St Mary's University London
School of Education

Thunks on Death

Research Project Report
September 2026

Normalising conversations about death

> **Perhaps the most significant learning has been that the discussions were rarely only about death. Time and again, they became conversations about relationships, memory, identity, belief, uncertainty and what it means to live alongside one another. In this sense, philosophical dialogue did not seek to resolve difficult questions, but to create space in which they could be explored together."**

Immaculada Matthews
Research Assistant



Introduction

The School of Education at St Mary's University is known for its collaborative research in the field of bereavement in education, including a Bereavement in Education Summit in 2024 and a research project in 2025 in primary schools, using picture books to help children learn about death and grief. The *Thunks on Death* project in 2026 is another innovative and important contribution, engaging Year 9 students (aged 13-14) in philosophical discussions, as we seek to normalise conversations about death, grief and loss, for the benefit of individuals and wider society.

Research team

The *Thunks on Death* project brought together a strong team, including experts in the field of philosophy for children, bereavement education and research:



Professor Anna Lise Gordon
Project Lead and interest in research and practice in bereavement in education



Ian Gilbert
CEO and founder Independent Thinking, author of '*Independent Thinking on Loss*' (Independent Thinking Press, 2020) and an expert of facilitating complex, philosophical discussions with young people: **www.independentthinking.co.uk/speakers/ian-gilbert**



Immaculada Matthews
Research assistant, doctoral student, and former senior school leader

Support for the *Thunks on Death* project

The *Thunks on Death* project received some funding towards project and data collection costs from the Research England Policy Support Fund.

The project was also supported by Fergus Crow (CEO Winston's Wish, now Child Bereavement UK) and Fenella Prior-Smith – Head of Youth Participation and Engagement at the same child bereavement charity. Prior to embarking on the project in schools, the project lead met with members of the Youth Participation and Engagement group at Winston's Wish to explain the proposed project and seek the views of young people connected with the charity, including the identification of priority areas for discussion with the students in schools.

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this research project, especially the young people in schools who participated thoughtfully and with enthusiasm. The future is in good hands as we seek to normalise conversations about death, grief and loss.

What are Thunks on death?

Ian Gilbert, CEO of Independent Thinking, tells the story which inspired the foundations of the research project.

Thunks grew out of my work at the turn of the century encouraging schools to embrace Philosophy for Children (P4C). This approach to practising philosophical enquiry and discussion in a school setting was established by Professor Matthew Lipman in the 1970s at Montclair State University, US. It follows a pattern of sitting students in a circle, sharing a stimulus such as a story, thinking about and collecting questions that arise as a result of the stimulus, democratically choosing which question to start with, asking the student whose question it was to open the discussion and then letting the philosophical discussion that ensues take its course around the circle.

In my work – as was the case across the three schools in the *Thunks on Death* project – I did not have the luxury of time that the more formal P4C approach demands. I found I needed a stimulus that quickly tapped into what I have found is children's natural desire and ability to philosophise. This is how Thunks were born – beguilingly simple closed (yes/no/other) questions without provable answers that provoke questioning, debate, argument, frustration, conflict, resolution, the changing of minds (or the stubborn refusal to countenance new ways of looking at the world, usually prefaced with the phrase, 'Ah, well, technically…') and whose success I measure by the extent to which, at the end, the participants complain that their 'brain hurts'.

Typical examples of Thunks include questions such as:





It is an approach I have used with all ages and ability in school settings across the UK and in my work internationally and that has been taken up by teachers in classrooms around the world.

My first interactions with the child bereavement charity, Winston's Wish (now Child Bereavement UK), grew out of my desire to support their work following my own family circumstances, including donating the charity royalties from the book I wrote with my three children, the latest iteration of which is Independent Thinking on Loss.

It was in conversation with the CEO of Winston's Wish that the idea of the *Thunks on Death* was born, using my proven Thunks approach to facilitate conversations and discussion around the topics of death, life, loss, love, grief, and bereavement.

I created thirty *Thunks on Death* which the charity turned into a downloadable pdf hosted on their website (**www.childbereavementuk.org/thunks-on-death**). It is this resource that provided the starting point for this project.


Thunks on death

Introduction

Thunks™ are "beguilingly simple-looking questions" that make your brain go ouch. They grew out of educator and writer Ian Gilbert's work on Philosophy for Children and have proved incredibly popular with teachers around the world as a quick and easy tool for getting children and young people's brains to hurt. This particular set, a collaboration between Child Bereavement UK and Independent Thinking, is specifically designed to open up thinking and discussion around the topics of death, grief and bereavement.

Introductions

The only golden rule when it comes to Thunks is that there are no 'right' answers; their purpose is to encourage thought, debate, argument and philosophical reflection, as well as practising speaking and listening skills. You can work on a single Thunk as an entire class, work on one each or even in smaller communities of enquiry. You might also use them as lesson starters and build whole lessons around a single Thunk. Teachers have used them in many, many ways with children of all ages and academic backgrounds. Good luck!

