

TRAUMA AND GRIEF IN THE CLASSROOM: CREATING A SPACE FOR EMPATHY, COMPASSION, AND ALLYSHIP

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As I stood in front of my class and looked out at their faces, I found myself at a loss for words. Several of my students were quietly weeping; others sat wide-eyed and stunned. The grief in the air was heavy, and I felt helpless under its weight. I naively told them to get out their textbooks and try to read, and I agonized over what I should do next, over what I could say. I can remember wringing my hands and looking around, praying for a lifeline. At that moment, a trusted colleague walked by my classroom and looked in; she sensed my helplessness, my incompetence. She entered the room and began, “Hi guys. Why don’t you put down your books, and let’s talk about this.” She said all the right things and eased their grief in that moment. My class soon was engaged in a cathartic conversation—a testimony of sorts—about their classmate, their dear friend, who had died in a car accident that weekend. I sat on the periphery of the conversation, really on the periphery of my abilities to be an empathetic, compassionate teacher and ally to my students. While I had experienced the devastating deaths of students and students’ loved ones in my short career up to that point, I had yet to experience the weight of a tragedy like this placed directly in front of me, begging me to be better and to do better, to engage in both hearing and responding.

It is difficult to write about this experience and to come to terms with the feeling of naiveté and ineptitude, to acknowledge that I did not know how to handle this situation. As an experienced teacher now, as one who has lived through many different situations with students and who has experienced great loss myself, I see my younger self as novice and unprepared, maybe too insulated in the world in which I was raised and lived. I often come back to that day in my classroom, that day when I was so inept, so unprepared to support my students in their grief, in the heaviness of their emotions. I was a good teacher at that time; my instructional methods were sound, and I had excellent rapport with my students. I was organized and consistently evaluated at a high level. But none of that, and none of my own life experiences, prepared me for that moment with my students. And it was a moment in which they needed me. Desperately.

The truth is—there is no class in teacher preparation that teaches us how to be prepared when a student dies, when a student loses a parent or a relative or a dear friend. There is no handbook for what to do when we sense a student has an eating disorder or is slowly sinking under the weight of depression. Pre-service teacher programs are, more often than not, devoid of classes that prepare teachers for the realities of grief, depression, anxiety, racism, classism, sexism, and so much more that students must contend with in their lives. There is no class called Trauma 101 in which pre-service teachers learn the correct reactions, the correct responses. (Is there even a correct response?) But the reality is that teachers, often by the simple rule of proximity, are the first responders, the confidantes. Teachers are called on to triage when students’ lives are upended or even when students’ lives are simply off-kilter. And this is hard.

I have chosen to write about teachers’ classroom lives and the pervasive presence of trauma and grief because it is not something that is discussed enough. Our teachers are woefully underprepared and then, consequently, overwhelmed when dealing with all that students bring with them into the classroom. In short—It’s a lot. Teachers are often

looked to “for advice, comfort, and support” (Pereira-Webber & Pereira-Webber, 2014, p. 103). In the wake of tragedy, students often share that “it was our teachers who provided the crucial support that enabled our class to cope” (Pereira-Webber & Pereira-Webber, 2014, p. 103). The act of teaching calls us to see and hear—to critically witness—our students. Critical witnessing (Dutro, 2011) asks us to both listen to and engage with our students. It is what I was unable to do all those years ago in that classroom. For me, listening to and acknowledging the heavy feelings and grief in the room and then connecting to it while acknowledging that there are certainly distinct differences in my own experiences and those of my students was just so difficult. As teachers, though, we are called to witness the experiences—the grief, the trauma, the emotions, the sorrow, the sheer weight—of all of our students. It is part of the job. I believe that through critical witnessing and testimony (Dutro, 2011) teachers can begin their journey to the practice of an emotional pedagogy (Densmore-James & Yocum, 2015) that can create a space for empathy, compassion, and allyship.



