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Another Empty Seat: Educators' Experiences with Trauma and Grief After a Student's Death

A Dissertation Presented to
the Faculty of the Education Doctorate in Transformational Teaching and Learning
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Education Doctorate

By

Lori G. Berryman

15 April, 2022

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Lori G. Berryman

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This Dissertation for the Education Doctorate in Transformational Teaching and Learning

Degree

By

Lori G. Berryman

has been approved on behalf of the College of Education

Dissertation Committee:

Kathleen Stanfa, Ph.D., Committee Chair

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Scott Tracy, Ed. D., Committee Member

Abstract

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Another Empty Seat: Educators' Experiences with Trauma and Grief After a Student's Death

By

Lori G. Berryman

Kutztown University of PA, 2022

Kutztown, Pennsylvania

Directed by Dr. Kathleen Stanfa

This phenomenological study utilizes narrative inquiry to analyze four teachers' perceptions of their lives, occupations, and institutional expectations following a student's death. Through participant interviews and personal reflections, the researcher observes the effects of a student's death through a Contemporary Trauma Theory framework. Through this lens, trauma-narratives are a powerful tool in helping those affected by loss reframe the events and understand them in a clearer context. Participants indicated that there is an increase of concern for the parents of the deceased, feelings of guilt and regret, and retraumatization due to the lasting presence of the deceased student. Perceptions of participants' occupations also changed. After the student's death, there was an increased importance of connecting to students in personal and emotional ways and a greater awareness of the difficulty in taking on multiple roles in the classroom during the grieving process. Institutionally, participants felt that there was a responsibility to be strong and keep teaching and there was a lack of consistency and direction. Educators need to be incorporated into current trauma-informed practices, and pre-service education programs should include courses about death, grief, and bereavement to better prepare educators for the inevitability of loss.

Keywords: grief, bereavement, Contemporary Trauma Theory, educator, trauma, narrative inquiry, phenomenology

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And to my participants and any other educators that have suffered the loss of a student - *thank you* for your bravery in telling your stories. Together, we can heal.

*ONE need not be a chamber to be
haunted,
One need not be a house;
The brain has corridors surpassing
Material place.*

Emily Dickinson

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose of the Study

I remember standing in my kitchen in sweats with my face wet from the steam of a pasta pot. My phone rang. I picked it up and saw a familiar number – it was work. An automated message began, *tonight, at approximately 5pm, senior, Brian McCarthy, and junior, Sarah Shores, were involved in a car accident. Brian McCarthy was pronounced dead at the scene, Sarah is receiving treatment...*, and that was the first one. It was the first death of a student I had experienced. I ended the call. I put my phone down. In shock, I slowly crept back to the pasta pot. My husband wandered into the kitchen and asked, “Who was that?” I stared for a while, shook my head, and began to cry.

What I remember from that time was the level of sadness and emptiness that imbued the school but also feeling pressured to *get on with things* – hugging students who were crying in the bathroom, but then turning around and teaching comma usage until the bell rang. Nothing made sense, and yet every teacher seemed so strong. For a long time, I kept wondering if it was only me who was unable to process what had happened, or if my grieving process had been stunted due to my professional expectations.

In the nine years since, I have lived and worked through six additional student deaths at Northern Mountain High School. Out of these additional student deaths, one was a suicide, three were car accidents, one was caused by an accidental head injury, and one was an unexpected, fast-moving illness. After every trauma, there is grief. We gather together. There are counselors, group meetings, memorials, vigils – a carefully crafted response that ensures students return to an emotional equilibrium. As educators, we have committed ourselves to this process; we are the

support systems for our students, and we mitigate the overwhelming feelings of grief within our classrooms; however, teachers, themselves, receive little solace with their own experiences with the trauma. Furthermore, the trauma is exacerbated by continued exposure to the setting, anxiety over the loss and job expectations, and the increased isolation from lack of emotional expression.

How, then, do teachers move through the grieving process?

Rationale for the Study

After years of decline, the number of deaths of individuals between the ages of 10-19 is rising. The rise in death rate is attributed to an increase of injury-related deaths, which include traffic accidents, drug overdoses, homicides and suicides (Howard, 2018). The most recent Pennsylvania statistics show that from 2014 through 2018, there were on average 376 deaths per year for individuals aged 15-19 (United States, Pennsylvania Department of Health, Birth, Death, and Vital Statistics, 2018, p.3). While death is a natural part of life, the death of a child, or in this case, a student, is particularly challenging.

Children create webs of connections. When a child dies, there are multiple levels of grief for those who knew or knew of that child. When a death is unexpected, it becomes a deeper trauma for the family and the community. There are layers of mitigation techniques to help alleviate the trauma that stems from a child's death, especially at the institutional level. Grief counselors are present, there is a suspension of activities, and there might even be memorials and vigils. Teachers play a large part in this; they use several strategies to achieve emotional balance in the classroom. They position themselves as pillars of strength. They listen. They provide immediate support to those suffering. They amend due dates, lessen expectations, and provide comfort. Teacher grief is swallowed. Pushed away. Left undiscussed – for the sake of the students and the community. The grief of a teacher becomes disenfranchised, and it can have a

detrimental effect on teachers' personal lives, classroom management, work/life balance, and more. This phenomenological study seeks to understand the ways in which teachers cope with a student death, what the expectations are for the grieving process of a teacher, how grief/trauma affects a teachers' work/life balance, and how teachers perceive their occupations after the death of a student.

Research Questions

- How does the trauma caused by the death of a student impact a teacher personally and emotionally?
- How do teachers perceive their occupation after a student's death?
- How do teachers perceive the institutional expectations placed on them after a student's death?
- How does the act of storytelling affect the way teachers process grief after a trauma?

Research Design

This is a phenomenological study that utilizes narrative inquiry to examine teachers' attitudes and perceptions about the grieving process after the death of a student. The decision to use narrative inquiry as a research method is informed by the theoretical lens of Contemporary Trauma Theory. In Contemporary Trauma Theory, the retelling of the traumatic event is a way of creating a stable understanding of it, and "to gain access to a traumatic history, then, is also the project of listening beyond the pathology of the individual suffering, to the reality of a history that in its crises can only be perceived in unassimilable forms" (Caruth, 1995, p. 156). Coming to terms with a traumatic history requires a trauma-victim to tell the story and a person to listen; both individuals become witnesses to the trauma (Bradley, 2020). This is why it is important that the relationship between therapist and patient, or in this case, researcher and participant, exudes a

level of trust, competence, identity, and intimacy (Piers, 1996). Herman (1992) writes about “the restorative power of truth-telling” (p. 181) where patients are encouraged to tell the story of trauma to ameliorate the effects of it. Even the “malleability of memory is important, and can allude to dynamics operating in the present” (Piers, 1996, p. 6). This is why multiple interviews and the re-telling of trauma narratives can bring to light the full traumatic experience in order to understand it.

Through the lens of Contemporary Trauma Theory, the narrative is also cathartic; it allows individuals to access traumatic experiences, place the experience in a stable environment, and mitigate the effects of the trauma through the very understanding of it. For my research study, the Contemporary Trauma Theory lens will be used as a way to achieve catharsis throughout the sharing of narratives. Through three semi-structured interviews, participants will be encouraged to tell and retell their experiences with student death. In addition, participants will provide an artifact that aids in the storytelling, is a reminder of the experience, or that they attach to the deceased. This artifact is physical evidence of what the participant hangs on to, it’s a reflection of their lasting connection to that day and that student. Through this narrative process and the discussion of the artifact, participants will be able to stabilize and make sense of these experiences, bringing about a long-needed catharsis, a feeling of connection and comradery, and the beginning of the healing process. This study will determine commonalities among the ways that teachers perceive the grieving process after a student death. In the future, this research can determine what additional mitigation efforts can be put in place to help teachers express grief, handle the effects of trauma, and travel through the grieving process in a healthy way while still managing their job responsibilities.

A phenomenological approach will be used in this study in order to analyze a first-person point-of-view retelling of a specific experience and/or moment in time: the death of a student. Approaching the issue of disenfranchised grief from a phenomenological approach that utilizes narrative inquiry methodology that allows teachers to finally tell their stories of their grief, to express their perceptions of how job expectations and school efforts help or hinder the grieving period, and hopefully find understanding, catharsis, and community throughout the process.

Definitions

- a. Contemporary Trauma Theory: a paradigm shift in how trauma is treated; CT theorists see patients as needing care and help through narrative therapy instead of incurable, or plagued by sickness and weakness of character (Goodman, 2017)
- b. Compassion Fatigue: “The convergence of secondary traumatic stress (STS) and cumulative burnout (BO), a state of physical and mental exhaustion caused by a depleted ability to cope with one’s everyday environment” (Cocker and Joss, 2016, p.1)
- c. Dissociation: Separation from normally related mental processes
- d. Grief: deep sorrow, especially caused by someone’s death
- e. Grief-work: psychological process of coping with a significant loss (Freud, 1893/1895/1955)
- f. Narrative Inquiry: the study of experiences understood through storytelling
- g. Phenomenology: the studies of structures of consciousness as experienced through a first-person lens
- h. Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder: The presence of intrusive symptoms after being exposed to a trauma. For the full DSM 5: Diagnostic Criteria see Appendix F
- i. Repression: Suppressing a thought or desire so it remains in the unconscious

- j. Retraumatization: is a conscious or unconscious reminder of past trauma that results in a re-experiencing of the initial trauma event
- k. Secondary Traumatization: “caused by repeated or extreme confrontation with details of traumatic situations without any direct sensory impressions and is described as the victims’ symptoms being transferred to another individual” (Greinacher, et al., 2019, p.1)
- l. Trauma: emotional shock following a traumatic event or physical injury that can cause long term physical or psychological distress

Research Site & Ethical Concerns

It is important to note that I have developed strong working relationships with my participants over the last fifteen years, and therefore, there is already a level of comfortability we share when discussing our experiences. We have experienced numerous student deaths within that time frame, and throughout my interviews, we are able to help inform each other’s stories. The district we work in is also unique; our school is intertwined with the community, and this makes for strong relationships with our students and their families. Because of this, the line between our personal and professional lives is often blurred by these close ties. While I do not see this as a limitation per se, it is important to note that the relationships between me and the participants and participants with the community play a role in both participants’ responses and my own data analysis.

One limitation to my study is that it is very small; it includes four participants and my own reflections. While our number of student deaths is disproportional to our population size, large city schools deal with higher numbers of student deaths based on size alone. Another limitation is that I do not have the full history of each of my participants; therefore, someone

who has experienced more tragedy might be more resilient, or perhaps the opposite is true, and they will have more lasting effects from the student death. This will have an effect on participant responses as to their perceptions of the expectations of the grieving process.

My ethical considerations are two-fold. One, retelling and reliving stories of traumatic events can have deleterious psychological effects on the participants. I prepared resources and contacts that participants can use to seek guidance. I ensured that participants understood, prior to participating, that our discussions could elicit painful, sad, and troubling emotions. I also had the concern that by discussing student deaths and the grieving process for my dissertation might be seen as exploiting the tragedies, or if the topic becomes known, it could be a painful reminder of the loss for the families still living in and attending the school district.

Positionality

I am a mid-thirties, White, middle-class woman who has been working in public education for the past fifteen years in a small town in Southeastern Pennsylvania. There is a strong sense of community here that envelopes the school system. Teachers know students' families well, and many members of the teaching staff have grown up here and continue to work and thrive here. I grew up about an hour north of this community in a small town very similar to this one. There is a communal ethos that values community, volunteerism, kindness, and conservatism. Politically speaking, the county that houses the community is 53.2% Republican and 45.1% Democrat ("Politics and Voting," 2022). The median age for the surrounding district is 53.6 ("Data USA," 2022). The school district itself houses a slightly more diverse population than the immediate surrounding community. 93.7% of students identify as White, 3.9% of students identify as Hispanic, and 1.9% of students identify as Asian ("Redacted," 2022). The high school houses approximately 550 students with yearly fluctuations. The closeness of the

community, and the community's close relationship with the educational institution is a result of shared beliefs, shared ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and a community of families who have been a part of the district for generations.

As someone who has grown familiar with the landscape, it is true that the small-town atmosphere is very quaint and comforting. Because of the close-knit community, when a student dies, the impact is immense and thunderous. Because of the close relationship between teachers, students, families, and the community, grief is felt by nearly everyone. The community comes together. The school supports community members, and the community members support the school with culturally responsive interventions, which include volunteering at funeral services, creating scholarship opportunities in the name of the deceased, and other memorial runs, drives, and services. I wanted my research setting to be my own school institution because our little community has been beset by trauma. In my time working as an English teacher at the high school, which houses about 550 students in grades 9-12, we have experienced seven student deaths and one administrator death. All of these deaths were accidental or unexpected, which otherwise adds to the dint of trauma experienced at the school. While I had experienced death prior to my time working in this district, I had never experienced it so rapidly, or with such traumatization. All the deaths that I had experienced were elderly family members, and coming from a secular family, and with my own atheistic beliefs, there were no large gatherings for funerals or church services. Death was a part of life. When a child dies, it is very different. The universe tells us that's not supposed to happen.

My colleagues are my research participants. Because I believe that teacher grief is, on many levels, disenfranchised by expectations placed on teachers during a traumatic event, I felt that it was necessary to work through our trauma collectively, in a safe space, where trusting

relationships have already been forged through years of comradery and shared experiences. I will approach the re-telling of our experiences through the Contemporary Trauma Theory lens; that is, that through story-telling, we can stabilize our memories, make sense of them, and through processing, move on from them and understand them. This way, there can be some sense of healing after years of disenfranchised grief. I will be keeping a journal to help myself navigate through my own experience with students' deaths throughout the research process. I will also be reflecting on how my proximity to the tragedies may shape my understanding of others' experiences. My hope is that through the sharing of narratives, we as educators, and as friends, can process our grief and work to de-traumatize ourselves.

While all the student deaths I have experienced have been horrifically sad and tragic, there is one that always stands out to me as being *different*. Thomas Pacer was a student in my second period class. He sat in the second-to-last row, second seat from the front, and every day he would be the first student in my room to greet me with a, "Good morning, Ms. Berryman!" and a wide smile. He was the kind of student who would email you on a weekend to ask about the essay he was working on, and he would be so grateful to hear back from you. When I would throw out a question about a story we were reading, he would always raise his hand, even if he did not fully know the answer, just to end the silence that always lingers after a difficult question is posed. His kindness imbued the classroom.

On January 19, 2013, Tom, age sixteen, committed suicide at his home. On the morning of January 20th, I came to school like a normal day, and I was told the news at an early morning meeting prior to the start of school. I was crushed. The news physically pained me to hear it. I could not breathe. I could not think. And yet, we were left with this advice: *let's be there for our students today*. The day passed by slowly. For eight straight periods, I didn't talk, I didn't look

up, I just cried. Occasionally, some kind colleague would volunteer their prep period to take over my classes so that I could take a break, which I was incredibly thankful for, but at no point that day could I *be there for our students*, much less myself. With deep regret, compounded by a feeling that I was failing as a system of support for my students, I took off the next day. And then the next.

I did everything they tell educators not to do. I kept his seat empty for the rest of the year in my period two class. I held on to all of his work that was graded, but I had yet to give back. I did not attend the public viewing or the funeral to grieve with my students and fellow teachers. There wasn't then, nor is there now, a return to normal.

And yet, everything went on somehow. I was back to teaching rhetorical appeals and devices, facilitating discussions, grading essays, etc. while silently grieving day, after day, after day. After interactions with my colleagues, I would wonder *if they feel the same way that I do? Am I different? Should I talk to someone?*

For years, I would think about Tom on a regular basis. When my classroom was moved in 2017, I was relieved. A new space would certainly shift my focus off from the second seat in the second-to-last row. Maybe it would abate the haunting, the feelings of failure and regret, the unshakable feeling that *maybe I could have done something more*.

But it didn't. While reorganizing my filing cabinet at home to make space for research articles, I came across one of his essays that I had kept. It was in the same vein as "The Dialogue Between Franklin and the Gout" where Ben Franklin has a conversation with his gout which pains him regularly. I mulled over my corrections; they were so meaningless now, so...unimportant. Instead of throwing it away, I neatly tucked it back into the folder, placed the

folder back in the drawer, and closed the cabinet. This was a clear sign that I am just not ready to let go.

So, I keep on reflecting on the same question – I wonder if my colleagues feel the same way that I do? That after all of these student deaths, and putting students' needs first, and barreling on through curriculum, and moving forward, maybe one of these terrible student tragedies is *their* specter?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Much of the research done on the effects of trauma in education is focused on how students process trauma and grief. This literature review begins by looking at the gaps in this literature; while trauma-informed pedagogical practices are on the rise, very few trauma-informed approaches consider the role of the teacher as a griever. Next, there is a discussion about the history of grief and grief theory dating back from the 1500s to contemporary times. Grief, which was once viewed as a normal reaction to a traumatic event has become pathologized and stigmatized, which changes the societal expectations for bereavement. This then influences the next part of the literature review, which is a discussion about the different expectations for how teachers should process trauma. Many of these expectations are societal and institutional, and they determine how, when, and to what extent a teacher is able to grieve after a traumatic event. These expectations increase the effect of trauma on educators, and the following section in the literature review analyzes research studies that show the common negative effects on educators' abilities to teach, to maintain a work/life balance, and to stave off compassion fatigue.

Currently, there are few studies done to investigate the impact of trauma on teachers' lives (Lazenby, 2006; Case, 2017; Lowton and Higginson, 2011; Essary et al., 2020). The next section of the literature review shows how a phenomenological research study that utilizes narrative inquiry can fill gaps in the literature. The study will examine what methods educators use to cope with student deaths, how trauma caused by the death of a student impacts a teacher personally and professionally, what teacher perceptions of their occupations are after a student death, how teachers perceive their ability or inability to grieve in the workplace. Lastly, the literature review discusses the Contemporary Trauma theoretical lens that shapes the

phenomenological study. Here, story-telling is used to bring forth the memory of the trauma, stabilize it, and eventually make sense and process the event. Through this lens, narrative can take on a cathartic and healing aspect, which can help educators cope with shared trauma.

Trauma-informed Education

According to Carello and Butler (2015) being trauma-informed means to “understand the ways in which violence, victimization, and other traumatic experiences may have impacted the lives of individuals involved” and to design services that “accommodate trauma survivor’s needs” for recovery (p. 264). While trauma-informed practices have been in place for a long time, recently there has been an increased emphasis on trauma-informed education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational institutions are relying on trauma-informed principles to create safe and learning-conducive environments for students who are living through unprecedented times. The goal of trauma-informed practices is to “remove possible barriers to learning” and to “create networks of support both in and out of the classroom” (Carello and Butler, 2015, p. 266).

Regardless of whether it is a pandemic, a family tragedy, or a student death, trauma-informed education focuses mainly on traumatized students. Traumatized students “exhibit poorer attention, disruptive behaviors, aggression, hyperactivity and impulsivity, defiance, and school suspensions, absences and grade retention, as well as depression, anxiety, withdrawal and low self-esteem” (Berger, 2019, p. 650). In trauma-informed educational practices, teachers play an important role; they monitor, support, and facilitate students’ recovery from a traumatic experience. In the three-tiered approach for teacher intervention and evaluation, tier one is universal training for all school staff regarding childhood trauma; tier two is consultation between teachers and school mental health staff, and tier three is consultation

between school mental health staff and external professionals (Berger, 2019). Because administrations are so focused on mitigating the effects of trauma on students in trauma-informed settings, they neglect acknowledging the effects of trauma on educators.

