

Dr. Spencer Eth agreed:

Those kids affected and untreated will go on to have potentially lifelong difficulties directly related to 9/11: educational handicaps, substance abuse, and antisocial behaviour.

(Purnick, 2002, p.1).

## ***Bereavement***

9/11 left an untold number of bereaved children facing grief complicated by the traumatic nature of the death (Brown and Goodman, 2010). It took a heavy psychological toll: children experienced chronic nightmares, severe anxiety, and other health problems (Goodnough, 2002). Childhood parental death resulted in complicated or prolonged grief reactions, and affected overall functioning, reducing children's potential for normative development (Melham and Brent, 2019). Children and adolescents also grieved for the rites of passage they would have experienced and felt apprehensive about an uncertain future in the face of, for example, a marriage ceremony with a parent absent.

The 9/11 tragedy highlighted the lack of knowledge regarding childhood grief resulting from sudden or unexpected loss. Children perceived the death of parents or others known to them as traumatic and were overwhelmed by the trauma response, rendering them incapable of accomplishing normal grieving tasks and resulting in certain behaviours such as re-experiencing, avoidance, arousal, and depression. Thoughts and images of a traumatic nature such as the digging of mass graves or broadcast scenes from hospitals were so terrifying, horrific, and anxiety-provoking that they caused the child to avoid and shut out those thoughts and images that would be comforting reminders of the person who died (Brown and Goodman, 2010). Existential anxiety arose in older children as they tried to understand the event and the threat it posed to them, their families, and friends.

## ***Religion and spirituality***

Religion was an overlooked but important dimension of the coping process after 9/11. The spiritual dimension of coping can contribute to the coping process, shaping the character of life events, coping activities, and the outcome of events. Spiritual coping is associated with adjustment to stress over and above the effects of nonreligious coping and social support (Tix and Frazier, 1998). It cannot be 'reduced' to non-religious forms of coping; spiritual coping measures are stronger predictors of outcomes of stressful situations than traditional, generic measures of religiousness such as frequency of prayer, or church attendance (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez, 1998).

One of the observed, widespread coping responses to the 9/11 attacks was the high church/synagogue attendance following the events. (Meisenhelder, 2002). Research evidenced that 9/11 triggered increased participation in religious practices, with surveys reporting that 90% of the US national research sample turned to prayer, religion, or spirituality - subjective commitment to spiritual or religious beliefs (Schuster, Stein, Jaycox et al., 2001). People using positive spiritual coping were most likely to look to God for love, support, strength, and guidance during a crisis (Meisenhelder, 2002). Research found this aided the coping process. Greater connection and communication with religious social structures and faith communities were related to increased perception of social support, resulting in lower perceived vulnerability and isolation (Hoven, Duarte, Lucas et al, 2005).

Generally, outcomes of positive spiritual coping included lower depression, improved health, and fewer symptoms of psychological distress, such as those associated with posttraumatic stress (Meisenhelder, 2002). Research by McIntosh, Poulin, Silver et al (2011) found that religiosity such as participation predicted higher positive affect, fewer cognitive intrusions and lower odds of new onset mental ailments. Spirituality predicted higher positive affect, and lower odds of new onset ailments.

Religious/spiritual beliefs, however, sometimes led to negative spiritual coping. Perceptions of an angry, uncaring or punitive God had powerfully destructive implications for personal and social functioning, associated with poorer quality of life and psychological symptoms (Park and Edmondson, 2011). A lack of a system of beliefs about death was seen to make dealing with the loss of a loved one more difficult (McIntosh, Poulin, Silver et al, 2011).



Most practising psychologists and other professionals supporting children were found to have had little or no training in working with the religious and spiritual issues associated with death (Tix and Frazier, 1998; Woodhouse and Hogan, 2019). The effects of this were exacerbated by psychologists and professionals tending to be much less spiritual than the general population.

### **Spiritual wellbeing - considerations for Children**

Post-9/11, professionals' interventions varied widely and depended largely on their comfort zone particularly in the areas of bereavement and spirituality (Meisenhelder, 2002). The failure to incorporate the needs of young children after 9/11 may have resulted from a lack of awareness among professionals of the extent to which young children can be affected by traumatic events or from a simple shortage of qualified professionals with solid grounding in early child development and trauma, and their effect on children's spiritual wellbeing (DeVoe, Bannon Jr., and Klein, 2006). Any professionals involved with young children and their families were advised to recognise that events such as 9/11 can provoke serious negative spiritual reactions in young children (Stuber, Fairbrother, Galea et al., 2008).

Research post-9/11 recommended that professionals need to tackle these deficiencies responsibly, in the aftermath of a major event. One proposal was to provide additional training for professionals to support children at age-appropriate levels, along with their families and the community in general, following adverse events. Interventions suggested included acceptance and management of children's reactions; learning specific caregiver behaviours supportive of children's needs in the context of an event such as Covid-19; and how to assist effective spiritual coping following a bereavement (Mooney, Tarrant, Paton et al, 2019).

Adopting an approach of 'prevention rather than cure', psychosocial programmes could be introduced to schools' curricula to build resilience in children in anticipation of adverse events, and to enhance coping skills and assistance to children when such events occur (Mooney, Tarrant, Paton et al, 2019). Strengthening of family resilience was also recommended (Aldwin, Park, Yeoing and Nath, 2014; Pham, Porta, Biernesser et al, 2018). Family and community-level interventions were seen as important as their responses influence children's sense of vulnerability and distress (Phillips, Prince and Schiebelhut, 2004).

Professionals should be prepared to assist children with trauma-related symptoms of stress over the medium- to long-term. Educational and intervention efforts designed and implemented among professionals and the community at large need to be better informed, and more sensitive to the spiritual needs of children (Silver, Holman, McIntosh et al, 2002). Developmentally relevant services should be made available for pre-school and toddler-age children and their parents in the aftermath of a significant community trauma (DeVoe, Bannon Jr and Klein, 2006). In the context of Covid-19, many children will likely require support as they transition back to normal life during and after it, especially those who have experienced bereavement. As the pandemic continues it is important to provide spiritual as well as other support to children and adolescents facing bereavement and other issues (Rapa, Dalton and Stein, 2020).

In practice, the challenge facing parents and other professionals is one of enabling children who seek spiritual comfort after traumatic events to become better informed while also helping them cope with what are likely to be greater, although not necessarily enduring, levels of distress (Phillips, Prince and Schiebelhut, 2004). This suggests that a greater emphasis on direct emotional processing, primarily through parent/carer-child conversations, is efficacious. After 9/11 the majority of parents or other caregivers had talked to their children for an hour or more, and the availability of a supportive parent or family member was found to be the most important factor distinguishing traumatised children who had good developmental outcomes from those with who didn't (*ibid.*). Family and community-level interventions were seen as important as their responses influenced children's sense of vulnerability

and distress (*ibid.*). People may experience positive changes if they share their core religious and spiritual values, beliefs, or world views held by those who have been traumatised (Linley, Joseph, Cooper et al, 2003).

*Responding to the 'taboo' nature of death prevailing in much of society, the following research findings provide guidance for supporting children spiritually during Covid-19.*

*This research on the effects of Covid-19 on children (Rapa, Dalton and Stein, 2020) maps closely to that reported in 9/11 research.*

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### **Talking to children**

*Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak*

*Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it to break.*

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act IV, scene III

Listening to what children believe about Covid-19 transmission is essential; providing children with an accurate explanation that is meaningful to them will ensure that they do not feel unnecessarily frightened or guilty. 9/11-related research findings might help in identifying children who are having difficulty in readjusting to life after their loss (Walsh, King, Jones et al, 2002). Adults need to be authentic about some of the uncertainty and psychological challenges, including spiritual, of the pandemic, without overwhelming children with their own fears (Rapa, Dalton, and Stein, 2020).

It is important to acknowledge children's worries, concerns and anxiety, and to reassure them. Children who have been bereaved or are facing the death of someone important, especially during coronavirus, will appreciate people acknowledging their particular concerns. Children are well-attuned to adults' emotional states; exposure to unexplained and unpredictable behaviour is perceived by children as a threat, resulting in a state of anxiety. An absence of emotion-focused conversations might leave children anxious about the emotional state of the adults around them. This anxiety can inadvertently result in children's avoidance of sharing their own concerns in an attempt to protect others, leaving children to cope with these difficult feelings alone (Rapa, Dalton, and Stein, 2020).

The information provided to children needs to be age-appropriate and reflect the likely level of understanding - associations between trauma and stress responses have been found to vary between different age groups.

Empowering adults to communicate with children about illness and death has the potential to mitigate the short-term and long-term psychological effects. Sensitive and effective communication... has major benefits for children and their family's long-term psychological wellbeing.

(Rapa, Dalton and Stein, 2020, p.562).

Providing information and prioritising communication with children about Covid-19 is an essential component of any universal, community-led response to the pandemic. Adults need to be authentic about some of the uncertainty around psychological and spiritual challenges of the pandemic, without overwhelming children with their own fears. Honesty offers not only an understandable explanation for what children are observing, but also grants permission for them to safely talk about their own feelings. Normalising their emotional reactions and reassuring children about how the family will look after each other helps to contain anxiety.

## **Bereavement**

Bereavement is universally recognised as a critical life experience with which humans must grapple, as is its potential for strong positive and negative implications that reverberate throughout the lives of those who remain behind. Religious and spiritual answers are universally applied to the problems presented by bereavement (Park, Halifax, 2011). Both religion-spirituality and death play central roles in the human experience. Accordingly, religious traditions and academic disciplines such as theology and philosophy have long featured death as a central theme and have long considered ways to deal with the burden of grief, which is an unavoidable aspect of existence (*Ibid.*). Spiritual beliefs may provide an existential framework in which grief is resolved more readily. Most spiritual beliefs, whether or not associated with religious practice, contain tenets about the course of human life and existence beyond it (Walsh, King, Jones et al, 2002). Religious and spiritual traditions offer a panoply of coping resources for dealing with death. These resources include social support from the religious and fellow congregants, and many rites and rituals to assist mourners through the process of grieving (Park, Halifax, 2011).

Children experiencing loss of a loved one require particular attention. A seven-year prospective study (Pham, Porta, Biernesser et al, 2018) concluded that bereavement had a direct effect on impairment including effects on early and later life depression and through negative life events. Further research post-9/11 concluded that grief reactions are independent of other common types of post-disaster child and adolescent psychopathology, capturing a unique aspect of bereavement-related distress that is associated with functional impairment distinct from depression and PTSD. The findings suggest that grief reactions in traumatically bereaved children should inform tailored interventions (Geronazzo-Alman, Fan, Duarte et al, 2019).

Prigerson, Horowitz, Jacobs et al (2009) describe how traumatic life events and stressful situations can lead to physical or emotional suffering as a result of the desired, but unfulfilled, reunion with the deceased; heightened risk of death; and chronic and disabling grief. Complicated Grief is recognised as a significant health condition, sharing many symptoms with depression and anxiety and now accepted as a unique condition, included as a psychiatric condition in DSM-V (APA, 2013).

The condition of Complicated Grief describes painful emotions that are long lasting (typically beyond 6-12 months and more), and which severely impact on the griever's ability to recover from the loss and resume their own life. Post-9/11, children's grief symptoms typically still demonstrated functional impairment two years after the death, and research also found complicated or prolonged grief reactions to predict earlier onset of depression (Melham and Brent, 2019). Professionals involved with young children and their families should recognise and assess grief reactions in bereaved children and examine their impact on their functioning (Melham and Brent, 2019).

Communicating about and maintaining a connection to a person who had died were found to be helpful strategies for bereaved children (*Continuing bonds*, an emotional connection with the one they have lost. (Bowlby, 1980)). Creative activities yielded positive benefits for children with traumatic grief: bereavement tasks involved activities such as connecting with the deceased (for example collecting objects for 'memory boxes'). Schools could provide opportunities for individual and peer-group activities for children to express their emotions, such as creating a 'memory tree' where messages to the loved one who has died can be left, and through drawing, play, drama, dance, storytelling, and musical performance.

## **Religion and spirituality**

After 9/11 many children had 'their spiritual worlds shaken' (Pargament, Zinnbauer, Scott et al, 1998) and attempts at coping compromised. The absence of spiritual belief, and anger with God, were predictive of poor recovery and identified as risk factors for complicated grief (Walsh, King, Jones et al, 2002). The disruption in beliefs and goals were both personal and public, creating a shared sense

of grief and a collective search to make sense out of what had happened and what might happen next.

Post-9/11-research found that understanding children's spiritual beliefs helped them to use spiritual coping more effectively in coping with their grief. Religion and spirituality were highly involved in many children's ways of understanding this traumatic experience and responding to it (Park, 2005). Children with strong spiritual beliefs resolved their grief progressively over a 14-month period. (Walsh, King, Jones et al, 2002). Research revealed a number of links between belief in an afterlife and psychological issues relating to death and dying. For example, when compared with those who do not believe in an afterlife, those who do believe show greater wellbeing in the wake of bereavement (Exline, 2003).

Findings that spiritual coping could help guide general care and resource planning in future disasters such as Covid-19 may be useful in both assessment and intervention for religious, and other professionals (Exline, 2003). The positive patterns of spiritual coping methods could also serve as the basis for religiously oriented interventions to assist children in stressful times (Pargament, Smith, Koenig and Perez, 1998). A study by Tix and Frazier (1998) encouraged professionals to use individuals' religion and spirituality in helping them cope with various stressful circumstances. '(Children) may welcome a psychologist's enquiry about their religious beliefs and practices as part of a comprehensive assessment' (Fitchett, Rybarczyk, DeMarco et al, 1999).

The challenge is to identify those who are having difficulty and to facilitate the positive aspects of spiritual coping so strongly associated with lower PTSD (Meisenhelder, 2002). Reinforcing positive coping beliefs and practices is likely to augment a positive outcome - the combined benefits of positive spiritual coping result in lower perceived vulnerability, isolation, and lower posttraumatic stress response (Meisenhelder and Marcum, 2004). For example, prayer, a form of memorialisation, is seen to be the most common spiritual intervention (Meisenhelder, 2002), and communicating about, remembering, and maintaining a connection to the person who died are thought to be helpful strategies for the bereaved and consistent with normative bereavement (*Meaning making*) (Brown and Goodman, 2010).

However, professional intervention to enhance spiritual coping varied widely post-9/11 and depended largely on their comfort zone (Hoven, Duarte, Lucas et al, 2005). Research suggested that professionals need to tackle this responsibility, especially in the aftermath of a major traumatic event such as Covid-19. Spiritual leaders and other professionals would benefit from a deeper understanding of Complicated Spiritual Grief and the first-hand experiences of bereaved children who have experienced a crisis of faith when faced directly or indirectly with death. The former (spiritual leaders) have the unique advantage of drawing upon established relationships with the children in their care who are experiencing the sting of loss, and the latter (other professionals) are in a position to provide adjunctive support or being called upon in cases of intolerable or prolonged psycho-spiritual suffering (Burke and Neimeyer, 2014). Diagnosis and understanding should facilitate the process of evaluation and treatment rather than hinder it – the overarching goal in studying Complicated Spiritual Grief is to alleviate distress, accomplished through a targeted psycho-spiritual intervention (*ibid.*).

