The Emotion Labyrinth

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Context

"The Emotion Labyrinth" is a board game offering an opportunity to play and engage creatively with feelings related to change, loss, and grief. The game was created by a group of P6 pupils – each of them with different experiences of change and loss in life – as part of a creative arts project led by St Columba's Hospice Care at Victoria Primary School, Edinburgh. Delivered by the Hospice's Arts Team and the Child & Families team, this project was part of a wider ongoing programme, supporting the school to become a bereavement aware setting and co-design a bereavement policy for the school. The project was underpinned by the principles of the Bereavement Charter for Children & Adults in Scotland, and employed an arts-led, co-production methodology.

Overall Programme

Building a bereavement aware school setting and co-designing a bereavement policy for the school

- Staff grief awareness sessions
- Creative arts project workshops with pupils
- Creation of local school bereavement charter

Weeks 1-4

We used workshops and games to open discussion on loss and change. This unpacked personal stories alongside thoughts and feelings through a range of art-based activities. We also explored the benefits of using colours and imagery as an inclusive, non-verbal alternative. Characters and zones became important parts of the workshops which were later developed.

Weeks 5-7

We looked at ways of sharing the learning and coping strategies with others. A game was suggested as a way of engaging peers and the development of a board game commenced. Segmenting the board into 4 zones or areas felt important to the children as they wanted to demonstrate a journey with the various emotions one might experience through bereavement or significant change. We looked at the dual processing model (Stroebe & Schut, 2008) and talked about the idea of bouncing back and forward between feelings. The cards and zones became a key part of demonstrating that shift whilst moving forward.

Weeks 8-9

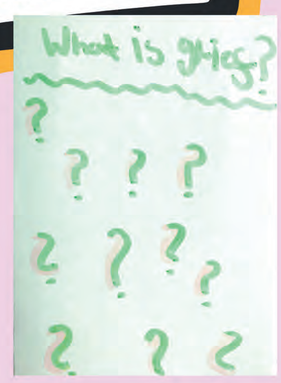
The 3 cards that can be landed on are LOL! Cards, Graveyard Cards and ? Cards. The question cards served to share the children's learning with others. Questions such as "what is grief" shared a suggestion whilst promoting personal reflection and understanding.

