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Loss in The English Classroom: A Study of English Teachers' Emotion Management During Literature Instruction

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Abstract: Scholarship in English Education has suggested that English teachers can invite experiences of death and loss into English classrooms as part of curricular engagement because students' identities and experiences should be witnessed in classrooms (e.g., Dutro, 2019). Scholarship on literature response and instruction has emphasized that readers should make personal connections and respond emotionally to texts. Drawing on feminist understandings of emotion, this interview study investigated what work teachers do in efforts to engage the topics of death and loss as part of English language arts curriculum when they themselves are affected by personal loss. Findings revealed that amidst emotional responses to texts they characterized as "overwhelming," teachers do considerable emotion management to fulfill what they perceive as professional norms and to enact what they believe to be important to literature instruction. This study therefore attends to challenges teachers might face when asked to engage topics of death and loss as part of literature instruction and provides insight into how English Education researchers and educators might support teachers in efforts to address topics of death and loss in their English language arts curriculum.

Keywords: emotion; grief; literature; teacher education



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Introduction¹

Rose² reads and teaches *The Crucible* (Miller, 1953) every year with her 11th grade English language arts students. She often talks with students about Ann Putnam, a character who believes her seven still-born children may have died as a result of witchcraft. Sometimes Rose asks her class to consider why Ann Putnam might be angry with or jealous of Rebecca Nurse, a woman with many children and grandchildren.

Rose has not always been able to talk with students about Ann Putnam's experience with infant loss. Over a period of several years, Rose lost six babies to miscarriage. In an interview, Rose explained that in the immediacy of her own miscarriages, she would "well up" with tears thinking about Ann Putnam. She said there was no way to explain to her students the trauma and grief of having babies born "withered" (Miller, 1953, p. 14), so in the rawest period of her personal grief, she often skipped over descriptions of Ann Putnam's babies because when it came to talking about them, she "just couldn't" (personal communication, October 26, 2017).

Rose's story is striking not only because of the emotional response to literature she describes in the midst of heartbreaking loss, but also because she expresses an emotional response to passages from *The Crucible*, a canonical text she and so many teachers have taught repeatedly in 10th and 11th grade English classrooms across the United States. Despite our familiarity with this text, as former secondary English language arts teachers and as current English language arts teacher educators, we thought about *The Crucible* in ways we had never before considered after hearing Rose's story.

In this study we consider how the loss experiences of teachers, including Rose, illuminate the interplay between teachers' personal experiences and their engagement with English language arts curriculum, specifically literature teaching and learning. In particular, given calls for English educators to include death and loss experiences as part of the curriculum (e.g., Dutro, 2019; Falter & Bickmore, 2018; Gorlewski, 2017), this study focuses on teachers' experiences reading and teaching literature while grieving a death and how teachers manage their emotions during literature teaching and learning.

To investigate English language arts teachers' experiences teaching following personal loss, Mandie conducted in-depth interviews designed specifically to elicit narrative accounts of teachers' experiences. These interviews were grounded in phenomenological and narrative approaches to understanding how people make meaning from their experiences through reflection and story-telling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Van Manen, 2001). Mandie and Ashley then analyzed together specific moments from these interviews where English teachers discussed their response to literary texts and their teaching of that same literature while they were grieving a death. In this study we ask:

How do teachers manage emotions during literature instruction as people who have experienced personal loss?

This study thus identifies how curricular possibilities for reading might be constrained or afforded by teachers' efforts to manage their emotional responses to texts in service of their expectations for themselves as professionals who serve students during literature instruction. This study also builds on Dutro's (2019)

¹ We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that

correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

² All teacher names are pseudonyms.

vision of literacy classrooms as spaces where students' and teachers' experiences with death and loss are invited in as part of literacy learning by adding understandings of what and how *teachers* attended to topics of death and loss when they themselves were grieving a death.

