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Trauma, Anger, Grief, & Healing: A Portrait of an Elementary Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the application of strategies to foster elementary students' emotional literacy to heal from traumas. Drawing from theories on colonialism, grief, and mindfulness, curriculum was developed to support students in navigating and processing grief and anger in the classroom. Blending autoethnography, portraiture, and decolonizing methods, a self-portrait was created to present the findings from the 2013–2014 study. Findings highlight the use of mindfulness strategies to develop curriculum to support students in processing grief and anger.

Keywords: elementary schools, grief, anger, trauma, autoethnography, decolonizing methods, portraiture, mindfulness

Growing up in my Mexican family, I was not allowed to feel emotions but especially not "unpleasant" emotions like grief or anger. Despite feeling these quite often I learned that I had to ingest these feelings, which resulted in me stewing in silence, unable to make sense of them. After my mother passed away when I was 18 years old, I began my long journey with therapy and later discovered meditation in my late twenties. When I was thirty, I found a new therapist who blended therapy and mindfulness. One visit, I shared a struggle I was experiencing, and she asked how that made me feel. I answered and she responded that what I had answered was not an emotion. I answered again, and again she said that it was not an emotion, that I was intellectualizing it and not feeling it. I frustratingly told her that she would have to give me a list of approved emotions because I did not know what she was looking for. The next meeting, she handed me a paper with various emotions listed and sketches of faces to depict each emotion. With her help over the coming months, I learned to name each feeling and connect it to where the sensation shows up in my

body. For the first time in my life, I learned that the tightness in my chest that I had felt regularly since childhood was anxiety, and that there were tools to process this anxiety in healthy ways. How could my life be different if I didn't have to wait until my thirties to learn to sit with a whole range of emotions?

Around this time, I was teaching fifth grade in South Central Los Angeles and many of my students were showing me they were angry and grieving. Like my childhood home, it became clear by students' behavior they were not being taught how to sit and process these emotions. As I continued to build my emotional literacy with my therapist, I learned strategies to teach this to students from other teachers in the People's Education Movement (Peoples). Peoples is a decolonial organization for Teachers of Color, which seeks to provide the much-needed support to sustain a critical teaching practice long-term while also being a space committed to teacher activism. When I would catch myself falling into normalized colonial classroom management practices, I would attend meetings and learn about the amazing curriculum and pedagogical practices my comrades were employing that pushed back on punitive practices. I would return to my classroom excited to think how I might adapt this for my elementary classroom. Being in community with other justice-oriented teachers reminded me of the "why" that began my teaching journey—to radically transform communities of color through education. It was these reminders that supported me to continue to resist dehumanizing classroom management and develop curriculum & pedagogy to foster the emotional literacy I wished I had learned as a child.

The following questions guide this study: How can elementary educators create context responsive curriculum to develop students' emotional literacy? Which strategies lend themselves to create space for grief and anger in the classroom?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the context in which I taught, this study draws from three bodies of scholarship around colonialism, grief, and mindfulness. Building upon historical and contemporary contexts, curriculum was developed to support students in navigating and processing difficult emotions, like grief and anger.

Historical and Contemporary Context

Literature on colonization and internal colonialism agree that violence is central—the violent domination and dispossession of land, labor, and resources of a people. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1963) defined in detail the physical violence endured by the colonized, and the psychological trauma that results from such violence. In addition to the classical colonialism experienced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) globally, in which lands were drained of resources and job opportunities that force migration to the United States, BIPOC people continue to endure internal colonialism within "urban ghettos" (Blauner, 1969; Chavez, 2011; Gutierrez, 2004). Built upon dependency theory from Latin America (Caporaso, 1978), internal colonialism examines the evolution of foreign colonialism over satellite colonies, into the contemporary domestic colonization of

ghettos (Gutierrez, 2004). The theory compares U.S. ghettos to underdeveloped countries in that they are characterized by poverty, illiteracy, cultural starvation, and the psychological effects of being "ruled over by others" (Cruse, 1968, p. 76). Some examples of contemporary byproducts of these issues include parental abandonment, incarceration, substance abuse, child abuse, etc. Thus, in addition to inheriting intergenerational trauma, the individual and collective wounds inherited from ancestors that survived classical colonialism (Bryant, 2019), those experiencing contemporary internal colonialism in urban cities also experience their own traumas that often go unprocessed, leading to emotional disconnection, and the numbing of righteous grief and anger that results from unprocessed trauma.

