# Approaching the Topic of Death in a Year 3 Primary Ethics Classroom

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## Abstract

Following the loss of my brother, I shed tears at the realisation of never seeing him again. I put on a facade of strength to support my mother. I embarked on a philosophical venture to understand and live with death, and I appreciated life more whilst contemplating on nothingness. Amidst these reflections, I faced an overwhelming challenge: his five-year-old daughter's grief. How do I journey with her? How do I speak to her about death? What is she feeling and will she understand what is going on?

Despite its undeniable reality, death remains a taboo subject in Western societies (Botîlcă, 2021). However, in some cultures one's passing is celebrated, and in some philosophies fearing death is absurd. As something that we cannot really explain, the importance of life lies in the meaning we give death.

Recognising that children encounter loss in various forms; be relatives, friends or even pets, my focus shifts to the critical responsibility of imparting death education. Concepts of life and death, and abortion are included in learning outcomes in the Maltese Ethics curriculum, yet at a much later stage. Therefore, the aim behind this dissertation is to underscore the importance of introducing death education at an early age (Higgins, 1999). This project-based dissertation endeavours to formulate tangible learning outcomes, lesson plans, and resources through an extensive literature review. The ultimate goal is to provide teachers with practical materials, should the inclusion of death education in primary schools be considered.

Centred on teaching death to Year 3 students, the project recognises the influential role educators play in children's education, particularly within the Ethics classroom, instilling virtues, nurturing their emotional, spiritual, academic, and social growth. The overarching aim is to empower young minds to navigate life's challenges with resilience and understanding, while dismantling taboos.



**Keywords**: Death Education, Primary Education, Mortality, Death Cultural Perspectives, Maltese Ethics Curriculum

I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved brother, Ludovick, whose passing inspired in me a desire to explore death, and in return discover life, and to all those who passed away—may you be remembered, so you only die once.

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# 1. Introduction

> The democracy of death encompasses us all. Even before its actual arrival, it is an absent presence. To deny or ignore it distorts life's pattern. Some will say "Don't waste time thinking about death—live well the time you have, forget that it ends. To remember that there is an end does something, in spite of good intentions, to cut the nerve of present effort." But what kind of adaptation is it not to consider the end of individual consciousness, which is pertinent to every undertaking of the individual? Our concern with death is not the sign of a cult of indifference to life or a denial of it. Rather, in gaining an awareness of death, we sharpen and intensify our awareness of life. (Feifel, 1959, p. 123).

Death is one of the few certainties every human being will face, yet it remains one of the most silenced topics within education. In a world that increasingly pushes mortality behind closed curtains, children are left to navigate loss, grief, and the deepest questions of existence entirely alone. This dissertation asks whether it has to be that way.

Rooted in the Maltese primary school context, this project proposes the introduction of Death Education (DeEd) in a Year 3 Ethics classroom through a Symbol Literacy approach. Rather than confronting children with the stark reality of death head-on, Symbol Literacy offers a gentler, culturally grounded pathway using artworks, stories, rituals, and real-world encounters to help children read the symbolic language that surrounds mortality in every culture, including their own.

The dissertation unfolds across four chapters. Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical and cultural foundations of Death Education, examining why Western society continues to deny death, what that denial costs children, and what the existing literature tells us about how seven-year-olds understand mortality. Chapter 3 develops the pedagogical and methodological backbone of the project, introducing Symbol Literacy within a sociocultural framework and outlining the project-based research methodology that guided the design of the teachers' pack. Chapter 4 presents the principles, rationale, and summary of the four pedagogical modalities across four progressive cultural levels. Finally, the appendices present the project itself: a fully developed digital teachers' pack built within the *All Hallows Google Drive* space, offering lesson plans, learning outcomes, resources, and guidance for educators and parents.

What lies ahead is not a morbid exercise. Rather, it is an invitation to look at life and death more honestly, more humanely, and with greater courage than our current silence allows.

# 2. Death Education

## 2.1 Introduction

Death is one of the few universal certainties of human existence, yet it remains one of the most silenced topics in Western education. While historically and philosophically, death was understood as an intrinsic part of life, viewed by the Stoics as a natural event and by Existentialists as the very force that gives life meaning, contemporary society has largely confined it behind medical curtains and euphemisms. This chapter explores the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of Death Education (DeEd), arguing that the omission of mortality from the primary curriculum does not protect children's innocence, but rather leaves them navigating complex emotions in a 'pedagogical vacuum'.

This chapter begins by examining the philosophical roots of mortality, contrasting ancient wisdom with modern avoidance. It then traverses diverse cultural landscapes, from the structured mourning of Jewish traditions to the vibrant celebrations of Mexico's Día de los Muertos, ultimately grounding the discussion in the Maltese context where Catholic rituals continue to shape local identity. Following this cultural contextualisation, the chapter defines Death Education (DeEd) through its four essential dimensions: cognitive, affective, behavioural, and valuational. Finally, it examines Death Education in relation to children's conception of death. By integrating these perspectives, this chapter provides the theoretical scaffolding necessary to justify a proactive, symbol-based pedagogical approach to death education.

## 2.2 Philosophical Perspectives on Death and Morality

Humanity has always been fascinated by the topic of death, and philosophers have been thinking and writing about it for centuries starting with Socrates' theory of the immortal soul (Fonseca & Testoni, 2011). Philosophical traditions, however, diverge on what lies beyond death. While Valverde (2021) notes that Socrates held a belief in the afterlife and reincarnation, many subsequent philosophical traditions reject any notion of post-mortem continuance altogether, holding instead a strictly finite understanding of human existence. For these thinkers, death is not a passage but an ending, and it is precisely this ending that gives life its urgency and meaning.

Beginning with the Stoic tradition, the famous idea to control what you can control, and let go of things you cannot control came about centuries ago, originated with the ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus. Alongside his fellow Stoics, he argued that death is a natural and inevitable event that we cannot control (Epictetus, c. 135 C.E./2015). Merely putting death aside into the category of things we cannot control and not thinking about it was not the Stoics' intention. Indeed, he argued that "… if you attempt to avoid disease or death or poverty, you will be unhappy." (Epictetus, c. 135 C.E./2015, p. 2). On the contrary, they believed in the practice of *memento mori*—remembering that we will die. Reminding ourselves of our death on a daily basis helps us to find greater meaning in each passing day (Breitbart, 2019). Crucially, the Stoics did not treat death as something to be transcended or survived in any spiritual sense but instead saw it as part of a fully finite philosophy. Death, for them, was a natural dissolution as the return of the individual to the whole, and it was this very finitude that made memory and attention to life so essential. Seneca, writing to his friend Lucilius, captured this with characteristic precision: "Death is non-existence, and I know already what that means. What was before me will happen again after me." (Seneca, c. 65 C.E./1917, p. 363). Marcus Aurelius similarly insisted that awareness of death was not a cause for sorrow but a clarifying lens: "The perfection of manners can make one spend each day as his last; and keep himself always calm, without sloth or hypocrisy." (Aurelius, c. 161–180 C.E./2008, p. 94). In this way, death and memory were not supplementary concerns for the Stoics but foundational ones as they were the very conditions that made a virtuous and examined life both possible and necessary.

Shifting to the Existentialist perspective, Jean Paul Sartre claims that "the first principle of existentialism" is that humans are only what they make themselves to be (Sartre, 1948, p. 28). Sartre argues that being aware of our finite life drives us to give it meaning. Like the Stoics, the Existentialists share a non-transcendent view of death as they believed that there is no afterlife to console us, and no immortal soul to preserve our identity. Death is absolute, and it is precisely this absolute quality that Existentialists place at the very centre of authentic human life. Sartre (1943/1993) argues that death, as the ultimate limit of human freedom, forces individuals to confront the radical responsibility of their choices; we cannot defer meaning to a future beyond death, because there is none. Albert Camus pushed this further, arguing that the human condition is defined by absurdity which is the clash between our desperate search for meaning and the universe's indifferent silence (Camus, 1942/1961). For Camus, acknowledging the finality of death does not lead to despair but to the rebellion of having a conscious, lucid commitment to life in full awareness of its limits.

Extending this existential line of thought, Martin Heidegger was interested in understanding the nature of human existence, Dasein (*being-there*), and what it means to 'be'. He argued that qualities of our human existence are *being-in-the-world*, *being-with-others*, and

*being-towards-death* (Grossmann, 1986). Being-towards-death implies that human existence is defined by its finitude. Our life is an anticipation of our own end, and confronting this reality is what cultivates authenticity (Watts, 2011). In fact, for Heidegger, death is not merely a negative ending but the key to meaning. Death opens up the question of Being, because in asking about our death, we are ultimately forced to ask, 'What does it mean to *be* alive and exist right now?' (Heidegger, 1989/1999). For Heidegger, anxiety (Angst) or the confrontation with the possibility of one's own non-existence, pulls individuals out of the comfortable anonymity of everyday social life and awakens them to their own most irreplaceable existence (Heidegger, 1962). Authentic existence, therefore, is not achieved despite mortality but through it; it is the ongoing, deliberate act of owning one's finitude rather than fleeing it (Menaldo, 2021).

However, living with this awareness is difficult, and society often discourages it. Heidegger argues that in Western society, discussions about death are highly avoided. Death is culturally framed as an accident or a misfortune and is, therefore, something to fear and to refrain from speaking about. As Heidegger (1962) notes, "In the publicness with which we are with one another in our everyday manner, death is 'known' as a mishap which is constantly occurring …" (p. 296). This evasion distracts individuals from the anxiety that is necessary to fuel an authentic life. Just as one understands light only through the knowledge of darkness, one can only fully understand life through the acceptance of death.

Although philosophers across various historical periods teach us not to fear our death, Western contemporary society still upholds "a death-denying culture" (Breitbart, 2019, p. 2). Paradoxically, when we try to avoid death out of fear, we are ultimately rushing towards it (Kundu, 2015). Attempting to escape death through fear-driven avoidance hastens our approach to it, while mindful presence in the current moment expands temporal experience.

### 2.3 Sociocultural and Religious Perspectives on Death and Mourning

Historically, death was not a lonely experience but a communal experience. Death was marked by participation of both the family and the community at home. Religion provided meaning through established rituals. However, over time, these practices and teachings have undergone many changes (Fonseca & Testoni, 2011).

Our understanding of death is shaped by diverse cultural and religious practices. In fact, English-speaking societies tend to react to death differently from other societies (Cohen, 1992). Social scientists suggest that a society's cohesion is upheld through its collective symbols and practices, including rituals. These rituals do not merely mirror society but also play a key role in shaping and keeping its social structure (Fishbane, 1989).

Given the self-evident centrality of death in life, mourning itself must be understood as a universal human practice. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1909/1960) identified funerary rites as a fundamental category of 'rites of passage,' arguing that all human societies mark the transition from life to death through structured rituals of separation, liminality, and reintegration. Victor Turner (1969) later extended this framework, showing how such liminal rituals generate *communitas,* a profound sense of shared humanity among the bereaved, reinforcing the bonds of the living in the face of loss. The first example, drawn from the Jewish tradition, is selected not because Jewish mourning is exceptional, but precisely because it exemplifies with unusual clarity and structure the universal anthropological functions that van Gennep and Turner describe: the withdrawal of the mourner from normal social life, the communal support of the bereaved, and the gradual reintegration of the individual into the social body. The subsequent examples of Mexican and Maltese cultures further illustrate how these same universal functions are enacted through radically different cultural and symbolic repertoires.

### *2.3.1 The Structured Mourning Ritual*

As noted above, Jewish mourning practices offer a particularly transparent illustration of the universal rites-of-passage structure. The mourning process begins immediately after death with a pre-burial period where words of comfort should not be offered to the mourners, as they are regarded as being beyond consolation and preoccupied with making funeral arrangements (Ochs, 2018). This is followed by *shiva*, a seven-day intense mourning phase in which the community offers a meal of consolation, composed of round foods suggesting the circle of life and death (Ochs, 2018). During shiva, mourners remain at home rather than attending work or engaging in daily routines. Men refrain from shaving, women avoid wearing makeup, and visitors come throughout the day and night to offer comfort and support to the bereaved (Ochs, 2018). After *shiva*, the individuals are gradually reintegrated into society over a year (Fishbane, 1989). This structured progression, from acute withdrawal to phased return, maps directly onto van Gennep's (1960) tripartite model, and is recognisable, in varying forms, across virtually all documented human cultures (Turner, 1969). In confronting the distress caused by death, many Jewish individuals have found spiritual and psychological reassurance in adhering to Jewish rituals (Ochs, 2018).

### *2.3.2 The Life Celebration Ritual*

Instead of a sombre mourning period, Mexicans reaffirm the ontological continuity between the living and the ancestors through *El Día de los Muertos*—The Day of the Dead, in which the

deceased are remembered in a joyful celebration both privately within the family and publicly within the community. In private contexts, this tradition functions as a mourning rite that helps people to cope with death and appreciate life. While in public contexts, it takes the form of a vibrant communal celebration, honouring the dead (Arredondo & Capistrán-López, 2017). The central element of the celebration is the *ofrenda*, a colourful altar made by family members to welcome back the deceased's spirit. These altars feature vivid flowers alongside the departed's clothing, personal belongings, and preferred foods and beverages. Although the soul remains unseen, participants sense their presence through this ritual (Cohen, 1992). Additional offerings for the season include *pan de muerto,* which is baked for the season, sugar skulls, candles, toys, beer or tequila, and marigolds. Cartoon-like skeleton figurines called *calaveras* serve as witty reminders of our shared mortality (Untiedt, 2008).

One of the most traditional practices of this ritual is the visit to the cemetery, where families remove weeds from the graves, repaint worn elements, water plants and flowers, and afterwards, spread a cloth over the grave and share a meal together at the graveside (Untiedt, 2008).

Children participate actively in these observances, from helping to prepare the *ofrenda* to taking part in the graveside gatherings. They internalise life lessons embedded in these rituals, and learn that death is a natural part of life—not an event to be feared but rather to be acknowledged with respect, and with courage to live each day as if it were the last one (Cohen, 1992).

> Death is not hidden, it is not denied, it is not placed in an ascetic dehumanized environment, it is presented as an inseparable antithesis of life; death and life synthesizing what is human in its social and individual sense (Arredondo & Capistrán-López, 2017, 319).

For Mexicans, death is understood as a natural stage within the life cycle, and is therefore celebrated (Cohen, 1992). The celebration also carries an educational dimension, as children, adults and the elderly within the community actively participate in the preparations and unfolding of these festivities (Arredondo & Capistrán-López, 2017).

### *2.3.3 Rituals in Malta*

Malta remains a predominantly Catholic country, in which religion functions as a central pillar of Maltese cultural identity (Lorenz, 2011). This relative religious homogeneity significantly shapes how death is perceived, spoken about, and ritually enacted within families and the wider community. Death in Malta has historically been surrounded by a rich system of taboos,

protective gestures, and liminal practices that reveal the deep cultural anxiety surrounding the boundary between the living and the dead.

Documented in the 1920s, Maltese death, mourning, and funeral customs included washing the body, closing eyelids, and supporting the chin with a white kerchief. Doors were kept shut and knockers were removed, neighbours partially closed their doors, and in some areas, doors or door knockers were draped with black cloth. In addition, poor women and beggars were hired as vigil keepers for the night (Cremona, 1923). Lanfranco (2011) further records the domestic and communal dimensions of these practices, noting how death rites were woven into the rhythms of family life, from the preparation of the body to the prescribed behaviours of neighbours and kin, marking death as an event that reorganised the social world of the entire community, not only the immediate family.

In earlier times, professional female mourners known as *newwieħa* (from newwaħ, 'to cry') were also employed. Before the practice was banned during the 1676 plague, these women performed mourning rituals that included breaking flowerpots and china, mixing the fragments with ashes, and smearing the paste on doorposts while chanting rhymed lamentations (Cremona, 1923).

While certain customs have been lost, others have persisted within Maltese cultural practice (Lorenz, 2011). Funeral ceremonies are held at the church, followed by the burial of the coffin in the cemetery (Putzi-Ortiz, 2008), either in a family plot or a communal burial site (Lorenz, 2011). A common Maltese family grave is divided into sections that can accommodate four or five coffins, with an additional space below for storing bones. A tombstone displaying details such as the names, birth dates, and death dates of the deceased may be placed on the grave. Furthermore, Maltese families annually observe All Saints' Day, held on November 1st, and All Souls' Day on November 2nd, as occasions to pay tribute to deceased relatives. These commemorative practices typically include attending church services, participating in anniversary Masses, visiting cemeteries, and offering prayers in honour of the deceased (Putzi-Ortiz, 2008).

### 2.4 What is Death Education?

Death education is the structured process of teaching and learning that addresses human experiences of death, dying, and grief (Phan, Ngu, Hsu, & Chen, 2024). This multidisciplinary field gained prominence during the 1960s, largely through the influential work of pioneers such as Herman Feifel, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, and Cicely Saunders, who played a crucial role in introducing discussions about dying into the public sphere.

### *2.4.1 Dimensions of Death Education*

Education about death and related matters encompasses four interconnected dimensions, each addressing a distinct aspect of human experience: what individuals know, how they feel, how they act, and what they value (Corr, 2024).

Firstly, this form of education is fundamentally cognitive in nature, as it involves the acquisition of factual knowledge concerning death-related experiences. It encompasses the study of biological processes, key concepts, terminology, developmental perspectives, philosophical views, and the social and cultural practices associated with death (Corr et al., 2018). The affective dimension of death education seeks to develop emotional literacy by identifying, expressing, and accepting a range of emotions linked to loss, including sadness, anger, and guilt. The behavioural aspect of death education examines why people act in certain ways around death, identifying both helpful and harmful behaviours. Many tend to avoid death and grief due to discomfort in communicating about it. Consequently, this unintentionally isolates those experiencing grief when they need support the most. This dimension of death education seeks to equip students with practical skills for both coping and supporting others (Corr, Corr, & Doka, 2018). Death education's valuational dimension helps individuals in understanding the fundamental values of human life. Life and death are closely connected, and as Heidegger argued, death is essential for understanding our existence. In this dimension, value reflection becomes important when engaging with contemporary ethical and socio-political issues, including terrorism, nuclear threats, global epidemics, forced migration, capital punishment, abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, and dilemmas generated by rapidly evolving technologies.

Furthermore, education in this dimension emphasises that death should not be concealed from children, as open engagement with the topic is vital for their healthy emotional development. Rather than shielding them from the reality of mortality, death needs to be addressed explicitly and systematically in ways that are sensitive to their developmental stage and cognitive capacities. This education should support values that help them cope with death and live wisely, equipping them for the inevitable experiences of loss that everyone faces in life.

### *2.4.2 Formal and Informal Death Education*

The four dimensions of death education are initially shaped within the home environment, where children acquire informal teachings through experiences and unstructured exposure. Media sources, such as television and videos, unintentionally provide continuous informal

learning about death (Corr et al., 2018), and have become our primary source of learning about death and dying (Kortes-Miller, 2014). In contrast, structured education about death is typically provided in schools, higher education institutions, professional training, and volunteer preparation programmes (Corr, Corr, & Doka, 2018). This formal education offers numerous advantages, as it bridges the gap between what individuals may not have learned within the family context, and what can be acquired at school.

### 2.5 Why Death Education?

Recognising the temporary nature of human existence is a universal aspect of human consciousness. However, many scholars argue that contemporary Western culture tends to minimise or avoid discussion about mortality, often described as denying death (Breitbart, 2019). Philippe Ariès, for example, introduced with the concept of *forbidden death*, where death is pushed out of everyday life, hidden in institutions such as hospitals, and treated as something shameful or taboo rather than a normal part of existence (Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984).

> A new situation appears around the middle of the 20th century in the most individualistic and middle-class parts of the West. (Ariès, 1981, p. 109). Weeping is synonymous with hysteria. Mourning is a malady. … The suppression of mourning is not due to the frivolity of survivors but to a merciless coercion applied by society. Society refuses to participate in the emotion of the bereaved. This is a way of denying the presence of death (Ariès, 1981, p. 109-110).

Paradoxically, we are constantly exposed to fictionalised, sometimes violent and traumatic, death in the media, however, we are increasingly shielded from the authentic, personal, and natural reality of dying and grief (Corr et al., 2018).

#### *2.5.1 The Death-Denying Culture*

Several factors contribute to the formation of a death-denying culture. One of these is the medicalisation of death, which treats dying as merely a biological event, overlooking its cultural, emotional, and spiritual dimensions as an inherent aspect of human life (Knepper, Bregman, & Gottschalk, 2019).

Furthermore, Gorer (1955) introduced the concept *pornography of death* to describe a societal shift in attitudes toward taboo subjects. While discussions of sex have become increasingly open and acceptable, death has progressively become silenced.

Another factor shaping our denial of death is linguistic avoidance. Just as terms like "pork" instead of "pig," "poultry" instead of "chicken," and "beef" instead of "cow" are used to soften the reality of consuming animals, euphemisms including "passed away" or "no longer with us" similarly obscure the reality of death (Crespo-Fernández, 2006, p. 101-102). A number of euphemistic expressions also exist in the Maltese language, such as "'mar id-dinja l-oħra' ('he went to the other world'), 'ħalliena' or 'telaqna' ('he has left us')" (Mizzi, 2006, p. 40). Ultimately, language not only expresses but also shapes our thoughts and meanings, and these linguistic choices are reflected in the rituals we construct (Botîlcă, 2021).

Death is increasingly treated as an existential problem to be avoided rather than as a natural stage in the human life cycle that merits open discussion. This persistent denial of death in contemporary society fosters a distorted relationship with mortality that hinders our journey towards a meaningful and fulfilling life (Das, Fransen, & Oliver, 2024).

One consequence of a death-denying culture is the social isolation of those who are both dying, and bereaved. Many people feel uncertain about what to say or how to behave, so they withdraw, leaving the dying and the grieving to endure their suffering alone. "The telephone does not ring. The bereaved is in quarantine" (Ariès, 1981, p. 110).

Insufficient or partial understanding of death can have serious consequences for children, even though grasping this concept is inherently difficult. If a child believes that death is temporary and that the deceased person will return, the separation experience can become even more stressful and confusing. Furthermore, when a child does not yet understand death as a universal and biologically caused phenomenon, they may blame themselves for the loss, experiencing feelings of guilt or shame because they imagine that a bad thought or action on their part caused the loved one's death (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017).

### *2.5.2 The Pedagogical-Vacuum*

The pedagogical vacuum described in this section is not an accident of oversight, rather it is a direct consequence of the death-denying culture examined above. When society at large actively suppresses open engagement with mortality, schools inevitably reflect and reproduce that same silence. The institutional exclusion of death from the curriculum is, in this sense, the educational face of a broader cultural taboo.

Prevailing myths about children's grief suggest that they do not mourn as deeply as adults, that they are too young to comprehend death, and that they should be shielded from thoughts of death in order to preserve their innocence (Chandran, Raman, & Shiva, 2025).

Contrary to the protective myth, children are not immune to loss. In fact, they may experience the death of grandparents, parents, siblings, friends, or pets, and they also develop their understanding of death (Chandran, Raman, & Shiva, 2025).

When death education is excluded from formal learning, this communicates that death is something to fear, avoid, and remain silent about, rather than a shared human reality. As a result, learners are not adequately prepared to support one another or themselves when confronted with it (Kortes-Miller, 2014). This creates a pedagogical vacuum—an educational gap due to a lack of structured, meaningful guidance on these experiences.

Education cannot prevent death, but it can help to mitigate some of the harmful consequences of denying death, such as anxiety, depression, fear, complicated grief, loss of meaning, and physical reactions. The aim of death education, therefore, is to reduce unfamiliarity and lessen fear of the unknown (Kortes-Miller, 2014).

Agreeing with Attig (1992), Kortes-Miller (2014) claims that in the end "No death education is still death education. The action of not doing perpetuates the status quo, endorsing denial and communicating attitudes and fears that can be harmful to our sense of being" (p. 42).

### *2.5.3 Benefits of Death Education*

> Why study death? Quite simply, we feel, to prepare for life (Lister & Gochros, 1976, p. 85)

Formal engagement with death as a subject of study and teaching has a history spanning over six decades (Corr, 2024). University-level courses emerged in the early 1960s, and by the close of the twentieth century, thanatology had grown into a broad interdisciplinary field spanning philosophy, psychology, medicine, sociology, and education (Kemp, 2018; Fonseca & Testoni, 2011). Professional organisations such as the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC, est. 1976) consolidated this momentum, and recent frameworks such as the 'Life + Death Education Framework' (Phan et al., 2024) reflect ongoing efforts to provide universal guidance for educators across diverse cultural settings.

Research specifically addressing death education for children and young people in schools confirms both its necessity and its current inadequacy. Friesen et al. (2020) found that while public schools are increasingly recognised as important sites for supporting bereaved children, structured and consistent provision of death education remains rare, with most schools lacking formal policies or trained personnel to address children's grief and questions about death. This gap is compounded by teacher unpreparedness. Engarhos et al. (2013)

documented that many classroom teachers hold positive attitudes toward death education in principle, yet feel ill-equipped to introduce the topic in practice, citing insufficient training and personal discomfort as primary barriers.

Death education acts as a proactive approach with clear benefits, helping to reduce the harmful effects of denying death. Allowing students to discuss what happens at and after death lessens fear of the unknown and equips them with the language to express thoughts about loss when needed. By exploring emotions of grief before addressing factual and spiritual aspects of death, schools support children's emotional well-being while fostering spiritual development and cultural awareness (Higgins, 1999).

The acceptance of death is inherent to human life and reflects a form of psychological courage that distinguishes itself from death denial. Furthermore, mortality serves as a fundamental condition for meaning-making. Without the reality of death, human existence would remain purposeless, whereas the consciousness of finitude drives individuals toward deliberate action, deeper engagement with life, and the pursuit of significant goals (Marseille, 2021). This philosophical perspective highlights the necessity of death education. By encouraging children to acknowledge death's reality rather than deny it, educators cultivate not only psychological resilience but also the conditions for authentic, purposeful living.

Around one in five children facing the traumatic death of someone close to them are likely to experience mental health issues such as separation anxiety and hindered secure attachment development, due to inadequate preparation for such loss. Consequently, school-based death education promotes healthy ways of coping with death (Fagnani, 2022). It helps anticipate and alleviate children's uncertainties and anxieties about death through developmentally suitable, truthful guidance, while assisting parents in navigating difficult conversations (Fagnani, 2022).

Furthermore, death education promotes emotional awareness, empathy, and respect for one's own life and the lives of others (Fagnani, 2022). Through the use of symbolic resources, DeEd addresses fears, mitigates death anxiety, and helps individuals find meaning in mortality. Its emphasis on symbolic and transcendental dimensions encourages meaning-making, resilience, and post-traumatic growth. Engagement with religious or spiritual narratives further helps to contextualise mortality, easing anxiety by situating it within a broader spiritual framework. Overall, Death Education encourages open dialogue, challenges social taboos, and equips individuals to cope more effectively with issues related to death and loss (Testoni et al., 2025).

## 2.6 The Child's Conception of Death

Studies on how children understand the concept of death started in the early twentieth century (Kenyon, 2001), showing that children's comprehension largely depends on their age. Younger children often view death as a temporary or avoidable event whereas they mature, they begin to grasp that death is both final and inevitable. Difficulties in understanding the various aspects of death arise not only from children's cognitive and perceptual development but also from external influences such as their home and educational environments, the beliefs and attitudes of adults, religious teachings, and cultural background. In fact, children's initial reaction to death is one of curiosity, and emotions like fear, anxiety, and sadness develop later, often shaped by the responses modelled in their surroundings (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017).

Researchers hold differing opinions about how cognitive development affects children's understanding of death. This relationship is often analysed within the framework of Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which outlines four main stages of intellectual growth. The sensorimotor stage (birth to 2 years) involves learning about the world through sensory experiences and movement. During the preoperational stage (ages 2–7), children begin to use symbols to represent objects. In the concrete operational stage (ages 7–12), logical thinking emerges, enabling them to solve practical problems. Finally, the formal operational stage (from around 12 years onward) marks the ability to engage in abstract thinking (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017).

Following their research in 1994, Speece and Brent identified the fundamental components that shape the concept of death. They proposed five subconcepts that structure how individuals perceive death, serving as a foundation for subsequent studies exploring children's comprehension of death (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017).

The first subconcept is *irreversibility*, which is also known as irrevocability and finality, refers to the understanding that death signifies a permanent and irreversible absence of a person. Research indicates that children typically grasp this notion around the ages of five or six, while those under three years old are generally unable to comprehend it (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017).

*Non-functionality* refers to the understanding that death entails the complete cessation of life and all biological processes that sustain it (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017). *Universality* involves recognising that death is an inevitable event that affects all living beings. Research suggests that most children under the age of five do not fully grasp this concept, including their own mortality (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017).

*Causality* refers to understanding the biological factors that can lead to death, and lastly, *noncorporeal continuity*, refers to beliefs about whether some aspect of the person continues after the death of the physical body (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017).

According to Brenda Kenyon, children tend to grasp the concepts of universality and irreversibility before developing an understanding of cessation and causality (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017). By around four years of age, they begin to recognise death as a transformation in state, and most children comprehend the majority of its components by approximately five years old. However, a complete understanding of all aspects of death typically does not occur until around the ages of nine or ten (Kenyon, 2001).

Children's understanding of death is shaped not only by their developmental stage but also by factors such as gender, cultural and religious background, family, and personal experience (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017). Research suggests that boys more frequently attribute death to violent causes, whereas girls tend to associate it with illness or accidents (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017). Religious traditions emphasising an afterlife may influence children's perceptions of irreversibility. However, cross-cultural studies reveal greater similarities than differences in their overall concepts of death (Kenyon, 2001). Additionally, findings indicate that children who have personally experienced death show a deeper comprehension of the concept of irreversibility and non-functionality, compared to peers without such experiences (Bonoti, Leondari, & Mastora, 2013).

Families also play a significant role in shaping children's conceptions of death, and scholars distinguish between two types of parents. Some parents are open to discussing death with their child and, when a death occurs in the family, they involve the child in mourning rituals and encourage the expression of feelings and thoughts. This openness supports the child in developing a more mature understanding of death. In contrast, other parents avoid the topic entirely, believing that this protects their child from emotional harm. However, when children receive limited or unclear information about death, they often experience greater anxiety and confusion (Krepia, Krepia, & Tsilingiri, 2017).

After the family, school is the second most influential context in a child's life and contributes substantially to the formation of abstract concepts such as death, in line with its aim of supporting children's holistic development. These research findings reinforce the argument for integrating death education into the primary school curriculum, particularly from the age of seven, ensuring that teaching approaches align with children's psychological needs and cognitive development. As educators, we have a responsibility to provide formal learning

opportunities about death, especially since some students may not receive accurate or supportive information within their home environment. Yet the evidence suggests a significant gap between this responsibility and teachers' readiness to fulfil it. Rodríguez Herrero et al. (2022) conducted a wide-ranging study of teachers across educational levels and found that, while the majority recognised death education as important, a large proportion had never addressed the topic in their classrooms, and many expressed feeling personally and professionally unprepared to do so. Crucially, their research identified that teachers' reluctance stems not only from a lack of formal training but also from their own unresolved relationship with death which reinforces how deeply the death-denying culture of wider society permeates even the professional attitudes of educators (Rodríguez Herrero et al., 2022). This highlights that preparing teachers to deliver death education is not merely a matter of curriculum design but requires addressing personal and emotional dimensions of professional development. Without such preparation, the school, despite being the second most formative environment in a child's life, risks replicating rather than counteracting the very pedagogical vacuum this dissertation seeks to address.

**2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has navigated the multifaceted terrain of Death Education, moving from abstract philosophical inquiries to the concrete cognitive realities of the seven-year-old child. As demonstrated, death is not merely a biological cessation but a cultural and spiritual event, deeply influenced by the rituals and symbols a society upholds. Whether through the solemnity of *shiva*, the vibrancy of *ofrendas*, or the community-centred Catholic rites of Malta, it is evident that rituals provide the necessary structure for humans to process loss. However, as this review has highlighted, a prevailing 'death-denying' culture often deprives children of these frameworks, leaving them unprepared for inevitable experiences of grief.

Ultimately, this chapter establishes that Death Education is not a morbid preoccupation, but a preparation for life that aligns with holistic educational goals. Having established *why* we must teach death and *who* we are teaching, the focus of this thesis must now shift to *how*. The following chapter and the project will translate these theoretical insights into practice, exploring how symbol literacy can serve as a gentle yet powerful tool needed to bridge the gap between a child's curiosity and the profound reality of mortality.

# 3. Pedagogy & Methodology

> In the end, the development of Symbol Literacy is not just an academic pursuit. It is a living, breathing journey—a way of being that honours what it is to be human and consequently spiritual (Gellel, 2025, p. 8).

## 3.1 Introduction

Children grow up immersed in a world rich with symbols conveyed through stories, images, rituals and cultural traditions that hold deep meanings about life, death, love and belonging. However, many of these symbols are no longer easily understood by contemporary society. This loss arises partly from the dominance of positivistic thinking—the idea that only scientific or factual knowledge is real. Furthermore, our fast, distracted and disconnected way of life has broken the links between generations, communities and the symbolic traditions that once helped people make sense of their existence. As a result, children's capacity for awareness, connectedness, and symbolic expression is diminished, thus limiting their ability to engage with existential questions like 'What happens when we die?' or 'Why are we here?', and the meaning-making traditions that have historically supported human understanding. For this reason, it is essential that children develop an understanding of diverse symbols.

A symbol literacy approach not only enables children to interpret symbols but also empowers them to construct meaning, engage with deeper layers of reality, and cultivate a sense of transcendence beyond the physical world (Gellel, 2018). It gives children the opportunity to develop the mindful capacity to recall and apply these symbols meaningfully across different contexts and phases of their lives (Gellel, 2018). Symbol Literacy speaks to the heart of this dissertation, which seeks to introduce developmentally appropriate death education in a Year 3 Ethics classroom through meaning-laden stories, images, rituals, and places. Within the wider dissertation, this sub-chapter provides the pedagogical and methodological backbone. It clarifies what spirituality and spiritual pedagogy mean in this context, explains how Symbol Literacy works as an educational approach, and situates the project within a sociocultural framework and a project-based research design. The chapter moves from spirituality and Symbol Literacy, through a sociocultural framework, to the project-based methodology and its curriculum alignment.