Theoretical Framework

This study of English language arts teachers' experiences teaching literature following loss is situated within a feminist framework for understanding emotion. Feminist framings of emotion suggest that emotions are not just individually felt but also that emotions circulate in social interactions, such that they come to define how people expect to feel in particular encounters (Ahmed, 2004; Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Zembylas, 2002). Over time, these expectations for how to feel stick, becoming raced, classed, and gendered, orienting people toward who and what matters, or who and what has power (Ahmed, 2004). Taking a feminist approach to studying emotion means that emotions are influenced by the social dynamics of any interaction, and that emotion is both felt in the body and reflected upon. Emotions are not internal states, but a constant negotiation between bodily sensations, feelings, and relationships between people and objects. This framing of emotion positions teachers in this study as actors who negotiate how they feel within the dynamics of their social world, including the dynamics of their position as teachers who engage with literature in the context of reading, but also teaching.

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Emotion Management and Teaching

To make sense of how the teachers negotiated their position within particular social interactions as they read and taught literature while grieving a death, we employed Hochschild's (1979) concept of emotion management. This concept, which came out of Hochschild's study of flight attendants training programs, built on feminist approaches to understanding how emotions become controlled or commodified in service professions, professions Hochschild noted were often predominantly populated by female workers. Working within this frame, the teachers in this study worked to shape their emotions to fit the feelings they perceived to be appropriate to teacher-student interactions and to

their professional roles as literature teachers.

All efforts teachers make to manage their emotions are not exactly the same. Hochschild (1979) established emotion management as a broad concept that accounts for the work service professionals do to make emotional response match a

perception of what emotion is acceptable or expected in a given social interaction. Within the frame of emotion management, however, Hochschild (1979) distinguished between *emotion suppression* and *emotion work*: emotion suppression is an effort to “stifle or prevent” feeling (p. 561), whereas emotion work is an attempt to “shape” emotion by changing it. In the context of this study, then, teachers might manage their emotions by suppressing them, or by pushing them down so that the feelings are not visible in their social interactions. By contrast, teachers might also work to change their emotions so that feelings of anger or sadness are *shaped* into what could be perceived as a more positive emotion, such as hope or faith. Still, in both cases, an individual is

conscious that there is a “discrepancy” between what “one feels” and “what one wants to feel” (p. 562). What one wants to feel is not, however, an individually-determined desire, but is instead, as Hochschild (1983) clarified, influenced by what one perceives one should feel.

For service professionals, like teachers, what someone perceives they should feel is influenced by the needs or demands of clients. When teachers respond with unexpected or perhaps perceived inappropriate emotions to a literary text, they may consciously manage that emotion by suppressing or changing it so that it does not disrupt traditional student-teacher classroom relations. In this way, Hochschild’s (1979; 1983) theory of emotion management helps illuminate how teachers may consciously act to silence their own potentially disruptive emotional responses to literature.

Regulating Emotion in the Classroom

Because teachers work within the specific context of schools and classrooms, Zembylas’s (2002) concept of *emotional rules* is helpful for understanding how and why teachers in this study manage their emotional responses to literature. Over time, as particular emotions become accepted as appropriate, they become a set of often unstated rules that guide which emotions are seemingly permitted and which are not. Breaking these rules, Zembylas said, comes with different costs. In his work with classroom teachers, he said, teachers’ understanding of appropriate or desired emotional responses come to be established as norms of the profession, regulating how teachers shape and are shaped by emotions in the classroom. In teaching, these rules act to privilege particular ways of being, including that of the nurturer or caretaker. Because teachers are supposed to care for others, for example, it may seem necessary for them to manage emotions, like the grief and loss the teachers in this study experienced. In this study,

these emotional rules served as the norms that teachers aimed to meet when they engaged in emotion management.

Literature Review

This article focuses on teachers’ emotional responses to literature and the emotion management (Hochschild, 1979) they performed while teaching literature and grieving a death. To situate this study in English education and approaches to literature instruction, we reviewed literature about how emotions have been studied as part of literature response in English classrooms and how death and loss have been studied as part of literacy curriculum.

Emotions in English Education Research about Literary Response

Scholars studying literature instruction have emphasized the potential for emotional responses to open up new ways of reading and interacting, while recognizing their continued regulation in literature classrooms (e.g., Boldt et al, 2015; Thein et. al 2015). For example, Boldt et al. (2015) argued that emotions are often over-regulated in literacy classrooms, limiting opportunities for learning. Emotions, they said, are not just part of literacy learning but central to the entire endeavor. Meanwhile, Thein et al. (2015) emphasized the always-present nature of emotional response to literature in their study of small and whole group book discussions. Drawing on Zembylas (2002), they argued that despite the presence of strong emotions, students regulated their responses to literature according to *emotional rules*. In particular, Thein et al. (2015) said, certain emotions, such as anger and confusion, were not appropriate or sanctioned in the shared classroom space. Similarly, Neville (2018) considered how three young women of color used “outlaw emotions” to resist White normed ways of reading when responding to reading the

novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Saenz, 2012).

