

## **United in Grief: Teachers of Color Embodying Love and Radical Joy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, many teachers, especially Teachers of Color, have had to navigate a disproportionate amount of grief with little to no institutional support. This has reinforced the importance of developing spaces within schools where teachers and students can learn how to metabolize their grief—to better understand it, recognize it, and listen to how their bodies respond to it. In this article, I share how a group of ninth-grade Teachers of Color participated in interdisciplinary teaching to create a collective space for grief with their students. Utilizing the Filipino cultural practice of talk story, called *kuwentuhan*, they shared reflections on their experience. Findings highlight love and radical joy as humanizing elements stemming from their collective grief, as well as suggest that grief, love, and radical joy are aspects of wellness that should be acknowledged and nourished to allow for Teachers of Color to sustain their wellness alongside their students.

**Keywords:** grief, love, humanization, radical joy, wellness, teachers of color, education, talk story

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In April 2020, just a few weeks after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a global emergency, the Center for Babayan Studies initiated a National Poetry Month challenge called “30 for 30: Decolonization through Poetry.” This challenge invited participants to “re-member, heal and vision radical change” by writing a poem for each day of the month. By this time during shelter-in-place, I was yearning for an opportunity to express my frustrations about what was happening in the world. I decided to return to poetry, the first outlet that allowed me to find my voice. For April 4th, the prompt was: “Imagine a historical injustice/tragedy that created hardship for

you/your lineage, what would life be like if it never happened?" I wrote about the present moment:

*This pandemic got me stressin'  
It's oppressin' and distressin'  
And whatever is in between  
I can't polarize my feelings  
Because it's revealing what needs healing  
And that is a whole ass process in itself  
Honestly, if I didn't have all this time  
I wouldn't be able to express what's on my mind  
What would life be like if this never happened?  
More importantly, what will life be like after this?  
I'm constantly reimagining what the world really needs  
Yet reminiscing about the times that used to be*

~Poem excerpt from "Namnama"<sup>1</sup> (April 4, 2020)

Writing this poem marked the beginning of naming the grief I was especially experiencing and navigating as a Teacher of Color during distance learning/shelter-in-place. During this time, I was holding and experiencing immense grief that intensified my realization of how the education system exerts the capacities of teachers, prioritizing labor over humanity. "Grief is a natural response to death. It indicates that one has deeply loved and lost" (Everett & Dunn, 2021, p. 4). Losing multiple family members and friends during this time reminded me of both the collective love we shared and the love I am capable of continuing to cultivate without their physical presence in my life. I was also reminded that I was not alone in my grief—my students and colleagues, as well as the rest of the world, were also grieving many losses in the midst of the pandemic. As a teacher leader, I wrestled with ways to support my students and colleagues, simultaneously grappling with how to support myself. I often reflected on how I could honor my grief *and* tend to my responsibilities, such as facilitating grade level meetings, updating administration on our progress as the ninth-grade team, and creating opportunities to collaborate with students to center their needs. The whole concept of "reimagining" was what I pushed for, and I am grateful that I was able to work alongside like-minded individuals who were willing to envision and embody what radical education looks like during a global pandemic.

When I was invited to contribute to this special issue, I immediately knew that I wanted to write about something radical and revolutionary: my experience during distance learning. Don't get it twisted though—distance learning was not the thing that was radical and revolutionary. My colleagues at the time, along with our willingness to collaborate, adapt to teaching in front of our laptop screens, and uphold

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<sup>1</sup> Ilocano word for "hope"

our joyful attributes, were what made it a radical and revolutionary experience. The opportunity to work with these individuals at this moment in time is what allowed me to embark on my journey of grief—to better understand what grief is, looks like, feels like, especially as a Teacher of Color.