## 3.2 Pedagogy: Symbol Literacy

This dissertation frames Symbol Literacy within a spiritual education framework because death, as one of the most universal and existential of human experiences, demands precisely the kind

of meaning-making, transcendence, and connectedness that spiritual education cultivates. Teaching children to read the symbolic language of death and mourning is not merely a cognitive exercise. Rather, it is a fundamentally spiritual one, in that it invites children to connect with their own roots, with the living and the dead, and with dimensions of reality that exceed the purely visible and material (Gellel, 2025). Situating this project within a spiritual education framework therefore ensures that death education is approached not as a clinical or distressing topic, but as an invitation to awe, wonder, and deeper aliveness.

### *3.2.1 Spiritual Education*

Defining or explaining spirituality presents a challenge because it belongs to the realm of non-verbal communication, just as music conveys emotion and mathematics reveals structure and meaning without reliance on words (Berryman as cited in Gellel, 2025). A fundamental distinction often emphasised in literature is that between spirituality and religion. Worthington et al. (as cited in Shek, 2012) define religion as adherence to a structured belief system and its associated practices, while spirituality is characterised as a broader sense of connection to the sacred. What individuals regard as sacred is often shaped by social and cultural influences, typically encompassing either (a) the perception of a divine being or object, or (b) a sense of ultimate reality or truth (Shek, 2012).

Furthermore, numerous scholars conceptualise spirituality as an innate dimension of the human condition—one that is articulated and experienced through diverse cultural expressions, including religious practices (Gellel, 2025). Several recurring elements are frequently used to conceptualise spirituality. These include the search for meaning and purpose in life, and understandings of and responses to existential limitations such as death and dying. They also encompass the pursuit of the sacred or the infinite, which may include religious dimensions, as well as experiences of hope, hopelessness, forgiveness, and healing (Shek, 2012).

Within the field of spirituality, particularly in the study of children's spirituality, there is broad agreement that spirituality is defined by dimensions of "connectedness, meaning-making, awareness, and transcendence" (Gellel, 2025, p. 10). Gellel (2025) advocates for educational practices that cultivate children's connection to the continuum of human experience.

Across cultural, religious, and non-religious contexts alike, children consistently exhibit a profound yearning for meaning and an inherent spiritual sensitivity (Gellel, 2025). Since spirituality is an inherent dimension of human existence, comparable to innate capacities such as mathematical reasoning, then teaching and learning spirituality is an integral component of education. Such an approach ensures the holistic development of young learners, enabling

them to grow into the adults they are meant to become. This is not merely a recommendation, but rather an educational *entitlement* where children have a right to a comprehensive education that encompasses spiritual development (Gellel, 2025). In this regard, death education finds a natural home within spiritual education. Confronting mortality calls upon precisely the capacities of meaning-making in the face of loss, the sense of connection with ancestors and those who will come after, and the awe and wonder before the mystery of existence that spiritual education seeks to cultivate (Gellel, 2025). Holistic education fosters the development of learners' character, encompassing their moral, ethical, and spiritual growth (Korompis & Kasingku, 2023).

### *3.2.2 The Language of Spirituality through Culture*

Just as spirituality requires a lived, relational context, it also requires a shared language through which meaning can be communicated across individuals and generations. Culture provides such a framework, offering the tools for meaning-making and fostering well-being. Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) is regarded as the first philosopher to offer a systematic account of the interdependent relationship between the human mind and culture (Tateo, 2015). While culture can be defined in various ways, it is commonly understood as a system of shared beliefs, values, knowledge, worldviews, social structures, skills, customs, and socialisation practices. Cultures use common symbols conveyed through language, imagery, and stories, to interpret and communicate shared experiences. These cultural elements are transmitted to children through multiple layers of interaction, from participation in societal structures like schools to everyday family routines and personal exchanges with caregivers (Miller, 2016).

Vico contended that human reality is most accurately understood through the study of the earliest human ideas, customs, and institutions, as these foundational elements have shaped how people live and interact in the present (Gellel, 2025). We are not isolated entities but travellers shaped by those who preceded us, and it is essential to live peacefully with both past and present as one continuous whole (Gellel, 2025).

As adults, and educators, our role is to interlace the narratives of the past and the present, generating new harmonies that can resonate into the future (Gellel, 2025). At any given moment in time, culture represents both the outcome of its historical development and the context that influences children's growth, thereby shaping the culture's own future (Miller, 2016).

From an anthropological perspective, Tomasello (1999) argues that culture itself is a system through which accumulated knowledge, practices, and symbolic meaning are stored and

transmitted outside individual brains, made possible by the uniquely human capacity for shared intentionality. Unlike other species, humans do not merely learn individually. Rather, they inherit and ratchet forward the entire symbolic and practical wisdom of their communities (Tomasello, 1999). Complementing this view, Gellel (2025) emphasises that culture, understood as a repository of collective wisdom, is also the medium through which individuals transcend themselves to find meaning, connection, and a sense of participation in something larger than their own lifetime. Through culture, we create meaning, and transcend together through shared stories, symbols, and rituals that express common human values, foster belonging, and open communities to something larger than themselves.

### *3.2.3 Spiritual Literacy and Symbol Literacy*

Schools are among the primary contexts through which young children encounter and begin to shape their spiritual and moral development. From an educational standpoint, schooling plays a pivotal role in enabling young people to engage in a search for life's meaning, as well as in supporting their personal recognition and self-actualisation (Lee, 2020).

Educators who nurture citizens with holistic worldviews can build more effective teams, cultivate a strong sense of community within the classroom, and foster the development of virtuous individuals who appreciate the worth of every unique person (Ker-Dincer, 2007). School communities and educators who actively support the spiritual growth of both teachers and students promote a holistic approach to learning, which enhances teaching effectiveness and improves student performance (Barsh, 2017).

As Gellel (2025) observes, educators hold a responsibility to guide children along this path, enabling them to engage with the continuum of human experience and to recognise that life is lived not solely for oneself but also for future generations yet unknown. Rather than viewing spirituality only through a faith-based or religious lens, teachers need to recognise it as something deeply connected to children's being and emerging identity. Children's identity concerns who they are and who they are becoming—it develops gradually, is continually renegotiated, and is shaped by the cultural contexts and relationships that surround them (Rouse, 2024).

One effective approach to teaching spirituality is through the development of spiritual literacy, understood as the ability to interpret and derive meaning from the symbolic signs embedded within personal experience. Spiritual pedagogy is a theoretical framework that seeks to integrate cultural and spiritual values into education, framing teaching and learning as experiential, contemplative, holistic, and reflective (Song, 2022). Recognising and understanding

these symbolic signs through self-awareness and articulating one's reflections, deepens the connection between the inner self and the external world. It involves constructing meaning at a profound level through personal narratives, where teachers listen to and interpret children's lived experiences (Binder, 2011). When teachers nurture spiritual literacy, children learn to recognise meaningful symbols and experiences, think deeply about their significance, and connect that understanding to their everyday lives (Binder, 2011). Interpreting these signs is therefore an act rooted in engaging with the shared inner life we all possess (Binder, 2011).

Spiritual literacy practices include (a) classroom rituals, (b) stories of experience, (c) mindful spaces, and (d) relationships. *Classroom rituals* include moments of stillness, shared visualisation, and journal writing that cultivate openness, boundaries, and hospitality. *Stories of experience* consist of guided meditations and visualisations where children express inner thoughts through drawing, writing, and symbolic imagery like "worry trees". *Mindful spaces* encompass play-based and self-directed activities that allow children to explore big questions, reflect on world issues, and co-create meaning in safe, present-centred environments. Finally, *relationships* are also crucial in spiritual literacy, in that they create feelings of hospitality and trust, where children express emotions freely, negotiate boundaries with care, and develop self-awareness and empathy through authentic, non-judgmental interactions with teachers and peers (Binder, 2011, p. 23-31).

For the purpose of this dissertation, the focus is placed on this type of spiritual literacy classroom practice. In researching the area, I encountered the pedagogy of Symbol Literacy. Departing from the view that humans access reality through symbols, moving from sensing to perceiving, this pedagogical approach encompasses fields of knowledge and learning, understanding them as the different facets of the same reality. In line with the belief that spirituality imbues every aspect of human life, including, and perhaps most especially, culture, Symbol Literacy resonates strongly with Vico's third edition of *The New Science*, where he contends that the 'world of nations' is a human artefact woven from myths, languages, laws, and rituals that people themselves have made (Vico, 1744/1948). By focusing on these human-made symbolic worlds, Symbol Literacy offers a powerful way of addressing culture, education, and spirituality together, enabling children to encounter spiritual meaning as something mediated through the concrete cultural forms out of which societies are built (Gellel, 2025).

Symbol Literacy is a means of facilitating children's ability to read and interact with symbols, which are the language of the spiritual dimension (Gellel, 2018). Symbols function as means of communication in language, as forms of ritual expression, tools of cultural

interpretation, and expressions of art and belief, and culture itself is constructed through networks of shared symbols (Sigdel, 2018).

Symbol Literacy enhances symbolic thinking—a way of thinking which revolutionised human cognition by enabling people to share inner experiences and coordinate actions through communication and cultural practices (Hobson, 2004). Symbolic thinking is the human ability to use symbols or representations to extend the meaning of objects, actions, or define concepts that are not physically present, forming a key component of children's cognitive development (Salmawati & Maryatun, 2024). Through symbolic thinking, children develop the ability to imagine and comprehend non-visible concepts, which supports effective learning and problem-solving in later life (Mufida & Hibana, 2024).

For instance, the pictorial symbolism of the ancient Tarot tradition conveys intellectual, moral, and spiritual teachings that reflect shared human experiences across different historical periods, locations, and cultures. Tarot's pictorial symbolism can function as an educational *technē* that supports ethical and spiritual growth by helping learners interpret life experiences, engage in relational ethics, and practice Socratic-style self-reflection toward greater self-understanding and being kinder to others (Semetsky, 2009).

Educators and parents can foster children's symbolic thinking by offering everyday opportunities for play, conversation, reading, and engagement with symbolic objects (Salmawati & Maryatun, 2024). The educator's role is to engage with the symbolic repertoire created by both their own community and humanity as a whole to help children and adolescents construct meaning. The interpretation of a symbol can vary from one culture to another, as the same symbol may carry one meaning in one culture and a very different meaning in another (Sigdel, 2018). Therefore, Symbol Literacy can be achieved through a pedagogy of concentric circles, guiding learners from the familiar to the unfamiliar—beginning with their own culture and gradually expanding to others.

In doing so, the educator builds on the learner's prior knowledge, fostering the ability to interpret symbolic meanings found in artefacts, language, and rituals within their own and other cultures, including global popular culture. Therefore, using the Maltese context as an example, this process can unfold across four progressive levels: (a) Level 1 - Within one's immediate culture, (b) Level 2 - Within neighbouring culture, (c) Level 3 - Within globalised pop culture, and (d) Level 4 - Within other cultures (Gellel, 2021). A progression from students' immediate culture to more distant cultures offers a developmentally sensitive way of cultivating symbolic and spiritual literacy around death, because it builds on children's experiences while gradually widening their cultural and imaginative horizons.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Level 1**<br>Within one's immediate culture | **A** | Current traditions including recipes, Halloween costumes, use of the pumpkin, movies. |
| | **B** | Tombstones in cemeteries and churches; art in churches, folklore and religious traditions |
| | **C** | Phoenician, Roman, Christian and Jewish catacombs; Muslim tombs and Neolithic symbols |
| **Level 2**<br>Within neighbouring culture | **A** | Art, prose, poetry and music available in European-Mediterranean culture |
| | **B** | Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman artefacts |
| **Level 3**<br>Within globalized pop culture | | Animation movies, movies, literature, pop songs, music videos and pop rituals |
| **Level 4**<br>Within other cultures | | Art, history, literature and rituals available in other cultures and religions |

**Table 1.** Four Progressive Cultural Levels.
*Note*. Reprinted with permission from Gellel (2021, p. 108).

In terms of symbol literacy on death, at the first level, 'within one's immediate culture', children draw on familiar practices such as seasonal traditions, popular imagery like pumpkins and Halloween costumes, local recipes linked to commemorations, and films or stories already present in family life. These practices anchor discussion of death symbols in children's everyday lifeworld and support meaning-making within their own sociocultural context. This can then be deepened through attention to the material and visual culture of death in the child's locality, for example tombstones, religious or civic monuments, and artistic depictions of mourning and remembrance, which invite observation, interpretation, and narrative construction and thus function as mediating tools in a Vygotskian sense (Hennig & Kirova, 2012). A further step at this local level is to explore historical layers of the same environment such as ancient burial sites, catacombs, and archaeological remains, so that children begin to see continuity and variation in how communities have symbolised mortality and afterlife hope across time, laying groundwork for historical consciousness as part of spiritual development.

On this foundation, neighbouring or regional cultures can be introduced through accessible art, poetry, prose, and music from the broader European-Mediterranean context, which offer children recognisable symbolic motifs in slightly unfamiliar configurations. Historical artefacts from Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek, and Roman traditions, including tomb art, funerary objects, and mythological narratives, extend this process by showing that death-related symbols travel, transform, and acquire new layers of significance, helping pupils to understand both the universality of death and the cultural specificity of mourning practices.

Globalised popular culture then provides a bridge between local and distant worlds through animated films, novels, pop songs, and music videos that address death and loss. This can be used to elicit children's emotional responses and to compare how contemporary media rework older symbolic repertoires for mass audiences.

Finally, children are given the opportunity to have encounters with other cultures' rituals and artistic traditions surrounding death such as festivals of remembrance, distinctive colours and garments of mourning, and narrative or musical practices from non-European religions and worldviews. Experiencing other cultures invites children into an attitude of respectful curiosity, emphasising both shared human needs for grieving and radically different symbolic solutions. Thus, fostering intercultural understanding, empathy, and a more expansive spiritual imagination.

In this regard, this dissertation serves as a pedagogical project consisting of teaching resources through which Symbol Literacy is fostered via engagement with art, narratives, rituals, and a *class without walls* approach which involves structured school outings across all four cultural levels.

### *3.2.4 Symbol Literacy applied to Death*

For millennia, humans have questioned whether death is truly the end and, consequently, what gives life its meaning. This curiosity gave rise to stories, myths, symbolic objects, and rituals. (Gellel, 2021). Many festivals from diverse cultural traditions such as Halloween, All Souls' Day, Día de Muertos, and Qingming, serve as ways of honouring the dead, maintaining bonds with ancestors, and expressing beliefs about an afterlife (Gellel, 2021).

Today, however, Halloween has been spread widely across the Western world under the influence of American media and popular culture—a process that has in some contexts diluted or displaced older, locally rooted traditions (Gellel, 2021). As a matter of fact, on Halloween around 65 per cent of American adults take part in Halloween activities that go beyond simply distributing sweets to children. Economic data suggest that approximately 1.5 billion dollars are spent annually on costumes, with an additional 3 billion dollars devoted to party-related accessories. This contemporary, consumer-driven manifestation of Halloween can be seen as a partial loss or dilution of its earlier ritualistic and symbolic dimensions (Al Amin, 2019). This tradition now has a stronghold over Maltese society replacing the age-old traditions of *Għid l-Imwiet*.

Through a Symbol Literacy approach, children can engage with a wide symbolic repertoire, from local and ancient to global and popular culture, while also exploring personal family histories. For instance, children can encounter symbols such as spirals and the tree of life in Maltese Neolithic temples alongside representations from other cultures. They can learn about Egyptian mummification, view selected clips from animated films like *The Lion King* (Allers & Minkoff, 1994), *Soul* (Docter & Powers, 2020), and *Coco* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017), respond creatively to musical pieces such as Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre* and Mozart's *Lacrimosa*, and participate in arts and crafts activities inspired by the vibrant traditions of *Día de los Muertos* (Gellel, 2021).

At the same time, in collaboration with their families, they are encouraged to inquire about and reflect on the life of a deceased family member. Through activities like creating a memory box, children collect objects and stories from family members about a deceased relative to commemorate them. At school, they share these stories with peers, which helps them express emotions, strengthen relationships, connect with their heritage, and, as families report, supports collective healing (Gellel, 2021). These findings resonate with research on memory-making interventions in paediatric palliative and bereavement care, which shows that parents highly value personalised keepsakes such as memory boxes, hand and footprint jewellery, and moulds because they document the child's life, sustain a sense of ongoing connection after death, and significantly support the grieving process (Safarifard et al., 2024).

Within children's immediate Maltese culture, teachers can reclaim and reinterpret traditions linked to *L-Għid tal-Imwiet* (the Feast of the Dead) and other All Souls' customs, drawing on traditional foods, and communal meals that once combined remembrance of the dead with hospitality toward the poor. By contrasting these practices with contemporary Halloween celebrations, students learn to recognise how commercialised symbols such as pumpkins, costumes, and horror imagery, may both obscure and invite a recovery of older, locally rooted meanings about solidarity with the dead and the vulnerable (Gellel, 2021).

Within neighbouring European-Mediterranean cultures, Symbol Literacy can draw on art, prose, poetry and music that reflect shared ways of imagining death, mourning and hope. Children might encounter, for example, hymnody and laments linked to All Souls' observances, visual depictions of saints and martyrs, or contemporary songs and poems that speak of remembrance and continuing bonds. Alongside these living traditions, teachers can introduce selected Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman funerary artefacts, such as mummified remains and decorated sarcophagi, painted tombs showing banquets in the afterlife, Greek grave markers and Roman reliefs. These employ recurring motifs of feasting, journeying, guardians

and cosmic order to express beliefs in an afterlife and the ongoing presence of the dead within the community.

Within globalised popular culture, narratives such as the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling, 1997–2007; Columbus, 2001) and films like *Coco* and *Soul* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017; Docter & Powers, 2020) offer accessible symbolic resources for exploring fear, death and enduring love. In *Harry Potter,* sacrificial love is repeatedly depicted as a power stronger than the Dark Arts and even death itself, inviting discussion about how love can transform the fear of dying into a willingness to protect others. In *Coco*, the practice of preparing *ofrendas*, sharing stories and fearing the final death of being forgotten illustrates how remembrance rituals sustain bonds between the living and the dead and affirm that a person 'dies' socially when there is no one left to remember them.

Finally, at the level of other cultures, children may be introduced to carefully selected images and narratives from non-European traditions, such as Hindu cremation rites on the Ganges, or East Asian festivals like Qingming. Here, the focus is not on doctrinal instruction but on recognising how diverse communities express grief, honour the dead and articulate beliefs about the afterlife through symbolic gestures, spaces and objects. This fosters respect for difference and broadens children's imaginative repertoire for thinking about death.

### 3.3 Pedagogical Approaches within a Sociocultural Framework

Grounding Symbol Literacy in a sociocultural view of learning means treating children's work with symbols as inherently relational and situated, emerging from their interactions with people, tools, and culturally meaningful practices rather than from isolated mental processes. This section therefore explains how the proposed pedagogy draws on sociocultural theory and complementary lenses to shape the four core Symbol Literacy modalities used in this project.

#### *3.3.1 Sociocultural Foundations of Learning*

Symbol Literacy is grounded in sociocultural theoretical framework (Gellel, 2025). At the centre of this pedagogy, one finds the learner, their interactions with others and with culture, and the meaning-making process. In contrast with Piaget, Vygotsky understood development as taking place through the interaction between the child and society, rather than solely within the individual (Miller, 2016). Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learning awakens internal developmental processes that operate only through social interaction. From this view, learning represents a universal mechanism through which children acquire culturally organised psychological functions—those specifically human capacities shaped by engagement with

others. Learning and cognition are therefore culturally mediated as they are shaped by the tools, symbols, and practices of a specific culture.

Moreover, higher mental functions have their origin in social and cultural interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Every higher mental function appears twice: (a) first on the social (*interpsychological*) plane, and (b) later on the internal (*intrapsychological*) plane. This means that capacities like voluntary attention, logical memory, and concept formation are first mediated through interactions with others before being internalised as individual abilities (Vygotsky, 1978).

A key characteristic of higher mental processes, distinctively human in nature, is their mediation through tools and symbolic systems like language. Vygotsky regarded the use of tools by apes as a prerequisite for the development of advanced mental functions. This reasoning enabled Vygotsky to acknowledge the evolutionary connection between apes and humans while emphasising the significant qualitative difference that distinguishes human cognition (Wertsch, 1993).

From these premises, several key principles of sociocultural theory can be distilled:

- Learning precedes development, initiating growth through guided interaction.
- Language operates as the primary cultural tool of thought.
- Mediation, which is the use of tools and signs, is central to all learning.
- Social interaction provides the foundation for cognitive change, occurring most effectively within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which Vygotsky described as the gap between a learner's current level of development consisting of what they can solve independently, and their potential level of development consisting of what they can achieve when supported by an adult or by collaborating with more skilled peers (Shabani, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978).

These principles highlight that cognitive development cannot be understood apart from the social, linguistic, and cultural contexts in which it occurs.

Vygotsky argued that human action is mediated by tools and signs, where all activity, whether collective or individual, depends on semiotic means such as language, mathematical notation, artworks, maps, and digital technologies (Wertsch, 1993). Thus, learning involves appropriating the symbolic systems of one's culture and transforming them into personal cognitive resources.

Symbol Literacy, which forms the core pedagogical approach in this project, positions children's engagement with narratives, images, rituals, and spaces as work with cultural tools that mediate understanding of self, others, and Ultimate reality. In line with Vygotsky's emphasis on tools and signs, symbols are treated as mediational means that support shared meaning-making in the classroom and, once internalised, become psychological tools children can draw on when thinking about complex themes including death and spirituality.

### *3.3.2 Four Core Symbol Literacy Modalities*

In order to enact Symbol Literacy in concrete classroom contexts, this project uses four interrelated pedagogical modalities: (a) oral narrative, (b) art-based, (c) ritual-based, and (d) *class without walls* outings. These practices translate the abstract principles of sociocultural theory into lived experiences in which children participate in cultural narratives, manipulate symbolic materials, and encounter meaning-laden places.

Narratives can be understood as individual and cultural meaning-making processes, and may be differentiated into four forms: oral narratives (storytelling), embodied narratives (ritual), collective narratives (ceremonies), and juridical narratives (law and governance). Each type highlights how meaning is created through relationships, shared experiences, and community life, which vary across cultures and places. These approaches aim to reveal how all beings and phenomena are connected, each with their own awareness, uniqueness, and influence (Celidwen & Keltner, 2023). Oral narratives, or storytelling, are among the most vital and dynamic aspects of human nature and culture, and human storytellers play a central role in creating, transmitting, and preserving the culture of every society (Zort, Karabacak, Öznur, & Dağlı, 2023). If culture is learned, then it can also be taught. Storytelling is one powerful strategy for sharing culture across generations (Zort, Karabacak, Öznur, & Dağlı, 2023). Historic or mythical oral narratives help us understand who we are, how we came to be this way, and understand the nature of reality or our *telos*—goal. Stories do not tell us what reality is like in itself. Rather, they show us how we perceive it as humans (Gellel, 2025). Furthermore, myths, even when they are not factually true, are also valuable because they teach us how we distort reality and why (Gellel, 2025).

On the other hand, art relates to communities and drives meaningful change in our society and its individuals. As Stoecker (2016) suggests, it is a powerful means of expression that transcends conventional forms of communication. Art allows individuals to channel their emotions, whether love or anger, through creative media, enabling them to express feelings in distinctive ways that resonate with others. This project adopts digital storytelling, which is the use of digital media tools such as audio, video, images, graphics, and text to create and share

narratives that convey meaning. Digital storytelling offers multiple educational benefits, including improved creative writing and overall communication skills, greater retention of information, deeper comprehension of learning material, higher motivation and engagement, and enhanced critical media literacy (Szecsi, Rivera, & Szende, 2025). Additionally, it allows a much wider range of representational resources to be combined than would be possible with single texts, images, or audio recordings alone, opening space for popular culture, family stories, and local as well as global spatial contexts (Szecsi, Rivera, & Szende, 2025). Reflective art is also useful in Symbol Literacy, as young children's drawing is increasingly recognised as a rich tool for communication, meaning-making, and problem-solving (Sonter & Jones, 2018). When young children are offered alternative modes of expression and experience, such as visualisation, drawing, and painting, they are able to access spaces that reflect a profound awareness of their inner worlds and their surroundings (Binder, 2011). These visual images function as a type of literacy in which children communicate their thinking through visual storytelling. By interpreting these drawings, educators can gain deeper insights into their students' abilities and understanding (Binder, 2011).

Ritual establishes a distinctive cultural setting within which individuals and communities construct meaning. Rituals do not simply mirror pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. They also play an active role in generating, shaping, and reinforcing these attitudes and beliefs through the very performance of ritual actions (Wojtkowiak, 2018). In the classroom, this performative dimension can be understood as a form of ritualised role-play, where students embody symbolic actions and social roles that both express and construct shared meanings. Scholars regard role-play as an effective active learning method that engages otherwise passive learners, brings energy and interactivity to the classroom, and supports deeper retention of knowledge (Stevens, 2015).

*Class without walls* refers to outings in which learning takes place in symbolically-charged spaces rather than solely within the school building. Such environments offer rich affordances for noticing symbols of death, memory, and continuity, enabling children to encounter cultural practices in situ and to situate their understanding within lived communal landscapes. Outdoor learning, therefore, functions as situated cognition where meaning emerges from children's embodied interaction with places, artefacts, and people. The physical environment consists of objects and surfaces that may be enclosed or open, ordered or cluttered, with paths, barriers, and obstacles that make some actions possible while constraining others. James Gibson refers to these possibilities as environmental affordances, namely what the environment offers to an organism. Along with the social environments of interactions and relationships, these spaces create affordances to enable or shape possibilities for learning and development (Papadopoulou & Vincent, 2025). "The outdoor space becomes a

pedagogical place that affords new opportunities for the emergence of certain intentions, interactions and behaviours." (Papadopoulou & Vincent, 2025, p. 2).

Learning, therefore, becomes contextually grounded, enabling children to develop fundamental skills for autonomous learning. The *class without walls* approach encourages an awareness that reality holds deeper layers beyond what is immediately visible and fosters the ability to draw upon the broader wisdom embedded within human experience and the surrounding environment. It centres on the cultural affordances present within specific sites while simultaneously acknowledging the natural affordances inherent in those locations. For example, a Neolithic site encompasses more than the physical attributes of its megalithic temples and their associated cultural significance. It also includes the natural landscape in which these structures exist (Gellel, 2025).

### *3.3.3 Theoretical Lenses: Affordances, Situated/Distributed Cognition, and Material Entanglement*

Alongside the core sociocultural framework, a set of complementary theoretical lenses helps to illuminate how the four modalities work in practice: affordances, situated and distributed cognition, and material entanglement. These perspectives sharpen the focus on how environments invite particular actions, how cognition is spread across people and tools, how materials co-constitute thinking, and how children gradually move into fuller participation in cultural practices.

First introduced by the psychologist James Gibson, affordance theory highlights how the environment offers concrete possibilities for action that are perceived and taken up differently by each learner. The concept of *affordance* describes the features of an environment that enable or influence particular forms of interaction (Greeno, 1994). As Gibson (1979) explains, affordances are "what [the environment] offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. … It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment" (p. 127). Gibson argued that an affordance is not a static property of the environment alone, but comes into being as a relational possibility when it is picked up in perception and action, so that features of the environment become lived opportunities for doing (Young & Cleveland, 2022).

Researchers studying children's environments differentiate between *potential affordances,* which are those available in a setting but not necessarily noticed, and *actualised affordances*, which are those children perceive and use. Harry Heft (2001) introduced the concept of *actualisation* to explain that individuals act on only some of the available affordances at any given time. Scholars have shown that culture shapes how people perceive

and interpret affordances, as they learn through instruction, observation, or play. Therefore, affordances are understood within sociocultural contexts, where meaning emerges through shared practices among people and objects within a community. In this project, both classroom and outdoor activities and settings are intentionally designed as symbol-rich environments whose artefacts and spatial arrangements invite children to look, touch, question, draw, and ritualise around themes of death and remembrance.

On the other hand, situated and distributed cognition draw attention to the ways in which thinking is inseparable from the activities, tools, and social relations within which it occurs, and is spread across people, tools, and time. In the context of Symbol Literacy, children's ideas about death are seen as emerging from joint activity with peers, teachers, stories, images, and ritual objects, rather than as purely internal processes. Learning and cognition are, at their core, *situated*—they always take shape within specific physical, social, and cultural environments (Allal, 2001). Cognition emerges from, and remains tied to, the ways an agent's body engages with its physical surroundings—in this sense, cognition is both *embodied* and *situated*. It also depends on the agent's interactions with its social world, so that thinking is always located within a social context. This context can be *immediate*, as when patterns of behaviour develop in direct relation to other individuals, or *mediate*, as when they are shaped by wider communities, networks, or societies. Cognitive processes are therefore *distributed* across material settings and social arrangements, with language use and concrete practices providing key examples of this distributed character. Much intelligent behaviour does not rely on explicit inner mental representations. What matters instead is how the world is structured and presented so that agents can act within it (Roth & Jornet, 2013). Therefore, both situated and distributed cognition draw heavily on, and in turn broaden, sociocultural theory and related cultural-historical approaches.

The notion of material entanglement underscores how humans and things co-constitute one another over time, challenging the view of materials as neutral background. In the Symbol Literacy classroom, candles, leaves, photographs, sculptures, and art media become active partners in children's sense-making about death, inviting particular gestures, associations, and stories. Human dependence on material things creates an entanglement between people and things, which has shaped both our evolutionary development and the ways we organise and live in contemporary societies (Hodder, 2012). When we *think* with materials, we choose to understand them not as static objects but as dynamic movements, encounters, assemblages, ecologies, and temporal processes. This perspective reshapes childhood education by inviting educators to attend to the ways in which children and materials are deeply entangled in classroom life, continually influencing and transforming one another through their ongoing encounters (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017).

## 3.4 Methodology

This chapter therefore outlines the project-based research design through which the teachers' pack was conceived, developed, and critically appraised, treating the creation of concrete classroom resources as both the object and method of inquiry.

### *3.4.1 Project-based Methodological Approach*

This dissertation adopts a project-based methodological approach in which the central research activity is the design of a coherent set of learning outcomes, lesson plans, and teaching resources that introduce death education within a Year 3 Ethics classroom.

> Educational studies are a practical science in the sense that we do not only want to know facts and to understand relations for the sake of knowledge, we want to know and understand in order to be able to act better than we did before. (Langeveld, 1965, p. 4)

In line with Langeveld's view that educational research should not merely generate knowledge but also inform and transform practice, the project is conceived as an intervention that directly supports teachers in addressing death as a natural, meaningful dimension of life with young children (Langeveld, 1965; Oaks & Bibeau, 1987). Framed as a project, the dissertation integrates a clearly defined practical product—a teachers' pack on death education for approximately seven-year-olds, with the current written report that documents the rationale underpinning the resources. Drawing on project-based dissertation guidelines, the study is structured around understandable goals, careful planning, and ongoing reflection—the main components of a project-based research (Hatami, Hietaniemi, Pitkänen, Saulio, & Jussila, 2020).

Empirical work on project-based research and learning suggests that such an approach cultivates higher-order skills such as creative thinking, problem-solving, time management, information analysis, and the organisation of ideas (Lee, 2010). These skills are essential when designing sensitive and developmentally appropriate activities around death and loss.

The focus on a teachers' pack also draws from scholarship on teaching-learning materials, which emphasises that resources should be age-relevant, conceptually clear, and capable of fostering critical reflection, empathy, and value formation through varied visual, textual and possibly digital media (Bušljeta, 2013). In the specific context of death education and children's spirituality, this project-based dissertation thus operates simultaneously as research and curriculum development. It uses the creation and critical appraisal of resources as

the primary vehicle for generating knowledge about how educators might invite seven-year-olds into thoughtful, emotionally contained conversations about mortality.

The creative and limitless nature of project-based research allows for a deep, personal connection with the subject matter, and with the community for whom the research is ultimately conducted. Drawing from this insight, I find that my own grief can be a source of inspiration and a medium for communication. By incorporating my personal experience with grief into the creation of the teaching resource pack, I aim to offer a unique perspective that not only enriches the content but also makes the resources more relatable and meaningful. In this way, I hope to contribute to the creation of a more empathetic and responsive educational environment, which acknowledges the emotional complexities students may face and cultivates a deeper understanding of difficult topics such as loss and mortality.

### *3.4.2 Project Structure and Resource Creation*

The project, presented in chapter 4 of this dissertation, is grounded in a Google Drive space titled 'all hallows', developed by Professor Adrian Mario Gellel to foster death education through a Symbol Literacy approach. This space currently offers school administration materials such as a circular for schools, flyers containing educational activities and information for parents and children, as well as a number of resources including book recommendations, short animated clips, songs, and articles for teachers and parents.