Child Bereavement UK
REBUILDING LIVES TOGETHER

independent thinking

A Teacher's Guide to Running a *Thunks on Death* Session can be found at the end of this report.

Setting the scene

This report documents the initial fieldwork undertaken as part of the *Thunks on Death* project. The project set out to explore the potential of philosophical dialogue to support conversations about death, dying and bereavement with children and young people within secondary school settings. Rather than approaching death solely as a topic of crisis or individual support, the project considered how carefully facilitated dialogue might create opportunities for young people to think together, explore uncertainty, and encounter different perspectives within a psychologically safe learning environment.

Between March and May 2026, fieldwork was undertaken across three state secondary schools involving six Year 9 philosophical enquiry sessions facilitated by Ian Gilbert using Thunks as the stimulus for discussion. Alongside the student sessions, adult debrief conversations were held with teachers and school leaders, and detailed field notes were recorded throughout each visit. Together, these materials generated a rich account of both the student dialogues and the professional reflections that followed them.

This report provides an account of the work undertaken to date, bringing together the literature that informed the fieldwork, the methodological approach adopted during data generation, reflections arising from the research process, and initial observations across the three participating schools. It also considers the practical implications emerging from the fieldwork and identifies opportunities for future development, including further research, professional learning and the continued development of resources to support schools in facilitating conversations about death and bereavement.

Throughout the fieldwork, the project's research assistant adopted the role of researcher-observer. Her attention extended beyond the spoken dialogue itself to the relational and embodied dimensions of the sessions, including moments of silence, humour, uncertainty, shifts in participation, body language and changes in the atmosphere of the room. These observations were considered alongside audio recordings, transcripts and adult debrief conversations. Together, these complementary sources provide a richer understanding of how philosophical dialogue around death unfolded within each school context than any single source of data could offer.

This report therefore serves two purposes. First, it provides a transparent account of the methodological decisions and practical learning that emerged through the fieldwork itself. Second, it offers an early account of the educational possibilities observed across the three schools, laying the foundations for future phases of the project and informing subsequent analysis.

Literature-informed fieldwork design

A focused review of the literature ensured that the *Thunks on Death* project was both methodologically informed and sensitive to the nature of the topic. Rather than seeking to establish a comprehensive theoretical framework, the research team approached the literature as a way of preparing for the fieldwork. The chosen approach was sensitive to conversations about death and bereavement, better informed to support thoughtful data handling decisions, and methodologically aligned with the aims of the project. At the same time, the team remained alert to what emerged through the fieldwork itself, rather than allowing the literature to predetermine what might occur in the different schools.

The starting point for the literature review was the pedagogical approach underpinning Thunks. The Philosophy for Children (P4C) tradition positions children and young people as capable of engaging with complex and often uncertain ideas through dialogue, encouraging collaborative meaning-making rather than the pursuit of a single correct answer (Lipman, 2003). This was particularly important for the present project, where conversations about death, bereavement and grief were not expected to produce consensus or certainty, but to create opportunities for curiosity, questioning and shared philosophical enquiry. Entering the field with this understanding encouraged the research team to attend not only to the content of students' responses, but also to the ways in which ideas were developed collectively, challenged, revisited and held in uncertainty.

Alongside the pedagogical literature, research concerning bereavement in schools was explored. Collectively, this literature presents schools as significant relational contexts in children's experiences of grief, whilst simultaneously highlighting the variability with which bereavement is recognised and supported (McLaughlin, Lytje & Holliday, 2019; McManus and Paul, 2019; UK Commission on Bereavement, 2022).

Across these publications, a recurring message is that teachers frequently occupy an important, although often underprepared, role in responding to children experiencing loss. Confidence, language and opportunities for professional learning emerge repeatedly as factors shaping how bereavement is addressed within everyday school life (Dimery and Templeton, 2021).

Whilst observing the student sessions, the research team was interested in how young people encountered uncertainty together, how they responded to one another's ideas, and how humour, silence, disagreement and curiosity shaped the dialogue. During the adult debriefs, attention shifted



towards teachers' reflections on facilitation, their perceptions of students' engagement, and the confidence with which they imagined leading similar discussions themselves. In this sense, the literature prompted the research team to notice both the pedagogical processes unfolding within the classroom and the professional questions emerging beyond it.

A further strand of the literature drew attention to the relational dimensions of bereavement support within schools. Gilbert (2020), together with the UK Commission on Bereavement (2022), emphasises the importance of everyday human responses, clear language and acknowledgement, suggesting that bereavement support is often enacted through ordinary interactions rather than formal interventions alone. This prompted the team to extend observations beyond spoken dialogue. Alongside audio recordings and transcripts, the research assistant recorded contemporaneous field notes documenting body language, silence, hesitation, laughter, shifts in atmosphere and changes in participation. These observations became an important part of the dataset, recognising that transcripts alone cannot fully represent the embodied and relational qualities of philosophical dialogue.