According to Alisic et al. (2012), a significant number of teachers experience a high degree of difficulty with trauma-informed practices. Educators in this study report that they are “concerned [about] the boundary between the tasks of a teacher and those of a mental health care provider” and “the risks of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatization” (Alisic et al., 2012, p. 100). In addition, “teachers make an effort to suppress, manage and express their emotions according to the normative beliefs held about the teaching profession” (Farnsworth, 2016, p.288). There is an urgency to increase mental health literacy among teachers and to focus on high rates of teacher burnout, especially in schools that are under-resourced (Luthar and Mendes, 2020). So, while trauma-informed practices show positive outcomes for students, teachers need to be supported in these settings. It is necessary to explore contemporary expectations of teachers’ grieving process in order to analyze what practices can help ameliorate the effects of trauma.

The History of Grief and Grief Theory

In the 1500s, Dr. Robert Burton was the first to define grief in psychological terms. He identified two types of grief: melancholy and melancholia. Melancholy refers to the type of grief that affects everyone, but it does not have a lasting effect. Melancholia, on the other hand, can stem from one incident (or many) and it comes and goes throughout one’s life. In the 1700s, Dr. Benjamin Rush encouraged the theory that grief could be potentially fatal, and he used techniques such as opium consumption, crying therapy, bloodletting, and purges in order to counteract the effects of grief. Later, in the 1800s, Charles Darwin discussed grief as both active

and passive, which adhered to Burton's theories from three-hundred years earlier. These were all pre-Freud and pre-pathologized theories on grief. Sigmund Freud made much of his psychological discourse about trauma. Freud believed that everyday traumatic situations could be included in psychological studies, and he was the first person to say that grief could be evaluated (Granek, 2010). Freud also developed a "grief-work hypothesis" that stated it was essential to undertake grief work in order to adjust to loss without lasting mental or physical effects (Kofod, 2017). Contemporary studies on grief also discuss "grief work" as a condition that was systematized by German-American psychiatrist Erich Lindemann in the 1960s. According to Lindemann, a "failure to accomplish grief work was associated with a range of symptoms for pathological grief, including somatic distress, preoccupation with the image of the deceased, guilt, hostility" and the inability to maintain organized patterns of activity (Kofod, 2017, p. 53). In order to overcome grief, grief-work must be carried to completion. Since then, labels have been used to describe grief when it goes outside the lines of what is considered normal. These labels include "morbid, pathological, unresolved...abnormal, complicated, traumatic, chronic, and prolonged" (Kofod, 2017, p.53). Labels such as these stigmatize the bereavement process and insinuate that the grief sufferers, too, carry the label. It also insists that grief that is not deemed as "normal" must be treated with a pathologized intervention. Western societies see grief as an interference to regular functioning with the importance placed on getting people back to work in a timely and cost-efficient manner while ignoring the active and often complicated process of bereavement (Granek, 2010).

Now, grief theorists are starting to recognize that bereavement does not always follow a standard course, and the work of mourning may become intense, violent, elongated, absent, etc. With the conceptualization of Contemporary Trauma Theory in the 1990s, there was a call for a

redirection of trauma theory, one where psychoanalysts “refrain from viewing survivors’ poor functioning as resulting from sickness, weakness, or deficiencies in moral character, and reframes viewing survivors as psychologically and physically injured, and instead, in need of healing and help” (Goodman, 2017, p. 187). Contemporary Trauma theorists, such as Cathy Caruth, sought to move away from postcolonial trauma theory and Freud’s evaluation of trauma in order to consider a “renewed engagement with history” by creating trauma narratives that can be curative so that trauma victims can “come to terms with their traumatic experiences” (Visser, 2015, p. 255). Essentially, CTT attempted to destigmatize grief and redefine it in such a way that the treatment of it would escape Western societal influences. Another prominent CT theorist, Judith Herman, suggests, “narrative as an empowering and effective therapeutic method in the treatment of trauma victims” and “narratives of trauma, as an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical content” can contribute to healing and recovery (Visser, 2015, p. 256). Contemporary Trauma theory changes the way trauma victims are viewed and helped, and it encourages the use of narration to understand the impact of trauma and empower the individual to find an authentic sense of self.

Expectations for Grieving

In Western society, “society dictates a person’s grief based on the survivor’s relationship to the deceased, how long the grieving period can last, how grief should be presented to the public, and if the deceased’s death was of a socially acceptable nature” (Case et al., 2017, p. 400). Grief can be interpreted as weakness, and individuals may isolate themselves or disenfranchise their own grief in order to replace it with other emotions to appear accepting of the death. Societal expectations determine what is and what is not appropriate in regard to the process of mourning. Ord (2009) writes, “Even during the most intense periods of grieving,

mourners are expected to restrain from displays of grieving to appropriate times and places” (p. 198). This shows that bereavement is expected to be disciplined, and that a display of sadness is abnormal. This is a reflection of the taboo nature at the very core of grief: death and dying. Case et al. (2017) state that, “euphemisms clearly illustrate the strength of Americans’ fear and unwillingness to even mention death in everyday conversation” (p. 400). This leaves many individuals to navigate the bereavement process alone. It is also important to note that there are no typical responses to loss. As Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2014) write, “Our grief is as individual as our lives” (p. 7) and this complicates society’s interpretation and stigmatization of the grieving process. There is no real framework that decides what span of time is appropriate for grieving.

Robson and Walter (2013) argue that “there are typically just one or at most a handful of people who are deeply distraught at someone’s death” (p. 100). Social norms provide privilege to close family and tend to ignore those who have less engagement. In a school setting, however, when a death occurs, the tragedy affects a large swath of people; students have numerous connections within classrooms and within the school itself. Lowton and Higginson (2003) write, “In the United States, school has been interpreted not just as a place of education, but as the hallmark of vital socialization” and teachers are “assumed by others to perform a supportive role in bereavement” (p. 719). As educators, our “identity informs how we show up in varying spaces, and there are privileges to certain identities as to how a person can or cannot show up” (Wright, 2020, p. 80). Societal and institutional expectations for teacher bereavement have authority over personal grief management. Wright (2020) recognizes the crux of this systemic problem: “We intentionally create opportunities to ensure students feel valued and empowered. Imagine how powerful that notion would be if applied to staff and faculty” (p. 83). It is true; if similar supports put in place for students were made available to educators, this might lessen the

disenfranchisement of grief. However, the lack of dialogue regarding how teachers experience grief after a student death is indicative of the level of silence surrounding the importance of the educator in trauma-informed practice. Because there are such high expectations for teachers to maintain a strong persona and so few efforts made to ameliorate the effects of trauma, teachers experience many negative consequences.

The Disenfranchisement of Teacher Grief

Typical organizational bereavement policies are “grounded in the strategic goals of efficiency and productivity” (Barclay and Kang, 2019, p. 131). While many private institutions are becoming more employee-centered, educational institutions are very slow in changing policies that specifically benefit staff. It is assumed that bereavement is a one-size-fits-all concept, but it is not a static experience. According to the “Collective Bargaining Agreement Between the Northern Mountain Education Association and the Northern Mountain School District,” (2018):

Bargaining unit members shall be granted up to four (4) days of leave per occurrence, without loss of pay in the event of a death in the immediate family. Immediate family is defined as parent, sibling, child, grandchild, spouse, parent-in-law, grandparent, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, near relative who resides in the same household, or any person with whom the Employee has made his or her home.

Bargaining unit members shall be granted one (1) day of leave, per occurrence, without loss of pay in the event of a death of a near relative. Near relative is defined as first cousin, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, or grandparent-in-law.

The Superintendent, at his/her discretion, may grant bereavement leave to an employee for special circumstances not specified in this policy. (p. 17).

Having limits on bereavement indicates that the grieving process is in conflict with the goals of the workplace. This creates what is known as “stifled grief or a situation where the grief process is not recognized or supported” (Barclay and Kang, 2019, p. 131). It also indicates a hierarchy of loss: first, immediate family members, then, near relatives, with these roles being specifically defined. It also creates the concept of “lesser” mourners, and it fails to acknowledge emotional realities (Peskin, 2019). Yes, this policy does leave some discretion to the superintendent, but the failure of the policy to address school-related trauma and recovery shows the disenfranchisement of teachers. While this policy only reflects my research site, similar policies are instituted in public schools all across the country.

According to Rowling (1995), disenfranchised grief, also known as “hidden grief,” stems from teachers’ “personal and professional duality that their role involves and is a phenomenon that puts their welfare and teaching performance at risk” (p. 321). Disenfranchised grief comes from three potential origins: “relationships not being recognized, grief not being recognized, and grieving rules” (Rowling, 1995, p. 321). These origins can manifest themselves in different ways. For example, by limiting bereavement days to only next-of-kin deaths, or by not acknowledging the strong teacher/student relationship, or integrating care for staff into school-wide trauma response protocols, teachers are inevitably left to manage the effects of trauma through other means.

There is also self-disenfranchisement that comes from the personal and professional duality that exists. Self-disenfranchisement is when the individual withholds their own grief by staying silent or ignoring that it exists. Self-disenfranchisement evolves from feelings of shame

and helplessness, the relationships teachers perceive between coping with their personal and professional lives at the same time, gender roles and expectations, the school itself and the teacher's personal history with trauma, and the beliefs held by those in leadership positions regarding death and grieving (Rowling, 1995).

One institutional expectation for teachers is to manage the effects of trauma on students before considering their own needs. Lazenby (2016) studied thirteen teachers who discussed eleven different students who had died during a school term. In this study, she found that there was "no evidence that the grief of a teacher had been acknowledged" (p. 50) and that "the majority of the teachers indicated that they had never thought about the fact that no one was there for them." (p. 53). This disenfranchisement was discussed in many other studies, including Reid and Dixon's 2009 study of sixty-seven school employees who experienced the Oklahoma City Bombing. Reid and Dixon (2009) found that teachers felt they had to put their grief on hold and that "managing grief is not included in teacher pre-service programs" (p. 219). Lowton and Higginson's 2011 study of 36 staff members in Southeast London found that there was "a low priority given to death and bereavement" (p. 724), and in Case's 2017 study, it was found that teachers were "torn between the need to address the student death, their personal anxiety about addressing the death, and curricular time constraints" (p. 403). Levkovich and Gada's 2020 study on fifteen Israeli pre-school teachers showed that there is "no methodological or structured training to deal with trauma" (p. 101). The disenfranchisement of teacher grief has detrimental effects on teachers' physical and emotional wellbeing, their abilities to do their jobs effectively, and their relationships with others.

Effects of Trauma on Teachers

Education requires high-levels of emotional involvement on behalf of educators. Educators are vulnerable to compassion fatigue because of their supportive roles and their exposure to “students’ traumatic and violent experiences, disasters, or crises.” (Levkovich and Gada, 2020). When a student death occurs, teachers are consistently brought back to the site of grief (a classroom, the school building, etc.) and have to prioritize students’ grieving processes. Compassion fatigue is also known as second-hand shock or vicarious traumatization, and it has similar symptoms to post-traumatic stress disorder such as “nightmares, avoidance, agitation and withdrawal” (Levkovich and Gada, 2020, p. 94). Educators can experience emotional and physical effects of this type of trauma which include helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression, fear, sadness, loss of enjoyment, intrusive thoughts, sleep difficulties, digestive issues, weakness, frustration, depersonalization, and dissatisfaction (Levkovich and Gada, 2020; Alisic et al., 2020; Essary et al., 2020; Lawson et al., 2019). Educators who experience compassion fatigue can also experience burnout. Burnout does not have to be specifically related to showing compassion, but it includes feelings of hopelessness, lack of professional support, and questioning one’s own ability to do the job well. Burnout is a potential effect of having teachers take on the role of both educator and social worker after a school-related trauma. Institutional expectations make it very difficult to take on the role of teacher and carer (Dyregrov et al., 2013). Teachers express personal guilt for expressing repressed emotions at home, and they have a compromised capacity to focus on students’ needs (Essary et al., 2020). The grieving process for teachers is sometimes truncated or extended based on the depth of the traumatic experience. This, coupled with lack of support and other personal factors, can lead to further feelings of helplessness and devastation (Lazenby, 2006).

Storytelling and Bereavement

New models of bereavement theory have strong connections to narrative inquiry. According to Hagman (2016), “mourning is a social process, subject to the influence of interpersonal relationships and social context” and offers a narrative framework to understand mourning (p. 208). Stories bring order to our lives, and narratives can be told through direct verbal language or indirect non-verbal cues. Because the grief process is a social one, by telling trauma-narratives, a person can “creat[e] links between the world, themselves, and others” and combine disparate events into logical temporal sequences (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 2). Storytelling helps to capture emotional events, gain control over them, relieve emotional tension, make meaning, and connect to different people’s experiences of the event (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Gilbert, 2001). This is due to several psychological narrative tasks that take place during the storytelling: “individuals simultaneously shape their worldview, deal with the anxiety of considering their own mortality and accept the finality of the lost” (Mroz et al., 2020, p. 99). Trauma-narratives are highly subjective and influenced by co-participators in the storytelling, which includes the listener or researcher. It is important to understand that these narratives are lived experiences, and they are subject to change and reinterpretation (Gilbert, 2001). Narratives can change with each telling, and they can be seen as representational. What gives narratives meaning is the storyteller's perception of the event and the listeners influence on the interpretation. This helps the individual realize that “others had the same feelings about the experience with grief and mourning” and “shapes the meaning of unique life experiences” (Glazer & Marcum, 2003, p. 42). Narrating challenging life events is linked to higher well-being, personal growth, and the expansion of self-knowledge (Mroz et al., 2020). Storytelling performs

a cathartic function for individuals, and it has been adopted as a key therapeutic practice in pathologized trauma support, such as Contemporary Trauma Theory.

Contemporary Trauma Theory

French neurologists Jean-Martin Charcot and French psychologist Pierre Janet were two of the leading trauma theorists when studies of trauma first began in the 1860s (Huopainen, 2002). These two individuals inspired Sigmund Freud, whose theories regarding trauma, neurosis, and hysteria became popularized in the late 1800s. As Freud's theories developed, he began to discover that psychologists must "use a method beyond interrogation" as "external events determine the pathology of hysteria to a greater extent than what is known or recognized" (Freud, 1893/1895/1955). He also found that his patients remained unaware of the full impact of their trauma, and that the trauma caused a chain of associations that extended beyond the physical injury (Piers, 1996). Breuer and Freud (1895/1993), when revisiting their earlier discussions of seduction theory write:

...the ego was confronted by an experience, an idea, a feeling, arousing an effect so painful that the person resolved to forget it since he had no confidence in his power to resolve the incompatibility between the unbearable idea and his ego by the process of thought. (p. 61-62)

It was because of this, Freud found that many of his patients were unaware of the full impact of the trauma (Piers, 1996). A memory trace is created and psychically integrated, which in turn, creates hysteria. Hysteria is "a result of experiencing events which overwhelm one's emotional processing capacity, whereby psychophysiological dissociation mechanism functioning at the moment of memory encoding results in their being retained in fragmented form" (Huopainen, 2002, p. 92). While Freud frequently saw dissociation as a result of trauma, other early studies

also noted “flashbacks, speechless terror, sensory deflation, numbness, and hyperarousal” (Houpainen, 2002, p. 93).

While Freud’s trauma research received a lot of recognition, he believed that all inner conflict arose from sexuality (repression, abuse, seduction, etc.) (Sletvold, 2016). He has also been criticized for his method of interviewing his patients; transcripts show that at times he led his patients to desired answers or insisted on a repressed memory that was not actually there (Huopainen, 2002; Anderson, 2012). In addition, early trauma studies did not address the stigma or cause of trauma, patients were “put on display as carnival attractions or hushed away into mental institutions,” (Anderson, 2012), and they were blamed for their symptoms or weaknesses. Contemporary Trauma Studies take a patient-centered approach to understanding trauma and ways to ameliorate the effects of the repressed memories that Freud wrote about at the end of the 19th century. It also takes into account the traumas of everyday life and the cultural effects of trauma (Anderson, 2012; Sletvold, 2016). Three of the leading theorists in the field are neuroscientist Bessel van der Kolk, psychologist Judith Herman, and literary theorist Cathy Caruth.

Contemporary Trauma Theory is a new trauma-based paradigm where it is necessary to “refrain from viewing survivors’ poor functioning as resulting from sickness, weakness, or deficiencies in moral character, and reframes viewing survivors as psychologically and physically injured, and instead, in need of healing and help” (Goodman, 2017, p. 187). Van der Kolk’s studies of trauma center on the impact of the traumatic experience. What determines symptomatic behavior are “auditory, visual, affective and relational cues” (Piers, 1996, p. 4). Van der Kolk (2014) writes that trauma causes a recalibration of the brain, and secondary trauma occurs when an individual cannot understand the experience. What happens in the brain after a

traumatic experience is dissociation; he writes, “dissociation reflects a horizontally layered model of the mind: when a subject does not remember a trauma, its ‘memory’ is contained in an alternate stream of consciousness, which may be subconscious or dominate consciousness” (Van der Kolk, 2014, 8:37:28). Treatment involves finding the traumatic experience, recovering it, and integrating it in a way that helps the sufferer make sense of the experience.

Clinical work done by neuroscientists like Van der Kolk has inspired the study of trauma in other fields like the Humanities. Here, theorists such as Caruth and Herman investigate the ways in which trauma can be ameliorated through the lens of Contemporary Trauma studies. For Caruth, “trauma is an experience so intensely painful that the mind is unable to process it normally” (Pederson, 2014, p. 334). Sometimes, the trauma is so severe that it is impossible to recall. Caruth (1995) argues that, “the most striking feature of traumatic recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory...the trauma thus requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure.” (p. 151 and 153). This is where Contemporary Trauma Theory and narrative inquiry come together. The retelling of the traumatic event is a way of creating a stable understanding of it, and “to gain access to a traumatic history, then, is also the project of listening beyond the pathology of the individual suffering, to the reality of a history that in its crises can only be perceived in unassimilable forms” (Caruth, 1995, p. 156). Coming to terms with a traumatic history requires a speaker to tell the story and a person to listen; both individuals become witnesses to the trauma (Bradley, 2020). This is why it is important that the relationship between therapist and patient, or in this case, researcher and participant, exudes a level of trust, competence, identity, and intimacy (Piers, 1996). Herman (1992) writes about “the restorative power of truth-telling” (p. 181) where patients are encouraged to tell the story of trauma to ameliorate the effects of it. While Caruth, Herman, and Van der Kolk all agree that the

re-telling of traumatic experiences can be flawed, the “malleability of memory is important, and can allude to dynamics operating in the present” (Piers, 1996, p. 6). This is why multiple interviews and the re-telling of trauma narratives can bring to light the full traumatic experience in order to understand it.

Conclusion

A study of the literature reveals gaps in regard to the ways in which teachers navigate the bereavement process when faced with institutional expectations. Throughout my research, many of the studies focused on student bereavement, trauma-informed classrooms, helping children mitigate the effects of trauma, and roles that teachers play within the bereavement process in their own classrooms. The lack of studies done on a teacher’s ability to grieve illustrate that few teachers are given a voice when it comes to the ways in which grief is ameliorated within the educational setting.

In order to understand bereavement through the perspective of teachers who have experienced one or more student deaths, my study adopts a phenomenological approach and uses narrative inquiry to enfranchise teacher grief and provide some catharsis through storytelling. By using in-depth semi-structured interviews, participants narrate their experiences with student death and the aftermath, and the study explores commonalities that identify connections between teacher narratives through the lens of Contemporary Trauma Theory. Participants’ insights reveal how teachers experience trauma and how institutional expectations hinder teachers’ grief-work. These narratives will also provide teachers a space to stabilize and understand their trauma through the shared act of listening and storytelling.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

This research is a phenomenological study that utilizes narrative inquiry to examine teachers' attitudes and perceptions about the grieving process after the death of a student. The narrative inquiry aspect of the study is framed by the theoretical lens of Contemporary Trauma Theory. In Contemporary Trauma Theory, the retelling of the traumatic event is a way of creating a stable understanding of it, and "to gain access to a traumatic history, then, is also the project of listening beyond the pathology of the individual suffering, to the reality of a history that in its crises can only be perceived in unassimilable forms" (Caruth, 1995, p. 156). Coming to terms with a traumatic history requires a trauma-victim to tell the story and a person to listen; both individuals become witnesses to the trauma (Bradley, 2020). This is why it is important that the relationship between therapist and patient, or in this case, researcher and participant, exudes a level of trust, competence, identity, and intimacy (Piers, 1996). Herman (1992) writes about "the restorative power of truth-telling" (p. 181) where patients are encouraged to tell the story of trauma to ameliorate the effects of it. Even the "malleability of memory is important, and can allude to dynamics operating in the present" (Piers, 1996, p. 6). Multiple interviews and the re-telling of trauma narratives helped to bring light to the full traumatic experience and aids in understanding it.

