Death Studies

ISSN: 0748-1187 (Print) 1091-7683 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/udst20

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To cite this article: Kate Adams, Donna Thomas & Rachael Paige (10 Sep 2025): Beyond belief: Advancing death education through children's experiences of non-corporeal continuation, Death Studies, DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2025.2556113

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2025.2556113

Published online: 10 Sep 2025.

DEATH STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2025.2556113

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Beyond belief: Advancing death education through children's experiences of non-corporeal continuation

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ABSTRACT

Proponents of death education in schools acknowledge that children understand the biological aspects of death, and many hold co-existing beliefs in non-corporeal continuation. This paper offers originality by highlighting a gap in the death education literature, arguing that to increase curriculum relevance, we need to move beyond considering children's "beliefs about" life after death/before life to also acknowledge their "experiences of" it. Using thanatological principles, it draws from different disciplines to document children and young people's encounters with other lives, including: communicating with the deceased in waking and dream life; having near death experiences (NDEs); and remembering past lives. The implications of including non-corporeal continuation in the curriculum are explored. While challenges are acknowledged, the paper argues that the topic contributes to a meaningful curriculum by foregrounding a child-centered approach which privileges their voice(s) and agency. Simultaneously, it can potentially alleviate some of the fears about discussing death in schools.

Introduction

As Dawson et al. (2023) note in the title of their paper, death is "the one thing guaranteed in life and yet they won't teach you about it." The words are derived from a longer quote from a bereaved teenager, who also commented on the irony of this situation. In a world which is awash with graphic images and reports of death, attempts to protect young people from it are no longer realistic. The arguments for death education for children are well established. The concept was developed in the USA, stemming from the work of Herman Feifel in the 1960s (Wass, 2004), with application to the education sector taking prominence in the 1980s (Rodríguez et al., 2022). However, in many education systems, there are no mandates to include it (Dawson et al., 2023; Herrán et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2022).

This paper focuses on primary and secondary schools, where conversations about death are often *ad hoc*, arising only when a child initiates them perhaps as a result of seeing something in the media, on a video game, in literature or a film. Additionally, children may ask questions about what happens after death as part of natural philosophizing, either out of curiosity and/or following a high profile event, or after a member of the school community has been bereaved. The benefits of having a more systematic approach, which is proactive rather than reactive, include normalizing talking about the subject (Jackson & Colwell, 2001; Krouglov, 2024). An inclusive approach, which recognizes and respects different viewpoints also develops cultural competence, facilitating empathy and cultural sensitivity (Krouglov, 2024). Doing so can facilitate a reduction of fear about death and offer opportunities to develop skills to cope with related situations (Fagnani, 2022; Wass, 2004; Yang & Park, 2017). Such advancement in skills in turn supports positive mental health (Friesen et al., 2020). Arguments for a preventative element have also been made, such as the possibility of it mitigating against suicide (Chen et al., 2024; Fagnani, 2022; Wass, 2004). Furthermore, its inclusion in the curriculum can help young people develop a more conscious approach to life (Rodríguez et al., 2024), which is particularly enhanced if it includes reflection on personal experiences, which can help shape a sense of meaning and purpose.

Of course, schools do not sit in isolation from their wider cultural contexts, and the themes of this paper are also pertinent to broader public health initiatives that also seek to normalize talking about death. The

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'compassionate communities' movement is one such example, whereby educational programmes in schools connect with their wider communities and health care systems (Kellehear, 2013; Roleston et al., 2023). Paul et al. (2019) offer a case study of a hospice working with schools, and propose a model of integrated practice for wider implementation. Hence, such holistic approaches which also include a public health focus, are also relevant here, particularly in relation to normalizing talk about death (Krouglov, 2024; Rodríguez et al., 2022; Roleston et al., 2023) – a task which schools cannot achieve alone.

Authors have highlighted the practical issues which mitigate against death education being implemented in schools. For example, without a mandate, many teachers in different countries have no training in dealing with death and loss (Adams et al., 2025; Bowie, 2000; Dawson et al., 2023; Kurttekin, 2024; Ramos-Pla et al., 2023; Rodríguez et al., 2022). In addition to their lack of preparation, there are often strong social and cultural taboos in different countries around talking about death with children (Puskás et al., 2023; Rodríguez et al., 2022). Paul (2019) observes that the social taboo theory is more nuanced than is sometimes presented, and offers the concept of "death ambivalence" as an alternative. This notion relates to both the presence and absence of death in children's lives across settings such as home and school. Paul contends that death was omnipresent in her study with children in Scotland, although schools and families often avoided the topic. Notwithstanding the debate about taboo, studies have found that many teachers (as well as parents) are uncomfortable having conversations with children and young people about the subject (Mcgovern & Barry, 2000).

In this article, we situate our work in the emerging, wider literature on the Pedagogy of Death, which includes death education (Herrán et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2022). The latter relates "to teaching, learning, and research within a form of education for life that takes the awareness of death into account". We concentrate on the curricular strand of this area, which "seeks to normalise death through what is taught and learnt" (Rodríguez et al., 2022, p. 1519), and support Krouglov's (2024) argument for an inclusive pedagogy which comprises dialogue, reflective practice and experiential learning.

Discussions about death and curricular content need to include children and young people's perspectives to ensure relevance to their learning. As Paul (2019) states, the child's voice has been under-researched in understanding how children experience death in their lives, despite the fact that their views are vital to shape ways in which adults can support them. Recent studies have asked young people about their views on death education, which have elicited positive responses (e.g. Bowie, 2000; Herrán et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2024). Specifically, in this paper, we focus on the deliberate inclusion of non-corporeal continuation: a conviction that after the body dies, a nonphysical part of the person still exists, perhaps in heaven or through reincarnation, or that the deceased can return in some form which is not physical (see Ahmadi et al., 2019; Corr, 2010; Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Speece, 1995; Yang & Park, 2017).