Spiritual coping was the second most commonly used coping mechanism nationally following the 9/11 events, used by 90% of those surveyed. The challenge for professionals is to appreciate the complexities in this coping mechanism and facilitate the positive aspects that are so strongly associated with lower posttraumatic stress (Meisenhelder, 2002). The absence of spiritual belief is a risk factor for delayed or complicated grief, while children who profess stronger spiritual beliefs seem to resolve their grief more rapidly and completely after the death of a close person than do people with no spiritual beliefs (Walsh, King, Jones et al, 2002).

## Discussion

As they did after 9/11, children living through Covid-19 are trying to make meaning of their world, and the traumatic events that they are experiencing and witnessing. Confronted with death daily, mostly indirectly but for many directly, they struggle with trying to explain the unexplainable, having never experienced such an event before during their lifetime. Every aspect of their lives is being affected, including health, schooling, socialising, and religion. They are faced with ever-changing advice and guidance from those trying to lead them through the epidemic who themselves are faced with something they have never had to deal with before, and are bombarded by a daily diet of news both global and local. It is perhaps unsurprising that we are witnessing what has been described as a 'tsunami' of mental health and spiritual issues that are likely to affect our children, and those who care for them in whatever way, for years to come.

In this situation, it is apposite to look to the past to see whether lessons can be learned to help children cope with future loss. This is not the first global event experienced in recent times, but there are certain similarities between Covid-19 and 9/11 that suggest that we can look at that event to determine whether we can avoid 'reinventing the wheel'. 9/11 was characterised by a high mortality rate, an immediate reporting of the unfolding tragedy, and the leaving behind of many thousands of grieving children. While the consequences of Covid-19 are still unfolding and will not be known in their entirety for some time to come, the need to address the issues that are already surfacing demand our attention. This research seeks to identify meaningful and appropriate recommendations and advice arising from research post-9/11 and contextualise it with what is already known from Covid-19 experience.

Given the key roles that professionals play in helping and supporting children to meet the challenges presented by Covid-19, support for spiritual caregivers is needed throughout the epidemic if they are to cope, and indeed thrive. This is unlikely to be the last such global event that many of the children will have to face in the lifetime, and the opportunity is presented as to how to meet the demands of Covid-19 to develop their strengths and capabilities to cope with whatever loss they encounter in the future.

As we can learn from 9/11, so can we learn from Covid-19. 'The findings (from research on 9/11) may hold promise for development of intervention strategies' (Galea, Resnick, Ahern et al, 2002). Future research on Covid-19 is needed to understand how particular contexts in which children develop and operate, can use spirituality to enhance children's capacity to cope with adverse events (Mooney, Tarrant, Paton et al, 2019).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor.

Michael Coombes is a doctoral researcher in Religious and Theological Studies at Cardiff University. His Masters degree in *Counselling and Psychotherapy* examined whether belief in the afterlife helped or hindered the grieving process. This led to his PhD research seeking causes of spiritual distress – Complicated Spiritual Grief. After a 20-year career in pastoral bereavement counselling, supporting over a thousand people, he is using his experience to explore the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife in primary school religious education.

Michael has developed a *Covid-19 Schools Pack* for teachers, parents and children. He has used his personal knowledge and experience of available bereavement support resources to provide advice and guidance on dealing with psychosomatic and spiritual issues arising from Covid-19-related loss. This has been distributed throughout the UK to over a thousand counsellors, schools, charities and councils.

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## Appendix 3d

## Conferences and publications

### Research papers and conferences:

- A paper was presented online via Zoom at the BIAPT Summer conference July 2020, the theme of which was *Theology in the time of Covid-19*.
- An article comparing the effects of Covid-19 and 9/11 to other global tragedies was published in December 2020 in the researcher's professional body British Association for Counsellors and Psychotherapists journal *Children, Young People & Families*.
- A paper was presented online via Zoom at the BIAPT Students conference April 2021 on the subject of *Ecclesiology and ethnography: Ethics and methodology when working with children*, reflecting on the problems arising from loss of direct interaction as happened with Covid.
- A journal article is being considered by the *International Journal for Children's Spirituality*, on the subject of what can be learned from the past to support children cope with loss, based on the effects of Covid.



## **Appendix 4 Covid Impact Statement**

Covid had a significant impact on the research, in particular on the recruitment and retention of research participants. It also presented research opportunities for addressing issues related to death and coping.

### **Recruitment**

With an original ambition of recruiting participant primary schools from the Faith and State sectors, and within the Faith sector Catholic and Anglican, the plan was not achieved: schools in all sectors had been recruited but decided not to participate, the primary concern given being that exposure to discussing death and the afterlife might negatively affect the children and staff involved at such a time. The schools were also struggling with the additional workload on school staff who had to cope with the fallout from a 'lost' academic year. This was regrettable, as one premise of the research was that greater exposure to eschatology would be beneficial in coping with loss, but dying remains a taboo subject with adults who often act as 'gatekeepers' to protect children.

Two Roman Catholic primary schools participated in the research. Recruitment levels of children for Focus Groups were sustained in the first school despite the onset of Covid. Recruitment of pupils in the second school was reduced primarily due to parents' reluctance to expose their children to further death, with only one group recruited. Sufficient children were recruited overall to meet the research target of Focus Group participants – seven Focus Groups, thirty-six participants, plus a 'pilot' group. All Educators in both schools participated in Study 3.

While the impact on recruitment might be seen to have narrowed perspective through the Covid-related restrictions setting boundaries on the research, rather it allowed for an approach of depth not breadth. It established a foundation for future research with other faiths and state schools in primary, secondary and further education. It also allowed for recruitment of a cohort of bereaved young people who did *not* have faith to call on to cope with loss, to provide for a comparison to those who did.

### **Educators interviews**

The first Educator interviews had been scheduled to start three days before the first lockdown. Interviews were re-scheduled and were done via the Zoom platform for school 1, and the TEAMS platform for school 2. Educator interviews for both schools were completed

To agree to participate at such a time said much about the professionalism of the staff involved – their motivation was to better understand what is being taught and how, to help them in their own teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife, and to support their children.

### **Focus Group interviews**

The first scheduled Focus Groups were cancelled within 2 days of starting in March 2020 and re-scheduled for September. Discussion with the supervisor confirmed these could be done via online interviewing subject to attention to ethical considerations. These were discussed with the participating schools and the first two Focus Groups went ahead using TEAMS in October. The second wave of Covid in September led to further postponement.

As the end of the 2019/20 school year in June 2020 was 'lost' due to Covid, the Y6 pupils had moved on to secondary school. Y5 participants had already been recruited and had moved up to Y6: recruitment of 'new' Y5 participants was undertaken. This was achieved but with a slightly lower take-up due to parental concerns.

All Focus Group sessions for the first school were completed successfully. The sessions for the second school were delayed due to the extension of school closures in Wales to April 2021. Recruitment in that school stalled, and only one took place - while the headteacher and staff were enthusiastic, other events overtook them. Even if further Focus Groups had gone ahead on resumption of schooling, it would be too late for results to be included in the research. If completed at some stage the data will be available for future research.

## **New Welsh Curriculum**

A new Welsh Curriculum has been launched in 2021 for implementation in primary schools in 2022. While its full implementation is due after the likely completion of this PhD (end 2021), the changes due in the new curriculum have been central to this research. Preparatory work was meant to be done in schools in 2021, but has not been possible due to Covid. The thesis therefore reports on current practice and anticipated changes for the new Welsh Curriculum in 2022. Its actual impact on the teaching and understanding of death and the afterlife will be the subject of future research.

## **Participant availability**

Readjustment of the project plan was necessary due to a number of research participants not being available. These included the Director of Religious Education; bereaved young people; and school children in Y5 and Y6 – age 9-11. As a result, the planned-for submission date for the thesis was extended from end-June 2021 to end-November 2021.

## **Effect on personal health**

Restrictions associated with pre-existing physical health conditions mirrored those imposed by Covid-19, and there was limited personal impact from Covid *per se*. However, heightened stress and anxiety was caused by issues arising from Covid:

- Inability to hold face-to-face supervision meetings, particularly nearing the end of the degree. Appreciating that Zoom sessions were held, it did not fully mitigate the impact
- Limited library access was problematic with no means of obtaining key material. Acknowledging that after a period of time it was possible to arrange library visits, as a result of shielding due to a health condition and the Welsh Government-imposed restrictions on 'local travel' this was not an option.

## **Opportunities - broadening of research scope**

In the context of the research's themes of pastoral counselling and teaching children eschatology, Covid presented opportunities to address issues arising.

Of primary importance was the utilisation of the author's experience and knowledge to develop a *Schools Covid Pack*. This was founded on the problems arising from Covid and peoples' witnessing, vicariously or directly, of significant death on a daily basis. Based on research findings from interviews with primary school staff, the *Pack* was developed and distributed UK-wide from end-2020 to over

1,000 practitioners for use in advising and supporting counsellors, teachers, parents and children. It addressed coping with the physical, emotional and spiritual effects of loss.

While not a mainstream activity it was consistent with the pastoral and vocational nature of the research and is included as Appendix 3b *Schools Covid Pack - extract*.

In addition, Covid provided the platform for both journal articles and presentation at conferences, as outlined in Appendix 3d Conferences and Publications.

## **Appendix 5      Analytic procedures**

### **Study 1      Bereaved young people. IPA Data Analysis and Presentation**

All twelve interviews were transcribed from the video recordings, and read several times while listening to and watching the recordings. Each transcription was annotated with the themes and challenges identified, to enable subsequent analysis using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. This method enabled groupings of themes and challenges to be quickly identified and categorised as primary or secondary; it also served to enable statistical analysis of number of occurrences.

Acknowledging the importance of treating each case on its own terms to do justice to its individuality, the author stayed grounded and attentive, bracketing ideas that emerged from each case when working on the next. The author also bracketed any preconceptions and expectations of what the data might find, to ensure the integrity of the data, as discussed in chapter 6 Research methodology. This included any particular focus on the themes and challenges that had emerged from the literature review, though when the data was analysed it was found that there was a close correlation between the literature and the actual experiences of the participants.

#### ***Theme analysis***

*Please note that the approach described here has been used for all four studies, to provide a consistent and seamless basis for detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data collected. Having described the analytic procedure it will not be reproduced for subsequent studies.*

Thematic analysis was used, the tables (See *List of Tables and Figures: Study 1-4 Category Analysis*) showing each highest-level theme (super-theme) with its sub-themes. Meanings of themes and sub-themes are provided in the subsequent detailed analysis. Several coding frames were created based on the content analysis of each interview transcription. Every response made by the participants was placed under the most appropriate corresponding category. No response was included in several categories: a decision had to be made as to which category it was to be included in, using the respondent's own focus and emphasis and the context of the response. Separately, using the video and audio recordings, nuances, pauses, emphases, and body language was recorded against each response, reported in the qualitative analysis, for its own value and expression as well as emphasis. Interpretations were supported by participants' quotations to support their inclusion, and to enable the reader to assess their usefulness. In these quotations, ellipsis points ... indicate the omission of material. Information that appears inside square brackets [] has been added for clarification purposes. Ellipsis points in brackets (...) indicate a pause in the flow of participants' speech.

#### ***Quantitative measurement***

With twelve participants for the first IPA study, eight in the Educators' study (Number 3) and thirty-six children for the Focus Group study (Number 4), double the usual number that would normally participate in such studies, it was felt some quantitative measurement could be undertaken and would further open the analysis for evaluation by readers. To enhance the validity of the findings, for a superordinate/sub-theme to be classified as significantly recurrent it was determined that it must have occurred in a specific number of all participants' interviews. A framework was produced identifying occurrences of significant themes/sub-themes meeting the following measure.

<b>No. of occurrences</b>	<b>Category</b>
20+ times	0
10-20	1
5-9	2

In the framework analyses, the Frequency Analysis Count (FA Count) refers to the numbers of times an individual participant refers to a particular theme or sub-theme. Totalling the number of FA Counts across all participants in a cohort provides the FA Total, which determines what category (0-2 above) that theme/sub-theme is included in. e.g. if Symptomology (the number of times a participant refers to the psychosomatic or spiritual effect the loss has had on that individual) had a total of twenty-five references, it would be located in Category 1 (20+ references).

The detailed analysis of these themes makes reference to other themes and challenges that emerged during the study. The criterion for inclusion of those in the secondary analysis table would be their significance in subsequent studies with faith- and policy leaders, educators, and the children who were the participants in Focus Groups. A final classification was of those findings corresponding to Causes and Coping mechanisms. Causes are the main focus of this thesis, but specific coping mechanisms also figure prominently as they can be linked to an underlying faith and the way that faith and hope can contribute to coping with loss.

All tables showing how the results were arrived at are provided in *List of Tables and Figures*.

Consistent with the recommended approach to IPA analysis, themes/sub-themes that were not significant were either dropped from the analysis or incorporated into other themes/sub-themes.

Please note that any names of participants were changed to ensure confidentiality.

## ***Background information***

### *First cohort*

In the first cohort of six participants there were four female participants and two males, with a mean age of 22 (range 19-23). The interval between bereavement and interview ranged from two to five years. Two participants had lost a father, one a brother, one a husband and two a grandparent. Anticipation of death was variable: two of the six participants had experienced a sudden or unexpected loss, and four after a terminal illness of between two and six years.

All cohort one participants were purposively selected as a closely defined group for whom the research question would be significant. Three were practising Roman Catholics, one practising Anglican, and the remaining two non-practising Roman Catholic though had been educated through the Catholic faith school system. All rated their religious beliefs as important or very important. One participant had converted to Catholicism and taught in a Catholic primary school.

### *Second cohort*

In the second cohort, there were three male participants and three females, with a mean age of 21.5 (range 8-25). The interval between bereavement and interview ranged from two to four years. Two participants had lost spouses in unanticipated deaths; two had lost a parent; and two had lost a sibling. The latter four deaths were anticipated, following long illnesses.

Selection criteria for the second cohort were as for the first. Four of the participants were practicing Catholics, two were brought up and schooled in the Catholic faith but were not practicing.

### **Detailed analysis**

Participants were sent semi-structured questionnaires in advance of the interviews – see Appendix 8 *Information sheets, Interview schedules/guides, Consent forms: Other participants*. In the interview they were asked the following (prompts used during the interviews are interleaved):

1. Can you tell me about any belief you had in the afterlife before the loss?
  - a. What do you understand by the term afterlife?
  - b. What afterlife beliefs were you taught when you were young? Have these changed or been added to in any way as you grew up? If so, how?
2. Following the loss, can you describe what feelings or thoughts you had about God and afterlife?
  - a. What religious or spiritual issues related to the afterlife, if any, caused problems after the loss?
  - b. If resolved, how did you resolve them? If not resolved, how do they affect you?
3. Please describe any ways in which belief in the afterlife strengthened or challenged your relationship with God following your loss.
  - a. Has the practice of your faith changed since your loss? Please explain
  - b. In the context of belief in the afterlife, would you say you have more or less hope for the future?
4. Is there anything else you would like to say about belief in the afterlife that has not been covered?