Through the lens of Contemporary Trauma Theory, the narrative is also cathartic; it allows individuals to access traumatic experiences, place the experience in a stable environment, and mitigate the effects of the trauma through the very understanding of it. For this research study, the Contemporary Trauma Theory lens was used as a way to achieve catharsis throughout the sharing of narratives. Through three semi-structured interviews, participants were encouraged

to tell and retell their experiences with student death. In addition, participants provided an artifact to aid in the storytelling as a reminder of the experience or to discuss his/her attachment to the deceased. This artifact was physical evidence of what the participant grasped onto; it was a reflection of their lasting connection to that day and that student. Through this narrative process and the discussion of the artifact, participants were able to stabilize and make sense of these experiences, bring about a long-needed catharsis, further develop a feeling of connection and comradery, and begin or continue the healing process. This study determined commonalities among the ways that teachers perceive the grieving process after a student death. In the future, this research can determine what additional mitigation efforts can be put in place to help teachers express grief, handle the effects of trauma, and travel through the grieving process in a healthy way while still managing their job responsibilities.

A phenomenological approach was used in this study in order to analyze a first-person point-of-view of a specific experience and/or moment in time: the death of a student. Approaching the issue of disenfranchised grief from a phenomenological approach that utilized narrative inquiry strategies allowed participants to finally tell their stories of their grief, to express their perceptions of how job expectations and school efforts help or hinder the grieving period, and find understanding, catharsis, and community throughout the process.

Through three semi-structured interviews and the submission of an artifact that explored participants' experiences with trauma related to student death, I looked to understand the ways in which that trauma affected participants' lives personally and professionally, what institutional expectations they perceived to be placed on them after the event, and the ways in which the participant's perceptions of themselves and their roles as educators had changed as a result of the trauma. Through my own journaling and reflection, I made meaning of this phenomenon and

contextualized others' experiences in relation to my own. Through the Contemporary Trauma Theory lens, the act of narration and interpretation brought new meaning and understanding to the traumatic experiences and provided catharsis and healing as a result that benefitted the individual and school community.

The following research questions were broken down thematically. The first question focused on the participant's reflection of the impact. The second question focused on perceptions of the occupation. The third question encouraged participants to consider what outside forces, such as institutional expectations, affected their responses to the tragedies, and the third question analyzed the effectiveness of narrative on bereavement. The first three questions examined the phenomenology of participants' reactions to a student death, while the last question focused more on the Contemporary Trauma Theory lens and the power of narration.

Research Questions:

- How does the trauma caused by the death of a student impact a teacher personally and professionally?
- How do teachers perceive their occupation after a student's death?
- How do teachers perceive the institutional expectations placed on them after a student's death?
- How does the act of storytelling affect the way teachers process grief after a trauma?

Phenomenological Research Methods and the Incorporation of Narrative Inquiry

Phenomenology is the study of a specific phenomenon; in other words, it is a situation as experienced by an individual. The perception of a phenomena is affected by time, body, place, and relationships to others. While an experience of the phenomenon is a subjective experience, a lot of knowledge can be gained by looking at many perceptions of the event and looking for

commonalities and themes. This study analyzed the phenomenon of a student death as seen through the eyes of five educators. Through three interviews and the submission of an artifact, educators detailed their perceptions of the event itself, and their perceptions of its effects on their personal and professional lives. Allowing participants to tell their stories gave an individual and detailed view of their lived experiences.

Stories bring order to our lives, and narratives can be told through direct verbal language or indirect non-verbal cues. Because the grief process is a social one, by telling trauma-narratives, a person can “creat[e] links between the world, themselves, and others” and combine disparate events into logical temporal sequences (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 2). Storytelling helps to capture emotional events, gain control over them, relieve emotional tension, make meaning, and connect to different people’s experiences of the event (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005; Gilbert, 2001). This is due to several psychological narrative tasks that take place during the storytelling: “individuals simultaneously shape their worldview, deal with the anxiety of considering their own mortality and accept the finality of the lost” (Mroz et al., 2020, p. 99). Trauma-narratives are highly subjective and influenced by co-participants in the storytelling, which includes the listener or researcher. It is important to understand that these narratives are lived experiences, and they are subject to change and reinterpretation (Gilbert, 2001). Narratives can change with each telling, and they can be seen as representational. What gives narratives meaning is the storyteller's perception of the event and the listener’s influence on the interpretation. Therefore, my role as researcher placed me in the role of meaning-maker, as my presence, my questioning, and my relation to the subject all influenced the understanding of the traumatic event. This helped participants realize that “others had the same feelings about the experience with grief and mourning” and “shape[d] the meaning of unique life experiences”

(Glazer & Marcum, 2003, p. 42). Narrating challenging life events is linked to higher well-being, personal growth, and the expansion of self-knowledge (Mroz et al., 2020). Storytelling performs a cathartic function for individuals, and it has been adopted as a key therapeutic practice in pathologized trauma support, such as Contemporary Trauma Theory.

Narrative is a term assigned to “any text or discourse, or, it might be text used within the context of a mode of inquiry in qualitative research” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 54). Narrative inquiry is a type of qualitative inquiry where stories are collected and analyzed in a multi-layered approach with a focus on “form (how the story is told), content (what is said in the story), and context (wherein the story is produced and told) to illustrate the dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place” (O’Toole, 2018, p. 177). It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.20). Narratives are often told in chronological order, which can help the researcher make meaningful connections between experiences, feelings, and time and place; however, they do not have to be told that way. Researchers engaging in narrative research go through an iterative process of analyzing field texts; it is a meticulous process of meaning making in order to understand the ways in which stories and lives are multi-layered, temporal, entwined, sequenced, and threaded (Samah, 2018).

Generally, the researcher focuses on one or two individuals and gathers data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences and analyzing chronological order (Cresswell, 2013). A new theme in narrative inquiry is that the relationship between researcher and participant will change in the encounter as both parties negotiate the meaning of the stories (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007). The researcher cannot “subtract themselves” from the inquiry relationship, and instead, they must “situate themselves in more or less relational ways with the

participants” (Clandinin, 2016). These complex relationships take into account not just the stories themselves, but the person, time, and place of the experience; during the analysis process, the researcher and participants negotiate and renegotiate the understanding of the experience through multi-layered contexts. It is important for “researchers to stay awake to the multiple ways to tell and live experiences” (Clandinin, 2016). Narratives are not just through writing or interviews; story-telling can also occur through various mediums such as poetry, painting, artifact collection, music, etc. As a researcher and listener, it was important for me to understand that narrative construction can be understood in many ways.

After collecting participants’ stories, the researcher has to “restory them into a framework that makes sense” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 56). Restorying can consist of the researcher analyzing for elements like time, plot, place; rewriting them to place them in a chronological sequence, or otherwise finding a causal link among ideas expressed in the narratives themselves (Cresswell, 2013). Restorying can unmask dichotomies, silences, and meaning behind disruptions and contradictions (Cresswell, 2013). Narrative inquiry is often a part of phenomenological studies because is it always a narrative view of a phenomenon under study (Clandinin, 2016).

Phenomenological and narrative inquiry research requires “high-order interpretive work” (Sohn et al., 2017, p. 124). The researcher seeks an intimate connection with participants, maintains an open mind, and understands the world as the study participants perceive it (Sohn et al., 2017, p.125). Similar to narrative inquiry philosophy, phenomenology has four existential themes: corporeality, temporality, relationality, and spatiality that constitute the makeup of the human experience (van Manen, 2016). The emphasis is on the “world lived by a person, not the world or reality as something separate from the person” (Webb and Welsh, 2019, p. 170). By

studying more than one individual, I was able to make meaning of an entire experience through commonalities within the narratives.

When studying a traumatic phenomenon, it is important for the researcher and participants to understand that by telling their stories, they will relive and re-engage in the traumatic experience. Shared trauma, “where one’s social support network is saturated with people who experienced the same trauma at the same time,” can carry risk and be emotionally taxing (Boasso et al., 2015, p. 398). Retelling stories of trauma can lead to retraumatization for the participants or vicarious traumatization for the researcher; therefore, social and professional support must be in place if participants require it. However, this does not mean that researchers should shy away from investigating, interpreting, analyzing, and engaging in the personal narratives of trauma survivors; instead, it is important to understand that story-telling can also have a cathartic impact for the participant. By sharing their narratives, participants and researchers can make sense of traumatic experiences, process emotions, and achieve an emotional catharsis. This healing theoretical approach to narrative is also known as Contemporary Trauma Theory. Multiple interviews were conducted in order to hear participants’ trauma narratives from their point of view; follow-up questions investigated both the narrative and the lapses in narrative. Participants were required to submit an artifact that was produced from the traumatic experience or was a reminder of the traumatic experience. The importance of this type of narrative inquiry was to allow participants, who may have disenfranchised grief and who may not have fully processed the student’s death, to make sense of the traumatic experience and heal while, in addition, analyzing the connection between the artifact and the educators’ experiences with processing grief.

Participants

Four participants were selected for this study. Participant requirements included 1.) employment at Northern Mountain High School since 2010 and 2.) the teacher must have taught one or more deceased student/s in class at the time of their deaths. It was important for teachers to meet both of these requirements; first, the rapid succession of student deaths began in 2010, and teachers who had that student (or those students) in class fostered a strong connection with them prior to their deaths. Teachers who meet both requirements were contacted via email and letter regarding the study. Participants completed the informed consent paperwork prior to the beginning of the research study. My individual reflections and memos throughout the process were also incorporated as data in this study.

- Participant #1: John
- Participant #2: Bill
- Participant #3: Sarah
- Participant #4: Jane
- Researcher (Lori Berryman; not anonymized)

John and Bill identify as male, and Sarah, Jane, and Lori identify as female. Participants are from varied curricular areas. Ages of participants ranged from 37-56. All participants are caucasian, married, and have been employed at the high school since at least 2010.

Data Collection Instruments

Narratives help us make meaning of our lives. It requires us to remember an event, identify key details, place aspects of it in a formal order, discuss it, interpret it, and relate it to other social contexts. In order to fully understand how my participants processed the death of a student and their perceptions of the event and institutional expectations, narrative inquiry was the key to examining the phenomenon. To construct the narrative and to produce the quality and

quantity of data that was required for this research, there were three semi-structured interviews. The interviews were only semi-structured because there were guiding questions, but otherwise, I allowed the participants to take the narration in the direction that was comfortable or important to them. This is important to my use of narrative inquiry because stories are not always told chronologically, and the narrator can move in and out of timelines, characters, and emotions. The semi-structured interview questions are as follows:

Semi-structured Interview #1:

1. When did you hear the news that your student had died? Please explain in as much detail as you can remember. Narrate the events from that point forward.
2. What were some of the immediate thoughts/feelings you had regarding the death?
3. What were thoughts/feelings you had in the days and weeks following the death?

Semi-structured Interview #2

1. How did you approach your class/occupational duties the next day and in the following weeks?
2. In what ways did you express grief?
3. Did your grief affect any other aspects of your life?
4. What are some other events that you can recall surrounding this student's death? What were the reactions of the students? What expectations were in place for how you were to manage your classroom and students?

Semi-structured Interview #3

1. Has any of your feelings/understanding of the event changed through having the ability to narrate and discuss the events?
2. How has your perspective of your occupation changed since this traumatic event?
3. Do you feel as though your experience with grief is different because of your occupation?
4. How does the artifact you are submitting reflect your experience with trauma?

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews took place at the research site in a private setting, and lasted approximately thirty minutes. Participants were interviewed individually in a classroom setting. In the first interview, participants were asked to narrate the experience of the student death (i.e. Where were they when they heard the news? What do they

remember about the next day? Next week?). The first interview was mostly open-ended; I asked questions for clarification or for the participant to expound on the narrative. The second interview focused on the teacher's perceptions of teacher expectations of grief before and after the traumatic event (What were the expectations for you after the traumatic news? How did you perceive yourself as an educator at this time? Etc.). The third interview discussed with the participant what, if anything, changed as a result of the story-telling experience (How has the participant changed as a result of this traumatic experience? How were you able to move on? How has the experience changed your perceived roles both personally and professionally? Etc.). There were specific questions written for each interview; however, I encouraged participants to narrate, expound, and allow the conversation to naturally progress to other areas that are not specifically identified and only rely on these questions to provoke the narrative. At the end of every interview, I provided time and space for participants to provide additional information, raise questions, and clarify points. After all interviews were transcribed, I provided participants with individual copies of the interviews for the purposes of editing, clarifying, and checking the narrative.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, each participant submitted an artifact or artifacts that relate to their grieving experiences. I offered some ideas: a written reflection, a picture, a song, an object, etc. Asking participants to provide a physical artifact was another way to encourage meaning making, which was essential for productive grieving and healing. According to Rolbiecki et al. (2021), "Research has shown that having a physical artifact can facilitate storytelling and sharing of emotional experiences, breaking the verbal barrier, and promoting open communication" (p. 571). With both the interviews and the artifact, participants were able to organize their thoughts regarding the loss and feel a sense of control over both the

narrative and an object of representation; this is significant in helping the participants master their experiences.

The artifact captured a moment in time or evidence of what connections these teachers still have to the deceased and how that affects them today. In addition to the four research participants, I incorporated my own story of grief and analyzed my narration in relation to the others.

The data collected through interviews and artifacts addressed the following research questions:

- How does the trauma caused by the death of a student impact a teacher personally and professionally?
- How do teachers perceive their occupation after a student's death?
- How do teachers perceive the institutional expectations placed on them after a student's death?
- How does the act of storytelling affect the way teachers process grief after a trauma?

The interviews took place at a time convenient for both the researcher and the participant, mainly before or after school hours. Because the school has been approved as a research site, the interviews were held within teacher classrooms in the facility. Having interviews within the educational setting where the grief was managed or maintained helped participants add detail to their narratives.

Data Analysis

I transcribed my own interviews with the help of the talk-to-text transcription application in Zoom. Throughout this transcription, I began to notice common themes that I labeled as codes. Initial codes that emerged were: time and place, prior experience with tragedy, shock, guilt,

haunting, and lasting effects. Before the second round of coding, a sampling of the data was reviewed by three doctoral students for interrater reliability using the codebook developed by the researcher. Interrater reliability “is a recognized method of ensuring the trustworthiness of the study when multiple researchers are involved with coding” and it ensures the value of the results and safeguards the quality of the research (McAlister et al., 2017, p. 1). The reviewers agreed on my initial coding, and two of the three reviewers had additional specific codes that led to the expansion of the category of lasting effects. I took this into account during my second round of data coding. During my second round of coding, I added the code of administrator intervention and changed the category of lasting effects to work/life balance which later became personal and professional effects. After the third round of coding, I reorganized my codes into themes. The first theme, connecting tragedies, showed how participants connect the student death with another tragedy they experienced. This provided some background into the participants’ experiences with grief, and it showed how the participants typically respond to a tragedy. This helped to create the “moment of impact” section of chapter 4. The next theme was labeled as personal effects. This housed a wealth of categories such as concern for the student’s parents, guilt/regret, lasting presence, and the effect it has on other areas of their personal lives. Then, the theme of occupational awareness emerged. This theme contained participants detailing the importance of connecting with students personally and emotionally and the different roles they are placed in during the aftermath of a tragedy. The theme of institutional expectations highlighted the lack of direction and consistency from administration and the implicit expectation to be “strong” for the students. The last theme emerged after the last interviews were coded. Those interviews encouraged participants to reflect on the actual narration of their experiences, which exposed the impact and benefits to narration.

Throughout the process, I kept a research journal to keep track of my journey through my own emotions and narrative. This subject is very personal and highly emotional; both the research participants and I were working through narratives of bereavement, and throughout the interview process, we became co-constructors of each other's narratives. While I asked participants to narrate and make sense of their own trauma, they were, in turn, helping me narrate and make sense of my own. My memoing and journaling became a key aspect of my analysis of the data.

Ethical Considerations

Retelling and reliving stories of traumatic events can have deleterious psychological effects on the participants. I prepared resources and contacts that participants can access to seek guidance. I ensured that participants understood, prior to participating, that our discussions could elicit painful, sad, and troubling emotions. In addition, participants were provided with information regarding resources available through the school if they felt as though they needed to talk to a counselor as a result of the study. Because I also analyzed my own grief narrative, I was cognizant of how my own emotional and psychological health was affected, too. I also had the concern that through the discussion of individual student's deaths, it may bring up painful memories in the community or be viewed as exploiting the tragedies. These fears were ultimately allayed by receiving such positive feedback from fellow participants and school community members.

Lastly, it is important to note that this research is being completed in a very small district situated in a very small community. My participants are not only my coworkers, but I consider them my work family. We have long established connections that made our conversations easy and comfortable, and it allowed them to be more open with me than they might be with an

outside researcher. Also, the experiences my participants are narrating are all shared experiences, and during the interviews, we were able to recall or discuss the specifics of the tragedies in an understanding and compassionate way.

Data Collection

Data collection began after approval was granted by the university's institutional review board. It took place during September and October of 2021. My instruments of collection were the transcriptions of three semi-structured interviews and the artifacts submitted by participants. My own reflections and memos written during this time period, along with my responses to the interview questions, were also a part of the analyzed data.. This data was what I used to address all of my research questions.

The three semi-structured interviews were held in close proximity to each other. The data collection plan was as follows:

Participant 1, John: 8/31/21 (interviews 1 & 2), 9/7/2021 (interview 3)

Participant 3: Jane: 9/2/2021 (interviews 1 & 2), 9/9/2021 (interview 3)

Participant 2, Sarah: 9/23/21 (interviews 1-3)

Participant 4: Bill: 10/7/2021 (interviews 1-3)

Having the interviews in succession over the course of four weeks ensured that participants were not burdened by the study and therefore, they remained a part of the study. It allowed for participants to remain focused on the topic of study so that the narrative was built upon from the prior interview. Some participants requested that multiple interviews take place within the same day; this created more cohesive narratives. It is important to note, that due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, participants discussed topics that were not necessarily prompted by the interview questions.

Names, positions at the school, age, and years worked were anonymized and/or not included within the participant description. Identifying information remains separate from the research data (audio, transcripts). I am the only individual handling raw data; it will not be accessed by my dissertation committee or by administration. De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance discussion on the topic of study. I will remove or code any personal information that could identify participants before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that no one will be able to identify participants from the information I share.

Chapter 4: Results

Participant and Study Overview

All participants were high school teachers who have fifteen or more years working within the district. There were two male (John and Bill) and two female (Sarah and Jane) participants. Participants took part in three semi-structured interviews throughout August, September, and October 2021. Interviews were approximately 25-35 minutes in length. The chart below identifies the semi-structured interview questions in relation to the emergent themes.