Over the last decade, there has been an increase in research pertaining to Teachers of Color (e.g., Gist & Bristol, 2022), yet the retention of Teachers of Color is at its lowest since the late 1990s (Dixon et al., 2019). Even less research focuses on the wellness of Teachers of Color, which has been increasingly revealed through these last few years of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Everett & Dunn, 2021). The attrition of Teachers of Color can be linked to the need for schools to center their wellness, especially by creating spaces that allow teachers and students to explore the complexities of grief, which heavily impact the implementation of pedagogical practices and learning in the classroom. It is for these reasons that I intend to focus on Teachers of Color, specifically because the need to support teachers in their healing process is acutely apparent in urban contexts (Garcia, 2019), in which the lives of Students of Color tend to be positively impacted when their teachers reflect who they are.

On these pages, I share the collective experiences and perspectives of ninth-grade Teachers of Color from June Jordan School for Equity (JJSE) who collaborated on lessons and projects to meaningfully engage students in distance learning during the 2020–2021 school year. I begin with the background and context of JJSE, followed by introducing the ninth-grade teachers (myself included) who participated in a virtual *kuwentuhan* to talk about our collaborative experience. Secondly, I describe the origins and elements of *kuwentuhan* as a methodology (Francisco, 2014; Gutierrez et al., 2023). I then share snippets of our *kuwentuhan* in which we conceptualized our collective grief. Findings surfaced that in and from our collective grief, we embodied love and radical joy as essential elements that allowed us to humanize our students, ourselves, and each other in the midst of a global pandemic. I conclude with the importance of Teachers of Color being supported to sustain their wellness alongside their students, offering that grief, love, and radical joy are aspects of wellness that need to be acknowledged and nourished.

## **BACKGROUND & CONTEXT: JUNE JORDAN SCHOOL FOR EQUITY**

In 2001, Small Schools for Equity (SSE) was created by a group of teachers, parents, and students who advocated for an innovative model of education, particularly in San Francisco, California (SSE, 2018). In 2003, together with the San Francisco Organizing Project (now known as Faith in Action Bay Area), SSE developed a new public high school called June Jordan School for Equity (JJSE) in the San Francisco Unified School District. The first graduating class decided to name the school after June Jordan—a poet, writer, activist, and teacher who proclaimed a vision of liberation in her work.

JJSE is a small school by design (SF-CESS, 2007) with a population of about 250 students, mostly Students of Color from working-class families that live in the surrounding urban neighborhoods of the Excelsior, the Mission, Visitacion Valley, and Bayview-Hunters Point. Since 2003, JJSE has been known for its commitments

such as being intentional in building community with students (as class sizes are up to 25), incorporating culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995), and developing relationships with students' families. With this, I would argue that JJSE is a blueprint for a school that promotes and models what equitable and liberatory education can look like.

## **Who We Are and How We Are**

During my time at JJSE, I had the honor of working alongside Giulio Sorro, Crystal Proctor, and Annette Luckett, who I would dub as some of my comrades in the struggle. We all started teaching at JJSE at different times, except Giulio and Crystal who both started in 2006. Annette (who we call “Coach” or “Luckett”) started in 2014 and I (the baby of the group) started in 2017. The intergenerational aspect of our relationships speaks volumes, especially as we were all introduced to JJSE by our community connections, some that are even intertwined. Our collective understanding of what community feels like and what solidarity looks like are what drew us together. In a sense, our interconnectedness exemplifies the meaning behind June Jordan's (1978) infamous line, “we are the ones we have been waiting for”—that we do not need to wait for others to “sing and sing / back into the mountains and / if necessary / even under the sea”—because we are already willing to do what is necessary to protect the humanity and liberation of our young people.

Humanity and liberation in education seemed almost impossible to recognize during the 2020–2021 school year. However, this was when we all happened to be part of the ninth-grade level team, along with a few other amazing colleagues, which provided us structured time to meaningfully collaborate with each other. During this school year, I was the ninth-grade lead teacher who taught Ethnic Studies, while Giulio taught Health, Crystal taught Geometry, and Annette taught Physical Education (PE). To create a space for us to reflect on our collaborative experience, I invited everyone to participate in a virtual *kuwentuhan*. In the next sections, I describe how *kuwentuhan* has developed as a methodology and how we engaged in *kuwentuhan* to conceptualize our collective grief.