## **Study 2 Church leaders and Policymakers. QRI Data Analysis and Presentation**

All interviews were transcribed from the video/audio recordings, and read several times while listening to and watching the recordings. Each transcription was annotated with themes and challenges as they emerged, to enable subsequent analysis using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets as in Study 1, enabling groupings of themes and challenges to be quickly identified and categorised as primary or secondary. It also served to enable statistical analysis of number of occurrences.

The author stayed grounded and attentive, bracketing ideas that emerged from each interview. The author also bracketed any preconceptions and expectations of what the data might find, to ensure the integrity of the data, as discussed in chapter 6 Research methodology. This included any particular focus on the themes and challenges that had emerged from the literature review or from Study 1, though when the data was analysed it was found that there was a close correlation between all three. As noted above, the same procedure for analysis was used for all four studies. The method of analysing data can be seen in Appendices *Analytic Procedures*.

Analysis of QRI Themes for Church leaders and Policymakers can be found in *List of Tables and Figures: Study 2 Category Analysis*.

In advance of the interviews participants were sent a semi-structured questionnaire that would be used for the interview. Participants were asked the following – probes used during the interviews are reported at the end of the questions:

1. What is your understanding of what children and young people are taught on this subject?
2. What is your understanding of how children and young people are educated on this subject?
3. What do you think children and young people understand from this education?

### **Probe: What are your experiences of education of children and young people about death and the afterlife? Positive/Negative/Neither**

1. What are your own views on the education of children and young people about death and the afterlife?
2. What are your views on whether the education given to children and young people in this area prepares them for the experience of loss?
3. If you consider there to be any deficiencies, how do you think we might address them?

### **Study 3 Educators. QRI Data Analysis and Presentation**

All interviews were transcribed from the video/audio recordings, and read several times while listening to and watching the recordings. Each transcription was annotated with themes and challenges as they emerged, to enable subsequent analysis using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets as in Study 1, enabling groupings of themes and challenges to be quickly identified and categorised as primary or secondary; it also served to enable statistical analysis of number of occurrences.

The author stayed grounded and attentive, bracketing ideas that emerged from each interview. The author also bracketed any preconceptions and expectations of what the data might find, to ensure the integrity of the data, as discussed in chapter 6 Research methodology. This included any particular focus on the themes and challenges that had emerged from the literature review or from Study 1, though when the data was analysed it was found that there was a close correlation between all three. As noted above, the same procedure for analysis was used for all four studies. The method of analysing data can be seen in Appendix 5 *Analytic Procedures*.

Analysis of QRI Themes for Educators can be found in *List of Tables and Figures: Study 3 Category Analysis*.

In advance of the interviews participants were sent a semi-structured questionnaire that would be used for the interview. Participants were asked the following – probes used during the interviews are reported at the end of the questions:

1. What is your understanding of what children and young people are taught on this subject?
2. What is your understanding of how children and young people are educated on this subject?
3. What do you think children and young people understand from this education?
4. Would you like to share with me your own beliefs about death and the afterlife?

#### **Probe: What are your experiences of education of children and young people about death and the afterlife? Positive/Negative/Neither**

1. What are your own views on the education of children and young people about death and the afterlife?
2. What are your views on whether the education given to children and young people in this area prepares them for the experience of loss?
3. If you consider there to be any deficiencies, how do you think we might address them?



## Study 4 Children. FG Data Analysis and Presentation

As described in Chapter 6 Research Methodology, the interviews with children used Focus Groups and Grounded Theory for analysis of the data generated.

All interviews were transcribed from the video/audio recordings, and read several times while listening to and watching the recordings. Each transcription was annotated with themes and challenges as they emerged, to enable subsequent analysis using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets as in Study 1, enabling groupings of themes and challenges to be quickly identified and categorised as primary or secondary; it also served to enable statistical analysis of number of occurrences.

The author stayed grounded and attentive, bracketing ideas that emerged from each interview. The author also bracketed any preconceptions and expectations of what the data might find, to ensure the integrity of the data, as discussed in chapter 6 Research methodology. This included any particular focus on the themes and challenges that had emerged from the literature review or from Study 1, though when the data was analysed it was found that there was a close correlation between all three. As noted above, the same procedure for analysis was used for all four studies.

In advance of the Focus Groups participants were not sent a semi-structured questionnaire as was done for the interviews with participants in other studies. Instead, consistent with the recommended approach for conducting Focus Groups, a Topic Guide was used for the Moderator's and Co-moderator's use. All documents used in the preparation and conduct of the Focus Groups can be found in Appendix 8 *Information sheets, Interview schedules/guides, Consent forms: Parents/guardians and Children*. The Topic Guide questions were as follows:

1. What do children learn about dying in school?
2. What are children taught about life after death?
3. What do the participants understand by the terms: 'death' and 'life after death' or the afterlife?
4. What have the participants learned about dying and life after death outside school? Where from?

The Focus Groups commenced with a Powerpoint presentation, establishing the 'ground rules' for their conduct, and the expectations on children and moderators.

During the Focus Groups, probes were used by the moderator:

1. 'One thing I've heard several of you mention is.... I wonder what the rest of you have to say about that?' or 'Is there anything someone else would like to add?'
2. 'Would you explain further?' or 'Would you say more?' or 'I don't understand'
3. 'Would you give me an example of what you mean?' or 'Please describe what you mean'.

To facilitate the collection of data, Notepads were used by the children to record words or ideas they wanted to talk about, and 'three words to describe heaven' as requested by the moderator. Drawings were also requested: 'Draw what you think heaven looks like'. A sample is provided below; further samples of completed Notepads are provided in Appendix 10 *Notepads*.

I've collected all the information I was hoping for: is there anything you would like to add to your answers or ask me?



Thank you.

## Appendix 6 Literature review process and search terms

### Literature Review Process

Step	Procedure
1	<p>Preceding literature reviews from relevant theses were used as a foundation, sourced from Ethos (British Library), Theses Collection Wales (National Library of Wales), and the theses collections of universities where students were identified as having undertaken research on the topics under investigation: Cardiff, Edinburgh, Cambridge, Oxford, Durham, Bath, Bristol and others.</p>
2	<p>Using Google Scholar and Web of Knowledge, additional searches were undertaken based on the key themes of this research and informed by the experience gained from step 1.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National newspapers</li> <li>• APA PsychNet</li> <li>• Wiley Online Library</li> <li>• Routledge Online Library</li> <li>• ResearchGate</li> </ul>
3	<p>Based on the information gained from previous theses key journals were reviewed for relevant historical and new publications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>For research related to bereavement and Counselling:</i> Death Studies, Dying Matters, OMEGA, Mortality, Bereavement Care, BACP's Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, Centre for Death and Society, ADEC, Journal of Loss and Trauma, Journal of Interpersonal Loss, Therapy Today, Thresholds, Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling, Pastoral Care in Education, Psychology and Psychotherapy.</li> <li>• <i>For research material related to children's religious education:</i> Catholic Education Services, RE Online, RE Today, RE Matters, HCPT Educational Resources, Primary Resources, British Journal of Religious Education, Welsh Government, Gov.uk, DfE, SACRE, WASACRE, NATRE, CORE, Christian Teaching Resources, BIAPT, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, International Journal of Children's Spirituality.</li> </ul>
4	<p>New articles that were uncovered and found relevant to this review were tracked via the resources listed in Steps 2 and 3. This uncovered relevant publications that were not published in the more area-specific journals. Systematic library searches were undertaken on specific themes e.g. teaching death and the afterlife, and coping with loss.</p>
5	<p>To access the most relevant literature, publication dates were initially selected from 1990 to 2021. The search was iterative; additional key literature that emerged prior to 1990 was also included. Selection was made firstly based on the title, then the abstract, and then on reading the full papers.</p>

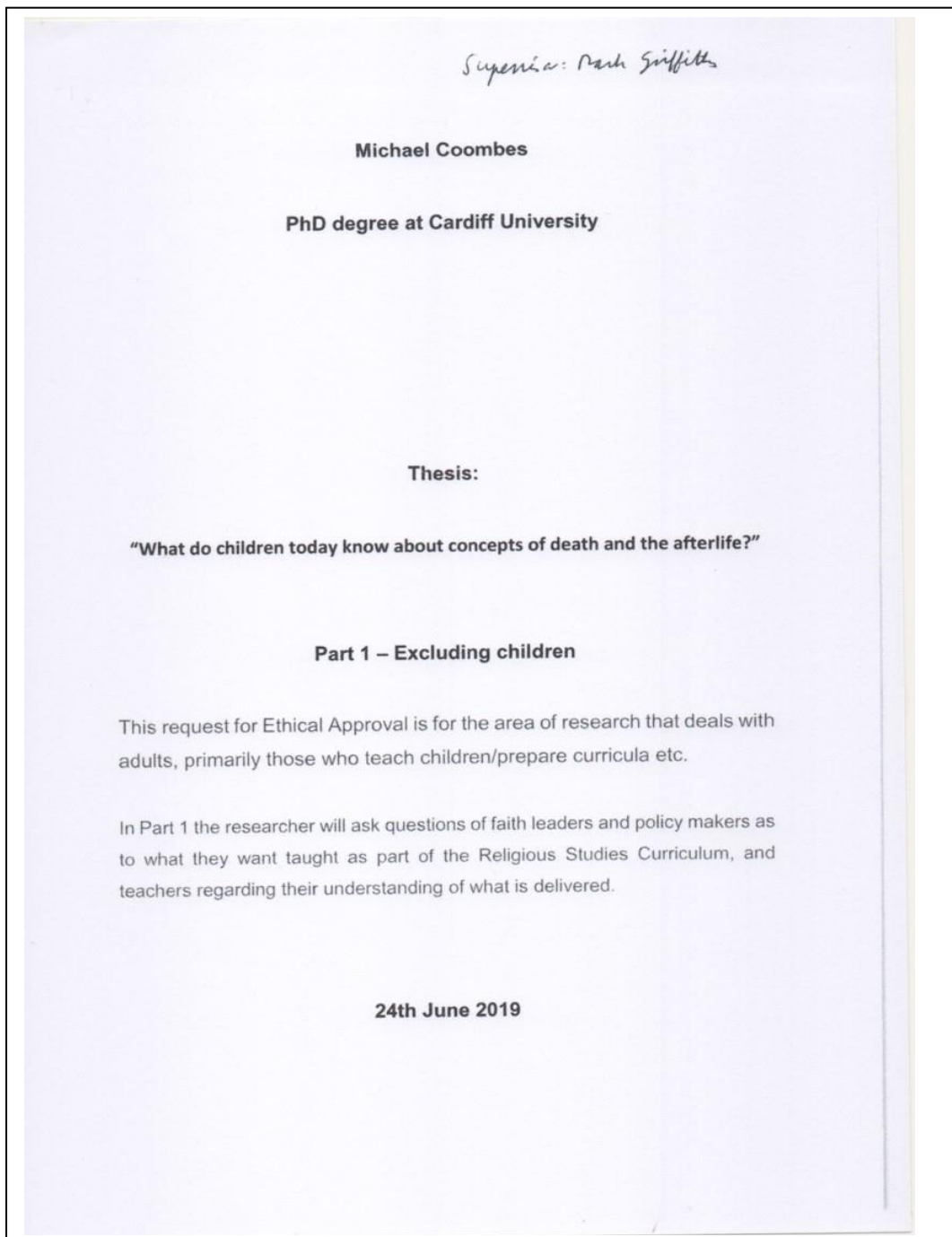
## **Search terms**

To ensure that important contributions were captured, an initial methodical approach to the literature review was adopted. While eschatology and thanatology are multidisciplinary fields, drawing research from many distinct positions, articles were mainly derived from the fields of psychology, education, pastoral and bereavement counselling, and psychotherapy.

Relevant keywords were used for the initial review: eschatology, continuing bonds, meaning making, bereavement, loss, death, coping, grief counselling, grief therapy, schools, education, children. New key terms uncovered during the review process were added including specific searches on the 'Challenges' identified as the research progressed, such as school ethos, leadership, children's voices, parents, and teacher training.

The database Google Scholar was used as the main search tool, chosen for its coverage of vast sets of articles and effective citation referencing. The Web of Knowledge were also consulted, though on a smaller scale. All articles which were found to cover topics related to the research questions were initially downloaded, reviewed for relevance, and analysed for their contribution to the topics covered by the research. When contributions were found to be of interest and relevance, their references and citations were recorded.

**Appendix 7      Ethical approval      ADULTS**



**1. RESEARCH AND TEACHING ETHICAL APPROVAL FORM****2. DISSERTATION SUMMARY  
ETHICS SUMMARY****3. PERMISSIONS:**

- a. Permission to interview clergy, staff and pupils Faith leaders
- b. Permission to interview clergy, staff and pupils Policy makers

**4. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEETS:**

- a. Participant information sheet Counsellors
- b. Participant information sheet Faith leaders & policy makers
- c. Participant information sheet Educators

**5. CONSENT FORMS:**

- a. Participant consent form Counsellors
- b. Participant consent form Faith leaders & policy makers
- c. Participant consent form Educators

**6. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE:**

- a. Semi-structured schedule Counsellors
- b. Semi-structured schedule and questions Faith leaders & policy makers
- c. Semi-structured schedule and questions Educators

**7. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:**

- a. Semi-structured questions Faith leaders & policy makers
- b. Semi-structured questions Educators

REFERENCES		
Item	Description	Reference
<b>Permissions</b>		
1	Permission to interview clergy, staff and pupils – Faith leaders	MC_Q2_1_1_24062019
2	Permission to interview clergy, staff and pupils – Policy makers	MC_Q2_1_2_24062019
<b>Participant information sheets</b>		
3	Counsellors	MC_Q0_1_1_24062019
4	Faith leaders & policy makers	MC_Q2_1_1_24062019
5	Educators	MC_Q3_1_1_24062019
<b>Consent forms</b>		
6	Counsellors	MC_Q0_1_2_24062019
7	Faith leaders & policy makers	MC_Q2_1_2_24062019
8	Educators	MC_Q3_1_2_24062019
<b>Interview Schedule and questions</b>		
9	Counsellors	MC_Q0_1_3_24062019
10	Faith leaders & policy makers	MC_Q2_1_3_24062019
11	Educators	MC_Q3_1_3_24062019
<b>Interview questions</b>		
13	Faith leaders & policy makers	MC_Q2_1_4_24062019
14	Educators	MC_Q3_1_4_24062019

**NOTES – Reference: code structure**

- |                           |                    |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Initials of researcher | MC                 |
| 2. Study number           | Q (0-4) SEE BELOW  |
| 3. Version                | 1....              |
| 4. Sequence number        | 1....              |
| 5. Version date           | Initially 24062019 |

**Study number**

- |    |                                    |
|----|------------------------------------|
| Q0 | Unspecified – general, counsellors |
| Q2 | Faith leaders and policy makers    |
| Q3 | Educators – head- and teachers     |



SCHOOL OF HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY AND RELIGION  
RESEARCH AND TEACHING ETHICAL APPROVAL FORM

To Be Submitted in hard copy to the School's Ethics Officer: Professor Helen Nicholson,  
School of History, Archaeology & Religion, John Percival Building, 5.45  
(Nicholsonhj@cardiff.ac.uk)

**Note:** The form must be accompanied by any necessary documentation applicable to the project (consent forms, permissions, etc.)