Finally, the research team remained mindful of the wider policy context. Statutory Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) guidance positions learning about change, loss and bereavement as part of children's broader emotional development (Department for Education, 2025). Yet the literature consistently identifies a gap between policy aspiration and classroom practice, with considerable variation in how confidently schools approach conversations about death and grief (UK Commission on Bereavement, 2022). Rather than treating this as something to test, the research team was curious about how these wider tensions might be reflected in the experiences of students and staff across different school contexts.

In summary, the literature did not provide a specific framework through which the fieldwork was interpreted but rather encouraged the research team to enter the field more thoughtfully. As the project's research assistant comments: "The literature informed the questions I carried into the schools, the decisions I made whilst observing, and the methodological choices that followed during transcription, data handling and reflection. Throughout the project, I found myself returning to the literature alongside the fieldwork, allowing each to inform my developing understanding of the other".

Ethical considerations

Although the Year 9 (aged 13-14) participants in this research project may not have encountered bereavement in their lives to date, ethical decisionmaking was informed throughout by previous research into bereavement in educational settings, including consideration of safeguarding issues, and support for any student who might become distressed. For these reasons, a teacher from the school was present during the discussions with the students to be able to support and follow up on situations if needed. Additional consideration was given by the research team to the seven key commitments for working ethically with children and young people (ERIC, 2024). Ethical approval for the research was granted by St Mary's University Ethics Committee. In line with BERA's Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2024), consent was gained from headteachers (as gatekeepers to the school), teachers and parents / caregivers for involvement in the research, as well as from the Year 9 students themselves.

Fieldwork design and data generation

The fieldwork was conducted across three secondary schools between March and May 2026. Each school hosted one or two Year 9 *Thunks on Death* sessions, resulting in five student discussions in total. Each discussion group involved up to ten students. The sessions formed part of the project's exploration of how philosophical enquiry might support conversations about death, dying and bereavement within school settings.

The sessions were facilitated expertly by Ian Gilbert (see introduction). Rather than participating in the discussions in each session, the research assistant and project lead adopted the role of researcher-observers, noting the interactions between students, the facilitation of the dialogue, and the wider relational atmosphere within each session. This allowed an important opportunity to focus attention on both the spoken dialogue and the ways in which the discussions unfolded in practice.

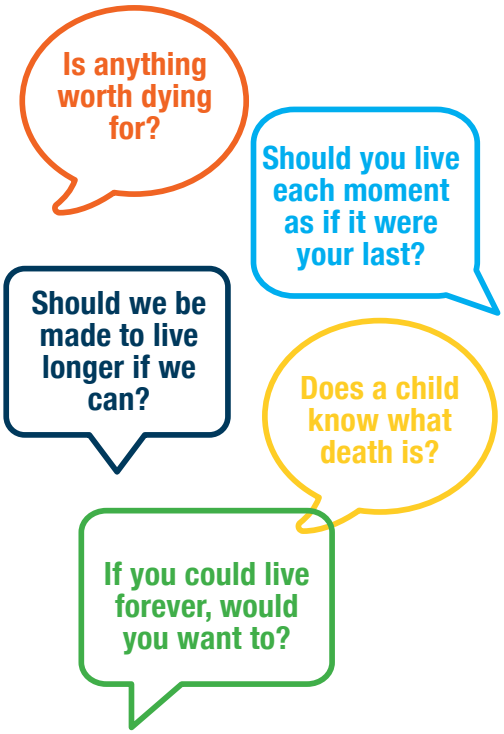
Drawing on the literature-informed fieldwork strategy, observations were guided by five broad areas of attention: the facilitation of the dialogue, student engagement, the relational atmosphere, the wider school context, and the language used by both students and adults. These areas were not used as analytical categories but as prompts to support careful observation whilst remaining open to what emerged during the discussions. Particular attention was given to moments of uncertainty, humour, silence, disagreement, curiosity and shifts in participation, recognising that these often revealed as much about the conversations as the spoken content itself.

Data were generated from several complementary sources. Each student session was audio recorded using Microsoft Teams, producing both a recording and an automated transcript. Following each visit, adult debrief conversations were held with participating teachers and school leaders to capture their reflections on the discussions, students' engagement, and the practicalities of facilitating conversations about death within their own educational contexts.

Alongside the recordings, contemporaneous field notes were maintained throughout every observation. These notes documented descriptive accounts of the discussions, immediate methodological and analytic noticing, and reflexive questions that arose during the sessions. Rather than relying solely on transcript data, the field notes enabled observations of body language, eye contact, gesture, silence, laughter, cognitive processing, changes in group dynamics and the overall atmosphere of the room. These dimensions frequently provided important contextual information that was not fully represented within the audio recordings or transcripts alone.

Following each school visit, the research assistant revisited the recordings alongside the field notes, allowing observations made during the sessions to be considered alongside the spoken dialogue. As the project progressed, edited conversational transcripts of selected adult debriefs and interpretively reconstructed versions of selected student discussions were produced. These were developed to support different purposes within the project and are discussed further in the methodological reflections that follow.