Figure 1: Relationship Between Questions and Themes

Semi-structured Interview Questions	Themes
<p>INTERVIEW 1:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When did you hear the news that your student had died? Please explain in as much detail as you can remember. Narrate the events from that point forward. 2. What were some of the immediate thoughts/feelings you had regarding the death? 3. What were thoughts/feelings you had in the days and weeks following the death? 	<p>Concern for the deceased's parents</p> <p>Guilt and regret</p> <p>Lasting presence of the deceased</p>
<p>INTERVIEW 2:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did you approach your class/occupational duties the next day and in the following weeks? 2. In what ways did you express grief? 3. Did your grief affect any other aspects of your life? 4. What are some other events that you can recall surrounding this student's death? What were the reactions of the students? What expectations were in place for how you were to manage your classroom and students? 	<p>Guilt and regret</p> <p>Effects on other aspects of participants' personal and professional lives</p> <p>Importance of connecting to students in personal and emotional ways</p> <p>Be "strong" and</p>

	keep teaching
<p>INTERVIEW 3:</p> <p>1. Has any of your feelings/understanding of the event changed through having the ability to narrate and discuss the events?</p> <p>2. How has your perspective of your occupation changed since this traumatic event?</p> <p>3. Do you feel as though your experience with grief is different because of your occupation?</p> <p>4. How does the artifact you are submitting reflect your experience with trauma?</p>	<p>Greater Awareness of the Difficulty of Taking on Multiple Roles in the Grieving Process</p> <p>Be “strong” and keep teaching</p> <p>Lack of institutional direction and consistency</p> <p>Understanding the impact and benefit of storytelling</p>
Artifact	Theme
<p>Bill: Little Trees Black Ice Car Air-Freshener</p> <p>John: “Stairway to Heaven” by Led Zeppelin</p> <p>Sarah: Jake’s Class Notebook</p> <p>Jane: “Drops of Jupiter” by Train, Student Presentation</p> <p>Lori: Tom’s Reflection Paper on Ben Franklin’s “The Dialogue Between Franklin and the Gout”</p>	<p>Importance of connecting to students in personal and emotional ways</p>

The study also utilized my own written response to the interview questions, self-reflections, and memos that were written throughout the data collection phase. I used inductive coding for emerging themes; then, commonalities were identified and analyzed.

Participant names have been anonymized:

- Participant #1: John
- Participant #2: Bill
- Participant #3: Sarah
- Participant #4: Jane
- Researcher (Lori Berryman; not anonymized)

John and Bill identify as male, and Sarah, Jane, and Lori identify as female. Participants are from varied curricular areas. Ages of participants ranged from 37-56. All participants are caucasian, married, and have been employed at the high school since at least 2010.

Student names have also been anonymized:

- Jake: Deceased; fatal car accident
- Grant: Deceased, fatal illness
- Tom Miller: Deceased, suicide
- Brian: Deceased, fatal car accident
- Noah: Deceased, fatal accidental head injury
- Austin: Deceased, fatal car accident

Some places and names were redacted for the purpose of anonymity of the participants.

Each participant in the study experienced the loss of a student through accident or illness. At the beginning of the initial semi-structured interview, participants were asked to narrate the events of the student's death. The broadness of this request was intentional. Stories of trauma are often non-linear, and I wanted the participants to feel comfortable identifying for themselves what was actually the "beginning" of the story. The beginning of this chapter will provide insight into the key details of the initial impact of the student death as related by each participant. The purpose of providing each participant's "moments of initial impact" was to create context for

each participant's experiences with student death. While this data does not answer any one specific research question, its importance is twofold. For one, the moment of impact was a catalyst for the shift in the participant's views of their own lives and their occupations, and it was the inflection point that caused a ripple through the entire school community. In a study regarding blog narrative practices Karkar and Burke (2018) write:

The individual's ability to narrativize and make meaning of their grief further appeared determined by how they made loss their own - that is, the individual's success in assuming their grief as a part of their identity, whereby grief became an impetus to narrative development rather than an impediment. (p. 217)

By including each participant's moment of impact, it helps to determine how much of the participant's identity has been affected by the loss, and it also helps to highlight how they see the death of a student in relation to other deaths they have experienced. Participants made numerous connections between the student's death and personal experiences that existed outside the death itself. This creates a more detailed picture of each participant, how their view of grief has developed through this experience and over time, and how that affects their perceptions of their personal and professional life after the tragedy. The emergent themes in this first section are time and place, the pairing of the student death to another significant and concurrent life event, and the relationship between the student death and a past traumatic event for the individual. The stories were prompted by the question of: When did you hear the news that your student had died? Please explain in as much detail as you can remember. Narrate the events from that point forward.

John's Moment of Impact

John had a unique position in this study because not only is he a long-time educator at Northern Mountain High School, he was also a part of the county-wide “flight” team that is dispatched to schools who have had a school-wide tragedy. The flight team is composed of educators, guidance counselors, administration, and other faculty and staff that are specifically trained in helping mitigate the effects of the tragedy. Here, he recalled the moment in which he heard of Jake’s car accident. He said,

I got the call very late at night...or I think...it was midnight, because he passed...he had his car accident at 11:15 or something? He was trying to get home because he had his junior license before midnight, and I think he was already going to be late, and it was a rain-slicked road. I know exactly where it happened living here, and I think I got that one either at midnight or 1am that I got the notification.

With little time to organize a response to the tragedy prior to the start of school the next day, paired with the district-wide shutdown due to COVID, an in-person response to the tragedy was impossible. John mentioned,

So it was decided we were going to set up our counseling rooms via Zoom, and...so by that morning we were ready to go. It was [redacted], the the nurse and I... we ran a room, and we had it open all day. And uh...I think part of the issue with being virtual, it’s not necessarily a good thing for grieving. Kids need to be social during that process, and to sit in a room empty and deal with that kind of emotion is very difficult for them.

Because of John’s experiences on the flight team, he noted that he wasn’t “numb” to the news, but that he had “done this so many times...it’s like... ok, we just lost a child again, and this is

what has to happen.” His reflection on classroom practices in the aftermath is discussed later in connection with research question three in Chapter IV.

In all participant interviews, the narration of the initial student event was paired with both a life event and a prior tragedy. For John, his experience with Jake’s accident brought back emotions related to two other, both tragic, events. First, he reminisced about Grant, another male student who had a long-lasting illness that led to his death. He said,

You know, we were going through the fall, and Grant’s performance in cross [country] was not where he wanted it to be, and you know, [redacted] was talking with me during lunch the one time,...and he’s like I just can’t figure out why he’s not running, you know, the way I think he should, and you know, we were talking about reasons that could be, and some of them physiological, you know, and it was like the next day or two, I can still see him...you know...I was sitting and talking to [redacted] and he came in the doorway, and he’s like ‘I’m going to get some...I’m going to the doctor...and I’m going to get some tests done.’ and [redacted] jokingly says ‘You better! You know...you better figure this out!’ and Grant is like, ‘Okayyyy... I’m going to figure it out!’ and that was the last time I saw him.

The leading narrative and this digression toward another student’s death created parallels between the two events and the unexpectedness of them. To further deepen the concept of John’s perception of the situation, he paired the tragic news of Jake’s passing to a personal prior tragedy where a close friend committed suicide. John explained, “...my best friend...um...he committed suicide when we were in our thirties, and he was the kind of guy...most intelligent guy I ever met in my life...and we would talk regularly on the phone...” and he further remarked that, “I’ve dealt with a lot of death in my life, probably more than I should at this point.”

He also remembered a poignant experience he had with another student death at a neighboring school district:

At [redacted], in the spring, there was a kid who was a freshman, and they were hybrid at that point. He was a big kid in the theater, and he had heart issues, so the kid goes in for a routine pacemaker replacement, and the surgeon nicked his aorta, and he died on the table.

Next, he recalled a death at his prior job, and said, “I remember back we lost the director of the planning commission. It was my second year there, and she was a raging alcoholic, and it was terrible.” Finally, he connected the event to a tragic student death from his own high school experience. He said, “I remember very well...he died in a car crash, and again, the district did its best....but I remember they played over the announcements, they did a quick little reflection, and they played a part of ‘Stairway to Heaven’.” These experiences affected how John perceived his own grief, and they also affected the choices he made within his classroom after the death of a student, and to what extent a tragic event affected his personal and professional life.

Bill’s Moment of Impact

Bill also brought a unique perspective to this study. Bill, similar to John, was a long time educator at the school. Additionally, he was the leader/advisor of a very productive and popular curricular and extracurricular group within the school. This gave him the ability to start, grow, and maintain close relationships with students not just within the walls of the school, but beyond graduation. This is why Jake’s death, Jake being a recently-elected officer of the group at the time, had a profound effect on Bill. Bill recalled,

So it was during COVID, but the first phase of COVID. And it was a Saturday morning, and I got a phone call from [redacted], the athletic director, and he’s the one that told me

Jake had a car accident and passed away, and he didn't know a lot of details. Okay, but he also told me...shared with me that there were other students that witnessed it happening. So what happened was, he was driving, and then there were two girls [who] were following him home, and they actually witnessed him basically going...and we don't know if he was going too fast or whatever, but he was going around a turn and didn't make it, and then went into the woods and down an embankment. And the girls were traumatized.

Bill mentioned that he, and others, did not know what to do. It was a challenge to get in contact with the principal, and that, mixed with the constraints of COVID, made it difficult to put together a plan. The day after the death, Bill reached out to Jake's mother and explained that he would provide any and all resources that he or his group of students could provide to her. He also mentioned how challenging it was to manage rumors and grief while the district was closed due to COVID. He said,

If this would have happened during school, we would have been able to have the kids come down here. There would have been counselors, you know what I mean. So it was really tough. Then, school did open, they did, I'm almost sure that I know they did. They actually opened the library for students to come in, but it wasn't well attended. I think they have counselors, but it just wasn't...wasn't the same as, like if we were in school. We even had [witness 1, redacted] and [witness 2, redacted] come in that next week... I think that Monday...to talk to [redacted] and me, and we made a point to be here to meet with them. Now even though it was against the rules, we felt we had to, and they kind of were in tears crying and just explaining everything that happened.

The two witnesses to the accident were also members of Bill's group. His job in the aftermath of the death was really threefold. On one hand, he had to process the grief of losing a student who was close to him. Secondly, he extended the services of his group to the deceased's family, and he had to help two students who witnessed the accident through their state of shock and despair. The depth of his empathy is clear when he remarked, "...and that's something that will affect her and [witness 2, redacted] their whole lives. But, yeah, yeah, I mean, I can't even imagine."

As evidenced in all participant interviews, Bill paired Jake's death with a life event and a prior tragic occurrence. Bill first recalled a unique connection between Jake and his own son. He said,

Jake had a condition called microtia, and did you ever notice in his ear...he had no ear...basically, ear surgery? Microtia you're born with.... my son, [redacted] was born the same way with the right ear. So we related, you know what I mean, we had that in common.

Bill's identification of the relationship between the deceased student and his own son showed the depth of his connection to the school; members of Bill's group are considered family, and that added insight into why this death was particularly difficult for him.

While on the topic of Jake, Bill reminisced about another tragic student death. He said, "See, but then there was another one...just a freshman or sophomore, and he had older siblings. This wasn't that long ago, he committed suicide." We discussed some other student deaths he experienced in the years prior to my working in the district, and also some of those that we experienced together. His ability to recall specific details of many of these events indicated his connection to the wider school community.

Sarah's Moment of Impact

Sarah was not only a long-time educator at the high school, but she had been a part of the community her entire life. She, too, discussed the moment she learned about Jake's death. She said,

...[it] would have been in May, end of May 2020, right when we finished school. That was when we were quarantined. I think you texted us that we should check our email, or somebody said check your email, and as soon as I see that, I know that it's not a good thing. Um, I had also seen it on Facebook; I follow the fire alerts of [redacted] County, and I saw the location, the time, and had a bad feeling because I typically just...you know...you get those. So when I saw the text, I had a feeling that it's going to be bad. And I read it, and it was very heartbreaking because he was a wonderful, wonderful kid, and just finishing school.

She alluded to the fact that she has experienced the impact of student death before; however, this one was a bit different for her. She said,

It was the first time that it was a kid in my class...in my current class. And then, not being able to see kids, and we were virtual and not being sure how to, like, not only process it myself, but like should I say something to them? Should I not? Type thing. And I remember thinking like right before, a week before, that maybe I gave them their last quiz and Jake and one of his friends, who's another student I've had multiple times now, they both started the quiz at the same time, had the exact same answers, finished the quiz at the same time and submitted it. And so I sent them a message and was like...you know what's ironic? You guys have the same questions and finish up at the same time...whatever... and he wrote me back and said, "Great minds think alike!" and I just

left and thought it was so funny...and then to think like, oh my gosh, like this just happened.

What was particularly poignant about this interview is that Sarah discussed the moment of impact of multiple student deaths. When finding out about Brian, another student who also died in a car accident, she recalled being at a basketball game, and after she heard the news, returning to the gym to find "...no players, no cheerleaders. I had no idea where anyone went. And it was like a pin...like you could hear a pin drop, and I'm like, what's going on?" and additionally, learning about Tom's suicide by first recalling, "...and when I was driving, state cops went flying past me on [redacted] Road, and I thought that was odd. My assumption is that's where they were going." She continued by saying, ,

So yeah, so um...and then I was going out with other friends for a friend's birthday that night, and I had gotten home. I was in such a good mood, and we got this, you know we got this text, and I'm going to dinner. And then we got the phone call, and it was just like...my...my...emotions were just like, woah, it is very unexpected.

This led her to feel the following, "Every time I hear that siren, my concern is, is it a kid?" which illustrated the amount of tragedies she has worked through in her career. Similar to other participants, she related these tragedies to other life events and prior tragedies. When it came to Jake's death, that tragedy ran concurrently with being quarantined and having the inability to meet due to COVID restrictions. Tom's death was paired with a friend's birthday celebration and bridesmaid dress shopping. Relating these experiences to me made her think about her own past dealings with high school tragedy. She said,

I had a friend that died in a car accident when I was in high school here. I was with him, maybe an hour before, and he left in his car to go home. I left my boyfriend-at-the-time's

house and saw all the commotion. I saw the lights, and I thought, hmm... I wonder what happened. And then a friend called about an hour later and told me.

She mentioned that this past experience helped her negotiate her students' own feelings after the string of student deaths.

Jane's Moment of Impact

In Jane's interviews, she chose to focus on Grant, the student who died after an illness. This death is a bit different from the others participants have focused on, namely due to the nature of the death, which was not immediate; the student's health degraded over a few months. Here was her recollection of the moment when she found out that Grant was sick:

... I can still remember that we were at a Hershey show when we found out that it was, like, serious. Like, I knew he was sick, and I remember we got... I think I got a text from [redacted], and I felt like I was gonna throw up the entire afternoon. It was horrible to realize like, this kid is like...he's probably going to die. I remember checking my phone like a hundred times that day, like what happened? Like that moment of...like...it's gotta, it's gotta be fine. It's gonna be fine. It can't be the guy who was, like, super healthy and everything was fine.

While reminiscing about the events leading up to Grant's death, she connected the events to another life event, her pregnancy. She said,

I'm looking at Grant, specifically, because I think that's probably the one that I remember the best just because I was pregnant at the time. I was actually getting my substitute ready, like talking to him that day that Grant died about like...what to do when he came back, because he'd been out for some many months, so I'm like okay...this now...deal with it. I got papers from him from CHOP (Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania) that he

would send me. He was like, writing essays while he was at CHOP, and you're just like...it was crazy. ... I don't know if you got those emails, but I was on an email with [mom's name, redacted], and she was sending us pictures of him, like regularly from the hospital and sending updates and stuff. So, I knew it wasn't good. The day, or the day before, they are like "he's brain-dead - it's happening" it was just a matter of time before they turned off the machines or whatever.

Next, she identified the exact moment when she learned about his death:

We were in the office, we were...we were in the library, and the librarian [redacted] went over to the office to ask about some resources that I needed for a research paper I was doing for my kids, and she came back sobbing, and she was like, "It's over...he's dead". She really freaked out like, oh...she's really upset.

Like all other participants, narrating this student death led her to recall a prior tragic event that affects the way she perceives the tragedy. She said, "I've had friends that have died, I had a boyfriend that dropped over dead in college, you know like... I've experienced loss in other ways." After Grant's death, Jane was out of school due to maternity leave. This had an effect on her ability to grieve the death and help her students during this tragic time.

Researcher's Moment of Impact

The following comes from my self-reflective interview that took place during the September-October interview window. This is what I can recall from the moment I learned that Tom had died:

It was an early January morning, and we received a phone call and email that there would be an emergency faculty meeting in the library prior to the start of school. I didn't think this was that unordinary; we had a string of bomb threats at the school, and in my mind

this was going to be related to that. At this point, in 2013, social media certainly existed, but as a staff, we weren't really well-connected. I wasn't the only one that showed up that day unaware of the news we were about to hear. We gathered in the library chatting about the topic of the meeting, and our principal, [redacted], walked in with an exhausted and familiar look; something terrible had happened. I knew immediately that there was another death, injury, or terrible tragedy he was about to relay.

Unfortunately, my assumption was correct. Everything felt as though it had stopped:

The room grew somber and quiet. I could hear the ticking clock on the wall, and the air became heavy and anxious. I can't recall much of how [redacted] broached this difficult topic, but I do remember him poignantly explaining that Tom Miller, junior, committed suicide the night before.

After I had a moment or two to even consider the possibility of this happening, I recalled, "In my head, I thought Tom? My Tom? I felt like I had been punched. I was frozen. Why? How? This must be a mistake."

As I continued to reflect on this time in my life and teaching career, I thought about how I felt the rest of that day. I wrote,

...all I can remember for the rest of the day is just crying; an endless crying that came from somewhere deep inside me that had never been touched by such sadness and loss. [...] All I was, however, was unabashedly, horrifically, and mournfully sad" [...] [there was]an endless crying that came from somewhere deep inside me that had never been touched by such sadness and loss and every time I thought of Tom, what he must have been going through, his empty seat, attending a funeral for a 16-year-old, it all very much broke my heart.

Similar to the other participants, I connected my retelling of Tom's story to another life happening and prior tragic event. As I mentioned, at this time, we received a lot of bomb threats in the district, so having our day disrupted was not all that abnormal. I also remembered the following about what my husband and I were going through at this time:

He had just lost his grandfather and two grandmothers. My aunt died a terrible death from lung cancer. My favorite high school teacher and mentor had recently passed away as well. An omnipresent heaviness was already imbued throughout my home, and there was certainly no escaping it at school.

It's important to note that instead of an oral interview, I had time to write down, reflect, and process my answers to the interview questions; therefore, this allowed me to provide more detailed responses as opposed to my other participants.

Addressing Research Question #1: How does the trauma caused by the death of a student impact a teacher personally and emotionally?

Now that the context has been developed for each of the participants, the specific research questions are addressed. Research question number one asked, How does the trauma caused by the death of a student impact a teacher emotionally and personally? The questions associated with this section of the semi-structured interview were:

1. What were some of the immediate thoughts/feelings you had regarding the death?
2. What were thoughts/feelings you had in the days and weeks following the death?

There were three main themes that appeared here. First, participants showed deep concern for the deceased student's parents. Next, participants elaborated on feelings of guilt/regret in the aftermath of the death. This guilt and regret is both tied to feelings of inadequacy at dealing with the student death with his/her students and not being able to prevent the death. The next theme

discussed here is the lasting presence of the student after death, or haunting. For lack of a better word, this is the omnipresent feeling of the student after death and acknowledging the aspects of that student's life that remains. While all participants expressed some level of sadness and loss, this is kept out of the coding discussion because these are all too common responses to death, and more attention needed to be paid to responses that were unique to an educator's experience. At the end of this section, I have included brief passages from the interviews that show how these three prominent feelings (concern, guilt/regret, haunting) have affected other aspects of the participants' personal lives.

Concern for the Deceased's Parents

John was the first participant to mention the differences in how grief can impact the parents of a deceased student. He expressed concern about a parent in particular who has spent years in the aftermath of her child's death struggling with the loss. John said,

I also saw the way that it impacted his parents, because his parents live right next to where [redacted]'s parents live...and the mother, [redacted] she has never gotten over that. I mean...she completely unraveled, and she's never been the same. So you watch that, and you watch how, and on the flip side.... I used to watch [redacted - Grant's mother], just deal with her son's passing, and she was back working at [redacted] part-time and substituting and asking how [redacted] was doing, boom boom boom, being upbeat about it, and it's just such a...it's interesting how it affects people.