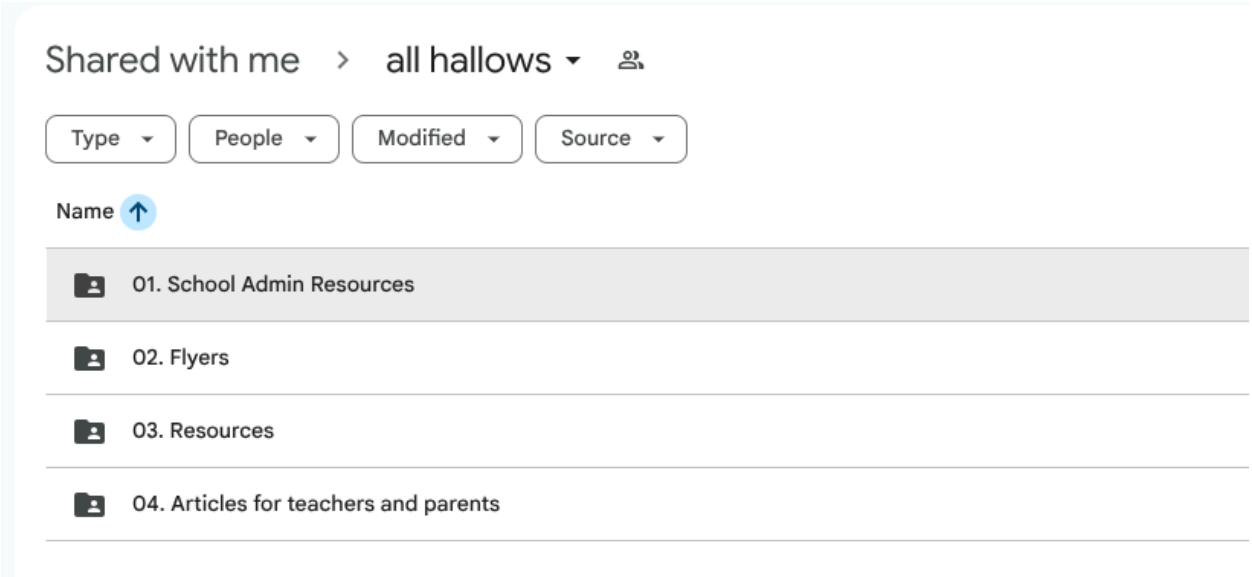



**Figure 1.** *All hallows* Google Drive




**Figure 2.** Flyer no. 1

The aim of my project is to curate, adapt, and expand some of the activities found in these flyers into a structured teachers' pack tailored specifically for a Year 3 Ethics classroom. Building on the original materials, I developed new activities linked to the resources in the '03. Resources' folder on Google Drive, generated additional symbol-rich tasks and discussion prompts, and reorganised the content into themed sequences that support progressive engagement with death-related symbols and questions.

It should be noted that this dissertation is conceived as a project that runs parallel to, and takes direct inspiration from, the existing *all hallows* initiative developed by Professor Adrian-Mario Gellel. While the two share a common pedagogical vision centred on Symbol Literacy and death education, this dissertation constitutes an entirely independent academic work. The teachers' pack produced herein may, in future, be incorporated into the broader *all hallows* project, but it has been developed autonomously and should be read as a standalone contribution to the field.

Furthermore, the title ‘all hallows’ was assigned to this Google Drive initiative prior to the commencement of this dissertation, and I had no involvement in its selection. Had the choice rested with me, the term ‘Halloween’ would have been preferred on the grounds that it carries far broader global recognition, and a resource pack named after it would arguably be more immediately identifiable and accessible to practitioners, parents, and researchers beyond the Maltese context. Nevertheless, the title ‘all hallows’ is retained throughout this work in fidelity to the original initiative.

The revised Google Drive structure will be organised around the four previously-mentioned cultural levels: immediate culture, neighbouring culture, global popular culture, and other cultures. It will also include suggested learning outcomes, brief lesson plans that teachers can adapt, and guidance documents for both educators and parents. The next chapter builds on this overview by presenting the final structure of the *all hallows* space and exemplifying the teachers’ pack through selected activities and lessons.

### *3.4.3 Why Year 3?*

Recent studies indicate that from the age of three, children enter an ideal stage for introducing death-related topics within the curriculum. At this age, they tend to discuss death openly and perceive death as a normal aspect of life, while it is often adults who discourage such conversations (Ramos-Pla, del Arco, & Espart, 2023). Similarly, another study revealed that even four-year-old children generally recognise that humans can breathe (98%), think (93%), and die (85%), and that animals also breathe (89%), think (72%), and die (72%), but they rarely attribute these abilities to objects (Lane et al., 2016).

Piaget’s theory of cognitive development identifies the concrete operational stage (approximately ages 7–12) as the period when logical thinking begins to develop, allowing children to approach and solve practical problems. This suggests that from the age of seven onwards, children possess the cognitive capacity to engage with more complex and abstract concepts of death, making this an appropriate stage to introduce structured death education.

According to Kenyon’s contemporary perspective, by around four years of age, children begin to view death as a change in state, and by approximately five, most understand several of its basic components. However, a full comprehension of death’s various aspects generally develops between the ages of nine and ten (Kenyon, 2001). This suggests that age seven falls within the developmental phase between partial and complete understanding, making it an ideal period to consolidate and deepen children’s emerging awareness through structured teaching.

### 3.5 Curriculum and Policy Alignment

Traditionally, schools begin death education at the secondary level (Higgins, 1999). However, given the research highlighting the benefits of death education, children's developmental understanding of death, and the role of spiritual education in supporting holistic growth, offering it earlier in primary education is advantageous. Although topics such as life and death are included in the Maltese Ethics curriculum, they usually appear later in secondary school, and are approached with different learning outcomes. The SEC 40 Ethics syllabus treats death and loss mainly as part of a broader moral-philosophical, rights-based and risk-prevention framework for adolescents (MATSEC Examinations Board, 2023).

In line with my dissertation, the aims of education articulated in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) include fostering students' moral and spiritual development, while also respecting and promoting Maltese culture and heritage. Moreover, the NCF emphasises the development of intercultural competence, encouraging learners to value their own heritage within wider Mediterranean, European, and global contexts (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012).

Within the aims set for the junior years cycle (Years 3 to 6), the 2012 framework states that developing children's moral, spiritual, and religious dimensions supports their ability to value, appreciate, perceive, and interpret the world they inhabit. It seeks to initiate children into a deep, life-long search for truth and for the value of life and existence, approached through a Catholic perspective. At the same time, an ethical education programme is to be offered as an alternative to denominational religious education (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012).

> Religious Education is duty-bound not only to contribute to knowledge about other religions, or just to facilitate social conviviality through such knowledge. It is mainly called to serve the very same purpose at the heart of education, that is, to help students connect with their very human nature and become human. (Gellel, 2010, p. 48)

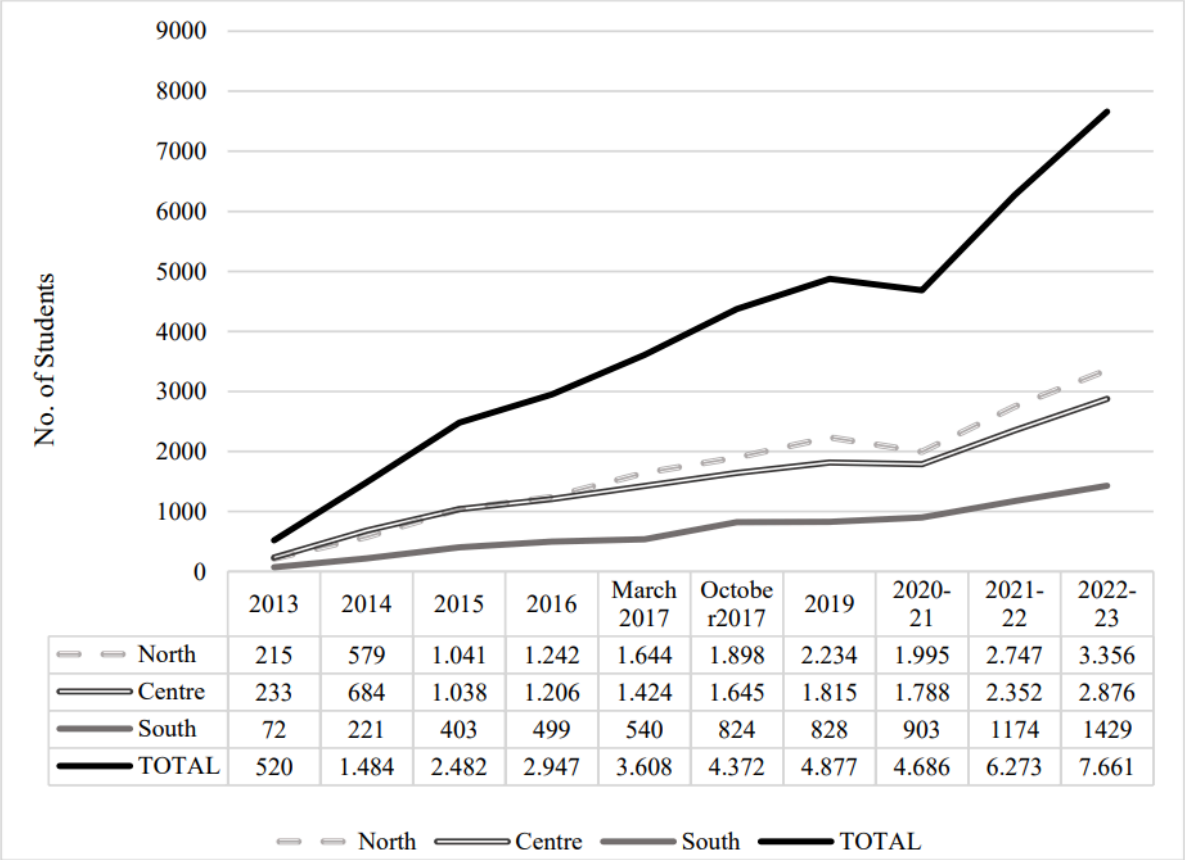
Spiritual formation is not an optional add-on, but central to education's purpose. Thus, although spiritual and existential education is not currently part of the Ethics curriculum, it is intended to be addressed through the Ethics subject. It is evident that both Religious Education and Ethics are expected to engage with spiritual issues and to support children in formulating and expressing questions that are fundamental to human experience, while also encouraging them to seek answers to these questions. This dissertation responds to that educational gap by

proposing a symbol-literacy-based teaching pack that nurtures children's capacity for meaning-making, empathy, and spiritual awareness within an inclusive ethical framework.

Consequently, the goal of this dissertation is to highlight the importance of introducing death education at an early stage (Higgins, 1999), whilst the overarching objective is to empower young minds to navigate life's challenges with resilience and comprehension while breaking down societal taboos.

Apart from being in line with the NCF, a Symbol Literacy approach pedagogical approach is also in line with Malta's National Educational Strategy (NES) 2024-2030, particularly with 'Pillar 3: Equity and Inclusion'. The third pillar guarantees that high-quality education is accessible to all learners and that their personal or social background does not limit their life opportunities (MEYR, 2024).

Malta's non-Maltese population exceeds that of the EU average, with the Indian and Filipino communities being the largest (Gauci & Caruana, 2025). This is reflected in the tenfold growth of migrant learners in schools from 2013 to 2023, who now make up 16.2% of pre-primary to secondary enrollments (NSO, 2024).




| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | March 2017 | Octobe r2017 | 2019 | 2020-21 | 2021-22 | 2022-23 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North | 215 | 579 | 1.041 | 1.242 | 1.644 | 1.898 | 2.234 | 1.995 | 2.747 | 3.356 |
| Centre | 233 | 684 | 1.038 | 1.206 | 1.424 | 1.645 | 1.815 | 1.788 | 2.352 | 2.876 |
| South | 72 | 221 | 403 | 499 | 540 | 824 | 828 | 903 | 1174 | 1429 |
| TOTAL | 520 | 1.484 | 2.482 | 2.947 | 3.608 | 4.372 | 4.877 | 4.686 | 6.273 | 7.661 |

*Figure 1: Migrant Learners in Maltese State Schools*[1]

**Figure 3.** Migrant Learners in Maltese State Schools (Gauci & Caruana, 2025, p. 327)

The considerable diversity in learners' origins and backgrounds poses a significant pedagogical challenge. Educators must account for cultural and geographic differences, language barriers, and pre-migration experiences, particularly for students from conflict zones (Gauci & Caruana, 2025). The NES recognises that migration and diversity are reshaping Maltese society, and therefore the document aims to guide schools to build children's cultural awareness and intercultural competence so learners can handle differences constructively and equitably (MEYR, 2024).

Vygotsky sees learning as rooted in specific social and historical contexts. This sociocultural perspective takes both individual and cross-cultural differences in development seriously. This matters because much existing research is based on white, Western, middle-class children and wrongly treated as universal. On the other hand, acknowledging that "ideal" thinking and behaviour can legitimately differ across cultures frees educators from a narrow universalism and encourages them to create learning environments where diversity is treated as

a resource rather than a deviation (Miller, 2011, p. 183). Therefore, a Symbol Literacy approach aligns with Malta's NES by fostering inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogical practices that value diversity as an asset to learning, and cultivates inclusion.

### 3.6 Conclusion

An enlightened global culture is one that intentionally creates conditions for learners to grow in every possible dimension of their development. It seeks to move beyond the narrow focus on the discrete knowledge and skills prescribed by individual curriculum subjects, towards a more holistic vision in which all subjects, taken together, cumulatively contribute to learners' understanding of life's meaning and purpose as a whole (Moulin-Stożek, 2020).

Taken together, this chapter has portrayed Symbol Literacy as a spiritually attuned pedagogy in which children learn to 'read' and work with symbols as cultural tools for making sense of death, loss, and life's meaning. The literature on children's cognitive development confirms that by Year 3, pupils have typically entered the concrete operational stage and are developmentally ready to grasp the irreversibility and universality of death. At this point they are no longer satisfied with evasive euphemisms, but seek truthful, sensitive answers, which makes the current "pedagogical vacuum" in Maltese curricula a missed opportunity to cultivate emotional resilience and existential literacy.

By tracing spirituality as an inherent human dimension, it has located children's questions about mortality within a broader search for connectedness, purpose, and transcendence, rather than as isolated or purely cognitive curiosities. Spiritual and Symbol Literacy have been presented as practices that invite children to externalise and explore inner experience through stories, images, rituals, and symbolic objects, thereby deepening their capacity to think and feel with others in a shared symbolic world.

# 4. Principles, Rationale, and Project Summary

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter translates the theoretical and methodological foundations established in the preceding chapters into concrete pedagogical practice, presenting the four modalities of art-based, narrative, ritual-based, and *class without walls*. Each modality is grounded in a Symbol Literacy approach enacted across four progressive cultural levels, guiding children from the familiar landscapes of their immediate Maltese culture outward to neighbouring, globalised, and other cultural traditions in a developmentally sensitive and emotionally contained progression.

## 4.2 The Art-Based Modality

The art-based modality gives concrete form to the Symbol Literacy framework through structured engagement with visual art, inviting Year 3 children to read symbols embedded in artworks drawn from each of the four cultural levels. For children who may lack the verbal vocabulary to engage directly with ideas of death and remembrance, visual art provides an immediate and emotionally accessible entry point. The silent gaze with which each lesson opens cultivates what Gellel (2025) describes as mindful capacity to recall and apply symbols meaningfully across different contexts and phases of life.

The creative outputs embedded throughout this modality (the personal polyptych, the life flower, the decorated calavera, and the identity coffin) are not merely craft activities but meaning-laden artefacts through which children externalise and begin to process their emerging understanding of the human life cycle.

The art-based modality comprises four lesson plans. The first draws on the Polyptych of St Paul at the Mdina Cathedral Museum, concluding with *My Life in Little Panels* in which each child creates drawings of personal memories. The second introduces Vanitas still lifes by Philippe de Champaigne and Jan van Kessel the Elder, exploring life, time, and impermanence through everyday objects, concluding with children's own life flower. The third draws on selected stills from Pixar's *Coco* (2017), concluding with the decoration of a personal calavera that shows children that death can be approached with colour, memory, and celebration. The fourth introduces the *abebuu adekai*, or fantasy coffins, of the Ga people of southern Ghana.

### 4.3 The Narrative Modality

The narrative modality invites Year 3 children into carefully chosen stories drawn from each cultural level, using storytelling to explore existential themes of death, remembrance, transformation, and the continuity of love. Stories hold protective emotional distance, where children encounter loss through a character rather than in the first person, and each narrative is set within a specific cultural tradition, functioning simultaneously as a window onto diverse worldviews and a mirror in which children may recognise their own experience.

The narrative modality comprises four lesson plans. The first is rooted in the Maltese tradition of *għadam tal-mejtin* through the original story *Nanna's Bones of Remembrance*, written for this project, concluding with children decorating their own għadma tal-mejtin colouring page. The second expands to ancient Egypt, introducing the concept of Ma'at and the weighing of the heart against a white feather in the Hall of Osiris. In the story, the relatable protagonist Khepri explores compassion, truth, and legacy, and the lesson concludes with *The Light and Heavy Heart Worksheet*. The third draws on four key scenes from Pixar's *Coco* (2017), centred on the film's teaching that the true final death is being forgotten. The lesson concludes with *My Memory Flower,* in which children draw or write about someone they love. The fourth introduces an Aboriginal Australian Dreamtime myth retold by Michael J. Connolly (Munda-gutta Kulliwari), in which the death of a young cockatoo gives birth to the first butterflies. The lesson concludes with *The Butterfly Worksheet*, in which children decorate butterfly wings with the face or name of someone they love.

### 4.4 The Ritual-Based Modality

The ritual-based modality invites Year 3 children into ritual actions drawn from specific cultural traditions, using sensory and symbolic engagement to explore themes of death, remembrance, care, and the continuity of love. Ritual constitutes one of the most ancient and irreplaceable human responses to mortality. To light a candle, to walk in procession, or to float a paper lantern on a cloth river is to engage the whole body's senses, imagination, and social self in a shared act of meaning-making that classroom discussion alone cannot replicate.

Shared principles across all four lessons include a deliberately calm space, voluntary participation with alternative foci offered to any child uncomfortable with the theme, concrete tangible symbols (candle, cloth, photograph, lantern) as sensory bridges, explicit cultural framing so children understand they are respectfully encountering another community's symbolic language, and a closing reflective statement to return the class to warmth and safety.

The ritual-based modality comprises four lesson plans. The first is rooted in *L-Għid tal-Imwiet* (All Souls' Day) where children sit in a circle around a battery tea-light and each may place a photograph, santa, or personal drawing near the candle and share a few words of remembrance. The second introduces Ancient Egyptian funerary ritual through classroom roleplay, with children divided into groups that wrap a soft toy in cloth, lead a slow procession to a designated 'tomb', and create paper drawings of symbolic offerings. The closing reflection affirms that love expressed through care and shared journey resonates across all human cultures. The third draws on the *Mexican Día de los Muertos* as mediated through *Coco* (2017), inviting children to build a shared classroom ofrenda with paper marigold flowers, while the closing reflection echoes the film's teaching that those we remember are never truly gone. The fourth introduces the Japanese Buddhist festival of Obon. Children craft paper lanterns and carry them to a 'river' of blue cloth, placing them down softly. The closing words "when we remember the people and animals we love, their light keeps shining" provide a unifying thread across the entire teachers' pack.

### 4.5 The *Class Without Walls* Modality

The *class without walls* modality gives the Symbol Literacy framework its most expansive expression, taking Year 3 children on structured visits to real-world sites charged with symbolic and cultural meaning. The treasure hunt, artefact detective and scavenger's hunt formats turn each visit into a guided act of symbol-reading in which the child is positioned as an active investigator rather than a passive recipient of information.

This modality comprises four lesson plans. The first situates children within Malta's largest burial ground, Addolorata Cemetery, where a treasure hunt guides them through symbolic features of the site. In this context, the visit normalises the cemetery as a place of peace and love, concluding with a moment of silence. The second relocates learning to St Agatha's Catacombs and Museum in Rabat, where children encounter artefacts from ancient Egyptian and wider Mediterranean funerary culture. The *I See / I Think / I Wonder* artefact detective worksheet supports observation, interpretation, and genuine existential curiosity. The third brings children into contact with globalised pop culture death symbols during the Halloween season in their own village, tracing the jack-o'-lantern, ghost, and spider back to Celtic Samhain traditions and developing Symbol Literacy as a tool for meaning-making rather than passive cultural consumption. The fourth takes children to the 19th-century Ottoman Turkish (Islamic) cemetery at Marsa. The treasure hunt features minaret-like towers and a flower-filled path evoking paradise, and children are framed as guests in a sacred space where the graves of soldiers from India, Egypt, and Algeria extend the project's global reach. In doing

so, this modality enacts in its fullest form the concentric, outward-moving logic of Symbol Literacy pedagogy that animates the teachers' pack as a whole.

### 4.6 Conclusion

Taken together, the four modalities presented in this chapter do not function as isolated teaching strategies but as an integrated pedagogical architecture, one in which visual art, story, ritual, and embodied encounters offer children a distinct but complementary portal into the symbolic, cultural, and existential dimensions of death and remembrance. By weaving these approaches into a coherent teachers' pack, this project demonstrates that death education at primary level need not be a source of anxiety for educators, but can become a rich, inclusive, and meaning-filled dimension of holistic learning that equips young children with the resilience and symbolic literacy to engage thoughtfully with one of life's most universal realities.

# 5. Conclusion

This dissertation began with a question that is, in many ways, deeply personal: what happens when children are left without language for the inevitable? What follows is an attempt to answer that question through pedagogy, through culture, and through the belief that children deserve better than silence.

The central argument threaded throughout this work is that the omission of Death Education from primary schooling does not protect children. On the contrary, it leaves them stranded in what the literature calls a *pedagogical vacuum*, which is the lack of preparation for loss, the inability to support one another in grief, and the deprivation of the existential literacy that meaningful living requires. Drawing on philosophical perspectives from Stoicism and Existentialism, sociocultural frameworks, Vygotskian theory, and an extensive review of Death Education scholarship, this dissertation has built the case for introducing developmentally appropriate death education in Year 3 Ethics classrooms in Malta through a Symbol Literacy approach.

What this dissertation taught me is that the topic you research always ends up researching you back. I came to this subject carrying my own grief, and I leave it with a deeper understanding of what that grief was asking me to do, that is, creating something meaningful from loss, to offer other children and educators a tool I myself did not have. Project-based research, as I discovered, is never neutral. The resources I developed are shaped by who I am as much as by the literature I read.

For children, the significance is perhaps most urgent. Children are not immune to loss. They think about death, they ask about it, and when adults withdraw into silence, they learn that death is something too dangerous to speak about. This project offers children a different experience where death is approached with honesty, gentleness, curiosity, and care. In education, this work matters because it responds to a genuine gap. The Maltese National Curriculum Framework calls for children's spiritual, moral, and existential development, yet death, which is the most universal of all human experiences, is largely absent from primary curricula. The teachers' pack developed here offers a practical, evidence-based response to that absence, one that is inclusive, culturally responsive, and aligned with both the NCF and Malta's National Education Strategy 2030. For teachers, it provides practical tools. Many educators feel unprepared to engage with death in the classroom. The teachers' pack is designed not to prescribe, but to support. It is not meant to overwhelm, but rather to open a door.

In Malta specifically, this dissertation carries particular weight. In a small, predominantly Catholic island where death rituals such as *L-Għid tal-Imwiet* are quietly being displaced by commercialised alternatives, children risk losing the very cultural vocabulary that once helped communities grieve together. By grounding the Symbol Literacy pedagogy in Maltese traditions first, this project reclaims and reaffirms that heritage as an educational resource. Furthermore, through the pedagogy of concentric circles, it invites children to move outward to other cultural traditions. In doing so, it teaches children not only how their culture speaks about death, but how all cultures do, and that beneath the differences in ritual, symbol, and language, the same human need to grieve, remember, and find meaning runs through all of them.

Death, as Heidegger reminds us, is not the opposite of life. It is the very force that gives life its meaning. This dissertation, therefore, is offered in that spirit as a small but genuine contribution to a conversation that Malta's children, teachers, and classrooms are ready to have.

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# Appendices

### Appendix A: The Project

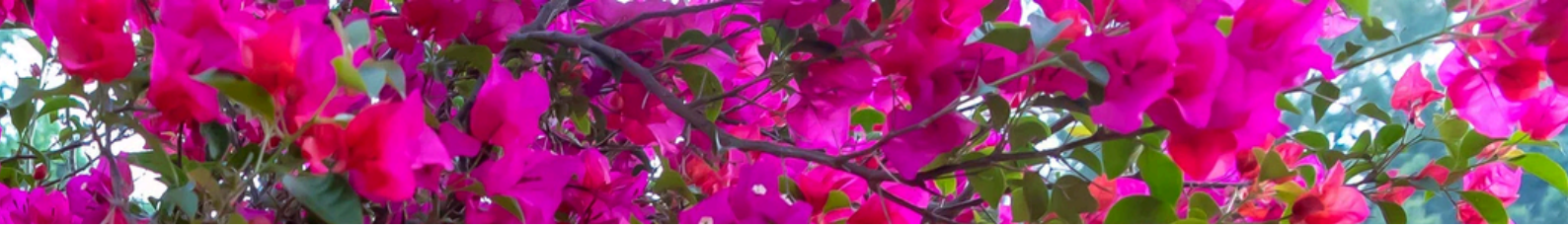
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# ALL HALLOWS CELEBRATION

## *A Death Education Teacher Manual*



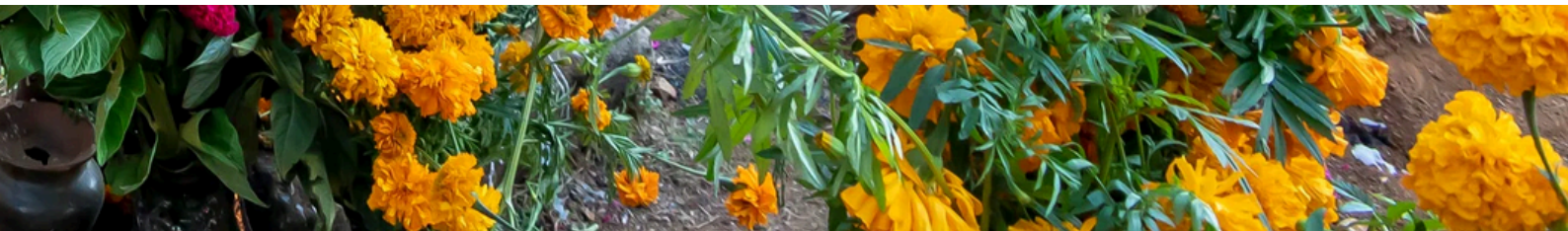
BRENDA CASHA



Project submitted to the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta for the Degree of Master in Teaching Ethics

June 2026

by Brenda Casha





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# GENERAL PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

The lessons in this teaching pack are organised around four cultural lenses through which children can explore the universal human experience of death, loss, and remembrance: Immediate Culture, Neighbouring Culture, Globalised Pop Culture, and Exotic Culture. Moving from the deeply familiar to the beautifully distant, this structure invites children to first find their footing in their own Maltese heritage before gradually widening their gaze to discover that every culture, in its own way, has found meaningful and loving ways to say goodbye.

## Culture 1: Immediate Culture

The lessons in this section draw on Malta's own living cultural heritage as the primary entry point for death education. Anchoring learning in the immediate culture which is the world children already inhabit, means that themes of death, loss, and remembrance are introduced through contexts that feel familiar, safe, and emotionally resonant rather than abstract or foreign.

Maltese culture offers rich, child-accessible material for this work. *The Polyptych of St Paul*, housed in the Mdina Cathedral Museum, invites children to read symbolic imagery of transformation, danger, care, and burial within a narrative deeply rooted in national identity.

The traditional *L-għadam tal-mejtin*, bone-shaped pastries baked for L-Għid tal-Imwiet (All Souls' Day), carry intergenerational stories of love and remembrance that children may already encounter in shops and schools each November. The ritual *Candle of Remembrance* extends these experiences into the classroom through sensory, communal, and spiritually meaningful practice, and a guided visit to Addolorata Cemetery repositions this space as one of peace and continuing love, rather than fear. Together, these lessons build on what children already know and feel, offering a culturally grounded, emotionally scaffolded foundation from which to explore the universal human experience of loss.

**Culture 2: Neighbouring Culture**

The lessons in this section widen children's understanding of death and remembrance by drawing on cultures geographically and historically close to Malta: the ancient Mediterranean civilisations with which the island has long shared sea routes, trade, and cultural memory. Engaging with a neighbouring culture offers a productive middle distance which is far enough from the personal to feel safe, yet close enough to feel connected and recognisable.

European Vanitas still life painting, particularly works from seventeenth-century France and Flanders, invites children to read everyday objects such as flowers, skulls, hourglasses, and bubbles, as gentle symbols of impermanence, time, and the preciousness of life.

Ancient Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife are explored through narrative, as the story of Khepri's journey to the Hall of Osiris introduces children to ideas of moral living, truth, and hope beyond death. A classroom role-play of an Ancient Egyptian goodbye ceremony allows children to embody these ideas through symbolic actions of care, procession, and offering. Finally, a visit to St Agatha's Catacombs and Museum in Rabat connects these neighbouring traditions directly to artefacts held in Malta itself, making the ancient tangible and personally meaningful. Together, these lessons show children that the human impulse to remember, protect, and love the dead is not uniquely Maltese but rather a universal thread woven across all the cultures of the Mediterranean and beyond.

**Culture 3: Globalised Pop Culture**

The lessons in this section draw on the cultural texts children encounter most naturally in their everyday lives through globally circulating films, seasonal celebrations, and commercial imagery. Engaging with globalised pop culture acknowledges that long before formal education introduces the topic of death, children have already encountered it through screens, shop windows, and seasonal festivities. This section uses those familiar entry points as pedagogically productive starting places.

Pixar's *Coco* (2017) serves as the primary vehicle across three of the four lessons. Through selected film stills and the iconic soundtrack, children read symbols of the *ofrenda*, the marigold bridge, and the calavera, developing the understanding that death can be approached with colour, joy, and love.

Two dedicated lesson briefs explore specific scenes: the fading of Chicharrón introduces the concept that being forgotten is its own form of loss, while Miguel's song to Mamá Coco offers a tender lens on memory, music, and dementia. The classroom *ofrenda*-building activity translates the film's symbolism into a shared, sensory ritual that children construct together. Finally, a Halloween village scavenger hunt brings children outdoors to discover how globalised death symbols such as ghosts, skeletons, jack-o'-lanterns, coexist in the same village streets as distinctly Maltese Catholic imagery, sharpening children's awareness that symbols travel, mix, and carry layered meanings.

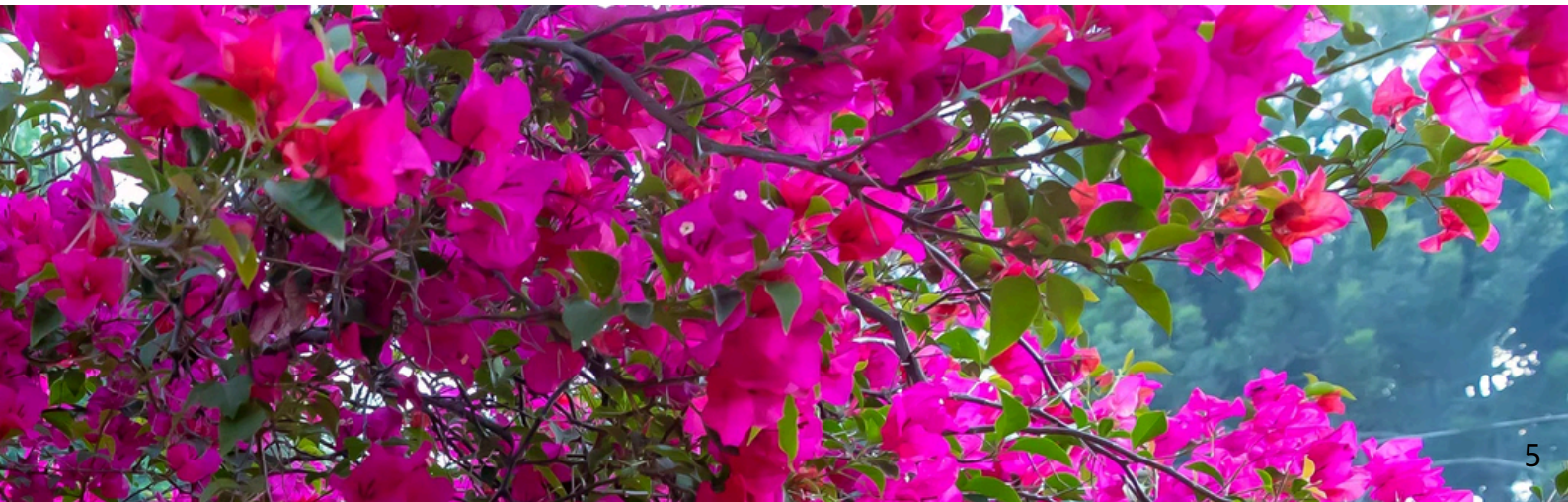
**Culture 4: Exotic Culture**

The lessons in this final section take children furthest from their own cultural horizon, introducing worldviews and funerary traditions that are geographically, spiritually, and cosmologically distant from the Maltese context. Engaging with an exotic culture cultivates curiosity, empathy, and the recognition that humanity's deepest responses to death such as love, memory, beauty, and hope, transcend any single tradition.

The *abebuu adekai*, or fantasy coffins of the Ga people of southern Ghana, invite children to understand that a coffin can be a joyful, identity-affirming symbol: a fish for a fisherman, an aeroplane for a dreamer, a celebration of who someone truly was.

The Aboriginal Australian Dreamtime myth *The Birth of the Butterflies* introduces death as transformation rather than ending, with the butterfly becoming a universal, child-accessible symbol of renewal and continuing life. The Japanese Buddhist tradition of Obon is explored through the making and symbolic floating of paper *chochin* lanterns, offering children the experience of a gentle, luminous ritual for welcoming and releasing the spirits of loved ones. Finally, a visit to the 19th-century Ottoman Turkish cemetery at Marsa brings the exotic close to home, revealing Islamic funerary symbolism such as crescents, turban-topped tombstones, and paradise garden imagery, embedded within Malta's own landscape.

Across all four cultural strands, a common thread emerges. Whether through a Maltese bone-shaped pastry, an ancient Egyptian heart weighed against a feather, a marigold-lit ofrenda, or a Ghanaian fantasy coffin, every human community has insisted that death is not the end of love. It is the hope of this teaching pack that, by walking children through these rich and varied traditions, teachers will feel equipped and confident to open space in the classroom for one of life's most important, and most natural, conversations.



# 1. IMMEDIATE CULTURE

# 1.1
# THE POLYPTYCH OF ST PAUL

LESSON TITLE: **The Polyptych of St Paul**



ART-BASED

IMMEDIATE CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This lesson uses an art-based approach at the immediate culture level, drawing on the Polyptych of St Paul, a significant work housed in the Mdina Cathedral Museum, to explore how artists speak about life, transformation, and death through narrative imagery rooted in Malta's own religious and cultural heritage. By moving from concrete observation of the panels to personal connections and then to gentle existential questions, children develop symbol literacy and learn that a single image can carry many possible meanings without there being a single right answer.

