JoLLE@UGA®
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

# Teaching Tragedies Following Personal Loss: Teachers' Heavy Emotional Labor Load

Erika Watts and Mandie Bevels Dunn

**Abstract**: This study explores how English Language Arts (ELA) teachers' experiences with grief shape their approach to teaching tragic texts that explore themes of loss and tragedy. By analyzing teachers' narratives, we examine how their emotional responses to personal losses influence their pedagogical practices when dealing with tragic literature. Specifically, we examine three key questions: how teachers navigate their grief while teaching tragic texts, how their emotions impact classroom activities, and how they align their emotions with professional norms. Building on existing literature and research on the role of emotions in teaching, this study highlights the complexities of teaching texts that address profound themes of death and suffering. It explores how personal grief can challenge teachers' instruction of tragic texts, potentially affecting their interactions with students and their ability to foster meaningful discussions about loss. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between personal experience and professional practice in the ELA classroom, emphasizing the need for emotional awareness and support for educators dealing with teaching and personal grieving.

***Keywords*:** grieving and teaching, teacher wellness, teaching during loss

**Dr. Erika Watts** is an accomplished educator with a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction, focusing on English Education from the University of South Florida (USF). As an assistant principal in Hillsborough County, she explores how teachers manage negative emotions and promote wellness, aiming to enhance teacher well-being and student outcomes. Dr. Watts is committed to supporting educators and creating nurturing learning environments for all.

**Dr. Mandie Bevels Dunn** is an assistant professor of English Education at the University of South Florida. She studies the role of teachers' emotions when they read, write, and think with students, especially during a period of bereavement for the teacher. In particular, she has identified the challenges grieving teachers face as well as the support that will help sustain them following the death of a loved one.

## Introduction

Elie Wiesel writes in his memoir *Night*, "There's a long road of suffering ahead of you. But don't lose courage." As Elie Wiesel watched many horrific events during his time in Auschwitz and Buchenwald and lost family members to the Nazi regime, he maintained his courage and strength while fighting for his survival; still, he witnessed unspeakable terrors and grieved the lives of those lost around him. His memoir highlights how loss never really leaves us. Grieving indeed can be a long road, one that is not always linear. When ELA classrooms incorporate texts that explore grief and make visible the human experience of loss, students and teachers alike may connect with the text personally. ELA classrooms are, therefore, unique spaces for human connection, where teachers and students collectively read and discuss texts that often feature themes of loss.

We are especially interested in teachers as readers of texts and, therefore, have centered this study on how teachers' grief experiences may influence their teaching of the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum. In our analysis of ELA teachers' narrated accounts of teaching texts following a loss, several teachers described teaching tragic texts, or texts that address themes of death and loss, as well as feature a hero who has a tragic flaw (Woodhead Publishing). Tragedies tend to be full of suffering or sadness and may not have a happy or hopeful ending. Teaching tragedies can potentially be draining, as the themes of the text may be dark or sad. We wanted to understand how teachers' personal loss experiences influenced their teaching of tragic texts that touched on themes of death and loss because increased personal connection to these texts might bring about new challenges for teachers, who are reading and discussing these texts with students within a professional context.

Building on previous research that centers the role of emotions in teaching and learning (Dunn, 2021; Zembylas, 2004; Lewis and Crampton, 2015), we explored how a teacher's personal experiences of loss and grief influenced their teaching of tragedies. We focused our study on the following questions:

1. *How do teachers describe their experiences with navigating personal losses while teaching tragedies?*
2. *How do teachers' emotions affect the activities they do or do not do in their classroom?*
3. *How do teachers engage in emotion management when teaching tragedies, according to their perceptions of norms for their professional role?*

We explored how teachers navigated the emotions that stemmed from a personal experience, and how they incorporated or avoided their emotions while teaching tragedies. In texts that may emphasize certain emotions, such as sadness, despair, or even the evil humans are capable of enacting, teaching, and managing one's emotions can be increasingly difficult, and we explored what this concept of teaching tragedies while grieving might look like in the ELA classroom.

## Theoretical Framework: Emotional Labor

Emotion management, defined by Hochschild (1979), is the active effort to change or control emotions in oneself or in others to meet guidelines. *Emotional labor*, however, is a requirement to induce or suppress feelings to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labor differs from emotion management in the sense that emotion management is a private act and emotional labor applies to the public world of work, (Hochschild, 1983), and these concepts come into

play when looking at emotions while teaching tragedies as teachers are going through a personal loss. As Chang (2020) described, "the caring nature of teaching makes the classroom a unique space in which one may experience a wide range of emotions in numerous daily encounters with students; therefore, it requires one to manage or regulate one's emotions adaptively," (p. 2). We examined how using texts that tend to focus on suffering might be even more complex to teach while managing one's emotions because teachers are navigating personal loss and grief.