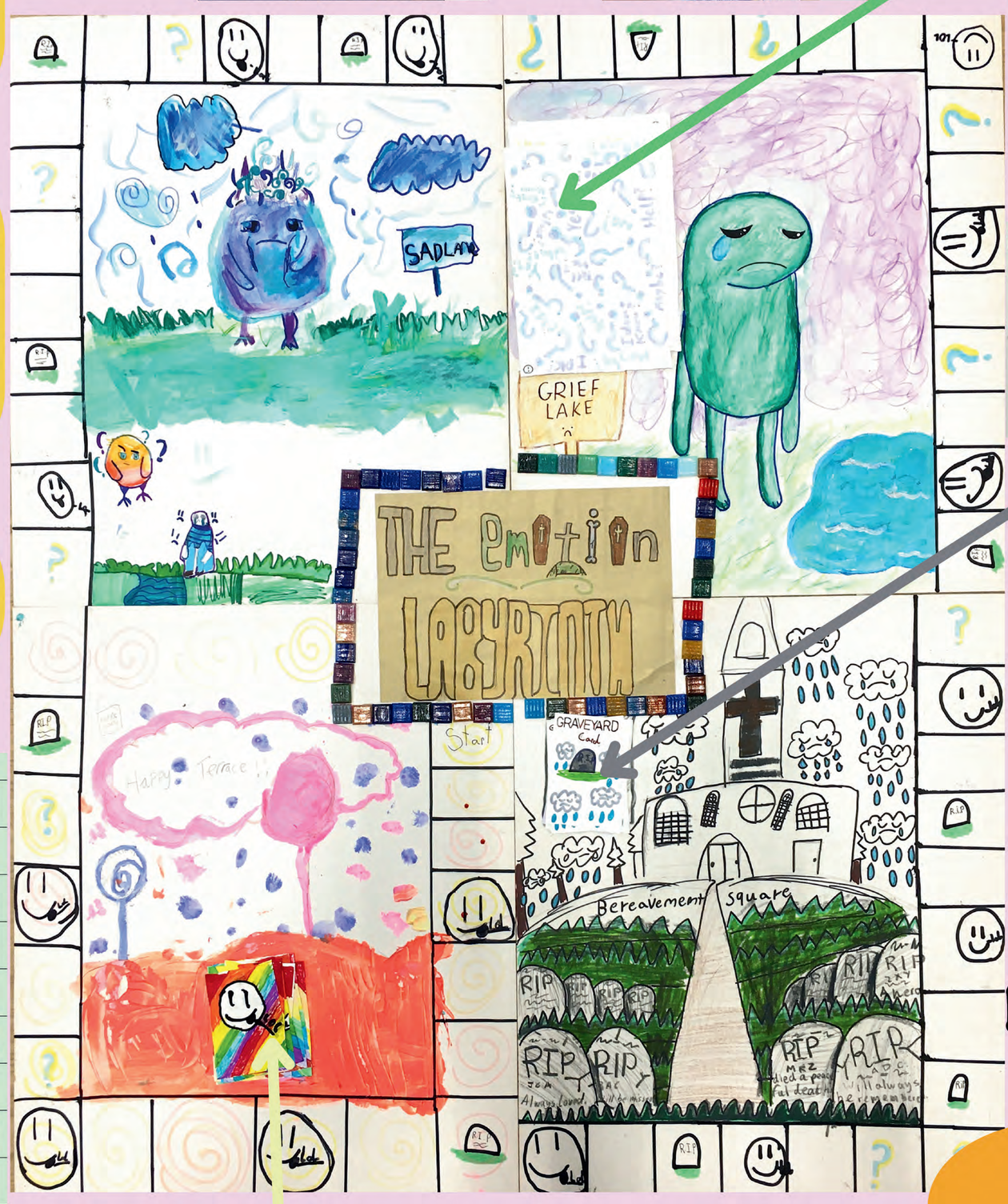
Approach

Over 9 sessions throughout Spring/Summer 2023, we delivered workshops to support pupils to create a bereavement aware environment. These workshops were pupil-led and developed in response to what they brought to each session. The role of the Community Artist was to observe and provide creative scaffolding for the children to build on each week. Being responsive and adaptable to their experiences felt important for the pupils to create something that was authentically theirs. The aim for working with this group was to empower them to become 'bereavement ambassadors' in their school and community. Exploring the idea of coping strategies for challenging times, the children felt a board game was a tool that could help others touch on some of the themes they explored in the sessions. Throughout the project, it was essential for the Community Artist to stay in the moment, to respond and to value each idea that was brought forward. Giving the children space to see where ideas may lead, whilst also guiding and enquiring was crucial in letting the work take its own path. Sometimes this meant sitting in uncertainty for a while, waiting on the next idea to spark. Each of these moments led to the completion of a board game which the pupils felt they had full ownership of.

Question Cards

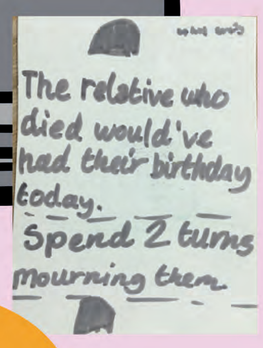
"Grief is when someone dies and you get a feeling in your gut. Grief is different for everyone. You might feel a bit of depression or anger. When someone dies, you may want to stop going out with your friends and hanging out with them. You could feel angry at the person who has died and say it's their fault."





Graveyard Cards

The children wanted to demonstrate the bumpy journey of grieving. We talked about grief not being a linear journey that you move through and recover from, but one that catches you unawares at times and pulls you back into unexpected feelings. Moving round the board of the Emotion Labyrinth, no one escapes landing on a Graveyard Card, however you can rejoin the game and even go on to experience joy (through the LOL! Cards).



Board Game

Aim:
Each person runs their own journey round the board, encountering opportunities for healing and learning as well as setbacks along the way.

"Everyone kinda has to go through the same things and feel the same feelings but for different amounts of time." P6 Pupil

Rules:
In rolling the dice, you move your counter round the board, moving through the different zones. You may land on a logo to pick up one of the cards. This may share insight around grief and feelings, set you back or give you a silly task!

Player Age: 8 Years +

LOL Cards

In one of the earlier workshops with the children, we looked at coping strategies that helped them through challenging times. These were brought into the game as they acknowledged that it is important to still find moments of enjoyment as these give rest from carrying sad feelings and help us eventually feel better.

Playing the Game

When the board game was complete, the children played it. There were one or two players who had "bad luck" and landed on more Graveyard Cards than the others. The children could recognise the 'misfortune' of this and commented on how it feels sometimes "unfair". This raised conversation about the random and unfair nature of challenging times. It also gave them an opportunity to support one another or offer encouragement; "you might get a LOL! Card next, keep going!"

Next Steps

This programme is the first of its kind in terms of supporting a school community to become a bereavement aware setting. Learnings around the programme's impact and its reach, as well as the vital role that the creative arts workshops played in engaging with the pupils feed to the ongoing development of the Bereavement Charter for Scotland. This work also contributes to the wider area of public health palliative care with potential implications for health promotion, death education and intergenerational work (Hartley, 2011, Kleijberg et al., 2020, Tsiris, in press; Tsiris et al., 2011)

Through developing The Emotion Labyrinth, the children created a creative tool to instigate dialogue around what can be challenging themes. The pupils' deeper understanding of change and loss, and of people's varying responses to such experiences were some key outcomes of this project . Having developed their emotional literacy and understanding of grief, the pupils became bereavement ambassadors who are more confident to engage with such topics and experiences both with their peers and their families .

We hope that this project's approach can be taken forward in other schools, with pupils using the creative arts to develop coping strategies, further creating supportive bereavement aware environments.

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