Principal Investigator / Supervisor	Mark Griffiths
Student Name & Number (if applicable)	Michael Coombes 1864177
Email Address	[REDACTED]
Title of Project	'What do children today know about concepts of death and the afterlife?'
Purpose of work proposed i.e. teaching, undergraduate project, postgraduate project, externally funded research, commercial research	Postgraduate project
Other Collaborators	None
Funding Body (if applicable)	None
STUDENTS ONLY Has your supervisor both read <b>and</b> approved this form	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Supervisor Signature	



**PLEASE REFER TO THE FOLLOWING BEFORE FILLING OUT THE REST OF YOUR APPLICATION:**

1. The School Research Ethics webpage can be accessed on the School's website, under the research section, as well as the staff intranet.
1. Information on data management, collecting personal data: data protection act requirements can be accessed via the Staff Intranet of Cardiff University: <https://intranet.cardiff.ac.uk/>  
Log into Intranet/Research Support/Research Integrity and Governance/Research Ethics/Ethical Review/School Research Ethics Committees
2. Cardiff University's Research Integrity and Governance Code of Practice  
[http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/937021/Research-Integrity-and-Governance-Code-of-Practice.pdf](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/937021/Research-Integrity-and-Governance-Code-of-Practice.pdf)
3. Ensure attachment of the following with your application:
  - a. Full project proposal
  - b. Participant information form and Consent form (if available)
  - c. Copies of all relevant permissions (if applicable)
  - d. Details concerning external funding (if applicable)

**Recruitment Procedures**

		Yes	No	N/A
	<b>If you answer 'yes' to any of these questions, please explain in the ethical issues box of this form, and in your proposal, how you plan to address these concerns. For the University's ethics procedures regarding research involving children and vulnerable adults, please follow the link below and see in particular pp. 12-13: <a href="http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/937021/Research-Integrity-and-Governance-Code-of-Practice.pdf">http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/937021/Research-Integrity-and-Governance-Code-of-Practice.pdf</a></b>			
1	Does your project include children under 16 years of age?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Does your project include people with learning or communication difficulties?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Does your project include people in custody?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Is your project likely to include people involved in illegal activities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Does your project involve people belonging to a vulnerable group, other than those listed above?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Does your project include people who are, or are likely to become your clients or clients of the department in which you work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Does your project include people for whom English / Welsh is not their first language?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Consent Procedures (non-archaeological)**

		Yes	No	N/A
8	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reasons?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	Will you give potential participants a significant period of time to consider participation?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13	If there is anonymity or disclosure involved, will you obtain explicit written, signed, and dated consent of the participant(s)?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Possible Harm to Participants**

		Yes	No	N/A
	If there are any risks to the participants you must explain in the ethical issues box of this form, and in your proposal, how you intend to minimise these risks and provide appropriate safeguards. For further information regarding the University's research ethics procedures and its health and safety policies, please follow the link: <a href="http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/937021/Research-Integrity-and-Governance-Code-of-Practice.pdf">http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/937021/Research-Integrity-and-Governance-Code-of-Practice.pdf</a>			
14	Have all measures been taken to minimise the risk of any participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress or discomfort?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
15	Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing a detriment to their interests as a result of participation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
16	Please confirm that you have read and understood CU's Interim Guidance for Researchers Working with Children and Young People. <a href="http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/sohcs/resources/Child%20Protection%20Procedures%20-%20Interim%20Gdnce%20-%20SEOs%20031209.pdf">http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/sohcs/resources/Child%20Protection%20Procedures%20-%20Interim%20Gdnce%20-%20SEOs%20031209.pdf</a>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Data Protection**

		Yes	No	N/A
17	Will any non-anonymised and/or personalised data be generated and/or stored?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18	Will you have access to documents containing sensitive <sup>1</sup> data about living individuals?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	If "Yes" will you gain the consent of the individuals concerned?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**Ancient Human Remains**

		Yes	No	N/A
19	Have you secured the appropriate permission, if required, to excavate, export and/or sample any ancient human remains?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
20	If applicable, have you discussed and agreed preferred options for the disposal of human remains after excavation and analysis?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
21	Have you read and understood the School's policy on Human Remains?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

<sup>1</sup> Sensitive data are *inter alia* data that relates to racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs, trade union membership, physical or mental health, sexual life, actual and alleged offences.

**Human Tissue**

		Yes	No	N/A
22	Does the study involve the collection and use of human tissue (including, but not limited to, blood, saliva and bodily waste fluids)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
23	If "Yes", has a copy of the submitted application and any supporting documentation been emailed to the Human Tissue Act Compliance Team (HTA@cf.ac.uk), with the Research Ethics Officer of SHARE (contact on p. 1) copied in? A decision will only be made once these documents have been received.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**Permissions to Carry Out Fieldwork**

		Yes	No	N/A
24	Have you secured the appropriate permission from the tenant and landowner?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
25	Does the research take place outside of the UK?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	If "Yes" have you gained appropriate permissions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
25	Does the area of research include any Scheduled Monuments?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	If "Yes" have you gained permission from the appropriate authority?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
26	Is the area of research special environmental interest or value (e.g., is it an SSSI)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	If "Yes" have you gained permission from the appropriate authority?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
27	Have you contacted the local Site and Monuments Officer?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
28	Is there an agreement in place with the legal owner of any materials recovered regarding the deposition of material culture and archive?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
29	If the material is to be deposited with another institution in due course, is this agreement in place?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**Provision against terrorism**

30	Have you given due regard to the "Prevent Duty", in particular, to prevent anyone being drawn into terrorism? <a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445916/Prevent_Duty_Guidanc">https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445916/Prevent_Duty_Guidanc</a> <a href="http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/freedom-of-speech">http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/freedom-of-speech</a>	N/A
----	---	-----

**Dissertation Summary (Students only)**

Please provide further information on your overall dissertation proposal below (200-300 words only)

Please see enclosed

Please explain how the identified ethical issues will be handled. This would include anonymity, confidentiality, safe storage and ethical handling of data within the expected time frame, and participant consent as detailed in the sections above. If you are working with children or vulnerable adults, discuss your processes for recruitment and obtaining consent.

It is your obligation to bring these and any other issues not covered on this form to the attention of the Committee (please use separate sheet if necessary).

Please see enclosed

**STATEMENT OF ETHICAL APPROVAL** Part 1 of Project

This project has been considered using agreed School procedures and is now approved.

Signed [Signature] Print Name Helen J. V. [unclear] Date 8/8/19  
(Chair, School Ethics Committee)

Signed [Signature] Print Name J A MULVILLE Date 13/08/2019  
(Second Confirmation)

**Appendix 7      Ethical approval      CHILDREN**

**Michael Coombes**

**PhD degree at Cardiff University**

**Thesis:**

**“What do children today understand about concepts of  
death and the afterlife?”**

**Part 2 –Children**

This request for Ethical Approval is for the area of research that deals with children who receive Religious Education in schools.

In this Part 2 of the Ethical Approval application, the researcher will discuss with children what they have learned and understood in Religious Education, including teaching on the afterlife.

The discussion will not involve direct questioning about the afterlife in any general, abstract sense, but rather, it will be based on ideas and concepts which the children have already learned at school. The aim is to determine what they have understood from this aspect of Religious Education, and their views on what they have learned.

**4<sup>th</sup> October 2019**

**1. REFERENCES**

**2. RESEARCH AND TEACHING ETHICAL APPROVAL FORM**

**3. DISSERTATION SUMMARY  
ETHICS SUMMARY**

**4. INFORMATION:**

- |                                  |                 |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| a. General information leaflet   | All             |
| b. Participant information sheet | Pupils          |
| c. Participant information sheet | Parent/guardian |

**5. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORMS:**

- |                             |                 |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| a. Participant consent form | Pupils          |
| b. parent/guardian          | Parent/guardian |

**6. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: SCHEDULE AND TOPIC GUIDE:**

- |  |        |
|--|--------|
| a. Focus Group semi-structured topic guide | Pupils |
|--|--------|

**7. NOTEPAD:**

- |  |        |
|--|--------|
| a. Issued when relevant only to topics being discussed | Pupils |
|--|--------|



SCHOOL OF HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY AND RELIGION  
RESEARCH AND TEACHING ETHICAL APPROVAL FORM

To Be Submitted in hard copy to the School's Ethics Officer: Professor Helen Nicholson,  
School of History, Archaeology & Religion, John Percival Building, 5.45  
(Nicholsonhj@cardiff.ac.uk)

**Note:** The form must be accompanied by any necessary documentation applicable to the project (consent forms, permissions, etc.)

Principal Investigator / Supervisor	Mark Griffiths
Student Name & Number (if applicable)	Michael Coombes 1864177
DBS (Enhanced) ID	C3391338199 (Auto renewed 20 <sup>th</sup> September 2019)
Email Address	[REDACTED]
Title of Project	'What do children today understand about concepts of death and the afterlife?'
Purpose of work proposed i.e. teaching, undergraduate project, postgraduate project, externally funded research, commercial research	Postgraduate project
Other Collaborators	None
Funding Body (if applicable)	None
STUDENTS ONLY	
Has your supervisor both read <b>and</b> approved this form	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Supervisor Signature	

**PLEASE REFER TO THE FOLLOWING BEFORE FILLING OUT THE REST OF YOUR APPLICATION:**

1. The School Research Ethics webpage can be accessed on the School's website, under the research section, as well as the staff intranet.
1. Information on data management, collecting personal data: data protection act requirements can be accessed via the Staff Intranet of Cardiff University: <https://intranet.cardiff.ac.uk/>  
Log into Intranet/Research Support/Research Integrity and Governance/Research Ethics/Ethical Review/School Research Ethics Committees
2. Cardiff University's Research Integrity and Governance Code of Practice



**Appendix 8 Information sheets, Interview  
schedules/guides, Consent forms**

**Appendix 8a Parents/guardians and Children**

**Appendix 8b Other participants**



## Information sheets

- General Information leaflet
- Pupils
- Parents/guardians

**Hello – my name is Mike Coombes  
and I would like to ask you for your help**

I am doing research into what children today understand about concepts of death and the afterlife, and I am looking for volunteers. To help you decide whether you'd like to take part I've answered some of the questions often asked, but if you would like to talk about it some more, my contact details are at the end.

**This is important work –  
please take time to consider taking part**

- ***What is it about?***

My research is looking at what children today understand about death and the afterlife

- ***Intention, purpose and process of the research***

I would like children in Y6 (age 10-11) to take part in a series of discussions on the subject. Approximately 4 groups of about 6 children will be involved for about 1 hour and we will talk generally about aspects of Religious Education. I will be guiding the discussion which will be co-administered by an appropriate adult

***Mutual expectations in the research process***

As well asking the questions I will ensure that children involved are not becoming anxious or upset – if they are, they can decide to take a break or end their participation

**The wellbeing of the child is the main thing I will be thinking about** – all they need to do and be is honest, as I will be

- ***Researcher's duty of candour and responsibilities in the research***

I will answer any questions I am asked. It is important that children have a 'voice' that is heard: this is more important than them hearing what I say

- ***Any potential identified risks and how addressed /managed***

Though it is unlikely, as the discussion may cover death and the afterlife a child may become upset or anxious, even though they will only be talking about things they have been taught in school or already know. This could happen during the discussion or afterwards. A qualified counsellor will be available should this be wanted

- ***My duty to intervene to prevent harm to participants in the course of the research***

I am a qualified counsellor, and I am trained to identify any signs of anxiety or distress during the discussion. If I do, it will be paused or stopped, whatever is best

- ***Ethical personal boundaries***

My work as a researcher is subject to ethical standards established by both Cardiff University and my professional body BACP. Contact details will be provided on request if you want to discuss any matter regarding the research

- ***Rights of the participant to end their involvement in the research***

Taking part is voluntary. There will be no pressure to participate in the research, and if a child does start, they can end at any time, without explanation

- ***Complaints procedures and how to access them***

The two organisations I answer to for ethical practice, Cardiff University and BACP, can be contacted about making a complaint – contact details will be provided on request

**Confidentiality, anonymity and privacy are the main issues to do with research,**

- ***Confidentiality issues including data gathering, data storage and limitations***

which is about collecting, analysing and reporting data.

- The data to be collected will be minimal personal information – name, age, gender, ethnicity, religion, parent/guardian – and the answers to the discussion questions
- Each child taking part will be given an ID code, and only this code will be used during the research. The code and personal information will be kept separate and never reported at the same time, so every effort will be made to ensure anonymity
- Everything that is said during the discussion will be kept confidential – children’s individual views will not be reported to ensure no attribution to any one child
- There is only one situation that would change that – if the child identifies to the researcher any safeguarding issue, or their intention to harm themselves or someone else, I am obliged to let an appropriate person or organisation know
- **DATA PROTECTION:** All information will be recorded and kept on digital media – computer or external hard drive – and encrypted to prevent anyone seeing or accessing it unintentionally. The computer, backups, and any paperwork will be kept in a secured location for a period of seven years
- The data recorded and collected will be analysed and reported – a summary of the findings will be made available to everyone taking part in the research
- There is no intention to use the data collected for any purpose beyond this study: if this situation changes, for example a new research study is set up and wants to use the data, consent will be obtained before this happens
- All participants have legal rights under the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR, 2018) including access, amendment, return or removal of data. More information will be provided on request

**Contact details: M:                      E:**

# Children's Information Sheet

## Religious Education Project

This term Mr Mike Coombes will be visiting to carry out a research project in your class. He will ask about your experiences of different parts of religious education and what you have understood.



To start with, Mike will speak to you about the project, and also meet with your parents so they know all about it. You can ask Mike any questions. The project will involve recording discussions with some children in the class. There will be some writing activities but mostly it will be discussing things to help Mike understand more about what you have learned.

After you and your parents have had time to think about it, you can choose if you would like to be involved in the discussions and if you don't want to then that is OK.

We will ask you all to read through a Consent Form and write and sign your name at the bottom if you agree to take part in the project. You can ask Mike questions or change your mind about taking part at any time.

## What will we be looking at?

- Hobbies and interests outside school



- In RE, what you learn about



- Outside the school, what you learn



PAGE 2

## What will we be asking in recorded discussions?



- What are your hobbies and interests outside school?
- In RE what are you taught about the end of life?
- What are you taught in RE about the afterlife?
- What do you *understand* by the end of life and the afterlife?
- Have you learned anything about these subjects outside school? What have you learned?

It's up to you whether you want to take part in a recorded discussion. We will ask you to talk to Mike in four groups of around six pupils, but we might not be able to involve everyone.

We won't tell anyone else in school what you say in the discussion unless we think you are in any kind of danger. If your comments are written in the final report, we will use a pretend name.

## What activities will we be doing?

We will ask you to work in a group to discuss experiences of RE and what you have understood. The main activity is talking, along with recording ideas and what is being said, which can include:

- *Using a Notepad for writing and drawing*
- *Post-Its to record points you make*
- *Flipchart to keep a track of the discussion*



## What will we do with the information?

We will put it together with what we receive from other groups to see what you learn and understand in RE. We will ask you for permission to copy your Notepad, Post-Its and flipchart used in the discussion, in case we need to include pictures or other information in reports about the research.

All the information will be kept secure, private and confidential, no-one else will be able to see it or see what anyone has said in the discussion.