Later, he also reflected on Grant's parents and family:

So, I went to that viewing, too, and there is his dad and his two brothers remaining and...they are trying to be upbeat, and I'm like...talk about trauma. I mean, you know, and his mother was one of the most upbeat and holding out hope, and she finally came to

the realization that he's going to pass, and she was... I mean, I can't imagine...she was so um...she had it so together during that period, and I was always like...how do you do that? You just lost your son?

Bill's deep connection to the district and surrounding community was evident in his interactions with the deceased student's mother and his concern about how she was managing her grief. He reached out to Jake's mom the day after Jake's death. He said, "... I also reached out to Jake's mom, but that was the next day, Sunday, that I reached out to mom to let them know [redacted - group's name] would do whatever we needed to, you know, to help. He later expresses concern for Jake's mother by saying, "I mean how do you? I don't know how to deal with it. So, I'm not judging, because she was a mess. I mean...she was a mess." He also continued to offer Jake's mother any and all resources he could, he said,

Yeah, actually to be honest, I never met her before... I think I could call her, you know, because I'm sure enough, she was overwhelmed with calls. Yeah. It was good. Just due to [redacted - group's name] because he knew that we would do anything for that, you know, but, [I] could tell her, her brain, was going, a mile a minute too, she wanted to. She started organizing a memorial service, so she had a lot of things on her mind. We did talk. We talked about the next week about the service...and then all the [redacted - group's name] helped. They got shirts, too.

Bill's group amassed 30-40 students to help prepare the local youth league for the memorial service.

Jane and Sarah also expressed concerns for the deceased student's parents. However, their concerns are regarding what support they are able to give to the parents during that difficult

time. Jane remembered being pregnant, and not being able to attend the funeral service but still wanting to support Grant's mother. She said,

I remember being really upset. It kind of seems stupid in hindsight because, like, I didn't know what to do about the funeral because I was SO pregnant, and I'm like, I want to be there and do the right thing, and it was very awkward to be leaving as well. [...] And I remember that Friday thinking I should go and just feeling horrible and being like, if my water breaks in line at a funeral...you know I just didn't think so. I mean, I wrote [redacted - deceased student's mother] a letter and stuff. I just, I felt so bad, because I can't imagine the position she was in.

She later mentioned Grant's mother, again:

I always felt bad for her every time I saw her. I think about that every time I walk in the office and see [redacted - other deceased student's mother]. And I hate that I still feel bad, because I think it must be hard to live your whole life, knowing people you see, even your co-workers, like they still kind of see you through that lens. I see her and think of a mom whose son has died, and not necessarily just her. So I, you know, I think we have it here that way like how hard would it be for you to move past that? It's not upsetting for me to see her, and I just don't, I think I question more like... I was always nervous I didn't react the right way. Yeah, like if I felt that bad with what happened to Grant, can you imagine? I can't even imagine.

Sarah mentioned her wavering feelings on whether to express her sympathies to Jake's mother.

She reflected,

... I did actually get a card for his mom. And then I never sent it because it's, again, one of those things where I'm like, I feel like I'm bringing up things that people are trying to

move on from, and I don't... I'm just... I don't do well with it. [...] So, I have this card that I bought but never managed to send.

This quote not only shows concern for the deceased student's mother, but it also illustrates some of Sarah's feelings of guilt and regret.

Guilt and Regret

The feelings of guilt and regret emerged in participants' interviews once they were past the "moment of impact" stage. When questions became more reflective, participants began to consider their own actions, and the actions of others, and they were forced to reframe and justify them.

Bill expressed a sense of regret after not feeling comfortable attending a makeshift memorial for Jake:

A lot of kids built a memorial right away. Right where he passed, and I was hearing, and that's one thing. It was difficult for me. I really wanted to go, but I knew, you know, I don't think it was the right thing for me, being the teacher to go because we were... I know administration, and we were not condoning that. [...] We felt it was a dangerous area. We didn't want them hanging out there. Yeah, but again, it goes back to what we could have done otherwise, we could have, you know, I don't know that was enough. Because it was April/May that time when COVID just started getting bad, and...and all the restrictions, right.

Bill later reflected on his inability to create a stronger connection to Jake prior to his death:

So he would be a senior, right? I had him as a freshman in my class, and we were close, and you know, developed a good relationship, but then as a sophomore that happened in class. So, I didn't have him, you know in the virtual world, but he would come down

when we were in school, you know for [redacted - group name] things and so that's one thing I kind of regret...not being as close with him in his sophomore year, as I was in his freshman year.

Sarah's reflection of that tragic time made her consider whether her students recognize her level of care for them, and how she can change that. She said, "...but that accident, I think it has just made me be like, I, I, want to be more, I don't want to say more emotional with the kids...but they don't think I care as much as I do, and I want that to change." She also expressed regret for not attending Jake's funeral. She said,

I didn't [go] because it was during COVID, and I was concerned about how many people there were, at that time. It was outside. I had considered going, but again, no one else that, you know, I'm friendly with here had him or planned to go themselves, so that's not typically a thing I like to do by myself. I mean, I don't think anyone enjoys it. Yeah. Um. So, I didn't, and I don't want to say I regret it, but I kind of do.

This is echoed in Jane's statement regarding being unable to attend Grant's funeral:

I remember being really upset. It kind of seems stupid in hindsight because, like, I didn't know what to do about the funeral because I was SO pregnant, and I'm like, I want to be there and do the right thing, and it was very awkward to be leaving as well.

In my own interview, I expressed my regret over not being able to prevent Tom's suicide, even though I know there was nothing I could do. I wrote,

I felt responsible in some way for Tom's death, and I felt guilty that I did not see any signs or symptoms that he was struggling to such an extent. [...] There were also feelings of so much deep regret and guilt for not being able to prevent this student's suicide, but also my inability to provide support, comfort, or understanding for my students in my

classes. [...] I have never been able to shake the guilt of not adequately supporting my students after Tom's death because of my own suffering. I will also always feel responsible for not recognizing his suffering.

Lasting Presence of the Deceased

The lasting presence of the deceased is an omnipresent feeling that the deceased student is still a part of the classroom in either a physical or metaphorical way. Bill and Sarah viewed this feeling as a positive remembrance of the dead. Bill said,

So it's funny...we have two chalkboards, one in the grow room. And I guess Jake wrote his name there, and, we...the kids won't... They don't want it erased. And there's one out here on the whiteboard, that he wrote his name, and one of the students wrote DO NOT ERASE. So, definitely. He's here.

He also reflected upon the permanent memorial that exists outside his classroom:

You know, and I'm missing so much more...there's a lot more. You know what I mean? Because, I mean...he's still here. And I do think of Jake almost every day, too, because you know the memorial things we have for him and this, you know his friends are still here. He should be a senior graduating.

Sarah thought about Jake's notebook that is still sitting in her classroom and Jake's presence felt by her and the students. She said

...like circumstances when being at home was hard, and then I have classes was hard, and then I have this notebook in my room, because he never got to get it back. And I have his friends again in [redacted] classes and like it's still something we talked about, like, they told me...he was one of the kids who was supposed to be in the class. So like that was kind of weird to be like, oh, like, this is the first time this class is running. He was

supposed to be here. So, two of the boys that were in the class last year that were good friends of his said it was weird for them to walk in that room again, because the last time they were all in that room and Jake was there.

Jane recalled this haunting feeling and being unsure how to handle that for herself and her students. She remembered:

I remember talking to them [students] about things like, what should we do? Do you want to move your seats? Do you want to stay? And you feel the seat's dominance. And, like...you just feel like there's a spot. Like how are we going to process this?

Out of all the participants, I recounted the feeling of sensing that lasting presence the most. I attribute this to my focus on Tom, who died by suicide, instead of Jake, who died in a car accident, or Grant, who died after an illness. It was not just the physical loss that stayed with me, a lot of these lasting feelings were manifested due to my regret and inability to prevent the death. I reflected,

The most memorable feeling I had after Tom's death was the feeling of just being so haunted by it. Teaching never felt normal again.[...] This feeling of being haunted...it went on for years. It was a mix of could I have done something to prevent this? And how could this happen to a seemingly happy, well-adjusted, kind, and outgoing young man? [...] It wasn't until I began researching grief and trauma that I realized even eight years later, I am still profoundly impacted by Tom's death.

The very title of this dissertation is a reference to those remaining feelings. Similar to Jane, the dominance of the empty seat in my classroom reverberated louder and louder every day that it remained unfilled.

How These Feelings Affect Other Aspects of Participants' Personal Lives

While I was able to identify the three prominent lasting emotions of concern for the deceased's parents, guilt/regret, and haunting, it was more challenging to organize how these emotions impacted participants' personal lives because the impact of the trauma really proved to affect, well, everything personally and professionally. There were some clear areas where the trauma and lasting emotion from the students' deaths impacted participant's personal lives in prominent ways.

For Bill, one of the major impacts is how he viewed his own family. He said, "Well, um, I guess when anything like this happens, you just are grateful for your family, you know what I mean? My wife and I just talked about how blessed we are, you know, and you just appreciate what you have. And it just hits home, and you don't want anyone to go through it.

Jane then echoed this same sentiment. She remarked,

I think there is a different understanding of, like, how much you care about somebody, like, if it's not, like, you know...having a child. ... [...] So it's hard for us, but I think it's also that you think of your own kids, and it's just unbearable. [...] And I mean this across the board, I think that we carry these things home with us.[...] You don't just go home and drop it. And I think that those emotional things are what's hard to process and move on from.

For Sarah, these lasting emotions made her more contemplative in her personal life. She said,

You can't change it, there's nothing you can do. You can only maybe make better decisions...like you know what I mean, be more cognizant of what you're doing and where you're going or like, like in Brian's case, supposedly, you know, a guy had a turn

signal on which is, or it was like faulty or something, which is why he pulled out, so when I see people turning, I typically don't like, pull out of somewhere unless I know they're going to turn. So maybe as a decision, that I have thought of since to be like...no... I should make sure this is happening before I put myself in a situation like that.

And for John, he continued to live with the expectation that there will be another student who inevitably dies during his tenure at the school. He said,

...as I said before, some hit harder than others. You know, time heals all wounds, but some of them for me aren't, no matter how long ago it was. [...] I think it...we've had so many here at Northern Mountain High School that you're always expecting it to happen again. So yeah, I guess I'm always waiting for the next one, which is kind of unsettling.

He brought up this expectation a second time in the interviews, as well:

I think it...we've had so many here at Northern Mountain High School that you're always expecting it to happen again. I think that's the way I look at it as we go through these quiet periods of a couple of years. I think, okay...time's up again. Just based on statistics, it seems like every two or three years we have a loss, so that being said, we should be okay for a little while, but that doesn't mean...it's...it's almost like when you look...here's the terrible analogy, but if you look at floods, you know you have a hundred-year flood, and what does that mean? That means that on average, your property could be affected every 100 years, but you can have a hundred-year flood and then next weekend, you have another hundred year flood. It's just statistics. Umm, so yeah, we could have one student death every year for the next ten years, and then not have any for

50. [...] I think I mentioned before, we're like the perfect storm for having those in this district, so yeah, I expect more before I retire, unfortunately.

Because I had time to write and reflect on the ways in which this trauma and the lasting emotions have affected my personal life, my response recognized a more direct connection:

When I had my daughter in 2014, I struggled with anxiety in the post-partum; however, I kept it under control, and I had a lot of help and support from my family. Then, in 2017 when I had my son, this anxiety became so overwhelming that I sought professional help and was diagnosed with postpartum anxiety. I had never heard of PPA, only PPD.

Through therapy, I learned that my anxiety grew from my fear of others and my fear of not being able to protect my children. I thought back to Tom. I also have realized that I have never been able to complete my "grief-work" and move through the stages of grief after Tom's passing. I think this was stunted by my desire to be a teacher who kept teaching and moving, and also my feeling as though I couldn't really express grief at home at the time. It has only been at the start of my research for this dissertation, and my reflecting on what happened, that I am finally being able to work through my grief.

Responding to these questions and writing my positionality are some of the hardest things to do. I find myself often needing to take breaks. I'll pace around the kitchen, I'll pretend to look at the calendar, I'll make a coffee, find something to clean, and it's all acts of avoidance, because Tom's death still really hurts and reliving it through the process of storytelling is both painful and cathartic.

Addressing Research Question #2: How do teachers perceive their occupation after a student's death?

Experiencing a student's death impacts the educator in innumerable ways. When in the physical school building, there is a dichotomous relationship between personal grief and professional responsibility. The following research questions seek to understand how educators perceive their occupations after a student's death, their roles and responsibilities, and their expressions of grief inside and outside of the workplace.

1. How did you approach your class/occupational duties the next day and in the following weeks?
2. In what ways did you express grief?
3. Did your grief affect any other aspects of your life?
4. What are some other events that you can recall surrounding this student's death? What were the reactions of the students? What expectations were in place for how you were to manage your classroom and students?
5. How does the artifact you are submitting reflect your experience with trauma?

After reflecting upon loss, participants realized that a large part of teaching is creating emotional and personal connections with students. This, in many cases, takes precedence over meeting curriculum standards. This was emphasized throughout participants' responses. As a part of my data collection, I asked participants to provide an artifact that reminds them either of the student, the loss, the trauma, etc. of their choosing. In this section, I will provide participants' insights into the importance of connecting to the students in personal and emotional ways and describe the artifact that each participant produced. I decided to incorporate the artifact with this area of data collection even though it was a part of the third semi-structured interview. In all cases, the

artifact emphasizes the blurred line between participants' professional and personal lives, and the artifacts show even if the impact is not directly related to the participants' profession as educators, the trauma does force a recall of another event from their lives. This gray area between participants' professional and personal lives may be the result of participants' close community ties and the small institutional setting.

The Importance of Connecting to Students in Personal and Emotional Ways

Bill, who ran a popular group in and outside the school, discussed how this provides an important opportunity for him to connect to his students. He said,

It's different with me being a [redacted] teacher and [redacted] advisor and kind of...you develop a different relationship I think with kids, because we travel together, we compete together, we hear a lot, you know what I mean? We do night activities, meetings, and you know, so I it kind of sounds weird, but a lot of the close [redacted] students, I consider, you know, my kids too.

In the aftermath of Jake's death, he expressed some frustration that he was unable to continue those close relationships because of the constraints of COVID-19. He remarked,

So if this was non-COVID, we could have gone to a student's house or my house. You know what I mean? I couldn't do that because of the restrictions. So that's what made this so much, so much, I think...more difficult to deal with.

Sarah expresses some concern about students not thinking she cares as much as she does. She strove to create a warm environment, but she felt as though students did not perceive her as emotionally available. She said, "I'm like, not mean... I think like, they think I don't care as much as I do. And it's not, I don't want them to think that." Later in her interview, she reiterated

the importance of creating personal and emotional connections with students through this profession. She said,

...and I think COVID had something to do with it too as well, and I do think that [redacted] speaks of this a lot more recently, that there is more to this than just I'm teaching you math. Especially being so interconnected here and going to school here, you know, that it is like, [...] I think that there is more of an emotional relationship that you build with some kids, but I don't think I also have this weird, like, I don't think I make as much of it.

She mentioned that it was recently when the importance of this emotional connection was really brought to her attention. She provided an apt anecdotal story:

When I was at the airport, when I was leaving Myrtle Beach the other week, the guy was like, "Oh! Don't leave us!" and I was like, "Oh, I wish...trust me... I wish I could!" And he's like, "Why do you have to go back to work?" and he said, "What do you do?" and I said I'm a teacher, and he's like "Oh, so you're changing kids' lives?" and I'm like..." I guess?" I'm just like no, I just tell them and make them do things they don't want to do, like, that's what I do. Yeah, but I guess there is more to it than I think about sometimes.

Jane also reflected upon how she's changed over the years regarding building personal connections with students. She said,

I think I'm really lucky because we have such incredible kids here, so it makes you recognize, like, I think I've gotten better with getting to know them. Like, or like being able to take it slow and talk to them or stepping in. I think in the past I was like I'm not their mom. But now it's okay, I can bark at them about driving too fast if I sit in the parking lot or whatever. And I think some of that's because they died. [...] I'm certainly

not at the level where I want to know who you're dating, but I also think, like, it's important to have those personal connections with them because you realize like even at 17 or 18, it's good for them because it makes me happy when they're happy. It's nice to have that interaction.

She also mentioned how making those personal connections with students is an extremely important part of teaching. She remarked,

I feel like I get to work with them on a different level and like, I am kind of a parent for a while and like, I think about that responsibility. If you don't feel it personally, you can't do a good job. I just don't see there is anyway not to, and I think...taking that personally and making those relationships with those kids is so important to get them to do the work and to learn and be able to thrive while they're here, but as a result you're invested in them. And when you're invested in them, you feel bad when they're upset. [...] Like...we need those relationships and [redacted] says how many times that personal relationships matter.

Near the end of the third interview, she came back to this idea: "...so much of our job is hooking them and getting to know them and creating relationships where they'll learn from us and do what they need to do."

In my own self reflection, I wrote:

I am much more attuned to what my students tell me through their work both academically and creatively. I respect and value the connections I make with my students, and I work hard to reach students who seem hesitant to make a connection with me. I've become more involved in student activities, and I make it a point to become invested in

students' lives. It has made me, as a teacher in this school community, feel closer to my students and colleagues through our shared experiences.

In a later response, I remarked:

I think I've come to realize that it's not just an occupation. Teaching is very different from your average 9-5 job; it requires an investment in the school and community, and when something tragic happens, it feels very personal. My classroom could potentially be a safe haven or a welcoming space for students who are struggling with aspects of their lives. As an educator, I have the responsibility to make judgments on how to act/what to say/what to model to my students after a tragic event. I may not make the right decisions.

It has also helped to humanize me in that way; I am affected by trauma, and I'm not just an automaton who can forget what's happened and get up and get back to teaching.

Although the discussion of the artifact was left for the third interview, I found that once participants began discussing their artifacts, it showed how the traumatic experience deeply impacted participants and blurred the lines between their personal and professional lives. The artifacts showed that even if the impact is not directly related to the participants' profession as educators, the trauma does force a recall of another event from their lives.

When I gathered artifacts from participants, I left it very open-ended. I gave some examples. They could provide a song, a reflection, a picture, an item, etc. Below, I'll list a brief description of the artifact for each participant along with the participants' explanations. All the artifacts speak to the importance of those unique personal and emotional connections students and teachers make with each other. It hearkens back to the importance placed on personal connections even within the professional setting.

Bill's Artifact

Little Trees Black Ice Car Air-Freshener: "This is air freshener black ice, and I've never used it before, until, I never bought them until Jake passed away. And the reason I use these all the time, I buy them in bulk and give them to my own children. I have them in my cars, and yeah, his mom told me this story. [...] He, he got his license, I believe, one day, and then Friday is when his accident was. So he was, what, 16 and a half that Monday? So, what, four days later or five days later he gets into this accident, but his mom was saying that he ordered, I think I might be wrong here, but 100 or 200 black ice air fresheners because they were his favorite. And he was so excited to have his own truck, and he did a lot of work on it. [...] I make sure all of my family vehicles have it."

John's Artifact

"Stairway To Heaven" by Led Zeppelin: "When I was in high school, at [redacted], this girl I grew up with, we were really good friends, she had a very large family... I think like nine or ten brothers and sisters. And the younger brother, he was only a year or so behind her, and I remember very well...he died in a car crash, and again, the district did its best. It's [redacted], so it's a different entity....you know, a couple of thousand students. But I remember they played over the announcements, they did a quick little reflection, and they played a part of "Stairway to Heaven" because it was his favorite song at the time. And every time I hear that song, I'm always reminded of grief for some reason. I just always think about this kid."

