



Never again: Disaster memory and education for social justice after Grenfell

Following on from Issue 60 and integrating disaster education into Citizenship education, we learn about the Grenfell Curriculum and why it is essential to teach about this in the classroom so that, as the authors write, “‘never again’ becomes more than a slogan and education becomes part of the struggle for justice”. This is a very powerful and evocative piece of writing; read with a sensitive mind.



The frequency of human-made technological disasters – infrastructure collapses, hazardous material releases, transportation catastrophes, nuclear accidents and biotech/pharmaceutical failures – has risen dramatically in recent decades. As researchers, we explore how education can enable individuals and societies to learn from such events and contribute to building more just and equitable communities. Central to this endeavour is nurturing reflective and transformative citizenship in young people, through educational initiatives that cultivate critical awareness of technological risk, ethical responsibility and civic engagement.

In the last few years, we have collaborated closely with the families affected by the Grenfell Tower tragedy that occurred on 14 June 2017, when a catastrophic fire engulfed a 24-storey residential tower block in North Kensington, London. The fire, which began in a faulty refrigerator on the fourth floor, spread with alarming speed, due to highly flammable cladding installed during a recent renovation. The building's single stairwell, lack of sprinklers and inadequate fire safety measures

trapped many residents. The disaster claimed 72 lives and left hundreds homeless. Subsequent investigations revealed multiple regulatory failures, cost-cutting measures and ignored safety warnings.

Grenfell and the struggle for recognition

Since the fire, many survivors spent months or even years in temporary accommodation, hotels or unsuitable housing. The public inquiry and criminal proceedings have moved at a glacial pace, delaying justice despite clear evidence of regulatory failures and corporate negligence. Many bereaved families and survivors have felt excluded from decision-making processes regarding memorialisation and rebuilding, while companies involved in the refurbishment have shown little accountability.

Amid this ongoing injustice, the Grenfell community's activism exemplifies what Honneth (1996) describes as the struggle for recognition, offering profound implications for how we conceptualise and teach Citizenship in contemporary Britain. The emotional trauma of losing loved ones has been compounded by inadequate support

services, undermining the community's fundamental need for care and emotional recognition. The protracted inquiry and lack of criminal accountability signify a failure of legal recognition, effectively denying them their full status as rights-bearing citizens, deserving of equal protection and justice. Equally devastating has been the denial of social esteem – residents' warnings before the disaster were ignored and their voices marginalised in recovery efforts. The story of the Grenfell families reveals the systemic denial of their dignity and how the country has failed to recognise and listen to them.

Education has been a cornerstone of community-led disaster activism since the fire. In July 2017, the Grenfell Education Fund was established via a motion to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council. As a form of restorative justice, it supports children and young people affected by the tragedy by removing barriers to education – offering financial aid, tuition, extra-curricular opportunities, bursaries and advocacy.

Art and music have also played a vital role in community activism and education. At Kensington Aldridge Academy, the school closest to the tower, students undertook a project to write and perform a musical telling the story of their school – from its founding to the present day. The performance expressed their pride in the community, celebrated the courage and compassion that they have shown one another and looked ahead to their hopes for the future (Butter, 2019). In addition, 13-year-olds Yousra Cherbika and Johara Menacer released a tribute song for their friend who died in the Grenfell fire. Writing helped them to cope with trauma and honour victims' lives, aiming to raise awareness and ensure that their voices are heard (Butter, 2018).

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Co-constructing how we teach about Grenfell with the local community

It is against this backdrop that we started our community-engaged project to co-construct how we should teach about Grenfell with the local community in North Kensington. Supported by Research England and the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account, the 'Grenfell Curriculum' project has worked with over 70 people in the local community who were affected by the fire or people who have been involved in the recovery efforts since the fire. Drawing on their lived experiences and knowledge, we developed key principles for teaching about Grenfell and similar tragedies (Park et al., 2025).