For these scholars, attending to emotional responses to literature is one way to disrupt the status quo of whose ideas and identities get represented when teachers and students read literature in language arts classrooms. In particular, these studies focused specifically on how emotions circulated in literature classrooms, influencing *students'* reading and responding to literature. Yet, across this work in English Education, scholarship has remained focused on students or what teachers should do to attend to students' emotions, not on teachers' emotions as they are experienced as part of the work of English language arts teaching. If, as these researchers suggest, opening up emotional response in the classroom can disrupt power dynamics and typical ways of reading in classrooms, then scholarship must contribute added attention to how *teachers* respond to literature, as well as what possible norms emotional response to literature might disrupt.

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Death and Loss in the Literacy Curriculum

In addition to scholarship that addresses emotional responses to literature more broadly, Dutro (2011, 2019) has specifically examined the role of sharing experiences of death and loss in literacy curriculum. Dutro (2011, 2014, 2019) called for *reciprocal* sharing between teachers and students, including teachers sharing emotion surrounding trauma and loss. Dutro (2011) conceptualized reciprocal sharing as “a circular notion of testimony and witness” that requires “teachers to participate as both witnesses to student experience and testifiers to their own” (p. 198). Drawing extensively on theoretical framings of

trauma studies and critical witnessing, Dutro and Bien (2014) advocated for teachers to make intentional space for stories of loss and trauma in literacy classrooms, because continuing to avoid those experiences marginalizes children whose stories are too often kept out of learning. They further pushed teachers to share their stories of loss, saying that it is unethical to ask children to share but not teachers. This reciprocal sharing, they suggested, creates opportunities for children and teachers to connect across their shared humanity, disrupting traditional school routines so that they might build trusting, vulnerable spaces for exchanging stories. Dutro and Bien considered how teachers might position themselves as allies to their students in this process. Thein and Schmidt (2017) built on this work

and investigated teachers' emotional labor as they strove to serve as witnesses to their students' stories. In their study, they emphasized the deliberate emotion work teachers completed to be able to become productive critical witnesses for children. Dutro (2019) highlighted that this “vulnerability” to students' lives requires “intentional cultivation” (p. 8).

Building on Dutro (2011, 2019), English Education scholarship has begun to consider what the experience of grieving, one particular type of response to loss, might be like for English teachers. One study suggested that when English teachers navigated grieving, their need to focus inwardly competed with the professional expectation for teachers to focus outwardly on others, namely students (Dunn, 2019). The navigation of these two competing roles created challenges for English teachers who were teaching while grieving personal loss and contributed to teachers feeling guilty or ashamed of how they performed in their jobs during

times of personal grief (Dunn, 2019). Dunn and Garcia (2020) argued more specifically that professional expectations to care for students meant teachers spent little time caring for themselves as grievers in the context of literature instruction.

Given the call for teachers to engage in reciprocal sharing with students around loss experiences, as well as the continual attention scholars have given to the role of emotion in literature learning, research must now attend to how teachers' emotions surrounding loss experiences influence literature instruction in English language arts classrooms. Knowing more about what work teachers do to manage their emotions surrounding sharing loss experiences will provide insight into what work is required for teachers to share about loss in healthy and meaningful ways.

Methods

Data were collected by Mandie and included excerpts from in-depth interviews in which teachers narrated their experiences teaching following loss, including experiences teaching literature following loss. Secondary data in this study include memos Mandie wrote following in-depth interviews, curricular artifacts, focus group data and transcripts, and written reflections from participants about their experience being in the study.