Grief

Francis Weller (2015) analyzed grief and identifies five gates in which grief enters our soul. The first gate identified is that everything we love, we will lose. In Buddhist traditions this is "Nothing is permanent: this too shall pass," such as loved ones or things. Outside of this first gate, Weller argued that the remaining gates are largely ignored in modern society. In addition to loss, Weller identified perceived defects in ourselves as another gate to grief. These perceived defects result in shame, which disconnects us from our life and soul. Weller highlighted that shame is not innate but rather is learned from neglect or harm from a loved one because of our perceived defects. Shame is also a direct result of colonialism and racism that has told BIPOC people they are defective for centuries, which is internalized and further passed on to future generations.

The third gate Weller (2015) identified is the "sorrows of the world." Although adults believe children are unaware of world happenings, they are very aware. Global capitalism and the destruction of the earth are not only visible on the news, but also in their communities and families. Current events like war, mass shootings nationally, community violence and addiction in their neighborhoods, police terrorism, Immigration and Customs and Enforcement raids (all byproducts of colonialism) are *lived firsthand* by many children in urban cities. Weller identified the fourth gate as not receiving what was expected—sacred community and a feeling of belonging. This hallowed "village" was destroyed by colonialism and continues to be erased by global capitalism's individualism that keeps us from creating community. Not only is this community absent from students' neighborhoods, but also from their classrooms where neoliberal schooling centers instructional minutes and testing over relationship building. The last gate identified is ancestral grief, which results from classical colonialism, imperialism, and forced migration, in addition to other byproducts mentioned above as the sorrows of the world.

The Relationship Between Grief & Anger

In the book *Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation through Anger*, Owens (2020) defined anger as the tension felt between experiencing hurt and figuring out a strategy for self-care. The text notes the difficulty in trying to care for oneself while also trying to figure out how to feel safe. Although many of my students were

showing me anger in the classroom, such as outbursts with hurtful language, red faces with tears of rage, and explicitly telling me they were angry, with probing discussion there was often a wound and unprocessed grief underlying their actions. Owens outlined six mediation practices to attend to the wound and anger, with the first being to "see it" by noticing the sensations on the body. The next practice after seeing it is to label it and name it, which develops the narrative we have with the sensation.

The next practice Owen (2020) identified is owning the emotion and refraining from denying it. Owens explained how oppressive systems have conditioned BIPOC communities to fear our emotions, which keeps us from owning difficult emotions like grief and anger. The fourth practice outlined is to experience the emotion in a non-reactive activity, so that it does not develop into a reactive response like an angry outburst. The remaining two practices are to let it go, and let it float. Owens described this as detaching from the emotion and continuing to let it go repeatedly as it floats.

METHODS

This study blends portraiture, autoethnography, and decolonial methodologies to examine my teaching practice in an elementary classroom (Chang, 2008; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Understanding the roots of research in colonial expansion and study, with outsiders entering indigenous spaces and analyzing happenings through a western lens (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), a self-portrait was fashioned to paint the findings from an insider perspective. Autoethnography was used to explore the nuances of my pedagogy through the examination of classroom interactions and dialogue (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Blending this method with portraiture, I created a self-portrait as the central participant to examine the intimate process of creating a healing culture in my classroom, where students feel safe to feel and express a range of emotions and receive support and empathy rather than judgment. Portraiture was used to conduct an in-depth analysis of my process and interpretations of interactions in co-creating this culture with my students (Chang, 2008; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), where I too felt safe to name and express a range of emotions.

The use of portraiture pushes back on the sterilization of teacher experiences, highlighting the chaos of the classroom, where theory meets application (Chapman, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). Pulling from the elements of portraiture, this study centers the classroom context in examining my navigation of traumas, both my own and my students, as well as my relationships with students, parents, and community. Central to portraiture methods is the presence of researcher voice and aesthetics within the presentation of findings (Chapman, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). As a teacher researcher, my voice is embedded throughout the study both as the teacher enacting the curriculum with my students, and as the researcher examining my teaching practice. Intentional with my purpose to listen for a story, rather than listen to a story (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005), my findings are presented within a series of snapshots that unpack the ways in which I tried to create a healing classroom with my students.