Sarah's Artifact

Jake's Class Notebook: "It...it's like look. He was just this kid writing these things, like taking notes on this thing, and look what happened, which is like a couple of months in between, but it was just like how quickly. Here he is, being a kid. Like, it also has a survey that I Have

them do at the end of the year that talks about their home life for what they like. It's just, it's crazy to think that, and it could be anyone, and it can be any time.

Jane's Artifact

“Drops of Jupiter” by Train: “‘Drops of Jupiter’ by Train reminds me of a student dealing with grief and depression. She missed school and had to make up a presentation after a placement for suicidal thoughts. This was right after Tom’s death. She and I met after school to complete the assignment. When she was presenting, I can still remember long pauses as she tried to come up with words. Her mouth was dry, and she was distant throughout the presentation. I clearly remember watching her and seeing how much pain she was trying to hide and feeling so sad that I couldn't really help her. I was so worried about her and scared for what would happen to her.”

Researcher's Artifact

Tom’s Graded Paper written in the theme of Ben Franklin’s “The Dialogue Between Franklin and the Gout”: This is one of the graded assignments that I had but did not get a chance to return to Tom prior to his death. I still keep it. I still cry over having it. It makes me realize how there is so much more to teaching than just grading for commas and spelling. In this particular assignment, Tom had to create a dialogue between himself and a weakness that he had. Just like in the original dialogue between Ben Franklin and his gout, the weakness or ailment would provide tips in order to overcome it. Most students wrote about their addictions to their cellphones or procrastination. Tom wrote about his emotions. While at the time I could recognize how it was different from other students’ papers, I had no idea what Tom was actually battling. It takes me back to that day and those moments. I’m hoping that one day it will be an artifact that memorializes Tom in my mind instead of making me return to the trauma.

Greater Awareness of the Difficulty of Taking on Multiple Roles in the Grieving Process

Through the interviews, participants also revealed that mitigating the effects of a student's death placed them in multiple roles outside of just the educator. These roles include being placed in a parent or counselor position. This widened their view of the educational occupation, and overall, made them realize that they are more adequately prepared for some roles than others.

Jane spoke about this quite a bit throughout her three interviews. To her, it's difficult to bridge the roles between educator and "in loco parentis". She said:

I've experienced loss in other ways, but I think when you have to watch someone's child like that and like think of it and I think especially being a teacher or if you see those kids in a different light, I think it's like the fact that I'm responsible for those kids when their parents aren't here, like, and I...you...you're, you're in that role. I mean we are in loco parentis. You know...how much time of that year. So it's hard for us, but I think it's also that you think of your own kids, and it's just unbearable. [...] So, it's tough because it's like...you have a job to do here, but again, you're partially their parents, and you're here in a different role, so it's tough.

She continued on speaking about the difficulty in carrying educational duties, acting as counselors, and holding faux-parental roles. She said,

I think that pressure comes from me, too, because I think it's the same barrier...like...

I'm not your mother, and I am your teacher, and I need to move on at some point if you're still sad because I can't be the one who's necessarily helping to bridge that in my classroom during our class time. And that can be harsh, but at the same time it's like...a

job or something like, at some point you're going to have to get back to doing your job or at least look like you are...like...you can't continue in that pattern forever.

She followed this up in the third interview by remarking,

And I just think, what we're required to do, and we do a good job, and it's so much more intensive, psychological, more than what people think. We think of being a parent like the ultimate job, but it's really difficult if you think here in some ways, we are parenting and teaching students one after another, year after year, and, especially in our culture, that is so devalued, and that can be really frustrating, because you can give so much, it's hard to look at the news or read an article where it's like I don't want my kid to have to wear a mask or things like that, and even if a student death doesn't directly relate, it's that feeling like you're so involved, and you care so much that you can see, and I know I mentioned it last time, but teacher burnout. I see where that comes from. Because this isn't like a normal job.

Sarah also mentioned the teacher/parent dichotomy. Here she was reflecting on being at one of the student's funerals and having to shift into a parent role instead of a teacher role. She said,

I went to Austin's funeral. And there were a bunch of kids who were there without parents. And for me, that was rough. Because [redacted] and I...we actually stayed with, like, we brought kind of a line with them and when I realized none of their parents were there, we kind of stayed with them to like, be like, are you okay you know, to kind of fulfill that role of being the adult. Not there's much we can do, but just to let them talk about it or say anything, you know.

Because of Bill's connection to the students through his club, he generally played the role of parent and educator due to the close-knit atmosphere of the club itself even outside of the

tragedy. When discussing Jake, however, he acknowledged his connection to him in relation to his own son. He reflected on how Jake, and his own son, had a congenital birth defect known as microtia. He said,

...my son [redacted] was born the same way with the right ear. So we related, you know what I mean, we had that in common. Now the only difference is that [redacted]'s microtia wasn't so bad at all, and it didn't affect his kidneys. [...] So that's another thing we have in common.

Later on, Bill mentioned that he and his club "adopted" Jake's brother before he even entered the high school, and he remarked, "So, yeah, I think, you know, it goes back to always being such a close community."

John, on the other hand, had a unique perspective. As a member of the county flight team and as an educator in the school, his roles were often shifting after a student death. He took on the role of counselor, substitute, and parent, in many cases. He reflected:

I've...unfortunately, here at Northern Mountain High School, we've had several deaths where that kid has been right in my room, or I coached or something, so umm...yeah... I...it takes time, umm...a lot of times after I do a day of grief counseling, I just need time to myself that night, or that afternoon. Sometimes I go somewhere for grief counseling, and I'm completely shot, so they might have me released at noon, like okay...you can go home now, we have another set of counselors coming in and umm... I usually come back to teach, but sometimes I need to stay home for a couple of hours and decompress a bit.

He also discussed his role of filling in for other teachers who are too beset by grief to continue teaching. He said,

...sometimes a teacher just can't...and I'll take over the lesson. I'll say, 'Okay, I got this... I can teach [redacted]. What are we doing?' Then I'll get in front and make sure everyone knows I teach [redacted] and this is going to be a crap show, and here we go. So I've done that before to give the teacher a break.

John's ability to change roles came a lot easier to him because of his experience with the county flight team. Other participants noted the difficulty in these shifting roles between educator, parent, and counselor. This was compounded when the death was sudden and unexpected.

Addressing Research Question #3: How Do Teachers Perceive the Institutional Expectations Placed on Them After a Student's Death?

The last research question focused on how participants' perceptions of being an educator shifted in the aftermath of a student's death. This question focused on their perceptions of the institutional expectations that were placed on them immediately and in the aftermath of a student's death. Perceptions were formed by assumptions about what the "right" thing was to do after the death, administration direction, or lack thereof. The third semi-structured interview was guided by the following questions:

1. Has any of your feelings/understanding of the event changed through having the ability to narrate and discuss the events?
2. How has your perspective of your occupation changed since this traumatic event?
3. Do you feel as though your experience with grief is different because of your occupation?

Be "Strong" and Keep Teaching

The need to be "strong" and continue teaching was a commonality expressed by all participants. First, John spoke specifically about his perceptions of institutional expectations:

I think there is the expectation that you pull yourself up by your bootstraps and get back to work. I think that's the expectation. We have a very hard job, and we're dealing with like...you know...fifteen different kids sobbing...and we're going to get on with it. [...]

So I think sometimes they look at us like these pillars of strength and say, go and do your business. When those kids come in, you do not show emotion, direct them onto the lesson, and that's just not going to happen all the time. I think schools need to be aware of that, and know that it's going to affect the staff, sometimes more than it affects the kids.

Bill also referred to the expectation of needing to be "strong" while also having the personal desire to express emotion with his students. He reflected,

You have to be strong, but you also have to show, you know, emotion. And I don't know what the differences are. You can show emotion and still be strong, but I think they look up to you as a role model and teacher, you know, [redacted] advisor. So...but I don't know if it's showing signs of weakness...it's just showing that you're human, too. You know? I don't know, it's hard.

Sarah, too, discussed the expectation to be strong and keep going with her classes. First, she reflected upon the feeling of being strong and what motivated that:

I'm sure I cried a couple of times, you know, when it happened. Shortly after, you know, but I do... I for some reason feel like I'm in this role and I need to be the stronger, like, I don't know why, but I feel like I need to be a support that's like not... I don't know, I don't know how to explain it, but I feel like I need to be strong for them.

Later she spoke about the difficult time after a student's death where students were not ready to move on, but yet, teaching had to continue. She said,

I said...do you want to do [redacted]? Do you want to talk? What do you want to do?

And they really didn't say anything, and they just sat there, and I said, we're not going to sit, I said...we can't just sit here. We can't just sit here and like, you know, I said...so, for me, it's easy to just kind of keep going. So I said, I'm going to teach math, and we'll do it mellow.

Jane also discussed the difficulty managing the expectation to keep going but being mindful of students' emotions. She remarked,

Most of us can have someone die, and you still have to go to work two days later, yea. And again, maybe that's not right, maybe you know, who knows what the answer is. But like, this may be the first time they've ever had to do something traumatic and then three days later you have a quiz. We gotta move on at some point, and I think I've always been very good. I know I'm going to treat my kids like my real kids and I try to be with them and to just talk them through it and just say like, this may seem like it's going too fast, but you need to talk to me and at some point we need to get back to doing work.

She also brought up the feeling of needing to be "strong" during this time. She said,

...there are moments where you're upset, you're stressed out. I get anxious., but I think more than anything I try and just force myself to keep going. Because I don't, I don't feel like I can stop. I think especially here at work.

In my own reflections, I discussed what I perceived to be these same institutional expectations (to be strong and to keep going), and how I felt as though I thoroughly failed to meet them. First, I recalled an administrator providing us with the following advice, "Let's try and be there for our students today." That, I could not do. There were many kind teachers who stepped in for me that day so that I could mourn privately. I also reflected on the few days following the news:

I did everything I wasn't supposed to do. I took a few sick days. I kept his seat open and empty for the rest of the year. I couldn't bring myself to attend the funeral or show strength to my students. I didn't speak about it, nor did any students bring it up for the rest of the year. On a personal level, it was extremely difficult even to be in the physical classroom. [...] When it comes to the act of teaching, I was doing very well; we were moving through content, writing essays, and taking tests and quizzes. When it comes to being human, I was suffering.

I also recalled that because Tom's death was a suicide, it was treated differently due to the stigmatization of suicide and the fear that there would be other students who copied his actions. That also made it difficult to be "strong" for my students, as I felt that his death went largely unrecognized compared to other students.

Lack of Institutional Consistency or Direction

During the discussion of participants' perceptions of institutional expectations, they also identified that despite feeling like they need to be strong and move on with the curriculum, what also affected their trauma-response was their perceived lack of institutional consistency or direction.

John, Bill, and me, all recognized how different student deaths are responded to differently. For John, this was a major point of criticism with how these deaths are handled from an institutional standpoint. He remarked,

One part I really struggle with, is who was the kid? Because depending on who that kid was, that determines the impact. I really struggle with that because it really shouldn't be that way. I don't like the way our district dealt with those types of deaths over the years, and in our community, we have high profile kids that we have showcases set up as a

memorial, we have you know...we're going to do this, this, and this, and that's usually the first thing. We lost student X, and I'm like, okay, last year we lost student Y. Yeah but, that's why I get upset.

Bill discussed the same inconsistency at the end of his interview:

It's just some of them, it's like you have a pot of water. It's like, you know, dropping a marble in it, but for some other people it's like dropping a basketball in it, like it just depends. It's unfortunate, but it's just the connections that are made. Yes, that's what it is.

I also remarked on this in my own reflection. I wrote,

For example, after a student died in a motor vehicle accident, there were t-shirts made, and a display put up in the hallway case to commemorate him and other things like that, but there was no commemoration of Tom because of the stigma of suicide.

John and Jane both remarked on the lack of direction in the aftermath of a student death. John reflected,

Um...again, they are all different. I would like to see us do something, and again...there is no standard kids, just like there are no standard tests, and so I think it would be nice if we still had a set series of steps in place..."

Jane viewed the lack of direction as both a societal and institutional issue. She explained,

I think we need to do a better job, as a society, dealing with mental health. This is a snapshot, and maybe I overemphasize that it is our job or our situation, and maybe it isn't. I think we gloss over mental health issues, and in general, and that's a problem. Like, how do we deal with grief? We don't. Period. [...] I'm not sure how much of it is like a...just a professional problem vs. a social problem. We don't really acknowledge

any of that stuff. I wonder if everything in the past years, with everything else that's gone on, are we going to start to recognize how important that is?

It is also important to note that John, Bill, and Sarah also all acknowledged that COVID complicated the administration's response in the aftermath of Jake's death in 2020; the lack of consistency and structure identified in the data, here, is not lumped in with the struggles brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Addressing Research Question #4: How Does the Act of Storytelling Affect the Way Teachers Process Grief After a Trauma?

This question in particular pertained to the theoretical framework of the study. In Contemporary Trauma Theory, narration is used as a tool to help those who have been affected by traumatic situations bring the experience back into their consciousness and make sense of the details. This is one aspect of grief-work. Brandeland (2022) sums up the impact of narrating grief:

The labor and art of storytelling has the power to transform our lives. In sharing and receiving stories, we connect more deeply to one another: We become more real, more fully human. We feel less alone. [...] It requires honesty, vulnerability, and the courage to contact the wounded places within ourselves. (p. 926).

Stories are a way of making meaning, and participants felt that the act of narrating tragic events was both restorative and difficult. In participants' responses, they identified that the act of narrating the events brought about a greater understanding of the events, in particular, the lasting effects of the trauma, and the benefits of the reflection.

Understanding the Impact and Benefits to Narration

All participants acknowledged the impact and benefits of narration. Sarah was the most comprehensive in her response. She focused on the meaning-making aspect of sharing narratives.

She said,

Talking about it does change how I feel about it, or like at least it does increase your understanding of it. It does. I think it makes me feel better when you can talk about it with somebody else who does understand because being, you know, obviously...any child death is awful. But like, for people who aren't in the profession, or don't know the profession, or don't know the people...they can't. They can't understand as much how you feel about it because they don't know the person. So, I do think talking with other people or even their friends, does make it kind of like, it makes it easier to not get over it...but like...move on from it...

Jane echoed a lot of these sentiments, and she also expanded on the difficulty of sharing stories related to trauma:

You realize the impact and how much stuff just carries over. Just life. I think we compartmentalize so much, and you're like, okay, I have to deal with this and then tomorrow there is something else we have to deal with. You don't think of how many different things you've been through. Not in a bad way. There is just a lot tying me to this place, and to each of my coworkers and my students and stuff, it just deepens all that for me thinking about it all.

Bill was happy to have the opportunity to finally sit down and discuss Jake's death. He said,

This is really the only time I really sat down and, you know, talked about this, which I think is really good. You know, I'm missing so much. There's a lot more. You know what I mean? Because, I mean, he's still here.

This was not the only time that Bill expressed a desire to recall more and tell more. Throughout each interview, he recalled elements of his story that he did not previously recall. It was clear that as he spoke, he continued to make more sense of the narrative after being asked to put it into words. This is really the crux of Contemporary Trauma Theory.

John reflected on how narrating these events helped him with other areas of his life. He remarked,

Umm...say, I think to me...death is always going to be death. To me, it's loss. I think the more I grief counsel, I think the easier it is for me to deal with them. As I said before, some hit harder for others. I think...umm...you know, time heals all wounds, but some of them for me aren't...no matter how long ago it was.

John's numerous previous experiences with traumatic situations involving students was evident here. He has a continual exposure through his work in the county's flight team; when asked to narrate the events of just one of these exposures, it was challenging for him, at times, to stay focused on just one storyline. It was clear, however, that he has had many opportunities to talk about his experiences, so that could be a potential reason as to why speaking with me may not have had the same impact as it did on other participants.

My reflection addressed the impact of not only the act of narrating my own story but having the opportunity to listen to others' stories. I wrote,

Since I began this research (especially my research on Contemporary Trauma Theory), I

have been storytelling and analyzing the events of Tom's death. I think one of the most important things I've discovered is the long-lasting effects that not only this one particular student's death has had on me, but how all of them have affected and continue to affect my personal and professional lives. I am much more attuned to what my students tell me through their work both academic and creative. I respect and value the connections I make with my students, and I work hard to reach students who seem hesitant to make a connection with me. I've become more involved in student activities, and I make a point to become invested in students' lives. It has made me, as a teacher in this community, feel closer to my colleagues through our shared experiences.

In a few memos that I wrote after I conducted interviews, I continually returned to the idea that my understanding of each of these student deaths became more whole. Through every interview, that sense of community and camaraderie grew out of the shared connections that we had with our students. Even though we were surrounded by four brick walls in an old classroom down a well-trodden wing of the school, the act of narration allowed us to share our struggles, acknowledge our authentic reactions, and reflect upon ourselves as educators, and more importantly, humans.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Major Findings

Most modern grief theorists acknowledge that grief does not follow a standard course. After a loss, mourning can be intense, violent, elongated, absent, truncated, interrupted, or unchanging, or otherwise vary at different times on different days. Ross and Kessler (2014) in *On Grief and Grieving*, acknowledge that “our grief is as individual as our lives” (p.7), and the stages of grief they identify (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) do not follow a specific order, and in fact, mourners can and will travel through the stages and return to these stages throughout their mourning periods. This was evident in my participant interviews and within my own reflections. Because I interviewed participants over 2-3 different periods of time, their responses reflected these varying levels of grief and mourning. At first, the majority of participants were stoic, objectively recounting the events from the day of impact. After some investment in the narrative and opportunities for reflection, they began to attach the student’s death to periods of grieving that they previously experienced in their lives. This then expanded into grief over the deceased parents’ state of being, and then grew further into acknowledging the lasting effects of the student’s death. While they passed through the stages of grief, it was clear that their mourning was anywhere from absent or interrupted to elongated and absolute. One participant, John, did not go through the gamut of grief and mourning during his interviews; this is due in part by his long time involvement with the county’s flight team, and being exposed to multiple deaths over a series of many years. During his interviews, it felt as though he had successfully navigated his grief-work, and was no longer mourning the loss of the student on whom he focused his narrative.

The disenfranchisement of teacher grief was also evident throughout the process. When participants expressed the need to *get on with things* or *be strong for the students*, it is indicative of the “hidden grief” Rowling (1995) recognizes in a similar study on how teachers process grief. She acknowledges that this is a phenomenon that stems from teachers’ “personal and professional duality” and is exacerbated by “relationships not being recognized, grief not being recognized, and grieving rules” (Rowling, 1995, p. 321). Participant statements also indicated a self-disenfranchisement of grief brought about by their perceived institutional expectations for grief and their personal histories with trauma. Research shows that the disenfranchisement of grief can lead to second-hand shock, retraumatization, nightmares, avoidance, agitation, withdrawal, frustration, depersonalization, etc. (Levkovich and Gada, 2020; Alisic et al., 2020; Essary et al., 2020; Lawson et al., 2019). However, my participants mostly showed compassion fatigue and the questioning of one’s own ability to do a job well. Jane spoke the most about this during interviews. After discussing how grief “builds up,” I asked her what happens when it gets to be too much. She responded by saying, “That’s a great question. Then you end up in therapy?” The other participants, besides John, had similar sentiments. By having been part of the system for responding to so many student deaths, they were tired, burnout, and questioning their actions as educators, while also acknowledging a deeper need to have their grief recognized.

Theoretical Implications

Contemporary Trauma Theorists prioritize a “refrain from viewing survivors’ poor functioning as resulting from sickness, weakness, or deficiencies in moral character [...] and instead, in need of healing and help” (Goodman, 2017, p. 187). The healing and help is applied through the narration of the traumatic event. Trauma narratives are curative because they help victims “come to terms with their traumatic experiences” (Visser, 2015, p. 255) and help

traumatized individuals organize, detail, orient, and contextualize the experience through repeated narratives. In addition, the act of recounting the narrative puts the narrator in control, creates an authentic sense of self, and also engenders a sense of community between the speaker and listener.

