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Grappling with Life After Loss as Educator Leaders: An Invitation to Transformational Educator Grief Healing Work

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ABSTRACT

When a student dies, educators must cope with their own grief while supporting the grief of their surviving students. Educators have navigated student death for centuries, but today's educators face new circumstances—gun-related violence, the COVID-19 pandemic, and increasingly-common natural disasters—and persistent reminders of student death via 24-hour news cycles and social media feeds. Such experiences occur in the context of a Western propensity to dismiss grief as a distraction from production. Having few or no preparation or processing supports to depend on, school leaders may lack the ability to effectively care for educators in the wake of a student's death. Outlined herein is the School Crisis Recovery and Renewal (SCRR) project. Described in detail is the Life After Loss Tables: Educators Edition (LALTs) program, a set of practices that aim to rehumanize the educator grief healing process by hosting educators in a co-created supportive and regenerative space. Practical recommendations are outlined.

Keywords: educator grief, loss, educator healing, trauma, grief sensitive leadership, crisis leadership

"Our Hardest Moments Don't Have to Be Our Most Isolating"
- A Life After Loss Educators' Edition Participant

Over the course of their decades-long careers, many educators will experience the death of a student in their school community. Students may die from natural causes, accidents, death by Fentanyl or other drug-related poisoning, violence, or suicide. When such deaths happen, educators are faced with the difficult task of coping with their own grief while supporting the grief of their students. Unfortunately, educators often find themselves missing the tools to cope with such a loss. A recent study found that among a sample of 675 educators (classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, school nurses, counselors, psychologists, social workers and other school staff members), almost all respondents surveyed (95%) said they wanted to do more to help grieving students, yet only 15% reported feeling prepared and comfortable to do so (New York Life Foundation, 2021).

Educator leaders—those who are responsible, whether in formalized positions or not, for supporting educators and for influencing school climate and culture—are accountable for preparing educators to cope with and integrate the death of a student. Such preparation is fundamentally tied to the need to support educators' own relationship with grief (Devich-Cyril et al., 2023; Everett & Dunn, 2021). Transforming school climate and culture requires that space is created to support educators and educator-leaders in not only what to do, but also how to be when grief arrives at the school community's doors. Yet, to our knowledge, preservice teacher and administrator credential programs rarely prepare candidates for student death.

Educator grief related to student death is a specific, unique phenomenon (Ayers, 2015; Case et al., 2020; Fulford, 2021; Hart & Garza, 2012; Wolf-Prusan, 2021). Educators, like most adults, rarely prepare for the loss of a young person; deaths that occur in childhood and adolescence are typically unexpected. For educators, the death of a student can hold great existential meaning since most educator-student interactions are future-oriented (e.g., teaching students to be ready for the world, cultivating their knowledge and skills for growth thriving in the years after the teacher or educator works with them). When a young person's future is abruptly cut short, the loss can evoke painful thoughts and emotions about who that student could have or would have become, and what they may have contributed to their families, peers, and communities. For some communities, the loss of a young person may have additional layers of meaning. Educators of color have shared that when a student comes from the same community (racialized identity, geographic neighborhood) as they do, the student's death may activate a sense of loss similar to that of losing a child, sibling, or family member (Wolf-Prusan, 2014). The death of students isn't normal, yet it is normal for educators to grieve, and that reality beckons educator leaders to be proactive and responsive. Educators' grief is real and can be traumatic if unrecognized, invalidated, and unsupported.

Providing a national platform to advance educators' grief-related healing is the vision of the School Crisis Recovery and Renewal (SCRR) project, a five-year, federally funded national initiative launched in 2020. SCRR aims to rehumanize the grief healing processes by bringing together educators to co-create a supportive and regenerative space wherein we foster the dispositions, attitudes, and skills necessary

to care for educators after a student dies. SCRR contributes to the crisis, trauma, grief, and educational leadership field in the following ways:

- Providing opportunities to surface experiences of student death, unique events, too often unspoken of, that are rarely supported interpersonally or structurally in schools.
- Creating spaces for school leaders to metabolize student death experiences that have been ignored, silenced, or undervalued.
- Helping individuals and groups distinguish between, address, and create shared language around disenfranchised grief, grief burnout, and moral distress found in education settings that lack grief literacy.
- Cultivating ways of leading school communities' life after loss in a reimagined way, by normalizing grief as an experience beyond the acute event and one that can be the source of profound transformation to the self, colleagues, community, and the teaching profession itself.