The cultural proximity of this artwork is central to its pedagogical value: St Paul's story is woven into Maltese national identity, making the polyptych both emotionally resonant and immediately familiar to children. This intimacy provides a secure foundation from which to explore more complex themes of change, danger, care, loss, and remembrance in a way that feels personal rather than abstract. At the same time, the multi-panel structure of the polyptych offers a natural scaffold for children to understand that a life story is not a single moment but a sequence of experiences that together form a whole.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Analyse** the Polyptych of St Paul.
- **Read** symbols in the artwork .
- **Identify** different stages of the life narrative of a human person, including death.
- **Understand** that remembrance continues after death.
- **Connect** the story of St Paul to Maltese cultural and religious heritage.
- **Create** a personal multi-panel artwork to represent key moments in their own life.





## INTRODUCTION

- Ideally children would be asked to observe the artwork during a school outing to the Mdina Cathedral Museum. Otherwise they may view the **1.1 Presentation** of the polyptych in the classroom.

- The session begins with a short silent gaze. Children are invited to notice colours, shapes, faces, lines.

## ACTIVITY

- Children first notice and describe what they see in each panel. Encourage them to describe only what they observe, without offering interpretations. For example, at this stage, children should not provide the names of the characters in the panels.

- With each panel, ask concrete questions that move into symbol reading. *Question exemplars are found below.*

- After children share their observations, an explanation of the story is given.

- **__Note:__ The number of panels may be too many for one lesson, and you may need to choose. If a reduced set is needed, it is recommend focusing on 4 key panels: Conversion (change), Shipwreck and departure from Malta (danger), Healing the father of Publius (kindness), and Death and burial (death and remembrance).*

## QUESTION EXEMPLARS

***Conversion**

- What is the brightest thing you can see in this picture?
- If the light could speak, what do you think it would say to Paul?
- How do you think Paul is feeling in his body right now (surprised, scared, excited)?

**Baptism**

- Where do you see water in this picture?
- If the water could talk, what might it say about Paul's new start?
- What small details show that something is being washed or made clean?

## QUESTION EXEMPLARS

**Paul before King Agrippa and Festus**

- Who looks powerful in this picture, and how can you tell?
- What do you notice about Paul's body? Is he standing, pointing, calm, afraid?

***Shipwreck and departure from Malta**

- What can you tell me about the man next to Paul?
- Where do you see danger in this picture (waves, rocks, dark sky)?
- What does shipwreck mean?
- Do you think that shipwrecks still happen in the Mediterranean? *Images showing migrant shipwrecks near Maltese waters have been added to the presentation to help children to empathise and learn the meaning of danger and death as a potential consequence.*
- What do you notice about the sky and water colours? How do they make you feel?

**Shaking the viper into the fire**

- Where is the scariest part of this picture for you?
- What could the snake stand for (fear, danger, something that hurts)?
- What could the fire stand for (warmth, safety, burning away bad things)?

***Healing the father of Publius**

- Who looks sick or weak in this picture, and how can you tell?
- Who looks like they are helping, and what are they doing with their hands?
- If the helping hands could speak, what would they say to the sick person?

**Raising Eutychus from the dead in Troas**

- Who is being lifted up, and how does their body look?

***Death and burial**

- Which people look sad or serious, and what might they be thinking?
- What could the earth, tomb, or place of burial stand for (rest, quiet, remembering)?
- If you look only at the people who are staying near Paul, what do they show about love?
- How do you think people will remember Paul after this moment?

**Central enthroned St Paul**

- What is Paul holding, and what might each object stand for (book, sword, scroll)?
- How do you know he is important in this picture?
- If the book could speak, what kind of words would be inside (kind, strong, brave)?
- What could the sword stand for besides fighting (truth, choices, strong words)?

**Predella with St Peter, St Agatha and St Catherine**

- Why do you think these three saints are painted under Paul's big picture?
- How can you tell these people are important in the big story?

**Madonna enthroned with angels on top**

- What makes this part of the picture feel 'above' or 'special'?
- What could the music or angels stand for (joy, heaven, celebration)?



**General Questions:**

- If this whole tower of pictures was one big story, what do you think it is trying to tell us about a person's life?
- Which panel makes you feel most uncomfortable or afraid? Why?
- Which part of the big picture feels most peaceful to you, and why?

## CONCLUSION

**My Life in Little Panels**

- Show the polyptych and ask: "If Paul's life is told in little paintings, how could we tell a gentle story about our own life?"

- Give each child **1.1 Conclusion Worksheet** and invite them to draw:
  - A moment that changed their life
  - A moment when they felt safe
  - A moment when they helped others
  - A memory of someone who is gone or who is far away

- Mount their panels around a simple central symbol (heart, tree, or light) to create a class P*olyptych of Our Stories*.

- Children share their panels with the class

## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Children who find symbolic questioning challenging can be provided with visual prompt cards showing simple symbols (e.g. light = change, water = new start, hands = helping) alongside each panel to scaffold their responses.

- Always adapt this to teacher's and students' needs.

# The Polyptych of Saint Paul



## The Polyptych of Saint Paul

This big artwork is called a polyptych, meaning many parts in one big painting.

In the middle, there is Saint Paul.

Around him there are smaller paintings showing important moments in his life.





# Conversion

Paul is travelling when a bright light and a voice from heaven make him fall and change the direction of his whole life.



# Baptism

Paul is gently washed with water to show his new beginning and his choice to follow a different path.









# Paul before King Agrippa and Festus

Paul bravely tells important leaders about what he believes, even though it might be dangerous.




# Shipwreck and departure from Malta

Paul and his friends survive a terrible storm at sea and leave the island to continue their journey.









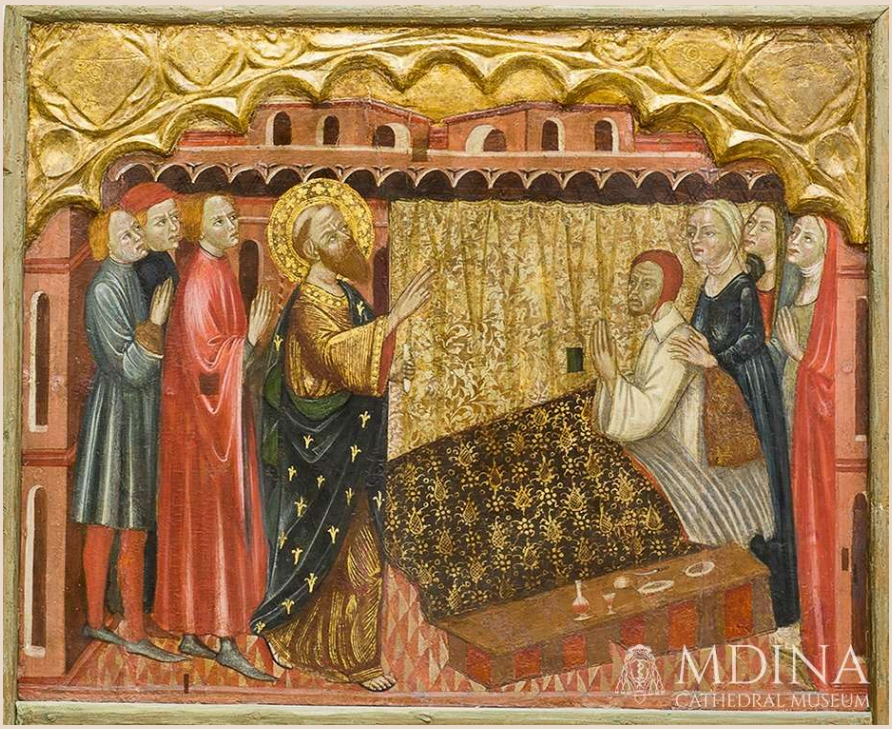




# Shaking the viper into the fire

A snake bites Paul but he throws it into the fire and stays safe, showing protection in scary moments.






# Healing the father of Publius

Paul gently cares for and heals a sick man, showing kindness and help for people who suffer.

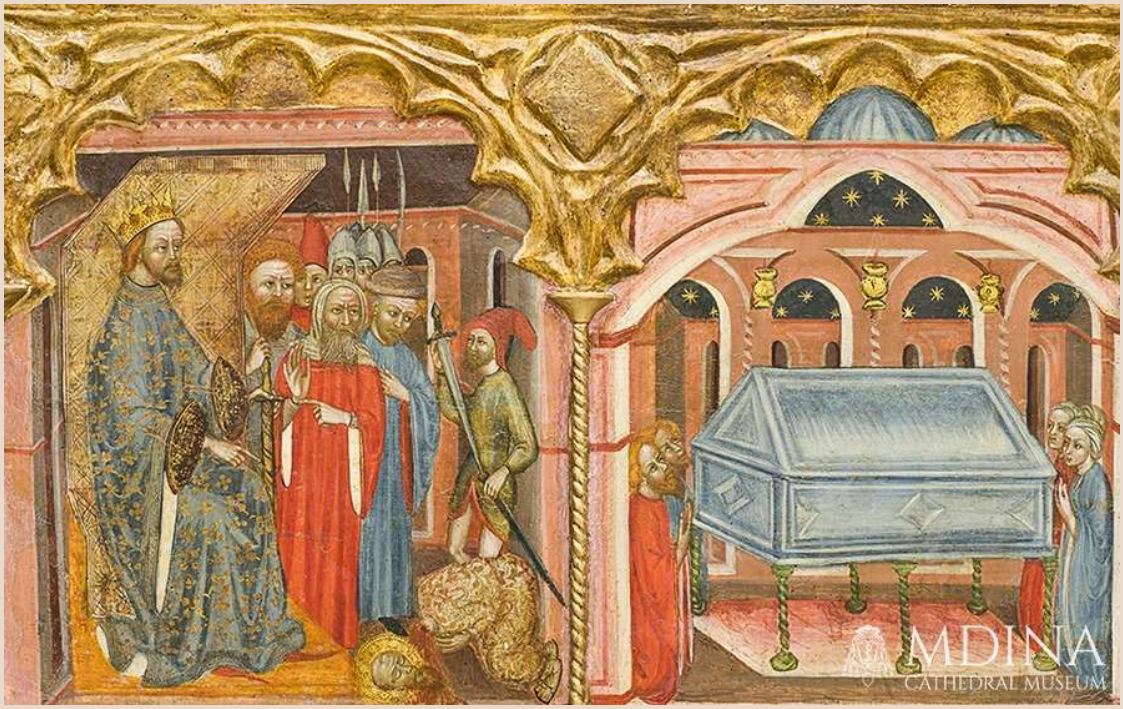






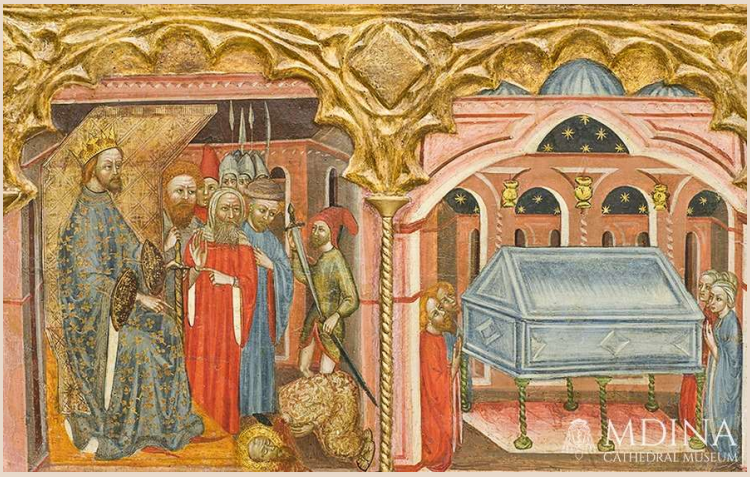
# Raising Eutychus from the dead in Troas

A young man falls and dies but is brought back to life, showing hope when something sad happens.




# Death and Burial

Paul is killed and lovingly buried, and people remember him as a friend of God whose story does not end with his death.







# Central enthroned St Paul

Paul sits in the middle holding a sword and book, showing that his words and choices are strong and important.



# Predella with St Peter, St Agatha, St Catherine



Other holy friends stand below, reminding us that Paul's life is part of a bigger family of helpers and examples.





# Madonna enthroned with angels on top

Mary with music-playing angels above shows a peaceful, heavenly space that holds Paul's whole life story in love.

Name: _____ Date: _____

# My Life in Little Panels

| | |
|---|---|
| From your own personal memory, draw a moment that changed your life: | Draw a memory of a moment when you felt safe: |
| Draw a memory of a moment when you helped others: | Draw a memory of someone who is gone or who is far away: |

# 1.2
# NANNA'S BONES OF REMEMBRANCE

**LESSON TITLE:** **Nanna's Bones of Remembrance**

NARRATIVE | ART-BASED | IMMEDIATE CULTURE

## RATIONALE

*L-għadam tal-mejtin*, which literally 'bones of the dead', are traditional Maltese bone-shaped pastries made for All Souls' Day (2nd November). They are also known as November Bones, and are made of shortcrust pastry with a pure almond paste filling, and coated with white icing and flaked almonds. The tradition is rooted in Christianity and was originally created to honour departed family members. They share the same recipe as the Maltese Easter figolli, differing only in their bone shape. L-għadam tal-mejtin are still offered to students in schools today, and are found in groceries and confectionaries across Malta and Gozo between October and November.

November is known in Maltese as ix-xahar tal-mejtin ('Month of the Dead'), a time when the living reflect on those who have passed and offer them prayers of peace. L-Għid tal-Imwiet, also referred to as L-Għid tal-Erwieħ, the Feast of the Dead or the Feast of All Souls, is a significant communal celebration in Malta dedicated to remembering the departed through food, storytelling, prayer, and charity. Traditions include cleaning and decorating graves with flowers and candles, communal meals, and reflecting on the lives of loved ones.

This learning opportunity uses narrative pedagogy. The story *Nanna's Bones of Remembrance* is written in an age-appropriate, gentle tone that introduces *L-Għid tal-Imwiet* and old All Souls' Day customs through the eyes of a child named Emma, set in Żejtun. Students hearing this story would benefit from understanding the symbolism in November bones,rather than encountering them only as seasonal sweets.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Listen** to the story *Nanna's Bread of Remembrance* and **identify** key Maltese traditions around remembering loved ones who have died (*L-għadam tal-mejtin*, visiting the cemetery, storytelling, and L-*Għid tal-Imwiet*).
- **Discuss** how families keep the memory of loved ones alive through stories, food, and rituals.
- **Identify** symbols of love, memory, and connection in the story.
- **Decorate** an għadma tal-mejtin as an art-based remembrance activity.



## INTRODUCTION

- Ask: "Has anyone ever smelled something delicious baking at home? Today we're going to hear a story about a girl called Emma who helps her Nanna bake something very special."

- The teacher tells the story *Nanna's Bread of Remembrance* to the children.

## ACTIVITY

- The teacher tells or reads the story below aloud, pausing at key moments for discussion.

## DISCUSSION QUESTION EXEMPLARS

- What did Emma think when she first heard the name 'bones of the dead'?
- Have you ever seen għadam tal-mejtin in a shop or at school?
- Emma says they are 'keeping their stories alive.' What do you think she means by that?
- Does your family do anything to remember people who have passed away?
- How do Emma and Nanna show their love for family members who have died?
- Can you think of other ways people remember someone they love who is not here anymore?
- If you could leave a little gift or message for someone you remember, what would it be?



## STORY: NANNA'S BONES OF REMEMBRANCE

It was a cool autumn morning in Żejtun, and Emma could smell something sweet baking in the kitchen. The scent of almonds, and sweet pastry filled the house.

"Nanna, what are you making?" Emma asked, peeking over the table.

Nanna smiled. "It's għadam tal-mejtin dear. 'Bones of the dead.' It's a special sweet we bake for All Souls' Day to remember our loved ones who have died."

Emma wrinkled her nose. "But that sounds spooky!"

Nanna chuckled softly. "It only sounds that way. These bones aren't scary at all. They help us remember the people we love. Would you like to help me bake them?"

Emma nodded eagerly and rolled out the dough beside her grandmother. As they worked, Nanna talked about how she usually spends All Souls' Day.

"On All Souls' Day, I visit the cemetery" Nanna said. "I clean my family's gravestones, put flowers, and light a candle. Then I pray. When I was little we also told stories about our family such as about how kind your great-grandfather was, and how your great-aunt loved to sing."

Emma listened carefully as she shaped her biscuit like a little bone. "So it's like we're keeping their stories alive," she said.

“That’s right,” Nanna said. “L-Għid tal-Imwiet, the Feast of the Dead, is another way we showed love. We bake these bones to remind us that love continues even when someone passes away.”

Emma thought for a moment. “So even though they’re not here, they’re still part of us.”
Nanna smiled and touched Emma’s cheek. “Exactly. Every time we share a story or bake these sweets, it’s like saying, Niftakru fikom, which means we remember you.”

Later that day, Emma wrapped a few biscuits in a napkin and placed them by a photo of her late grandpa. “These are for you, Nannu,” she whispered. “I still remember your jokes.”

- The candle flickered gently, and Emma felt warm inside. It felt like her grandpa was smiling right back.



## CONCLUSION

**Decorate Your Own *Għadma Tal-Mejtin***

- Provide children with **1.2 Conclusion Worksheet**. Children are invited to decorate their own għadma tal-mejtin using colours, patterns, and symbols.
- Explains that as they decorate they can think of someone they love. They can be here with them, far away, or someone they remember.
- Once finished, children share their decorated għadma with the class and, if comfortable, share who they were thinking of while they decorated.

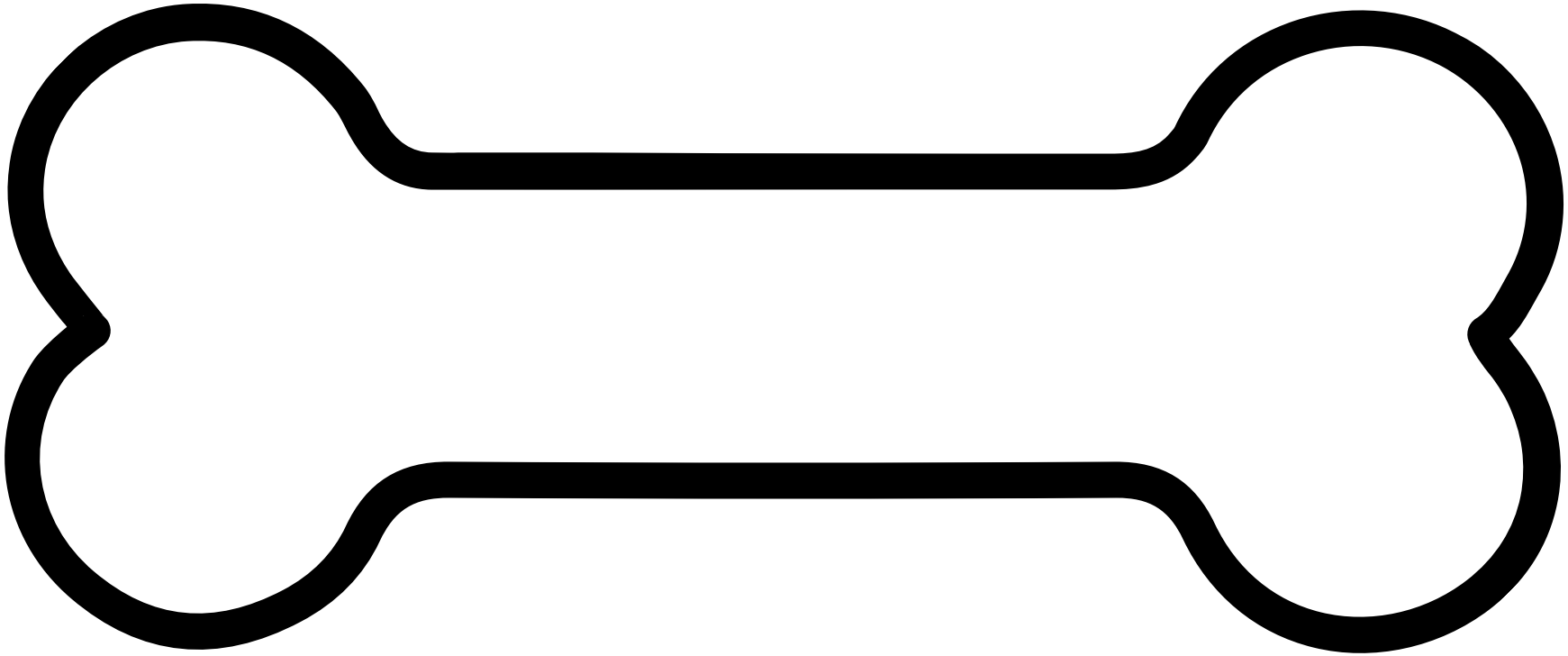
## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Children can also be prompted to write a short message to, or name of a person they are thinking of while they decorate.
- Instead of a colouring page, children can decorate real biscuits (bone-shaped shortcrust biscuits provided by the teacher or school) with icing, almond flakes and sprinkles, to make the activity a multisensory experience.
- A home-school connection can be encouraged by inviting children to ask a family member about a remembrance tradition or story and share it with the class in a follow-up session.



Name: _____ Date: _____

## Decorate your own Bone of the Dead



# 1.3
# THE CANDLES OF REMEMBRANCE

LESSON TITLE: **The Candle of Remembrance**



RITUAL-BASED

IMMEDIATE CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This activity is a child-friendly, sensitive, and meaningful extension designed to follow the narrative *Nanna's Bones of Remembrance*. It invites 7-year-olds to reflect symbolically and gently on remembrance, connection, and love through imagination, story, and simple ritual actions.

Furthermore, this learning opportunity allows learners to engage emotionally, culturally, and spiritually with Maltese traditions surrounding remembrance and All Souls' Day (*L-Għid tal-Imwiet*), connecting family customs, sweets, and cemetery visits to a simple, shared ritual in the classroom.

Symbolically, the candle represents the ongoing light of love and memory, while the personal item (photo, santa, or object) embodies continuity and shared story. These tangible elements act as accessible signifiers that help children bridge the abstract idea of remembering the dead with familiar concrete objects.

Pedagogically, the session recognises that spiritual and emotional learning at this age is best fostered through sensory, embodied, and communal experiences: sitting in a circle, seeing light, touching an object, and speaking short, meaningful sentences in a safe, warm atmosphere.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Discuss** death as a natural part of life.
- **Recognise** that love and connection can conh memory, story and simple ritual actions.
- **Experience** remembrance safely in a guided ritual.
- **Use concrete symbols** (candle, photo, santa or object) to represent abstract ideas such as ongoing love, spiritual presence, and intergenerational bonds within Maltese traditions of All Souls' Day and *L-Għid tal-Imwiet*.
- **Show sensitivity and respect** when listening to classmates' sharings during the circle, recognising that others also have people or pets they remember.

## MATERIALS

- A big battery tea-light candle
- A small table or cloth
- Children's santa, photo, or simple drawing of someone or a pet the students' family has lost (or someone far away, if preferred)
- **Optional:** A small basket of *għadam tal-mejtin* biscuits (to connect with Emma's story) and soft instrumental music

## INTRODUCTION

- Set a calm atmosphere by inviting children to sit in a circle.
- Place the switched off candle on the small table or cloth in the centre.
- Explain the remembrance circle.
- Take a few slow, deep breaths together.
- Dim the lights slightly or play soft music to create a peaceful space.

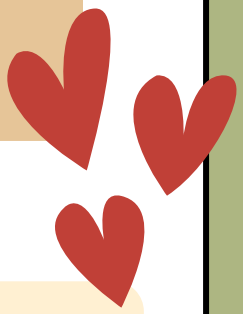
## ACTIVITY

- Explain how the candle is a symbol of remembrance.
- Briefly connect to the story *Nanna's Bones of Remembrance*.
- Switch the candle on.
- Invite children, one by one, to place their photo, santa or drawing around the candle and say a few words. Discussion questions can be: "Who is your light for?" and "What is something kind or loving that you remember about this person or pet?"
- Children who do not want to speak can simply place their item and sit back down. Their silence is respected as another way of remembering.

## CONCLUSION

- When everyone who wished to share has had a chance, invite the class to look quietly at the circle of the candle surrounded by photos and objects.
- Offer a closing reflection.

> "Love never disappears. It stays with us in our hearts, in light, and in stories. When we remember, it is like saying 'thank you' for the time we had together."



## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Children who are uncomfortable talking about death can be invited to remember someone far away (e.g. a relative abroad) or a loved pet instead.

- For children who do not bring a photo or santa, the teacher can offer a quick drawing option at the start.

## DRAFT PARENT LETTER: 'THE CANDLE OF REMEMBRANCE'

Dear Parents and Guardians,

As part of our ongoing [insert subject] and cultural learning programme, our class will soon take part in a short, reflective story-based roleplay called 'The Candle of Remembrance.' This activity is a follow-up to 'Nanna's Bones of Remembrance,' which introduced children to Maltese traditions surrounding *L-Għid tal-Imwiet* (All Souls' Day) in an age-appropriate way. Through this new session, we will explore how remembrance can be expressed through light, story, and love.

The activity will take place in a calm, supportive atmosphere. We will sit together in a circle, light a battery-operated candle, and invite children to share a short remembrance phrase or simply place a small item (such as a printed photo, a santa, or a simple drawing) near the candle. Some children may choose to remember a relative, a pet, or someone they simply miss. Participation in speaking is entirely optional, and quiet reflection is equally respected.

This session promotes key aspects of children's emotional and spiritual education, including understanding that love and connection continue through memory and story, expressing feelings of gratitude and remembrance, experiencing Maltese cultural traditions, and developing empathy and emotional literacy.

We encourage each child to bring one small photo, santa, or simple drawing to place near the candle during the session. If your child prefers not to bring anything, that is completely fine as we will have drawing materials available in class.

Should you have any concerns or wish to discuss your child's participation, please feel free to contact me before the session.

With warm regards,
[insert name]
[insert subject] teacher

# 1.4
# SYMBOLS OF LOVE, HOPE AND MEMORY: ADDOLORATA CEMETERY TREASURE HUNT

LESSON TITLE: **Symbols of Love, Hope and Memory**
***Addolorata Cemetery Treasure Hunt***

CLASS WITHOUT WALLS | IMMEDIATE CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This lesson uses the *class without walls* modality to support children's emerging understanding of death and remembrance by situating learning in the natural, peaceful environment of Addolorata Cemetery. This cemetery is Malta's largest burial ground and was built around the neo-Gothic Chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows. Walking among trees, flowers, birds, and graves allows children to experience how life and death coexist: plants grow around gravestones, families visit, light candles, and place flowers, showing that love and memory continue even after someone has died.

A teacher-led treasure hunt turns the visit into a guided symbol-detective walk, helping children notice key features such as statues of Mary, crosses, angels, cypress trees, chapels, family graves, and flowers. Through short questions at each treasure, children practise looking closely, and beginning to guess what these symbols might mean in terms of love, hope, and memory.

From a death education perspective, the visit and treasure hunt together aim to normalise cemeteries as places of peace, respect, and love rather than fear.

The experience is designed to offer simple, sensory-based learning (seeing, hearing, walking, noticing) through the treasure hunt that supports reflection without focusing on personal loss unless children choose to share.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Discuss** how death as a natural part of life.
- **Recognise** cemeteries as places where people show love and respect for those who have died.
- **Notice** and **describe** simple remembrance rituals (visiting graves, placing flowers, lighting candles).
- **Recognise** how nature in the cemetery symbolically shows that life continues and changes.
- **Identify** and **talk** about common symbols in cemeteries.



## INTRODUCTION

- Ask children: What is this place? How do you know? Have you been to this place? Does this place mean anything to you? What do you see? How do you feel here?
- Explain the rules for the treasure hunt, such as walking together as a group, and speaking softly for respect.

## ACTIVITY

- Give a copy of **1.4 Treasure Hunt Worksheet** to each student.
- Explain to the children that the treasure hunt is a walk through the cemetery where they will act as symbol detectives.Their job is to find each ‘treasure’ (a symbol or feature of the cemetery).
- Walk together as a group from one treasure to the next. At each stop, give children a moment to observe quietly before inviting them to share what they notice.
- Encourage the use of all senses: ask children to listen to the sounds around them (birds, wind, quiet), feel the texture of tree bark or stone, and smell the flowers, as well as using their eyes to find the treasures.
- Remind children that this is a peaceful place where people come to remember those they love.Model quiet, respectful behaviour throughout.
- At certain points during the walk (see notes in the Treasure Hunt Answers section below), pause to tell a short story connected to the treasure. Stories help children understand that every gravestone is the story of a real person and the people who loved them, building their sense of wonder and empathy.
- After each story or observation, gently prompt children’s curiosity with open questions such as:”I wonder who this person might have been?” or “What do you think the people who loved them wanted to remember?”
- If a child spontaneously shares a personal memory or experience of loss, acknowledge it warmly and briefly, then gently return the group’s focus to the treasure hunt.

## TREASURE HUNT ANSWERS & KEY DEATH EDUCATION POINTS

**TREASURE 1: Cypress tree**

- Evergreen trees symbolise that something can continue even through changes and endings, helping children connect the idea of ongoing love and memory with a living, growing plant.

**Story to tell here:**

"Look at this tall, thin tree reaching up towards the sky. This is called a cypress tree. Can you see how it points straight up, almost like an arrow pointing to heaven? People have been planting cypress trees in cemeteries for thousands of years, ever since the ancient Greeks and Romans, because it stays green all year round even in winter, when other trees lose their leaves. It never seems to die. That is why people chose it for a cemetery. It reminds us that love and memory stay alive, even after someone has gone.

There is also a beautiful old myth about how the cypress tree got its name. Long, long ago, the Greeks told the tale of a young boy called Cyparissus who had a deer with magnificent antlers. He loved that deer more than anything in the world. But one terrible day, he accidentally hurt the deer with a spear, and the deer died. Cyparissus was so heartbroken that he wept and wept and said he wanted to grieve forever. The gods felt so sorry for him that they turned him into a cypress tree, so that his tears (the drops of sap you can sometimes see on the trunk) would fall forever. From that day on, the cypress has been a tree of sadness, but also of love that never ends."

**TREASURE 2: Our Lady of Sorrows (Addolorata)**

- Mary is shown as a mother who feels sadness when someone suffers or dies, reminding children that when we are grieving we are not alone, because others (and for believers, God) understand and share our pain.

**TREASURE 3: The Cross**

- The cross teaches that death is part of a larger story that Christians see as including love, forgiveness, and new life, so death is not only a full stop but also a doorway into hope.

**TREASURE 4: The Angel**

- Angels are shown as helpers or guardians, supporting the idea that the dead are not abandoned but lovingly cared for on a spiritual journey beyond this life.

**TREASURE 5: The Chapel**

- The tall, pointed chapel and towers draw eyes upward, gently inviting children to wonder about heaven, God, and the thought that life has a spiritual side that continues beyond what we can see.

**TREASURE 6: Family Grave**

- Graves with many names show children that families stay connected in story and memory, even when different generations have died.

**Story/"I wonder" moment to introduce here:**

**"**Look at this grave. You can see several names written on the stone. Different members of the same family were buried together across many years. Each name is a whole story of a person who was born, who had people who loved them, who did things in their life, and who is now remembered here.

Now look around at the other gravestones. Pick any one. I wonder... who might this person have been? What was their name? Did they have children or grandchildren? What did they love to do?

Every single stone here is a story, just like a book. The people who are buried here were real. They laughed, they worried, they celebrated birthdays, had favourite meals, and someone loved them enough to write their name in stone so they would never be forgotten."

**Optional extension: The Famous Grave**



If your route passes the grave of Joseph Calleia who was a boy from Malta who grew up to become a Hollywood actor, appearing in over 59 films, you can use it as a vivid example: "This man was born right here in Malta. He dreamed of performing, and one day he sailed far away to America and became a famous actor in Hollywood. He came back to Malta at the end of his life, and now he rests here. I wonder what he thought about on the boat to America? I wonder what he missed most about home?"

**<u>TREASURE 7:</u> Light: Candle or Lamp**

- A small flame or lamp stands for the light of love, prayer, and memory that keeps shining in people's hearts, even when the person they miss is no longer physically present.

**<u>TREASURE 8:</u> Flower**

- Flowers placed on graves show that love is still being offered and renewed, giving children a concrete image of how families keep saying 'you are important to us' long after someone has died.

## CONCLUSION

- Gather the students in a quiet spot and invite them to look again at the cemetery around them. Ask a few simple reflection questions such as what they noticed and which treasure stood out to them the most. *You can stop at the chapel esplanade at the top of the hill for this.*

- End with a brief moment of silence where children can think of someone or something they love, without needing to speak.




## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Reduce the number of treasures, and use more sensory prompts (touching bark, listening for birds, feeling the quiet).

- Emphasise that these are symbols from Maltese Christian culture, and that other cultures and religions remember loved ones in different ways, all showing respect and love.

- Invite children, if they wish, to share examples from their own family or tradition.

Name: _____ Date: _____

# Symbols of Love, Hope and Memory

## ADDOLORATA CEMETERY TREASURE HUNT



**RULES & INSTRUCTIONS:**

- We will walk together as one group.
- We will speak softly, walk slowly, and show respect.
- We are here to look, notice, and learn how people show love and hope when someone has died.
- Tell an adult if you feel unsure or sad.

**Treasure 1:**

I am a type of plant and I am very tall and thin. I stay green all year. I stand quietly beside the graves and along the paths. I remind people that love and life continue, even when someone has died.



Who am I?

_____

Why do you think I am pointing upwards?

_____

_____

**Treasure 2:**

I am a statue of a mother who looks sad and thoughtful. I remember the suffering of Jesus and all the pain people feel when they lose someone. People pray to me because they believe I understand their sadness and I care for the souls of the dead. I am a sign of compassion and comfort.

Who am I?

_____

Why do you think there are so many statues of me here?



_____

_____

**Treasure 3:**

I am a special shape you can see on many graves. I remind Christians that Jesus died and rose again. I am not only a sign of death, but also of hope and new life with God. I tell people that death is not the end of the story.




Who am I?

_____

What do you think I mean to the families who come here?