Whenever I think about the act of teaching, I return to a passage in William Ayers’ (2001) book *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*. Ayers says that teaching “includes a splendorous range of actions” (p. 4). He says, “teaching is instructing, advising, counseling, organizing, assessing, guiding, goading, showing, managing, modeling, coaching, disciplining, prodding, preaching, persuading, proselytizing, listening, interacting, nursing, and inspiring” (p. 4). I know this to be true. I have lived it. But I was *not* prepared for it. And I worry that many young teachers are not prepared for it either.

So what are we confronting in our classrooms today? According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2020a, 2020b), 17% of youth ages 6-17 experience a mental health disorder, and only 51% of those youth get treatment in a given year. Alyssa Nadworny (2015) found that, “1 in 20 children will lose a parent by the time he or she graduates from high school. And that doesn’t include the many more kids who will lose a sibling, grandparent or close friend” (para. 7). Further, “7 out of 10 teachers have a student currently in their classroom who is grieving” (para. 8). Students are engaging in more screen time and social media interactions than ever. Researchers tell us that the increased use of social media and screen time has coincided with increased levels of anxiety and depression in our young people (Barrett, 2018). As of the writing of this essay, we are in the 10th month of a global pandemic, which has resulted in roughly 73% of all school districts engaging in remote learning for their students (Lieberman, 2020, para. 2), which, in turn, limits students’ access to mental health services, as “schools are ‘the de facto mental health system for many children and adolescents’” (Terada, 2020, para. 13). These statistics do not even begin to tell the whole story. We have students who suffer from a large range of trauma: mental and physical ailments; grief; bullying; homelessness; abuse; lack of access to resources, food, support, medication, and healthcare; racism; poverty; low self-esteem; and so much more. To quote The Offspring, “The Kids Aren’t Alright.” I’m not sure the teachers are either.



Recently, one of my friends—a wonderful teacher—talked about having to make a really tough phone call. *The* phone call. She said she makes a few every year, with

the frequency increasing in recent years. Her calls are mostly about mental health concerns—concerns she gleans through student writing or conversations. She has called about suspected eating disorders, suspicion of self-harm, or symptoms of depression and/or anxiety. This time, she was placing a call to a mom about concerns that her student may engage in self-harm. He had lost his father in the past year and had begun writing about it. His writing was often dark, revealing inner suffering the student was experiencing. My friend knew the phone conversation would be hard, but she was concerned and knew she would appreciate the same phone call if it was her own child. She admitted, though, that making these phone calls had never been easy, and she was less inclined to make them earlier in her career. This particular phone call went well. The mom, too, had concerns, and the student had been attending counseling. There was reassurance that both my friend and the parent were on the same page; both were seeing signs that concerned them but also behavior that showed the student was seeking help and trusting adults in his life. After this phone call, a small weight was lifted from the teacher's shoulders, and she knew she was doing right by this student. Unfortunately, it doesn't always go this way.

In my own teaching life, I have often been overwhelmed by the range of crises faced by my students from day to day. Conversations with students are intense; their writing is often raw. Those tough phone calls home do not always go well. Parents and guardians struggle under the same weight as their children, or they might not even have a sense of what is going on. My education degree didn't teach me about the art of emotional triage for students; I didn't learn how to make a parent phone call. Even at my first teaching job, there was no direction, no tutorial about what to do when a student shared a crisis with me or about talking to parents. Essentially, I was on my own. The general rule is baptism by fire. In teaching, "there is an underlying professional legacy of sorts that instructs teachers to only think of the business of the classroom even while ignoring the reality of a need for being attuned to our students' emotions" (Densmore-James & Yocum, 2015, p. 119). This "professional legacy" also fences out the acknowledgement of personal, emotional contact with parents, contact that reveals and reinforces humanity and shared concern for students. I distinctly remember when one of my students, one who had begun to hang out in my room more and more often during lunch, told me about a trusted adult in her life who had begun to make her feel uneasy. She described a tangled relationship in which I could sense a grooming of sorts, an unhealthy power dynamic in which my student was trapped, unable to disengage. Her growing presence in my classroom was a cry for help, an effort to navigate what she knew to be an unhealthy situation. After learning about this relationship, I knew I had to call home, and her parents had no idea what I was talking about. The situation was one that required the support of counselors, administrators, and parents. And my student had entrusted all of this to me. This is typical of a teacher's life with students. It leads us to wonder what we can be doing differently to support our teachers and students as they navigate the complexities of trauma, crisis, and grief.