Several studies have explored, or elicited as part of wider investigations, children and young people's beliefs in non-corporeal continuation (see Ahmadi et al., 2019; Francis et al., 2017; Natsis, 2017; Rodríguez et al., 2024; Singleton, 2012). We propose that this conversation around children's "*beliefs about*" life before life/life after death, should progress to recognize and value their "*experiences of*" it, i.e. that many children and young people report encounters beyond the material world. In describing their accounts, we adopt a core principle of qualitative research which focuses on understanding the meaning that people give to their experiences, rather than attempting to determine whether the experience occurred or is accurate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Subjective accounts are, therefore, valued because participants - in this case children - are viewed as sources of expert knowledges about themselves (Thomas, 2023). People's experiences and interpretations of them are, of course, also shaped by a range of factors including the cultural and psychological, and this paper refers to varied disciplinary lenses through which they can be viewed.

We develop our argument by first contextualizing death in education systems, drawing on Childhood Studies to illuminate the child's voice as a central tenet in developing meaningful curricula. We briefly review the literature on children's understandings of death more broadly, before narrowing it to beliefs about non-corporeal continuation. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach in line with thanatological principles, we then draw from varied disciplines and fields to collate empirical examples of children's *experiences of* life beyond the material world. These sources include spirituality, consciousness studies, psychology, bereavement studies, parapsychology and anthropology. Finally, we outline some key arguments for, and challenges of, introducing conversations about experiences of other lives in the classroom. We conclude that their inclusion brings pedagogical benefits while also potentially reducing some teachers' fears about talking about death with pupils.

Talking about death: the child's voice in education

Scholars from a range of fields who research with children recognize that many are willing to talk about death (Adams et al., 2025; Ahmadi et al., 2019; Bowie, 2000; Champagne, 2008; Paul, 2019; Puskás et al., 2023; Thomas, 2023). Indeed, young children are naturally inquisitive about it, often asking questions about what happens after death as part of wider philosophical ponderings about the meaning of life (Corr, 2010). As Puolimatka and Solasaari (2006, p. 201) suggest, children "deserve serious answers" to these questions. Schools can offer a safe space for these discussions, particularly as many children and adolescents want to talk about death in school (see Bowie, 2000; Herrán et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2024). Nevertheless, as with all sensitive subjects, there are also some pupils who would be uncomfortable exploring such ideas with peers, and concerns from teachers, and we will address these situations later.

Children's voices, in addition to being vital to research about death, are also highly pertinent to education in general, and death education in particular. The theoretical context emanates from the new sociology of childhood, which has elevated the importance of voice in academia and practice. The most recent international influence lies with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 (Adams, 2009; Bourke, 2023), which affords children a wide range of rights including to:

- express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and have them considered (Article 12);
- freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds (Article 13); and
- freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14) (UNICEF, n.d).

Sociologically, such expressions also link to the concept of children's agency, which frames them as active beings, capable of exerting their influence and shaping their knowledge of the world, rather than being passive recipients of knowledge (James & James, 2008). In line with the UNCRC, many countries have incorporated the child's voice into formal education systems, where it is often referred to as "pupil voice" (Lundy, 2007, p. 297) or "student voice" (Flynn & Hayes, 2021, p. 43).

This sociological concept is not without complexities nor critics. Indeed, there have been concerns that it could undermine adults' authority in schools (Lundy, 2007). There have also been questions around professionals' willingness to listen to children, how they can do so successfully, as well as issues around young people's age, maturity and competencies (Komulainen, 2007). However, in many western education systems, pupil voice has been made explicit in different elements of schooling, including curriculum design. The need for a curriculum that is relevant to children's lives has long been recognized by foundational, influential educational thinkers (see Bruner, 1973; Dewey, 1913). More recently, Flynn and Hayes (2021, p. 44) warn that to be effective, this task involves much more than asking pupils for their views about what should be taught; instead it requires a paradigm shift toward "a democratic process of shared curricular development and co-construction, as well as a collective responsibility for developing solutions in education environments."

As Bourke (2023) states in relation to shaping curricula, pupils' curiosity is heightened when they have an active interest in what they are learning about. She further notes that the reopening of schools in the post-Covid 19 era brings with it the need for children's voices to be more prominent, based on their motivations and experiences of education and the changing context within which they are learning. On contributions to death education specifically, Rodríguez et al.'s (2024) work with adolescents in Spain suggested that their views could form an educational model for a didactics of death. Of course, the implementation of death education brings particular challenges for teachers (Herrán et al., 2021; Kurttekin, 2024; Mcgovern & Barry, 2000; Rodríguez et al., 2022), which we refer to throughout this paper.

How children understand death

Despite many teachers' concerns about addressing death in schools, including anxieties that children may not be mature enough to comprehend it, psychologists generally agree that most understand the biological aspects by the age of 5–8 (Paul, 2019). Jackson and Colwell (2001) state that research into children's attitudes toward death began in the 1940s but post-World Wars I and II, this appeared to stop for decades to come. Speece (1995) noted that early research proposed four main categories in children's understandings:

1. universality – the notion that all living things will die
2. irreversibility – that when the physical body dies, it will not come back to life, although some children recognize that resuscitation can reverse death in some cases

3. non-functionality – that the body can no longer perform functions such as walking, eating, seeing, thinking (Speece, 1995). Longbottom and Slaughter (2018, p. 2) refer to this as 'cessation'
4. causality – understandings of external and internal events which caused the death.

Longbottom and Slaughter (2018) subsequently proposed a category of applicability: the understanding that only living things can die. Part of Speece's (1995) original classification also included non-corporeal continuation. In later research, psychologists have shown that these religious and/or spiritual beliefs co-exist alongside scientific understandings of death (Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Legare et al., 2012); i.e. that it is common for many people across cultures to hold natural and supernatural beliefs about the same event simultaneously, in a complementary way, the latter being shaped and influenced through socialization (Legare et al., 2012). Furthermore, Macabulos et al.'s (2015) investigation with Filipino children into their concepts of death found that they needed to understand non-corporeal continuation in order to fully comprehend Speece's (1995) four main biologically-oriented concepts.

Children's beliefs about non-corporeal continuation

The belief in life before and/or after this earthly existence is a widespread cross-cultural historical phenomenon, and is central to most religions, as well as being widely reported by those with no religious affiliation (Moraes et al., 2022). These ideas are not limited to adults, with empirical studies providing considerable evidence that many children and young people hold and express ideas about life before and/or after death (see Ahmadi et al., 2019; Corr, 2010; Francis et al., 2017; Natsis, 2017; Rodríguez et al., 2024; Singleton, 2012).