While Grenfell is often associated solely with the fire, community members stressed that its story began before June 2017 and continues today. Furthermore, they highlighted the need for teaching to recognise both the positives and the negatives of the before, during and after the fire, placing emphasis on displaying the tight-knitted nature of the community as a positive alongside the negative of institutional neglect. Having this balance of positive and negative led to discussions of 'right' and 'wrong', with recommendations emphasising the need to engage learners with the hard facts and truths of the tragedy. We saw first-hand the importance of different perspectives of justice for the community, with the unresolved nature of Grenfell surfacing the differences between justice and law; from this, teaching justice would demand teachers being able to distinguish between the current laws and resolutions related to Grenfell and wider justice. Justice also heavily links to recommendations regarding teaching Citizenship, with an emphasis on responsibility and being a good neighbour, alongside connecting Grenfell to a more general idea of citizenship.

Recommendations on *how* to teach about Grenfell were also considered, with a focus on being educationally meaningful, empowering and sensitive to the community. One technique for this was through art-based approaches, which were repeatedly spoken of in relation to therapeutic responses to Grenfell. We learned of the various informal learning and memorialisation activities that helped the community to process emotions and memories. We also came to understand how powerful creative and artistic mediums were for the community's emotional recovery. This emotional recovery also demands recommendations regarding trauma-informed education; whether working with explicit Grenfell content or with the arts, we heard a clear need for teachers working on the topic to compassionately respond to their learners' and their own needs.

From these discussions, we distilled three key recommendations:

1. **Cross-curricular and lifelong learning:** Grenfell should be taught across subjects and educational levels, in and out of school.
2. **Focus on truth and community stories:** Teaching should centre the lived experiences and truths of those affected, developing learners' ethical and civic sensibilities.
3. **Sensitive and respectful pedagogy:** Grenfell is a recent and ongoing national tragedy. Education must reflect this, with age-appropriate, trauma-informed and community-sensitive approaches.



The value of active listening

Educators who have taught about Grenfell shared their experiences with us. One particularly powerful lesson was developed and delivered by a bereaved family member to a GCSE English class. The lesson began by introducing Grenfell and the Grenfell Testimony Week – a restorative space where survivors and families shared their stories.

Students watched a video of Bill Marsh, the Testimony Week mediator, who opened the event by saying:

"I want to say something about the process and structure of this week, but before I do that, I want to say a bit about listening because that is a critical aspect of this week, as has been indicated already. This is particularly important because the vast majority of us here, probably 80 or 90% of those here, are here for that very purpose: to listen.

It is, I think, quite rare in society that generally we truly listen to people. Usually, when we listen, we're thinking of our own opinions, our own responses, our own views on the subject. This event, this event is to give a voice to those who have felt voiceless. Them having a platform, a chance to speak this week, is part of that. But they are only truly given a voice when we truly listen."

Following this, students were tasked with analysing Marsh's speech by identifying adjectives, verbs, adverbs, similes and metaphors. They were then asked to complete two assignments:

1. How does the writer use language to engage and inform the reader?
2. Write a summary of the text, including three separate themes, each supported by evidence.

This lesson exemplified how literacy education can integrate critical reflection and ethical engagement, by learning how to listen to the stories of others with care and attention. It not only conveyed the facts of the disaster but also foregrounded the emotional and ethical responsibility to listen, making space for young people to hear voices that are often silenced or ignored in mainstream narratives. Listening also has implications for how we think about Citizenship. In contexts of trauma and injustice, the act of listening can itself be a form of civic action. It acknowledges the full humanity of others and creates the conditions for solidarity.

Rethinking Citizenship after Grenfell

As well as Grenfell being a topic within the Citizenship curriculum, it more profoundly raises questions about the nature of citizenship itself, in forcing us to ask what kinds of citizens are needed to avoid such tragedies in the future, and therefore what could be in the curriculum in the future. Some elements of this resonate with current expectations, but some are newer.

Among the existing elements, the historic constitutional principle of rule of law is shown in stark relief. Rule of law is often imagined in more long-standing examples, such as criminal law issues, or the principle that everyone is under the law, usually thought of as being about individuals. Here, it is shown in more humdrum building regulations, in that the disaster occurred in part because several organisations – both businesses and Government – broke the law, either intentionally or through neglect. For example, the second-phase report stated:

"The dishonest strategies of Arconic and Kingspan [two suppliers of cladding] succeeded in a large measure due to the incompetence of the BBA, its failure to adhere robustly to the system of checks it had put in place, and an ingrained willingness to accommodate customers instead of insisting on high standards and adherence to a contract that was intended to maintain them." (Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2024, para. 2.42, emphasis added)