Participants

Participants for the study were middle and high school English language arts teachers teaching in a mid-size city in the Midwest. Inclusion criteria for participation in the study were that the participant have a life experience that matched the experience the study investigated: teaching English language arts while grieving a death. To recruit voluntary participants who met these criteria, Mandie sent an invitation for teachers to participate in the study to English teachers that she knew in her local

community, and these teachers forwarded the invitation to teachers they knew. Teachers contacted Mandie indicating their willingness to be interviewed. A volunteer sample of participants was appropriate for this study because grief and loss are personal topics, and sharing about these experiences required participants' vulnerability and trust. Mandie built trust in setting up this study by contacting teachers with whom she had built strong relationships. These teachers invited teachers they knew who might have an experience teaching while grieving they wanted to share. Seven middle and high school ELA teachers participated in the interviews: Jerry, who lost two students to murder; Emma, who lost a student to suicide; Ann, who lost her grandfather and grandmother to old age and a child by miscarriage; Tiffani, who lost her mother to cancer; Rachel, who lost her mother to cancer; Tara, who lost her mother to a heart attack; and Rose, who lost six children to miscarriage and infant loss. For a summary of participants, see Table 1.

Interview Protocol

Interviews were conducted by Mandie from August 2017 to January 2018. Each interview was conducted one-on-one with the teacher, in the teachers' classroom after school, except for one teacher, Tiffani, who chose to be interviewed at Mandie's house, a more comfortable environment for Tiffani. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 100 minutes in length.

The interview protocol was designed to elicit lived accounts of teachers' perceptions of their experiences teaching English language arts while grieving a death. The interview design was informed by Van Manen (2001)'s theorization that "life always comes first" and "theory comes later" (p. 15), and by Clandinin and Connelly (2000)'s assertion that narrative is "the best way of representing and understanding experience" because it has a temporal element (p. 18). When

Table 1

Summary of Research Participants

Participant	ELA Teaching Context	Number of years teaching	Loved one Lost
Rachel	6th grade	12	mother
Jerry	4 th and 8th grade	19	two students
Tiffani	9 th -12 th grade	Completing teaching internship at time of interview	mother
Tara	9 th -12 th grade	26	mother
Ann	6th grade	12	grandparents; child by miscarriage
Rose	11th grade	11	children (6) by miscarriage
Emma	8th grade	2	student

people locate things in time through narrative, they make meaning of events and experiences. Teachers in this study use the language of narrative or storytelling to process and make meaning of their lived experience. This meaning-making process continues through the analysis process, during which researchers interpret the meaning of participants' experiences by analyzing their language.

Based on this theoretical understanding of language and meaning-making, Mandie created possible questions that were grounded in the lifeworld rather than questions that asked participants to provide reasons for *why* they acted in a particular way or questions that asked participants to name the meaning of their experience. For example, rather than asking a participant to explain why teaching while grieving might be so difficult, Mandie instead

asked participants to tell her about a moment during grieving that sticks out as being particularly difficult. Mandie designed conversational interviews (Patton, 2002) in that she asked many follow-up questions as they came up in the interviews. To account for this conversational goal but also to make sure interviews addressed the research questions, Mandie created a note sheet for reference during interviews. Mandie used the pre-phrased questions from this note sheet as possibilities for how to ask participants to name particular experiences related to grief and the curriculum but was able to decide which questions to use in the moment, in response to what the participants were sharing in interviews. For the interview protocol, see Table 2.

Finally, it is important to note that during interviews, Mandie shared openly with teacher participants that

Table 2

Conversational Interview Protocol

What I Want to Know	How I Might Ask It
What is their experience of teaching while grieving like?	“Well as you already know I’m interested in understanding more about the experiences of teachers who are dealing with a significant loss while also having to teach in front of a room of students every day. Why don’t you tell me a little bit about the experience you had in mind when you reached out to me.”
How does their experience of teaching while grieving influence their relational work as part of curriculum?	<p>Did your students know about XXX?</p> <p>Do you remember telling your students about XXX? What was that like?</p> <p>Do you remember a moment in your classroom during this period of grief that sticks out as being particularly difficult?</p>
How does the loss experience interplay with English language arts curriculum?	<p>What texts were you reading that semester/year with your students?</p> <p>Did any of those texts touch on themes of loss or death?</p> <p>Did you think about that connection when reading?</p> <p>Did you talk about that connection when discussing literature with students?</p>

she was processing her own trauma: She was teaching following her spouse’s near-death car accident and during his lengthy recovery. The choice to share this personal connection to the research project was intended to invite participants into a project that included reciprocal sharing rather than a project that extracted stories of trauma from participants (Dutro, 2019). Mandie shared her experience at the

conclusion of asking the interview questions described in the protocol. In all seven interviews, Mandie asked “What questions do you have for me?” once the questions in the protocol had been asked and answered. At this point in the interview, each participant asked Mandie what led her to studying this topic, which created the opening for Mandie to share her experience.