## **METHODOLOGY**

With over 300 years of Spanish colonialism, people and languages in the Philippines became heavily influenced by Spain. Thus, the Tagalog word, *kuwento*, is derived from the Spanish word, *cuento*, which means “story.” The “k” and “w” consonants take the place of the letter “c” to create the “ue” vowel sounds in the Philippine alphabet (Jocson, 2008). *Kuwento* draws from Philippine folk literature (Eugenio, 2007) and oral traditions of re-membering (Strobel, 2001). I grew up hearing folklore and personal stories told by my family members. Listening to these stories allowed me to imagine life in the past and reflect on my own experiences so that I, too, can tell my own story. Sharing *kuwentos* is a process of reclamation (McCarthy & Nicholas, 2014), reflection, and re-membering.

While *kuwentos* means stories, *kuwentuhan* is the process of telling stories. Francisco (2014) utilized *kuwentuhan* as a method of talk story amongst Filipino

migrants. Coupling kuwentuhan and Participatory Action Research (PAR), Filipino migrants were able to share their individual stories and connect them to the larger collective experiences of forced migration. Kuwentuhan was developed with the migrant workers as a way to cultivate a space where they felt valued and humanized to exchange their stories with each other. With this in mind, creating space for kuwentuhan should be a collaborative process.

## **Elements of Kuwentuhan**

Gutierrez et al. (2023) engaged in kuwentuhan as a research method to learn about the experiences of undocumented Filipino students. From their research, they identified three elements of kuwentuhan: (a) collective storytelling and memory, (b) co-producing knowledge through Filipino talk story, and (c) a generational language. Significantly, they share how kuwentuhan is a way of preserving and passing down ancestral wisdom and practices, whether a person is Filipina/x/o or not. In the following sections, I focus on the element of co-producing knowledge and share how we engaged in a virtual kuwentuhan to talk about our collaborative experience.

## **Teachers Co-creating Knowledge Through Kuwentuhan**

Kuwentuhan is a cultural way for people, especially Filipinas/xs/os, to exchange their knowledge, which is possible through relationships in which people understand that they have shared struggles. Kuwentuhan allows people to access their experiences across time, space, and in relationship with others (Gutierrez et al., 2023). As a praxis, kuwentuhan disrupts traditional ways of engaging in research, whereas the researcher integrates themselves with the participants instead of being neutral and detached from them. Kuwentuhan shifts from usual research methods, such as focus groups and interviews, in that it breaks power dynamics and cultivates a space for researchers and participants to be seen as co-creators of knowledge.

To better understand how we conceptualize the collective grief we experienced, I decided to utilize the method of a virtual kuwentuhan, since we are now all in different places. Only four out of seven of us from the 2020–2021 ninth-grade level team were able to do the kuwentuhan, and we actually ended up being the ones who are Filipina/mixed with Filipina/o. Currently, Giulio and Crystal still teach at JJSE, Annette teaches at a middle school in Oakland, and I am a Ph.D. student at the University of California, Los Angeles. Our current positions in different spaces indicate how solidarity can continue to be built across various contexts.

Our virtual kuwentuhan took place in December 2022. Our overarching questions that comprised the kuwentuhan were: (a) How did we sustain our wellness alongside our students during distance learning? and (b) What is the importance of engaging in grief as educators? The reference of “we” and “our” in the questions signify that I did not only see myself as the facilitator, but also as a participant in the kuwentuhan. During the kuwentuhan, we did not follow a specific format where one person was expected to speak after the other. Instead, a back and forth exchange happened organically, allowing us to build from one another’s experiences and perspectives to make sense of our own, while also honoring the silences that were

needed for us to reflect on the questions we asked and process what we shared. We had not seen or talked with each other for approximately six months, yet we were comfortable to be vulnerable and joyful during our kuwentuhan because our relationships are grounded in the understanding that our experiences and struggles are tied together—this understanding was more important than ever when we experienced collective grief that we had to navigate alongside our students.