Context

The school was located in South Central Los Angeles, where the median household income was $33,321, well below the Los Angeles median income of $49,745. Although the median income is higher than the 2014 national poverty guidelines (set at $23,850), the guidelines fail to take into account the high cost of living for the Los Angeles area, which is 29% higher than the national average ("AreaVibes," 2011; Swanson, 2014). South Central Los Angeles reports a violent crime rate 32% higher than Los Angeles, with 57% of its residents completing high school, and 11% of residents receiving a Bachelor's degree ("AreaVibes," 2011).

Students in the classroom were clustered according to English Language Development (ELD) level, as English Only (EO), Initial Fluent English Proficiency (IFEP) and Reclassified English Learners (RFEP), with 75% of the class being Latine and the remaining 25% being of African descent. Classroom observations, field notes, and work samples were collected throughout the 2013–2014 school year. Artifacts include lesson plans, handouts, student samples, and student reflections. Observations documented lesson topic, method of instruction and activity (i.e., direct instruction, group investigations, etc.), which allowed me to examine interactions with the curriculum, as well as evidence of students' healing.

Traditional research has identified several symptoms that may develop as a result of childhood trauma (Children's Defense Fund-Ohio, 2015; Child Mind Institute, 2023; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017), such as impaired academic ability, difficulty regulating emotions, difficulty focusing and controlling impulses, and difficulty disengaging from threat related cues, which many of my students exhibited. When reflecting on my classroom, symptoms I observed, and my personal experiences with therapy and mindfulness meditation, I developed context responsive curriculum to support my students in learning to name and process emotions.

Analysis

Data were analyzed according to portraiture's utilization of emergent themes, which aligned with Owens' (2020) six practices to heal the wound. Using my lesson plan book and teacher reflection journal to create a timeline of the year, I clustered the series of snapshots into portraits according to critical moments of challenges and successes in supporting students' processing of trauma, grief, and anger.

FINDINGS

See it, Name it: Emotion Dictionaries & Status Updates

I began the year aware of the community conditions in which my students lived. I had taught eighth grade in the community a few years before and was cognizant of the high percentage of students in foster care. I also lived two miles away from the school, so I had seen the byproducts of internal colonialism firsthand. For example, a month into the school year I had witnessed a drive-by shooting while jogging through the neighborhood and was so shaken up by it that I stopped running in the

area for a year. However, it was not until we read a scene in the book *One Crazy Summer*, where the young characters witness their mother being arrested and my student Brenton opened up about witnessing the same, that I realized just how much grief and anger my students carried—and they wanted to talk about it. Several teachers in the People's Education Movement had presented lessons and units they had taught to help students process trauma, so I referenced strategies they shared to inform my curriculum.

I decided to use some of my Academic Language Development[1] time for students to learn language to name and write their emotions. Knowing that my students were media savvy and experienced with Facebook, I decided to build off their social media literacy. Facebook had recently added a "feeling" option to their Status Update feature, which allowed users to select an emotion for each post and the corresponding emoji for said emotion. Thus, I used this feature as the template for my writing activity. I sat on my couch at home, the TV providing my background noise, as I took a screenshot of the status update box on Facebook. I pasted it into my Word document, typed the directions and created the writing lines beneath it. I had noticed that my students often lacked the words to name their feelings, so a vocabulary lesson on the various emotions would precede their Status Update, with students recording new terms in their Emotion Dictionaries.

The following day, I cut and stapled paper to create the dictionaries and prepared my PowerPoint presentation introducing the first round of terms. Each word was presented first within a sentence in which students would use context clues to figure out the meaning, followed by the formal definition and the matching emoji as a visual. When discussing each term, we brainstormed examples of how this emotion might feel in our bodies and students added this to their dictionary. For each of the six new terms we added each week, students developed antonyms and synonyms with a partner prior to applying them within their Status Updates.