_____

_____

**Treasure 4:**

I am a stone figure with wings, sometimes crying, sometimes pointing to the sky. I watch over the graves and seem to guard the people who are buried here. I remind families that their loved ones are cared for and that their souls are on a journey to God. I am a symbol of protection and the soul's journey.



Who am I?

_____

What do you think I am doing? Am I praying, guarding, or pointing somewhere? What do you think I am trying to say?

_____

_____

**Treasure 5:**

I am a building in the middle of the cemetery. My roof and towers reach upwards, like hands stretching to the sky. People come here to pray and think about heaven and God. I remind everyone that this place is holy and that life also has a spiritual side.



Who am I?

_____

Stand still and look at my towers. Why do you think I was built so tall?

_____

_____

**Treasure 6:**

I am a special place where more than one person from the same family is buried. I sometimes have the word 'Family / Famiglia / Familja' written on me. I show that families stay together in memory, even when some members have died. I remind people that love can link generations.



Who am I?

_____

Read the names on me carefully. How many people are buried here? Can you guess how they might be related to each other?

_____

_____

**Treasure 7:**

I am small, but I shine brightly, especially in the dark. Families place me on graves to show their love and prayers. I remind people that hope and memory are like a light that does not completely go out. I am a symbol of warmth, prayer, and remembrance.



Who am I?

_____

Why do you think someone came here and lit me?

_____

_____

**Treasure 8:**

I am soft and colourful, and I can be real or made of plastic. Families place me gently on graves or in vases to show care. I remind people of beauty, love, and thankfulness for the person who has died, and I am a sign that someone has been remembered and visited.



Who am I?

_____

Look at the colours around you. If you wanted to leave these for someone you love, what colour would you choose and why?

_____

_____

# 2. NEIGHBOURING CULTURE

# 2.1
# VANITAS STILL LIFES

LESSON TITLE: **Vanitas Still Lifes**



ART-BASED

NEIGHBOURING CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This lesson uses an art-based approach at the neighbouring culture level, drawing on Vanitas still lifes from nearby European countries to explore how artists speak gently about life, time, and death using everyday objects. By moving from concrete noticing of objects to personal connections and then to gentle existential questions, children develop symbol literacy and learn that one object can carry many possible meanings without there being a single right answer.

The cultural distance is close enough to be recognisable yet not as emotionally charged as immediate family or national rituals, offering a safe middle space for reflection. Through creating their own small still life, students can express feelings and memories in a creative way, modelling how neighbouring cultural artefacts can open age-appropriate conversations about the human life cycle, impermanence, and remembrance.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Analyse** neighbouring culture art, noticing how artists talk about life, time, and death using everyday objects.
- **Read** symbols in the artwork.
- **Explain** in simple language how their chosen objects can stand as symbols for parts of the human life cycle, change, or remembrance.
- **Create** a personal still life.

## INTRODUCTION

- Children either observe the artwork through the **2.1 Presentation** of the vanitas still lifes.
- The session begins with a short silent gaze. Children are invited to notice colours, shapes, and objects on the table.
- Explain to students that in some countries near Malta, artists painted Vanitas still lifes (tables full of objects) to send gentle messages about life, time, and remembering. Show the Mediteranean map.

## TIP FOR EDUCATORS



Use language such as “Some people also say it could mean…” instead of “It means…”, to keep symbol reading open.

## TEACHER BACKGROUND NOTES

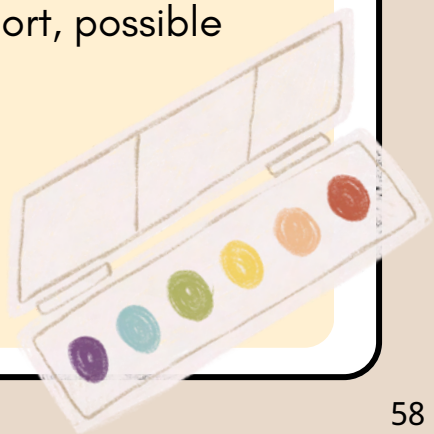
Vanitas still lifes were especially popular in Europe from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Artists used ordinary objects such as flowers, skulls, candles, books, watches, fruit, shells, insects, and bubbles to remind viewers that life is beautiful but temporary.

Teachers do not need to present one fixed interpretation. It is enough to explain that these objects often carry possible meanings, and that children may notice more than one idea in the same image.

In the Maltese context, symbols such as skulls and hourglasses may also be familiar from tombstones and church monuments, especially older ones such as those in St John's CoCathedral and in village cemeteries. This can help children connect the paintings to symbols they may already have seen in local visual culture.

## ACTIVITY

- Children first notice and describe what they see in each Vanitas still life.
- With each painting, questions move from concrete to personal/experiential to gentle existential/spiritual.
- After children share their observations, offer short, possible meanings.



## QUESTION EXEMPLARS

**Painting 1: Philippe de Champaigne – Life, Death, and Time**

Philippe de Champaigne was a seventeenth-century painter working in France. In this painting, he places only three objects together (a flower, a skull, and an hourglass) to create a very clear message about beauty, mortality, and passing time.

***Main symbols and possible meanings***

- **Flower or tulip:** beauty, life, growth, and the fact that living things fade.
- **Skull**: mortality, shared human destiny, remembrance of death.
- **Hourglass**: time passing, life moving forward, the preciousness of each moment.

**Flower**

- Why do you think the flower is there?
- What happens to flowers over time? What about fruit in a bowl at home?
- The artist used flowers and fruit as symbols to say that Life changes and nothing stays exactly the same forever. How does that idea feel inside you?

**Skull**

- Can you find anything that looks hard like bone or stone? What do you think this object is?
- Where have you seen something like this before (books, films, Halloween decorations, churches, museums)?
- Why do you think the artist chose to paint this, instead of another object?
- What does a skull usually make people think about?
- The artist added a skull as a symbol to say that all people are human, and nobody lives forever. How does that sentence feel to you?

**Clock or hourglass**

- Where do you see time in this picture – a watch, a clock, sand in glass?
- What do clocks or hourglasses do all day?
- They remind us that time keeps moving. Some people think the artist used them as a symbol to say: "Our time is precious." What is one time in your life that feels precious to you?

## Painting 2: Jan van Kessel the Elder – Vanitas Still Life

Jan van Kessel the Elder was a Flemish painter from the seventeenth century. He was known for detailed paintings of flowers, insects, shells, and small natural objects.In his Vanitas paintings, these beautiful details are not just decorative. They also suggest ideas about change, fragility, wonder, and the shortness of life.



***Main symbols and possible meanings***

- **Butterflies**: transformation, change, the soul, new life.
- **Bubbles**: fragility, short-lived beauty, moments that disappear quickly.
- **Flowers**: beauty and life, but also fading and impermanence.
- **Shells or precious objects:** rarity, wealth, curiosity, and the passing value of worldly possessions.
- **Insects**: decay, movement, life cycles, and the small details of nature.

**General noticing**

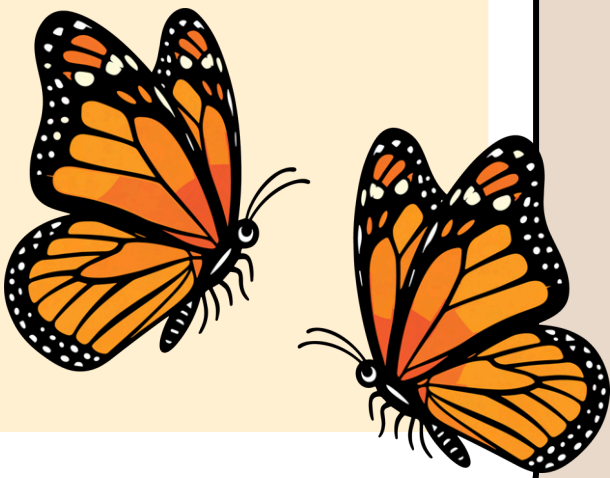
- What objects can you see here that were not in the first painting?

**Butterflies**

- Can you find any butterflies in the painting? Where are they resting or flying?

- Have you ever watched a caterpillar become a butterfly? What changes did you notice?

- In these old paintings, some people said butterflies stand for the soul or for transformation. Something small and crawling becomes light and able to rise. How does that picture make you feel about life after death?



**Bubbles**

- Do you notice any bubbles or shiny round shapes in the air or on the table?
- What happens to soap bubbles when you blow them? How long do they last?
- Some people long ago said bubbles are like human life and happy moments: bright, beautiful, and gone quickly. Does that remind you of any special moment in your own life that felt fast but important?

## CONCLUSION

**Still Life of my Life**

- Hand out the **2.1 Symbols & Meaning Chart** and the **2.1 Conclusion** to each child. Invite students to decorate their own life flower and then add symbols around it that represent their memories, feelings, values, or important moments. Encourage children to choose at least two symbols from the support sheet and explain what these symbols mean to them.



## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Pre-teach key words (symbol, skull, still life, remembering, time) using real objects or photos before showing the paintings.
- Place real or replica objects (flower, fruit, candle, clock, book) on a table so children can touch/see them before or during the art discussion.

# Vanitas Still Lifes



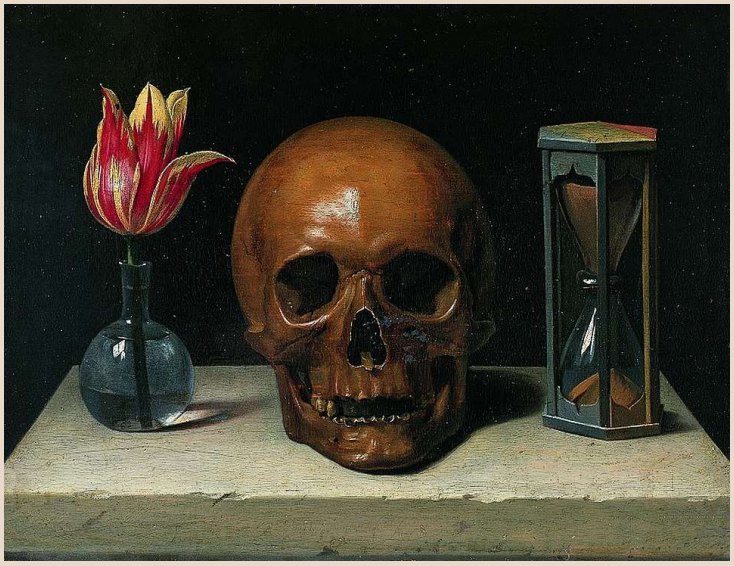

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EUROPE
Atlantic Ocean
France
Slovenia
Croatia
Bosnia & Herzegovina
Monaco
Ligurian Sea
Italy
Adriatic Sea
Montenegro
Albania
Black Sea
Bosporus Strait
Sea of Marmara
Corsica
Balearic Sea
Spain
Tyrrhenian Sea
Greece
Aegean Sea
Dardanelles Strait
ASIA
Strait of Gibraltar
Balearic Islands
Sardinia
Ionian Sea
Turkey
Syria
Sicily
Malta
Sea of Crete
Cyprus
Alboran Sea
Algeria
Crete
Mediterranean Sea
Lebanon
Israel
Morocco
AFRICA
Tunisia
Libya
300 mi
300 km
Suez Canal
Egypt
Countries that border the Mediterranean Sea







**What objects can you see?**







**What objects can you see which were not in the previous painting?**

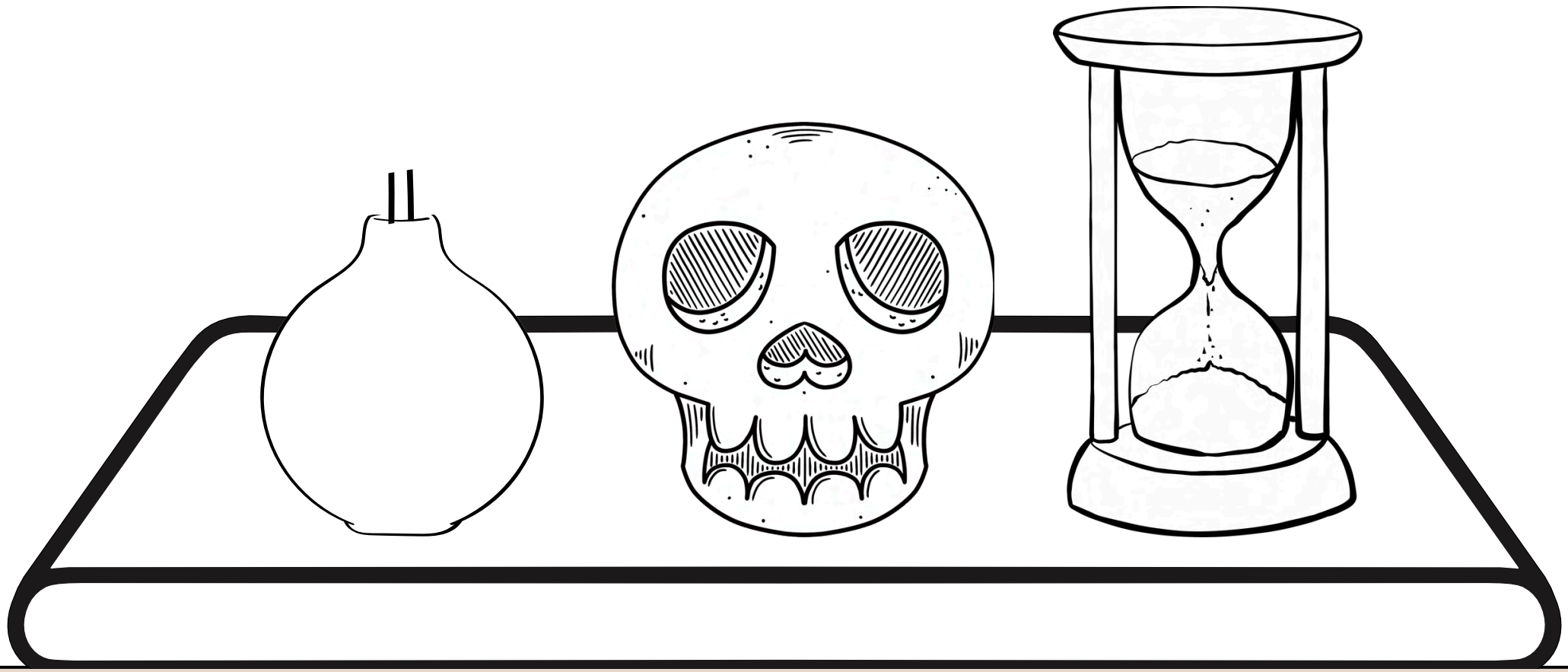


# Symbols & Meanings

| Symbol | What it could mean |
|---|---|
| Flower | Life, beauty, growing, fading |
| Skull | Death, memory, all people are human |
| Hourglass | Time passing, each moment matters |
| Butterfly | Change, transformation, new life |
| Bubble | A beautiful momentthat does notlastlong |
| Shell | Treasure, beauty, things we collect |
| Candle | Light, life, a flame that can go out |

Name: _____ Date: _____

## Decorate your own life flower



# 2.2
# THE JOURNEY TO THE HALL OF OSIRIS

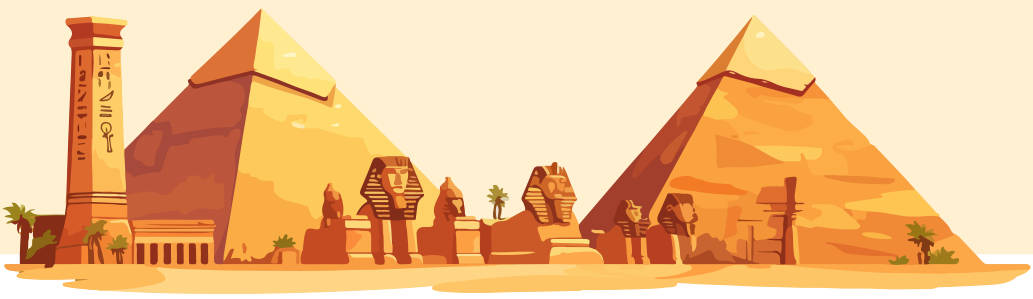
**LESSON TITLE:** **The Journey to the Hall of Osiris**

NARRATIVE | ART-BASED | NEIGHBOURING CULTURE

## RATIONALE

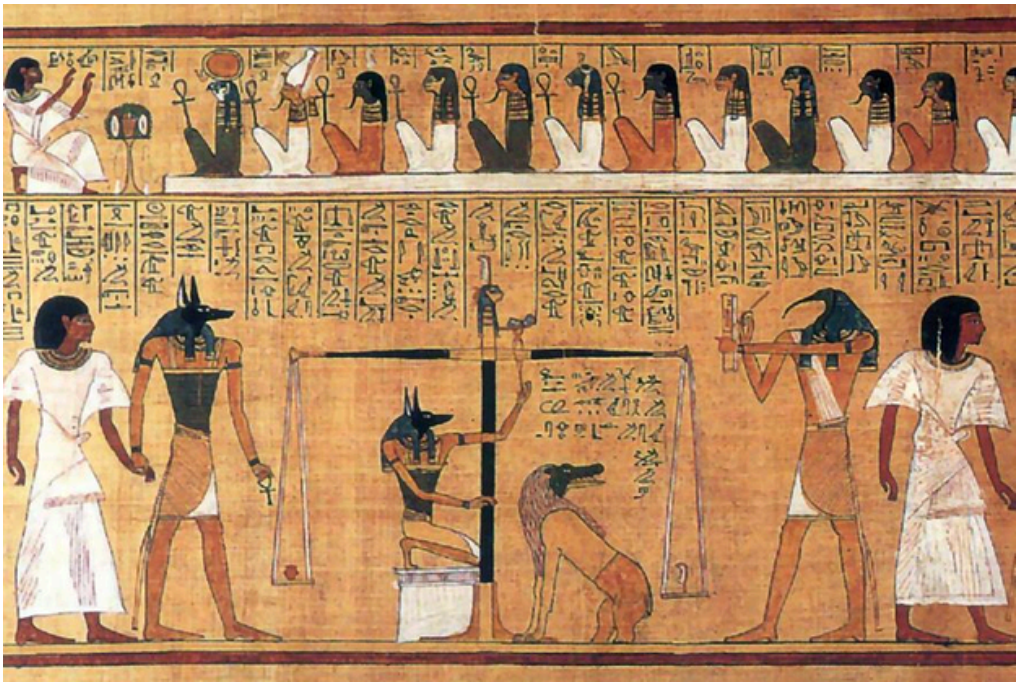
The ancient Egyptians held one of the most detailed and morally rich visions of the afterlife in world history. Central to their belief system was the concept of *Ma'at*, a goddess and principle representing truth, justice, and cosmic order. When a person died, their soul was believed to travel through the Duat (the underworld) to the Hall of Osiris, also known as the Hall of Two Truths, where their heart was weighed on a golden scale against the white feather of Ma'at. If the heart balanced with the feather, signifying a life lived with kindness and honesty, the soul was welcomed into the *Field of Reeds* (Aaru), an afterlife imagined as a perfected, eternal reflection of life along the Nile, with abundant crops, rivers, fishing, and reunion with loved ones. The weighing of the heart was so central to Egyptian culture that it was immortalised in the *Book of the Dead*, one of ancient Egypt's most enduring texts.

This learning opportunity uses narrative pedagogy through a story told by a grandfather to introduce children to an ancient cultural perspective on death, moral living, and the afterlife. The character of Khepri, a boy the same age as the learners, serves as a relatable figure through whom children can explore questions of kindness, truth, and what gives a life meaning. The worksheet conclusion invites children to reflect on what makes a heart light, anchoring abstract ideas in their own moral experience through an art-based, symbol-rich activity.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Listen** to *The Journey to the Hall of Osiris* and **identify** key beliefs from ancient Egyptian culture about the afterlife, including the weighing of the heart, the role of Ma'at, Osiris, and the Field of Reeds.
- **Discuss** what it means to live with kindness and truth, connecting the story's values to their own daily actions.
- **Identify** symbols in the story (the feather, the scale, the golden hall, the Field of Reeds).
- **Describe** what makes the heart feel lighter using words or pictures.



## INTRODUCTION

- Begin by showing children a real feather and a small scale (or images of them) to pique curiosity before the story begins.

- Ask the class: "Why do you think I am showing you these objects? Can a heart be lighter than a feather? The feather and a scale remind me of a story ..."

## ACTIVITY

- Tell the story *The Journey to the Hall of Osiris* to the children.

## DISCUSSION QUESTION EXEMPLARS

- What did Khepri do during his life that made the gods smile?
- What do you think a heavy heart feels like?
- The feather of Ma'at stands for truth. What does it mean to tell the truth, even when it's hard?
- Khepri shared his figs and helped his neighbours. Can you think of a time you did something kind like that?
- The Field of Reeds is described as a place of peace and joy. If you could imagine a perfect, happy place, what would it look like?



## STORY: THE JOURNEY TO THE HALL OF OSIRIS

"Come here, little one," said Grandpa, patting the cushion beside him. "Tonight, I'll tell you a story from the ancient land of Egypt. A story about courage, kindness, and the journey every heart takes when its time comes."

The boy's eyes widened, and he leaned closer.

"Long ago, the people of Egypt believed that when a good person left this world, their soul sailed across the night to a grand and golden place named the Hall of Osiris. Osiris was a wise and gentle god who welcomed the souls of those who had lived kindly and truthfully."

"Now, there was once a boy named Khepri, just about your age. He had a big heart and a bright smile. He helped his neighbours carry jars of water, shared his figs, and always told the truth, even when it was hard."

Grandpa's voice softened to a whisper.
"One day, when Khepri closed his eyes for the last time, he awoke in a boat made of stars. The river beneath him shimmered with silver light. And beside him was the goddess Ma'at, whose feather stood for truth. She said, 'Come, Khepri. It is time for your heart to be weighed.'"

The boy gasped. "Weighed? Like on a scale?"
"Yes," chuckled Grandpa. "But not for how heavy it is, but for how kind it is."

They reached the Hall of Osiris, where golden pillars gleamed. Osiris stood tall, his face calm and bright. Around him stood the Forty-Two Judges, which were guardians of goodness and justice.

Ma'at placed her white feather on one side of a great scale. Then Osiris nodded. "Khepri," he said kindly, "place your heart upon the other." Khepri took a deep breath and did as he was told. The hall grew still.

The scale balanced perfectly. Osiris smiled. "Your heart is light, Khepri, for you have lived with kindness and truth. Go now, to the Field of Reeds, where peace and joy live forever."



"And so," Grandpa said softly, "Khepri stepped through golden gates into a fertile landscape with vast fields of crops, fishing, and boating.

The boy rested his head on Grandpa's knee. "Grandpa, do you think my heart would be light too?"
Grandpa stroked his hair. "Oh, my dear, a heart that tries to be kind and honest like yours is the lightest kind of all."

## CONCLUSION

- Provide children with a copy of **2.1 Conclusion**.

- Chidren use **black or grey colours** to draw or write inside the first heart: actions, feelings or choices that weigh a heart down. They then use **light blue or other light colours** inside the second heart: acts of kindness, honesty, and care that keep a heart pure.

- Once finished, children share their worksheets with the class and, if comfortable, explain one thing they wrote or drew.



## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Children who find writing challenging may dictate their responses to the teacher or a partner, or respond entirely through drawing.

- The worksheet can be extended by asking children to write one small act of kindness they will try this week, turning the activity into a personal intention.

- You may introduce other cultural afterlife beliefs (e.g., Valhalla, the Christian Heaven) and invite children to notice what these stories have in common.

Name: _____ Date: _____

# The Heavy and Light Heart

| In black or gray draw or write what makes a heart heavy and ugly | In light blue draw or write what makes a heart light |
| --- | --- |
| | |

# 2.3
# AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN GOODBYE CEREMONY

LESSON TITLE: **An Ancient Egyptian Goodbye Ceremony**

RITUAL-BASED NEIGHBOURING CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This activity is a child-friendly, sensitive, and meaningful way to introduce 7-year-olds to how Ancient Egyptians showed respect for someone who had died. It invites learners to explore death, remembrance, and care through story, symbol, video, and simple role-play actions.

The lesson allows pupils to engage emotionally, culturally, and spiritually with ideas about farewell rituals in Ancient Egypt, while keeping the focus on love, respect, and symbolic meaning. The class video provides a visual introduction to Ancient Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife, while the role-play helps children embody the ideas through movement, cloth, procession, and offerings.

Symbolically, the cloth represents care and protection, the procession represents a journey, and the offerings represent ongoing memory and love. These concrete symbols help young children bridge the abstract idea of death with familiar, safe, and meaningful classroom experiences.

Pedagogically, the session recognises that spiritual and ethical learning at this age is best supported through sensory, embodied, and communal experiences: watching a short video, sitting in a circle, handling symbols, and speaking short, respectful phrases in a calm atmosphere.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Explain** how Ancient Egyptians had special rituals for someone who had died.
- **Discuss** how rituals can show care, respect, and love.
- **Experience** a guided classroom role-play safely and respectfully.
- **Use concrete symbols** such as cloth, procession, and offerings to represent abstract ideas like journey, protection, and remembrance.
- **Show sensitivity and respect** when listening to classmates' contributions during the circle.

## MATERIALS

- The video about Ancient Egypt and the afterlife.
- A battery tea-light candle or small symbolic light, if desired.
- A small table, mat, or cloth.
- A soft toy, pillow, or small box to represent the person in the role-play.
- Cloth strips, scarves, or paper bands for wrapping.
- Paper, crayons, or coloured pencils for offerings.
- A sign or card for the 'tomb' area.

## INTRODUCTION

- Set a calm atmosphere by inviting children to sit in a circle.
- Show the short video attached. You may wish to skip to the latter half of the video, which focuses more directly on burial rituals and symbols.
- Take a few slow breaths together, and remind the class that the lesson will be gentle, respectful, and imaginary.
- Explain that they will not be seeing anything scary or graphic, only learning about symbols and rituals.

## ACTIVITY

Explain that the cloth is a symbol of care and protection, the walking line is a symbol of a journey, and the paper offerings are symbols of love and remembrance. Invite children to take part in a simple role-play:

**Step 1: Introducing the soft toy (affective connection):**
Before moving to wrap the soft toy, take a moment to introduce it to the class. Hold it gently and invite children to look at it carefully. You might say:

*"This is [name]. They were someone very special. They loved [flowers / playing / being with their family]. How do you think the people who loved them felt when it was time to say goodbye?"*

Give children a moment to respond quietly or simply to look and feel. Invite them to gently touch the soft toy if they wish. This affective step is important: it helps children empathise with the person being remembered and connect at an emotional level before the symbolic ritual begins



**Step 2: Role-play**

- One group gently “wraps” the soft toy or box in cloth.
- One group leads a slow procession to the “tomb” area.
- One group creates drawings of symbolic gifts such as bread, flowers, toys, or light.

As the procession moves, children can say short phrases such as:

- “We care for you.”
- “We walk with you.”
- “We remember you.”
- “We give you this gift for your journey.”

Children who do not want to speak can still join by placing their offering or watching quietly. Silence is respected as another form of participation.



## CONCLUSION

- When everyone has had a chance to participate, invite the class to look quietly at the wrapped object, the tomb sign, and the offerings around it.
- Offer a closing reflection.

> "People in Ancient Egypt showed love through care, gifts, and a journey together. Today, we can also remember people with respect, stories, and symbols."



## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Children who do not wish to speak can simply place their drawing in the tomb area and sit back down.

- The teacher can adapt this ritual-based activity according to the teacher's and students' needs.

# 2.4
# ST AGATHA`S CATACOMBS AND MUSEUM ARTEFACT DETECTIVES

LESSON TITLE: ***St Agatha's Catacombs and Museum***
**Artefact Detectives**

CLASS WITHOUT WALLS

NEIGHBOURING CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This lesson uses the *class without walls* modality to support children's emerging understanding of death and remembrance by situating learning in the ancient, meaningful environment of St Agatha's Catacombs and Museum in Rabat. The catacombs are underground burial spaces used by early Christians, and the museum holds a collection of artefacts connected to Egyptian and Mediterranean funerary culture, including pottery, glass remains, statues, and other objects recovered from burial contexts. Moving through these spaces allows children to experience how people across the Mediterranean Sea honoured, remembered, and cared for those who had died by leaving objects, carving symbols, and creating special resting places as acts of love.

A teacher-led artefact detective activity turns the museum visit into a guided symbol-literacy walk, helping children notice key objects such as Egyptian pottery, glass vessels, amulets, statues, and tomb shapes. Through short questions at each artefact, children begin to understand what these objects might symbolise in terms of love, care, memory, and the journey after death.

From a death education perspective, the visit aims to normalise the idea that all cultures, including our Mediterranean neighbours in Ancient Egypt, Rome, and Greece, found meaningful and loving ways to say goodbye and to keep remembering those they loved. The experience is designed to offer simple, sensory-based learning (seeing, noticing shapes and colours, wondering, comparing) through the artefact detective activity that supports gentle reflection.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Give examples** of how people from ancient Mediterranean cultures showed love and respect for those who died through special objects and symbols.
- **Discuss** how catacombs and museum collections as places that preserve memories and stories of people who lived long ago.
- **Notice** and **describe** simple remembrance practices from ancient cultures.
- **Explain** how symbols (the amulet, the lamp, and the boat) were used across Mediterranean cultures to express hope, protection, and care for the dead.

## INTRODUCTION

*Note: The introduction may begin outdoors in the alley outside the catacombs, drawing on the children's immediate sensory environment to elicit prior knowledge*

- Begin by eliciting children's prior knowledge through open questions before entering. Ask: 'Have you ever been to a place like this before? What is this place? Even if you have never come here, what can you see around you outside? What do you notice?'

- Allow children to share their responses freely. In the discussion that follows, weave in that this is a very old underground place and a small museum in Rabat, where people from long ago kept special objects to remember and honour those who had died, and that many of these objects were made by people who lived across the Mediterranean Sea and were brought to Malta through travel.

- Once children have explored their prior knowledge and the discussion has brought in the relevant context, invite children to become artefact detectives. Share the rules for the visit: moving quietly, keeping hands at their sides near the artefacts, and using their senses carefully to observe.



## ACTIVITY

- Give a Artefact Detective Worksheet to each student.
- Students use their senses to observe, and complete three simple tasks for each artefact stop.



# ARTEFACT DETECTIVE ANSWERS & KEY DEATH EDUCATION POINTS

**ARTEFACT STOP 1: Egyptian Pottery or Glass Vessel**

- Objects from Egypt found at St Agatha's, such as pottery and glass remains recovered, were sometimes placed with the dead as gifts and signs of care. People believed that the objects a person loved or needed in life could travel with them beyond death, and so they were placed in the tomb as an act of generosity and love.

**ARTEFACT STOP 2: The Amulet**

- Small amulets, often shaped like animals, eyes, or protective figures and linked to Egyptian or Phoenician tradition, were placed in tombs or worn by the dead to protect them on their journey after life. Children can understand these as a kind of hug in object form, something given to say that they are not alone, and they are safe and cared for.

**ARTEFACT STOP 3: The Lamp or Oil Vessel**

- A small lamp or oil vessel found in burial contexts stands for the light that people offered to those who had died. Just as people today light a candle at a grave or in a church in memory of someone they love, people in ancient times placed lamps in tombs to say that there are not forgotten.

**ARTEFACT STOP 4: The Statue or Portrait Figure**

- Statues and portrait figures placed near burial spaces were a way of keeping the person present even after death. This connects directly to how children understand photographs kept in homes or rooms and is a way of saying that they are still here with us in our hearts and in our memory.





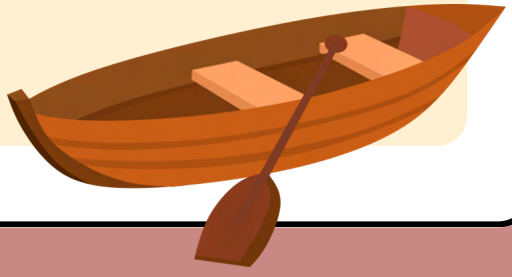

## ARTEFACT DETECTIVE ANSWERS & KEY DEATH EDUCATION POINTS

**ARTEFACT STOP 5: The Tomb Niche or Underground Chamber**

- The carved niches and underground chambers of the catacombs were created with great care and effort, showing that the people buried here were important and loved. Catacombs were visited by families who came to pray, remember, and feel close to those they had lost, much as people visit graves in a cemetery today.

**ARTEFACT STOP 6: The Boat or Journey Symbol**

- In Egyptian and wider Mediterranean culture, the boat was a symbol of the journey the soul takes after death which is a passage across water towards peace, rest, or a new life. The idea of death as a journey, rather than a sudden ending, helped people feel hope rather than only sadness. Children can think of this as a symbol of something continuing like a boat that disappears over the horizon, the person is not gone forever, they have simply moved somewhere we cannot see yet.



## CONCLUSION

- Gather the students in a quiet spot and invite them to look back at what they have seen. Ask a few simple reflection questions such as what they noticed and which treasure stood out to them the most.

- End with a brief moment of silence where children can think of someone or something they love, without needing to speak.





## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Reduce the number of artefact stops and use more sensory prompts, such as noticing the cool air underground, the quietness of the spaces, and the texture of the stone walls.

- Emphasise that these are symbols from Mediterranean and Egyptian culture, and that many different cultures across the world remember their dead in their own ways which all show respect, love, and care.

- Invite children, if they wish, to share examples from their own family or tradition of how people are remembered after they die, connecting the ancient practices seen today to living cultural memory.

Name: _____ Date: _____

# ST AGATHA`S CATACOMBS AND MUSEUM ARTEFACT DETECTIVES




**RULES & INSTRUCTIONS:**

- We will walk together as one group and speak softly, walk slowly, and show respect.
- We are here to look, notice, and learn how people showed love and hope when someone died.
- Tell an adult if you feel unsure or sad.
- At each artefact stop, complete your three tasks: I SEE, I THINK, I WONDER.