We at the SCRR believe that embracing the radical, rigorous practice of grappling with grief can catalyze more humanized school cultures that support safety, connection, and healthy grieving for school community members amidst and after a crisis. Below we describe our foundational conceptual models for trauma recovery and grief attunement, after which we share one approach to educator grief healing as school communities.

Trauma, Trauma Recovery, Grief, and Grief Attunement

To guide its work, the SCRR relies on decades of trauma, trauma recovery, grief conceptualization, and grief attunement scholarship. SCRR defines trauma as any experience that overwhelms an individual's nervous system and/or collective support systems, causing harm and necessitating repair. McGlynn-Wright and Briner's (2021) Integrative Trauma and Healing Framework serves as one of SCRR's foundational conceptual models, defining safety as a "sense of being physically, psychologically, emotionally secure," and trauma as the "harmful interruption of safety, agency, dignity, or belonging." Their work demands that trauma be: (a) held in relationships that unpack trauma intellectually and its impact on our bodies; (b) contextualized in our current social, cultural, and economic conditions; (c) experienced at the collective, systemic, and cultural levels; and (d) expansive in its healing potential. SCRR also utilizes Judith Herman's (1992) work as a road map for an individual or group's trauma recovery: first, establishing safety; second, retelling the story of what happened or what is happening; and third, reconnecting with others and life as it is. While trauma ruptures our worldview and challenges our belief systems, recovery demands that we spend time individually and communally integrating into our identities the loss and the circumstances associated with that loss. While educator leaders are often well-resourced by district, county, or state crisis response protocols that focus heavily on physical safety, there tends to be a jump from physical safety to rebuilding and recovering, leaping over the second "retelling the story" phase wherein

lies the remembrance and mourning components of grief work. Such grief work cannot occur in contexts absent physical, emotional, and psychological safety, and reconnecting with life as-is cannot happen without remembrance and mourning.

We become grief-attuned when we bear witness compassionately to what grief we have experienced in the past, either professionally or personally, that we may be carrying with us in the present (the feelings and needs that surround the immediate experience of student death) and how that story informs how we will act or respond to grief-evoking experiences in the future. Developing grief attunement helps educators get clear about what is activating them in the present when coping with a student's death; they start to acknowledge what needs and feelings are surfacing that may be interrupting or facilitating their life functioning.

WHY EDUCATOR GRIEF HEALING WORK IS NECESSARY

There is a gap in the need for educators' grief to be validated and affirmed and for educator leaders to be prepared for, and committed to, fostering the skills and cultivating the spaces necessary to do so. The death of a student is a specific type of relationship and loss that, in recent years, has been described as disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2008), or grief that does not receive the priority of time and attention (Fulford, 2021; Lathrop, 2017; Wolf-Prusan, 2014). Disenfranchised grief is the result of school systems, cultures, and educator leaders dismissing the need for educators to process the experience of student death. This pattern results from school systems and school leaders being acculturated to the Western propensity to dismiss grief as a distracting inconvenience. Having few or no preparation or processing supports to depend on, school leaders may lack the ability to effectively care for educators in the wake of a student's death; the systemic resources and interpersonal capacity to name and normalize death, loss, trauma, and pain in their school communities is often under supported, primed, and processed.

In discourse about educator wellness and healing, a frequently used term is burnout, which often signals untended trauma and grief; untreated burnout contributes to feelings of exhaustion, depersonalization, and dehumanization (Fumis et al., 2017). Even more specific and helpful is the term grief burnout, a distinct form of burnout at the nexus of chronic workplace stress and disenfranchised grief (Forneret, 2021). We also rely on the concept of moral injury and distress as it contributes to the educator loss experience: when educators and their leaders are forced explicitly or implicitly to act or respond in a way that is contrary to their values (e.g., to be silent in the wake of a student death or not talk about grief), it can evoke "lasting emotional, psychological, and existential harm" (Sugrue, 2020, p. 43). Many student deaths are embedded in seemingly intractable societal issues, such as racism and/or classism; such deaths may further contribute to educator grief burnout. When a student's death is racialized, such as when a student of color is killed by state-sanctioned violence, gun violence, or community violence, educators may experience an added dimension of trauma and grief (Grinage, 2019). Layered onto all these experiences is the increasingly common requirement of educators to plan and participate in school activities that may resurface existing trauma and grief and produce new trauma and

grief, such as school active shooter drills (Treleaven, 2022). Next, we describe three scenarios that depict disenfranchised grief and grief burnout:

> *Scenario 1: During a faculty meeting, a principal announces that an alumnus has been shot and killed over the weekend. The principal pauses for a moment of silence and then resumes the agenda as initially planned.*
>
> *Scenario 2: It is October, and a new principal is assigned to a large comprehensive high school. The principal cannot figure out why the faculty's behavior is so sensitive; every time they ask something of the faculty, there is backlash. Teachers are bickering and fighting more than usual. After discussion, it comes to light that a big violent student death event occurred in October years ago. "It is always in the air," one teacher says softly, "The students feel it. We feel it. However, administrator turnover makes it invisible."*
>
> *Scenario 3: A popular valedictorian and cheerleader gets killed in a drive-by shooting. "She was going to make it," a teacher whispers. In the same year, three students were involved in a stabbing, and it is unclear if a student stabbed the others. "They had it coming," a circle of educators determined. The school site administrative team acknowledged the first student's death in an assembly; the three students later in the year went unmentioned.*

In these scenarios, none of the educator leaders are wrong. They aren't terrible leaders. They are humans who have not been prepared nor supported to lead school communities through the complex and uncomfortable experiences of student death aftermath and its cousin, educator grief healing. In Scenario 1, the principal has disenfranchised the grief of the educators she is leading. By "sticking to the script," she is implying that there is no time to slow down to hold space for the humanity of the student. Scenario 2 sees a principal learning about the importance of a school's history; here, the unresolved past plays out in the present via interpersonal interactions among faculty. Finally, Scenario 3 illustrates the moral injury that occurs when student deaths are addressed in an ad hoc manner; without proper planning and reflection, some students' losses are acknowledged while others are ignored.

EDUCATOR GRIEF HEALING

Guiding schools in the aftermath of student death and life after loss is a breathtaking responsibility. Stewarding trauma-informed and grief-sensitive school ecosystems requires careful and persistent attention to repair, cohesion, meaning-making, and relational connection (Greig et al., 2021; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017; Venet, 2021). We call this educator and/or educator-leader grief healing work, an umbrella term used to describe the internal loss experience (grief), the external demonstration of the loss (mourning), the fact of the loss (bereavement), and the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that might arise from or be attached to the event of the student's death or the way the death is addressed in the aftermath (trauma, moral distress, and/or grief burnout).

Educator grief healing work is transformational because it demands tough, often uncomfortable effort individually and collectively to shift educator belief systems and practices, often surfacing implicit and explicit belief systems about which students' lives matter(ed) and which do or have not. Our grief experiences and paradigms related to student death are intricately connected to identity and inequity. Because of that, SCRR uses the Conceptual Framework for Teacher Transformation (Peters, 2016), a roadmap that "outlines stages of work necessary for educators and schools to shift beliefs and practices and maintain a commitment to interrupting and transforming inequities" (p. 5). This framework helps us steer our approach to educator grief healing work and life after student loss processing. Peters' original framework offers four stages intended to help school system leaders interrupt inequitable practices and policies that lead to racialized disparities in student support. The first stage, stance and schema awareness, requires educators to "engage in work to identify and understand who we are and how we came to be" (p. 14). From there, the second stage, interruptive and catalytic experiences, requires learning "more about how to engage with each other and develop the trust to do so," (p. 15), and the third stage, making new meaning, maps three spaces in which teacher transformation can be internalized and integrated, asking, "What can I learn from myself, from those with whom I share affinity, and from allies across difference?" (p. 16). Finally, in the fourth stage, teacher transformation results in change or new action, a "sustained shift in practice" (p. 16). These sustained shifts in practice transform school culture over time.

Our Educator Grief Healing Transformation Framework (EGHTF), an adaptation of Peters', moves through and between *five stages*:

1) self and collective attuning
2) creating conditions for catalytic experiences
3) meaning making
4) integrating school culture
5) sustaining bold action

In the next section, we describe how we have used the EGHTF to inform one of the most profound ways we at SCRR have nurtured educator grief work: the *Life After Loss Tables: Educators Edition* (LALTs) program (Wolf-Prusan & Flowers, 2023).