Cultural norms obviously play an important role in shaping beliefs, as exemplified by Gutiérrez et al. (2020) who explored the impact of socialization and cultural practices around death with 54 parents, five grandmothers and 61 children aged 3.5 to 6.9 years in the state of Puebla, Mexico. They found that 11.6% of the children asked questions about non-corporeal continuity, and the majority (51.7%) of parents' answers to children's questions included information about it. Parents also used the questions to explain that their dead relatives returned and consumed the food which had been laid out on an ofrenda (a ritual altar). The adults' responses therefore reinforced the belief. Interestingly, this Mexican example offers a challenge to Speece's (1995) aforementioned proposal that children understand that physical death involves the cessation of bodily functions. This situation suggests that Speece's categorisations may be too western-centric and would benefit from recognizing the nuances of different cultural traditions.

Continuing the theme of societal influences, Natsis's (2017) phenomenological study with 12 adolescents in Australia discovered that the 10 who came from a faith background – Christianity and Islam – also expressed views about the afterlife which aligned with their respective religious teachings. Similarly, Macabulos et al. (2015) found that 7–11 year olds in the Philippines believed in a transition to heaven, which again was consistent with wider religious and spiritual (Christian) teachings.

However, children's beliefs also demonstrate levels of complexity which belie a simple transmission model from communities and families down the generations. Studies have shown how many adults create their worldview from various sources, which can include different religions as well as other understandings such as those from the New Age, which have become mainstream (Cornille, 2021). Children are no exception to such forms of meaning making. Ahmadi et al. (2019) explored 6–9 year old Swedish children's ($n = 40$) perceptions of death, and identified different beliefs in relation to cultural ideas. While some believed that the dead go to heaven or hell, others talked of reincarnation with the deceased's soul moving into a new body, despite this latter belief not being part of their upbringing. Similarly, in a different study in Scotland, Danny explained, "I do believe you get reborn but not as a human again but as, say, an insect… a different form" (Cameron & Cassidy, 2022, p. 179).

In addition to adopting concepts from other religions, some children also create their own. Ahmadi et al. (2019) referred to these as child-specific ideas, which were a combination of culture and the child's own reflections. One example cited was, "I believe that when you die, you become an angel and can transform yourself into whatever you like, whenever you want" (Ahmadi et al., 2019, p. 429). Here, becoming an angel reflected some widely-accepted societal views, but the child had introduced their personal idea that death facilitated transformation into another form of one's choosing (p. 429). Other children spoke of death being a relief to people who are old because post-death they would be able to do lots of things which they had previously wanted to do.

Clark (1998) asked 94 young people aged 11–17 in England what they thought happened after death. Some offered views which differed from the mainstream cultural narratives, including believing that we

sleep and dream for the rest of our lives, or go to our own world. In a Scottish study, Bart explained that people who had behaved badly while alive became "a ghost but nobody can see you but, you know, he's there" (Cameron & Cassidy, 2022, p. 181). Diverging views were also expressed in Yang and Park's (2017) study with Korean, Chinese and Chinese-American 5–6 year olds who also talked of beliefs in ascension and resurrection after physical death. In one case, a child drew a picture of a physical body with wings, which was flying into the sky. Another explained, "Dead people will be taken to heaven. Angels will take them there… They get old, eat food, and play in the playground there" (Yang & Park, 2017, p. 70).

The inclusion of children's concepts is essential in death education because it supports a curriculum which is relevant to their lives, and also enables them to exercise agency. The range of ideas expressed in studies - relating to their respective traditions, those of other cultures, derived from a combination of sources, or the embodiment of the child's own views – makes for rich peer learning. Furthermore, the variety of thoughts facilitates the development of skills such as listening and respect for different perspectives in the generation of cultural competency (Krouglov, 2024). Cameron and Cassidy (2022, p. 184) also propose that the use of philosophical enquiry is an effective child-led approach which enables pupils to "engage in shared meaning-making and self-understanding through philosophical dialogue".

These research findings focus on children's *beliefs about* non-corporeal continuation, but we now extend the conversation, taking it into the territory of their *experiences of* it. Our approach adds to existing arguments for death education in schools by illuminating the child's voice from a different perspective. Specifically, it moves beyond hearing their opinions about ideas alone, to learning about their experiences beyond the material world. This approach foregrounds children's authority over their own experiences, whereby their subjective, lived experience is central (Thomas & Durston, 2025), and supports the experiential element of death education advocated by Krouglov (2024). Before we continue, it is important to clarify our use of language. We do not intend to imply that the two categories of ideas and experience are separate. On the contrary, they are often interrelated, with experiences (of many types) being a factor in shaping beliefs, sometimes affirming them, and sometimes altering them. Rather, we use this distinction to differentiate between research which has asked children what they believe about the possibility of non-corporeal continuation, and research which has attended to their experience/encounters of it in various forms. Thus far, the former has informed arguments for death education, and we now propose that the latter strengthens the case further.

Children's experiences with the non-corporeal

The research cited thus far provides important insights into how children understand aspects of both physical death and non-corporeal continuation. Nevertheless, these studies do not tell the whole story. We now turn to various disciplines and authors, including the respective primary research of the two lead authors (Adams and Thomas), which collectively provide us with insights into young people's experiential connections with other realms. Research spans a range of disciplines, so a multidisciplinary approach is required to capture the full range of phenomena. Academic silos have obscured some of this work, with authors often describing the same experience but framing it in one way, according to their specific discipline (Adams et al., 2022). In so doing, we only achieve a fragmented picture of experiences, which is further exacerbated when one cultural perspective dominates, drowning out other voices. For example, Bluett (2020) observes that in the Māori communities of *Aotearoa* New Zealand, a child who reports interacting with an invisible person is understood to be engaging with their ancestors who travel with them through life. This is clearly a view which speaks directly to life beyond the physical. Yet the same experience is most likely to be deemed as an "imaginary friend" by western developmental psychologists, or perhaps as pathological if viewed through a western medical perspective (Adams et al., 2022; Bluett, 2020; Thomas, 2023; Thomas & Durston, 2025). Where culturally dominant labels disregard religious or spiritual views, this can silence children if they are worried about ridicule or dismissal (Adams, 2009, 2010; Thomas, 2023). In turn, they are likely to under-report experiences with the deceased, thereby restricting their visibility, and leading to many inaccurately thinking they are rare.