## 1. Egyptian Pottery or Glass Vessel

**Egypt**

| I SEE | I THINK | I WONDER |
|---|---|---|
| Draw the artefact here: | Tick what do you think it represents:<br><br>☐ Protection<br><br>☐ Love<br><br>☐ Journey<br><br>☐ Memory<br><br>☐ Light | Write any thoughts or questions here:<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____ |



## 2. The Amulet

**Egypt / Phoenicia**

| I SEE | I THINK | I WONDER |
|---|---|---|
| Draw the artefact here: | Tick what do you think it represents:<br><br>☐ Protection<br><br>☐ Love<br><br>☐ Journey<br><br>☐ Memory<br><br>☐ Light | Write any thoughts or questions here:<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____ |



## 3. The Lamp or Oil Vessel

**Mediterranean**

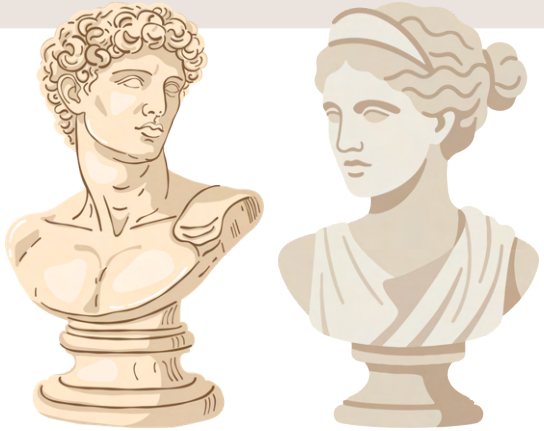
| I SEE | I THINK | I WONDER |
|---|---|---|
| Draw the artefact here: | Tick what do you think it represents:<br><br>☐ Protection<br><br>☐ Love<br><br>☐ Journey<br><br>☐ Memory<br><br>☐ Light | Write any thoughts or questions here:<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____ |



## 4. The Statue or Portrait Figure

**Mediterranean**

| I SEE | I THINK | I WONDER |
|---|---|---|
| Draw the artefact here: | Tick what do you think it represents:<br><br>☐ Protection<br><br>☐ Love<br><br>☐ Journey<br><br>☐ Memory<br><br>☐ Light | Write any thoughts or questions here:<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____ |



## 5. The Tomb Niche or Underground Chamber

**Catacombs, Rabat**

| I SEE | I THINK | I WONDER |
|---|---|---|
| Draw the artefact here: | Tick what do you think it represents:<br><br>☐ Protection<br><br>☐ Love<br><br>☐ Journey<br><br>☐ Memory<br><br>☐ Light | Write any thoughts or questions here:<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____ |



## 6. The Boat or Journey Symbol

**Egypt / Mediterranean**

| I SEE | I THINK | I WONDER |
|---|---|---|
| Draw the artefact here: | Tick what do you think it represents:<br><br>☐ Protection<br><br>☐ Love<br><br>☐ Journey<br><br>☐ Memory<br><br>☐ Light | Write any thoughts or questions here:<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____<br><br>_____ |



# 3.1
# COCO STILLS & MUSIC VIDEO

# 3. GLOBALISED POP CULTURE

LESSON TITLE: ***Coco* Stills & Music Video**



ART-BASED

GLOBALISED POP CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This lesson uses an art-based approach at the globalised pop culture level, drawing on selected stills from Pixar's *Coco* (2017) to explore how a globally shared animated film speaks gently and joyfully about life, death, memory, and love. By moving from concrete noticing of colours, characters, and objects to personal connections and then to gentle existential questions, children develop symbol literacy and learn that a single image can carry many layers of meaning without there being one right answer.

The cultural distance of *Coco* is carefully calibrated: the film is emotionally immediate and already deeply familiar to children from their own screen culture, yet it draws on Mexican *Día de los Muertos* traditions that are different enough to open productive curiosity about how different cultures approach death and remembrance.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Analyse** selected stills from *Coco*, noticing how the film uses colour, objects, and characters to speak about life, death, and remembrance.
- **Read** symbols in each still.
- **Explain** in simple language how chosen symbols can stand for parts of the human life cycle, change, or love that lasts.
- **Connect** the film's ideas to their own experiences of remembering someone.
- **Respond** emotionally to music, images, and stories, naming how they feel and why.

## INTRODUCTION

Begin by activating children's prior knowledge and emotional connection to the film through the following steps:

**Step 1: Prior Knowledge Elicitation**

- Ask children: "Has anyone here ever watched the movie Coco? What can you tell us about it?"
- If some children have seen the film, invite them to briefly share the story with their classmates in their own words. Use prompting questions: "Who is the main character? What does he love to do? What happens to him?"
- If no children have seen it, reassure them: "That's okay – we're going to discover it together now!"



**Step 2: Show the Official Trailer (Recommended) or a Short Clip**

Show children the official *Coco* trailer or a short 'Remember Me' clip. This sensory (visual and auditory) experience anchors children emotionally before exploring the stills. After watching, ask:

- "How did that make you feel? Did any part of it surprise you?"
- "What did you notice? Colours, music, people, places?"
- "Has anything in the film reminded you of something from your own life?"

**Step 3: Setting the Context**

- Explain that Coco is a film made for the whole world, but rooted in a Mexican celebration called *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) which is a joyful, colourful time when families remember and celebrate the people they love who have died.
- Show a simple world map locating Mexico through the **3.1 Presentation**.
- Ask: "Do you know of any special days in your own family or culture when you remember people who have died?"



## ACTIVITY

- Children explore selected stills, moving from concrete observation to personal/emotional response to gentle existential reflection.
- Questions are designed to elicit children's own ideas and feelings rather than deliver information.
- Offer short contextual meanings only after children have shared their observations

## QUESTION EXEMPLARS

**Still 1: The Ofrenda (Family Altar)**



**The Photographs**

- What can you see on this table? Can you count how many photos there are?
- Why do you think people put photos on a special table like this?
- Some families do this to tell their loved ones who have died: "We remember you. You are still part of our family." How does that idea feel to you?

**The Candles**

- Can you find any candles? What are candles usually used for?
- In *Coco*, candles are lit to help the spirits of people who have died find their way home. What do you think it means to help someone "find their way"?
- If your candle could send a message to someone you miss, what would it say?

**The Marigold Flowers**

- How do these flowers make you feel? Do they seem happy, sad, festive, calm?
- When and why do we give flowers? Can you think of times you have given or received flowers?
- To whom do we give flowers? (birthdays, celebrations, someone who is sick, funerals...) What does it mean to give someone flowers?
- Why do you think there are so many marigold flowers in this scene? What might the filmmaker want us to feel?
- What colour are these flowers? Where else have you seen this colour?
- If a flower could stand for a feeling, what feeling would these bright orange flowers stand for?
- **After children respond** explain that in Mexico, these orange flowers are called *cempasúchil*. People believe their scent and colour help guide the spirits of the dead back to their families.



## Still 2: The Marigold Bridge: Crossing Between Two Worlds

### The Bridge

- What is this bridge made of? Have you ever seen a bridge like this before?
- Where does this bridge seem to go — where does it start and where does it end?
- In *Coco*, this bridge only appears on the Day of the Dead, and only those who are remembered can cross it. Why do you think being remembered might be important?

### The Light and Colour

- What colours can you see? Does it feel dark and frightening or bright and welcoming?
- The makers of Coco chose to make this crossing a place of glowing light rather than darkness. Why do you think they made that choice?
- If you could design what happens after death, what would it look like?

### The Skeletons

- Who is crossing the bridge? What do you notice about how they look? Are they happy, sad, or scared?
- Where have you seen skeletons before (books, films, decorations, museums, churches)?
- The filmmakers gave the skeletons bright clothes and big smiles. Some people say this shows that even after death, a person's spirit stays alive. How does that idea feel to you?



## Still 3: Miguel singing 'Remember Me' to Mamá Coco

### The Guitar

- What is Miguel holding? What do you think he is doing?
- Have you ever had a song that made you think of someone you love or miss?
- In the film, the song 'Remember Me' was the last connection Mamá Coco had to her father. Some people say music can carry memories that nothing else can reach. How does that idea feel to you?



### Mamá Coco

- How does Mamá Coco look at the start of the scene?
- What happens to her when she hears the song?
- Why do you think remembering a person might matter so much, even after they have died?



## CONCLUSION

**Decorate your own calaveras**

- Hand out the **3.1 Conclusion Worksheet** to each child.
- Invite students to decorate their own calaveras which are bright, colorful skull decorations from Mexico's Day of the Dead that show children death is not something scary, but a joyful way to remember and celebrate the people we love who have passed away.
- As children work, play 'Remember Me' softly in the background as a gentle auditory backdrop.
- Encourage children to think about who they would like to remember as they decorate.




## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Pre-watch a short clip of *Coco* (such as the opening *ofrenda* scene or the final 'Remember Me' scene) at home or as a class in the days before the lesson, so children arrive with emotional familiarity and the stills feel like returning to a known story.

- Always adapt the lesson plan to your own context and the students' needs.


Coco
Stills


MEXICO LOCATION MAP
150°W 120°W 90°W 60°W 30°W 0° 30°E 60°E 90°E 120°E 150°E 180°
ARCTIC OCEAN
Arctic Circle
60°N
30°N
Tropic of Cancer
MEXICO
ATLANTIC OCEAN
PACIFIC OCEAN
Equator
0°
PACIFIC OCEAN
INDIAN OCEAN
Tropic of Capricorn
30°S
60°S
Antarctic Circle
SOUTHERN OCEAN
0 2,000 Miles
0 2,000 4,000 Kilometers
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Remember me






## 'Remember Me' Song

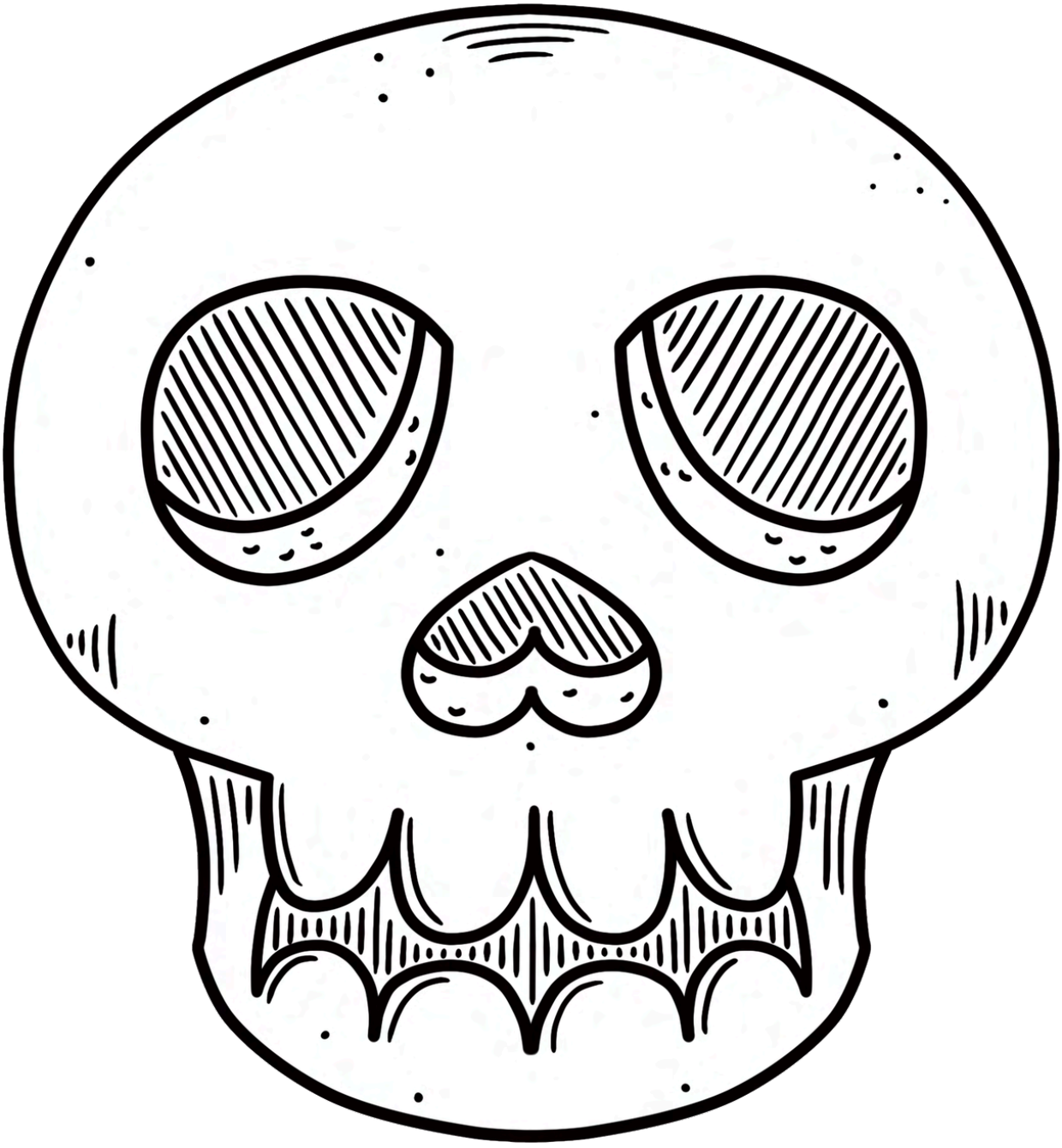






Name: _____ Date: _____

## Decorate your own *Calavera*



# 3.2 THE STORIES IN COCO: LESSON BRIEF A

## LESSON TITLE: The Stories in *Coco: Lesson Brief A*

NARRATIVE | ART-BASED | GLOBALISED POP CULTURE

RATIONALE

Pixar's *Coco* (2017) is a globally recognised animated film built around the Mexican tradition of *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). This first lesson focuses on a deeply human question: what happens when no one remembers us any more? Through the character of Chicharron, an old musician who fades away because he has been forgotten, children are gently introduced to the idea that memory is a form of love, and that being forgotten is its own kind of loss.

Rather than telling children what to think, this lesson scaffolds on their prior knowledge and lived experience. Through sensory entry points (music, an image of a marigold-lit ofrenda, and the texture of a photograph) and carefully chosen questions, children are invited to construct meaning for themselves.

***Note to teachers about emotional sensitivity:***
*This lesson touches on the fear of being forgotten, which can resonate deeply with children who have lost someone or who worry about death. Create a safe, unhurried atmosphere. Children should never feel obliged to share personal experiences. Normalise a range of feelings since it is fine to feel sad, curious, or even to laugh (as Chicharron does). If a child becomes distressed, allow them to step back quietly. Having a quiet corner activity (example: free drawing) available is advised.*

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Watch/listen** to selected scenes from *Coco* and **explore** through discussion what it means to be remembered.
- **Reflect** on their own feelings about remembering and being remembered.
- **Identify** symbols of remembrance in the film (*ofrenda*, marigold petals, music).
- **Recognise** that keeping a person's memory alive through songs and stories is an act of love

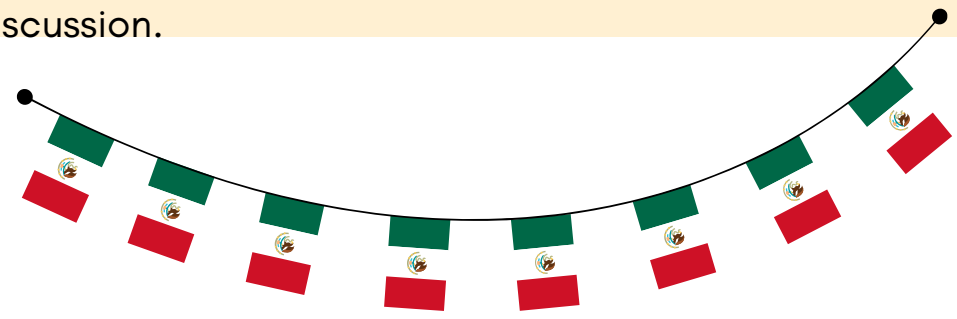
## INTRODUCTION

- Before playing any video, create a moment of curiosity and connection. Place a single marigold (or a printed photograph of one) on the table alongside a family photograph. Invite children to look, touch, and smell if possible.

**Activating prior knowledge through opening questions:**

- Have you ever kept something to remember someone? What was it?
- What do you think happens to people's stories after they are gone?
- Do you know anyone who loved music? What music did they love?

Show the first slide of the **3.2 Presentation** a photograph of a real ofrenda. Ask children to look closely and describe what they see before explaining anything. Let their observations lead the discussion.



## SCENES & DISCUSSION QUESTION EXEMPLARS

**Scene 1: Chicharrón Fades Away**

**Why we watch it?**

- This scene introduces the concept of the 'final death' gently and visually. Chicharrón fades into golden petals, which is beautiful rather than frightening. Children see that being forgotten is the true loss, not physical dying.

***Visual sensory moment:*** *Pause on the image of Chicharron fading into golden petals. Ask children to describe the colours and feelings this image gives them.*

**Question Exemplars:**

- What do you think is happening to Chicharron? How does it make you feel?
- Hector says the worst death is being forgotten. Do you agree? Why?
- Have you ever been afraid someone might forget you, or that you might forget someone?
- What would you want people to remember about you?



**Scene 2:  Héctor Sings for Chicharrón**

**Why we watch it?**

- This scene shows that even in the face of loss, a song is an act of kindness. The mood is warm and almost funny because remembering someone does not have to be sad. A favourite song is a gift you give someone at the end.

***Auditory sensory moment:*** *Play the clip of Hector singing 'Juanita'. After watching, sit in silence for 5 seconds, then ask children: 'What did you notice in your body when you heard that song?'*

**Question Exemplars:**

- Why do you think Hector chose to sing instead of just saying goodbye?
- Can a song be a way of saying 'I love you'? Have you ever felt that way about a song?
- How do you think Hector felt when he sang for Chicharron?
- Do you have a song that reminds you of someone? You don't have to share it if you don't want to.



# 3.2 THE STORIES IN COCO: LESSON BRIEF B

## LESSON TITLE: The Stories in *Coco: Lesson Brief B*

NARRATIVE | ART-BASED | GLOBALISED POP CULTURE

### RATIONALE

This second lesson, which should follow Lesson Brief A, shifts focus to a distinct and very sensitive theme of dementia and the fading of memory in old age. Mama Coco is an elderly woman who can no longer easily recognise her own family or remember her past. Yet when Miguel plays her father's lullaby, something deep inside her responds. The scene offers children a tender, hopeful lens through which to understand what it can be like to love someone whose memory is slipping away.

This lesson builds on children's prior knowledge and emotional experience. It uses music and a photograph as tactile and auditory anchors, and centres children's own reflections rather than providing them with information. The final scene, Miguel singing to his newborn baby sister, closes the lesson with warmth, affirming the child's own role as a keeper of stories

***Note to teachers about dimentia:***

*Dementia is not a single disease but an umbrella term for a group of conditions that affect memory, thinking, behaviour, and the ability to perform everyday activities. The most common form is Alzheimer's disease. Dementia is caused by damage to brain cells and is most common in older adults, though it is not a normal part of ageing. Some children in your class may have a family member with dementia. Be sensitive and watchful. Allow children to express sadness, confusion, or even relief.*

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Explore**, through film scenes and discussion, what it can feel like to love someone whose memory is fading.
- **Reflect** on the emotional power of music in keeping connection alive.
- **Develop** empathy for older people living with memory loss.
- **Affirm** their own role as storytellers who carry memories forward.

## INTRODUCTION

Begin by placing an old photograph (ideally of an elderly person with a child) on each table. Ask children to look at it quietly for a moment before you say anything.

**Activating prior knowledge through opening questions:**

- Do you have a grandparent or an older person in your life? What do you love about them?
- Have you ever noticed that an older person sometimes forgets things? How did that make you feel?
- Is there a song your family has always sung together, or a song that reminds you of someone?



**<u>Scene 3: Miguel Sings "Remember Me" to Mamá Coco</u>**

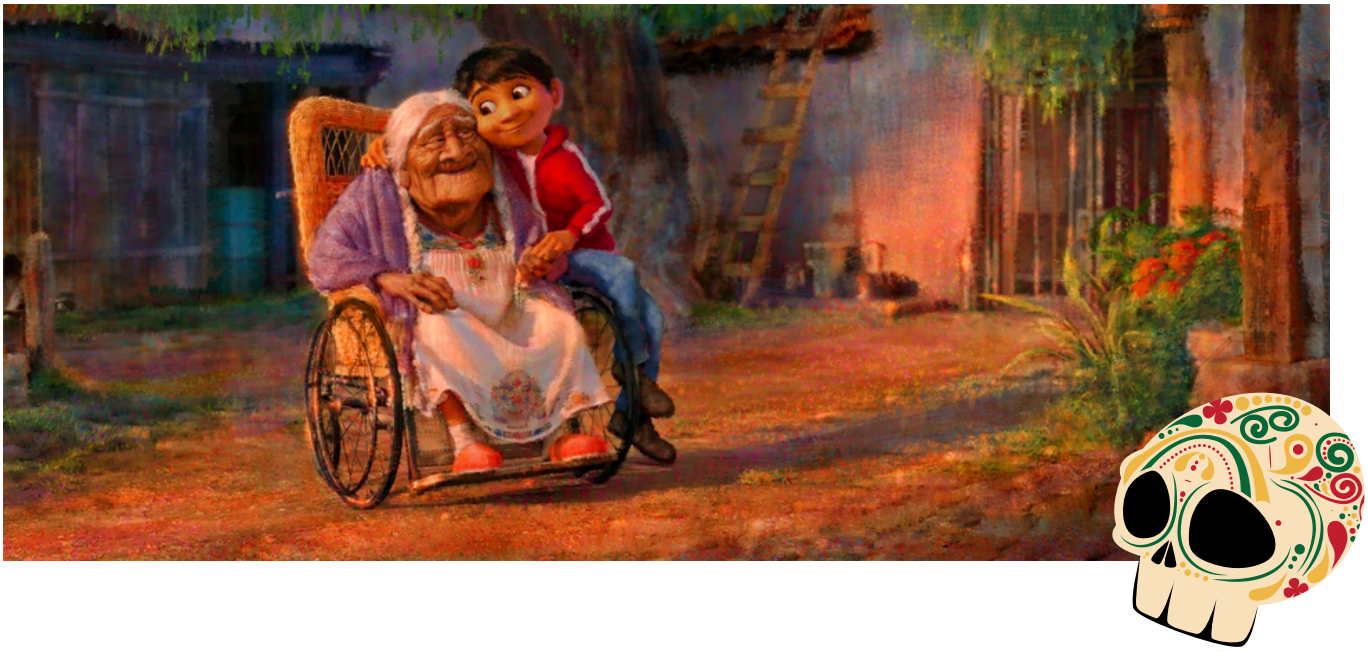
**Why we watch it?**

This is the film's most powerful teaching scene. A song unlocks what words could not reach. The child (Miguel) is the one who restores the memory, showing children that they have the power to keep people alive through music and storytelling.

***Auditory and emotional sensory moment:*** *Play the 'Remember Me (Reunion)' clip. Invite children to close their eyes while listening if they wish. Afterwards, ask: 'What did that feel like to watch? Where did you feel it in your body?'*

**Question Exemplars:**

- What happened to Mamá Coco when she heard the music? Why do you think that happened?
- Have you ever heard a song that reminded you of someone you love?
- Miguel is just a child but he saved his great-great-grandfather from being forgotten. How?
- If you could play one song for someone you love, what would it be and why?



**Scene 4: Miguel Tells His Baby Sister the Family Story**

**Why we watch it?**

The cycle is complete. Miguel, once the child who needed to hear the story, is now the one who tells it. Every generation passes on the story. This affirms that children themselves are storytellers who carry the people they love into the future.

***Visual sensory moment:*** *Pause on the image of the completed ofrenda with Hector's and Coco's photographs side by side. Ask: 'What do you notice is different now? How does this image make you feel?'*

**Question Exemplars:**

- Why does Miguel tell the story to his baby sister, who is too young to understand?
- What is on your family's special shelf? Photos, objects, or things you keep to remember people?
- If you could put one thing on an *ofrenda* for someone you love, what would it be and why?
- Who in your family tells the stories? Could you be one of those storytellers?



## CONCLUSION

**My Memory Flower**

- Provide children with a copy of the **3.2 Conclusion Worksheet**.
- Children fill in each petal with words or drawings about someone they love. Emphasise that this is a private, personal activity and there is no obligation to share.
- Once finished and if comfortable, children can explain what they wrote or drew with the class.



## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- An introductory context-setter can be: “Today we are going to watch some special moments from a film called Coco. In this film, a boy named Miguel discovers that the people we love never truly disappear, as long as we remember them. As we watch, I want you to listen very carefully to the stories people tell, and the songs they sing.” However, you can come up with your own or also adapt this as you wish.
- The memory flower can be extended into a class ‘Garden of Remembrance’ display, where all flowers are arranged together on a wall
- The lesson plan can be adapted to the teacher’s liking and students’ needs.

# The Stories in *Coco*







# The Film *Coco*

*Coco* is a film about a young Mexican boy named Miguel who loves music and, on the Day of the Dead, accidentally ends up in the colourful Land of the Dead.

There, he goes on a magical adventure with friendly skeletons to discover the truth about his family and learns that remembering the people we love keeps them alive in our hearts.



# Scene 1:
# Chicharrón Fades Away

Héctor and Miguel visit the old musician Chicharrón, who is fading because no one in the living world remembers him.

Héctor explains: “When there is no one left who remembers you… you disappear from this world. We call it the final death.”



# Scene 2:
# Héctor Sings for Chicharrón

Héctor plays a silly, affectionate song for the fading Chicharrón, which is a tune they both clearly know and love.

Chicharrón laughs and says: “Brings back memories.”

Then he fades peacefully, still smiling.



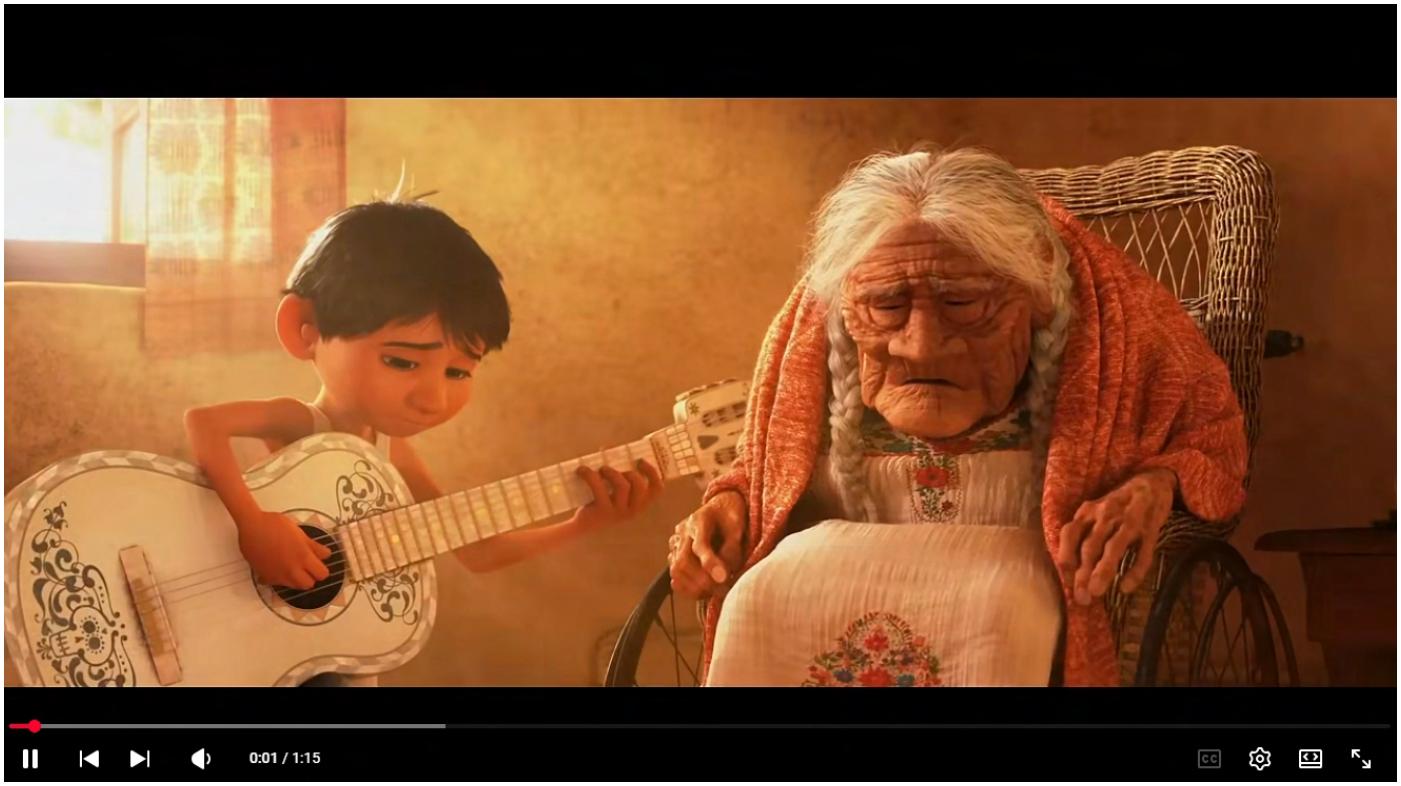


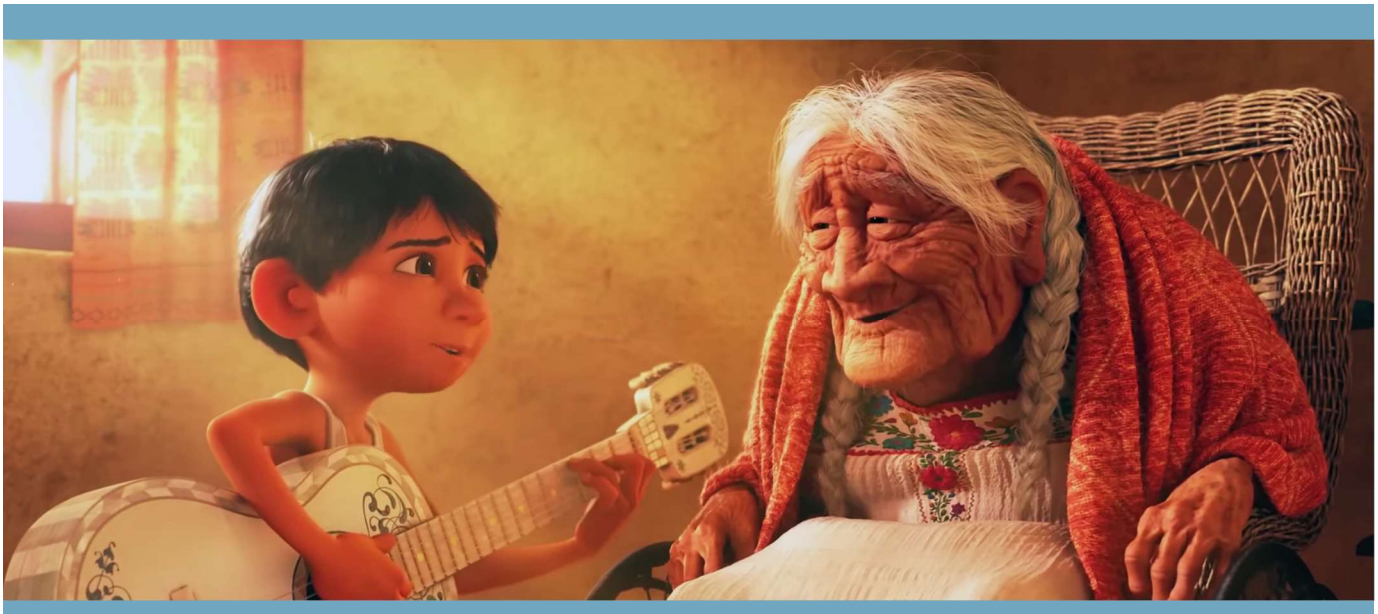
Video

## Scene 3:
## Miguel Sings “Remember Me” to Mamá Coco

Back in the living world, Miguel finds Mamá Coco sitting quietly, as if very far away. He plays “Remember Me”, the lullaby her father wrote for her when she was small.

Slowly, Mamá Coco begins to sing along, wakes from her fog, remembers her father Héctor.



Video

# Scene 4: Miguel Tells His Baby Sister the Family Story

In the final scene, Miguel shows his newborn baby sister the family's *ofrenda* which is now with Héctor's photograph restored and Mamá Coco's photo newly added.

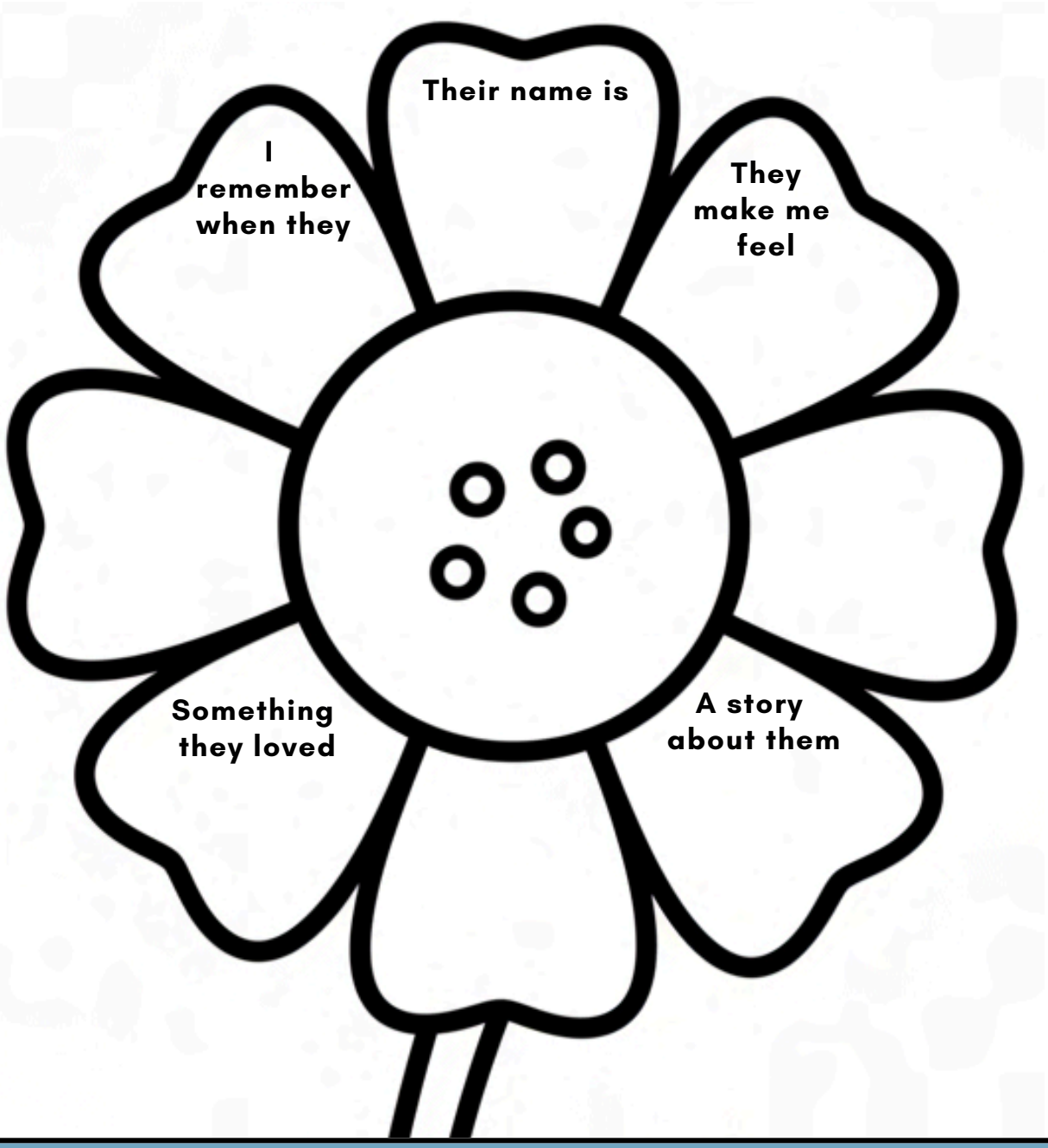
He sings for the whole family, living and dead, and the Riveras gather together across both worlds.