Taken together, the fieldwork generated a rich and multi-layered dataset comprising student philosophical enquiries, professional reflections from school staff, observational field notes, audio recordings, automated transcripts and researcher reflections. Considering these sources alongside one another provided a fuller account of the discussions than any single source could offer, enabling attention to be given not only to what participants said, but also to how conversations were held, experienced and responded to within each school community.



Methodological reflections

The fieldwork generated a rich and varied dataset, whilst also highlighting a number of methodological considerations that shaped the research as it progressed. Many of these were not anticipated at the outset and only became apparent through the practical experience of undertaking observations across the three schools. Looking back, these reflections have informed the subsequent handling of the data, but also how future phases of the project would be designed.

One of the most significant methodological challenges concerned the use of Microsoft Teams to record the discussions. Recording through a single Teams account provided a reliable audio record of each session and ensured that all conversations were captured. However, the automated transcription proved far less useful than anticipated. Rather than accurately attributing speech to individual participants, the transcript frequently assigned multiple speakers to the account from which the recording had been made. Whilst this did not compromise the audio itself, it substantially reduced the usefulness of the transcript as a conversational record and required repeated comparison with the recording to reconstruct individual speaker turns. What initially appeared to be a straightforward transcription process therefore became a much more interpretive editorial task.

This challenge also prompted a methodological distinction between the different forms of data generated during the project. For the student discussions, the research team became increasingly interested in preserving the philosophical dialogue itself rather than producing verbatim transcripts. These evolved into interpretively reconstructed dialogues that remained faithful to the substance and sequence of the conversations whilst improving readability for future readers. In contrast, the adult debrief conversations served a different purpose. Here, the intention was to preserve professional reflection as accurately as possible. Rather than reconstructing these discussions, edited conversational transcripts were developed in which speaker attribution, punctuation and obvious transcription errors were corrected, whilst preserving the participants' identifiable voices and the natural flow of the conversation. These two approaches emerged through the practical demands of the data rather than being predetermined methodological decisions.

A second methodological learning concerned the value of observational field notes. Initially, the research team had anticipated that the transcripts would form the primary source of data, supported by observational notes. As the fieldwork progressed, however, the field notes increasingly became an equally important source of understanding. They captured aspects of the discussions that transcripts alone could not preserve – students leaning into conversations, pauses before responding, moments of shared laughter, hesitation, changing facial expressions, shifts in energy across the room, and the relational atmosphere that accompanied the dialogue. These embodied observations often helped explain why particular exchanges felt significant, even where this was not immediately apparent within the spoken transcript. In retrospect, the field notes became far more than supplementary observations; they formed an integral part of the dataset.

The fieldwork also highlighted the potential value of video recording in future studies. Whilst audio recordings preserved the spoken dialogue, they inevitably omitted many of the embodied dimensions of philosophical enquiry that became increasingly important during the observations. Students frequently communicated through gesture, eye contact, posture, silence and shared laughter, while facilitators responded to these subtle cues in ways that shaped the direction of the dialogue. A video record would allow future research to examine these relational processes more fully, providing opportunities to explore not only what was said, but how conversations were collectively held and facilitated. Such recordings would, of course, require careful ethical consideration and explicit consent, particularly given the sensitivity of the topic. Nevertheless, they have the potential to enrich both research and professional learning by making the relational craft of facilitation more visible.

Finally, the fieldwork reinforced the importance of remaining methodologically responsive. Although the literature informed the preparation for entering the field, many of the most valuable methodological decisions emerged during the research itself. Adjustments to transcription, increased reliance on observational notes, and the development of two distinct forms of transcript all arose through engagement with the data rather than through prior planning. Rather than viewing these adaptations as departures from the original design, this was embraced as part of an iterative qualitative process in which the methodology developed alongside the fieldwork. These reflections have shaped thinking about future phases of the project and will continue to inform how subsequent fieldwork is designed, documented and shared.

Emerging observations across the three schools

Although this report does not seek to present a formal analysis of the fieldwork, several observations emerged consistently across the three participating schools. These observations arose through the student discussions, the adult debrief conversations and contemporaneous field notes, often reinforcing one another across the different sources of data. Taken together, they suggest not only the potential of Thunks to facilitate conversations about death with young people, but also the importance of the relational and pedagogical conditions that supported those conversations.

Young people engaged readily with philosophical conversations about death

Across all three schools, students demonstrated a willingness to engage with philosophical questions surrounding death, dying and bereavement. Rather than avoiding the topic, discussions were characterised by curiosity, thoughtful disagreement, humour and careful listening. Although some students contributed more frequently than others, field notes repeatedly recorded sustained attention across the groups, with students leaning into the conversations, responding to one another's ideas and remaining engaged throughout the discussions. Several members of staff commented afterwards that some of the students who contributed most thoughtfully were not necessarily those who would typically be expected to participate so confidently in classroom discussion. One teacher, for example, reflected that "Thunks allows them all to engage. Every one of them did, the quiet ones were engaging. Even if you're not speaking all the time, you're thinking." Ian Gillbert comments: "This is a common experience in this work and one of the reasons I like teachers to observe. It asks the question, why do these students not participate as actively in other areas the curriculum? One possibility, I think, is that I have attempted to remove the fear of getting it wrong by the first few questions I pose." The purpose of the *Thunks on Death* discussions is to facilitate thinking and this does not always mean speaking; indeed, on occasions, those who are contributing more may be thinking less.