Educator Grief Work Transformation: Life After Loss Tables

We created LALTs, virtual or in-person gatherings of educators who have experienced student death, to come together and share what life as an educator has been like after loss. These are not professional development trainings where specific knowledge and skills are taught; rather, LALTs are gatherings to provide space for educators to commune with peers as a means towards healing. Based on The Dinner Party Lab's peer model, these recurring virtual gatherings ("tables") were intentional, peer-led spaces for educators to engage in conversation around their experience with death-related, school-based losses as a means towards healing. "Table" is used for its metaphoric connotation to a dinner table conjuring a warmer, more informal, and

relational experience. In our model, the LALTs are facilitated or co-facilitated by "hosts," fellow peer educators who take on the role of facilitating the space.

We held virtual LALTs for over two years in various formations, learning alongside educators and educator leaders as they cultivated the dispositions, knowledge, and skills to lead their school communities in the aftermath of student deaths. In those two years, participants ranged from first-year teachers to retired special education teachers, school counselors, and youth advocates, all bound by the experience of having lost a student either in recent days or many years ago.

From focus group feedback, participants report the value of a warm, inviting, and brave space where honest and revelatory conversations can occur. We invited participants across identities, locations, and professional roles to share their stories of student loss and to listen as others share theirs. No two stories were ever the same, just as no two relationships were ever the same. What all participants shared was a hunger for connection around an experience they've too often had to suppress or hide. As one educator reflected, "our hardest moments don't have to be our most isolating." In the following section, we illustrate how LALTs help educator grief work come alive by mapping them through the Educator Grief Healing Transformation Framework; we describe each stage with suggested reflective questions and practices for educator leaders.

Stage 1: Educator Grief Work- Self and Collective Attunement and Awareness

Essential Questions: How might we improve self-awareness and inquiry into what kind of student deaths and grief might activate us? How might we use our lived experience to inform the ways we lead through and amidst crises (grief and trauma)? How might we support our own emotional needs and healing to better support the needs of our colleagues and the young people we serve?

Collective educator grief healing actualizes when we as educators are attuned to our own grief stories, thereby relating, and recognizing that our emotional landscapes (past, present, and future) are not separate from those of our students. Relating to ourselves is symbiotic with relating to our students. What we ignore in ourselves, we might ignore in our students. Without the space, support, and tools to move beyond the harms of our own lived experience, it is possible—perhaps probable—that we lead schools from our own emotional interests, anchors, and wounds rather than from an interest in serving the greater good. Without acknowledging, reframing, and healing our own hurts, we run the risk of internalizing the behaviors and needs of others, missing important signs, operating from a compromised parasympathetic nervous system, or finding ourselves stuck in self-defeating stress responses such as fight, flight, or freeze (Erskine, 2018). Developing such self-awareness requires a brave space to examine, unpack, and explore so that we, as educator leaders, can co-regulate and co-grieve.

We come into the classroom, school halls, or educator-training programs with our own personal experiences of grief (Cariaga, 2023). Some of those are informed by what we ourselves experienced as students or as student teachers. In the first stage, we take time at LALTs to unpack our own stances and schemas, our individual and shared historical and contemporary relationships to grief, and our belief systems

about student death, grief, and loss. One LALT school leader shared that because of her own experiences with death by suicide in her family, she had little room to hold space for, and respond to, deaths by suicide in her school community.

Individually and collectively attuning to our grief necessitates an exploration of grief bias (Wolf-Prusan & Flowers, 2023). Our grief stories can impact what we validate or do not validate in our colleagues' and students' grief experiences. Educator leaders humanize themselves by unearthing their grief bias, and identifying what might be internal narratives that influence their external decisions. As Castrellón et al. (2021) wrote:

> The first step in engaging in a radical healing justice framework necessitates school leaders and teachers to acknowledge the loss and grief that students, families, and communities are experiencing and acknowledge it for themselves. By removing the veil that seemingly separates—and further perpetuates a pathologizing narrative of students—humanizing elements from classrooms and schools, school leaders and teachers begin to challenge individualistic notions of loss, grief, trauma, and healing. (p. 11)