Name: _____ Date: _____

# My Memory Flower

1. Think of someone you love, they may be with you, far away, or no longer here.
2. Fill in each petal with your thoughts.
3. You can write or draw.



# 3.3 OUR CLASSROOM OFRENDA

LESSON TITLE: **Our Classroom *Ofrenda***



RITUAL-BASED

GLOBALISED POP CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This activity is a child-friendly, sensitive, and meaningful way to introduce 7-year-olds to the Mexican tradition of the *ofrenda* (offering altar) as it appears in the Disney-Pixar film *Coco*. It invites learners to explore death, remembrance, and love through storytelling, symbol, and a shared hands-on ritual in the classroom. By building a class *ofrenda* together, children experience how a different culture expresses love, memory, and continuity beyond death in a joyful, colourful way.

Symbolically, each item placed on the ofrenda carries meaning: the photograph honours the person being remembered, the marigold flowers (*cempasuchil*) guide the spirit home with their scent and colour, the candle offers light and warmth, the water refreshes the soul after its journey, and personal mementos welcome the spirit back with familiar objects. These concrete symbols bridge the abstract idea of remembering the dead with safe, tangible classroom experiences.

Pedagogically, the session scaffolds on children's prior knowledge through questioning techniques and elicitation strategies, giving significant attention to the affective and emotional dimension so that children are active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients. Short sensory experiences (visual, tactile, and auditory) are integrated throughout the lesson. The film *Coco* serves as a culturally rich entry point that most children will recognise, making abstract concepts about death and remembrance accessible, joyful, and non-threatening.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Recall** and **connect** prior knowledge about loss and remembrance by responding to open questions before the lesson begins.
- **Discuss** death as a natural part of life that is marked with love and celebration in many cultures around the world.
- **Recognise** that the ofrenda is a meaningful ritual symbol through which the Mexican tradition of *Dia de los Muertos* expresses ongoing love and memory.
- **Experience** and **reflect** on building a class *ofrenda* safely and respectfully as a shared ritual.
- **Use concrete symbols** such as photographs, marigolds, candles, water, and personal items to represent abstract ideas such as spiritual presence, memory, and the continuing bond between the living and the dead.
- **Express and share feelings** about memory and loss in a safe, supported environment.
- **Show sensitivity and respect** when listening to classmates' contributions and when handling each other's meaningful objects.
- **Connect** how Coco presents universal themes of love, memory, and loss through the lens of a globalised cultural tradition.



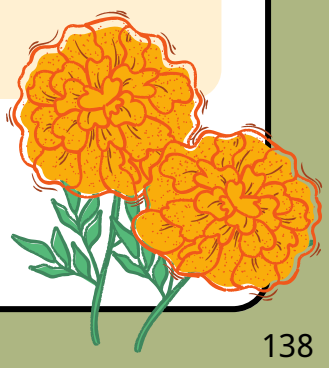
## MATERIALS

- A clip of the ofrenda scene from the film *Coco*
- A small table or shelf
- An orange or gold cloth
- Battery-operated candles
- A small glass of water
- Real or artificial marigold flowers (for tactile/olfactory sensory experience) plus paper marigold flowers (pre-made, see **Worksheet 3.3**)
- Children's photos, drawings or small personal objects representing someone or a pet they with to remember
- Paper and crayons
- **Optional:** The *Remember Me* lullaby from *Coco* *(auditory sensory experience)*
- ***Optional***: A printed image of a traditional Mexican *ofrenda* for additional visual reference



## INTRODUCTION

- Set a warm, calm atmosphere.
- Play the Remember Me lullaby softly as children enter and settle (Sensory: Auditory).
- Begin with open questions before showing anything: 'Has anyone ever missed someone who is no longer here such as a person or a pet? What do you do to remember them?' (Prior Knowledge Questioning). Allow 2-3 children to share.
- Show the opening *ofrenda* clip from Coco on the screen.
- After the clip, invite children to share one word or feeling. Ask: 'How did watching that make you feel? Did anything surprise you?' (Affective Elicitation)
- Ask: 'Have you ever seen something like this before? Does anyone know what it is called or what it is for?' Collect responses before explaining.
- Only after eliciting children's ideas, gently confirm: in Mexico, families build a special altar called an *ofrenda* to welcome the spirit of someone they love who has died, filling it with photos, flowers, candles, food, and beloved objects.
- Explain today's activity briefly.
- Take three slow, deep breaths together as a group before beginning.



## ACTIVITY

***Note**: Use elicitation throughout by inviting children to guess and reflect before explaining each element.*

- Give out the **3.3 Worksheet** to students to colour and cut out the marigold flowers. As they colour, pass around a real or artificial marigold for children to touch and smell (Sensory: Tactile).
- Before explaining each element, hold it up and ask: 'What do you think this might mean on the *ofrenda*? Why do you think families put this here?' Accept all answers before sharing the symbolic meaning.
- Lay the **orange cloth** on the table together. Ask: 'What colours do you see? How does the cloth feel? Why do you think they chose orange?' Then explain: the colour represents the sun and the marigold flower that guides spirits home (Sensory: Visual & Tactile).
- Switch on the **candle**. Ask: 'What does a candle make you think of? When do we use candles?' Then explain that the light calls the spirit (Sensory: Visual).
- Place the **small glass of water** on the *ofrenda*. Ask: 'Why might water be important for someone on a long journey?' Then explain that this refreshes the soul.
- If using the lullaby, play it softly in the background as children place their items, creating a gentle emotional atmosphere (Sensory: Auditory & Affective).
- One by one, each child places their photo, drawing, or small object and marigold flower. Encourage them to share: 'Who or what are you remembering? What was special about them?' They may say as much or as little as they wish (Affective).



## CONCLUSION

- When everyone has had a chance to participate, invite the class to stand or sit quietly and look at the completed ofrenda together for a moment.
- Offer a closing reflection. For example:

> "In the film *Coco*, Miguel learns that the real magic of the *ofrenda* is not just the flowers or the candles, but the love and the stories we keep alive Today, our *ofrenda* shows that when we remember the people and animals we love, they are never truly gone."



## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Sentence starters can be written on the board to guide children into saying a few words if they wish. For example: "I remember ... because ... . " and "I think they would like ... because ... ."
- Children who do not wish to speak can simply place their item and sit back down. Silence is respected as another form of remembrance.
- The teacher can adapt this ritual-based activity according to the teacher's and students' needs.

Name: _____ Date: _____

# Marigold Flower



#2036

ColoringCow.com

# 3.4 HALLOWEEN VILLAGE SCAVENGER'S HUNT

**LESSON TITLE:** **Halloween Village Scavenger's Hunt**

CLASS WITHOUT WALLS

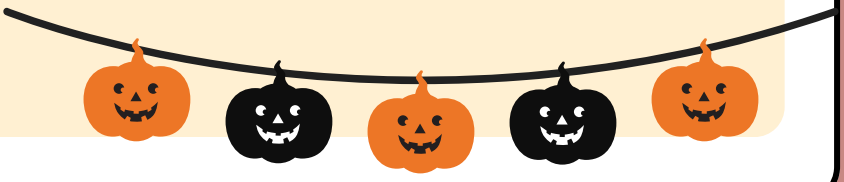
GLOBALISED POP CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This lesson uses the *classroom without walls* modality to bring children into direct, embodied contact with globalised pop culture death symbols as they appear in the real world during the Halloween season. Rather than encountering skeletons, ghosts, jack-o'-lanterns, and skulls on a screen, children walk their own village streets in late October and actively search for how commercial Halloween imagery has spread into their immediate environment (shop windows, doorways and other decorations).

From a death education perspective, Halloween offers a uniquely accessible entry point for 7-year-olds. Its symbols are familiar, colourful, and playful rather than immediately threatening, yet they carry genuine cultural meanings about death, the afterlife, and humanity's long relationship with the dead. The scavenger's hunt transforms the walk into a structured symbol-counting activity in which children purposefully look for specific images and mark how many times they spot each one. This supports focused observation, quantitative thinking, and reflective discussion about what each symbol communicates.

Crucially, the activity extends beyond Halloween imagery to include Maltese symbols related to the afterlife such as a soul in purgatory and Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which may be found in village niches, chapels, or churches. This widens the comparative lens and invites children to discover that images and symbols from different cultures can meet and mix in the same village space. It supports cultural literacy and symbol literacy as tools for meaning-making.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Recognise** and **count** common Halloween death symbols (skeleton, ghost, jack-o'-lantern/pumpkin, bat, witch, black cat, spider/cobweb) as they appear in the local village.
- **Recognise** Maltese afterlife symbols (a soul in purgatory, Our Lady of Mount Carmel) that may be found in village niches, chapels, or churches.
- **Explain** that these symbols belong to different cultural traditions that have come together and can mix in shared spaces.
- **Notice** the difference between symbols that trivialise death (pop-culture Halloween) and symbols that show reverence or love for the dead (Maltese Catholic tradition).
- **Practise** close looking, careful observation, and descriptive language as tools of symbol literacy.



## INTRODUCTION

- Before the outing, ask children about any decorations or religious images they have noticed around the village.

- Explain that today they will be symbol detectives on a walk, purposefully searching for specific images and ticking how many times they spot each one.

- Briefly explain that Halloween comes from a very old Celtic festival called Samhain, which later mixed with Christian traditions (All Saints' Day on 1st November and All Souls' Day on 2nd November), and was then spread around the world by Irish and American popular culture.

- Point out that Malta also has its own symbols connected to death and the afterlife such as the soul in purgatory and Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which can be found on village walls and inside churches.

- Emphasise that today children will discover both kinds of symbols in the same village, which is itself a beautiful example of how images from different cultures can mix.

## ACTIVITY

- Give the **3.4 Scavenger's Hunt Worksheet** to each student.
- Students walk through the village purposefully looking for the images on their sheet.
- For each symbol they spot, they tick a box to record how many times they saw it.
- After the walk, gather the class and discuss the results: Which symbol did you see most often? Which was hardest to find? Where did you find the Maltese symbols? How did they feel different from the Halloween ones?

## SYMBOL DISCUSSION POINTS

**The Jack-o'-Lantern**

- The jack-o'-lantern has its roots in Celtic Samhain traditions where carved turnips (later pumpkins in America) were lit with candles to ward off wandering spirits on the night when the veil between the living and dead was thinnest.

**The Ghost**

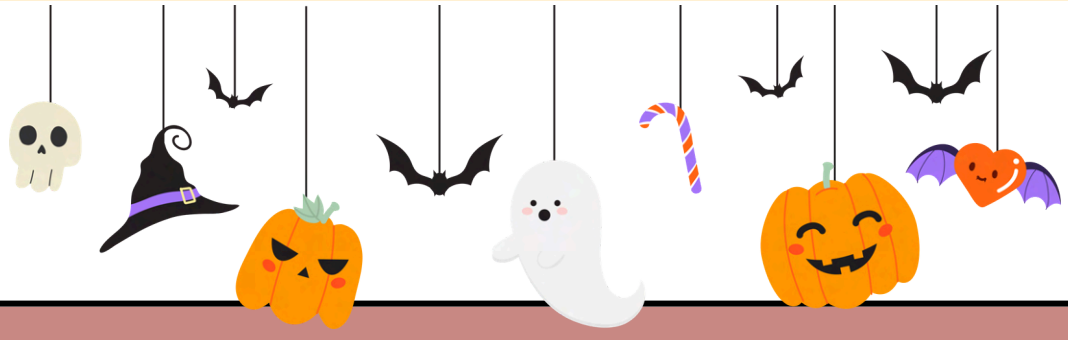
- In pop culture, ghosts are the spirits of people who have died and stayed in the world of the living, usually shown as white, floaty shapes. They represent the idea that something of a person continues after death. In Halloween imagery ghosts are often funny and harmless. The ghost gently introduces the concept of spiritual existence after physical death.

**The Skull or Skeleton**

- Skulls and skeletons are perhaps the oldest universal symbol of death across many cultures and they represent what is left of the body after life ends. The skeleton reminds us that all living things die and that our bodies change. In Mexico's *Día de los Muertos*, skull decorations are colourful and joyful. This supports comparison of cultural attitudes towards death.

**The Bat**

- Bats are nocturnal creatures associated with darkness, caves, and the night which all spaces historically linked with the dead and the supernatural. In pop culture they became Halloween symbols partly because of vampire mythology (creatures that 'die' and rise again as the undead).



**The Witch**

- Witches in Halloween imagery are connected to old beliefs about people who could communicate with the dead or the spirit world. Children can notice how pop culture has changed what a symbol means over time.

**The Black Cat**

- Black cats became associated with Halloween through Celtic and medieval beliefs linking cats to magic and the spirit world. In pop culture they are symbols of mystery and bad luck, often placed alongside death-related imagery. For children, the black cat opens a conversation about how different cultures attach meaning to animals, and how some of those meanings get stuck, even if most people today don't really believe black cats are unlucky.



**The Spider or Cobwebs**

- Cobwebs and spiders became Halloween symbols because they are found in dark, abandoned places such as attics, old houses, forgotten spaces. Culturally, such spaces have long been associated with death and things left behind. In pop culture the spider web signals 'this is a place where death hangs in the air.'

**Soul in Purgatory**

- A distinctly Maltese Catholic image often found on village niches or inside churches. Represents the soul of someone who has died and is being purified before entering heaven. Loved ones pray for these souls, especially in November. A symbol of care, memory, and intercession.

**Our Lady of Mount Carmel**

- Widely venerated in Maltese villages and churches. Often depicted holding the Brown Scapular, a sign of protection for the faithful both in life and after death. Her presence in the village connects the community to beliefs about the afterlife and divine protection.



## CONCLUSION

- Gather students in a quiet spot after the walk and ask simple reflection questions: Which symbol surprised you? Did any symbol make you feel curious? What is different about the Halloween symbols and the Maltese ones?

- Highlight that both kinds of symbols show that people everywhere think about death and find ways to remember those who have died.

- End with a wonder moment: 'Today we walked through one village and found symbols from America, from ancient Celtic Ireland, and from our own Maltese tradition – all in the same street. Symbols travel and mix, just like people do.'




## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Reduce the number of symbols on the sheet for a shorter or simpler walk.
- Bring in examples of *Día de los Muerto*s (skull sugar decorations, marigolds) to extend the cultural comparison.
- After the walk, ask children to draw their favourite found symbol and write or dictate one sentence about what they think it means.
- If a church visit is possible, arrange to view the image of Our Lady of Mount Carmel inside and discuss its meaning with the children.
- Always adapt this lesson plan to your liking and to the children's needs

Name: _____ Date: _____

# HALLOWEEN VILLAGE SCAVENGER'S HUNT



**RULES & INSTRUCTIONS:**

- We will walk together as one group through the village.
- We will walk quietly and show respect to people and their homes.
- Look carefully at shop windows, doorways, garden decorations, walls, and churches.
- Each time you see one of the symbols below, put a tally mark in its box.
- Tell an adult if you feel unsure or if something worries you

**The Jack-o'-Lantern or Pumpkin**

carved face • candle inside • wards off spirits

How many did you see?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐



## Ghost

floaty • white • spirit of the dead

How many did you see?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐




## Skeleton or Skull

bones • death • all living things end

How many did you see?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐



## Bat

nocturnal • dark caves • vampire myth

How many did you see?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐



## Witch

pointy hat • spirit world • magic

How many did you see?



## Black Cat

mystery • magic • spirit world

How many did you see?



## Spider or Cobweb

dark places • abandoned • things left behind

How many did you see?



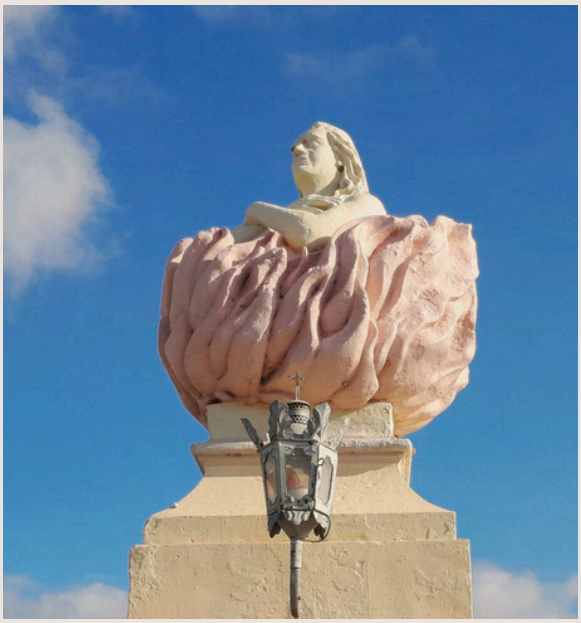
**Soul in Purgatory**

flames • prayer • afterlife • Catholic

How many did you see?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐



**Our Lady of Mount Carmel**

blue mantle • scapular • protection • church

How many did you see?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐



Symbols from many different cultures can live in the same village, just like people from many different cultures can live in the same world.

# 4.

# EXOTIC CULTURE

# 4.1 GHANAIAN FANTASY COFFINS

LESSON TITLE: **Ghanaian Fantasy Coffins**



ART-BASED EXOTIC CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This lesson uses an art-based approach at the global distant culture level, drawing on the *abebuu adekai* (fantasy coffins) of the Ga people of southern Ghana, West Africa. These elaborately carved and painted sculptural coffins transform the coffin itself into a powerful symbol: each unique shape communicates who the person was, what they loved, what they did, and what they dreamed of.

By moving from concrete noticing of shapes, colours, and objects to personal connections and then to gentle existential questions, children develop symbol literacy and learn that a single object can carry many layers of meaning without there being one right answer.

Furthermore, Ghana is geographically and culturally distant enough to invite curiosity and wonder. While the core message which is that we can say "This is who I am" through the things we love, is immediately accessible to any child. This opens age-appropriate conversations about identity, legacy, memory, and the human life cycle, while modelling how distant cultures approach death as a continuation and celebration of life rather than an ending.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Identify** and **describe** the shapes and colours used in Ghanaian fantasy coffins, explaining what the Ga people of Ghana believe about life and death.
- **Read** the symbolic meaning carried by each coffin shape, connecting it to the identity, work, or dreams of a person.
- **Explain** in simple language how an object or shape can stand as a symbol for who someone is, what they loved, or what they hoped for.
- **Design** their own personal identity coffin by choosing a shape that says something true about themselves.

## INTRODUCTION

- Children observe the fantasy coffin images through the presentation slides.
- The session begins with a short silent gaze. Children are invited to notice colours, shapes, materials, and the feeling each coffin gives them.
- Explain to students that in Ghana, a country in West Africa, there is a tradition among the Ga people of making a very special kind of coffin. Instead of a plain wooden box, a Ga craftsman carves and paints the coffin into a shape that tells the world who the person inside was: what they did, what they loved, and what they dreamed of.

## ACTIVITY

- Children first notice and describe what they see in each coffin image in the **4.1 Presentation**.

- With each coffin, questions move from concrete → personal/experiential → gentle existential/spiritual.

- After children share their observations, offer short, possible symbolic meanings.

## QUESTION EXEMPLARS

**Coffin 1: The Aeroplane Coffin**

**The Shape**

- What shape is this coffin? Have you ever been on an aeroplane, or seen one fly over your home?
- Why do you think someone chose an aeroplane for a coffin?
- This was the very first fantasy coffin. The carpenter Seth Kane Kwei made it for his grandmother, who had always dreamed of flying but never got the chance. He decided that if she could not fly in her life, she would fly into her next one. How does that idea feel to you?

**The Colours and Details**

- What colours can you see on the aeroplane?
- The Ga people believe that when someone dies, their life continues in the next world. The coffin is like a vehicle to carry you there. If you were choosing a vehicle for that journey, what might you choose?
- What does the word 'dream' mean to you? Have you ever wanted to do something you haven't done yet?

## QUESTION EXEMPLARS

**Coffin 2: The Fish Coffin**

**The Shape**

- What kind of creature is this? Where does it live?
- If you were a fisherman and someone made you a coffin shaped like a fish, what would you feel?

**Livelihood as Identity**

- Can you think of something your family member does every day? A job, a craft, a skill or something they are really good at?
- If someone made a coffin in the shape of that thing, what shape would it be?

**Coffin 3: A Modern Shape such as a Mobile Phone, Nike Trainers, or a Car**

**The Shape**

- What everyday object is this coffin shaped like? Where do you usually see this object?
- The craftsman Eric Kpakpo Adotey says: "Your coffin speaks about you." What do you think he means?



## CONCLUSION

**Personal Objects as Symbols**

**Ask children:**

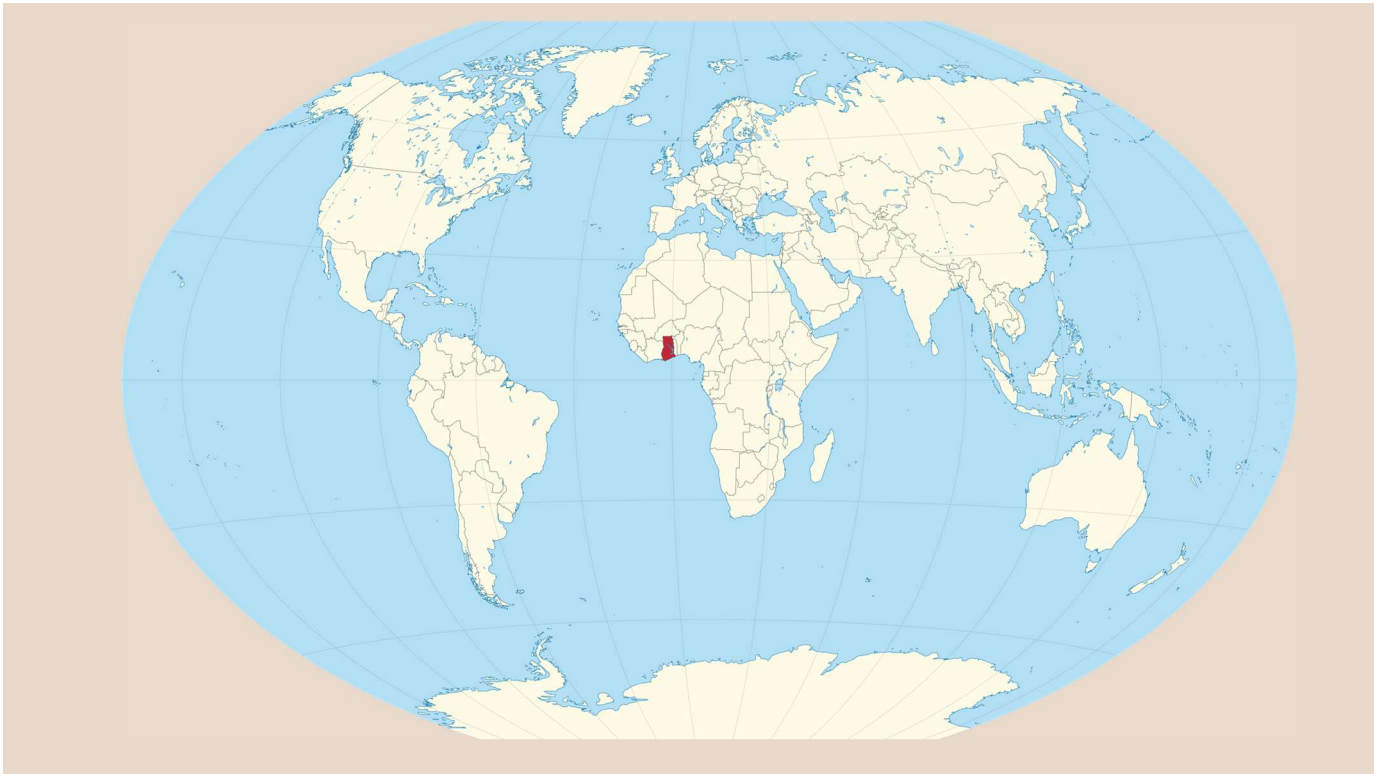
- 'Is there an object in your life that you feel says something about who you are? A book? A football? A musical instrument? A pet?'
- If that object could speak, what would it say about you?



## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

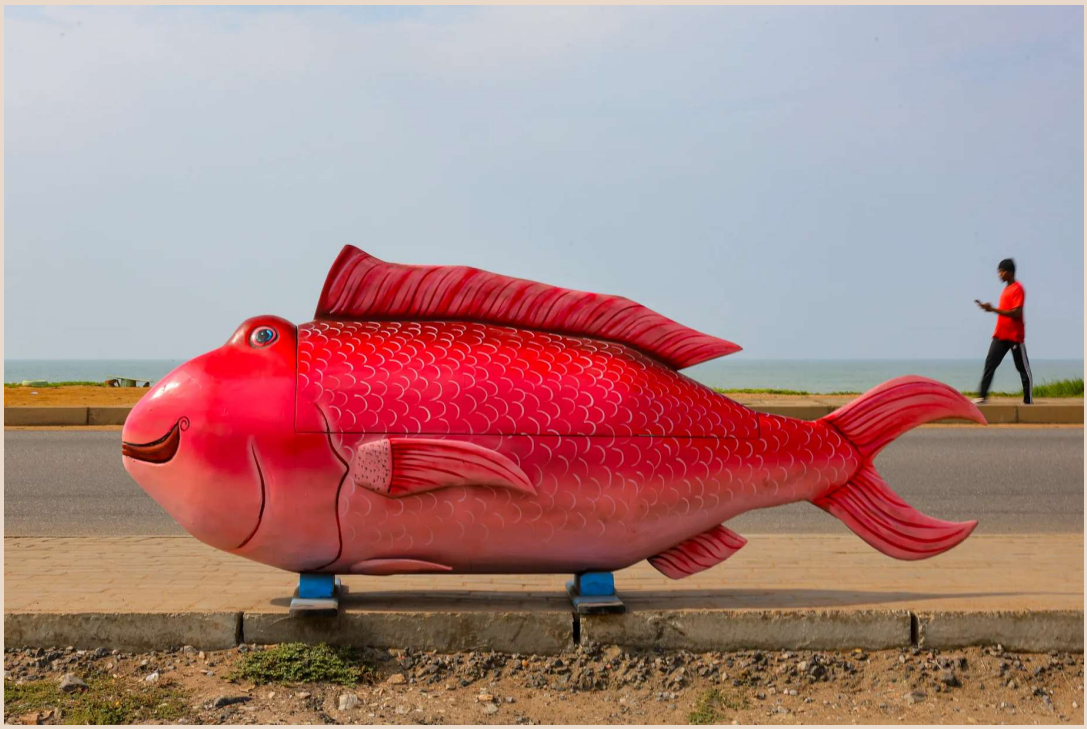
- Bring in a collection of everyday objects (a shoe, a small toy fish, a toy car, a phone, a book) and ask children to choose one object that says something about who they are before revealing the coffin tradition.
- For children who find it difficult to think of a shape for themselves, offer a starter list of choices: a favourite food, an animal, a sport, a musical instrument, a vehicle.
- Show a short video clip of the Kane Kwei Carpentry Workshop in Accra, so children can see the craftsmen at work.
- Always remember to adapt the lesson plan to your own liking and the students' needs.


Ghanaian
Fantasy
Coffins




GHANA AIRWAYS
$H_2O$


GHANA INT. AIRLINE






Ice Cream


MILO

# 4.2 THE BIRTH OF THE BUTTERFLIES

## LESSON TITLE: The Birth of the Butterflies

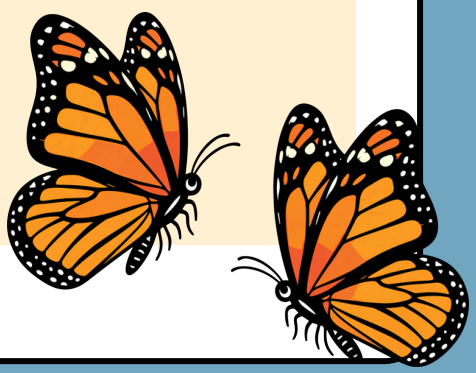
NARRATIVE | ART-BASED | EXOTIC CULTURE

### RATIONALE

*The Birth of the Butterflies* is an Aboriginal Australian Myth, retold by Michael J Connolly (Munda-gutta Kulliwari). In Dreamtime, when no creature had yet experienced death, a young cockatoo dies and is taken by Spirits who promise transformation into a new form. Inspired by this, caterpillars follow the Spirits and later emerge in spring as the first butterflies, teaching the animals that death leads to renewal and new life.

This lesson sits within the Exotic Culture strand of the teaching pack because it introduces children in Malta to a worldview geographically and cosmologically distant from their own Mediterranean, Catholic context. This lesson opens a window onto Indigenous Australian storytelling, where the land, the animals, and the Spirits together carry the lessons of life, death, and renewal. The butterfly becomes a universal symbol of transformation.

The lesson uses narrative pedagogy paired with art-based symbol literacy, allowing 7-year-olds to meet death gently through metaphor: the caterpillar does not disappear. Rather, it is changed by the Spirits into something new and beautiful. Children are invited to notice that, in this story, death is not an ending but a doorway to a different and more colourful kind of being. The myth offers an age-appropriate, hopeful, and spiritually rich entry point into conversations about what happens when someone we love is no longer here.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Listen** to the Aboriginal Australian myth The Birth of the Butterflies (retold by Michael J Connolly).
- **Identify** the butterfly as a symbol of transformation, change, and continuing life after death.
- **Discuss** the idea that many cultures use symbols from nature (butterflies, seasons, the sky) to speak about big feelings like loss, hope, and remembering.
- **Create** a symbolic butterfly artwork that expresses something they want to remember or a wish for someone they love.



## INTRODUCTION

***Note for teachers:*** *Stories are magical in many ways as they open us up to possible worlds, allowing children (and adults) to imagine and wonder. As teachers, we are first and foremost storytellers. Use the transportative power of language and voice to carry your children into this myth. Do not simply read the story, rather tell it, act it out, and give it life. Vary your tone, slow down at the dramatic moments, and whisper when the Spirits arrive. Great teachers are experts in the power of language, and this lesson invites you to embrace that gift fully.*

- The teacher gathers the children on the story mat and shows a short (silent) nature clip of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly found in the **4.2 Presentation**.

- Set the scene and show the world map, locating both Malta and Australia. Explain that the people of Australia tell stories from Dreamtime to explain the big mysteries of the world, like why the sun rises, why rivers flow, and even what happens when a living thing dies.

- Invite children to settle, take a breath, and prepare to travel to a faraway land through the power of a story.



## ACTIVITY

- The teacher tells the story below aloud, using using voice, gesture, and expression to bring the myth to life.

## STORY: THE BIRTH OF BUTTERFLIES

Long ago in the Dreamtime when the world was very young, all the birds and animals spoke the same language. All lived forever - no one ever died so none of the creatures knew about death.

One morning a young cockatoo was playing high up in a tree swinging on a branch when he slipped and fell to the ground landing on his head very hard. The other animals clapped but the cockatoo did not move.

They tried to wake him but he just lay there. A wise old wombat looked at the young bird and told the others that he had broken his neck. The animals believed that the spirits had done this so they called a meeting of all the animals under a big old gum tree to discuss this problem.

While they were talking, the Spirits came and took the little cockatoo up into the sky. The animals looked up and saw their friend wafting away into the sky. This puzzled the animals very much. Why had the Spirits taken their friend.

Wombat told the animals that the Spirits have taken the Cockatoo up into the sky so they can change him into something else. The animals agreed that someone should go up into the sky and wait and see what the Spirits do with their little Cockatoo friend - but who would do this as it was nearly winter.

Wombat asked all the animals but none of them wanted to go except for one. The Caterpillars agreed to go together up into the sky and make camp there for the winter and return in the warmth of spring to tell them what happened to little Cockatoo. In one huge wriggling cloud the Caterpillars went up into the sky and all the other animals went away and waited for spring.

When the winter was nearly over, Wombat called all the animals to search for the caterpillars but they could not find anything. They searched daily but would return with nothing. Then on the first warm day of spring, they saw them. A beautiful parade of brightly coloured wings. The first Butterflies!