Perhaps most strikingly, the conversations rarely remained focused solely on death. Students moved fluidly between abstract philosophical questions and lived experience, drawing connections between funerals, memory, religion, identity, assisted dying, science and what it means to be human. These transitions were not introduced as separate topics but emerged naturally through the dialogue itself, illustrating the capacity of philosophical enquiry to support broad and interconnected thinking. Students themselves recognised this, describing the discussions as leaving them with "more opportunities to hear different opinions," making them realise "there's a lot that I don't know," and that death was "more complicated than it seems."

Facilitation shaped the quality of the dialogue

Whilst the student conversations formed the focus of the observations, the adult debrief discussions consistently returned to the facilitation of the enquiry itself. Teachers became increasingly interested not simply in what students had discussed, but in how the discussions had been held. Across the debriefs, staff reflected on questioning, pacing, humour, silence, transitions between ideas and the facilitator's ability to sustain curiosity without judgement or directing the conversation towards predetermined conclusions.

Several teachers commented that the craft of facilitation was often difficult to notice whilst participating in the dialogue because they themselves had become immersed in the discussion. One teacher captured this particularly well when she reflected, "You'd woven your magic somewhere… we're onto the topic without knowing where it happened… you could miss the work you're doing, the craft of what you're doing, because you're so engaged with what you're actually talking about."

Later, they observed that, rather than evaluating students' answers, the facilitator consistently responded by asking, "'Why?' 'What do you mean by this?'" and "picked up some of the words" to extend the thinking further.

This shift in focus – from the content of the discussion to the process of facilitation – was one of the most consistent observations across the fieldwork. By the end of each debrief, teachers were no longer asking primarily what the students had discussed, but how such conversations had been facilitated.

Teachers immediately began considering implementation

The adult conversations also revealed that teachers quickly moved beyond reflecting on the observed sessions to considering how similar discussions might be facilitated within their own schools. Questions centred on practical implementation, including which members of staff might lead philosophical enquiries, how confidence could be developed, what preparation might be required, and how teachers could respond to particularly sensitive topics if they arose during discussion.

Rather than questioning whether these conversations belonged in schools, teachers instead repeatedly asked how they might become part of everyday educational practice. One teacher reflected on wanting to identify "those little nuggets… what I call your craft" that could help staff facilitate similar discussions, asking, "If I walked out of here now… what would those things be that I'd say to staff?" The teacher also recognised that implementation extended beyond resources, commenting that "some staff would need more support than others" and that she would want to think carefully about "how I make sure my staff are supported just as much as the young people."

Topics such as assisted dying and religious belief prompted thoughtful consideration of the emotional and professional demands that such conversations might place upon staff.

These discussions highlighted the importance of considering professional learning, facilitation skills and ongoing support alongside the development of resources for young people.

Relational safety appeared to underpin the discussions

One observation that became increasingly apparent across the fieldwork was the significance of the relational atmosphere within which the dialogue unfolded. The observation field notes repeatedly documented moments of shared laughter, thoughtful silence, hesitation, sustained eye contact and changing body language as students listened carefully to one another's contributions. These observations suggested that engagement was communicated not only through spoken responses but also through embodied participation.

The adult debriefs reinforced these observations. Teachers frequently commented on the openness of the discussions, the willingness of students to consider different perspectives and the absence of pressure to arrive at a single correct answer. One teacher reflected that the atmosphere allowed students to "take ownership of the direction they're going in with their own learning" and that, because there were "no right or wrong answers," students were able to remain engaged in thinking together rather than searching for the correct response. At this point, Ian Gilbert offers an alternative perspective: "The word 'learning' is interesting. I have often wondered if you can think without learning (and learn without thinking)? I was not there to teach them anything, so what did they learn, if anything? And if they learned nothing – or at least nothing explicit and testable – does that matter?"

The students' own reflections echoed this experience. One commented that the sessions "make you think way more than a PowerPoint," while another observed, "We're not being talked at; we're being talked to, and we're talking." Others described the discussions as "confusing" because "you don't actually know, there's no right answer," suggesting that uncertainty itself had become something that could be explored collectively rather than avoided.

Students reflected positively on the dialogic approach itself

One of the most distinctive aspects of the fieldwork was that students were invited to reflect not only on the topics they had discussed, but also on their experience of participating in the philosophical enquiry itself. These closing reflections provided valuable insight into how young people experienced the Thunks approach and why they felt it mattered.

Across the three schools, students consistently described the discussions as requiring them to think differently. Several commented that the approach encouraged deeper thinking than more traditional classroom teaching. Others observed that death was not a topic that adults could simply provide answers for, making dialogue feel more authentic because uncertainty was shared rather than resolved.