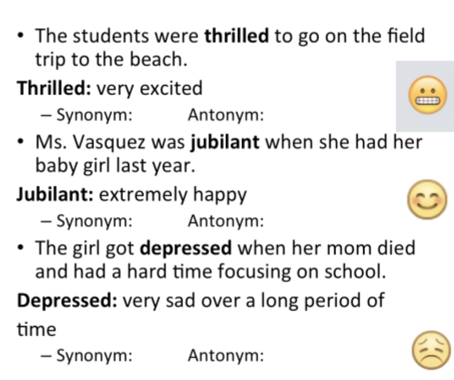
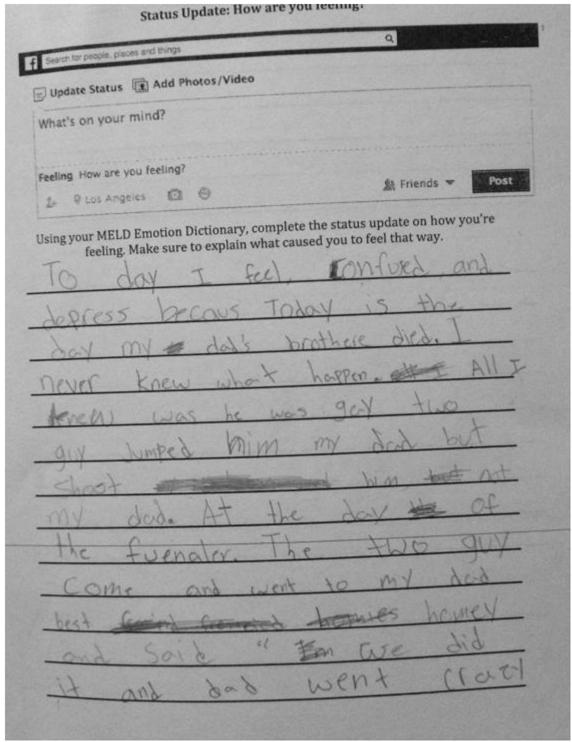


Figure 1: Emotions Slide

[1] Academic Language Development is a district-mandated hour each day for language instruction.

Student Status Updates ranged depending on the student and the events they experienced that week. Most student updates consisted of typical events, such as feeling jubilant because they were going to see the new Pixar movie, or feeling grief because they got in an argument with a friend at recess. However, at times students shared much deeper trauma, such as confusion when a brother went back to jail or depression when a father had to work out of town for months. The Status Updates helped me keep up with students' lives to inform my pedagogy and interactions with students, sometimes referring students to counseling services when needed.

In one Status Update, figure 2, Lionel shared feeling confused and depressed on the anniversary of his uncle's murder, as well as feeling grief because in addition to this loss his family would not talk about it. Colonial schooling serves to dehumanize students by focusing on standards and ignoring the grief and anger students experience. If children are not able to process these emotions at home or school, where are they supposed to process them? After reading his update, I was able to pull Lionel aside and ask him what supports he needed. The implementation of the Status Updates may not have resolved the causes of students' grief and anger, but it did allow them to see and name them. A wound cannot begin to heal if its existence is not acknowledged, so this was a necessary first step.


Status Update: How are you feeling?

Search for people, places and things

Update Status | Add Photos/Video

What's on your mind?

Feeling How are you feeling?

Los Angeles | Friends | Post

Using your MELD Emotion Dictionary, complete the status update on how you're feeling. Make sure to explain what caused you to feel that way.

To day I feel confused and depress becaus Today is the day my dad's brothere died. I never knew what happen. All I knew was he was gay two guy jumped him my dad but shoot him at my dad. At the day of the fuenaler. The two guy come and went to my dad best homey and said " we did it and dad went crazy

Figure 2: Status Update

Own it, Experience it: Transformative Justice Circles

Although students were opening up within their Status Updates, I knew that it was not enough, and that student grief and anger was continuing to bubble up within reactive outbursts. Students needed even more space to experience their feelings where they could discuss them without feeling frustrated with writing skills. Several teachers in People's Education Movement had presented a training on the use of restorative justice at their school site, sharing the general structure and success stories since implementing it. Not wanting to enforce punitive practices for students who were experiencing grief and anger, I decided to give circles a shot in my class.

Students were already aware they could speak to me about anything. They would often ask to speak to me in the hallway to share issues they were having, with me following up with students in meetings at recess, but I wasn't sure how vulnerable they would be with each other in circles. After learning of another argument on the playground between two of my students, I pushed my hesitation aside and decided to hold my first circle.

"Ok, we need to push the desks towards the walls! Everyone sit in a circle on the floor," I hollered. Several students helped move the tables as the rest of the class sat on the floor, many with looks of confusion as they glanced around the room, trying to figure out what we were doing. I grabbed the wooden jaguar head I got in the Yucatan off my desk to use as a talking piece and waited for the students to settle down before explaining what was to happen.