## PARENTS/GUARDIANS

### Invitation to take part

I would like to invite your child to take part in a project that I am doing as part of my research at Cardiff University.

**Title of the project:** *'What do children today understand about concepts of death and the afterlife?'* - I will explain this to you if you need me to.

### The Aims of the Project:

- Firstly, to find out what children know about death and the afterlife, and where they learned it;
- What the church wants to teach children;
- What is actually being taught by teachers;
- Finally, see if there are any 'gaps' between what children understand and what is taught.

### Background to the Project

I became interested in this subject when I was doing bereavement counselling. People often asked, "*What's next?*" when they talked about someone who had died. I have studied whether believing in the afterlife helped people or not. I found that it *did* help most people eventually, but sometimes things weren't understood properly or clearly because of what they learned when they were young. I want to find out what children today understand, and how they learn it.

### **Why you have been asked**

Your child has been selected as a pupil receiving religious education, which includes aspects of death and the afterlife. I would like to know what they've understood about this, and your views on it.

### **What happens if you want to change your mind?**

You or your child can change your mind any at time. I will fully respect your decision.

### **What would happen if you join the study?**

If you agree to take part, then together with other pupils in a group we would have a discussion. This would be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you and, if being held in the school, for the head teacher and/or teacher. During the discussion I will offer the group some areas to think about concerning their religious education. I need your written agreement to taking part in the discussion please, and to recording and writing it up.

### **Are there any risks?**

The discussion may involve some thinking about things the children know about death and the afterlife, and how they learned it. Should they get upset a counsellor will be made available, but this is unlikely as they will only be discussing things they've already learned and talked about. It is important that you understand that at all times I will do my best to work professionally and follow the rules and standards expected of researchers at Cardiff University.

### **Your rights**

You or your child have the right to stop at any time. They can also choose not to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable.

### **What happens to the discussion results?**

**DATA PROTECTION:** The discussions will be recorded. The recordings will be written up, password protected and secured on my personal computer. A copy, also password protected, will be kept on an external hard drive and at a secure location provided by Cardiff University for data security. This data will only be used for the purposes of the study and for any future academic work. Everything that is said during the discussion will be kept confidential. Quotes from the discussion group will be included in the work, but individuals will not be identified from the quotes.

**NO-ONE ELSE WILL HAVE ACCESS TO THE INFORMATION**

### **Are there any benefits from taking part?**

I hope that this research will lead to new knowledge being created, and new ways of thinking being generated about the education of children on death and the afterlife. Your child taking part will make a very valuable contribution to my research project, for which I am very grateful.

### **How we protect your privacy**

Any information I receive from you or your child is strictly confidential, and all data will be made anonymous. Individual views will not be reported.

There is only one situation that would change that confidentiality – if a child identifies to the researcher any safeguarding issue, or their intention to harm themselves or someone else, I am obliged to let an appropriate person or organisation know

As a researcher, I must abide by the Code of Ethics set out by the School of History, Archaeology and Religion at Cardiff University (I will explain this if you need me to). I will keep your name and contact details completely separate, and there will be no information on either the recorded or the written data that could identify you.

### **Holding your information**

Cardiff University requires that a copy of the consent form will be retained for ten years. Once I have finished my study, the data and all the relevant paperwork will be destroyed.

**Thank you.**

**Contact Details:** Michael Coombes

**Tel No:**

**Email:**

## **Participant Consent forms**

- **Pupils**
- **Parents/guardians**

**Children's Consent form**  
**(As Information Sheet – last page only)**

---

**Religious Education Project**

**What consent is needed for.**

- I agree that I have received a Participant Information leaflet, I have had time to think about it, ask questions, and have discussed it with my parents.
- I understand that taking part is voluntary and I am free to stop at any time, without giving a reason.
- I understand that the discussion is to be recorded.
- I understand that Mike Coombes will lead the discussions and that another person will be present to help if needed.
- I agree to my words being used in reports and understand that they will be used under a pretend name. My views and words will be confidential.
- I agree to take part in the research.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

---

## Parent/guardian: consent form (Study 4) 2019

Study ID Number: MC\_Q4\_2\_5\_04102019

Participant No: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Project: 'What do children today understand about concepts of death and the afterlife?'

Name of Researcher: Michael Coombes

---

### Participant to complete this section: Please initial each box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my child's participation in a discussion group is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I agree to my child taking part in the above study.
4. **DATA PROTECTION:** I agree to the discussion group being recorded.
5. I agree to the researcher moderating the discussion group \*   
\* *This term has been explained to me*
6. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.
7. (Information for parent/guardian): 
  - a. The research has been explained and discussed with my child
  - b. My child is willing to take part in the research
  - c. We understand that we can refuse, or we can withdraw at any time
  - d. My child is/may be too young to understand but I/we will explain as much as possible and respect any signs that he/she wishes to withdraw.

---

Name and signature of participant 's parent/guardian

---

Date

Michael Coombes

---

Name and signature of person taking consent

---

Date

## Children's Focus Group documents

- Schedule and Topic Guide
- Notepad

**\*\*\* NOTEPAD PAGES ISSUED WHEN RELEVANT\*\*\***

## **NOT FOR ISSUE**

---

### **Focus Group Discussion: Schedule and Topic Guide (Study 4) 2019**

**Study ID Number:** MC\_Q4\_2\_6\_13052019

**Title of Project:** 'What do children today understand about concepts of death and the afterlife?' \*

**Name of Researcher:** Michael Coombes

---

#### **Introduction**

Introduce researcher (moderator) and other person (co-moderator) to be present/roles

**DATA PROTECTION:** Recording the focus group.

*This is for the moderator's benefit so as not to miss anything.*

#### **The Focus Group ("Discussion")**

Clarify the aims of the study.

Talk through the procedure.

*Check that participants can commit the time – up to 1 hour.*

*Ensure the participant understands they can pause or end the discussion if they experience any anxiety or distress.*

#### **Reassurance**

Confirm that the participant does not object to the researcher leading ("moderating") the focus group discussion\*

*Reaffirm anonymity and confidentiality.*

*Reassure participant that the only material used will be anonymised quotes for the purposes of the study.*

#### **Definitions \***

**BRIEFLY** Explain what is meant by 'afterlife' or 'life after death'.

*Don't undermine the children's views and beliefs.*

*Explain what is meant by 'moderator'/'moderating'.*



## NOT FOR ISSUE

### CHILDREN: FOCUS GROUP TOPIC GUIDE

**POWER: GROUND RULES** *Make clear at outset and reaffirm throughout*

- Use the **NOTEPAD** or Post-Its to write or draw something if you want *Distribute **ONLY** when relevant.*
- No rights or wrongs.
- Every opinion is valued.
- Give everyone a chance to talk – only one person talking at a time, no ‘side’ conversations.
- Duration – up to an hour.
- **Confidentiality** is important – do not tell anyone outside this group what anyone has said.

**AIMS OF THE SESSION:** *Reiterate what was said in the Information Sheet .*

- To find out what participants know about death and the afterlife.
- Where they found out what they know.

**OPENING QUESTION:** *Designed to relax participants and start inter-group discussion.*

**Tell me about your hobbies and interests, what you like in school and outside.**

*(Max. 10 minutes)*

*Pages 1-2.*

**TOPIC GUIDE**    **\*\* NOT specific questions, but AREAS OF DISCUSSION on what learned in RE.**  
**\*\* Before each question Distribute relevant NOTEPAD.**

5. Do children learn about **dying** in school? Ask them to tell you about it    *Distribute page 3.*
6. What are children taught about **life after death**?    *Distribute page 4.*
7. What do **the participants** understand by the terms: ‘**death**’ and ‘**life after death**’?    *Distribute page 5.*
8. What have the participants learned about dying and life after death **outside** school? Where from?    *Distribute page 6.*

*(Max. 45 minutes)*

**PROBES:**

4. ‘One thing I’ve heard several of you mention is.... I wonder what the rest of you have to say about that?’  
or ‘Is there anything someone else would like to add?’
5. ‘Would you explain further?’ or ‘Would you say more?’ or ‘I don’t understand’.
6. ‘Would you give me an example of what you mean?’ or ‘Please describe what you mean’.

**STIMULI:**

1. Introduce a **Bible story** relating to death and afterlife e.g. raising of Lazarus.
2. **POWER:** Use drawing (**NOTEPAD**), POST-ITs, flipchart to record information offered.

**CLOSING THE FOCUS GROUP** *Summarise what has been said, refer to POST-Its and flipcharts, ask for confirmation of what has been gathered/understood.*

1. These are all the questions I have. Is there anything you would like to add or ask me?  
*(Max. 5 minutes)*
2. Finally, using the final NOTEPAD sheet:    *Distribute page 7.*
  - a. Give me 3 words to describe HEAVEN.
  - b. Draw a PICTURE of HEAVEN.

*Leave video and audio running. collect Notepads & Co-moderator information.*



## **Focus Group discussion**

### **NOTEPAD**

**\*\*\* PAGES ISSUED ONLY WHEN RELEVANT\*\*\***

**We may talk about particular areas that you've learned in Religious Education: please use the space to write things down if you would like to, or you can do a drawing as well as using words.**

**Say as little or as much as you like!**

**Hobbies and interests, what you like to do in school and outside**

**Notepad for you to use**

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

## What is taught about **Dying?**

PAGE 3

## What is taught about **Life after death?**

PAGE 4

What is **understood** about 'death' and 'afterlife'?

PAGE 5

**What has been learned about death and the afterlife from **outside school**? From where?**

**PAGE 6**

**I've collected all the information I was hoping for: is there anything you would like to add to your answers or ask me?**

**FINAL REQUEST:**

- **Please write 3 words to describe HEAVEN**

\_\_\_\_\_

- **Please use this page to draw a picture of HEAVEN**

**Thank you.**



**Forms :**

- a. Information sheet
- b. Consent form
- c. Interview schedule
- d. Interview questions

**For:**

1. Bereaved young people
2. Faith leaders and Policymakers
3. Educators
4. Other (Information sheet and consent form only):
  - a. Permission to interview clergy, staff and pupils (Director of Education/Director of Religious Education)
  - b. Co-moderator
  - c. Bereavement counsellors

\*\*\* 1 form only for each category – all forms are variations of the selection, EXCEPT '*Permission to interview clergy, staff and pupils*'

---

## Bereaved: Participant information sheet (Study 1) 2020/2021

Study ID Number: MC\_Q1\_010120

Participant No: \_\_\_\_\_

---

### Invitation to participate

I would like to invite you to participate in my research project, which I am conducting as part of my PhD degree at Cardiff University.

**Title of Project:** A study into 'what children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife'

### The Aim of the Project

The aim of the study is to explore what the church wants to teach children and young people about death and the afterlife; what is actually being delivered by educators; what children and young people understand they have been taught; and any effect on them with regard to their understanding of death and the afterlife when they have a personal experience of death.

### Background to the Project

I have become increasingly interested in this area of study over my almost twenty years of bereavement counselling. The question of "what next?" has always arisen when the bereaved talk of the ones they have lost, but this has become more pronounced since I started counselling exclusively in a pastoral, religious setting.

As part of a 'Masters' research degree I explored whether belief in the afterlife helped or hindered the grieving process: the conclusions were primarily that it *did* help eventually, but initially it was complicated by a lack of understanding of the afterlife and the expectations of the bereaved not being met by reality, which could be traced back to their education. This study seeks to explore this phenomenon and whether the statement that we are not educating our children and young people adequately in this area is supported by research.

### Why you have been asked

You have been selected because as a pupil you received education about death and the afterlife and have experienced a bereavement.

### What happens if you want to change your mind?

You can change your mind any time up to and including the interview stage. I will fully respect your decision. Moreover, there will be no penalties for non-participation.

### What would happen if you join the study?

If you agree to participate, then I would conduct a semi-structured interview with you. This interview would be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you and, if being held in your school, to your head teacher and/or teacher. I will ask you a series of questions based around your understanding of what you are being taught about death and the afterlife. I plan to record and transcribe each interview.

**Are there any risks?**

The research will involve some thinking about your home and school life and your history. I do not anticipate that this will generate any undue distress to you and I do not foresee any risks to your participation at this time. However, should you as a participant experience distress an experienced counsellor will be made available. You may also access the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) website where you will find a list of qualified counsellors who would be able to help ([www.bacp.org.uk](http://www.bacp.org.uk)). At all times during the interview, I will endeavour to work with integrity and honesty and follow the principles and guidance expected of researchers at Cardiff University.

**Your rights.**

You have the right to withdraw at any time up to and during the interview. This also includes your right to elect not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

**What happens to the semi-structured interview results?**

The data will be transcribed, password protected and secured on my personal computer. A copy, also password protected, will be kept on a memory stick. This data will only be used for the purposes of the study and for any related academic work. You as a participant will not be identified in any publication. However, anonymised quotes from your interview will be included in the thesis and any academic articles. My intention is to progress this study to PhD level.

**Are there any benefits from taking part?**

No direct and tangible benefit will arise from your participation. I hope that this research may lead to the creation of new knowledge and ways of thinking about the education of children and young people about death and the afterlife. Your interview will make a material and valued contribution to the research project, for which I am grateful. I would be happy to send you a summary copy of the final report.

**How we protect your privacy.**

Any information I receive from you is strictly confidential and all data will be anonymised. As a researcher, I agree to abide by the Code of Ethics set out by the School of History, Archaeology and Religion at Cardiff University. I will keep your name and contact details completely separate from all other forms and there will be no information on either the recorded or the transcribed data that could identify you.

As per University requirements, a copy of the form with your name and contact details plus the attached consent form will be retained for ten years. Once I have finished my study, the data and all the relevant paperwork will be destroyed.

Thank you.

**Michael Coombes**

**PLEASE NOTE:** *You will be given a copy of this sheet to keep, together with a copy of your consent form.*

**Contact Details:** Michael Coombes

**Tel No:**

**Email:**

---

**Bereaved: Participant consent form (Study 1) 2020/2021**

**Study ID Number:** MC\_Q1\_010120

**Participant No:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Title of Project:** A study into 'what children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife'

**Name of Researcher:** Michael Coombes

---

**Participant to complete this section: Please initial each box.**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.
4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.
5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.

---

**Signature of Participant** **Date**

Michael Coombes

---

**Name of person taking consent** **Date**

---

**Signature of person taking consent** **Date**

*When completed, 1 copy for participant & 1 copy for researcher Study 1 file*

---

**Bereaved: Semi- structured schedule and questions (Study 1) 2020/2021**  
**(NOT FOR ISSUE)**

**Study ID Number:** MC\_Q1\_010120

**Participant No:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Title of Project:** A study into 'what children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife'

**Name of Researcher:** Michael Coombes

---

### **Introduction**

Introduce researcher

Talk through Participation Information Sheet and Consent form

Clarify any queries on these forms.

### **The Interview**

Clarify the aims of the study

Talk through the procedure

Check that participants can commit the time – up to 1.0 hours

Ensure the participant or their parent/guardian understand they can pause or end the interview if either party experience any anxiety or distress.