Students also reflected on the value of hearing multiple perspectives. Several described how listening to others had changed or extended their own thinking, with some recognising that conversations about death rarely have a single correct answer. Others commented that the discussions prompted continued reflection beyond the classroom, encouraging conversations with family members or leaving them thinking about the questions long after the session had ended. One student described leaving with "tools" to think about death differently, whilst another reflected that the discussion had made an inevitable aspect of life feel easier to approach.

Perhaps most importantly, students recognised the wider significance of these conversations. When invited to consider why the project might be useful, their responses frequently moved beyond their own experiences to acknowledge the value of creating opportunities for young people to discuss death openly, hear different viewpoints and prepare for experiences of bereavement that many recognised as an inevitable part of life. These reflections suggest that students were not simply participants within the research; they were also contributors to thinking about how conversations about death might be approached within schools and how future educational practice might be informed.

Bringing the observations together

Taken together, these observations suggest that the Thunks approach offers more than a structured resource for discussing death. Across the three schools, young people demonstrated a willingness to engage thoughtfully with complex and uncertain questions, whilst teachers increasingly turned their attention to the relational craft of facilitating those conversations. Equally significant were the students' own reflections on the dialogic process, which suggested that they valued not only the opportunity to discuss death, but also the experience of thinking collaboratively, hearing different perspectives and contributing to conversations that they regarded as relevant beyond the classroom.

Collectively, these observations point towards the educational potential of philosophical enquiry as a means of opening conversations about death and bereavement in schools. At the same time, they highlight the importance of facilitation, teacher confidence and relational safety in creating the conditions within which such dialogue can flourish. Rather than offering conclusions, these observations provide an initial account of the possibilities that emerged through the fieldwork and establish a foundation for considering their implications for educational practice, policy and future research.

Implications for educational practice considering the September 2026 RSHE Curriculum

The revised RSHE curriculum positions learning about change, loss and bereavement as part of children's wider emotional development, recognising bereavement as a normal life experience rather than an exceptional event. In doing so, it creates opportunities for schools to introduce and normalise conversations about death in age-appropriate ways whilst simultaneously raising questions about how such conversations are facilitated in practice.

The fieldwork observations, considered alongside the literature and wider policy context, suggest several practical considerations for schools as they begin responding to these curriculum expectations. Rather than presenting prescriptive recommendations, the following implications are offered as areas for consideration when designing curriculum experiences and supporting staff to facilitate conversations about death and bereavement.

Dialogue, rather than information, should sit at the heart of bereavement education

One of the clearest observations across the three schools was that students responded most readily when they were invited into dialogue rather than provided with information. The Thunks approach encouraged young people to think collectively, question assumptions and explore uncertainty without pressure to reach a single correct answer. Students repeatedly described valuing the opportunity to hear different perspectives, with comments such as "more opportunities to hear different opinions", "it makes you think way more than a PowerPoint", and "we're not being talked at; we're being talked to, and we're talking."

This observation closely reflects the pedagogical principles underpinning Philosophy for Children, which positions dialogue as a process through which children collaboratively construct meaning rather than receive knowledge (Lipman, 2003). It also aligns with the aims of the revised RSHE curriculum, which emphasises developing emotional literacy and understanding through discussion rather than simply transmitting information.

Teachers require preparation in facilitation, not simply bereavement knowledge

Whilst the student discussions demonstrated that young people were willing to engage with conversations about death, the adult debriefs consistently shifted towards questions of facilitation. Teachers were less concerned with acquiring factual knowledge about bereavement than with understanding how to hold open conversations characterised by uncertainty, disagreement and multiple perspectives. One teacher, for example, reflected on wanting



to identify “those little nuggets... what I call your craft” that could support colleagues in facilitating similar discussions themselves.

This observation resonates strongly with the literature, which consistently positions teachers as important relational figures whilst simultaneously highlighting that many feel underprepared to respond confidently to bereavement within school contexts (McManus and Paul, 2019; Dimery and Templeton, 2021). Rather than focusing solely on bereavement knowledge, professional learning may therefore need to include the relational skills associated with dialogic facilitation, including questioning, responding to uncertainty, managing silence and supporting respectful disagreement.

Facilitation requires appropriate relational and physical conditions

The fieldwork suggested that the quality of the dialogue was influenced not only by the questions themselves but also by the conditions in which the conversations took place. Students were seated in small circles, discussion was not interrupted by written tasks or presentation slides, and participants were repeatedly reminded that there were no right or wrong answers. Teachers also reflected on the importance of physical space, with one teacher commenting that classroom layout and the absence of a “back row” fundamentally changed the dynamics of participation.

These observations suggest that successful implementation is likely to depend upon more than simply introducing new curriculum content. Attention to classroom organisation, pacing, group size, opportunities for thinking time and the creation of psychologically safe environments may be equally important in enabling young people to explore sensitive topics openly.

High-quality resources should support, rather than replace, dialogue

The fieldwork demonstrated the value of carefully designed prompts, such as the *Thunks on Death* resources available via the Child Bereavement website (see references), in opening conversations that might otherwise remain difficult to initiate. However, it also became apparent that the resources themselves were only one part of the process. The richness of the discussions appeared to emerge through the interaction between the prompts, the facilitator and the students’ collective thinking.