The use of narratives throughout this study helped us all “creat[e] links between the world, [our]selves, and others” (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 2), by reflecting on the commonalities of our experiences, and together, see what each participant viewed as their own individual bereavement become a larger communal bereavement process. As Glazer & Marcum (2003) write, the storyteller realizes that “others had the same feelings about the experience with grief and mourning” and it “shapes the meaning of unique life experiences” (p. 42). While at first I thought my closeness to the participants and experience with the tragedies would hinder my ability to accurately code the data, I came to realize that this sense of community that I developed with my participants did not hinder my process, but helped it. There was no subtracting myself from the subject. If I relate this back to Contemporary Trauma Theory, I think about how my experience being researcher *and* participant allowed me to feel the full mitigating effects of narration in relation to trauma. This is explained well by Glazer and Marcum (2003) that narrating and listening shows that “others had the same feelings about the experience with grief and mourning” and that the process “shapes the meaning of unique life experiences” (p. 42). I have come to realize that since Tom’s death, I have not been able to adequately move through all the stages of grief. I felt alone in my responses to his death and my perception of it. However, in addition to me listening to my participants, they also listened to me, and I, too, was able to make more sense of the time surrounding Tom’s suicide.

In addition to the narratives, I also required participants to submit artifacts. According to Vafga-Dobai (2015), “Stories have artifactual qualities which represent possibilities, or affordances, for meaning making. While telling stories about ourselves, we often incorporate details about objects that carry relevance for us from a personal and cultural perspective.” (p. 78). The artifacts were a significant part of this because narratives are not provided through just writing and interview; stories occur through different mediums. These artifacts also articulate the cultural values and knowledge of the participants. These artifacts are “fractures of self” and they served as a point of discussion and analysis (Vafga-Dobai, 2015, p. 78). For a long time, my artifact was the cause of great distress for me. It was the last piece I had that connected me to Tom. I felt silly for keeping it all these years, and I saw my attachment to it as unnatural. What I now see is that we all do this. Whether it is an air freshener, a song, a notebook - it is not only natural, but instinctive, to hold onto memories in physical forms. This is one other way that my narrative bonded me to my participants. It is also telling that many of the participants made the suggestion of making a type of “club” for teachers to express grief. This would be a key strategy used by Contemporary Trauma theorists to elicit narration. Whether it’s oral narrative, self-reflection, memoing, or artifact analysis, this study brought a long-needed catharsis through the lens of Contemporary Trauma Theory.

Implications for Teacher Development

Eyetsmitan (1998) writes, “An area of concern that has rarely caught the attention of organizational theorists and practitioners is how grief adversely affects workplace performance. [...] A lack of understanding of the grieving process, coupled with false assumptions on how employees form emotional attachments promote stifled grief in the workplace.” (p. 469 & 474). While institutions have developed more trauma-informed approaches over time, the lack of

literature regarding trauma-informed educator training or institutionally-focused professional development illustrates the need for change. Educators are vulnerable to compassion fatigue and burnout because of their supportive roles and their exposure to “students’ traumatic and violent experiences, disasters, and crises” (Levkovich and Gada, 2020). Without proper education or intervention, educators can experience emotional and physical effects that include helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression, fear, sadness, loss of enjoyment, intrusive thoughts, sleep difficulties, digestive issues, weakness, frustration, depersonalization, and dissatisfaction, coupled with conditions such as compassion fatigue and burnout (Levkovich and Gada, 2020; Alisic et al., 2020; Essary et al., 2020; Lawson et al., 2019). If educational institutions and educators themselves are more prepared to handle traumatic situations, such as the death of a student, responses will lessen the chance of chronic grief and burnout. My participants’ emphasis on needing to be strong for the students and feeling ill-prepared to know what is the “right” thing to do in the wake of a tragedy, show that three specific areas of teachers’ own pedagogy needs to be changed. For one, school districts should evaluate their current trauma-informed practices and create additional space for educators who are also affected by school-wide tragedies. Additionally, there should be clear expectations for educators in relation to these policies, and educators should be placed in positions where they feel comfortable taking on the roles of friend, parent, and counselor instead of the base expectation that all educators are prepared to engage with students in those ways.

Next, in-service teachers require professional development in the areas of managing grief (educator and student) and institutional expectations that outline a plan of action within the school and within the classroom. Educators also need to be made more aware of what resources are available to them through the school to help them manage and process their grief-work.

Educators in the United States have access to Employee Assistance Programs that provide health and wellness services that include short-term counseling services and assessments (United States Office of Personnel Management). Anything labeled as “short-term” is not enough. As I have discovered through my research, there is no timeline for bereavement, and teachers should have not only more diverse methods of intervention but also more access to them and for a greater amount of time while having those services being compensated by the district. Three of the four participants of my study also referenced the need for having time for teachers to gather together to decompress after a tragedy, and discuss their connections to the student, how they have handled their classroom atmosphere, but most importantly, express how they are doing and support other teachers. This hearkens back to the need for bond-building, and creating more space for teachers to have these conversations can have the alleviating effects that listening and providing trauma-narratives does.

Many other occupational fields (healthcare, social services, counseling services, police entities, etc.) require and provide professional development in the areas of trauma and bereavement. Reid and Dixon (2009) found that “managing grief is not included in teacher pre-service programs” (p. 219) and Levkovich and Gada (2020) argue there is “no methodological or structured training to deal with trauma” (p. 101). Pre-service teaching programs need to incorporate courses that address specifically the history of grief, grief theory, strategies for managing a classroom in the wake of a tragedy, and Western expectations for bereavement.

The Theory of Grief Recovery is a common trend in course work designated to increasing awareness of trauma-informed practices in other fields. This is “the movement toward using loss experiences to promote healing, positive imagery, self-restoration, and posttraumatic growth”

(Nolan and Hallam, 2019, p. 88). Contemporary Trauma Theory works adjacently; it uses narrative in order to engage with the loss experiences. Studies done on successful bereavement education interventions show that it is important to “identify and raise awareness of the needs of children who have experienced the death of a significant person”, “provide practitioner who will be able to act as an information and educational resource to other professional staff”, “enhance understanding of each other’s roles, to increase cooperation and collaboration meeting the needs of children and young people who cross the boundaries between professions” (Braund and Rose, 2001, p. 68).

The course I developed will engage students in researching school district bereavement policies and advocate for pursuing deeper understandings of the roles educators are expected to perform in the wake of a tragedy. This can help to eliminate future educators from expressing certain feelings that were commonly expressed throughout participant interviews: questioning one’s own ability to perform adequately in the wake of a tragedy, not knowing how to maintain the balance between continuing with curriculum and student bereavement, processing one’s own grief while in the role of educator, and feeling anxiety associated with the expectation to take on other roles for the students such as parent, counselor, and friend. This course may help decrease the stigmatization of discussing the topics of death and bereavement. In an article entitled “The Grieving Killjoy: Bereavement, Alienation and Cultural Critique”, Kofod (2021) argues that culture stigmatizes death and bereavement because “happiness, future-orientedness, and productivity [...] dominate[s] Western cultures. The experience of grief - with its sadness, preoccupation with the past, and lack of initiative - is inherently at odds with such ideals.” (p. 434). Quer (2020) mentions that “fear, especially fear of death, does indeed occupy a central place in the foundation of modern politics” (p. 323) and Case et al. (2017) points out that

“euphemisms clearly illustrate the strength of Americans’ fears and unwillingness to even mention death in everyday conversation” (p. 400). Course work associated with bereavement, trauma-response, and grief management can make discussion of death more prominent throughout other areas of professional development, and educators can be more aware of the inevitability of dealing with death and trauma within the school.

Implications for Practice

As a result of my research, I have created two professional practice products. First, I have outlined a mock-course for pre-service educators to be taught during a traditional college semester. In this example, I hit four key areas: the history of grief and grief studies, Western expectations for grief and their influence on institutional expectations, Contemporary Trauma Theory and classroom management, and common educational institution bereavement policies. The rationale for this course is as follows:

This course will discuss the ways in which teachers experience trauma within the classroom, focusing specifically on the deaths of students and faculty. In addition, the course will uncover what institutional expectations there are for teacher bereavement, and it will look at the larger picture of Western beliefs regarding bereavement and trauma. Contemporary Trauma Theory, made popular by trauma-theorists Cathy Caruth and Bessel van der Kolk, will frame class discussions.

Please see Appendix C: Example Course to view the course outline in its entirety.

My second professional practice product is a social media awareness campaign. Social norms provide privilege to close family and tend to ignore those who have less engagement. In a school setting, however, when a death occurs, the tragedy affects a large swath of people;

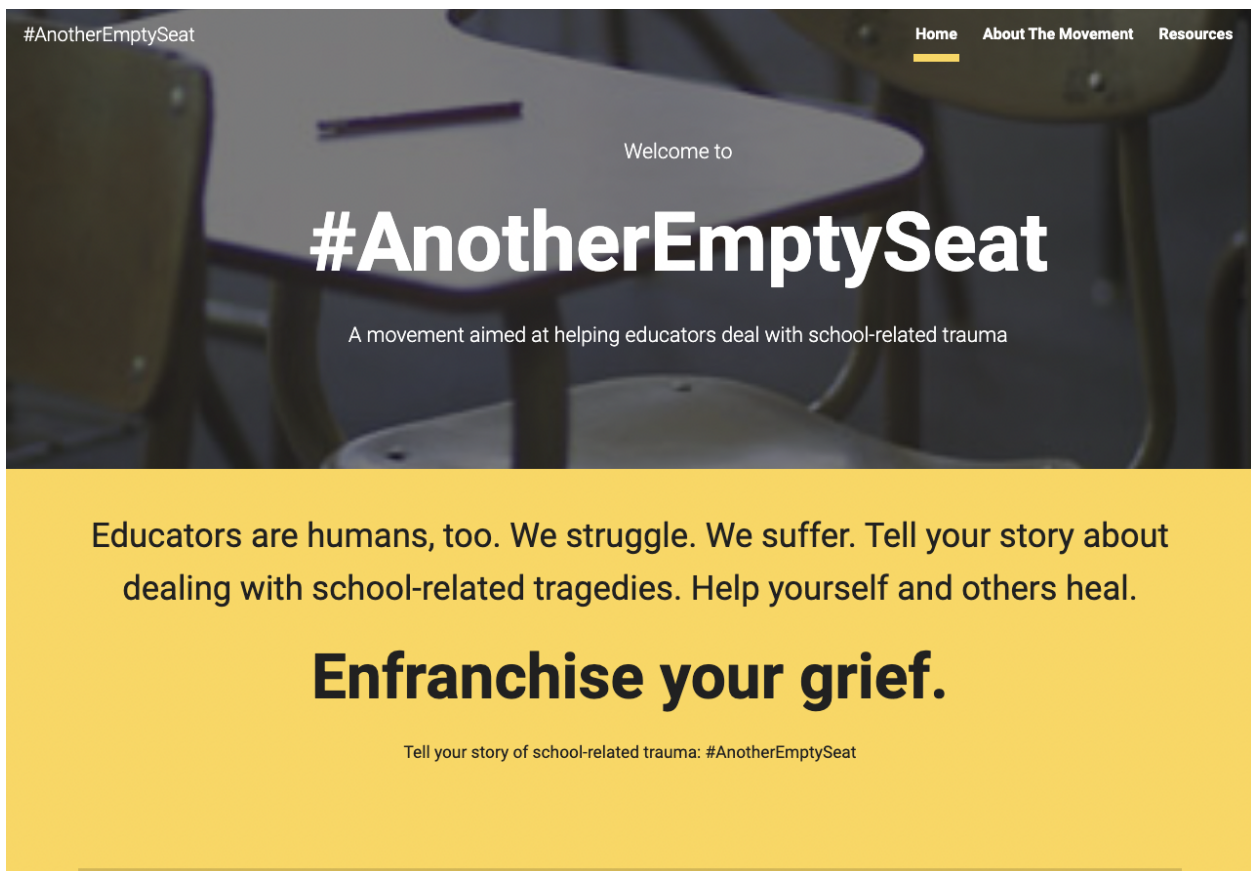
students have numerous connections within classrooms and within the school itself. Lowton and Higginson (2003) write, “In the United States, school has been interpreted not just as a place of education, but as the hallmark of vital socialization” and teachers are “assumed by others to perform a supportive role in bereavement” (p. 719). As educators, our “identity informs how we show up in varying spaces, and there are privileges to certain identities as to how a person can or cannot show up” (Wright, 2020, p. 80). Societal and institutional expectations for teacher bereavement have authority over personal grief management. Wright (2020) recognizes the crux of this systemic problem: “We intentionally create opportunities to ensure students feel valued and empowered. Imagine how powerful that notion would be if applied to staff and faculty” (p. 83). That is the intention with this social media campaign. It would create a space where educators can narrate their experiences with school-related deaths and trauma, and in the process destigmatize discussion about death and bereavement.

This campaign would start small, at the district level, and bring in support from my participants who have seen the positive effects of sharing and storytelling. With the potential success of a school-wide campaign, I would have authentic supporters in the building who follow me on various social media platforms. This is where the advocacy for teachers through social media would begin. I would begin on the platforms that allow for larger image-forward posts such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. There, I would post my social media campaign “poster” that introduces the hashtag and provides a link to the website that further explains the goals of the movement. The website also contains my #AnotherEmptySeat trauma, which I hope would encourage others to share their raw experiences. Next, I would compose a compelling Tweet that builds my ethos and builds interest in the movement in addition to being sharable. An example would be something like this: “My student committed suicide in 2013. I’m only fully

grieving now. I'm not the only one. #AnotherEmptySeat". I would continue to Tweet other reflections on trauma I have experienced after the death of other students and as a result of this study. The repetition of the hashtag and story makes it more likely that my colleagues, whom I already have support from, will retweet the campaign. In addition, I also follow and am followed by a lot of education bloggers who I hope would support the campaign.

Figure 2: Website Home Page

<https://sites.google.com/view/anotheremptyseat/home?authuser=0>



This multi-tiered social media campaign has the potential to reach a large audience over time and amplify the voices of educators who have suffered similar tragedies. At the very least, it would create a protected space and community for those who have been affected by similar tragedies.

On a larger scale, it could provoke administrative teams to see the need to create professional development and pathways of support that can help educators as well as students.

Limitations and Considerations

This research study involved a small number of participants who are educators working in a close-knit community. The school district has been disproportionately impacted by an amount of student deaths over the last fifteen years. It is important to acknowledge that:

1. The rapidity and rate of these deaths created a larger traumatic impact on participants.
2. The small size of the community influences a larger ripple effect of the tragedy outside the institution.
3. The district's size also impacts the line between educators' personal and private lives; here, educators are very much invested in family and student lives, and half of the participants live in the district.
4. I already have an established, trusting relationship with the participants where little work was necessary to encourage an honest narrative.
5. The deaths that were discussed throughout the interviews were shared experiences, so I was able to help participants remember details about the experiences and vice versa.

My relationship with my participants increased their willingness to discuss these events with me, and our shared narratives helped to inform the overall remembrance of the student's death. This close relationship could have potentially limited the amount of emotionality they divulged. While not all of these factors necessarily limit the study, it is important to acknowledge the impact that they may have on both data collection and data analysis.

This small phenomenological study was not intended to yield generalizable results. The data, however, was triangulated through narratives, personal reflections, and artifact collection.

Additionally, three other members of my learning scholar community reviewed the consistency of my coding confirming interrater reliability of the data.

Another limitation is the pandemic. The most recent student death happened at the incipient stage of COVID-19. Many participants discussed this student and the effects of his death on various areas of their personal and occupational lives. Because of the constraints of COVID, and having the district be shut down during the time of these students' deaths, approaches to continuing education, helping grieving students, and having the ability to communicate with other educators, administration, and students were all strained. This could potentially skew participants' perceptions of this time and make it less relatable to their reactions to other students' deaths throughout the last fifteen years. Because this was also the most recent student death, the tragedy and challenging impact of COVID-19 became a part of the same narrative.

COVID-19 also impacted my collection of the data. The beginning of the school year was chaotic. We were holding classes in-person while also live-streaming for students who were sick or in quarantine. The district was embroiled in a mask policy debate, and we all felt the strain of learning loss from the previous school year. Both educator and student mental health was at the forefront of most school-wide administrative conversations. When I reached out to potential participants, many teachers replied that they would love to help, that the conversations we would have are necessary and beneficial, but they either did not have the emotional capacity or time to engage in those conversations at the moment. For the participants that did follow through with the study, they too, felt the constraints of time and ability, and it forced the completion of multiple interviews on the same day, where originally I projected to space them out over a week or few weeks. I wanted to space them in order to provide me with more time for transcription

between interviews, so it ultimately had no effect on participants' responses. There was one benefit to interviewing during a shorter period of time, however, and that was that participants were able to sustain their narratives with more detail, there was no time loss in recapping previous interviews, and both me and the participants were able to engage in asides that were adjacent to the main interview questions.

Suggestions for Future Research

Taking the methods of Contemporary Trauma Theorists into account, one area of research that could expand upon my study is by analyzing the effectiveness of professional learning communities that specifically focus on trauma and grief and the effect on educators. Two of my four participants suggested that we implement something similar to this. We jokingly called it a "trauma club" as a play on "drama club", where fellow educators could discuss grief/bereavement-related literature, narrate their stories of grief, and provide community and support. I would propose a year long cycle for this PLC. It should be guided by at least one or two common texts to support conversations, and groups should meet monthly, or more frequently, based on the school environment. Similarly to my study, a researcher could assess, through the use of narrative inquiry, what impact this PLC has on educators' abilities to process school-based trauma. Potentially, it could also measure what size group would be most effective to yield desirable results.

There are many studies about trauma-informed practices and its successes and failures, but there are very few that analyze how current trauma-informed practices help or hinder educators and their own responses to school-related trauma. There is potential that research in this area could encourage reflection at the administrative level on how trauma-informed practices, bereavement policies, and access to outside therapeutic resources can be adapted to

meet the needs of grieving teachers. In order to study a larger population of educators, I propose using a mixed methods study that collects both quantitative and qualitative data. Using a wide breadth of educators at different levels and different schools, the researcher could employ a survey utilizing a Likert scale and ask that participants write narrative responses expanding on the survey questions asked. This would be necessary to look at both large-scale patterns among participants paired with real-time phenomenological feedback. A study such as this could inform an administrative action plan and potentially generalizable results.

There is a lack of training in these areas for teachers, and many pre-service educator programs do not offer courses specifically dedicated to teachers' responses to trauma or institutional expectations. For those rare programs that do, studies regarding the effectiveness of these programs, such as whether they are realistically helpful to post-grad educators or qualitatively understanding students' perspectives on the course after completion, could go a long way in amplifying the importance and necessity of these courses. A study such as this would require a researcher who would be willing to follow participants through a period of time. For example, the researcher would need to investigate universities that have this curriculum, analyze the key aspects of the curriculum in relation to bereavement and grief, and then follow participants as they enter the educational field as educators and gauge, over time, the effectiveness of these courses.

Throughout my research, it is clear that in the aftermath of a tragedy, educators lack formal training to manage their students, institutional expectations, and most importantly, their own grief. Despite this lack of formal education on trauma and grief, educators are incredibly effective at crisis management that is fueled by the common desire to prioritize students. However, it is clear that this then leads to institutional and self-disenfranchisement of grief, and

can create compounding implications for teachers and their work/life balance and perceptions of their occupations. Through an increase in pre-service education, space provided within educational institutions to allow educators to deal with personal grief, and the destigmatization of bereavement through cultural understanding, educators can be both the facilitators and the benefactors of reformed trauma-informed practices.

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Appendices

Appendix A: DSM-5 Diagnostic Criteria for PTSD

Appendix B: Semi-structured interview questions

Appendix C: Example Course

Appendix D: Informed Consent Letter

Appendix E: Resources for participants

Appendix F: Letter of approval for research site

APPENDIX A: DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR PTSD

From: American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. 5th ed. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association; 2013.