### **Recording**

Taped interview

**\*\*\* CHECK RECORDING EQUIPMENT – VIDEO, SOUND \*\*\***

Ask whether or not the participant/parent or guardian objects to be recorded. (This is for my benefit so as not to miss anything)

Invite the participant/parent or guardian to complete the Participant Consent Form

Reaffirm anonymity and confidentiality

Reassure participant/parent or guardian that the only material used will be anonymised quotes for the purposes of the study.

**Date of recording:** \_\_\_\_\_

## SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Introduction

Can you please tell me about your loss of your loved one?

**PROMPT:** For example, what was the relationship to the deceased, when was the loss, how did the person die, was the participant present, what support was available/offered/taken, what “symptoms” (physical, mental, emotional) were experienced.

### Interview questions

1. Can you tell me about any belief you had in the afterlife before the loss?

#### PROMPTS:

- What do you understand by the term “afterlife”?
- What afterlife beliefs were you taught when you were young? Have these changed or been added to in any way as you grew up? If so how?

2. Following the loss, can you describe what feelings or thoughts you had about God and afterlife?

#### PROMPTS:

- What religious or spiritual issues related to the afterlife, if any, caused problems after the loss of your loved one?
- If resolved, how did you resolve them? If not resolved, how do they affect you?

3. Please describe any ways in which belief in the afterlife strengthened or challenged your relationship with God following your loss.

#### PROMPTS:

- Has your practice of your faith changed since your loss? Please explain.
- In the context of belief in the afterlife would you say you have more or less hope for the future?

4. Is there anything else you would like to say about belief in the afterlife that has not been covered?

---

**Permission to interview clergy, staff and pupils (Study 2) 2020/2021**

**Study ID Number:** MC\_Q2\_010120

**Consenter Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Role:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Title of Project:** A study into 'what children today understand about the concepts of death and the afterlife'

**Name of Researcher:** Michael Coombes

---

**Participant to complete this section: Please initial each box.**

6. I confirm that I have read and understand the Participant information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
7. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent at any time, without giving any reason.
8. I agree to take part in the above study, and in doing so I consent to the researcher interviewing clergy, staff and pupils in those areas and schools over which I have jurisdiction.
9. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.
10. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.

---

**Signature of person giving consent** **Date**

Michael Coombes

---

**Name of person taking consent** **Date**

---

**Signature of person taking consent** **Date**

*When completed, 1 copy for consenter & 1 copy for researcher Study 1 file*

## Appendix 9

## Study participants

### Bereaved young people

<b>IPA Participant Analysis Group 1</b>			
<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Bereaved (years)</b>
Darren	Male	23	3
Cheri	Female	21	4
Emma	Female	20	5
Jodie	Female	22	5
Neil	Male	21	4
Felicity	Female	19	3

<b>IPA Participant Analysis Group 2</b>			
<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Bereaved (years)</b>
Cory	Male	24	5
Annie	Female	23	4
Lara	Female	21	3
Charlie	Female	19	3
Steve	Male	25	3
Huw	Male	18	4



## Policymakers and Church leaders

<b>Policymakers and Church leaders</b>	
<b>Role</b>	<b>Name</b>
Policymaker	Fr. Brian
Church leaders	Canon Thomas
	Fr. Ronan
Chaplain	Claire

## Educators

<b>Educators School 1</b>	
<b>Role</b>	<b>Name</b>
Head teacher	Brigid
Religious Education Co-ordinator	Andrea
Teachers	Ann (Deputy headteacher)
	Geoff

<b>Educators School 2</b>	
<b>Role</b>	<b>Name</b>
Head teacher	Daniel
Religious Education Co-ordinator	Teresa
Teachers	David
	Gareth

## Focus Group participants: School 1

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>School year</b>	<b>Allocated code</b>	<b>AKA</b>
1	Y5	101	Amy
		102	Gary
		103	Adele
		104	Craig
		105	Carole

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>School year</b>	<b>Allocated code</b>	<b>AKA</b>
2	Y5	201	Celine
		202	Did not attend
		203	Macey
		204	Toni
		205	Steven
		206	Lina
<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>School year</b>	<b>Allocated code</b>	<b>AKA</b>
3	Y5	301	Bryan
		302	Robert
		303	Matthew
		304	Mary
		305	Tina
<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>School year</b>	<b>Allocated code</b>	<b>AKA</b>
4	Y6	401	Charlie
		402	Will
		403	Jayne
		404	Diana
		405	Sarah
<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>School year</b>	<b>Allocated code</b>	<b>AKA</b>
5	Y6	501	Nina
		502	Sophie
		503	Lizzie
		504	Alex
		505	Paul

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>School year</b>	<b>Allocated code</b>	<b>AKA</b>
6	Y6	601	John
		602	Freddie
		603	Josie
		604	Ann
		605	Izzy

**Focus Group participants: School 2**

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>School year</b>	<b>Allocated code</b>	<b>AKA</b>
7	Y6	701	Morna
		702	Virgina
		703	Tomas
		704	Martina
		705	Elizabeth
		706	Judith

## **Appendix 10 Notepads**

**Appendix 10a Children's written work**

**Appendix 10b Children's drawings**

## Appendix 10a Children's written work

### 1 What is taught about dying

5

### What is taught about Dying?

I learned that when we die, we go to Heaven (or Hell). I think that our souls ascend into Heaven and God allows us into his Kingdom. Jesus ascends into Heaven on Easter, and I think we do as well.

PAGE 3

Page 21

4

### What is taught about Dying?

We learnt about remembrance day  
Some people say you go to heaven  
or your dreams but some  
say you turn into animals  
I don't know what to believe

PAGE 3



2 What is taught about life after death

(3) *man*



What is taught about Life after death?



- 1 they see nothing - only see Black
- 2 they get remembered and people come to bring flowers a year later on the date of the death.
- 3 God sends a light and ~~tears~~ lifts up the dead body.
- 4 they will see Black for a while and rebirth
- 5 ~~the~~ <sup>when</sup> the people die, the people are Stars

PAGE 4



~~1~~ (2)

**What is taught about Life after death?**

If you die After some one dies do they just go to heaven or do they go to hell instead. When they bury you is your body still under there or is it ashes because people keep the ashes.

PAGE 4

5



**What is taught about Life after death?**

What happens when you die is where you get picked to heaven or ~~hell~~ hell, or if you don't get picked you stay in the purgatory.

PAGE 4

4. (MAD)

### What is taught about Life after death?

~~We have~~ 1. We haven't learnt much about it, we just learnt that there is no ~~we~~ right or wrong.

2. I think that they would see black for a while then they would go to heaven or hell and God or Jesus would bring them back to life as a different person.

PAGE 4

3 What is understood about life after death

3



What is understood about 'death' and 'afterlife'?

I understand dying like when you get older your body gets older with you so it doesn't function as well it would when you're younger.

Afterlife is when you go to heaven I don't know if you have like a another life but I think so.

PAGE 5




1



**What is understood about 'death' and 'afterlife'?**

In death I think it's where you go to a place where you go somewhere after death and you can see your family and animals (pets).

Death  x0 x0

It's where you end life and go somewhere. there is lots of ways you can pass away. There's lots of ways to die. Have another life in heaven.

PAGE 5

What has been learned about death and the afterlife from our school's story?



4 What is learned outside school

3

What has been learned about death and the afterlife from outside school? From where?

I learn abt from my parents because they are from poland and I also have a kids bible. In poland they have alot of like events. They don't have halloween and instead you go and pray for parts of your family and friends.

PAGE 6

\* 5

What has been learned about death and the afterlife from outside school? From where?

I learn about death by reading books, and I learnt that, people have to pass a test to go to the afterlife and one task is were you fight a giant Animal and with no Weapon and if you pass you have to weigh less than a feather to pass.

PAGE 6

5



What has been learned about death and the afterlife from outside school? From where?

I have learned about Death and afterlife from ~~catechism~~ catechism and the TV. I have learned that in catechism, we learn lots of Jesus' stories. So in the Resurrection, Jesus ascended. So if you're bad I think you descend into Hell. We do online Catechism because of Covid 19.

PAGE 6





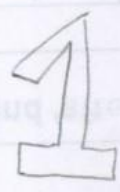
What has been learned about death and the afterlife from outside school? From where?

My freinds told me that aster you are burried it takes 1000 years for your body to disintergrate into ashes.  
my nan's got her dogs ashes in her room.

My mum and dad told me that the stars are dead people.

We become  
alive again

PAGE 6



Page 24





What has been learned about death and the afterlife from outside school? From where?

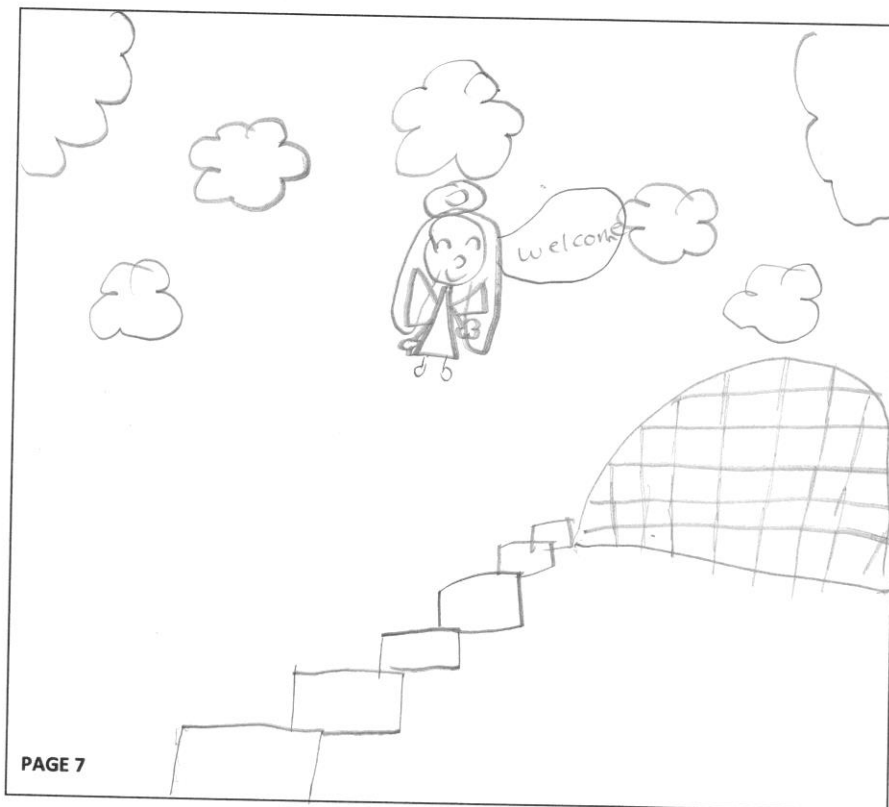
I think that = if you have a good and friendly, loved life, you will go to heaven. But if you do something/somethings really bad then God or Jesus will send you to hell. But is God can't decide you will need to go on the stars until you learn how to be a better person. My nan still has her dog - Rosie's ashes. My nan still has her ashes because she has spreaded some out in the woods which she used to Lorrell!! So she put half of the ashes there and kept the other half of the ashes so she won't forget her. My mum told me when you get buried you with look down on the people And that the stars are the dead people looking down on us.

PAGE 6



Appendix 10b Children's drawings

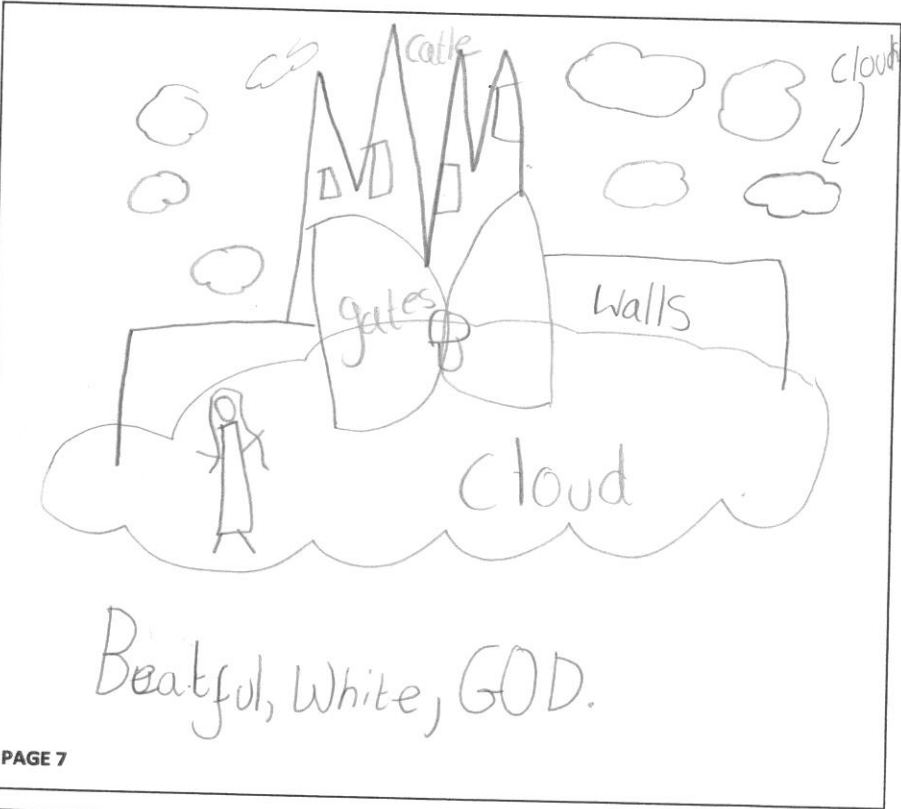
I've collected all the information I was hoping for: is there anything you would like to add to your answers or ask me? *thea G*



Thank you.

7

**I've collected all the information I was hoping for: is there anything you would like to add to your answers or ask me?**



Beautiful, White, GOD.

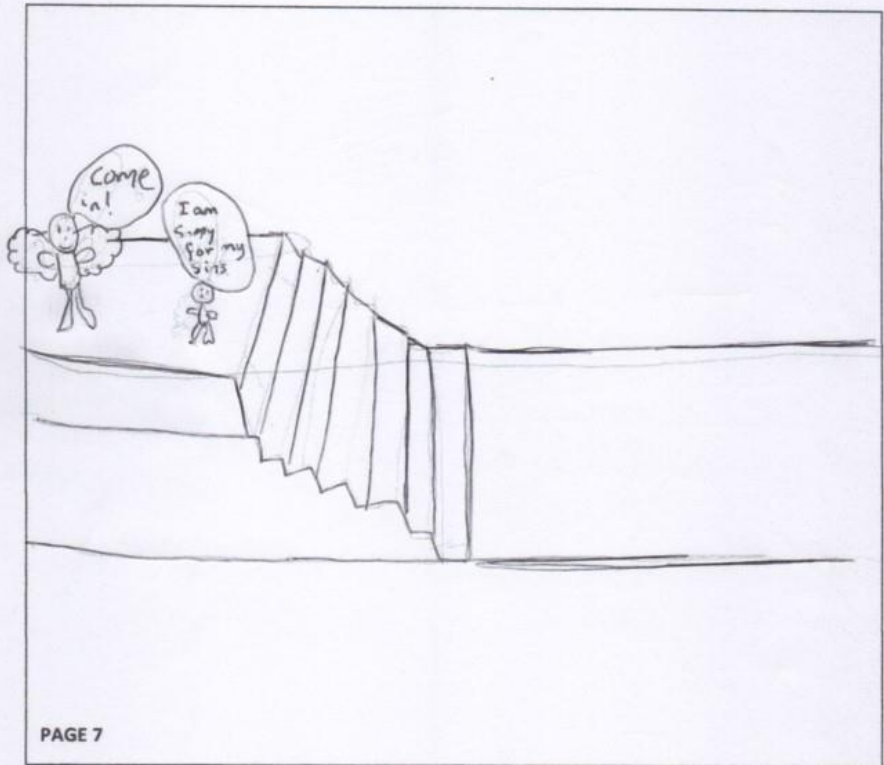
PAGE 7

**Thank you.**



1

I've collected all the information I was hoping for: is there anything you would like to add to your answers or ask me?