In conceptualizing our collective grief during our kuwentuhan, the themes of love and radical joy emerged from our dialogue, which are elements that have always been embedded in who we are and what we do as educators. After watching, listening, transcribing, analyzing our kuwentuhan, I realize that the invaluable insight that everybody shared will lose its meaning if it were to be condensed into short quotes. Therefore, actual excerpts (with some modifications to provide brevity) from our kuwentuhan have been included, followed by my reflections.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I share how we recognize grief as an aspect of our wellness.

### **“UNITED IN GRIEF” (LAMAR, 2022)**

Having to transition to distance learning meant that we had to confront the collective grief we were feeling from the loss of interacting with each other and our students at school. Giulio mentioned how this transition enhanced the traumatic stressors that our young people experience (Hannegan-Martinez, 2019; Perry & Szalavitz, 2007). As we adapted to distance learning, we also gained new perspectives of how young people may feel about school and about themselves, like the social anxieties from having to interact with others or the insecurities they feel from being teenagers. The pandemic also magnified the uncondusive environments that teachers are expected to work in. With this, we knew we had to collaborate to figure out ways in which we could navigate this grief with our students.

From the losses we experienced (and continue to experience) amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, we learned that grief is a part of our wellness. “Wellness is the harmonizing of mind, body, emotion, and spirit. It is cultivated and sustained through healthy relationships that are responsive to the lived experiences and the historical and material conditions that shape them” (Community Responsive Education, 2020). When we leave our grief unattended, this impacts a major part of our well-being. This necessitates that schools consider how to support both students and teachers in their grief. Doing this can allow them to metabolize their grief, meaning that they can better understand their grief when they are able to recognize it and listen to how their bodies are responding to it. Significantly, because schools are intergenerational spaces, our young people cannot be well when their teachers are not well enough to teach them. Below is an excerpt of our kuwentuhan in which we talk about grief:

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<sup>2</sup> This format was inspired by Marin et al.’s (2020) “Enacting Relationships of Kinship and Care in Educational and Research Settings.”

*Lauren: How do you define grief? How important is it to engage with grief as educators?*

*Giulio: If you were to ask a 14-year-old, "What did you lose?" or "What are you sad about losing?," it might be hard for them to articulate....I don't know if they consciously could or are aware. But [there are] these human deeper sides that we know of loss, of human contact together, loss of isolation which causes a grief that might not be able to [be articulated]. It's clear to know grief like my father lost a job or we're struggling with bills. It's a little harder at 14 to say, "I have grief...."*

*Lauren: I think [because] we don't necessarily directly talk about grief or there's not a lot of trauma-informed teaching in schools, and I don't know why because a lot of our students go through so much trauma and grief processes....I feel like we're just taught to kind of accept that that happened, and then kind of move on....And so I think it's tough for students to name that, because they don't have the language to do so. And I think I'm trying to figure out ways in which schools can do that....not necessarily to force them to talk about the traumas and all the things that they're going through, but just providing a space to invite them to talk about experiences like this and to kind of normalize the ways in which we're able to engage in collective healing....what I've noticed, especially the past couple years, is that there's so much grief that we hold for ourselves and that we have to hold for our students. And so what are the institutional supports that we need in order for us to go through grief together, to work towards healing?*

*Giulio: To answer your question, Lauren, we basically have to have a radical, revolutionary perspective/theory on education....And I would say that the system of capitalism, which we are under, completely goes against all trains of grief, of healing, of community coming together....But meanwhile, can we create—[and] I think June Jordan might have been the closest to it—can we create these radical institutions [that actually] have a focus on healing?....And the problem that I think happens is that people think that if you're talking about healing, or grief, or love, or joy, and all these things that culturally all four of us have practiced and believed, that we're not teaching academic rigor....The kids will do whatever you ask them academically, when they believe in what you're doing in that space for them to be human...*