"It kills me to see you all fight with each other over silly things when you already have so much bigger struggles in your lives. Sometimes we get hurt or angry by something else, something that happened at home with our parents or sibling, and we don't know how to talk about it. Then we hurt others, so they feel hurt like we do. If you all knew what your classmates were going through, you wouldn't treat them like this, so we're going to talk about what's going on with us. This jaguar head is going to be our talking piece, only the person holding it can speak." I went on to explain the norms and the privacy of the circle. Students who did not wish to speak could pass and nothing shared during circles should be repeated outside the circle.

I started off the circle by being vulnerable myself and shared what I was struggling with at the moment. "I'm feeling really anxious right now because I'm having issues with a friend of mine who doesn't seem to really be my friend." I shared my confusion of not knowing where we stood in our friendship and feeling like she wasn't being honest with me, and then I passed the piece to my left. I did not expect my students to open themselves up in the first circle. The restorative training I had attended shared that it takes time to build trust but that using the circles to build community helps build the trust needed to address severe issues when they arise. However, six students into our first rotation, one student was brave enough to share her grief.

"I'm really scared right now because I don't know when I'm going to see my dad again. He drinks a lot and one night he was really bad and my mom had to call the cops, and now he can't live with us anymore and I'm afraid he might never come back." As she spoke, her chin quivered and a tear rolled down her cheek. She had come to me the week before to tell me what had happened, but seeing her experience

and share her grief in community with classmates touched me and I began to tear up. As she handed the piece to the next student, I looked around the circle and saw that I was not the only one crying with her; several other students had tears rolling down their cheeks, too.

That student being vulnerable started a domino effect and nearly every student that spoke after her opened up and shared their grief. Two of the so-called "toughest" students in the class, Dante and Juan, offered their stories. Dante shared that his mother had abandoned him as a baby and he had never met her. "Why doesn't she want to meet me?" he said softly in between sobs as he covered his face trying to hide his tears. Juan, sitting next to him, put his arm around him and hugged him while he cried. Then Juan, gripping the talking piece, pushed through his tears as he shared his desire to spend more time with his father. "My dad works three jobs, so I don't see him a lot. Sometimes he doesn't get to sleep because he has to go to his other job. I just really miss him." My students were no longer carrying their grief alone or reactively—they were experiencing it *with* sacred community.

I'm not sure what it was that made my students feel safe enough to open up in our first circle. Perhaps it was because we had regular discussions in class and talking was normalized within the space, but seeing students cry, not just tears of grief but tears of empathy, bonded us that day. I grabbed the box of tissues from my desk and passed them to students while we finished our rotation, giving each student that wanted to speak the chance to do so.

We all looked a bit disheveled when we wrapped up the circle, so I rounded up the class to head to the bathroom to wash our faces and gather ourselves. As the class somberly lined up after using the restroom, I gathered them together. "I love you all, we're a family. Group hug!"

Students rushed me as we made a thirty-plus group hug at the base of the stairwell. We continued to hold a circle each week, strengthening our sacred community, with students eagerly asking me if there would be a circle each day. My students finally felt a space where they could experience their grief and anger, and longed for the weekly session to unload the bags they carried to class each day. This practice was crucial in combating colonialism's individualism and teaching my students that collective care is crucial in building Weller's (2015) sacred village.

Let it go, Let it float: A Letter for Healing

It was May and there were only a few weeks left in the school year. Although my students' reactive experiences of grief and anger had declined since implementing the Status Updates and weekly circles, Brenton's outbursts had actually gotten worse. I pulled him into the hallway one morning while the rest of the class worked on a Status Update to check in with him.

"What's going on Brenton? Is everything okay with you? You started the year a different kid—you were never disrespectful." He kept his gaze on the floor while he began to explain.

"Sometimes I'm just angry. I don't get to see my mom a lot and it makes me angry." Knowing that his mother struggled with addiction, had been incarcerated, and that he was being raised by his elderly grandmother, I understood his anger and grief.

"I'm sorry you don't get to see your mom, and it's okay that you're angry. It sucks. I'd be angry too, but it's my job to make sure you're learning. I don't give you classwork to be mean, I want you to learn. Let's make a deal: if you're feeling angry and need to take a break you can. I'll make you a 'break' card and you can place it on your desk and go take a break in the classroom library for a few minutes. But I want you to take your journal with you and write about what you're feeling, and once the anger subsides, I need you to come back to your seat. Is it a deal?"

"Yes."