At LALTs, educator leaders can acknowledge that they experience grief, and they can safely begin removing that veil of separation between students' experiences and educators' experiences. Doing grief bias self-inquiry work can reveal patterns of connection (i.e., which student deaths get more attention and validation) and disconnection (i.e., which student deaths activate us, push us into dissociation). To unearth our grief bias as leaders, we have found the following inquiry questions to be transformational in understanding our stance and schema as it pertains to how we will hold ourselves and each other in the context of student death:

- When imagining holding space for your school community, what kinds of grief might irritate you? Upset you? Surprise you? Move you?
- What types of student death might you be more prepared to hold, and what types might you need to sit with more?
- What is your relationship to grief? How might that impact your professional relationship with grief-sensitive school leadership?
- How might the experience of student death years ago impact your current practice? How might we make sense of school-based loss, and how does that inform who we are as administrators, educators, clinicians, and youth advocates?
- What have we seen and felt in our own experiences with student death that impact how we lead or will lead?

At LALTs, we frequently invite educators exploring their grief bias to examine if they are teaching and leading schools from a scar (a mark of healing or healed work) or from a wound (experiences of grief and trauma that are unexamined and unhealed). In advocating for grief work as foundational to culturally responsive teaching, educators experience unexpected teaching transformations when they

unpack their self-narratives that frame their relationship to grief (Moore, 2016). One participant noted that because he had witnessed so much community violence-related death as a teen himself, he was more closed off and shut down when his students died from similar experiences. Years later, through reflection, he is able to re-engage with not only the deaths of his students but those of his friends and the larger socially oppressive conditions that undergird their deaths. When educator leaders examine their grief bias, the new self-awareness births clear and grounded stances from which school communities' grief can be more equitably addressed.

Stage 2: Creating the Conditions for Transformational Grief Healing Work

Essential Questions: How might we hold space for ourselves and each other? What might we need from each other, especially when activated? How might we build our skills and visions for how we will come together as staff after student loss?

Showing up relationally for ourselves and each other to explore life after loss and engage in radical grief work necessitates, in Peters' (2016) words, "the development of tools, practices, agreements, or permissions to interrupt inequities in design and practices" (p. 15). Applying it to our context, this stage involves creating the agreements, skills, and conditions that will ensure safer experiences. At LALTs, this might look like co-constructing group agreements such as "safety and self-preservation first," "contextual confidentiality," and "we are our own best expert" or growing the skills for how to hold space for colleagues. In other words, how to notice and name what you do and don't have capacity for, exploring what it means to sit with discomfort, how to ask good questions, and group facilitation tips to create and maintain a brave space (Wolf-Prusan & Flowers, 2023).

Discussions at LALTs can range from unpacking our stance and schemas to sharing how a student's death is or is not impacting us. It is highly likely that discussions unearth insights that might require belief system or practice interruption (e.g., we might notice how we are holding one student's death is markedly different than how we are holding another's because of our stigma, bias, and judgment around their death events or who that student was). For example, two educators surfaced different needs and ideas about how a former student's death was honored because he was not well known or popular and was often absent from school. The discussion about this student's death provoked needed discourse about how educator grief and the way schools respond to students' deaths signal to community members, and especially students, which students are grieved and loved, and which are not.

When our biases arise and we hold them in a supportive community, they become data for us to examine. Sharing them aloud allows us then to unpack how our biases benefit, complicate, or inhibit our educator grief healing, thereby making meaning of student death.

Stage 3: Educator Grief Meaning Making

Essential Questions: How might we make sense of student loss and how does that inform who we are? How might the experience of student death years ago impact your current practice? How might we incorporate the losses we experienced as

students ourselves now that we are educators-perhaps even in the same community in which we grew up?