*Lauren: Yeah, I think we're slowly getting there....With June Jordan, we're known for doing talking circles, especially in our advisories. And so I think that's one practice that we have engaged in consistently that has allowed us to really engage in humanizing intentions, with students and teachers.*

*Crystal: You know what that makes me think about? Just creating space to create community. I just feel like a lot of the structures, the ideas for healing, talking circles, grief workshops, whatever it might be....those can't happen without the space feeling communal and safe.*

One of the “6 Key Aspects of Social Justice Pedagogy” is for JJSE teachers to create a safe classroom community. Another key aspect is to develop our students as humans first. These aspects are interdependent of each other. Classrooms have the potential to be sacred, safe spaces when teachers build humanizing relationships with their students. Humanizing our students opens up possibilities for them to bring their whole selves into their learning (Cariaga, 2018). When students see themselves reflected in their education, this provides them with a purpose and willingness to learn. Our productive struggle to build and sustain relationships with our students during distance learning reminded us that humanization should always be at the core of education.

In a similar vein, our grief makes us human, which is a lesson we learned with our students. However, “grief becomes problematic when the conditions needed to help us work with grief are absent” (Weller, 2015, xviii). Our students are not equipped with the tools to acknowledge and metabolize their grief, let alone teachers. This means that students and teachers are carrying a disproportionate amount of grief, with little to no support. This disproportionality diminishes our humanity and negatively affects the education our young people deserve.

As you can see, our conversation around grief left us with more questions to reflect on. We recognize that it is acutely apparent that schools need to create spaces for the grief of teachers and students. We have no exact answers or solutions, as grief is not something to be solved (Weller, 2015). However, we can share that in and from our collective grief, we learned that love and radical joy were essential elements we embodied to sustain our wellness alongside our students.

## **OUR COLLECTIVE ELEMENTS OF GRIEF**

### **Love**

*Grief and love are sisters, woven together from the beginning.* (Weller, 2015, xvi)

Because of the collective grief we experienced and navigated with our students, we learned about our expansiveness to love. “Love is a political praxis of cultivating interdependence for the purpose of individual and collective survival, sustainability, well-being, healing, and joy” (Hannegan-Martinez, 2023, p. 6). Love is what grounds us as Teachers of Color, as comrades in the struggle with sole intentions and purpose to create spaces with our students that are centered on love (hooks, 2000).

The midst of the pandemic taught us that love is needed to truly reimagine education. With this, we decided to try interdisciplinary teaching for the first time on Zoom. The “Flower Project” was the first project we collaborated on. This project calls for students to create a visual of a flower that represents who they are and deeply reflect and write about their growth as young people. In addition, they are invited to share their flowers and stories with their peers and their teachers. This project is meant to be done after having already built community with and amongst students. To frontload the project, each teacher taught a different lesson that related to their subject



area. Crystal taught students how they could draw different types of flowers and incorporated Geometry in the shapes and lines they created. For Health class, Giulio created space for students to reflect on the good, bad, ugly, and beautiful memories in their lives. In Ethnic Studies, my lesson focused on Tupac Shakur's poem, "The Rose That Grew from Concrete." Annette continued to facilitate PE workouts, which allowed students to move the energy in their bodies at the end of the school day. We made sure to consider both our capacities as teachers and the capacities of our students while engaging in this collaborative project by trying to center our emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Instead of each student attending their regular class periods on Zoom, we combined our classes into one Zoom so that we were all together. Because JJSE initially has small class sizes, we were able to make this work with about 60 students in one Zoom. Here, I share our exchange about the "Flower Project," which was significant in strengthening our community as a whole ninth-grade class:

*Lauren: We engaged students in multiple ways: the PE workouts, the "Flower Project," and the [Youth Participatory Action Research] project. How do you think these impacted our students' wellness?*