I made his break card, and he used it a few times over the next two weeks, but I began to wonder how many of my other students entered the class each day angry, with unprocessed grief, and needing to let it go and float. I thought back to the presentations I had seen in People's Education Movement meetings and the methods they had used to support students in expressing their pain, such as through poetry and writing letters, and decided to have my students write their own letters to someone in their life, either of appreciation or naming harm. I introduced the topic by sharing how I had used letters for closure with my parents.

My class was already familiar with my story: my parents had divorced when I was eleven and my father had stopped being a father at that point. They also knew my mother had died of cancer when I was 18 and I had been on my own since then, so I chose to share my process of letting go with each parent to open the lesson. I first shared that I had sent my father a letter in college, letting him know how his absence had hurt me and continued to affect me and my relationships. I chose to mail him that letter because I wanted him to know exactly how his actions made me feel. Then I shared the letter I had written for my mother.

"After my mom died, I had a lot of guilt. I was young and didn't make the best decisions… I wished I had spent more time with her when she was sick. I felt so guilty that I started doing things that I knew were bad for me…" I stopped mid-sentence and struggled for my words. I could feel my throat closing, my cheeks were hot, and my eyes started to swell with tears. The room was silent, and every students' eyes were on me. I stopped fighting it and let the tears roll down my cheeks. My students had seen me cry before during our circle time, but this was the first time they had seen me cry about *my grief* in community with them. One brave student spoke up.

"Let's not talk about this, let's talk about something happy." I knew she had good intentions and only wanted to cheer me up, but felt the need to address her comment.

"No." I said as my voice quivered. "We have to be able to talk about stuff that hurts. Life is not perfect, but if we avoid talking about our grief it turns into poison inside us. It's ok to be sad. It's ok to cry." I wiped my face and finished telling my story. "I had so much guilt inside that I was hurting myself and others with my behavior. So I wrote a letter to my mom apologizing for not being there for her when she was sick. I knew I could never give it to her, but it was my way of letting go of that guilt and moving on in my life. I needed to let it out and put it on paper."

I finished explaining the activity to the class, and let students know they could choose what they wanted to do with their final draft, keep it for themselves or give it to the person they wrote it to. Every student jumped into the lesson—the sounds of their pencils scratching the paper was the only sound in the room. As they worked, I

walked around the room and observed some students writing letters to friends they had argued with, others were writing letters of gratitude to parents, thanking them for all they do, while others were writing letters to parents who had abandoned them.

> *Dear Dad,*
>
> *I'm writing to you because I want you to know how I feel about you and what you've done to me...*
>
> *Dad, it feels like you don't care about me and my sister. You do not know how much we are struggling to become a family with my mom's new boyfriend. The sad part is yesterday we were talking about you and after all these years we still love you. I know you came to visit us and you promised you would come more often, instead you didn't come again. Everyday I say I want to see you again, sometimes I wait for you, then I'm tired of waiting. I'm your youngest kid, you should be with me. You're a super bad dad, what's wrong with you? My mom struggles with money! You have a nice house, money and a good job...*
>
> *I know you have a wife and [family] you love. You also have daughters with my mom! I'm mad, frustrated, disgusted, sad. I always feel I don't have a dad. I want you to come back. My birthday is on Friday and I bet you won't even call.*

The following day, our classroom phone rang, and the office asked me to send a student up because her mother had dropped something off for her. I excused the student and returned to our lesson. When she returned, she was carrying a homemade fruit arrangement, similar to those you can order from Edible Arrangements for special occasions. She walked up to me and handed me the arrangement, my mouth agape and eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's for you. My mom made it for you."

Still confused, I opened the card attached to the arrangement and a warmth spread over me as I read it. My student had gone home the day before and told her mother about the letter activity, and that I had cried telling them about my mom's death. Touched, her mother had made me the arrangement and thanked me for sharing my joys and sorrows, and that her daughter would always remember me, not as a teacher, but as a friend. I smiled as I closed the card and hugged my student. I had always kept it real with my students throughout my years of teaching, sharing my life struggles and victories with them, but this letter showed just how rare it is for teachers to be vulnerable with their students. Even parents knew it was rare.