On April 20, 1999, as a young adult studying to be a teacher, I, along with many others across the United States and the world, watched as unspeakable tragedy played out before my eyes. We watched as the first mass school shooting in U.S. history unfolded at Columbine High School in Colorado. I struggled to make sense of what was happening on my television screen. The images of students and teachers escaping through windows,

of students with their hands up being evacuated from the school, of the police holding their lines outside of the building, filled my screen. I struggled to make sense of the event that day and in its aftermath, as we learned about the students who planned and executed the mass murder, the details of their plans, and the clues they had left along the way. It haunts me still. I did not understand what that event would mean to me as a soon-to-be teacher; I did not know how that event would manifest itself in so many ways in my life as an English teacher. At that time, we had never experienced such tragedy, such an unspeakable assault on our schools, perpetrated by students. Really—before that event, student cries for help were often chalked up to *kids will be kids*.

As an English teacher who worked hard to build relationships, I read countless pieces of writing and I had countless conversations that I could say were calls for help or red flags to varying degrees. I distinctly remember the first time a student submitted a writing piece to me that had red flags. The writing detailed violence and sexual perversion. It was my first-year teaching, and I was incredibly naïve. I went to my department head who told me I needed to call home. I cannot recall the specifics of that phone call now, but I am certain I fell short. I believe my response was probably to enact censorship of some sort, to tell the student and his parents that he should not write about violence, to dismiss the content altogether. In truth, I was probably insulating myself from confrontation, from having to have that hard conversation. I know now that silence is damaging. Ignoring what students are saying, what I am seeing, is not the answer. This *falling short* occurred many times, I am sure. I was simply unprepared to deal with student trauma, especially as it manifested itself through writing and one-on-one conversations. Early on in my career, I am not sure I understood the severity of students' calls for help, of the possible peril they might have been in. It is not something we talked about when I was studying to be a teacher, and my own experiences had not prepared me with the skills I would need to react appropriately, to see red flags for what they were, to be an ally but also to know when to sound the alarm.

In 2010, just a year or so after the experience I described in my classroom with student grief, I read the book, *Columbine*, by Dave Cullen (2009). In this book, the author examined the April 20, 1999, mass school shooting at Columbine High School. He traced the roots of the event, illuminating the missed red flags that were present from the two young perpetrators. The students wrote about their intentions to execute this mass murder; they gave testimony via writing to their teachers. Their teachers commented on their writing pieces about the inappropriateness of the content, urging for censorship. The writing probably left teachers unsettled, unsure what to make of it. But there was no recognition of the crucial *red flag* in these instances. Although “the instructors were criticized for inadequate responses” (Brown & Buskey, 2014, p. 37), I think it can be said that it is not that the teachers were inept or uncaring. At that time, we just didn't know. Nothing like that had ever happened before. When I read *Columbine* in 2010, this part stuck with me. The lesson I learned wasn't necessarily about school shootings; it was about *paying attention*. It was about critically witnessing our students, and it was also about learning when to humbly acknowledge all the tough stuff that is present in their lives and its place in our classroom.

In the examination of sharing trauma in the classroom, specifically through literacy, Elizabeth Dutro (2011) acknowledged that “emotions are part and parcel of literature study and of classroom life and too often bracketed from our notions of what constitutes an education or a curriculum” (p. 193). I don't believe that emotions should only be shared through the vehicle of literature. In short, “the hard stuff of life is important in classrooms” (p. 193). In literature, we read stories that are sad, tragic, anger-inducing, joyful, or raw. Sometimes the stories are fictional; often they are memoirs or another

non-fiction genre, though. We learn about the wounded, about the suffering of others as a part of curriculum. By extension, I believe one way we can support teachers when they are navigating the emotions of their classrooms is through critical witnessing. Teachers can be critical witnesses to the stories of their students in the classroom, as a vehicle to build emotional intelligence and to enact an emotional pedagogy, as a way for teachers to begin to cope.