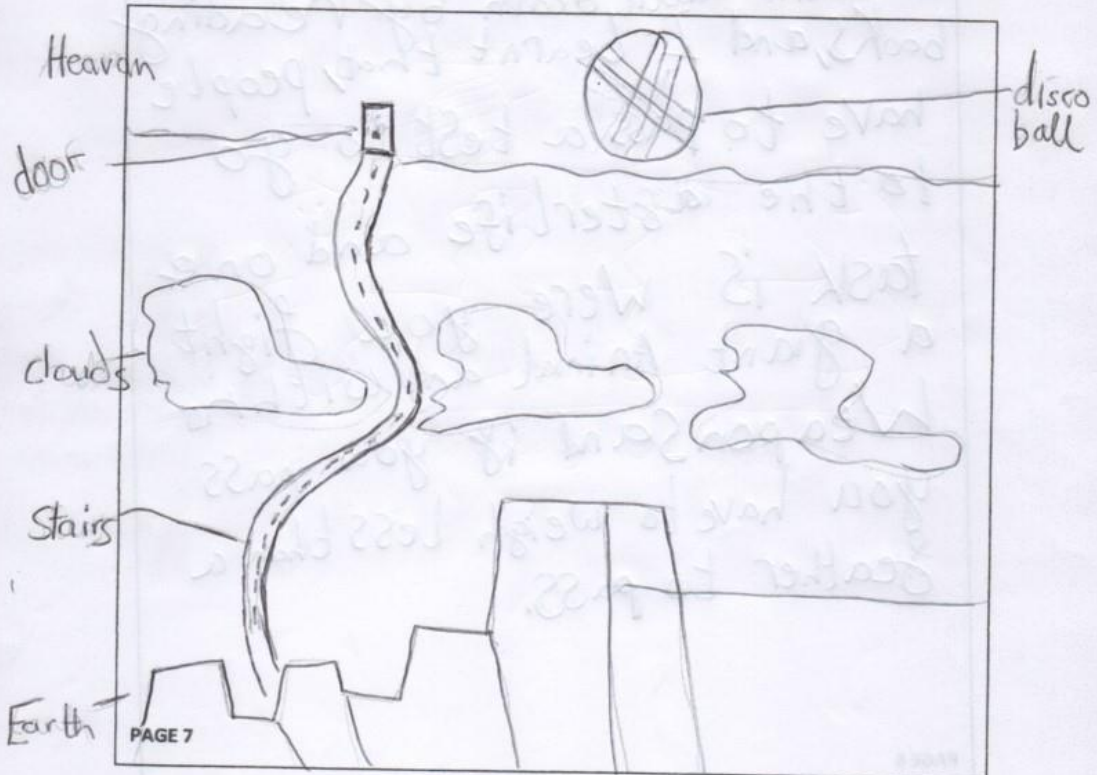


Thank you.

2 \*

\*

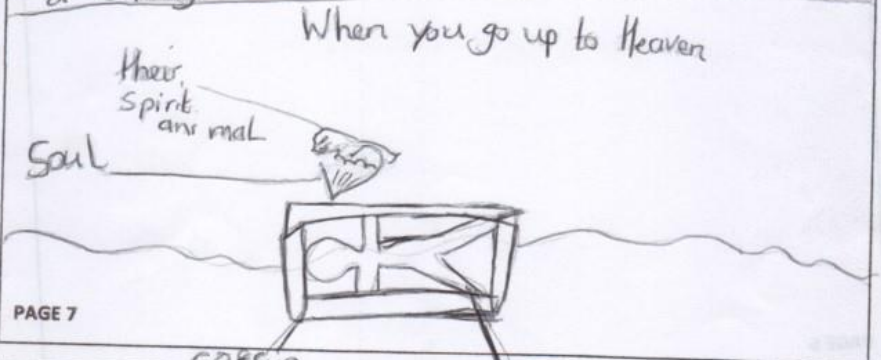
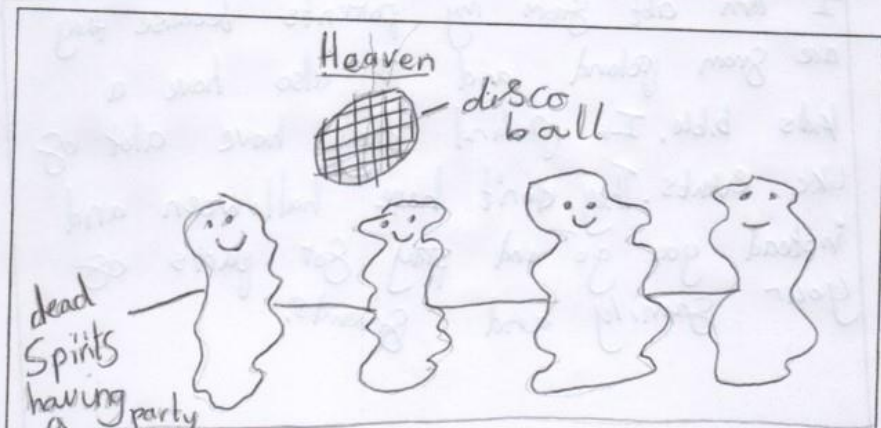
I've collected all the information I was hoping for: is there anything you would like to add to your answers or ask me?



Thank you.

3

I've collected all the information I was hoping for: is there anything you would like to add to your answers or ask me?



Thank you dead body

## Appendix 11 Ethics reference information

### Legislative details:

- *The Children's Act* (2004)
- *The Data Protection Act* (2018)
- *The General Data Protection Regulation* (2018)
- *The UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research* (2017)
- *The Declaration of Helsinki* (2013 edition)
- *The Singapore Statement on Research Integrity* (2010)
- *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (2012). See Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills [Ofsted] (2013) 'Young People's Guide to The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)', London. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/guide-to-the-uncrc/>

### Abbreviations used in this section:

- DfE Department for Education
- BACP British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
- BERA British Educational Research Association
- Ofsted Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills.

### BACP standards documents referenced:

- Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions (2018)
- Ethical Guidelines for Research in the Counselling Professions (2018)
- Competence framework for work with children and young people (4-18 years) (2019)
- Information Sheet: Working with Issues of Spirituality, Faith, Religion or Belief (2011)

### Cardiff University standards documents:

- Research Integrity and Governance Code of Practice. Version 2 July 2018. pp.15-17
- Safeguarding Policy: Children and Adults at Risk: Policy and Guidance. Version 1 May 2017 Section. 3.8.3 Research Involving Human Participants: Basic Principles: p17.



[downloaded from Cardiff University website page ‘Safeguarding children and adults at risk’ 5<sup>th</sup> December 2018].

- Code of Practice for Those Working with Children and ‘Adults at Risk’ [downloaded from Cardiff University website page ‘Safeguarding children and adults at risk’ 5<sup>th</sup> December 2018].
- Working With Children and Vulnerable Adults: working with children (Under 15). [Downloaded from Cardiff University website page ‘Safeguarding children and adults at risk’ 5<sup>th</sup> December 2018].
- Research Involving Human Participants Version 1.0 October 2018.

**BERA:** Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 2018)

**Information Commissioner’s Office: GDPR** - Guide to the General Data Protection Regulation (2018)

**DfE:**

- Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018)
- Young People’s Guide to The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2012)

<b>Location of ethics-related documents</b>	
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>Description</b>
7	<p><i>Ethical Approval</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cardiff University Ethical Application approval</li> </ul>
8a	<p><i>Information sheets, Interview schedules/guides, Consent Forms</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents/guardians</li> <li>• Children</li> </ul>
8b	<p><i>Information sheets, Interview schedules/guides, Consent Forms: Other Participants</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bereaved</li> <li>• Church leaders</li> <li>• Policymakers</li> <li>• Educators</li> <li>• Counsellors</li> <li>• Co-moderators</li> </ul>

## **List of tables and figures**

- 1) Census Information 2011
- 2) Progress of cremations 2010-2020
- 3) Childhood bereavement statistics
- 4) Study 1 Category Analysis
- 5) Study 2 Category Analysis
- 6) Study 3 Category Analysis
- 7) Study 4 Category Analysis

## Census 2011 – ‘What is your religion?’

The question ‘What is your religion?’ was on the 2011 census in England and Wales. It was open to all respondents but answering it was voluntary.

The question aimed to measure how we connect or identify with a religion regardless of practice or belief.

Religion	%age	Total
Christian	59.3	33,243,175
No religion	25.1	14,097,229
Religion not stated	7.2	4,038,336
Muslim	4.8	2,706,066
Hindu	1.5	816,633
Sikh	0.8	423,158
Jewish	0.5	263,346
Buddhist	0.4	247,743
Other religion	0.4	240,530

Source ONS Published 15<sup>th</sup> January 2015

## Progress of cremations 2010-2020

Progress of cremations in the British Isles 2010-2020 (Figures rounded up)

Year	No. of deaths ('000)	No. of cremations ('000)	Percentage cremated (%)
2010	566	414	73
2011	556	414	74
2012	573	426	74
2013	580	436	75
2014	574	429	75
2015	606	463	76
2016	597	460	77
2017	607	469	77
2018	618	481	78
2019	607	472	78
2020	691	543	79

Source: Office for National Statistics.

# Childhood bereavement statistics 2016



## KEY ESTIMATED STATISTICS ON CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT

	UK	GB	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland
How many parents died last year (2015), leaving dependent children? <sup>1</sup>	23,600 <sup>*</sup>	22,800 <sup>*</sup>	19,100 <sup>*</sup>	1,300 <sup>*</sup>	2,500 <sup>*</sup>	800 <sup>*</sup>
How often does a parent die, leaving dependent children?	Every 22 mins	Every 23 mins	Every 28 mins	Every 7 hours	Every 4 hours	Every 11 hours
How many children under 18 were bereaved of a parent last year? <sup>2</sup>	41,000 <sup>*</sup>	39,000 <sup>*</sup>	33,000 <sup>*</sup>	2,200 <sup>*</sup>	4,100 <sup>*</sup>	1,500 <sup>*</sup>
How many children were bereaved of a parent each week last year?	780 <sup>**</sup>	750 <sup>**</sup>	630 <sup>**</sup>	40 <sup>**</sup>	80 <sup>**</sup>	30 <sup>**</sup>
How many children were bereaved of a parent each day last year?	112	107	90	6	11	4
What proportion of 16 year olds have been bereaved of a parent? <sup>3</sup>		5% <sup>**</sup> or 1 in 20				

\* rounded to the nearest 1,000    ^ rounded to the nearest 100    \*\* rounded to the nearest 10    \* rounded to the nearest 1d.p.

© Childhood Bereavement Network (NCB), November 2016. Details of full workings available from Alison Penny, CBN Coordinator [apenny@ncb.org.uk](mailto:apenny@ncb.org.uk) | 020 7843 6309

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from data from the Office for National Statistics licensed under the Open Government Licence v.3.0. Combines age banded mortality statistics with census data on the proportion of adults living with dependent children.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from data from the Office for National Statistics licensed under the Open Government Licence v.3.0. Combines age banded mortality statistics with census data on the proportion of adults living with dependent children, and average number of dependent children by family type

<sup>3</sup> Percentage of young people included in the BCS1970 cohort study who had been bereaved of at least one parent by the age of 16. Parsons S (2011) *Long term impact of childhood bereavement. Preliminary analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)*

**Study 1 Category analysis First cohort Bereaved young people**

**FIRST COHORT Category 0, 1 & 2 Young People Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) themes**

Super-theme	Sub-theme	Darren	FA Cnt	Cheri	FA Cnt	Emma	FA Cnt	Jodie	FA Cnt	Neil	FA Cnt	Fliss	FA Cnt	FA TOT	Cat.	Cat.
<b>Effects of loss</b>	Symptomology	Yes	8	Yes	7	Yes	4	Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes	2	25	0	0 20+
	Impact on life	Yes	1	Yes	3	Yes	3	Yes	4	Yes	1	Yes	3	15	1	1 10+
<b>Delivery of Religious education</b>	Age-appropriate, communication	Yes	5	Yes	4	Yes	3	Yes	2	Yes	3	Yes	8	25	0	2 5+
	Live a good life			Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes	1	Yes	3	Yes	3	11	1	
	Teaching eschatology	Yes	3	Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes	2			Yes	3	12	1	
	'Planting the seeds'									Yes	1	Yes	9	10	1	
	School leadership & ethos			Yes	5			Yes	1	Yes	1			7	2	
	Transition to secondary									Yes	3	Yes	5	8	2	
<b>Change over time</b>	Parents/family	Yes	1	Yes	2			Yes	4	Yes	5	Yes	3	15	1	
	Generational change in RE			Yes	3	Yes	1			Yes	1			5	2	
<b>Taboo subject</b>		Yes	1	Yes	2					Yes	2	Yes	3	8	2	
<b>Socialisation</b>	Society			Yes	1	Yes	3	Yes	2	Yes	1			7	2	
<b>Faith</b>	Faith as a coping resource	Yes	4	Yes	4	Yes	7	Yes	4	Yes	5	Yes	6	30	0	
	Faith & hope for coping	Yes	1			Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes	2	Yes	1	8	2	
<b>Religious challenges</b>	Theodicy			Yes	5	Yes	2			Yes	1			8	1	
<b>In the counselling room</b>	Religion/faith not in room	Yes	2	Yes	3									5	2	

FIRST COHORT PRIMARY ANALYSIS OF IPA THEMES								
Super-theme	Sub-theme	Darren	Cheri	Emma	Jodie	Neil	Fliss	Cat.
<b>Effects of loss</b>	Symptomology	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	0
	Impact on life	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	1
<b>Delivery of RE</b>	Age-appropriate, communication	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	0
	Live a good life		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	1
	Teaching eschatology	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	1
	'Planting the seeds'					Y	Y	1
	School leadership & ethos		Y		Y	Y		2
	Transition to secondary					Y	Y	2
<b>Change over time</b>	Parents/family	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	1
	Generational change in RE		Y	Y		Y		2
<b>'Taboo' subject</b>		Y	Y			Y	Y	2
<b>Socialisation</b>	Changes in society		Y	Y	Y	Y		2
<b>Faith</b>	Faith as coping resource	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	0
	Faith & hope	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	2
<b>Religious challenges</b>	Theodicy		Y	Y		Y		1
<b>In the counselling room</b>	Religion 'not in the room'	Y	Y					2