Using the concept of emotional labor, research can begin to account for what emotions teachers might be willing to bring forward in teaching interactions and which they might tuck away to keep to themselves. Zembylas (2004) established that teachers respond in the classroom according to emotional rules or norms for feelings that suggest showing some emotions is beneficial, and others come with costs. In studying teachers who were grieving, Dunn (2022a) builds on Zembylas (2004) to show how emotion work becomes part of the relational work of teaching, which can be draining during bereavement: teachers believe certain emotions to be acceptable and appropriate at work and others to have costs, and display emotions as a response to what they perceive as their appropriate relationship to students and curriculum. Emotional rules for teaching may influence how teachers teach tragedies because the sad or dark themes of tragedies may already conflict with the expected feeling rules for teachers, teaching, and classrooms. These emotional rules are often affected by gender, as Brody and Hall (2008) analyzed when looking at self-reported evidence in men and women. They found that women often expressed feeling more sympathy and empathy, as well as feeling ashamed after expressing more negatively perceived emotions. Furthermore, many scholars have argued that Black women and women of color do more emotional labor than men because the expectations for the emotions that are acceptable differ (e.g. Ahmed, 2014 Evans & Moore, 2015). In this study, we analyze the concept of avoiding emotions that are perceived negatively and carefully allowing certain emotions to be presented while others are not, and how emotions are perceived is influenced by social identities such as race and class (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Clark et al, 2024).

**Reader Response**

We also draw on theories of reader response to understand the role of emotions in teachers' responses to literature. Rosenblatt (2005) described readers' meaning-making processes in responding to texts as existing on a continuum from efferent to aesthetic: that is, readers process both information within the text and focus on the experience they have with the text.

Building on Rosenblatt's foundational work, we draw on recent theoretical approaches to reader response foregrounding the role of affect. Ahmed (2014) explained that affective responses are socially situated: people respond with emotions from a particular social position. As women in a position of power in the classroom, they try not to express the negatively perceived emotions they might be experiencing. In their work on affective reader response, Coleman (2021) has extended Ahmed's conceptualization and argued that "affective reader responses register as subjectively situated, embodied meaning-making elicited during acts of reading, and importantly, these felt experiences register across levels of intensity" (p. 256). Taken together, Rosenblatt's theory of reader response and affective approaches to reader response, we understand emotions as responses to texts as well as responses to social positions within the social where the reading of that text takes place, in this case, a teacher reading in the context of teaching and

learning with students.

Analyzing teachers' accounts of teaching tragedies for instances of emotional labor allowed us to begin to understand how teachers perform emotional labor to manage teaching tragedies that evoke certain emotions that teachers may be experiencing. When teaching tragedies, teachers are asked to address themes of loss, death, and grief. In analyzing interviews with ELA teachers, we examined how it felt to teach during times of loss and grief. The three teachers' experiences we focus on here had a common experience of teaching tragic texts (Night and Macbeth) while dealing with loss in their own lives. Drawing on concepts of certain emotions coming with risk in professional contexts (Zembylas, 2002), the burden of emotion management may be greater for teachers during times of personal loss that coincide with the teaching of tragic texts.

**Literature Review**

**Teacher Emotions in the ELA Classroom**

Scholars in English language arts education have long been studying the role of emotion in the teaching and learning of literature in classrooms (e.g., Rosenblatt, 2005). Thein, Guise, and Sloan (2015) suggested that "emotion is always already in the fabric of every classroom context," (p. 202) and highlighted how students and teachers alike respond emotionally to texts, but based on what emotions they perceive as sanctioned within the classroom space. Similarly, Lewis and Crampton (2015) found that emotion and ambiguity leverage the academic practice of transforming texts and signs at the center of what we call learning in English language arts, so teachers could help their students learn by sharing their emotional responses to these texts. Extending this work, in response to literature, Lewis (2020) argued, "Because emotion plays a key role in processes of meaning-making and transformation, it is important for educators and researchers to consider how emotion circulates in sites in which critical reading and critical response are central actions," (p. 274). Lewis (2020) highlighted the importance of understanding how emotions are connected to reading practices and the social positions of different readers within the classroom. Indeed, in considering the social position of teachers in particular, Thein and Schmidt (2017) define "emotion work as the work teachers engage in related to shaping, evoking, and managing emotion in the classroom," (p. 315) in the context of discussing literature.

**Similarly, Lewis and Crampton (2015) found that emotion and ambiguity leverage the academic practice of transforming texts and signs at the center of what we call learning in English language arts, so teachers could help their students learn by sharing their emotional responses to these texts.**

Teaching tragic texts creates emotion work for teachers in both the classroom setting to help students learn and understand and in themselves to ensure they follow the emotional rules (Zembylas, 2004) they tend to adhere to create a sense of professionalism in the classroom. Using Lewis' (2020) concept of how whiteness is reinforced by interaction, we might also look at what Bonilla-Silva (2019) calls "racialized emotions" that produce "relational phenomena" where emotions produced are "wishing to protect and sustain innocent youth in one's charge," (Lewis, 2020, p. 276). This concept of showing only emotions that would be relational and protect those around us is typically associated with preserving and sustaining white innocence.

Studying emotions is therefore an important site to explore how whiteness gets perpetuated through normalized reading practices (e.g. Clark et al., 2024). A.H. Dunn, Moore, and Neville (2020) used the term "outlaw emotions" to explain emotions that are deemed inappropriate in society and argue that a way to disrupt this concept of emotion rules against outlaw emotions is to be vulnerable. A.H. Dunn, Moore, and Neville (2020) express their belief that showing these outlaw emotions should be viewed as courageous, yet there is still much work to be done in education to allow more teachers to feel this way when sharing their own emotions in the ELA classroom. Neville (2018) found that young Black girls of color displayed outlaw emotions to resist white norms for expressing emotions when reading young adult literature. Across scholarship in English language arts education, norms for emotions address the role of race and gender in shaping which emotions are sanctioned and which are not.