Here, we draw on the following disciplines and fields: spirituality; consciousness studies; psychology; bereavement studies; parapsychology and anthropology to elucidate this argument and represent the range of phenomena in question, albeit that it is not intended to be an exhaustive list. In this section, we do not offer interpretations of the phenomena. Instead, we report them verbatim as they were recorded in the literature to privilege the children and young people's perspectives. We discuss the need for critical thinking and identify some alternative explanations in the subsequent section.

Children's encounters with the deceased

Children regularly report seeing, sensing, hearing, smelling and/or interacting with deceased people in both waking and dream life (Adams, 2010; Adams et al., 2022; Mallon, 2002; Thomas, 2023). However, different terms are used for similar experiences in various fields and disciplines, which can obscure a holistic overview of research findings. Examples of terminology include "sense of presence", "continuing bonds", "visitations" and "After Death Communications" in bereavement studies; terms which also appear in the parapsychology literature, alongside "anomalous phenomena" and "ghosts". In anthropology, religion and spirituality, language conveying different cultural notions of "spirit" and "souls" are found, alongside Indigenous terms and concepts. Meanwhile, psychiatry frames some encounters as hallucinations (Adams et al., 2022; Thomas, 2023).

Psychologists propose that during bereavement, it is normal to encounter the deceased person (or pet) as part of the grieving process (Mallon, 2002). In Gutiérrez's (2009) study of 61 preschool children (mean age = 5.1 years) and their families in Mexico, 86.9% of the children reported seeing or talking to a dead relative during *dia de los muertos*, The Mexican Day of the Dead festival.

Such interactions are not confined to waking hours, with many recounting meeting people who have died in their dreams (Adams, 2010; Mallon, 2002; Siegel & Bulkeley, 1998; Thomas, 2023). Jerry, an American teenager, recalled a vivid dream in which his deceased grandfather spoke to him, "[asking] many direct questions about my conduct. At first I started to reply defensively, but then I knew that he was right about every point. It was like no other dream I had ever experienced" (Siegel & Bulkeley, 1998, p. 176). Jerry, like many young people, exhibited agency in attributing meaning to this experience. Jerry believed that his grandfather had returned in this dream to guide him, in light of his association with a group of boys at school whose behavior was questionable. Mallon (2002), a psychotherapist, reports a similar case of interacting with a deceased relative, told by Stuart aged 12 who said, "I dream that my grandad, who's dead, sits at the end of my bed and sings to me" (p. 138).

Writing in the field of spirituality, Adams (2010) recounts 11 year old Claire's narrative. Claire recalled how her friend Susie had died when they were eight years old. More recently, Claire dreamt that she was walking through a large gold tunnel, finding Susie standing at the end of it. The girls engaged in conversation, with Susie offering reassuring words about being happy, and Claire telling her of recent events in school.

It is important to note that not all childhood (or adult) experiences with the deceased are related to bereavement. Parental accounts tell of their child interacting with a deceased relative who had died long before the child had been born, and whom the child had not been aware of. Writing on spirituality, Hart (2003) describes how an 18 month year old girl called Sydney would talk of "the lady" in their Victorian home in the USA. Her mother reported how Sydney would look at a small rocking chair in her room, with her eyes moving backwards and forwards as if it were moving. She would urge her parents to be quiet, so as not to disturb "the lady". One day, when sorting some old photographs, one fell to the floor, at which point Sydney became excited and proclaimed "lady!", saying it was the lady in her room. The picture was of her great-grandmother who had lived and died in the house, long before Sydney had been born (Hart, 2003, p. 131).

Parapsychologists report similar incidents to that of Sydney, referring to the perceived beings variously as ghosts, supernatural entities, apparitions, After Death Communications or anomalous phenomena. For example, Roll and Persinger (2001) detail how a young girl named Heidi told her mother about two (invisible) men called Con and Mr Gordy who played with her, describing how Con was covered in blood. Her mother later discovered that two men, called Lon and James Gordy had lived in the area in the past and Lon had lost his hand in a machinery accident (Roll & Persinger, 2001). In this case, Heidi – like Sydney in Hart's (2003) work – had been able to correctly identify the "invisible" people in a collection of photos. Unlike the earlier cases, these two accounts were not linked to grief, and would likely to be referred to as ghosts, spirits or hauntings.

Near Death Experiences

Some reports of encounters with the deceased and/or the afterlife are prominent in research into Near Death Experiences (NDEs). The term was coined by Raymond Moody, and refers to an experience occurring during unconsciousness while close to death, after which the person describes a set of components (Sartori, 2014). Adults across different studies and countries often report visiting another realm, sometimes having a review of their life, an out of body experience, moving through a tunnel and/or toward light, choosing or being told to return and/or meeting deceased relatives or friends (Adams, 2010; Sartori, 2014; Sutherland, 2012; Thomas, 2023; Thomas & O'Connor, 2024). There are differences in some cultures, which Sartori (2014) outlines. Elements which

are pertinent to this paper include being in the presence of the deceased, God/Transcendent beings and/or visiting heaven or another place which the experiencer perceives to be the location of another life.

The majority of studies have been with adults, some of which include retrospectives of childhood experiences. While adult recollections can obviously be prone to changes resulting in lapse of memory and/or unintentional embellishment, there has been a tendency to find consistencies in re-tellings (Sartori, 2014). Some researchers have captured reports during the participants' childhood (see Morse & Perry, 1993; Sutherland, 2012; Thomas & O'Connor, 2024). Morse and Perry (1993) conducted one of the earliest such studies, undertaken with 12 participants at the Children's Hospital, Seattle in the USA. Cindi was 17 years old when she had a cardiac arrest. She recalled leaving her body and moving into a room, which was,

> …open at the top. It was like looking out at the sky. Sparks would fill the air and streaks of light zoomed up from the earth and burst into rainbows… I wanted to leave the room but the door was closed… my dead grandfather then came to help me. He was a very religious man. He took me by the hand and said, "Go back to your body. You have work to do." Then he led me out of the room and back to my body. (Morse & Perry, 1993, pp. 43-44).