Meaning making is an essential grief and trauma healing function (Kessler, 2019; Neimeyer, 2001). Piecing together the ways in which memories, sensations, and perceptions have shattered previous understandings of life is necessary for metabolizing grief. Peters' (2016) framework shares that meaning making happens in three arenas: alone, in affinity, and across differences. When we work with educator leaders in setting up LALTs, we encourage them to thoughtfully consider with whom educators (participants) can feel emotionally safer and what configurations of a table can conduct transformative connections that bind participants together. We invite them to consider what tables need to be offered in affinity, spaces that are bound by a shared identity (e.g., a table of administrators, a table for educators of color) or shared experience (e.g., a table for student death by suicide, a table for a specific shared student loss). For example, we held a LALT for educators who had experienced wildfire in their community and years after loss were activated by witnessing wildfire in another state. As Warren-Grice (2021) noted, affinity spaces are necessary for educators of color to foster safety, dignity and belonging in school spaces. As such, we held space for educators and staff who identified as Black, Indigenous, and Educators of Color and/or People of Culture who were in a rural community that had experienced the compounded trauma of natural disasters and student death, COVID-19, and police-involved murder of unarmed Black men (Devich-Cyril et al., 2023).

There is also transformational power in LALT participants being, as Peters terms it, across differences (e.g., mixed by educator experience, position, positionality, and place of employment). As Bianca Toletino (2022), a first-year, ninth-grade teacher, shared in her blog reflection of her experience at an LALT:

> Talking to people who had so much more experience than me as educators intimidated me at first, but I realized that they have had more time to look over what grief meant to them. To find the perspectives of people across state lines, across time zones, across ages and professions was an invaluable part of my healing…The difference in perspectives made me feel like I had half a dozen mentors at my side (np).

Across difference meaning making can foster affirmation, motivation, and validation, true mediations to grief burnout and visceral experiences of trauma recovery.

Stage 4: Integrating Grief Work into School Culture

Essential Questions: How might commemoration and memorialization be integrated into school culture and school leadership with the same if not equitable resourcing as safety and stabilization? How might school leaders recognize and foster the transformational power of structural witnessing? How might educators navigate the concurrent experiences of present and past loss for themselves and their students?

The "life after loss" wording in the naming of this practice is central: these tables are not only designed for coming together as educators in the acute aftermath of student death. Instead, LALTs can be routine and predictable spaces that have set meeting times (monthly, quarterly) to come together and share how educator grief is present (or not) on that day. School life moves quickly and, often, there is little room or space to pause, slow down, and reflect. At one LALT, an educator shared that they learned of their former student's death over the intercom announcement during the passing period. There was no follow-up; the ninth-grade teacher felt the punch of the loss, exhaled, and prepared for the next class period. This was years ago. "I didn't know anyone else felt my pain," she shared with us during an LALT, "and now knowing that I'm not crazy and it's okay to feel the pain of my student's death is a relief." Educator leaders who embrace and understand educator grief work can encourage and facilitate these LALTs, not only in the response phase but in the weeks, months, and years after a student's death. When we co-construct our individual and collective stories of educator grief healing, we reduce the isolation that educators may feel from their work and signal that educator grief healing is a priority. We normalize a shared experience.

Educator grief healing is catalyzed by structural witnessing, the creation and continuation of institutional routines, practices, and policies that bring us together in whatever formation, helping us name our experiences and see one another. One LALT participant, reflecting on her experience, shared, "After this [LALT], I'm carrying more of a sense of community. As educators, it's not something that people talk about. I am reminded I am not alone." Importantly, another school counselor reflected that "[At these Tables] I'm not the counselor right now, I'm the colleague right now." A school social worker shared: "I feel comforted in knowing that other educators and professionals in the helping sector have experienced loss of those we serve. I've been reaffirmed in the fact that just because I possess certain training and a specialized degree, that doesn't mean I have to live up to others' expectations of being an expert about anything related to emotional well-being." Counselors, school-based social workers, and educators who tend to lead the emotional labor at school can take off that hat for the duration of the Table and show up as peers, not professionals.

Moreover, without space (i.e., time, psychic, and physical space) and place (i.e., safer physical or virtual locations) to process and validate the experience, educators may experience student death personally, absorbing the responsibility for the loss and over-personalizing the student's death (Case et al., 2020; Wolf-Prusan, 2014). Castrellón et al. (2021) pointed out that trauma and grief shift from individual experiences to collective experiences when we frame schools as communities and ecosystems, each member impacting the other.