**Teachers' Responses to Literature**

Thein, Guise, and Sloan (2015) state "ELA teachers must cultivate classroom spaces that allow for the disruption of emotional rules," (p. 218). During ELA classrooms and teaching texts, emotions do become an item of analysis with characters and themes. Teachers might help bridge the gap in literature between how a character feels and how it makes students or themselves feel, but Dunn (2021) found that responses suggested teachers often kept loss experiences private when loss-inspired changes to how teachers addressed texts. As we have seen in previous literature (Lewis and Crampton, 2015), the idea of teaching emotions with literature instruction can be important, but teachers might avoid it for various reasons.

Teachers teaching literature might find it acceptable to share emotions relating to characters, but not their own. Dunn (2021) found that "empathy for characters was an acceptable emotional response, but empathy for teachers themselves was not foregrounded" (p. 360), so in teaching these tragic texts, teachers might be able to share the emotions of the characters and how they might feel, but might not relate it to their own lives to avoid the empathy being placed upon them and not the characters. Lewis (2020) states that emotions in the classroom are important for meaning making in texts, but we are seeing a lack of teachers sharing the emotions they experienced, which would be vital to understanding tragic texts.

English teachers have space to create connections between students, literature, and themselves, but we wonder how the emotion management that goes into teaching while grieving might sever those connections. We see in previous research (Thein, Guise, and Sloan, 2012; Lewis and Crampton, 2015) that emotions are beneficial to the teaching of literature, but we argue it might be substantially harder to teach texts surrounded by suffering when going through a loss or some form of grief in the teacher's personal life. Using previous studies (Lewis, 2020; Dunn, 2021; Lewis and Crampton, 2015) on the concept of teaching students literature, we aim to build on the ideas of using emotion to teach and add how one might have a hard time doing so when considering outside forces of loss and grief that might entail more emotion management for teachers to protect their emotions they are experiencing.

**Teaching Tragic Texts**

ELA scholarship has already detailed how teachers teach tragic texts, though many of these studies emphasize how these texts might be used in the curriculum, not what might remain uncertain or difficult for teachers in teaching them. For example, in an NCTE article by DeHart (2022) titled "Stories

of Survival and Overcoming the Odds," Dehart explained he used *Night* by Elie Wiesel in his classroom to find "what resonates with [his] students" and described it as a work that is "emotionally resonant and highly relevant," (p. 1). For *Night*, he studies it as a piece of text where we might see hatred amongst others and connect it to today's issues, such as the political propaganda surrounding human rights in the 2024 election. Building on DeHart, the teachers in this study illuminate what it is like to teach *Night* from a teacher's perspective, including what emotions might be stirred up from teaching such a difficult, true story.

Research has also explored the concept of teaching tragedies when students and teachers are going through tragedies on their own. Quimby (2022) in her article "Do We Just Continue to Teach? An Examination of Teaching Through Tragedy by Teaching Tragedy" shares that she wondered if teaching students tragic texts while experiencing a tragedy would benefit them or make them retreat and found that, "students were using tragedy as a reflective mirror, holding up the texts as reflections of their inner thoughts and turmoil. They didn't want an escape; they wanted to feel the somberness," (p. 9). Our research explores more on how teachers manage emotions while dealing with teaching tragedies, but it is also of note that teachers in our study also mention relating to the characters and storylines they are teaching. It can be difficult to determine whether to work through an emotionally fueled text any day, but more emotion can be stirred up when someone in the room can connect with the characters and have experienced something similar.

Building on studies that have argued for how tragic texts might be engaging for students, we examined how teachers who were grieving changed their teaching of tragic texts to better understand the challenges teachers face when teaching about tragic themes during personal tragedy.

**Methods**

Using this foundational work on the study of emotions and their role in literature teaching and learning in previous research, we begin to analyze how emotion management happens when teachers are themselves grieving, whether it be through text avoidance or a shift in activity with students while teaching texts constantly surrounded by themes of death, loss, and grief when the teacher is experiencing it in his or her own life. Building on studies that have argued for how tragic texts might be engaging for students, we examined how teachers who were grieving changed their teaching of tragic texts to better understand the challenges teachers face when teaching about tragic themes during personal tragedy. This study addresses the barriers teachers face in engaging students in texts with high emotional intensity when they are also engaged in high amounts of emotional labor. Through this research, we explore possibilities of what teachers might do when teaching tragic texts to manage their emotions in times, thus supporting teachers in inviting emotional responses to texts.

In addition to our understanding of emotions and texts, we also bring to the study our own experiences of teaching English language arts. Erika is a former ELA teacher of six years in public schools in the south, with three additional years as a school administrator in southern charter schools. She identifies as a white, cis-gender woman. Mandie is also a former ELA teacher, having taught 9th and 10th grade in suburban Atlanta. Mandie identifies as

a white cisgender woman and currently works as an ELA teacher educator. Our collaboration began during Erika's doctoral studies and we both have an interest in acknowledging the difficulty and complexity in teaching, as well as supporting teachers' well-being, in part because of our own experiences feeling unsupported in classroom spaces. Both of us center teachers' experiences and voices in our scholarship.