Cindi's meeting with her deceased relative/person known to them is a common occurrence, which appears across studies. In another example, Sartori (2014) quoted the narrative of a woman who had an NDE when she was five years old. After regaining consciousness, she told her mother,

> … I had seen a beautiful lady dressed in a long white dress who was floating in front of a very bright sunshine light. She beckoned me with her finger and I was just about to go with her, as asked, when my granddad… sharply told me to go back. (p. 62).

The woman explained that she could only hear him from behind the light. He sounded stern, which was not his usual demeanor, so she followed his instructions and returned to this world. At the time, the girl did not know that her granddad had died, because her parents had delayed telling her while she was ill.

Descriptions of being present in another realm are common in NDEs. A typical example is that of ten year old Chris, who briefly died during a kidney transplant and subsequently remembered,

> … climbing a staircase to heaven… it was such a good and peaceful feeling. I felt wonderful. I was on a staircase, and it was dark, and I started climbing upward. I got about halfway up the staircase and decided not to go any higher. (Morse & Perry, 1993, p. 3).

Therefore, these types of NDEs illustrate a different form of children reporting deceased people continuing to live beyond their physical death compared to those who encounter them during usual states of waking or dreaming consciousness.

A related phenomenon is that of "deathbed visions". These are descriptions from people who are close to death of deceased people and pets appearing to them (Sartori, 2014). Thomas & O'Connor's (2024, p. 447) recent work in an intensive care unit in a hospital in England with seven children aged 5–16 captured such an encounter. In this case, it was offered by the mother of Harry, a 13 year old boy from the gypsy/traveller community. She explained how Harry had told her "he had seen lots of dead people around his bed when he was revived, and two other occasions shortly after his cardiac arrest." Harry reported that in the vision he was told he would heal.

Memories of past lives

In addition to reported encounters with the afterlife, some children describe experiences of having lived before. Moraes et al. (2022) conducted a scoping review of 78 studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals reporting past-life memories, and found that 84% were related to children. Research into recollections of previous lives was pioneered by the psychiatrist Ian Stevenson (Adams, 2010; Moraes et al., 2022; Thomas, 2023). Stevenson (2001) examined many reports in depth, investigating whether or not names, places and other details could be corroborated, which varied from case to case. In some, there was insufficient information to interrogate, as with an American girl named Erin. According to her mother, between the ages of 3 and 4, Erin spoke regularly of having been a boy called John, and having had a brother and a stepmother. She recalled going to the lake and floating a boat, and made comments about how the landscape, which used to have horses, had been ruined by cars.

Other participants provided more concrete information which Stevenson (2001) was able to investigate. One such example was that of Hanumant, a boy born in India. His mother explained that a neighboring farmer had been shot in a case of mistaken identity. One night, the deceased man appeared in a dream and told her that he was coming to her. She later became pregnant and gave birth to Hanumant,

believing that he was the reincarnation of the neighbor. As a young boy, Hanumant would often talk about his past life as a farmer. Hanumant was born with a large birthmark which Stevenson cross-checked with the postmortem of the dead man, and found that it was on the same part of the body where the latter had been shot. Stevenson (2001) states that around 35% of reports involve people bearing birth marks or birth defects which are similar to those which the person they remember being also had.

Whilst Dyer and Garnes's (2015) book is aimed at the general public, and does not include a rigorous analysis, they collected "thousands" (p. xiii) of written parental accounts of their children's memories. As with Stevenson's (2001) testimonies, the majority related to children's early years, many around 2–3 years of age. An Australian parent told how her 22 month year old son was insistent that he had died before, when he had been "little" and "fell on the road" and been run over by a truck. He was frustrated and upset that his mother did not recognize the event, and was adamant that he was not talking about a dream. His mother was unable to explain the narrative, contemplating whether her son had derived it from a news story, but to no avail.

Several accounts include children telling their parent(s) that they are not their real parent(s). A typical example was of a young American girl who became distressed when she heard sirens. Her mother said,

> Finally, one day I asked her why she'd get so upset. She told me that one time a siren came and took her mommy away, and her mommy never came back. I told her that I was her mom, but I was fine. She said, "No, the mommy before you". (Dyer & Garnes, 2015, p. 51).

People across many studies make similar claims. An American Roman Catholic mother explained that her daughter Roberta regularly talked about her "other mummy and daddy," whom she wanted to visit, not because she loved them, but because she had told them she would go back. Roberta even pointed out the house in which they had allegedly lived, but after several months, she stopped discussing it. This silence emanated from her mother's frustration, who did not want to engage in such conversations (Stevenson, 2001, p. 76).

As shown in some of these examples, reports of past life memories span communities which believe in reincarnation as well as those which have no tradition of doing so (Dyer & Garnes, 2015; Stevenson, 2001). Further, many children begin to report them at very young ages, usually around the age of 35 months (Moraes et al., 2022). Although investigators often do not revisit the same participants later on, there are many examples of children no longer being able to recall them even a few years later, when they are re-questioned by parents and/or researchers.

The varied examples in the previous sections on "beliefs about" and "experiences of" illustrate how children often adopt their own cultural beliefs, but also incorporate those from other traditions, as well as generating their own ideas. Such syntheses can be nuanced, but when they also have experiences, these can further shape their cognitive ideas and beliefs, making the experiential component of death education (Krouglov, 2024) particularly important.

Discussion

Having established the prevalence of childhood beliefs in, and experiences of, non-corporeal continuation, we now consider the implications of the intentional inclusion of the topic as part of a wider death education agenda in schools. First we present an overarching case for its inclusion. We then discuss the implications of teaching "beliefs about" and then "experiences of" in turn. The advantages of, and barriers to doing so, are considered in the context of the wider literature on education in general and death education in particular. Finally, we identify some implications for practice and future research that include public health education.