Structural witnessing is not new and is part of many cultures' way of healing: it centers storytelling and coherent narrative-building in the aftermath of grief and trauma, creating space for educators to feel more cohesion than chaos. LALTs transform a singular practice as an isolated response (e.g., a student dies, and we get together once to share memories) to a transformative, ongoing way in which educators experience empathy, witnessing, and processing with an integrated school culture (e.g., educators gather regardless of whether there was an acute incident and

they reflect on how past grief experiences are or are not being activated or present in their current professional practice or identities). Having regular, routine practices creates a sense of safety so that when an acute experience does arise, there are spaces and practices in place for educators to process. For example, when the school shooting at Uvalde happened, we were able to use our LALTs already in place and familiar to educators to check in with what might be activated. Integrated practices are a safety net for educator wellbeing and healing because they reduce heightened stress and scramble when a crisis event occurs, and they remind staff and community members that they are resourced to gather and hold space immediately.

Stage 5: Bold Action (Sustained Shifts in Grief Sensitive School Leadership)

Essential Questions: What conditions are necessary for me or us to be courageous and embrace grief work leadership? What might we need to do to radically transform how we respond to and recover from student death so that our grief work is equitable? Who might I need to become for that to happen?

Bold action or sustained shifts in grief-sensitive school leadership are recursive; they are informed by the previous four stages and then they cycle back. The self-attuning work that requires participants to ask themselves, "What is my stance and schema around grief?" is foundational to educators and educator leaders' collective meaning making in LALTs, which then influences how the practice is integrated into school culture. Often, big, necessary ideas arise in LALTs. Sometimes, past harms are revealed that invite participants to engage in repair of current relationships. Maybe an educator leader realizes that they do not have to be the one fixing, solving, or speaking for their staff's hurt but that their team can show up for one another.

The bold action might be the practice of a LALT itself and its integration into school culture, signaling that the educator leader understands and supports grief as a reality, an embrace of integrated grief. Integrated grief refers to both a process and a state wherein a person, community, or system has adapted to the reality of death or loss; it does not mean there is agreement, acceptance, or apathy toward death, but instead, the concept invites us to embrace the reality of death's possibility (Lerum, 2021). Inherent to integrated grief is the acknowledgment that loss and grief are normal, understandable, and authentic experiences for many educators who lose their students. Commemoration and memorialization activities can allow staff to remember their loved ones with joy because the hosts asks participants questions that are more about the life of the student than the death event.

An integration of grief healing into our educator leadership practice might mean intentionally envisioning how to build skills and a shared commitment for how we will come together as staff after student loss, or how to make sense of school-based loss and how that informs who we are as administrators, educators, clinicians, and youth advocates. Asking educator leaders who hold and integrate grief healing work into their practice by tending to and participating in mourning practices is not something to fear or turn from but instead to reframe as an opportunity to reconnect deeply with themselves and the community.

Another bold action is a shift in approach when educators and educator leaders lean into the idea of more questions than answers, and more shared, peer-driven

discussion and reflection than training. Grappling with grief is an entirely new way of being educator leaders. By moving our grief bias attunement into action, we metabolize losses in our own lives and engage in radical re-remembering of both what has been stolen from us through the process of colonization and on the daily basis of dehumanized schooling conditions that deny us the right to feel (Cariaga, 2023; Castrellón et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2019). Educator grief healing work often requires being ready for no answers, competing answers, conflicting needs, and sticky and wobbly dynamics. The type of leadership required for guiding a school community in the aftermath of student death differs from other types of management; it involves more grappling than governing. More conventional management strategies allow school site and system administrators to stay in the technical: fixing and responding. While such strategies are necessary and appropriate for the immediate post-death period, they can help educator leaders evade the more complex and more human work of creating and holding space for educators and staff in the months or years after students have died, in the life after loss.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE GRIEF-IN-SCHOOLS HEALING WORK

The invitation to engage with educator grief healing work as educator leaders might seem daunting. Here, we offer five implications for what this might mean for educator leadership, for teacher and administrator education and training, and for trauma and grief in schools initiatives in general:

Grief Doesn't Have a Timetable

Some educator leaders we work with experience waves of guilt or shame for not handling student death well in the past. Often it is not time that heals but the absence of feeling seen, heard and an active part of the loss experience (Hart & Garza, 2012; Wolf-Prusan, 2014). We also find that many educators can only process big experiences when there is space from the epicenter (after they have left the role or school), the site of the wound itself. Even more, crisis response resources are typically heightened in the weeks immediately following a student's death, but these resources fade over months and years, leaving educator leaders to manage on their own in the longer term. There is always time to do grief healing work, whether it be alone, in affinity, and/or across differences.