The three teacher interviews that are the focus of this study are taken from a larger set of ten teacher interviews about teaching literary texts following the death of a loved one (Dunn, 2021, 2022b). Each participant has a pseudonym to protect their privacy. Each participant agreed to partake in the IRB-approved study. We focus here on three interviews where the teachers explicitly named and described teaching texts that are defined as tragedies. For the interview protocol, please see Dunn, 2022b. Across all ten interviews, teachers described avoiding expressing certain emotions related to grief during the teaching of literary texts in their ELA classrooms.

A tragic text in this study uses the definition of a text based on human suffering, and/or terribly sorrowful events, usually looking at human suffering, based on the Greek definition of tragedy in literature. While the experiences told by all participants were important, we chose to analyze how teachers would avoid emotions in a text where themes of death, loss, and despair might be especially prevalent. In this study, we see teachers avoiding showing emotions in a sense of vulnerability, but they may express what might happen. For example, two teachers in this study shared that they would cry if they read a piece aloud, so they did not, but they were willing to share what the emotion they might share would look like. We focused on this concept because tragedies are often taught in English classes and may engender specific challenges for grieving teachers. We see teachers avoiding showing emotions in a sense of vulnerability, but they may express what might happen.

**Participants**

April, Corrine, and Cara were the focal participants in this study because they all taught tragedies following loss in their classrooms. April was a high school English language arts teacher with eight years of experience teaching in the rural Midwest. Cara was a high school ELA teacher with eight years of experience teaching in a rural public school in the South. Corinne was a high school ELA teacher with 24 years of experience teaching in a suburban high school in the Midwest. All three teachers identified as cis-gender white women.

April, Corrine, and Cara all taught tragedies following loss in their classrooms. While two of the teachers in this study experienced family member loss (Corrine and Cara) and the other experienced the loss of a student within the school (April), all three teachers were mindful of their emotions, as well as their students' emotions, that might occur when reading these tragic stories. Corrine and Cara both worked with the memoir *Night* by Elie Wiesel, and April was reading *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare with her students. In each of these interviews, teachers described a form of text avoidance or avoidance of emotions, especially when teachers felt their emotions might be inappropriate or burdensome for students.

**Data Analysis**

Using qualitative coding, we analyzed the participants' interview accounts to understand the reasons teachers avoided expressing certain emotions when teaching tragedies. In our initial readings of interview transcripts, we saw connections across stories and differences in

teachers' experiences. Elliot (2018) explained that the reason for coding as "researchers code to get to grips with our data; to understand it, to spend time with it, and ultimately to render it into something we can report," (p. 2851). Using qualitative coding allowed us to find common themes and understand what reasons these teachers gave for avoiding certain emotions when teaching texts in their classrooms.

Since qualitative inquiry requires meticulous attention and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experiences, (Saldaña, 2016), we both took time to look at the data separately before coming together to discuss codes and working through concepts of recoding based on interpretations of data that might differ. We used Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2020) concept of coding where "coding is thus a *data condensation* task that enables you to retrieve the most meaningful materials, assemble units of data that go together, and further condense the bulk into readily analyzable units," (p. 64) and from both of our understandings of the data, we began to form an analysis of our question to look more into the reasons teachers gave. As this study does not aim to define these reasons as the only reasons a teacher might give to avoid certain emotions, we used qualitative coding to analyze these teachers' experiences and form connections between similar concepts.

Using qualitative data analysis, we used emotion coding to determine which emotions were visible in the experiences of teachers dealing with grief. Saldaña (2016) defined emotion coding as "the emotions recalled and/or experiences by the participant or inferred by the researcher about the participant," (p. 125). Saldaña (2016) explained this style of coding is used "especially in matters of social relationships, reasoning, decision-making, and risk-taking," (p. 125). As we examined the reasonings surrounding decisions teachers make to avoid emotion during times of grieving and teaching tragedies, it is important to identify what emotions are being avoided through this coding method.

Both Erika and Mandie analyzed the data set and named the emotion and who felt the emotion during the narratives of the lived experiences. We compared our codes and pulled out overarching themes from what emotions were shown in the classroom, what emotions were avoided, and how the emotions impacted how the teachers handled their lessons in the classroom. We used the concept of building thematic ideas from literature, previous research, and early readings of transcripts and notes (Gibbs, 2007). We looked to find experiences within the narrative that highlighted how the teachers controlled their emotions in the classroom, whether this meant avoiding them altogether or shifting lesson plans to something that would bring out emotions differently. In our first coding experience, we were able to name the experiences as what emotion they were, such as "relief" or "overwhelmed". We then elaborated from there on how these emotions played into the classroom experience of teaching a text.

In our coding, we found similarities between the experiences of three teachers who were working with tragic texts (one reading *Macbeth* and two reading *Night*) while all experiencing the loss of someone in their lives. For example, Corrine states, "Guys, I can't read this. You're going to have to read it on your own," and Cara shares, "No, no, really, I will burst into tears reading this poem." Originally, we coded this as inability or avoidance of reading aloud. In these experiences, we see a commonality of avoiding reading a text aloud that is shared with students, but Cara shares what emotional response will happen if she does, while Corrine just avoids it altogether. This avoidance shows a way teachers manage their emotions in front of their students while explaining that they are unable to do something surrounding a

text.