Densmore-James and Yocum (2015) contended that we should engage in “a more holistic emotional pedagogy ... that encompasses providing instruction with knowledge of the whole spectrum of emotional motivators and outcomes from joy to sorrow” (p. 121). When students are encouraged to share their narratives—narratives of grief, joy, sorrow, cultural identities, familial relationships, trauma—we are giving students an environment in which they can learn to confront their emotions. And we, too, can give testimony. In this way, we can build a bridge to our students. After all, the acknowledgement of our own humanity connects us to our students in intimate ways. It allows us “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students” (hooks, 1994, p. 13). We can engage in what Dutro (2011) coined “the circle of testimony-witness” (p. 197). This invokes the interconnectedness of Freire’s (1998) teaching and learning, his idea that “there is ... no teaching without learning” (p. 31). In “the circle of testimony-witness” (Dutro, 2011, p. 197), teachers engage as both “witnesses to student experiences and testifiers to their own” (p. 198). Dutro (2011) posited:

This sharing of students’ wounds requires us to awaken to the ways our stories are connected to those we witness. At the same time, those connections must be allowed to reveal the potentially different ways that we and students are positioned by our challenges. Our testimony, then, functions as a conscious, risky move to share the vulnerability that is inherent in classrooms, while remaining aware of how privilege and power shape the stakes of those exposures. These two moves—a self-conscious attention to both the connection and difference between one’s own and others’ testimonies—constitute what I call *critical witnessing*. (p. 199)

When we acknowledge that *the kids aren’t alright*, it only makes sense to acknowledge that we might not be either. When we give space for students’ emotions and experiences, even when they include the hard stuff of grief and trauma and sorrow and sadness, we are giving space for healing. And we don’t have to be experts in *anything* to simply listen, learn, and respond in kind.



So, what now? Why am I writing about this? The truth is that lately I’m not really alright myself. In the 12 or so years since that day in my classroom, my own life has been intimately affected by the loss of loved ones, and I have felt the grief that my students were feeling that day. On that day, I didn’t know how it felt, but I also didn’t let them tell me. I didn’t know how heavy it was, how it wrapped itself around one’s shoulders and created a can’t-be-ignored presence. I didn’t know it wasn’t something I couldn’t simply fix. Now I understand. I know it’s hard to see beyond grief that envelopes our feelings, grief that is layered and unpredictable. I know that, as time passes, a small slice of grief will remain forever but that the heavy layers would soon begin to peel away and lighten. I know this now because I, too, have experienced it. The truth is, though, one’s own experiences in grief are not necessary for a teacher to be able to listen and

learn, to be able to see and understand a cry for help, a red flag, or a situation that one shouldn't carry alone. So while experiencing trauma and tragedy helps us relate to our students, just as being a parent helps us understand what it is like to be a parent, it is not a necessary condition for us to be able to connect, to *see* and *hear* our students and all they are trying to tell us in spoken and unspoken ways, to critically witness their stories and then give testimony to our own.

I am no longer a high school teacher; now I am a teacher educator. In my work with pre-service teachers, student trauma, and how my pre-service teachers will be equipped to deal with it, is never far from my mind. I want to talk to my pre-service teachers about those moments when they will be stuck in front of their class, speechless and confused, sad and lacking confidence. We ask teachers to do so much, to carry so much. While we might be tempted to insulate ourselves from all that is uncomfortable, perhaps the acknowledgement that we do not necessarily have the answers, that there isn't necessarily a *correct* response, that we are, indeed, uncomfortable, is essential. My trusted colleague—the one who saved me that day so many years ago—possessed the ability to listen and learn and engage and help begin to *heal* my grieving students. She didn't offer a panacea for their suffering; there is no panacea that can be offered, and she knew that. I know it now, too. But she witnessed their experiences and gave testimony of her own, reinforcing the shared humanity of a classroom that includes the empathy, compassion, and allyship of an emotional pedagogy.

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