Our comments related to pedagogical ideas, curriculum content and activities are written with the intention that teachers would adapt them to pupils' ages and contexts accordingly; Corr (2010) cautions against thinking along stage-based frameworks, i.e. that children's understanding of death develops through sequential stages. Corr proposes that such rigid approaches oversimplify the concept of death itself, and their understandings of it, which was corroborated by Ahmadi et al.'s (2019) empirical work with 6–9 year olds which demonstrated higher order thinking processes when constructing and conveying understandings about the end of life.

The case for including non-corporeal continuation in death education

As noted in the introduction, authors have documented a range of challenges which mitigate against death education in schools, including socio-cultural taboos and a lack of training. Friesen et al. (2020) further suggest that many adults associate such conversations with fear and anxiety, believing they are inappropriate and confusing for young people. When

applied to the school context, Puskás et al. (2023) also observe that questions related to death and dying are considered sensitive and can be treated as an educational taboo. Teachers can also fear unintentionally upsetting pupils and may be nervous about becoming emotional themselves, which further discourages such conversations (Feuchtwang, 2016).

However, discussing the concept of other lives can help to reduce this anxiety. As Chen et al. (2024) observe, writing in the Chinese context, religions which offer a specific perspective on an afterlife "can provide a sense of security about death" (p. 9). Puolimatka and Solasaari (2006) similarly refer to the hope which religious teachings about an afterlife bring. In addition, it is not just the religious who believe in other lives: studies show increasing numbers of adults across the world believing in reincarnation, including those who do not align themselves with religions which have that tradition (Moraes et al., 2022; Stevenson, 2001). This phenomenon also includes people who define themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Relevance to the curriculum is a key argument for teaching about non-corporeal continuation. As demonstrated earlier, researchers have shown that it is not just adults who hold these beliefs - many children also do (see Ahmadi et al., 2019; Francis et al., 2017; Natsis, 2017; Rodríguez et al., 2024; Singleton, 2012). This finding in itself supports inclusion of the topic because it is of interest to pupils – a key ingredient in engaging learning (Bourke, 2023). The argument is strengthened when we consider that many children report a direct experience with other lives. The pertinence of the topic would resonate strongly with those who had, particularly those for whom the encounter was meaningful. Given that many children (and adults) tend not to reveal their spiritual/religious/supernatural experiences due to fear of ridicule or dismissal (Thomas, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Adams, 2010), the school would be offering a different message. They would be acknowledging and respecting the cross-cultural nature of these beliefs and experiences, which have been recorded throughout history. Hence, inclusion of the topic could begin to counter the wider social narrative in many countries which devalues, and sometimes pathologizes, reports of encounters with the deceased and other lives.

Of course, not all children and young people would claim such an experience, but in most countries, they would be familiar with fictional and factual ideas/claims surrounding heaven, reincarnation, ghosts, and/or spirits and other dimensions. These accounts are widespread across media, social media, television/film, fiction and nonfiction texts. Hence, all pupils would have some awareness of the phenomena in question.

Another advantage of discussing non-corporeal continuation is that it can support pupils in developing a more conscious approach to life, through personal evolution, as contextualized in a Pedagogy of Death approach (see Rodríguez et al., 2024). It does so by taking a non-confessional approach to exploring all perspectives, and facilitating reflection on personal beliefs. Young people can consider how their viewpoint shapes the way they wish to live. For example, an atheist might decide to live a highly ethical and moral life, if this is the only life they have. Someone believing in reincarnation or heaven might adopt a similar approach, conceiving choices as being affected by a previous life and/or shaping the next phase of their existence. Given that these ideas encourage reflection on the inner worlds, and on meaning and purpose, the material is useful for the remit of educating for living a conscious life (Rodríguez et al., 2024).

Discussions about the possibility of an afterlife/pre-life – even if they do not exist – offer opportunities for meaningful, philosophical questions which children habitually ask, and may also provide some comfort for pupils and teachers. Importantly, the topic needs to be embedded in the curriculum as part of the wider proactive approach to death education which is advocated elsewhere (see Adams et al., 2025; Bowie, 2000; Dawson et al., 2023; Friesen et al., 2020; Jackson & Colwell, 2001). Indeed, it would be ethically inappropriate to introduce non-corporeal continuation reactively, after a bereavement. In this latter circumstance, the teaching would lack authenticity as it would not demonstrate respect for traditions and believers. Pupils and parents/carers may conceive it to be a superficial attempt to offer consolation for a loss, thereby lacking integrity.

Finally, the topic is inherently optimistic, in contrast to that of physical death, which is distressing. Of course, conversations have the potential to trigger upset about loss, which teachers would be sensitive to. Hence the calls for teachers to receive training which extend throughout the death education literature (see Adams et al., 2025; Dawson et al., 2023; Herrán et al., 2021; Kurttekin, 2024; Mcgovern & Barry, 2000) are reiterated here.

Discussing beliefs about non-corporeal continuation in schools

As others have observed, even in the absence of formal programmes, the broader topic of death emerges across different subjects (Adams et al., 2025; Jackson

and Colwell, 2001; Rodríguez et al., 2024). This is a notable point because many teachers are unable to add to their curricula due to a lack of time and/or policy restrictions/directives on what needs to be taught in their respective jurisdictions.

Fortunately, non-corporeal continuation also has these synergies with existing subject areas. The most natural home, for those schools and/or education systems which include it, are Religious Education and/or forms of spiritual education. Here, lessons about beliefs in past lives and the afterlife would already be taught as part of educating children about global religions and other worldviews. With the exception of faith-based schools, these would be taught in a non-confessional way.

Some education systems or schools do not teach about religion, but other subject areas also lend themselves to the topic, such as history, science and literature, as well as social, emotional, civic and cultural themes. Jackson and Colwell (2001) identified history as a space in which to explore how ancient Egyptians dealt with the dead bodies of the Pharaohs. Such conversations can also include their beliefs in the afterlife and the existence of the soul, *ka*.