Another instance in coding where we see similarities, but do not have exact reasons provided for why an emotion was avoided while teaching these tragedies would be Cara and April shifting the conversations about the text from the personal to ELA standards. Cara stated she would "make them write about imagery and stuff like that," while April had students analyze "if he was giving a true soliloquy," to shift the attention from the themes and emotions that might relate to their own lives and encourage them to show emotion to a safer route of using ELA strategies to analyze a text without connecting it to one's self as much. These two examples shared were coded as "text avoidance" and "ELA standards shift" respectively to begin to build an understanding of what might be happening in these classrooms.

Through this coding, we discovered that many of the emotions discussed teachers thought would be perceived negatively and then avoided these emotions to continue to follow the emotion rules in place for their profession. We both engaged in writing memos and connected with the idea that teachers are concerned about power structures, as the participants discussed things like not wanting to "lose it" in front of their students or seeing a change in text that might have hit too close to the loss the teachers were grieving. As we engaged in sharing our memos, we discussed the value of the lived experiences of the teachers going through the grieving process concerning a loss and expanded on how these retellings of their experiences would be beneficial to highlight to give back voice to teachers. These interviews connected to a larger picture of what teaching in a state of grief might look like while dealing with perceptions from the culture of education.

For our analysis, we focused on the themes of teachers managing their emotions by avoiding read-alouds, as well as shifting the conversation more towards standards and away from personal experiences. Teachers also focused their emotions on who was grieving, with the concept of personal and collective loss. Collective losses and individual losses required different emotion management because of who is grieving, and this theme was found in all three interviews. The teachers in this study also worked to manage emotions that fit within their professional emotion rules by only expressing those emotions that would be perceived as positive and trying to control the negatively perceived emotions; this theme was seen throughout the emotional expressions, or lack thereof, and activities they chose to do with their students.

**Findings**

Throughout the interviews, April, Cara, and Corrine navigate the concept of suffering to find ways to teach the text itself while protecting themselves and their students. For example, April often debates what she did to navigate teaching a tragedy while both she and her students were dealing with the loss of a classmate as "the best approach" and wonders whether she did what was right by teaching *Macbeth* the way that she ultimately did. Cara and Corrine had less of a focus on protecting their students during the teaching of a memoir doused in tragedy but more on protecting themselves as they grieved the loss of loved ones. They looked at ways to shift the focus of the text to hide emotions they might be feeling and avoided working with parts of the text or projects that related to the text that might stir up emotions they were not comfortable sharing with students for a variety of reasons. All three teachers we chose to focus on in this study had the unique experience of grieving something personal while teaching texts that bring out their experienced emotions and focus on grief and suffering.

**Emotional Expression: Avoidance of Read Alouds and Shifting from the Personal**

Teachers in the study managed their emotions by avoiding read-alouds of texts that would stir negative emotions in them and by shifting their teaching away from personal connections they might make with the tragic texts. In all these interviews, there was some avoidance of a task or text while teachers worked to manage what emotions they were sharing. For example, Corrine shares that while reading *Night* with her students, she approached the chapter where Wiesel's father passed away and had been reading to support them in their learning. However, following her mom's passing, she stated, "I started to read that section, and I got about two paragraphs in, and I said, 'Guys, I can';t read this. You're going to have to read it on your own."; She went on to explain that she knew she would cry, and it would be visible throughout the day:

> *My face gets red, my cheeks get puffy, my eyes get red, cry. I'm not a loud crier, I don't sob out loud, but the water works. And sometimes if I do it too much, I hyperventilate. So I'm like, "Yeah," And it's obvious for a good hour, maybe a little longer, that I'm crying.*

Cara shared similar sentiments when teaching Night when she struggled with sharing her Never Shall I Forget poem she had written about the childhood loss of a friend. She shared that she showed more emotions than she wanted in her first year and has now changed the way she teaches her poems to avoid this. She stated,

> *"So, I can't read you this poem." I was like, "We can put it up for a little bit and you guys can ask me questions about it." I was like, "I cannot read it," because I found out in my first year teaching that I would burst into tears, and they always kind of look at me. And I go, "No, no, really, I will burst into tears reading this poem."*

She goes on to share that she was embarrassed the first time this happened in front of students and can recognize the signs she is going to cry from being sad or anxious and stated "Yeah, I lose the ability to talk. People can talk through their crying. I cannot do it." Her lack of emotional expression in this instance is not to harm the students' learning but to protect herself from embarrassment and emotions that will be hard to manage.

April's experience was different as she does not mention her own emotional needs directly, but shares how she felt uncomfortable with aspects of her teaching and how she glossed over the mention of suicide to protect the collective group's emotions.