This reflects the wider literature informing the project, which emphasises that bereavement education is strengthened through structured opportunities for dialogue rather than didactic teaching alone. Future curriculum materials might therefore usefully combine discussion prompts with practical guidance for facilitation, illustrative examples of dialogue, suggested children’s literature and signposting to additional bereavement support where appropriate.

Teachers may benefit from opportunities for reflection and support

Perhaps one of the most unexpected observations emerging from the adult debriefs was the extent to which teachers began reflecting on their own emotional responses to the discussions. Rather than focusing exclusively on students’ needs, conversations frequently turned towards the support that staff themselves might require when facilitating discussions around death, particularly where topics intersected with personal experiences of loss. One teacher reflected that, if she were implementing this work within her own school, one of her first considerations would be “how I would make sure my staff were supported just as much as the young people.”

This observation reflects the wider literature, which identifies teachers as key relational figures whilst recognising the emotional labour associated with supporting bereaved children (Dimery and Templeton, 2021). It suggests that opportunities for collegial reflection, professional dialogue and ongoing support may form an important part of sustainable implementation.

Bereavement education has the potential to become part of a whole-school culture

Finally, the fieldwork suggested that teachers did not view conversations about death solely as an RSHE responsibility. Discussions frequently expanded to include tutor time, pastoral care, chaplaincy, staff development and wider school culture. This reflects the broader policy and literature context, which positions schools as important relational settings in children’s experiences of bereavement whilst also acknowledging considerable variation in current practice (UK Commission on Bereavement, 2022; McManus and Paul, 2019).

Rather than introducing bereavement as a discrete curriculum topic, the fieldwork suggests that philosophical enquiry may provide a powerful means through which conversations about death become embedded within a wider culture of openness, dialogue and compassionate educational practice.

Opportunities for future development

The initial fieldwork has demonstrated the potential of philosophical enquiry to facilitate conversations about death within secondary school settings. Whilst the project has generated valuable methodological learning and practical observations, it has also opened several opportunities for

further development. These extend beyond future research to include professional learning, resource development and wider educational engagement.

Developing the methodology through longitudinal fieldwork

One of the clearest opportunities arising from this initial phase is to revisit the participating schools as they begin to implement aspects of the approach themselves. Whereas the current fieldwork observed *Thunks on Death* facilitated by Ian Gilbert, a subsequent phase could explore how the approach evolves when facilitated by teachers within their own school communities.

Such a study would shift the focus from the effectiveness of the resource itself towards an understanding of implementation in practice. Questions might include how teachers develop confidence in facilitating philosophical dialogue, how connections across the curriculum might be established, how discussions evolve across different educational contexts, what adaptations emerge naturally over time, and what forms of professional support prove most valuable. A longitudinal design, following schools over one or two academic years, would provide opportunities to explore how practice develops rather than capturing only isolated examples of implementation.

Methodologically, future studies may also benefit from the use of video recording, subject to appropriate ethical approval and participant consent. Whilst the audio recordings captured the spoken dialogue, much of the richness of the discussions was communicated through gesture, body language, shared laughter, silence and changing patterns of participation. Video would enable these relational and embodied dimensions of philosophical enquiry to be explored alongside the spoken dialogue, providing a more complete understanding of how the discussions unfold in practice.

There may also be value in extending the work across different age groups. Although this fieldwork focused on Year 9 students, the discussions with the expert facilitator and participating staff repeatedly suggested that philosophical enquiry around death may be equally appropriate with younger children, with adaptation occurring primarily through language rather than through the nature of the questions themselves. Exploring how these conversations develop across primary and secondary settings could provide valuable insight into children's changing understandings of death throughout their educational journey.

Supporting implementation within schools

Perhaps the most immediate opportunity emerging from the fieldwork concerns implementation within schools themselves. Across the adult debrief conversations, teachers consistently shifted their attention from the student discussions towards questions of facilitation and the practicalities of implementation. Rather than asking whether these conversations should take place, they increasingly asked how they might facilitate them themselves.

This suggests an opportunity to develop professional learning alongside the *Thunks on Death* resources. Workshops, seminars and practical training could focus not only on introducing the resource, but also on the relational craft of facilitation, including questioning, managing uncertainty, responding to sensitive topics and creating psychologically safe environments for philosophical dialogue.

The fieldwork also suggests that implementation should be accompanied by opportunities for professional reflection. Facilitating conversations about death, bereavement and grief may evoke teachers' own experiences of loss whilst also requiring them to respond thoughtfully to the experiences of young people. Creating spaces for collegial reflection and emotional support may therefore be an important component of sustainable implementation.

Sharing learning across the education sector

The project also presents opportunities to share learning more widely across the education sector. The findings may be of interest to schools ensuring compliance with the September 2026 RSHE curriculum, and to PSHE and RSHE networks, teacher educators, bereavement organisations and policymakers seeking practical examples of how conversations about death might be facilitated within educational settings.