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Thus, the two companies deliberately broke the law. The BBA is the British Board of Agrément, a commercial organisation tasked with checking that products comply with the law, and which the inquiry here considered was negligent in its duties. Further, the Government was also negligent, in that the ‘Local Authority Building Control’, which supports local government on these issues, was also implicated by rubber-stamping products:

"There was a complete failure on the part of the LABC over a number of years to take basic steps to ensure that the certificates it issued in respect of them were technically accurate." (para. 2.47)

Put differently, if everyone had either followed the law or done their job of upholding the law, things might have been different. Further, these examples are not just of the usually less-noticed types of laws and regulations, but they are also about the civic duties of organisations – and of individuals within those organisations. It is not just that ‘I’ or ‘you’ must obey the law, but that the business or public body for whom we work must also do so – and that its obligations also fall on us, since it can only act through its management and staff. Citizenship is not simply about us as individuals and our rights and responsibilities in ourselves; it is also in the world of work. The current curriculum merely highlights “the roles played by public institutions and voluntary groups in society” (DfE, 2013, Key Stage 3) but not businesses, with only voluntary organisations identified as sites of citizenship. Economics is only covered by “income and expenditure, credit and debt, insurance, savings and pensions, financial products and services, and how public money is raised and spent” (Key Stage 4), i.e. only personal or national finances but not one’s responsibilities in work.

The need to recognise this ‘organisational citizenship’ is particularly evident in the recent development of requirements for organisations, especially public ones, to be more open and transparent after disasters. Grenfell here is one among several disasters that have led to this change. The most well-known example of this is the ‘Hillsborough Charter’ – also the ‘Charter for Families Bereaved by Public Tragedy’ – which was signed by the UK Government on 6 December 2023; 50 Welsh public bodies signed it on 18 March 2025, at a ceremony including survivors of Hillsborough, Grenfell, Manchester Arena and Aberfan. Another example is the infected blood scandal from the 1970s (Infected Blood Inquiry, 2025). The Hillsborough Charter includes the expectations that those in Government:

“Place the public interest above our own reputation. Approach forms of public scrutiny – including public inquiries and inquests – with candour, in an open, honest and transparent way, making full disclosure of relevant documents, material and facts. Our objective is to assist the search for the truth. We accept that we should learn from the findings of external scrutiny and from past mistakes.” (UK Government, 2023)

There is therefore an expectation not simply of honesty in speech but also of active disclosure, to speak out and not just to stay silent. There may also be situations when this is about the treatment of others within one’s own organisation, as the Post Office scandal shows, and those in positions of authority in a quasi-governmental body have not spoken out candidly.

Further, as the fuller title makes clear, the responsibility of these organisations is to support the victims and bereaved. As Bishop James Jones, who wrote the charter after chairing the Hillsborough Inquiry, said at the Welsh event:

“The charter represents a promise that after any future tragedy no one will be left to navigate their grief and survival alone. That no one will endure again the ‘patronising disposition of unaccountable power.’” (Quoted in Mining Remediation Authority, 2025)

In such circumstances, therefore, we can expect, as citizens, that we will be treated in this way by public bodies, but also that these demands will fall on those who work within these organisations. The organisations and their employees have obligations to those who have suffered and an obligation not to protect reputations or safeguard against compensation.

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Grenfell and these other disasters have therefore reiterated the importance of some basic principles of civic life, but have also both extended them to forms of corporate responsibility and created new rights and responsibilities of disclosure and support.

Towards a justice-oriented education after disaster

Grenfell is not only a site of loss but also a site of ongoing resistance, memory and civic learning. Education must play a central role in honouring the lives lost, amplifying the voices of the bereaved and fostering a more just society. Our work with the Grenfell community demonstrates that teaching about disasters must move beyond technical explanations or emotional responses alone. It must cultivate ethical responsibility, political awareness and collective care, through trauma-informed, community-centred and justice-oriented pedagogies. It also demands a reconceptualisation of Citizenship – one that includes organisational accountability, truth-telling and solidarity with those affected by public tragedies. As educators, we have a duty not only to teach about what went wrong, but also to create the conditions for a different future – one in which ‘never again’ becomes more than a slogan and education becomes part of the struggle for justice. ●

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