

Education and Memorialisation for Disaster Justice

Lessons from Grenfell, Hillsborough and Sewol

The challenge

In the aftermath of tragic disasters, how can societies ensure that justice is served, memories are honoured, and lessons are learned to prevent future disasters? This challenge lies at the heart of disaster justice—a multifaceted concept that encompasses accountability, remembrance, and education.

This policy brief synthesises the key insights from a webinar on ‘Education and Memorialisation for Disaster Justice’, hosted by the University of Southampton¹ in February 2024. The webinar brought together participants from three different communities and was attended by academics in various disciplines, as well as disaster families, activists, and charities.

Chaired by Dr Wonyong Park (University of Southampton), three presentations were made to share the education and memorialisation activities following the Hillsborough disaster (1989), the Sewol Ferry disaster (2014) and the Grenfell Tower fire (2017). After a reflection and discussion by Professor Phil Scraton (Queen’s University Belfast), participants discussed issues that emerged across the three disasters.

Summarising these discussions, this brief highlights challenges and proposes actionable recommendations for education policymakers and curriculum designers to advance disaster justice through informed education and meaningful remembrance.

“How can societies ensure that justice is served, memories are honoured, and lessons are learned to prevent future disasters?”

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Case study: The Hillsborough disaster

The Hillsborough disaster occurred on April 15, 1989, during an FA Cup semi-final match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, England. A human crush in the overcrowded Leppings Lane stand led to the deaths of 97 Liverpool fans and injuries to hundreds more. The tragedy was exacerbated by poor stadium design, inadequate crowd control, and failures in emergency response. Initial police reports falsely blamed the fans, but subsequent investigations revealed systemic failures and a cover-up by authorities. The disaster led to significant changes in stadium safety standards and police procedures in the UK.

The Real Truth Legacy Project² is an initiative launched by Ian Byrne MP in 2021 to educate all generations about the Hillsborough disaster, emphasising the injustice and cover-up by the authorities. It seeks to correct the false narratives propagated by the media and state agencies. The project, supported across Liverpool City Region, includes educational toolkits for schools. The educational materials link Hillsborough to other prominent social campaigns such as the Suffragettes movement and Black Lives Matter movement. In January 2022, Liverpool City Council approved an annual ‘Hillsborough Day’ for all schools in the region. The project has expanded nationally, with educational materials distributed to schools across the UK, and continues to advocate for the inclusion of Hillsborough education nationwide. Ian and his team are striving to add Hillsborough to the National Curriculum.³



Case study: Grenfell tower fire

The Grenfell Tower fire broke out on 14 June 2017 in North Kensington, London, engulfing the 24-storey residential building in flames and leaving 72 people dead. The fire started in a fourth-floor flat and spread quickly due to the building's combustible external cladding, which had been added during a major refurbishment in 2012. Inadequate safety measures, poor maintenance and regulatory failures contributed to the severity of the disaster. Many residents were trapped due to misleading fire safety advice and lack of effective evacuation procedures. Survivors were forced to live in poor temporary housing for years and were not treated fairly. The tragedy led to widespread scrutiny of cladding in the UK, with many buildings found to be non-compliant with fire safety building regulations.

The Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission⁴ was set up to develop a truly community-led vision for a memorial, working with bereaved families, survivors, residents of the Lancaster West Estate and people living close to Grenfell Tower. Led by 10 community representatives, the Commission heard the views of 2,259 people on the memorial. The recommendations highlighted that the community should remain at the heart of decisions and that the memorial should be a sacred and enduring place of remembrance, reflecting the rich mix of faiths and cultural backgrounds in the Grenfell community.⁵ The Grenfell community has initiated various educational projects, including those led by youth groups such as Kids on The Green and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Youth Council.

Case study: The Sewol ferry disaster

The Sewol ferry disaster occurred off the coast of South Korea on 16 April 2014, resulting in the deaths of 304 passengers, many of whom were students at Danwon High School in Ansan. The ferry was travelling from Incheon to Jeju Island when it capsized due to a combination of illegal modifications that destabilised the vessel, overloading and poor cargo securing. The crew's mishandling of the situation, including delayed evacuation orders and abandoning ship, exacerbated the tragedy. The South Korean government's inadequate emergency response further fuelled public outrage. The disaster led to nationwide grief, extensive investigations, and significant changes in maritime safety regulations and emergency response protocols in South Korea.

The 4.16 Memory Archives is a non-profit organisation that collect and preserve documents, testimonies, and artefacts related to the Sewol disaster. These records serve not only as a memorial but also as an educational tool, ensuring that the stories and lessons of the Sewol tragedy are passed on to future generations. They are currently working towards the artefacts and documents to be recognised by the UNESCO Memory of the World.

After a seven-year-long campaign by bereaved families in pursuit of justice, in 2021 the Gyeonggi Provincial Office of Education established **the 4.16 Institute for Life and Safety Education**.⁶ The Institute features 'memory classrooms', where the classrooms and everything in them – desks, chairs, blackboards, lockers, clocks, doors and windows, and personal belongings of the lost students – have been restored and preserved by professionals. Bereaved parents work as guides for visitors to raise public awareness and promote a culture of remembrance, memory, hope and solidarity. The Institute offers educational programmes for primary and secondary school students, teachers and parents, organised around the core principles of remembrance and empathy.⁷

Recommendations

1. Teaching about disasters as national memory

The three examples above illustrate that disasters are critical sites of national memory, revealing how systemic failures impact collective understanding. Teaching about these events is essential for preserving historical truth, fostering social accountability, and ensuring that national traumas are neither forgotten nor repeated.

2. Combating misinformation and promoting truth

Education and memorialisation are crucial in preventing the spread of misinformation about disasters and in promoting the truth. By incorporating accurate accounts of these events into educational curricula and memorial practices, we can counter state-led or media-driven misinformation that often distorts the reality of such tragedies. Education about disasters can empower learners to challenge false narratives, demand accountability and advocate for meaningful change.

3. Creating learning opportunities for all citizens

Opportunities to learn about disasters should be provided for citizens of all ages, in both formal and informal settings. This can include the inclusion of disasters in national, local and school curricula; school assemblies to remember and learn from disasters; educational spaces within memorials and museums; out-of-school programmes for young people and adults; and literature and arts-based programmes.

4. Centring community voices

The experiences of those who have suffered and endured disasters should be at the heart of decisions about how we remember and teach about disasters. Emphasising the experiences of survivors and the bereaved, and placing disasters in the society's political and historical context, can empower younger generations to challenge the official narratives that often obscure the voices of communities.



References

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