Rather than presenting the project solely as research, dissemination might include seminars, webinars and professional learning events that combine examples of student dialogue with reflections from participating teachers. Sharing both the student conversations and the adult debriefs may help educators understand not only the potential of philosophical enquiry, but also the practical considerations involved in facilitating discussions about death with confidence and care.

More broadly, the fieldwork contributes to ongoing conversations about inclusion, wellbeing and pastoral education. As schools continue to strengthen their approaches to belonging, emotional wellbeing and relational practice, conversations about death and bereavement may become increasingly recognised as part of a wider commitment to supporting children through significant life experiences rather than as isolated pastoral events.

Extending the conversation beyond schools

Finally, the fieldwork prompts questions that extend beyond the classroom itself. Throughout the discussions, students frequently connected philosophical questions with their own family experiences, suggesting that these conversations may continue long after the lesson has ended. Future work might therefore explore how parents and carers experience these discussions, how schools communicate with families when introducing conversations about death, and how home and school might work together in supporting children's developing understanding of bereavement and loss.

Such work may become increasingly relevant as schools continue to respond to the revised RSHE curriculum. Understanding the perspectives of parents, carers and wider school communities may help ensure that conversations about death are introduced in ways that are educationally meaningful, culturally responsive and relationally sensitive. In the longer term, this may also lead to changes in society where conversations about death remain taboo in many contexts.

Concluding reflection

This report captures an initial stage in the development of the *Thunks on Death* project. Rather than offering definitive conclusions, it brings together some of the literature, together with fieldwork and methodological reflections that have shaped the research team's thinking to date. Across the three schools, the conversations repeatedly demonstrated the capacity of young people to engage thoughtfully with questions of death, whilst also highlighting the relational skill, confidence and care required to facilitate such dialogue within educational settings.

Perhaps the most significant learning has been that the discussions were rarely only about death. Time and again, they became conversations about relationships, memory, identity, belief, uncertainty and what it means to live alongside one another. In this sense, philosophical dialogue did not seek to resolve difficult questions, but to create space in which they could be explored together.

As with the dialogues themselves, this report does not seek to close the conversation. Instead, it offers a point from which further thinking, practice and research might continue to develop.

This research project took place in schools, but the *Thunks on Death* approach and findings indicate relevance for other community group settings.



If you would like to find out more about the bereavement in education work at St Mary's University, please contact Professor Anna Lise Gordon (annalise.gordon@stmarys.ac.uk).

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A Teacher's Guide to Running a Thunks on Death Session

- A Thunk is a philosophical question that has no right or wrong answer.
- Its purpose is to facilitate thinking and talking on a particular topic.
- The answer to a Thunk is 'yes', 'no', 'yes and no', 'neither yes nor no' or 'something else'.
- A Thunk has no right answers. Or wrong ones.
- Your job is to facilitate, not teach. You may have something to say on the topic but don't. It's not about you. The more you talk, the less they think. Instead, this is your chance to use all your skills as a facilitator to get them thinking.
- A student who doesn't talk could well be thinking quite hard.
- A student who talks a lot may not be thinking very much at all.
- While such discussions work best with students sitting in a circle, they can also be facilitated in a traditional classroom setting. You just have to work a bit harder.
- Creative thinking warm-up questions (e.g. What do you think is the biggest colour? What colour is happiness? Is there more light or darkness in the world? Is there more happiness or sadness in the world?) help reassure students that there are genuinely no rights or wrongs and you are not playing a new version of the 'Guess what's in the teacher's head' game.
- Once warmed up, ask a Thunk, then give them time to think. But not very long. No more than a minute. They can think on their own. In pairs. In table groups. In silence. Loudly. Vary it each time.
- Then ask for a show of hands from those who think the answer is 'yes'. Then from those who think 'no'. Then from those who think 'other'.
- Pick a student and ask why they think what they think. That is the starting point for the discussion and the thinking. Encourage others to join in. Encourage students to speak to each other, not going via the teacher each time.
- When they do come to you with their answers, your job is not to praise or evaluate. Suitable responses include:
  - Repeating their question.
  - Reframing their question.
  - Saying, 'Sure?' and seeing what happens.
- Feel free to allow the conversations and thinking to take a route of their own. This is not a lesson, and you do not have a learning objective or curriculum to cover. Just let them take their thinking 'for a walk'.
- If you feel the tension is leaving the session, throw in a new Thunk. A Thunk that is not fully explored is better than one that is explored to, er, death. Keep it snappy and a little unpredictable.
- Despite the topic, feel free to laugh and use humour. It helps. But also be prepared for some quite heavy dialogue. Encourage the class to handle it respectfully (but they probably will anyway).
- At the end of a Thunks session, give them 30 seconds to sit in silence and come up with one sentence that sums up what is going through their head as a result of what they've just participated in. Go round the circle/class and hear as many sentences as you. Don't force anyone to participate. Include a sentence from yourself.
- Afterwards, give them 30 seconds or so to 'come back to reality' before you move on.
- Good luck.





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