- A. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:
1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
 2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others.
 3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.
 4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). Note: Criterion A4 does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.
- B. Presence of one (or more) of the following intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred:

1. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s). Note: In children older than 6 years, repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the traumatic event(s) are expressed.
 2. Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or affect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s). Note: In children, there may be frightening dreams without recognizable content.
 3. Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. (Such reactions may occur on a continuum, with the most extreme expression being a complete loss of awareness of present surroundings.) Note: In children, trauma-specific reenactment may occur in play.
 4. Intense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
 5. Marked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
- C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by one or both of the following:
1. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).

2. Avoidance of or efforts to avoid external reminders (people, places, conversations, activities, objects, situations) that arouse distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).

D. Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:

1. Inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event(s) (typically due to dissociative amnesia, and not to other factors such as head injury, alcohol, or drugs).
2. Persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world (e.g., “I am bad,” “No one can be trusted,” “The world is completely dangerous,” “My whole nervous system is permanently ruined”).
3. Persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame himself/herself or others.
4. Persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame).
5. Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities.
6. Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others.

7. Persistent inability to experience positive emotions (e.g., inability to experience happiness, satisfaction, or loving feelings).
- E. Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred, as evidenced by two (or more) of the following:
1. Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation), typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects.
 2. Reckless or self-destructive behavior.
 3. Hypervigilance.
 4. Exaggerated startle response.
 5. Problems with concentration.
 6. Sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty falling or staying asleep or restless sleep).
- F. Duration of the disturbance (Criteria B, C, D and E) is more than 1 month.
- G. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- H. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication, alcohol) or another medical condition.

Specify whether:

With dissociative symptoms: The individual's symptoms meet the criteria for

posttraumatic stress disorder, and in addition, in response to the stressor, the individual experiences persistent or recurrent symptoms of either of the following:

1. Depersonalization: Persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from, and as if one were an outside observer of, one's mental processes or body (e.g., feeling as though one were in a dream; feeling a sense of unreality of self or body or of time moving slowly).
2. Derealization: Persistent or recurrent experiences of unreality of surroundings (e.g., the world around the individual is experienced as unreal, dreamlike, distant, or distorted). Note: To use this subtype, the dissociative symptoms must not be attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts, behavior during alcohol intoxication) or another medical condition (e.g., complex partial seizures).

Specify whether:

With delayed expression: If the full diagnostic criteria are not met until at least 6 months after the event (although the onset and expression of some symptoms may be immediate).

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS*Semi-structured Interview #1*

1. When did you hear the news that your student had died? Please explain in as much detail as you can remember. Narrate the events from that point forward.
2. What were some of the immediate thoughts/feelings you had regarding the death?
3. What were thoughts/feelings you had in the days and weeks following the death?

Semi-structured Interview #2

1. How did you approach your class/occupational duties the next day and in the following weeks?
2. In what ways did you express grief?
3. Did your grief affect any other aspects of your life?
4. What are some other events that you can recall surrounding this student's death? What were the reactions of the students? What expectations were in place for how you were to manage your classroom and students?

Semi-structured Interview #3

1. Has any of your feelings/understanding of the event changed through having the ability to narrate and discuss the events?
2. How has your perspective of your occupation changed since this traumatic event?
3. Do you feel as though your experience with grief is different because of your occupation?
4. How does the artifact you are submitting reflect your experience with trauma?

APPENDIX C: EXAMPLE COURSE

DEPARTMENT OF SECONDARY EDUCATION
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

TITLE: Educators' Experiences with Grief, Bereavement, and School-related Trauma

DESCRIPTION: This course will discuss the ways in which teachers experience trauma within the classroom, focusing specifically on the deaths of students and faculty. In addition, the course will uncover what institutional expectations there are for teacher bereavement, and it will look at the larger picture of Western beliefs regarding bereavement and trauma. Contemporary Trauma Theory, made popular by trauma-theorists Cathy Caruth and Bessel van der Kolk, will frame class discussions.

- 18 Semester Hours

- M, W, Th. 8:00am-9:00am

RATIONALE: After years of decline, the number of deaths of individuals between the ages of 10-19 is rising. The rise in death rate is attributed to an increase of injury-related deaths, which include traffic accidents, drug overdoses, homicides and suicides (Howard, 2018).¹ The most recent Pennsylvania statistics show that from 2014 through 2018, there were on average 376 deaths per year for individuals aged 15-19 (United States, Pennsylvania Department of Health, Birth, Death, and Vital Statistics, 2018, p.3)². While death is a natural part of life, the death of a child, or in this case, a student, is particularly challenging.

Children create webs of connections. When a child dies, there are multiple levels of grief for those who knew or knew of that child. When a death is unexpected, it becomes a deeper trauma for the family and the community. There are layers of mitigation techniques to help alleviate the trauma that stems from a child's death, especially at the institutional level. Grief counselors are present, there is a suspension of activities, and there might even be memorials and vigils. Teachers play a large part in this; they use several strategies to achieve emotional balance in the classroom. They position themselves as pillars of strength. They listen. They provide immediate support to those suffering. They amend due dates, lessen expectations, and provide comfort. Teacher grief is swallowed. Pushed away. Left undiscussed – for the sake of the students and the community. The grief of a teacher becomes disenfranchised, and it can have a detrimental effect on teachers' personal lives, classroom management, work/life balance, and more. Trauma, loss, and bereavement are often undiscussed aspects of the reality of teaching. This course seeks to have students understand Western and institutional expectations for bereavement, mitigation techniques for lessening the effects of teacher trauma, and it encourages students to reflect upon the experiences of seasoned educators.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

• Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Define Contemporary Trauma Theory and identify its perspective on mitigating the effects of trauma.
- Identify current bereavement timelines within educational institutions. • Recognize how Western expectations for bereavement influences bereavement and trauma-informed policies.
- Write and reflect upon the effects of trauma within the classroom after interviewing an in-service educator.
- Collaborate in a discussion about the educator's role in trauma-informed practices.
- Create a revised bereavement policy or flight team process that is inclusive for educators and influenced by a local educational institutional policy.

ASSESSMENT

• Class discussions

• Four online posts (10 points each/40 points total)

• Posts of that week must be completed by midnight Sunday. Responses should be reflective of your prior course work, your current perception of teaching and education, or personal experiences. You must include at least one article within your post that either extends or informs your discussion.

• Responses to classmates (online) (10 points each/40 points total) • You must respond to at least one classmate; responses must engage in the original author's ideas and theories regarding the weekly prompt.

• Class engagement (10 points)

• Interview, narrative, & reflection essay (50 points)

For this essay, you will interview an in-service educator who has experienced a student/faculty member death. Transcribe the interview, and then write a narrative of his/her experience with trauma and bereavement. Complete the editing/review checklist with the interviewee to ensure accuracy of the narrative. Then, write a reflection on the interviewee's experiences which addresses the following questions:

- How was this teacher's ability to create "grief work" helped or hindered by his/her institutional expectations?
- What effects did this trauma have on the teacher's personal life and work/life balance?
- How did the teacher's classroom management change post trauma?
- What lasting effects of the trauma did you observe during the interview or upon re-reading the narrative?
- What was interesting, surprising, or unpredictable about this teacher's story of grief and trauma?

• **Critique of trauma-informed practices/policies at local institutions (25 points)** Please visit <https://www.hws.edu/academics/ctl/pdf/critique.pdf> for self reflective questions and organization tips.

• **Revised bereavement policy or flight team process (75 points) COURSE**

OUTLINE:**Week 1: Introduction to the course, “A History of Grief” introductory lecture**

- Questions to address:
 - What is the history behind perceptions of grief and bereavement?
 - What were some of Sigmund Freud’s early theories regarding trauma?
 - How do we grieve and bereave? What are current and common practices?
 - Article discussion: Case, D. M., Cheah, W. H., & Liu, M. (2020). Mourning with the morning bell: An examination of secondary educators' attitudes and experiences managing the discourse of death in the classroom. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 80(3), 379-419. doi:10.1177/0030222817737228
 - Article discussion: Kofod, E. H. (2017). From morality to pathology: A brief historization of contemporary Western grief practices and understandings. *Nordic Psychology*, 69(1), 47–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19012276.2016.1267914>
 - Online discussion post and two other responses due by midnight Sunday

Week 2: Expectations for educator interview and reflection, “Western Beliefs and Institutional Expectations” lecture

- Questions to address:
 - What are current Western expectations for grief?
 - What are institutional expectations for grief and bereavement?
 - What are current and common bereavement policies?
 - How do these expectations conflict or coincide with what we know about trauma?
 - Article discussion: Lowton, K., & Higginson, I. J. (2003). Managing bereavement in the classroom: A conspiracy of silence? *Death Studies*, 27(8), 717-741. doi:10.1080/713842340
 - Article discussion: Ord, R. L. (2009). “It’s like a tattoo”: Rethinking dominant discourses on grief. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 26(3), 195–211. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41669912>
 - Article discussion: Robson, P., & Walter, T. (2013). Hierarchies of loss: A critique of disenfranchised grief. *OMEGA*, 66(2), 97- 119. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.2190/OM.66.2.a>
 - Article discussion: Rowling, L. (1995). The disenfranchised grief of teachers. *OMEGA*, 31(4), 317-329.
 - Online discussion post and two other responses due by midnight Sunday
 - Educator Interview information (name, location, educator bio, etc.) due by midnight Sunday

Week 3: Project updates, “Contemporary Trauma Theory” lecture

- Questions to address:
 - What is Contemporary Trauma Theory?
 - How is CTT different from Freud’s original theories about trauma?
 - How can CTT help mitigate the effects of trauma?
 - What are the goals of CTT?
 - Article discussion: Pederson, J. (2014). Speak, trauma: Toward a revised

understanding of literary trauma theory. *NARRATIVE*, 22(3), 334-353.

- Article discussion: Caruth, C. (1995). Chapter II: Introduction to recapturing the past . In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (pp. 151–157). The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQFLQNUVWrw>
- Online discussion post and two other responses due by midnight Sunday

Week 4: Interview, narrative, and reflection projects are due; project decompression; focus on narratives of grief

- Questions to address:
 - What are your reflections after hearing and processing an educator’s experience with trauma?
 - How do narratives mitigate the effects of trauma?
 - What is the significance of finding commonalities in educators’ narratives?
 - Article discussion: Bradley, D. (2020). We are all haunted: Cultural understanding and the paradox of trauma. *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 28(2), 4-23. doi:10.2979/philmusieducrevi.28.1.02
 - Article discussion: Essary, J. N., Barza, L., & Thurston, R. J. (2020). Secondary traumatic stress among educators. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 56(3), 116-121. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2020.177004>
 - Article Discussion: Reid, J. K., & Dixon, W. A. (1999). Teacher attitudes on coping with grief in the public school Classroom. *Psychology in the Schools*, 36(3), 219. doi:10.1002/(SICI)1520-6807(199905)36:3<219::AID-PITS5>3.0.CO;2-0.

Week 5: Trauma-informed practices (What are current procedures?); local institution critique review

- Questions to address:
 - What information should be included in a critique and what is the general structure?
 - What does it mean to have a trauma-informed school/classroom?
 - How inclusive are current TI procedures inclusive of grieving teachers?
 - What are the benefits of TI pedagogy?
 - Article discussion: Wright, K. (2020). From disconnection to sentience: Creating space for practitioners who experience student death. *The Vermont Connection*, 41(11), 78-85. <https://doi.org/https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol41/iss1/11>
 - Article discussion: Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching and Social Work*, 35, 262-278. doi:10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059
 - What is a flight team? [school specific link redacted]
 - Online discussion post and two other responses due by midnight Sunday
 - Identify school for critique (due by midnight Sunday)

Week 6: Writing a critique, project updates, in-class work time

- Questions to address:
 - What are the positives and negatives of your chosen school’s TI

procedures?

- What is the protocol after a trauma?
- What concerns/issues do you have with the final project? • Resource:
<https://www.hws.edu/academics/ctl/pdf/critique.pdf>

Week 7: Present critiques, final reflections

- Questions to address:
 - In what ways can you be prepared for handling the trauma associated with student death?
 - What changes would you like to see when it comes to current practices/expectations for teacher bereavement? • What resources are available to educators in the event of a student death?
 - Article discussion: Barclay, L. A., & Kang, J. H. (2019). Employee-Based HRM: Bereavement policy in a changing work environment. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 31(3), 131–148. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10672-019-09337-8>
 - Article discussion: Berger, E. (2019). Multi-tiered approaches to trauma-informed care in schools: A systematic review. *School Mental Health*, 11, 650-664. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-019-09326-0>
- **Electronic Resources:** All resources are available through D2L. Please use the Rohrbach Library website article or book/media search in order to find compatible research sources to compliment our readings and projects.

¹ Howard, J. (2018, June 01). A 'wake-up call' about what's killing America's young people. Retrieved September 14, 2020, from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/01/health/youth-injury-death-rate-cdc-study/index.html>

² United States, Pennsylvania Department of Health, Birth, Death, and Vital Statistics. (2018). *Resident Deaths by Age, Sex, Race, and Single Year State Total, Pennsylvania, 2014- 2018* (pp. 1-3). PA: Pennsylvania Department of Health.

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Date _____

Dear _____,

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled “Another Empty Seat: Teachers’ Experiences with Trauma and Grief.” I will describe this study to you and answer any of your questions. This study is for my dissertation within the Kutztown University Ed. D. program. The Faculty Advisor for this study is Dr. Kathleen Stanfa. My additional dissertation chairs are Dr. Patricia Walsh Coates and Dr. Scott Tracy both from Kutztown University.

The purpose of this research is to answer the following research questions:

- What methods do teachers use to cope with a student death?
- How does the trauma caused by the death of a student impact a teacher personally and professionally?
- What are teachers’ perceptions of their occupation after a student's death?
- What are the expectations for the teachers’ grieving process?
- How does the act of storytelling affect the way teachers process grief after a trauma?

I will ask you to participate in three semi-structured interviews throughout an approximate three-week period. In addition, you will submit one artifact that helps you recall the time of the student death, the aftermath of the student death, or a general remembrance or reflection of the experience. Some examples of artifacts include: a song, a photo, a written reflection, a poem, a quote, or other tangible item. The three semi-structured interviews will be audiotaped for transcription purposes.

Your name, position at the school, age, and years worked will all be anonymized and/or not included within the participant description. Identifying information will remain separate from the research data (audio, transcripts). I am the only person handling raw data; it cannot be accessed by my dissertation committee or by administration. De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance education and health. I will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information I share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data. Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though I am taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through email could be read by a third party. I have received approval from Dr. Shank to use this building as my research site.

Please know that your participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate before the study begins, discontinue at any time, or skip any questions/procedures that may make you feel uncomfortable, with no penalty to you, and no effect on our relationship or your relationship to the school district.

I will be analyzing data using a Contemporary Trauma Theory framework. In Contemporary Trauma Theory, the retelling of the traumatic event is a way of creating a stable understanding of it, and “to gain access to a traumatic history, then, is also the project of listening beyond the pathology of the individual suffering, to the reality of a history that in its crises can only be perceived in unassimilable forms” (Caruth, 1995, p. 156). Through this theoretical lens, the narrative is also cathartic; it allows individuals to access traumatic experiences, place the experience in a stable environment, and mitigate the effects of the trauma through the very understanding of it. With that being said, some emotional risks of this study are

retraumatization, sadness, flashbacks, and post-traumatic stress. Free resources will be made available to you prior to the beginning of the study.

The benefit of this study is to understand the way in which teacher grief is disenfranchised and what institutional expectations are in place that cause disenfranchisement. In a wider view, the research will analyze the ways in which teachers process grief inside and outside of the school building, and furthermore, attempt to understand the ways in which teacher grief can be better mitigated.

If you have questions, you can ask now, or you may contact me through phone/text 570-640-4916, or through email: lori.berryman@gmail.com. This research has been approved through the Institutional Review Board. You can contact Kutztown University’s IRB by calling 484-646-4167 or through this website:

[https://www.kutztown.edu/about-ku/administrative-offices/grants-and-sponsored-projects/institutional-review-board-\(irb\).html](https://www.kutztown.edu/about-ku/administrative-offices/grants-and-sponsored-projects/institutional-review-board-(irb).html).

You will be provided with a copy of this signed form.

I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Your Name (printed) _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

Printed name of person obtaining consent _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for five years beyond the end of the study.

APPENDIX E: RESOURCES FOR PARTICIPANTS

OFFERED FREE THROUGH THE DISTRICT:

<https://www.guidanceresources.com/groWeb/login/login.xhtml>

Web ID: EAPBusiness



Confidential Emotional Support
Our highly trained clinicians will listen to your concerns and help you or your family members with any issues, including:

- Anxiety, depression, stress
- Grief, loss and life adjustments
- Relationship/marital conflicts



Work-Life Solutions
Our specialists provide qualified referrals and resources for just about anything on your to-do list, such as:

- Finding child and elder care
- Hiring movers or home repair contractors
- Planning events, locating pet care



Legal Guidance
Talk to our attorneys for practical assistance with your most pressing legal issues, including:

- Divorce, adoption, family law, wills, trusts and more

Need representation? Get a free 30-minute consultation and a 25% reduction in fees.



Financial Resources
Our financial experts can assist with a wide range of issues.

- Retirement, taxes, mortgages, budgeting and more

For additional guidance, we can refer you to a local financial professional and arrange to reimburse you for the cost of an initial one-hour in-person consult.



Online Support
GuidanceResources® Online is your 24/7 link to vital information, tools and support. Log on for:

- Articles, podcasts, videos, slideshows
- On-demand trainings
- "Ask the Expert" personal responses to your questions



Help for New Parents
ParentGuidance™ supports you through the process of becoming a biological or adoptive parent, including:

- Preparing for the baby emotionally and financially
- Finding child care
- Planning for back-to-work and other issues



Free Online Will Preparation
EstateGuidance® lets you quickly and easily create a will online.

- Specify your wishes for your property
- Provide funeral and burial instructions
- Choose a guardian for your children

Contact EAPBusiness ClassSM Anytime

No-cost, confidential solutions to life's challenges.

Your ComPsych® GuidanceResources® program EAPBusiness Class offers someone to talk to and resources to consult whenever and wherever you need them.

Call: 877.595.5281
TDD: 800.697.0353

Your toll-free number gives you direct, 24/7 access to a GuidanceConsultant™, who will answer your questions and, if needed, refer you to a counselor or other resources.

Online: guidanceresources.com
App: GuidanceResources® Now
Web ID: EAPBusiness

Log on today to connect directly with a GuidanceConsultant about your issue or to consult articles, podcasts, videos and other helpful tools.

24/7 Support, Resources & Information

Contact EAPBusiness Class Anytime

Call: 877.595.5281
TDD: 800.697.0353

Online: guidanceresources.com
App: GuidanceResources® Now
Web ID: EAPBusiness

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ADDITIONAL MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES:**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

Call 1-800-273-8255. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Disaster Distress Helpline

Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746. The Disaster Distress Helpline (DDH) provides crisis counseling and support for anyone in the U.S. experiencing distress or other behavioral health concerns related to any natural or human-caused disaster, including public health emergencies.

Crisis Text Line

Text MHA to 741741 and you'll be connected to a trained Crisis Counselor. Crisis Text Line provides free, text-based support 24/7.

APPENDIX F: LETTER OF APPROVAL OF RESEARCH SITE

Redacted

January 7, 2021

To the Institutional Review Board of Kutztown University of Pennsylvania,

I am writing this letter at the request of Lori Berryman. I am aware that she will be conducting a phenomenological research study entitled, "Another Empty Seat: Teachers' Experiences with Trauma and Grief" at [redacted]. I give her approval for the usage of the school as her site of research.

If any unanticipated problems or adverse events are to occur, it is up to Lori Berryman to report these events to the IRB at KU as promptly as possible.

Sincerely,

[redacted]