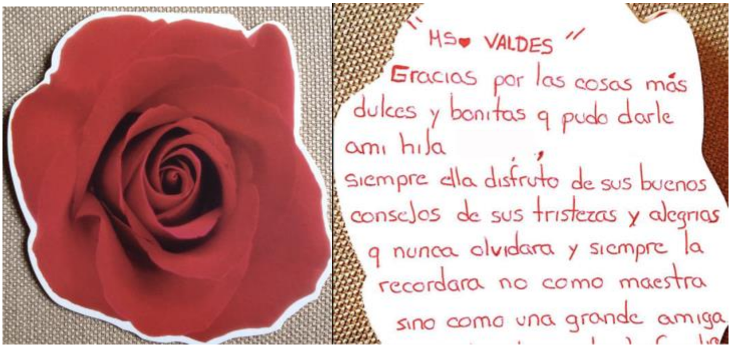


Figure 3: Thank You Card

My students carried grief and anger because of the colonial violence they endured in South Central Los Angeles; poverty, violence, parental abandonment, and addiction to name a few. The curriculum in my classroom could not fix all these issues, but it began the process of healing. For the first time in their education, students were supported in naming their pain and sitting with their feelings, reflecting on the causes and manifestations of grief and anger in their lives, and supported with tools like journaling and talking circles to let them go and let them float. This slow release of pressure allowed students to remain present for academic learning, rather than ignoring their pain and having it bubble up with reactive outbursts, and hopefully paved the way for future growth and healing, so that my students could become healthy members of a sacred community.

It's important to note that with this curriculum to process grief and anger, students were always offered flexibility and choice. Students chose what to share and not share; nobody should be forced to process an emotion when they are not ready. Additionally, beyond this curriculum students were offered support resources, such as the school psychologist and a non-profit counseling service on campus, which many visited regularly.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Developing this curriculum is difficult work that is often avoided by teachers. It is easier to prescribe to neoliberal ideas of just teaching facts and leaving personal lives at the door. I was vulnerable in showing students my grief and anger and that I continue to struggle with it daily. I was honest in sharing the struggles of my childhood, such as being a bully in middle school because I did not know how to process my grief when my parents' divorced, so I hurt others so they would feel hurt like I did. It was my struggles that inspired me to want my students to receive the emotional support and development that I did not receive as a child. I was not coming in to save my students, we were grieving and healing together.

The Status Update activity was critical for two reasons, the first being that it incorporated social media, which was a staple in students' daily interactions. The

second reason being that it provided students with the vocabulary to see and name their feelings—something that I had only recently learned to do as an adult. With students reflecting in their writing, the use of restorative circles complemented their emotional literacy development in creating a space for students to be vulnerable and experience their grief and anger with others, to know that they did not need to deny their feelings, as colonialism has ingrained within BIPOC people for hundreds of years. I was moved and proud when my students opened up in our first circle because it showed that they felt safe—with me and with their peers—to heal and build sacred community.

The final piece of the healing puzzle was having students let it go and let it float through the letter writing activity. With students now armed with the language to name their pain, and understandings that it was ok to experience it, it was critical that students practiced releasing their grief and anger. Crying with my students when speaking of my mother's death was the most vulnerable moment of my teaching career. It was evident in their silence and compassion in that moment that it touched them, but it was even more so evident when I learned that some had shared the story with their parents. Parents appreciated me being vulnerable with their children and that they believed it was the greatest thing I could teach my students—to be human. My students were resilient, strong, and tenacious. They not only continued to show up at school with the grief and anger they carried, but shared, discussed, and made meaning of their pain—comforting each other throughout the process. These portraits exemplify their strength and persistence in grieving, healing, and growing hope in their community.

To do this work, elementary educators must first be vulnerable and fully human with their students, modeling Owens' (2020) steps to liberation. They must be context responsive and adapt to student needs to create space for all emotions, including "unpleasant" emotions like grief and anger, and they must build the relationships with students and their families that are required to do this difficult work. District leadership must see the value and importance of this work and refrain from centering test scores and instructional minutes over the humanity and emotional well-being of students. They must also promote context specific curriculum to develop students' emotional literacy—you cannot standardize (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Sleeter, 2005) your way to emotional literacy because no community or classroom are the same, so there is no universal pathway to emotional literacy. Instead, districts and teacher preparation programs should provide coursework and professional development to pre- and in-service teachers on the process of developing their own *context-based curriculum* using healing-informed and restorative practices. Lastly, districts and teacher preparation programs must shift away from dehumanizing definitions of professionalism that discourages teachers from being vulnerable and building sacred community with students and their families.

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