Science – in which teachers routinely educate about the life cycle – can also accommodate these perspectives, opening up conversations about co-existing beliefs about the physical death of the body and the possibility of non-corporeal continuation (Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Legare et al., 2012). It is necessary to include the idea that there is no form of afterlife/pre-life, to provide a balanced overview so that children can develop informed opinions. Lessons should include atheistic beliefs that there is nothing beyond this material world, alongside scientific investigations. Zheng (2024) notes that mainstream science's methods focusing on empirical evidence based on observable phenomena and verifiable data have not been able to prove the existence of an afterlife, particularly because its methods require reproducibility. Zheng (2024) draws attention to studies which investigate the possibility of consciousness surviving the brain's death, the outcomes of which are challenged by some scientists. Pupils will benefit from learning about different types of scientific research methods through exploring Near Death Experiences and past life memories, to which we return in the next section in relation to the works of Morse and Perry (1993), Sartori (2014), Stevenson (2001) and Tucker (2014).

In addition, cultural studies or geography generate opportunities to explore Indigienous beliefs. Educators can draw from anthropological studies to share beliefs from around the globe. Examples could include the Konyak Nagas of India and the Tausug communities in the Philippines, who both believe that the soul comprises various parts which manifest in different ways after death (Eller, 2014). Incorporating varied cultural viewpoints also provides opportunities for critical thinking to challenge western models of categorization. The aforementioned example of the Mexican beliefs that deceased relatives return to eat food is a case in point, as it does not sit comfortably with Speece's category of understanding that bodily functions cease after physical death.

Discussing experiences of non-corporeal continuation in the classroom

Although not all schools will deem discussing pupils' personal experiences appropriate, discussing people's experiences of other lives more generally, we argue, is essential. There are numerous sources which teachers can use from literature, the media, documentaries and the internet to stimulate interest and debate. The benefits of using these secondary sources include providing distance between the experiencer and the experience, but at the same time, they allow pupils who have had one but do not wish to reveal it, the chance to privately relate to the topic in a meaningful way. Further, children may perceive the teacher as a trusted person with whom they might wish to share their experience later, knowing that the educator will be respectful of what they disclose.

There are also pedagogical benefits to discussing experiences. First, it provides a more concrete element to learning about what may otherwise appear abstract, i.e., a theoretical concept which other people believe in. For the experiencer, the encounters can serve as evidence of a preexisting belief, adapt it, or initiate a new belief. Hence, discussing accounts of experiences can develop critical inquiry skills, enabling pupils to respectfully consider and assess alternative explanations. An example is offered by Tucker (2014), writing on children's memories of past lives. Tucker outlines and responds to a range of explanations, including fraud, fantasy, false memory, genetic memory and extra sensory perception, as well as the possibility that they are genuine accounts. Tucker further suggests that if there is insufficient evidence to substantiate claims of a past life, then they are unlikely to be true. Pupils can contrast that scientific view with other approaches, such as: recognizing the legitimacy of an account without the need to objectively prove it; the importance of the meaning which children (or indeed adults) ascribe to them; and the psychological damage that can be incurred when a person's experiences are dismissed or ignored, irrespective of its (perceived) veracity.

Near Death Experiences also provide fertile ground for critical exploration. As with recollections of past lives, some might also consider these to be fabrications or products of false memory. Sartori (2014) notes that some professionals argue that the often quoted tunnels and accompanying light can be explained by the reduction of oxygen in the blood (hypoxia) which causes the pupils to dilate. Morse and Perry (1993) also acknowledge arguments that an NDE might have been an hallucination, sometimes affected by medication. These different explanations provide valuable material for classroom debate.

Second, especially in cases where there are reports of impacts on people, the class can discuss them in a way which engenders respect for others' views, even when they differ from their own, fostering cultural competence (Krouglov, 2024). Whilst there are diverse ways of accounting for each type of experience, it is always important to acknowledge and respect the individual's perspective. Many young people describe the incidents as feeling "real" and/or resulting in strong emotions. In various literatures, adults describe how their own childhood encounters had a lasting impact on them for decades (Adams, 2010; Thomas, 2023). Similarly, others describe immediate effects, such as comfort from seeing a deceased relative in a dream (Adams, 2010; Mallon, 2002; Siegel & Bulkeley, 1998). Crucially, it is important to emphasize the young person's understanding of their experience alongside other possible explanations, because their interpretation of it can impact their sense of meaning and purpose, and how they choose to live this life.

As noted earlier, children who report encounters linked to past lives and the afterlife, alongside other spiritual and religious experiences, tell researchers that they are often too embarrassed to share them (Thomas, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Adams, 2010). The stigma drives such conversations underground or into silence. Discussing experiences in schools is therefore one way of supporting the shared aims of public health initiatives and death education to normalize talking about death (Kellehear, 2013; Paul et al., 2019; Roleston et al., 2023). The process also provides children with a trusted adult – whether a teacher or parent/carer or other community member – which is vital not only to normalizing discussions, but also to reducing upset by feeling dismissed or unvalued when talking about personal, potentially formative, experiences.

Implications for teachers: mitigating fears through training

Adults' fears of speaking to children about death are a recurring theme in studies (see Fagnani, 2022; Friesen et al., 2020; Herrán et al., 2021, Kurttekin, 2024; Wass, 2004; Yang & Park, 2017), and as many authors have stated, death education needs to be underpinned by appropriate training, which has the potential to relieve some anxieties. Significantly, requests for training often come from teachers themselves, from a range of countries, who feel that they are unprepared to discuss death in the classroom without it, and/or would be more confident to do so as a result of receiving it (see Adams et al., 2025; Dawson et al., 2023; Herrán et al., 2021; Kurttekin, 2024; Mcgovern & Barry, 2000). These calls for effective training, with which we concur, have focused on death education more broadly, and we expand on colleagues' proposals to advocate for any programme to include non-corporeal continuation specifically as one of its topics. Reasons for the inclusion are contextualized in the historical longevity of beliefs and experiences of it across cultures. The learning should include knowledge and understanding of religions which teach about life beyond this life as well as other spiritual and atheistic worldviews. An overview of research into different types of experiences outlined in this paper would also be beneficial, to demonstrate the rich diversity of human experiences pertaining to non-corporeal continuation.