> *Honestly, we didn't even touch on the fact that she committed suicide. I just felt really uncomfortable doing that with that class and I felt like I just needed to gloss over it with them. We could have gone really into it and talked about the reasons behind it and that's what her grief led her to do but I didn't think I wanted to make that connection.*

Her choice to avoid this part of the text allowed her to manage the emotions that come with teaching a tragedy to both her and her students. The mention of suicide might already stir up emotions within the classroom but having just lost a classmate to it made it even harder to discuss. April shared how her discomfort changed how she taught both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* when later in the year she had to address the topic of suicide again, as Hamlet's "To Be or Not To Be" soliloquy became a focus. She shared that when she reached this moment that she spent time explaining the outcome was positive from his decision and told her students:

> *"This is Hamlet, and he's not really..." I think I didn't even use the word "contemplating suicide." I think I said something like, "Because he's not going to. Hamlet's a thinker and not a doer." So it's just kind of an idea that's popped into his head and he's arguing it with himself. And I had told them before we go any further looking into it, "I want to make sure that you're clear he decides not to do it. He decides to Be." Just to kind of frame it in that way so they knew kind of what the outcome was going to be before we talked about it.*

April avoided tougher conversations because of her and her students' discomfort with their emotional expressions that might come up from the nature of the tragedy. Neither she nor her students had to endure any form of emotional expression from the content read because she avoided diving deeply into aspects of the text that might be harmful to students or herself.

**Personal Vs Collective Loss: Who's Grieving?**

Collective loss and individual losses require different emotion management because of who is grieving. In collective loss, the teacher must address her students' emotions, as well as her own. April's experience was unique from Cara and Corrine's because it was a shared loss with her students. As she was teaching *Macbeth*, a former student of hers died from suicide, which also affected the students she taught. She shares that her "students did not want to engage in learning and that was fine because they needed that day to just kind of mourn. The school was open. They were just allowed to kind of float around a little bit if they needed to go." She shared that she did not spend as much time grieving with her AP literature students because they were far enough from Lady Macbeth's suicide that she felt she could move on after sharing with them, "Okay, we need to get back into what we normally do in here because you've had time to grieve and part of the grieving process is we need to start getting back to life as normal." While they might have gotten right back into it, she does share that she taught Lady Macbeth's part differently; "I felt like I just needed to gloss over it with them. We could have gone really into it and talked about the reasons behind it and that's what her grief led her to do but I didn't think I wanted to make that connection." She chose not to make the connection because it made her uncomfortable and she assumed it would do the same for her students, as they were all grieving the same loss.

She continued to skim parts of the texts they read that year, including Hamlet's soliloquy on suicide when they read *Hamlet* later because "I didn't want to dwell on that because I was worried that that would start maybe a little bit too much self-reflection that I don't think they were quite ready for at that point." April shared that both she and her students could have been uncomfortable and not ready to handle something in a text when dealing with grieving the loss of someone they knew together. In this experience, we examined the difference in emotional management when dealing with a more individual loss. April not only had to consider her own emotions when planning activities and facilitating discussion but also ensured none of her students were placed in scenarios that could bring out negative emotions in them. She worked to have a classroom where the emotions were discussed on a purely academic level and aimed to shield her students from things that might upset them, as they grieved alongside her.

Unlike the collective loss in April's school, Cara and Corrine both dealt with personal losses in their lives while teaching tragic texts to their students. Cara spoke on how she was dealing with the loss of her

grandmother while teaching *Night* and how she was able to relate it to her grief for her students to understand. She shared, "I was talking to them about my grandmother. And I was like, 'It was tough seeing her not be that same person.' And I was like, 'I actually identified pretty strongly with Elie.'" This type of text-to-self connection she shared with her students allows them to understand what the main character of Night experienced and how it happens to others during grief when they might not have experienced it themselves. Her personal loss during the time of teaching the text helped build connections for her students, even if she was struggling to get through teaching some aspects of the text.

Corrine did something similar in her classroom, where she focused more on the literary elements than her loss. She was struggling with the loss of her mother and shared that while teaching *Night*, "We can talk about the literary elements and how those connect into the theme and how those are intentional choices that an author makes. But if we don't start with universality, then the rest just doesn't matter. It just becomes lockstep." She taught the themes to universally connect instead of showcasing her loss with students. Ahmed (2004) comments on the collective feelings, like how Corrine looks at the idea of universality, stating (p. 27):

> *It is not just that we feel for the collective (such as in discourses of fraternity or patriotism), but how we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective, which paradoxically 'takes shape' only as an effect of such alignments. It is through an analysis of the impressions left by bodily others that we can track the emergence of 'feelings-in-common.'*

"We can talk about the literary elements and how those connect into the theme and how those are intentional choices that an author makes. But if we don't start with universality, then the rest just doesn't matter. It just becomes lockstep."

Corrine used the concept of "feelings-in-common" to connect the class through the book and its literary elements instead of doing much to share her own emotions. She taught her students to connect with the story and characters to understand grief, even as she was experiencing it herself.