*Annette: With all that's going on....just seeing with the detailed Flower Project, those are things you have to think of to bring out of yourself that only can come from you. You know what I'm sayin'? That's not something like somebody can help you build. And for the kids to sit and really think deeply from the bottom to the top, that had to be a lot for them to come out of [themselves] for that, you know?*

*Crystal: I just remember them producing [a lot more] than I had suspected....I think they created some beautiful flowers and it was just nice to kind of show that [and have] them share out. And I feel like it's hard to get a sense of a group through Zoom, but it felt like there was a lot more engagement during the Flower Project....I think that was actually pretty, pretty amazing we pulled that off and created somewhat of a community online.*

*Giulio: And you know, just doing that [project] over the years, I knew it was going to be accessible....because it was just really about their own personal lives that they could share and reflect [at] their own pace. Not like any of [us did] any special teaching....It's just a very human thing. And all those kids hidden behind their cameras in bed and isolated, the family going through everything, like they want to share....that's just kind of like the socialization that Crystal was talking about....We have to believe and know that our young people want to share. They want to be open, they want to express. It's just natural. I mean, look at us, we haven't [gotten] together for [a while] and we wanna be able to listen about, you know, things that are dear and true to us....that's the one thing that really caught the kids....having some type of humanity in the work.*

*Lauren: Yeah, that project was really powerful, and that was like the first project where we were all able to see students be vulnerable. And I'm thinkin', like, what do you all think allowed them to be so vulnerable on Zoom? What do you think allowed them to open up like that to us?*

## **Reflections on Love**

Giulio has been doing the “Flower Project” for about nine years. He shared that students have always been willing to be vulnerable with their stories because they see that their humanity is valued and honored when they engage in this project. In our case, the “Flower Project” provided an opportunity for our students to connect with other human beings in a way they were not able to for a long time, though via Zoom. Also, co-teaching allowed our students to experience and see our solidarity and camaraderie as teachers. Because we were all together, our students saw how comfortable we were with each other, which created space for them to feel a sense of belonging, as well. As Giulio mentioned, “We have to believe and know that our young people want to share.” I want to add that teachers have to be willing to share, as well. We cannot ask our young people to do what we ourselves would not do. Modeling what we expect of our students is an example of love. For us, when we love, we love hard because we know that without love, we are unable to engage in our healing.

As a way to model vulnerability and honor my own humanity, I share the following two vignettes to provide a glimpse of the specific moments I recognized the importance of engaging in collective healing. These moments serve as emblems of the grief I was deeply feeling as a teacher leader and how we worked collaboratively to create loving relationships (Hannegan-Martinez, 2019; 2023) and spaces to support students (and ourselves) through grief.

### ***“I am going to shine...”***

On the evening of March 10, 2021, I attended a candlelight vigil and birthday remembrance for Angelo Quinto, a Filipino American U.S. Navy veteran who was murdered by the Antioch Police Department on December 23, 2020. Right when I got to the event at City Park in Antioch, CA, I received a text at 4:47pm saying that one of our students had passed away. As my heart sank and tears slowly started to escape my eyes, I stepped away from the crowd to allow myself to process and feel the grief traversing through my body. I could not fathom that while I was grieving in community for Angelo, I was also having to make more space to grieve the loss of a student I had never even gotten a chance to meet in person. Reflecting on my positionality as the lead teacher, many questions raced through my mind: What are we going to tell our students, and how? How should we make space for us to process and reflect together? How do I support my students and colleagues in their grief? How do I support myself in my grief? What does support even look like right now? It was in this moment when I realized that as my feelings and reflections were all valid, so was the truth that it's impossible to have all the answers and know exactly what to do in our times of grief.