Given that one of the worries about providing death education is that it might upset children (Feuchtwang, 2016), teaching about pre-life and after-life concepts brings an element of optimism, unlike discussing the biological aspects of death. The latter – whether it is about the life cycle of a plant or animal – focus on death as the end, which can be naturally distressing. In contrast, the widespread belief in non-corporeal continuation introduces the idea that death might be a transformation or continuation, which can bring comfort. Puolimatka and Solasaari (2006) describe such religious beliefs as giving hope to people. That said, of course, in publicly funded schools which do not have a faith foundation, teachers would not encourage pupils to adhere to any particular belief. Rather, their role is to introduce them to a wide range of ideas and equip them with the critical thinking skills to investigate them further. An inclusive approach would be necessary, recognizing that some children will believe in life beyond life in its varied forms, some will not, and others will be unsure. However, training needs to go beyond knowledge. Kurttekin (2024) suggests that a cause of discomfort about death education is often a fear of the unknown or separation. Herrán et al. (2021) similarly suggest that teachers' own fears and attitudes toward dealing with the subject can be a hindrance. These points

would also apply to non-corporeal continuation, and preparation for teaching about it would benefit from professionals having reflected on their own beliefs, prompting reflexive approaches to ensure that they present a balanced stance. As with all contentious and sensitive topics which are taught in schools, softer skills such as active listening, empathy, and resilience are crucial to successful lesson; as Puolimatka and Solasaari (2006) point out, death education requires a high level of sensitivity. It is therefore necessary to develop a respectful classroom ethos in which pupils feel safe to explore ideas and experiences, especially in countries where matters related to religious, spiritual and supernatural beliefs are often dismissed (Adams, 2009)

Of course, even with effective training, not all teachers will be convinced of the need for death education in general, or teaching about non-corporeal continuation in particular, and confidence might not always be sufficiently increased. There may also be periods of time when a teacher is grieving and feels unable to talk about the subject with children. To resolve these situations, schools could ask for those who are confident to serve as specialist leads. Their role could include covering sessions for those colleagues who are unable to teach the topic for different reasons, and to mentor those who are interested but are less experienced and/or want to gain more confidence.

Schools as partners with parents/carers and communities

As Mcgovern and Barry (2000) observe, the support of parents/carers is essential when schools develop death education programmes. However, for school leaders seeking to implement a discreet death education programme, this is not a straightforward process, particularly when students are from diverse cultural backgrounds and some parents may object to schools raising perspectives which differ from their own. Even where there are homogenous groups, parents may still have different views about which topics should be covered, as Kurttekin (2024) found in her study about death education with mothers in Turkey.

While we support specific, well-informed death education courses or initiatives, as discussed earlier, we particularly advocate for the integration of the topic throughout the existing curriculum, to alleviate already overburdened staff, while simultaneously utilizing holistic pedagogies. Auditing the curriculum is likely to show that beliefs about non-corporeal continuation are already being taught, for example in history, cultural studies, literature or Religious Education. This integrated approach raises fewer issues for school-parent/carer-community relationships in schools where non-corporeal continuation is already covered. Nevertheless, in the collective aim of working collaboratively on broader public health initiatives such as compassionate communities (Kellehear, 2013; Roleston et al., 2023), it would be valuable to involve parents/carers. An ideal way to do so is for schools to commence the process by engaging children in designing the curriculum content (Bourke, 2023; Rodríguez et al., 2024). If children are interested in learning about beliefs and experiences related to reincarnation and the afterlife, their parents/carers are more likely to be supportive. In this way, the normalization of death talk, which is a shared aim of death education and public health initiatives, can be implemented collaboratively. The development of cultural competence (Krouglov, 2024) is simultaneously facilitated, with all parties becoming more aware of, and sensitive to, different viewpoints both within their communities and beyond.

Implications for research

Research has shown that many teachers across different countries would welcome training in how to manage death in the curriculum (Mcgovern & Barry, 2000; Rodríguez et al., 2022). Specific research is needed to ascertain teachers and pre-service teachers' views on incorporating adults' and children and young people's experiences of life beyond life into lessons, and the type of training they might need to manage any difficult issues arising. Given the wide range of studies which report teachers' fears about talking about death in schools (e.g. Fagnani, 2022; Feuchtwang, 2016; Herrán et al., 2021; Kurttekin, 2024; Wass, 2004; Yang & Park, 2017), this is an area for further research in relation to teaching about non-corporeal continuation. It would be useful to assess educators' fears prior to implementing the topic, as well as after, to identify whether or not it alleviated any of their anxieties, and why.

Authors have explored the importance of the child's voice in relation to their views on death education more broadly (see Bowie, 2000; Herrán et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2024). Further research which focuses on their levels of interest in learning about concepts and experiences of non-corporeal continuation would also be beneficial.

While there has been research into parents' views on death education in general (see Chen et al., 2024; Mcgovern & Barry, 2000), additional studies which investigate their views on non-corporeal continuation being included could further inform this aspect of

course content and training. Finally, especially where schools are part of compassionate community initiatives (Kellehear, 2013; Roleston et al., 2023) and/or developing compassionate cultures (Paul et al., 2019) more broadly, it would be useful to explore any longitudinal effect they might have on broader public health aims, such as normalizing talk about death and attitudes toward to end of life.

Conclusion

This paper has added a new element to the literature on death education by illuminating children and young people's experiences of non-corporeal continuation and their potential for a death education curriculum. We have extended the discussion from their beliefs about life before life and/or after death, to experiences of it, arguing that the latter contributes to a meaningful and relevant curriculum. We have used thanatological principles, drawing on sociological concepts of the child's voice and agency, and a variety of other disciplines to highlight a range of reported experiences. Discussing ideas, as well as experiences, in school from non-confessional, critical perspectives can generate a range of pedagogical benefits, if underpinned by appropriate training.

Of all the topics which could be included in a death education curriculum, non-corporeal continuation is one of the most compelling. It invites pupils to engage with the enduring question faced by humanity: what happens after we die? In relation to death, the possibility of existing beyond bodily cessation is distinctive in its inherent optimism. Not only can it reduce some teachers' fears around talking about death in school, but it also offers pupils much needed opportunities to contemplate meaning and purpose in life. If used proactively, the theme can help to normalize conversations about co-existing biological and religious/spiritual understandings. In this way, reflecting on varied beliefs about, and experiences of, possible existence beyond this world also has the potential to help the next generation to live a more conscious life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

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