Letter from the Editors

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Special Issue: Grief as an Invitation to Heal: Extending Trauma-Informed Pedagogies, Research, and Praxis

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My heart is not peripheral to me. ~June Jordan (as cited in Parmar, 1991)

As we culminate two years of putting together this special issue of JTSE, we continue to face an onslaught of unrelenting grief: we mourn the loss of Nex Benedict, a 16-year-old Indigenous non-binary student whose death stemmed from institutional failures and transphobic policies and rhetoric (Hinton, 2024); we mourn the ongoing loss of dignity and belonging suffered by 18-year-old Darryl George, a Black student in Texas who has been suspended from school for seven months for refusing to change his locs hairstyle as a result of an anti-Black school policy recently upheld by a district judge (Lozano, 2024); we mourn the loss of autonomy and safety of critical educators across the nation who fear censure from teaching the truth about systems of oppression in this country (Marrun et al., 2023); we mourn the lives lost to genocide and displacement across the world in Palestine, the Congo, Sudan, and of the Uyghur people (Al-Kassab, 2024; Imray, 2024; Kattoura & Abuasi 2023; Martina, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2023). We mourn that there are not enough pages to capture the depth and breadth of our daily grief.

And yet in schools, in the preparation of teachers and school leaders, in educational research, and in trauma studies in education, grief is relegated to the periphery. This special issue works to name the multi-layered ways in which schools try to suppress,

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delegitimize, and punish grief, especially when felt and expressed by those most critical of and most impacted by systems of oppression. Each piece in this issue poignantly interrogates how grief is a necessary disruption to the epistemological and ontological violence of schools that seek to separate the body, mind, and spirit and extract feeling from learning. Grief allows us to re-center what matters, who we have lost and still love, and what and whom we need to remember. Heeding June Jordan's epigraphic call above, the authors in this special issue collectively uplift grief as an important site of inquiry, teaching, and transformative praxis in schools and beyond—thus moving matters of the heart from the periphery to the center.

As the editors of this issue, we (Sharim and Stephanie) both came to this work as former English teachers who had experienced our own grief of leaving the classroom, disillusioned, drained, and pushed out by the inabilities and unwillingness of schools and school leaders to honor the young People of Color and communities we sought to serve. In response to our own experiences in schools, we have been part of a growing movement to center the healing and well-being of Children and Educators of Color through trauma-informed and healing-centered practices in schools and burgeoning research on social emotional learning (e.g., Alvarez, 2020; Camangian & Cariaga, 2022; Hannegan-Martinez, 2019; Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Shevrin Venet, 2023; Simmons, 2021). While we recognize and continue to shape these important contributions to the field of education, we would be remiss if we did not name that a significant portion of trauma research in education has (re)produced "damage-centered narratives" (Tuck, 2009) that serve to further obfuscate pathways to healing. Much of the efforts to address trauma are not aimed towards healing or well-being, but rather, at helping young people better acclimate to their suffering so they can engage in better behavior and get better grades (Marie & Watson, 2020). The trauma phenomenon in education is what critical race theorists would refer to as a form of "interest convergence" (Bell, 1980) in which the institution, in this case schools, becomes interested in the well-being of children only to the degree that it impacts the end goal of the institution—higher grades, test scores, etc.

It is therefore important to clarify what we mean in this special issue when we speak of, research, and intervene on trauma. While mainstream discourse often discusses trauma as an *event*, we define trauma as a protective and embodied *response* to danger (Menakem, 2021). This response to harm is what Chicana feminist scholars who draw from Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies have referred to as a *susto* (Anzaldúa, 2015), a wound that ruptures our lived realities and summons us through our *bodymindspirits* (Lara, 2013) to put our lives and worlds back together again. Indigenous scholars call this a *soul wound,* where colonial violence necessitates a collective retrieval of the soul and interdependent relations with the land, culture, and more (e.g., Duran, 2019). In short, trauma is how the *bodymindspirit* responds to events and conditions that threaten individual or collective safety, dignity, and belonging (Haines, 2019). Although trauma is a form of physiological protection, when trauma is unmetabolized, the stress cycle is left incomplete, or grief is left unacknowledged and unexpressed—such rigid, constricted, and defensive responses can become embedded or "stuck" (Haines, 2019; Menakem, 2021). When trauma becomes stuck or is ongoing, it can manifest in physical, behavioral, emotional, and spiritual changes and can lead to negative long-term health outcomes (e.g., Harris, 2018; Maté & Maté, 2022). It is important to frame trauma as a response that needs to be expressed and released—this helps us understand that within the context

of schooling, where a loss of safety, dignity, and belonging are persistent for marginalized groups, trauma responses are often sensible, or at least understandable, strategies that protect people from ongoing harm.

With at least two-thirds of children under 16 reporting that they have experienced trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative, 2023), research indicates that trauma, and child trauma in particular, is a public crisis that warrants our attention and action. While these numbers are painfully high, this data often reduces trauma as an event and does not account for the ways in which social toxicities such as racism, sexism, poverty, other forms of oppression, and subsequent microaggressions perpetuate ongoing forms of trauma (e.g., Nadal, 2018). When we understand trauma as a physiological response to danger, as described above, and understand all forms of oppression as a threat to safety, dignity, and belonging, it becomes evident that the trauma young people, especially young People of Color experience, is much higher. Much of the current trauma research in education continues to lack systemic analysis, conflates acute trauma with embedded and persistent traumas, and confuses trauma as something that children bring to schools as opposed to something that schools inflict upon children.