Educator Grief Healing and Leadership are School Climate and Culture Issues

There is robust and valuable scholarship and practice work that supports the insight that school and classroom climate perceptions impact student and educator outcomes (for reviews, see Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Wang & Degol, 2016; Wang et al., 2020). School-based grief leadership is most impactful when loss and grief is continually integrated (it is an ongoing personal, professional, and systemic project), thoroughly relational (professional workshops can only do so much and are often transactional how-tos rather than spaces for education leaders to explore and expound), and essentially constructivist (the most impactful transformation happens

when we build the vision together (McCabe, 2003). Educator leaders might understand grief leadership to be completely on their shoulders, with no one to share the burden and opportunity. It is not the responsibility or sole role of educator leaders to hold grief work in school communities; it is, however, powerful and transformational to foster trust, voice, choice, collaboration and mutuality and co-construct access points to safety when educators are invited to envision the ways in which healing can occur. Transformative experiences are often most powerful when peer-led and facilitated (as opposed to being conducted by an outside entity who does not have the history or relationships with the educators or the students).

Invest in School Site and System Leadership's Grief Work

Given little preparation for the likelihood of student death in their administrative journeys, educator leaders may unintentionally contribute to the dehumanization of educators by filling the days, months, and years after student death with silence and by asking educators to work on behalf of students without being given the resources and tools they need to heal. Rowling (1995) was one of the first scholars to identify that teachers are frequently turned to as the mediators of student grief healing, but they rarely feel the right to experience their sense of loss. Almost 30 years ago, Macpherson and Vann (1996) found that principals were the lever, the central role that influenced a school's bereavement process and emotional navigation of death in the community. More recent studies affirm administrators' pivotal role in leading schools' healing after school shootings and student deaths (Reilly & Kay, 2022). Administration needs their own space to integrate life after student loss; this practice allows them to provide social modeling for those they lead.

It's Trauma Recovery and Grief Attunement

We have done much work nationwide to build our understanding of trauma in the context of schools. We have done less work understanding grief and how it is connected and separated from trauma. This is the next necessary step: providing training and knowledge building on the differences and connections between grief and trauma so that educator leaders can more adeptly identify educators who might need intensive support in the aftermath of student death (trauma experiences) and who might benefit from peer support (grief validation).

Educator Grief Leadership Work must be Trauma-Informed

Trauma-informed principles of routine, consistency, and predictability (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023) affirm the value of grief routines and shared ways of being in the aftermath of a student's death. Put bluntly, just because one is trauma-informed does not mean they are also grief-sensitive, and vice versa. Grief leadership must be guided by the same trauma-informed principles we invite our educators to lead for students (e.g., choice, voice, collaboration, and mutuality).

CONCLUSION

> The way we deal with loss shapes our capacity to be present to life more than anything else. The way we protect ourselves from loss may be the way in which we distance ourselves from life. We burn out not because we don't care but because we don't grieve. We burn out because we've allowed our hearts to become so filled with loss that we have no room left to care. (Remen, as cited in Mathieu, 2012, p. 7)

Educator grief healing work asks us to befriend our strong emotions and experiences through loss, in order that we may connect to our grief in preparation to hold space for others (colleagues, students, or community). Leading schools in student death and educator grief aftermath is most healing-centered when the work is done collectively. It requires not only know-how but also be-how; it demands that we recognize that the underpinnings of school climate and culture work are weak and may fall apart if the people in a community are unable or unwilling to hold space for one another in the shadow of a student death. It is not only about "handling" death events in the immediate aftermath. This is a call to acknowledge and center that educator grief needs its own tending to, its own space and place, and is not time-bound.

Students will die, some due to illness of the body and some due to illness of structural oppression. If we are committed to educator recovery and healing, then memorialization and commemoration cannot be skipped over. Grief requires us to transform ourselves, each other, and our communities so that we commit to rehumanizing each other in stark moments of pain and in coming together to integrate and commit to educator life after student loss. Grief-in-schools healing work demands that we grapple with who we have lost, who we will lose, and what it will take for us to truly rehumanize our school spaces and places.

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