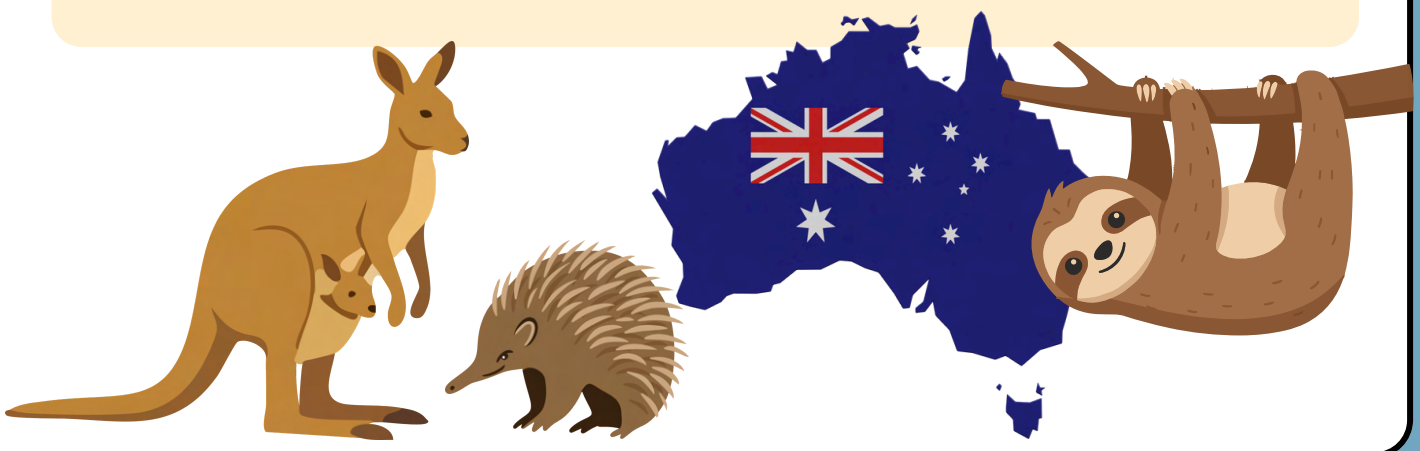
The animals realised then that these beautifully coloured creatures were proof that the Spirits had given the Caterpillars a new and beautiful shape and become a new creature and this had happened to their little Cockatoo friend. As the Butterflies settled in the trees, they made such a pretty sight that the old ones decided that this must always be.

So, ever since then, the caterpillars spend winter hidden in cocoons preparing to change into their beautiful spring bodies, just as they did long ago in the Dreamtime.



## DISCUSSION QUESTION EXEMPLARS

- How do you feel after listening to this story?
- Have you ever seen a butterfly in a garden and felt it meant something special?
- Why do you think the people who first told this story chose a butterfly to help them talk about death?
- In the story, the Spirits change the cockatoo into something new. Who or what do you think the Spirits are?
- The caterpillar becomes something very different, but it is still the same little life inside. Do you think people who have died are still with us in some way?
- The caterpillars were the smallest creatures, but the bravest. Why do you think being brave matters when we think about people who are no longer here?
- If you could be any creature in the story , the wise wombat, the little cockatoo, or one of the brave caterpillars, which would you be? Why?
- In the story, the Spirits change the cockatoo into something new. Who or what do you think the Spirits are?



## CONCLUSION

**The Butterfly**

- Provide children with the **4.2 Worksheet**. Children are invited to decorate their butterfly.

- Once finished, children can pin their butterfly to a board which the teacher can decorate with green paper grass and a blue sky to look like a garden. They can also share one thing they drew.



## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- As a movement adaptation, children can act out the myth by curling up small as 'caterpillars' under a soft scarf (cocoon), then slowly rising and 'flying' around the classroom as butterflies, accompanied by gentle music.

- Children take the **4.2 Worksheet** home and ask a family member, "Is there someone you would like me to remember on one of these wings?", bringing it back with a small addition for a follow-up session.

- The lesson plan can be adapted to the teacher's liking and the children's needs.

# The Birth of the Butterflies

Michael J Connolly
*Munda-gutta Kulliwari*
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Name: _____ Date: _____

# 1. **Remembering the Story**



**Tick the true sentences about our story from Australia:**

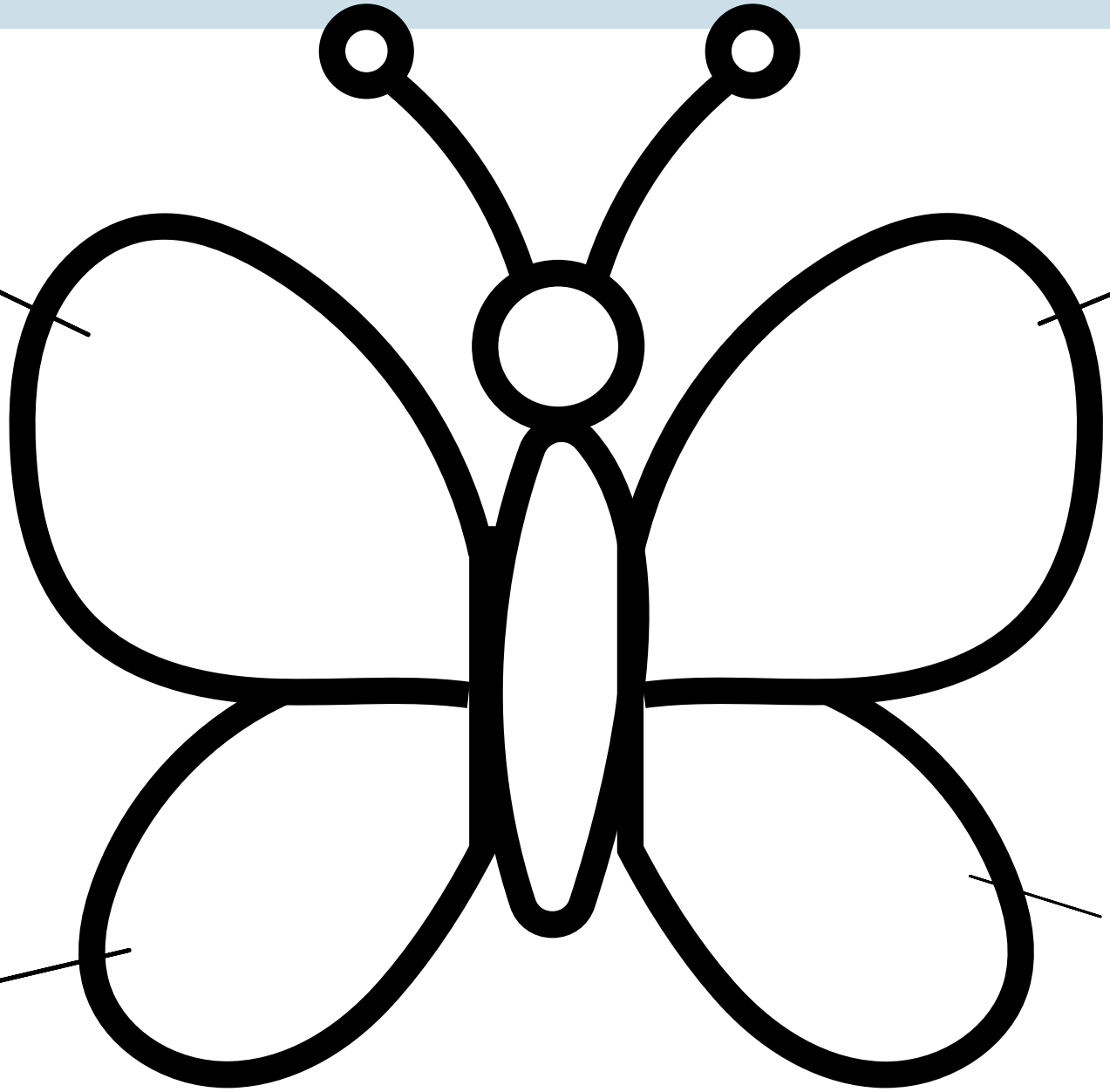
- ☐ The little cockatoo fell from a high gum tree.
- ☐ All the animals wanted to go up into the sky to see what happened to the cockatoo.
- ☐ The Spirits came and carried the cockatoo up into the sky.
- ☐ The caterpillars were the only ones brave enough to follow.
- ☐ On the first warm day of spring, the animals saw a parade of butterflies.

# 2. **Pictures and Meanings**

**Match the word to the meaning by drawing lines:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Dreamtime | A creature that changes and becomes something new. |
| Cocoon | A long-ago story time of the Aboriginal people. |
| Symbol | A quiet, hidden place for resting and changing. |
| Butterfly | A little picture that helps us talk about big feelings. |

# 3. Draw your Butterfly



Draw or write something lovely you remember.

Draw the face or the name of someone you love.

Draw a place where your heart feels calm.

Colour this wing with the colour that feels like love to you.

# 4.3 OUR CLASSROOM OBON LANTERNS

LESSON TITLE: **Our Classroom Obon Lanterns**

RITUAL-BASED

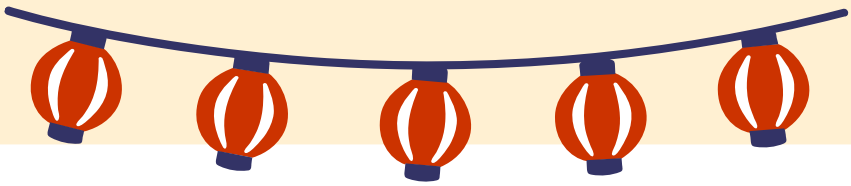
EXOTIC CULTURE

## RATIONALE

This activity is a child-friendly, sensitive, and meaningful way to introduce 7-year-olds to the Japanese Buddhist tradition of Obon, an annual festival during which the spirits of ancestors are believed to return to their family homes for a brief visit. Through the making and "floating" of simple paper chouchin (lanterns), children explore death, remembrance, and love as a gentle, luminous journey, discovering how a culture very different from their own expresses the ongoing bond between the living and those who have died.

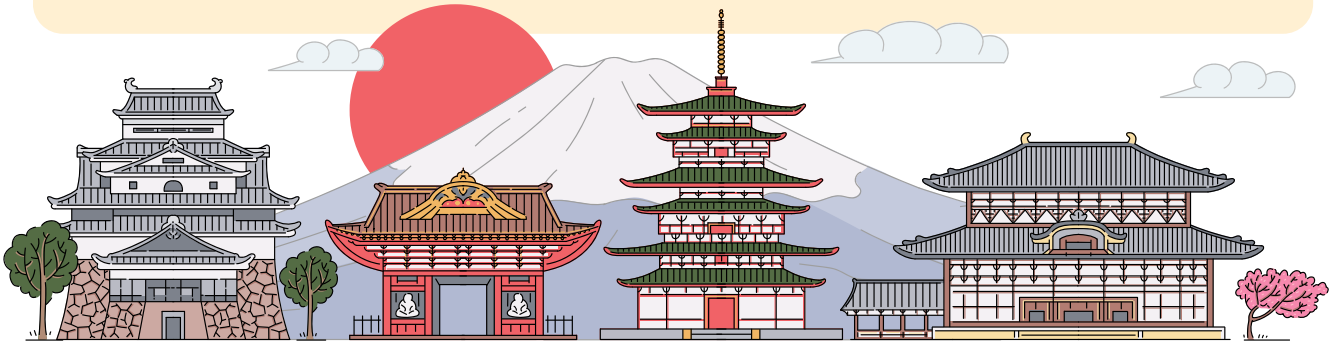
Symbolically, each element of the Obon lantern carries meaning: the paper lantern itself welcomes and shelters the spirit, the light inside represents the soul and the love that continues to shine across the boundary of death, the name or symbol written inside honours the person being remembered, and the act of floating the lantern embodies the soul's peaceful journey home across water, the threshold between worlds. These concrete symbols bridge abstract ideas about death, memory, and spiritual journey with safe, tangible classroom experiences.

Pedagogically, the session draws on sensory, embodied, and communal learning, crafting together, writing or drawing intentionally, moving quietly in a shared ceremony, and reflecting softly as a group. Obon is presented here as an exotic tradition, one that may feel unfamiliar to most children, inviting curiosity, respect, and wonder at how a distant culture celebrates a joyful memory festival for those who have died.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Discuss** death as a natural part of life that is marked with love and celebration in many cultures around the world.
- **Recognise** that the Obon lantern is a meaningful ritual symbol through which the Japanese Buddhist tradition of Obon expresses ongoing love, memory, and the spirit's journey home.
- **Experience** making and 'floating' a class set of paper lanterns safely and respectfully as a shared ritual.
- **Use concrete symbols** such as paper, light, written names or drawings, and water, to represent abstract ideas such as the soul, the continuing bond between the living and the dead, and the journey between worlds.
- **Connect** how an unfamiliar cultural tradition expresses universal themes of love, memory, and loss, broadening children's understanding beyond their own cultural horizon.

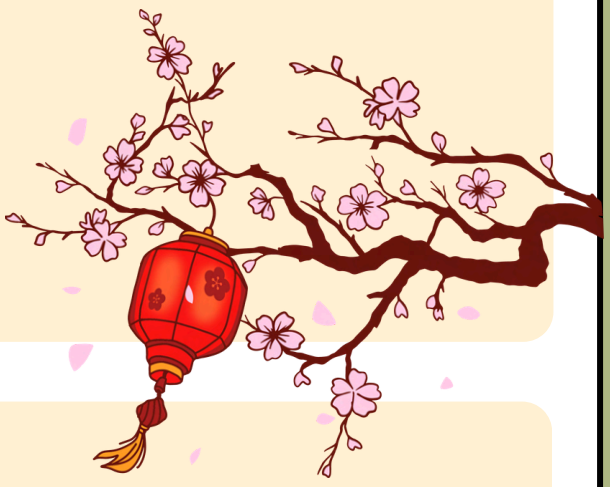


## MATERIALS

- A short video or a longer (Video 1 or Video 2) of an Obon lantern-floating ceremony.
- A world map or globe to locate Japan
- Plain A4 paper
- Lantern templates
- Scissors and glue sticks
- Crayons and coloured pencils
- Battery-operated tea lights (one per child)
- Blue fabric to represent the 'river'
- Calm Japanese instrumental music

## INTRODUCTION

- Set a warm, calm atmosphere.
- Show the short Obon lantern-floating clip on the screen.
- Invite children to share one word or feeling about what they saw.
- Locate Japan on the world map and explain that in Japan, families celebrate a summer festival called Obon. They believe that once a year, the spirits of people they loved who have died come back home for a short visit. Families light paper lanterns to welcome the spirits, and at the end of the festival, they float lit lanterns on rivers or the sea to guide the spirits gently back home.
- Explain today's activity.

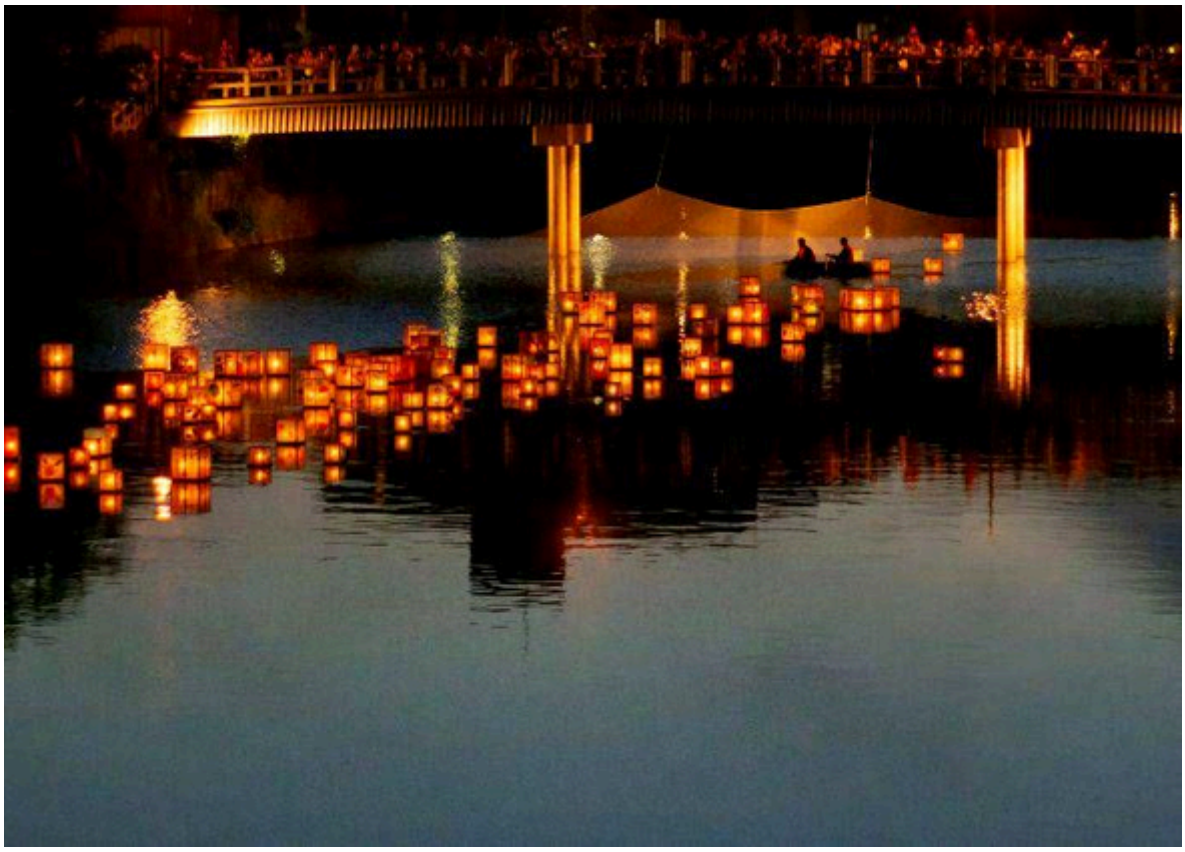


## ACTIVITY

- Give out the **4.3 Worksheet** to students to create the lanterns.
- Explain the symbolic meaning of each part of the lantern.
- Decorate the outside of the lantern with something beautiful to welcome a spirit.
- Write or draw inside the lantern the name, picture or a small symbol of someone (a person or a pet) they wish to remember.
- Place a battery-operated tea light inside and close the lantern.
- One by one, each child carries their glowing lantern to the 'river' (the blue cloth or tray of water) and gently places it down, saying the person's name softly or silently if they wish.

## CONCLUSION

- When everyone has had a chance to participate, invite the class to stand or sit quietly and watch the lights together for a moment.
- Offer a closing reflection.



## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Sentence starters can be written on the board to guide children into saying a few words if they wish.

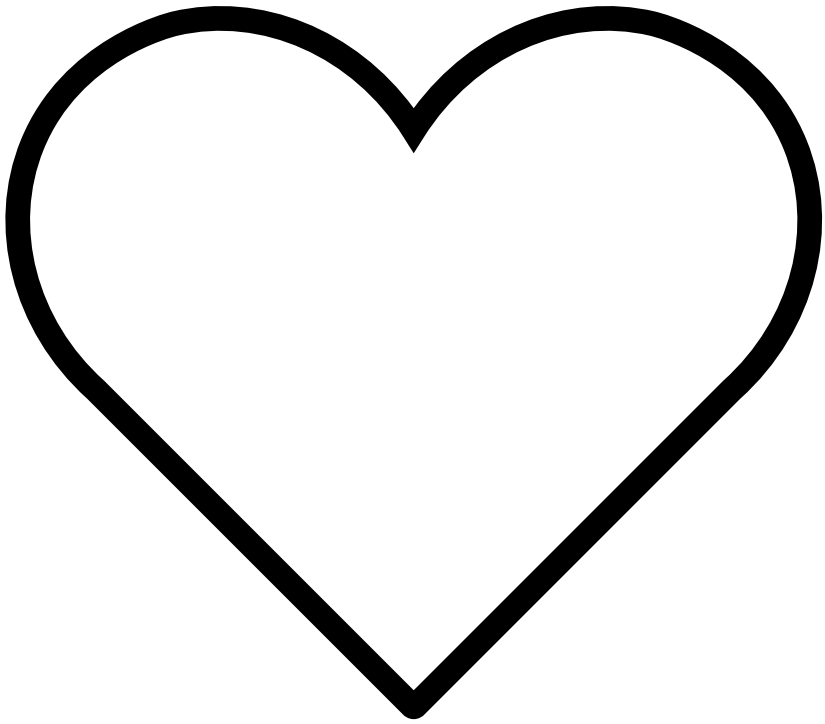
- Children who do not wish to speak can simply place their lantern on the 'river' and sit back down. Silence is respected as another form of remembrance.

- The teacher can adapt this ritual-based activity according to the teacher's and students' needs.

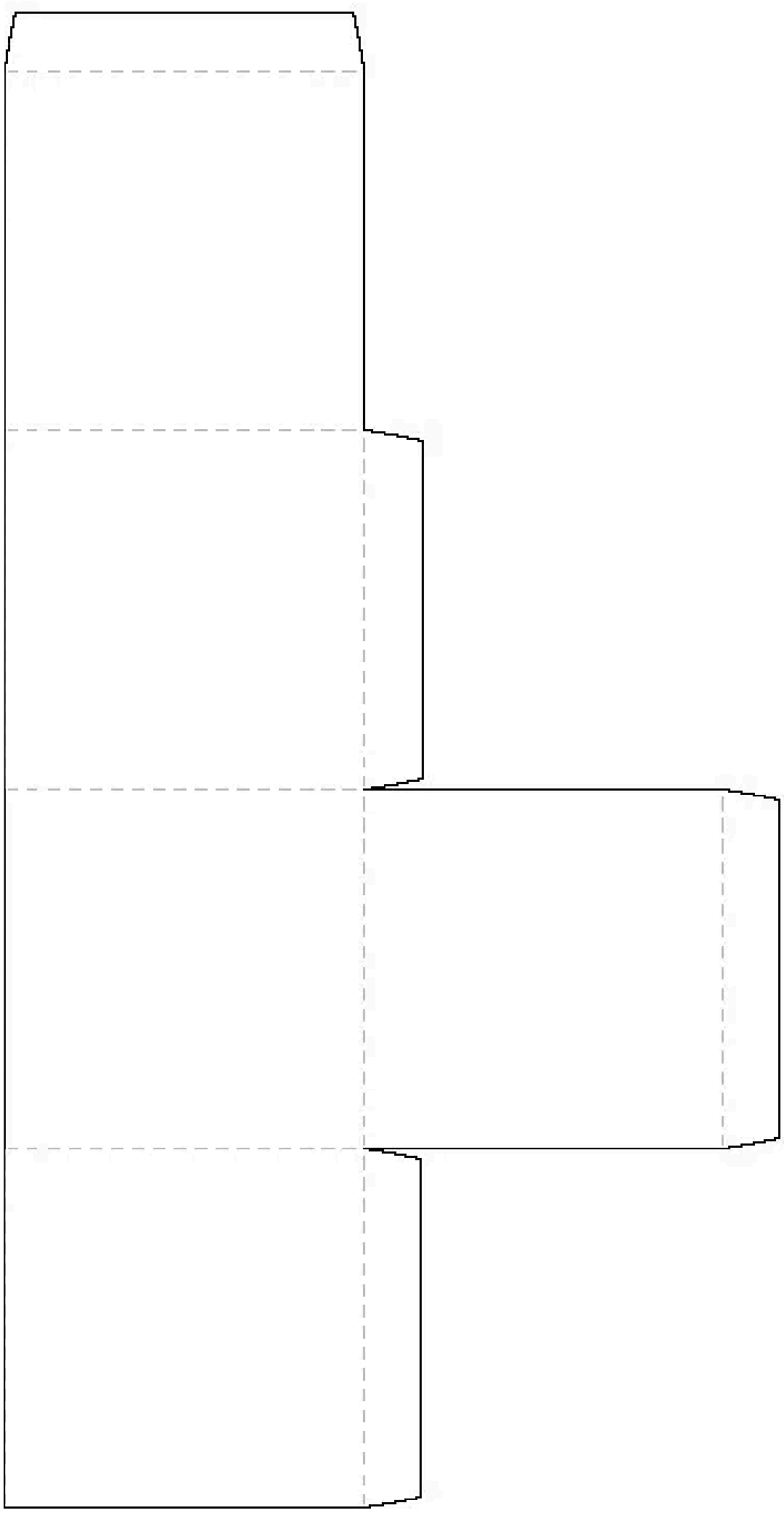
Name: _____ Date: _____

# My Obon Lantern

1. Write the name of someone you want to remember (a person or a pet, or draw them inside the heart, and cut it.



2. Colour and decorate the lantern below with gentle patterns like flowers, stars, waves, or anything beautiful to welcome a spirit.



# My Obon Lantern

## Symbol Key

| | |
|---|---|
| The lantern | A safe, beautiful home that welcomes the spirit |
| The light inside | The soul and the love that keeps shining |
| The name inside | The person or pet I am remembering |
| The water | The gentle path between our world and the spirit world |
| The floating journey | Guiding the spirit peacefully home |

***"When we remember the people and animals we love, their light keeps shining."***

# 4.4 TURKISH CEMETERY TREASURE HUNT

## LESSON TITLE: Turkish Cemetery Treasure Hunt

CLASS WITHOUT WALLS

EXOTIC CULTURE



## RATIONALE

This lesson uses the *classroom without walls* modality to bring children into direct, embodied contact with an exotic, non-Catholic funerary culture present in their own country: the 19th-century Ottoman Turkish (Islamic) cemetery at Marsa.

From a death education perspective, the Turkish Cemetery offers a gentle way to explore how another religious tradition honours the dead. The cemetery looks like a walled garden with flowers, minaret-like corner towers, and an entrance pavilion that recalls a tiny palace. This supports conversations about respect, beauty, and paradise imagery connected with burial places in Islam.

Historically, the cemetery was built in 1874 as a special burial place for Muslims from many countries (Ottoman Empire, North Africa, India, etc.) who died in Malta, including soldiers, sailors, and prisoners of war. It was financed by the Ottoman government and designed by Maltese architect Emanuele Luigi Galizia in a style inspired by Indo-Islamic and Ottoman architecture, sometimes even described as an 'Ottoman Taj Mahal' in Malta. Children thus encounter an exotic monument that is both Maltese and foreign at the same time: Maltese stone and craftsmanship, but Islamic design, Arabic-Ottoman inscriptions, and a crescent-topped dome.

The lesson helps children notice that this cemetery is different from Addolorata and other Christian cemeteries they may know (no statues of saints, no crosses, different languages), yet it shares similar purposes: honouring the dead, offering a peaceful place, and connecting living and dead through memory and prayer. It also opens a door to ethical respect for religious difference: we are guests in a sacred space and must behave with care. Walking through the Turkish Cemetery as 'symbol detectives' allows children to discover that Malta contains multiple ways of imagining death and the afterlife, including an exotic Islamic one, alongside the more familiar Christian practices they have seen.



## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- **Recognise** key visual features of the Turkish Cemetery (walled garden, minaret-like corner towers, small onion dome with crescent, central path, entrance hall, prayer/washing rooms, simple tombstones).
- **Identify** at least three Islamic/Ottoman symbols or features connected to death and burial (crescent and star, turbans on tombstones, Arabic-Ottoman script, garden full of flowers as a picture of paradise).
- **Discuss** how this cemetery was built for Muslims from different countries (e.g. Turkey, North Africa, India) and that it represents an exotic funerary culture living inside Maltese space.
- **Notice** and **describe** at least two differences and one similarity between the Turkish Cemetery and a familiar Christian cemetery such as Addolorata (e.g. symbols used, architecture, language on graves, garden feel, purpose of honouring the dead).
- **Practise** close looking, respectful behaviour, and descriptive language as tools for symbolic literacy and cross-cultural understanding about death.

## INTRODUCTION

- Ask children what cemeteries they already know in Malta and what they look like (crosses, statues, chapels, white stones, flowers).

- Explain that today they will visit a special exotic cemetery in Malta that belongs to Muslims, many of them from other countries such as Turkey, North Africa, and India. You can say: 'This is a resting place for Muslim people who died long ago in or near Malta, many of them soldiers and sailors, and also some who were prisoners of war during the World Wars.'

- Set the tone of respect.

## ACTIVITY

- Give the **4.4 Turkish Cemetery Treasure Hunt Worksheet** to each student.
- Walk together as one group through the cemetery, moving slowly along the central path and stopping at key point.
- Students use their senses to observe, and find the treasures.

## TREASURE HUNT ANSWERS & KEY DEATH EDUCATION POINTS

**TREASURE 1: The Garden Wall and Minaret-Towers**

- The cemetery is completely surrounded by a stone wall, with thin round three-storey minaret-like towers at each corner, marking it clearly as a special, sacred space. This creates a feeling of enclosure and protection, separating the world of the dead inside from daily life outside at Marsa, and gives the place a clearly Islamic and exotic look.

**TREASURE 2: The Entrance Gateway with Crescent Dome**

- The entrance pavilion is a square vaulted room with corner minaret turrets and a small onion dome topped by a crescent, giving an Indo-Islamic, almost fairy-tale flavour inspired by Brighton's Royal Pavilion. Over the outer portal there is the tughra (royal calligraphic emblem) of Sultan Abdülaziz and the date 1290 AH/1874 CE, linking the cemetery to the Ottoman Empire and showing official care for Muslim dead in Malta.

**TREASURE 3: The Long Path and Flower-Filled Garden**

- A central path runs from the entrance to the opposite building, creating strong bilateral symmetry in the layout. The burial ground is often covered in flowers, especially in spring, intentionally evoking the image of paradise as the believer's final home in Islamic tradition.

**TREASURE 4: The Prayer Hall and Washing Room**

- Opposite the entrance stands an open hall with three horseshoe arches and a wooden ceiling, with a marble plaque. On each side are rooms for burial ceremonies: traditionally a prayer space and a room where the body is washed and wrapped in a white shroud before burial. This allows discussion that, in Islam, washing and wrapping the dead is an important act of love and respect.

**TREASURE 5: The Turban-Topped Tombstones**

- Some of the oldest tombstones (early 19th century) are upright steles topped with carved turbans, following classic Ottoman patterns. Different turban shapes once showed the social group or role of the deceased (traders, Janissary soldiers, religious workers), although much detail is now lost. This gently introduces the idea that symbols on graves can show identity, status, and community.

**<u>TREASURE 6:</u> The Crescent and Star**

- Some tombstones bear a crescent and star, plus Arabic formulas such as 'He is the Forgiving' and 'We belong to God and to Him we will return.' These symbols show religious identity and link Malta's small cemetery to the wider Muslim world, while the texts gently express the belief that death is a return to God.

**<u>TREASURE 7:</u> Soldiers, Sailors, and Workers from Many Lands**

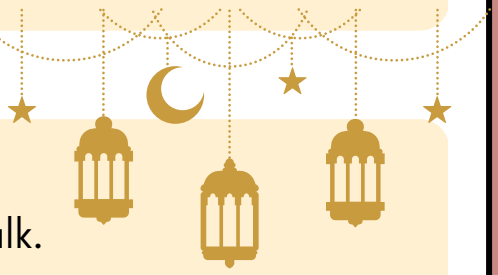
- Many graves belong to Muslim soldiers, sailors, and labourers who died in or near Malta during the First and Second World Wars; the cemetery was used for military dead until 1988. Names and inscriptions reveal people from India, Egypt, Algeria and other parts of the Muslim world, making this a truly international, exotic resting place embedded in Maltese soil.



## CONCLUSION

- Gather the students in a quiet spot after the walk. First, ask the children about their feelings: 'How did you feel walking through this cemetery? Did anything surprise you, make you curious, or feel different from what you expected?'
- 
- Then ask a few simple reflection questions such as 'What did you notice that was different from Addolorata or other cemeteries you know?' 'What was similar?'

- End with a brief wonder moment. You can say: 'All over the world, people have found different ways to remember their dead. We have seen a big Christian cemetery like Addolorata, and now this smaller Turkish Muslim cemetery. Both show that death is something people care about very much, even if their symbols and buildings look very different.'



## POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

- Reduce to less treasures for a shorter walk.

- Bring simple printed images of other Islamic cemeteries or mosques (with crescents, domes, gardens) to help children see that the Marsa cemetery belongs to a global Muslim visual world.

- After the visit, ask children to draw their favourite feature (e.g. a turban tombstone, corner tower, or crescent dome) and dictate or write one sentence about what they think it shows about how Muslims honour the dead.

- Always adapt this lesson plan to your liking and to the children's needs.

Name: _____ Date: _____

# TURKISH CEMETERY TREASURE HUNT

***An Exotic Resting Place in Malta***

**RULES & INSTRUCTIONS:**

- We will walk together as one group through the cemetery.
- We will walk quietly and show respect to the dead and to Muslim traditions.
- We are guests in a sacred place. We are here to look, notice, and learn.
- Tell an adult if you feel unsure or if something worries you.

**Treasure 1:**

I am a high stone wall that goes all around this special place. At my four corners stand tall, thin round towers that look like the minarets of a faraway mosque. I keep the resting place safe and quiet inside.

Who am I?

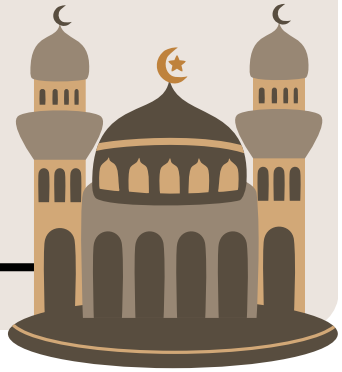
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**Treasure 2:**

You pass under me to enter. I have two columns and a curved horseshoe arch. On top of me sits a little round dome with a crescent moon, like something from a fairy-tale palace in the East.

Who am I?



**Treasure 3:**

I am a long straight path that runs through the whole cemetery. On both sides of me grow flowers and graves. In spring I look like a colourful garden, reminding people of paradise.

Who am I?



**Treasure 4:**

I am a building with three arches that faces the garden. Inside me people prayed for the dead. In small rooms beside me, bodies were gently washed and wrapped in a white sheet before burial.

Who am I?



**Treasure 5:**

I am a stone standing upright like a little person. On top of me is a carved 'hat' that looks like cloth wrapped around a head. Long ago, my shape told people what job or group the dead person belonged to.

Who am I?



**Treasure 6:**

I am carved into some of the tombstones. I am a curved moon together with a star. I show that the person resting here followed the faith of Islam.

Who am I?

**Treasure 7:**

I am a simple flat stone with a name, a job, and a date. I might belong to a sailor from India, a worker from Egypt, or a soldier from Algeria. I died far from home, in war or at sea, and I rest here in Malta with others.

Who am I?