To this end, we have spent the last decade challenging narratives that serve to pathologize or simplify trauma, drawing on embodied, intersectional, and Women of Color feminist scholarship that takes an asset-based approach to trauma and healing. It is at the intersections of this work, coupled with our lived experiences, that we arrived, however begrudgingly, at grief. Specifically, after many years of working and ideating together, we experienced the loss of a dear friend, mentor, and community member. In the depths of our shared pain, we began reading Francis Weller's (2015) *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*. In this seminal book on developing an "apprenticeship with sorrow," Weller shared that "grief work is a primary ingredient in the resolution of trauma" (p. 70). This revelation informed much of the trajectory of our personal and professional lives over the next several years and propelled us to study grief, trauma, and the relationship between the two.

Most recently, several scholars have begun to study grief (e.g., Collins, 2021), as the global COVID-19 pandemic led to conversations about resources to process grief and bereavement for both students and their teachers (e.g., Cariaga, 2023; Everett & Dunn, 2021). Like the field of trauma-informed pedagogies, the scholarship on grief has made significant contributions to the field of education, specifically in terms of how we support acute grief, or the grief that accompanies the loss of life. In education, however, the scholarship on grief remains nascent and the phenomena of trauma and grief are still addressed as separate from one another—little has been done to explore the relationship between grief and trauma or to situate grief *as* a trauma-informed practice.

Given that recurring grief and trauma are a manifestation and symptom of structural violence that disproportionately impacts marginalized communities (Ginwright, 2018), we argue that to ignore these fissures is to ignore the full humanity and well-being of ourselves and our students. Through this special issue we posit that when we experience trauma, there is *always* something that is lost: safety, self, wellness, land, language, authenticity, and more. Thus, grief is a practice necessary for honoring those losses and journeying towards healing and wholeness. Although schools and the academy would have us think otherwise, grief is a rigorous, intuitive, cultural, and intergenerational skill that, when felt and harnessed, can create new possibilities in our learning spaces and

beyond. When we are unable or unwilling to engage in the practice of grieving, we risk exacerbating the trauma and unmetabolized grief that already exists within schools. The articles in this special issue speak to the intersectional, embodied, and critical ways we must intervene upon the trauma of schooling that is disproportionally burdensome for Youth, Teachers, and Communities of Color. Through sharing the unique ways in which they have experienced and addressed grief in schools with themselves, their students, their peers—the contributors to this issue foreground grief as an integral practice for healing our individual and collective traumas.

It is important to note that in the two years it has taken to complete this special issue, every single one of our contributors has not only worked to "remember and dismember" (Milstein, 2022, p. 9) their grief as an offering to others, but has had to do so while navigating new and compounded loss. Individually, many have lost loved ones, struggled with health concerns, and experienced great life transitions, while collectively grieving ongoing genocides, climate crisis, and an attack on educational freedoms. In many ways, it would have been much easier to push this special issue to be completed on our original timeline. However, we not only challenge the academy's capitalistic emphasis on productivity at the expense of our well-being, but we also recognize that there exists a "healing gap" (Garcia, 2019) in education in which educators are often expected to support the healing and well-being of children, while being ill-equipped or ill-supported to engage or embody these healing practices in their own lives. The same is true for scholars who are often encouraged to intellectually theorize practices they have yet to embody. Instead, through this process we have sought to center presence and relationality, while engaging in the multitude of practices lifted up in this special issue. As such, each manuscript is written from an *embodied* place by authors who have journeyed diligently and lovingly alongside their own grief and that of others.

Embodied and relational research methodologies and praxis, like the ones engaged in this special issue, must be recognized and valued for their complexity, rigor, and commitment to personal, pedagogical, and political transformation. Because of the spirit-murdering function of the academy (Love, 2019), many of us authors have often found ourselves second-guessing the kinds of vulnerability that are necessary for our research. Yet such vulnerability about grief is only possible through meticulously cultivated relationships with research participants (Hannegan-Martinez, 2023), including ourselves as educators/researchers, our students, and our fellow community members who have offered their voices and stories to this special issue. "Traditional" research methods that focus on detachment and so-called objectivity are incapable of holding the fluid and felt narratives that are found throughout each piece. In these articles is an insistence on theorizing from radically different places: the body, the relational, the ancestral, through multiple generations, through the deeply intimate. In doing so, they arrive at radically different solutions and possibilities—where we can grieve through and embrace an inevitable collapse of schooling; where we can honor the grief of Women of Color, students, and our educator communities as a fertile resource to support learners, prepare teachers, and embolden leaders to be brave, to be present, and to transform from the inside out.

As Alanna Hurd's powerful cover art suggests, we invite you to not just read this special issue with your minds, but to engage your bodies, your full feeling self, your lived experiences, and all your relations. If ready, take a slow breath. Feel your feet on the

earth. Give thanks to the water (both within and around you), the land, your ancestors, and all that shape you and inspire you. May each piece plant seeds within you—ones that we hope will encourage educators and scholars alike to lean into grief, to learn from it, to utilize it as a tool for healing from trauma, and to alchemize it towards different futurities.

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