The unexpected loss of a student we never got to meet in person was new to us—we never had to navigate the loss of a student within the complex layers of a global pandemic. This loss reminded us of the importance of sustaining the love we cultivate with our students, because love brings forth new possibilities and love is what allows us to carry action into positive new places (Jordan, 1978). In conceptualizing the grief we experienced when we lost our student, during our *kuwentuhan* we shared how this grief felt different for us since we never got to be in her physical presence. We all felt grief in different ways and understood that it was okay if we did not feel grief similarly to when we lost other young people in our lives. Collectively as educators, we take Baldwin's (1980) words to heart: "The children are always ours, every single one of them." This loss brought up past losses of other students. Even though we were unable to build a more meaningful relationship with our student we never got to meet in person, we still recognized that this was a loss of another one of our young people, one of our children. This was a lesson we also learned with our students. While some students knew her and others did not, we learned that it was still important to embody love through the different levels of grief they were feeling and that we were feeling.

Our student left a mark in our ninth-grade community, specifically when she presented her Flower Project. She explained why she had named her flower "The Shine Flower": "No matter what situation or circumstance, I am going to shine either way it go." Her words describe how love will always persevere and remind us that our young people need love to thrive (Ginwright, 2015; Hannegan-Martinez, 2019; Perry & Szalavitz, 2007; Siegel & Solomon, 2003). Her light definitely continues to shine through the love we cultivate with every young person who enters our lives.

### ***"In a perfect world..."***

In experiencing this loss, we knew we had to seek the support we needed to facilitate a space with our students where we could acknowledge and process our grief. We asked our wellness coordinator if she could facilitate a grief workshop with our ninth-grade community on Zoom. During this workshop, she shared that grief is "the reaction a person might experience as a result of a loss. It can affect the way you feel, think, function, and behave. Grief and loss are feelings connected to so many different experiences, not just the death of a loved one." This opened up space for students (and teachers) to reflect and share what they were grieving in the face of a global pandemic and state-sanctioned violence, as the rest of the world was collectively grieving the many losses of loved ones and loss of social freedom. From what we all shared, students learned that "everybody grieves different" (Lamar, 2022) and that we can be united in our grief as we try to both honor what we need individually and be there for each other with whatever capacity we have.

To provide visuals of what grief looks like and feels like, our wellness coordinator shared a YouTube video entitled "5 Things About Grief No One Really Tells You" (Psych2Go, 2020). Our students shared their thoughts and connections to the video in the Zoom chat. As one of our students brought up the concept of trauma, another student shared, "I feel like trauma works on a different level in your brain, it's a lot harder to work through. In a perfect world, people would experience grief but not trauma." Our ninth-grade students' ability to distinguish the difference

between grief and trauma and to confidently craft and share this statement reminds us that our young people are constantly learning and capable of making sense of the world around them. “Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Trauma is a response to a distressing event or series of events while grief is a natural response to loss (Neelam, 2023). Though our world is full of traumatic experiences and oppressive social conditions, it is important to acknowledge that this is not natural for one to experience (Haines, 2019). Grief, on the other hand, is a human reaction that reminds us of what we deeply love and care about. While trauma is our protective response to what has harmed us, grief is our response that protects and honors our humanity.

### **Radical Joy**

Recognizing the complexities of grief also allowed us to reflect on how central joy is to our wellness:

*Lauren: What do you think allowed us to create such joy together, and how important is joy to you as an educator?*

*Giulio: \*sings\* (Or tries to) “Jooyyy! Pump it up! And pain. Sunshine and rain!” (Base & DJ EZ Rock, 1989). I think that song really speaks to it all and I think that was us....with me, you, Crystal, Coach, particularly just always having fun and laughing and kickin’ it, you know? And I think the kids vibed off that....I felt like us four, like we spent a lot of time together....So I think us just vibin’ with each other, you know, being there for each other....*

*Lauren: I agree with Giulio. I think us specifically, we have such a common purpose as educators....to hell a ride or die for our students. I mean other folks are like that too at June Jordan, but I think specifically with our ninth-grade team that year, I love that we were able to go to Coach’s house in Oakland, kick it there, and then we went to Giulio’s house....We were trying to find ways to really engage with each other so that we [could] engage with our students, and I think that’s what really set us off as a ninth-grade team....we’re just very open to being silly with each other and goofballs. So that’s also important. I think it’s just in our nature as Filipinos or something, I don’t know.*