The concept of individual and collective loss created a difference in how the teacher managed the emotion in the classroom. In April's case, she had to worry about others in the classroom beyond just herself and her grieving. Hochschild (1983) used the reference to flight attendants and their concerns from their clients when managing their emotions in a workplace to ensure that they show mostly positive emotions. April had the focus on her own emotions, as well as her "clients" and their emotions, which caused her to think about not only her own cost of emotions but also her students to help them avoid discomfort, potential embarrassment, and extended grieving. Thein, Guise, and Sloan (2015) share how important emotions can be in the classroom and how the teaching of literature can disrupt emotional rules in both teachers and students. We see teachers wonder if they should push through or if they are doing the right thing when there is a collective loss and Quimby (2022) argues, that in being able to "assume themselves" in characters and their circumstances, "students are able to forge deeper connections with those texts," (p. 8), which is beneficial to students' grieving as well as their understanding. In the content she was

teaching, many emotions were being stirred up, and she would need to ensure the collective loss was considered the entire time. Cara and Corrine did not have this to worry about on a large scale but still restrained their negative emotional expression to follow what would be appropriate to show in their place of employment. They worried about sharing the negative side of their emotions and did not want to make their students uncomfortable with the personal loss they had experienced. However, they did share bits of what might happen if they were to read aloud, such as crying to show students the emotions they were managing.

**Discussion**

English language arts as a discipline have long been attentive to and concerned with the emotions involved in reading and responding to texts. With texts, teachers discuss tone, mood, theme, and character development, all of which might have emotions throughout. While reading tragedies, the ideas of suffering and loss are dominant themes across the discussions and work to be done in the classroom. The teachers in our studies showed that emotion management and avoiding expressing certain emotions were necessary to maintain teachers' perceptions of professional norms for emotions, as well as what they perceived to be appropriate emotions for their students. April had an experience of collective loss where she had to manage curriculum and her own emotions to help her students feel safe and comfortable while reading texts that directly correlated with the loss they had experienced. Cara and Corrine both had to manage their emotional expression from individual losses in their lives when reading a text that was full of sorrow and sadness, as the main character lives through the loss of his family in the holocaust. While the experiences might have been different, the three teachers worked through how to conduct activities to engage in learning, manage their emotions, and still accomplish the goals and standards of the curriculum at hand.

Having teachers in a positive emotional state while teaching tragedies might be beneficial, as the hardships of the main characters of these pieces may be particularly resonant for them. When a teacher is dealing with a loss, it may make the curriculum even harder to teach. In our study, we see teachers avoid parts of their lesson, switch something from whole class to individual, and rush through discussions that would be fruitful for the students' understanding. It is understandable that a teacher would teach something differently to protect his or her well-being, but it could lose parts of the text instruction and connection, as mentioned in Lewis (2020). It might be more fruitful if a teacher experiencing grief were to switch the curriculum to a different text that still worked with the same standards as the text they were teaching. This could benefit their students' learning, as well as promote healthy relationships in the classroom when the teacher is emotionally well enough to do so.

Teachers may struggle to be emotionally well enough to work through these tougher texts because tragedies evoke sorrow and sadness, which the teachers in this study are already experiencing in their personal lives due to loss. When they are experiencing heavy emotions and then thrown into teaching a sad text, there should be systems in place to help with their wellness; realistically, there should be conversations around teacher wellness without grief and tragic texts. The teachers in this study deal with managing their emotions to avoid "losing it" in the classroom and to not show emotions that go against the emotion rules (Zembylas, 2004) in place to help promote a comfortable classroom environment. This labor to manage emotions can be especially draining for teachers already processing intense emotions related to their grief.

**Implications**

As teachers experience loss, there should be safeguards in place to protect their wellness, as well as the learning of the students. In collective loss, the same concept applies to the students' well-being. When picking curriculum, it might be beneficial to consider the text's themes and the emotional labor teachers may be required to do related to a particular text. Even when teachers are not grieving, tragedies can be a big lift for teachers, and they require emotional wellness to be able to teach something soaked in sorrow and suffering. Conversations should be had at the state, district, and school level when considering putting tragic texts in pacing guides and whenever possible, teachers should have choices related to texts in their curriculum. While we focused our study on teachers' experiences, we cannot ignore that tragic texts may also evoke strong reactions from students that are potentially challenging for students to navigate. Consideration for the emotional well-being of teachers and students is necessary when making curricular choices.

One possibility would be to consider including choices between tragedies and comedies when teaching Shakespearean texts for example. There might be a choice that teachers may choose between which texts they prefer and what best fits their needs. Future consideration might be taken as well with what activities they choose to do to protect the wellness of their students and themselves. Teachers in our study found read-alouds and whole-class discussions the most difficult and made changes to incorporate more small-group work. This move also gives agency to students who can choose to connect with the texts with more agency. Making these pedagogical choices could impact the students' learning and how fully a teacher teaches a text. Autonomy in the classroom and curriculum choices is important to both teachers and students to allow them to buy into what they are working on and engage more.

Future research might consider exploring how the idea of swapping out tragedies for comedies would affect learning, as well as the standards being taught. Teachers' wellness and the conversations surrounding emotional labor when teaching certain texts might be explored more in future research to push for promoting emotional mindfulness. We have explored what activities affect teachers when teaching, but switching the activities and the learning gains or losses from that could be considered as well for research studies. Through conversations and research, there can be a shift in a positive direction for teachers' wellness and emotion management.