FIRST COHORT SECONDARY ANALYSIS OF IPA THEMES							
Super-theme	Sub-theme	Darren	Cheri	Emma	Jodie	Neil	Fliss
<b>Effects of loss</b>	Coping strategies						Y
	Meaning making	Y				Y	Y
	Continuing bonds	Y					Y
	Death fear, anxiety, denial	Y					
<b>Delivery of RE</b>	Support, children's literature		Y				Y
	Resilience of children						Y
	Naïve & simplistic	Y	Y	Y		Y	
	Interaction with priest		Y		Y	Y	
	Exposure/osmosis	Y	Y		Y		
<b>Change over time</b>	Curriculum				Y	Y	
<b>Teachers</b>	Education & understanding					Y	Y
	Attitudes & beliefs				Y	Y	Y
<b>Societal changes</b>	Pluralism	Y					
	Demographics					Y	
	Disenfranchisement				Y	Y	
<b>External pressures</b>	Social media, TV, video	Y	Y			Y	
	Peer pressure					Y	Y
<b>Religious challenges</b>	Religion vs science	Y			Y		
	Religion vs spirituality				Y		
<b>In the counselling room</b>	Counselling provision		Y	Y			Y
	Lack of counselling	Y	Y		Y		
<b>Medicalisation/sanitisation</b>						Y	



**Study 1 Category analysis Second cohort Bereaved young people**

**SECOND COHORT Category 0, 1 & 2 Young People IPA themes**

ANALYSIS OF THEMES																Cat.
Super-theme	Sub-theme	Cory	FA Count	Annie	FA Count	Lara	FA Count	Charlotte	FA Count	Steve	FA Count	Huw	FA Count	FA TOTAL	Cat.	0 20+
	Symptomology	Yes	5	Yes	4	Yes	4	Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes	4	21	0	1 10+
	Impact on life	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	3			Yes	3	12	1	2 5+
<b>Delivery of Religious education</b>	Age-appropriate, communication	Yes	4	Yes	4	Yes	5	Yes	11	Yes	3	Yes	8	35	0	
	Live a good life	Yes	1	Yes	2	Yes	2			Yes	2	Yes	3	10	1	
	Teaching eschatology	Yes	4	Yes	2			Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes	2	12	1	
	'Planting the seeds'									Yes	1	Yes	9	10	1	
	School leadership & ethos			Yes	4			Yes	2	Yes	1	Yes	1	8	2	
	Transition to secondary			Yes	1	Yes	1			Yes	1	Yes	4	7	2	
<b>Change over time</b>	Parents/family			Yes	3			Yes	4	Yes	6	Yes	2	15	1	
	Generational change in RE			Yes	2	Yes	2			Yes	1			5	2	
<b>Taboo subject</b>		Yes	1	Yes	3					Yes	1	Yes	2	7	2	
<b>Socialisation</b>	Changes in society			Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	1	Yes	2			7	2	
<b>Faith</b>	Faith as a coping resource	Yes	5	Yes	5	Yes	4	Yes	3	Yes	5	Yes	3	25	0	
	Faith & hope for coping	Yes	1			Yes	2	Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes	1	8	2	
<b>Religious challenges</b>	Theodicy	Yes	1	Yes	4	Yes	1			Yes	3	Yes	2	11	1	
<b>In the counselling room</b>	Religion/faith not in room	Yes	3	Yes	2	Yes	1							6	2	

SECOND COHORT PRIMARY ANALYSIS OF IPA THEMES									
Super-theme	0 20+	Cory	Annie	Lara	Charlotte	Steve	Huw	Cat.	Cat.
<b>Effects of loss</b>	Symptomology	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	0	0 20+
	Impact on life	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	1	1 10+
<b>Delivery of RE</b>	Age-appropriate, communication	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	0	2 5+
	Live a good life	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	1	
	Teaching eschatology	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	1	
	'Planting the seeds'					Y	Y	1	
	School leadership & ethos		Y		Y	Y	Y	2	
	Transition to secondary		Y	Y		Y	Y	2	
<b>Change over time</b>	Parents/family		Y		Y	Y	Y	1	
	Generational change in RE		Y		Y	Y		2	
<b>'Taboo' subject</b>		Y	Y			Y	Y	2	
<b>Socialisation</b>	Changes in society		Y		Y	Y	Y	2	
<b>Faith</b>	Faith as coping resource	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	0	
	Faith & hope for coping	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	2	
<b>Religious challenges</b>	Theodicy	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	1	
<b>In the counselling room</b>	Religion 'not in the room'	Y	Y	Y				2	

**SECOND COHORT SECONDARY ANALYSIS OF IPA THEMES**

<b>Super-theme</b>	<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>Cory</b>	<b>Annie</b>	<b>Lara</b>	<b>Charlotte</b>	<b>Steve</b>	<b>Huw</b>
<b>Effects of loss</b>	Coping strategies	Y	Y				Y
	Meaning making	Y		Y		Y	Y
	Continuing bonds	Y			Y		Y
	Death fear, anxiety, denial	Y		Y		Y	Y
<b>Delivery of RE</b>	Support, children's literature		Y		Y		Y
	Resilience of children	Y					Y
	Naïve & simplistic	Y				Y	
	Interaction with priest				Y	Y	
	Exposure/osmosis		Y		Y		Y
<b>Change over time</b>	Curriculum			Y		Y	
<b>Teachers</b>	Education & understanding		Y		Y		
	Attitudes & beliefs			Y	Y		Y
<b>Societal changes</b>	Pluralism	Y					
	Demographics		Y				Y
	Disenfranchisement	Y		Y		Y	
<b>External pressures</b>	Social media, TV, video	Y				Y	Y
	Peer pressure			Y		Y	
<b>Religious challenges</b>	Religion vs science		Y		Y		
	Religion vs spirituality				Y		
<b>In the counselling room</b>	Counselling provision	Y		Y		Y	Y
	Lack of counselling		Y		Y		Y

**Study 2 Category analysis**

**Church leaders and Policymakers**

## CHURCH LEADERS CATEGORY ANALYSES

### CHURCH LEADERS Category 0, 1 & 2 Qualitative Research Interviews (QRI) themes

#### ANALYSIS OF THEMES

Super-theme	Sub-theme	CLER01	Faith Count	CLER02	Faith Count	CHAP01	Faith Count	Faith TOTAL	Cat.	Category	
<b>Politics</b>	Policy making (SATs, inspections)					Yes	8	8	2	0	20+
	Policy vs practice			Yes	1	Yes	5	6	2	1	10+
<b>Delivery of Religious education</b>	Age-appropriate, communication	Yes	12	Yes	6	Yes	11	29	0	2	5+
	'Planting the seeds'	Yes	6	Yes	4	Yes	2	12	1		
	Exposure/osmosis	Yes	9	Yes	7	Yes	1	17	1		
	School leadership & ethos	Yes	3	Yes	3	Yes	2	8	2		
	Observances vs opportunities			Yes	3	Yes	2	5	2		
	Resilience of children	Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes	1	5	1		
	Teaching eschatology	Yes	1	Yes	3	Yes	3	7	2		
	Transition to secondary			Yes	1	Yes	6	7	2		
	Interaction with priest	Yes	1	Yes	4	Yes	1	6	2		
	<b>Change over time</b>	Church guidance	Yes	4	Yes	14	Yes	11	29	0	
Generational change in RE		Yes	2	Yes	1	Yes	4	7	2		
Old vs new		Yes	1			Yes	7	8	2		
Curriculum		Yes	1	Yes	3	Yes	5	9	2		
<b>Teachers</b>	Education & understanding	Yes	4	Yes	2	Yes	5	11	1		
	Teacher attitudes & beliefs	Yes	5	Yes	3	Yes	6	14	1		
<b>Taboo subject</b>		Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	6	2		
<b>Faith</b>	Faith & hope for coping	Yes	8	Yes	4			12	1		

## POLICYMAKERS CATEGORY ANALYSES

### POLICYMAKERS Category 0, 1 & 2 Qualitative Research Interviews themes

#### ANALYSIS OF THEMES

Super-theme	Sub-theme	POL02	Policy count	Policy TOTAL	Category	Category	
Politics	Policy making (SATs, inspections)	Yes	10	10	1	0	20+
Delivery of Religious education	Content & resources	Yes	11	11	1	1	10+
	School leadership & ethos	Yes	7	7	2	2	5+
	Teaching eschatology	Yes	6	6	2		
	Naïve & simplistic teaching	Yes	7	7	2		
Change over time	Curriculum	Yes	9	9	2		
	Church guidance	Yes	7	7	2		
Teachers	Education & understanding	Yes	5	5	2		
	Teacher attitudes & beliefs	Yes	6	6	2		

**Study 3 Category analysis Educators**



# Educators School 1 Qualitative Research Interviews Category Analysis of Themes

## ANALYSIS OF THEMES

Super-theme	Sub-theme	HEAD101 Brigid	Count	TEACH101 Ann	Count	TEACH102 Geoff	Count	TEACH103 Andrea	Count	TOTAL	Cat	Category	
Effects of loss	Symptomology			Yes	1	Yes	3	Yes	1	5	2	0	20+
Politics	Policy vs practice							Yes	5	5	2	1	10+
Delivery of Religious education	Observances vs opportunities	Yes	4	Yes	8	Yes	6	Yes	3	21	0	2	5+
	Age-appropriate, communication	Yes	6	Yes	3	Yes	6	Yes	5	20	0		
	Content & resources	Yes	1	Yes	1	Yes	7	Yes	4	13	1		
	School leadership & ethos	Yes	5	Yes	4	Yes	1	Yes	6	16	1		
	Teaching eschatology			Yes	2	Yes	4	Yes	4	10	1		
	Transition to secondary	Yes	3	Yes	5	Yes	1	Yes	2	11	1		
	Support, children's literature	Yes	5	Yes	2					7	2		
	Passing back responsibility	Yes	3	Yes	2	Yes	1			6	2		
	Naïve & simplistic teaching	Yes	4	Yes	1	Yes	1	Yes	1	7	2		
	Own experience	Yes	2	Yes	3	Yes	1	Yes	3	9	2		
	Knowing your children			Yes	2	Yes	1	Yes	2	5	2		
Change over time	Church guidance	Yes	6	Yes	5	Yes	2	Yes	7	20	0		
	Curriculum	Yes	4	Yes	4	Yes	1	Yes	6	15	1		
	Parents/family	Yes	8	Yes	3	Yes	7			18	1		
Teachers	Education & understanding	Yes	11	Yes	4	Yes	6	Yes	8	29	0		
	Teacher attitudes & beliefs	Yes	7	Yes	4	Yes	3	Yes	2	16	1		
Taboo subject		Yes	1	Yes	3			Yes	2	6	2		
Socialisation	Culture			Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	2	6	2		

## Educators School 2 Qualitative Research Interviews Category Analysis of Themes

### ANALYSIS OF THEMES

Super-theme	Sub-theme	HEAD201 Daniel	Count	TEACH201 Teresa	Count	TEACH202 David	Count	TEACH203 Gareth	Count	TOTAL	Cat.
Effects of loss	Symptomology					Yes	4	Yes	1	5	2
Delivery of Religious education	Observances vs opportunities	Yes	3	Yes	7	Yes	8	Yes	6	24	0
	Age-appropriate, communication	Yes	8	Yes	4	Yes	7	Yes	9	28	0
	Content & resources	Yes	1	Yes	6	Yes	5			12	1
	Teaching eschatology	Yes	1	Yes	4	Yes	4	Yes	8	17	1
	Interaction with priest			Yes	2	Yes	5	Yes	3	10	1
	Support, children's literature	Yes	2	Yes	1			Yes	2	5	2
	School leadership & ethos	Yes	4	Yes	1	Yes	2	Yes	1	8	2
	'Planting the seeds'	Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	1			5	2
Change over time	Church guidance	Yes	6	Yes	4					10	1
	Parents/family	Yes	3	Yes	4	Yes	4	Yes	8	19	1
	Generational change in RE							Yes	5	5	2
	Curriculum	Yes	3	Yes	3	Yes	1			7	2
Teachers	Education & understanding	Yes	6	Yes	3	Yes	10	Yes	5	24	0
	Teacher attitudes & beliefs	Yes	2	Yes	6	Yes	4			12	1
Taboo subject		Yes	2					Yes	3	5	2
Socialisation	Culture	Yes	3	Yes	2	Yes	1	Yes	3	9	1
Societal changes	Pluralism			Yes	2	Yes	2	Yes	4	8	2

**Study 4 Category analysis**

**Focus groups**

## Primary Analysis of Focus Group themes

### ANALYSIS OF THEMES

Super-theme	Sub-theme	FG01	FG Count	FG02	FG Count	FG03	FG Count	FG04	FG Count	FG05	FG Count	FG06	FG Count	FG07	FG Count	FG TOTAL	Cat.
<b>Delivery of Religious education</b>	Judgement, justice, choice					Yes	14	Yes	9	Yes	5	Yes	6			<b>34</b>	<b>0</b>
	Resilience of children			Yes	2	Yes	3	Yes	4	Yes	5	Yes	7			<b>21</b>	<b>0</b>
	Teaching eschatology	Yes	3	Yes	14	Yes	3	Yes	13	Yes	16	Yes	11	Yes	5	<b>65</b>	<b>0</b>
	Naïve & simplistic teaching	Yes	4			Yes	4	Yes	2	Yes	7	Yes	12			<b>29</b>	<b>0</b>
	Age-appropriate, communication	Yes	23	Yes	8			Yes	9			Yes	9	Yes	4	<b>53</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Delivery of Religious education</b>	School leadership & ethos	Yes	5	Yes	4	Yes	3			Yes	1	Yes	3			<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>
	Live a good life	Yes	7	Yes	3	Yes	4	Yes	4					Yes	6	<b>24</b>	<b>1</b>
	Children's perspectives	Yes	7	Yes	2											<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Change over time</b>	Parents/family			Yes	2	Yes	3	Yes	3	Yes	11	Yes	8			<b>27</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>External pressures</b>	Social media, TV, videos	Yes	9	Yes	6	Yes	4	Yes	5	Yes	17	Yes	7			<b>48</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Faith</b>	Faith & hope for coping					Yes	1			Yes	3			Yes	10	<b>14</b>	<b>0</b>

## Secondary Analysis of Focus Group themes

### ANALYSIS OF THEMES (YELLOW - CAUSES, GREEN - COPING MECHANISMS)

Super-theme	Sub-theme	FG01	FA Count	FG02	FA Count	FG03	FA Count	FG04	FA Count	FG05	FA Count	FG06	FA Count	FG07	FG Count	FG TOTAL	Cat.
<b>Effects of loss</b>	Death - fear, anxiety, denial	Yes	2									Yes	1	Yes	2	5	2
	Continuing bonds											Yes	1			1	
<b>Delivery of Religious Education</b>	Content & resources					Yes	1	Yes	1	Yes	2					4	
	Transition to secondary							Yes	1							1	
<b>Change over time</b>	Church guidance									Yes	3					3	
<b>Secularism</b>	Humanism	Yes	1													1	
<b>Socialisation</b>	Culture					Yes	1									1	
<b>External pressures</b>	Peer pressure											Yes	1			1	
<b>Faith</b>	Faith as a coping resource					Yes	1									1	
<b>Religious challenges</b>	Theodicy					Yes	1									1	