*Annette: I think we all [have] outstanding personalities that just brought a big joy to the kids....Our style of how education is, is very fun while learning, as well. So I think that’s why we meshed real well and brought a lot of joy during the pandemic.*

*Crystal: Ummm—*

*Annette: And I think if you're not having fun while doing it, like who will want to do it? You gotta have some type of fun while doing this, right? This ain't for everybody.*

*Lauren: Yup, that's true.*

*Crystal: \*unmutes and slowly opens mouth to talk\**

*Lauren: And so ummm...I'm just kidding. Go ahead!*

*\*everyone laughs\**

*Crystal: Yeah, I think some of us come from a background where joy is huge. I would just say as a Filipino, that's huge. Like you have to laugh when you're with other people. It's a must. It's very cultural in my family.... I protect joy to the utmost and I get along with almost everyone on purpose....Not because I want to be someone who is liked by everyone, but I understand the importance of being able to work and collaborate with people....like I can only give true feedback to somebody who is willing to hear me. And if I'm causing tension with somebody, that ability to kind of grow and learn from each other [is] impossible. And so I try to attend to the fact [that it's] not just joy, it's not just, "Let's just get along and feel good." But let's do that so we create this trust....I walk down the [hallway to] my classroom and every now and then [I think] to myself, "I've been doing this walk for like 16 fuckin' years"....I've been seeing the same people, whether they're different or not. Students, staff come and go, [but these] walls still have their spirit in them. These classrooms, these floors, they still have their energy in them. And so I think just me being in that space and being joyous in that space is illuminated when I teach. And I think it's super important.*

## **Reflections on Radical Joy**

Joy is crucial for social change; joy is crucial for teaching. Finding joy in the midst of pain and trauma is the fight to be fully human. (Love, 2019, p. 119)

Acknowledging that grief and joy can coexist keeps us close to our humanity. I would say that we not only embodied joy but that we embodied radical joy with each other and our students. Similar to Black joy (Love, 2019), I see radical joy as the reclamation of the joy that People of Color have historically been robbed of. Radical joy speaks back to the institutional spaces that were not built for us. "Radical" asserts that "something is progressive, innovative, and goes against tradition" (Sacramento et al., 2023). For us to embody and radiate radical joy alongside our grief, especially in the middle of a global pandemic, was important for us to remain in touch with our humanity. Radical joy is a reminder of our capacity for feeling (Brown, 2019). When we honor our capacity to feel, we also honor our humanity. We recognize that our humanity is what we need to protect more than ever.

## CONCLUSION & OFFERINGS

*My predecessors have woven some strong ass fabric that I'm a part of  
This fabrication emphasizes self and collective preservation  
The caring of one another, sharing resources, creative communication  
Never had to stay 6 feet away and beyond for us to keep our respiration  
But this is preparation for us to plan our annihilation  
Of the generational trauma that's been this country's foundation  
My kumunidad has the capacity to love from our indignation  
What we do with this love is for the future generations*

~Poem excerpt from "Namnama" (April 4, 2020)

I revisit this poem to emphasize the importance of sustainability, hope, and endurance in education. Even through all the hardships we endured as Teachers of Color, we continued to persist despite the odds that tried to break us. When teachers are given opportunities to design their classrooms as spaces for healing (Garcia, 2019), they can uphold their responsibility of being responsive to not just the needs of their students, but their own needs as well. This holistic approach can be utilized in schools to centralize the wellness of teachers, especially Teachers of Color. With this, I contend that schools need to create spaces for teachers and students to explore the complexities of grief, so that they can cultivate and embody love and radical joy to sustain their wellness. "Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion" (hooks, 2000, p. 215). Schools have the potential to be spaces of collective healing. Schools are intergenerational spaces where grief, love, and radical joy can coexist. It is especially significant to understand that the liberation of our young people is more possible when we strive for liberation together. Because as our student said, "In a perfect world, people would experience grief but not trauma." So, how are we striving to build that world?

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