Teaching while grieving is hard to do, but teaching texts full of sadness and suffering has the potential to be especially challenging for teachers. The teachers in this study shared their experiences and we hope it brings awareness to what teachers might hide. There is still much to discuss in education about the emotional labor that teaching certain texts brings to both teachers and students, but it is a start to begin thinking about the teachers' experiences in this study. They have changed their activities when things were hard to do emotionally, avoided tough conversations, and managed their own emotions while also caring for the emotions in the classroom within their students. Cara and Corrine grieved internally while teaching Night to their students and reflected on their own personal losses while teaching their students about grief and suffering within the story. April combatted collective loss while she taught Macbeth and Hamlet as she and her students grieved the loss of a fellow student.

Continuing to share these experiences might lead to a change in education where teachers have more autonomy to make the changes that they need to

protect their wellness when grieving a death. Teachers are concerned about sharing their emotions due to the emotional rules of the profession they believe to be in place, and it continues to push them to manage their emotions instead of sharing them fully to help students build understanding. April, Cara, and Corrine taught the tragedies in their curriculum while grieving and it appeared to affect the students' learning and their own well-being as they were constantly avoiding emotions that might make them feel like they would "lose it" in their classroom. Grieving the loss of loved ones is hard enough, so teachers should have some say in what texts they choose to bring into their classroom. It is also worth noting that teachers may benefit from guidance in considering which texts may require additional emotional labor, and that can be a factor in how they choose to approach the text. Finally, though this study cannot speak to how students who were grieving responded to tragedies, in our minds, more research is needed to understand how students respond to tragic texts and what kinds of pedagogical choices around text selection may best support student and teacher well-being in equal measure.

**References**

Ahmed, S. (2004). Collective feelings: Or, the impressions left by others. *Theory, culture & society*, 21(2), 25-42.

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2 nd ed.). Routledge.

Bonilla- Silva, E. (2019). Feeling race: Theorizing the racial economy of emotions. American Sociological Review, 84(1), 1– 25.

Brody, L. R., & Hall, J. A. (2008). Gender and emotion in context. *Handbook of emotions*, 3, 395-408.

Chang, M.L. (2020). Emotion display rules, emotion regulation, and teacher burnout. *Frontiers in Education*, 5 (90), pp. 1-11.

Clark, C.T., Dunn, M.B., & Lewis, C. (2024). Editors' introduction: Interrogating the role of emotion and race in anti-oppressive literacy practices in education. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 27(3), 271-275.

Coleman, J.J. (2021). Affective reader response: Using ordinary affects to repair literacy normativities in ELA and English Education. *English Education*, 53(4), 254-276.

DeHart, J. (2022). Stories of survival and overcoming the odds. National Council of Teachers of English; NCTE. https://ncte.org/blog/2022/12/stories-of-survival-and-overcoming-the-odds/

Dunn, A. H., Moore, A. E., & Neville, M. L. (2020). "There isn't an easy way for me to talk about this": A historical and contemporary examination of emotional rules for teachers. Teachers College Record, 122(9), 1-36.

Dunn, M.B. (2022a). Teaching while grieving a death: Navigating the complexities of relational work, emotional labor, and English language arts teaching. *English Education*, 54(4), 315-332.

Dunn, M.B. (2022b). When teachers lose loved ones: Affective practices in teachers' accounts of addressing loss in literature instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 57(3), 1049-1064. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.460

Dunn, M.B. (2021). Teaching literature following loss: Teachers' adherence to emotional rules. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 20(3), 354-67. DOI: 10.1108/ETPC-11-2020- 0147

Elliott, V. (2018). Thinking about the coding process in qualitative data analysis. The Qualitative Report, 23(11), 2850-2861. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3560

Evans, L. & Moore, W. (2015). Impossible burdens: White institutions, emotional labor, and micro-resistance. Social Problems, 62(3), 439–454.

Gibbs, G. R. (2007). Thematic coding and categorizing. *Analyzing qualitative data*, 703, pp. 38 56.

Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 85 (3), pp. 551-575.

Hochschild, A.R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, University of CA Press.

Lewis, C. & Crampton, A. (2015). Literacy, emotion, and the teaching/learning body. In *Literacies, Learning, and the Body Putting Theory and Research into Pedagogical Practice*, 105-121.

Lewis, C. (2020). Emotion, critical response, and the transformation of signs: The fundamental of language art *Language Arts*, 97(4), 274-278.

Miles, M.B. et. al. (2020). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (4th ed.). Sage.

Neville, M. (2018). "Sites of Control and Resistance": outlaw emotions in an out-of-school book club. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 17(4), 310-327.

Rosenblatt, L. (2005). *Making meaning with texts*. Heinemann.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.

Thein, A. H., Guise, M., & Sloan, D. L. (2015). Examining emotional rules in the English classroom: A critical discourse analysis of one student's literary responses in two academic contexts. Research in the Teaching of English, 49(3), 200-223.

Thein, A. H. Schmidt, R. R. (2017). Challenging, rewarding, emotion work: Critical witnessing in an after-school book club. Language Arts, 94(5), 313-325.

Quimby, J.M. (2022). "Do we just continue to teach? An examination of teaching through tragedy by teaching tragedy," New Jersey English Journal: Vol. 11, Article 10. Available at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol11/iss2022/10

*What is tragedy in literature? definition, examples of literary tragedy*. Woodhead Publishing (n.d.). http://www.woodheadpublishing.com/literary-devices/tragedy

Zembylas, M. (2004). The emotional characteristics of teaching: An ethnographic study of one teacher. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(2), 185-201.