Transcription Methods

Primary data for analysis were transcripts from interviews with seven English teachers. In transcribing the interviews, Mandie first transcribed the words that participants said along with any audible expressions such as laughing, crying, or audible sighing. Laughing, crying, and sighing were italicized in transcripts to indicate that they are not words that participants said but rather sounds heard on the recording. During initial transcription, Mandie included filler words such as “uhm” and “like.” When it could not be determined what exactly a participant said, the marking [xxx] was used to indicate that the participant said something but what they said is not known. For the purposes of sharing participants’ words in this paper, filler words such as “uhm,” “you know,” and “like” have been eliminated. Transcripts were organized to create excerpts marked by a change in speaker. To be more precise in our coding for this study, we further broke up each excerpt into sentences for coding; sentences were identified in the original transcription process by listening for pauses and falling or rising intonation, as well as by listening for change in semantic content (Gee, 2010).

Selecting Interviews for this Study

In this study, we asked how teachers manage emotional responses to literature during literature instruction. To answer that question, we first identified all excerpts where teachers named literary texts by title, in total 43 excerpts across the interviews with 7 teachers. In reading and re-reading the 43 total excerpts about literary texts, we decided to focus our analysis on three teachers: Rachel, who lost her mother to cancer; Tara, who lost her mother to a heart attack; and Rose, who lost 6 babies to miscarriage.

We chose these three interviews for several reasons. First, these three teachers’ accounts included the most in-depth descriptions of literature response and instruction. The length of an interviewee’s response about a particular moment can be one indicator of the importance of that experience for the participant. As Van Manen (2001) asserted, narrative language is an interpretive process people use to make meaning of experience. When a participant responds at length, with multiple temporal narrative moves, it is an indicator that the experience is worth reflection and has meaning for the participant. We concluded based on this understanding that Rachel’s, Tara’s, and Rose’s interviews provided the best opportunity for analysis because their interviews indicated that responding to literature following loss was a meaningful experience for them, and their responses accounted for 33 out of 43 total excerpts about literary texts. By contrast, Ann’s interview only included 1 excerpt about literary texts and the brevity of that response suggested that the experience was not particularly salient for Ann.

We also noticed that Rachel, Tara, and Rose all described challenges that arose teaching specific literary texts while grieving. We determined that a teacher named challenges by noting the presence of emotion management, detailed in the analytic coding process below, and also by noting phrases participants said such as “I don’t know” and “It was really hard.” The purpose of this study was not to generalize what these three teachers experienced to what all English teachers experience, or to what all grieving teachers experience, but rather to understand the emotion management some teachers might need to engage in while teaching literary texts during a time of personal loss. The decision, then, to focus on interview responses where teachers indicated experiencing challenges engaging in literature instruction while grieving a personal loss situated this study in the work teachers must do when there is a “discrepancy” between what they

perceive they should feel in a given interaction and what they feel (Hochschild, 1979, p. 572).

Rachel, Tara, and Rose are all white women with between 10 and 26 years of teaching experience. Again, the purpose of the study is not to generalize to populations of teachers. These women's experiences do not attend to intersectional experiences of racial identity, gender, and emotion management, a limitation of the study.

Analysis

To answer our research question, we analyzed 33 excerpts from Rachel, Tara, and Rose's interview transcripts to consider how teachers managed their emotional responses to literature during literature instruction. We used qualitative coding methods and theoretical understandings of emotion management (Hochschild, 1979) to determine what emotion suppression and emotion work teachers engaged in and how and why they engaged in that suppression and work.

Coding Scheme

We developed the coding scheme by starting with Hochschild's (1979) description that, in identifying emotion work, "the very notion of an attempt suggests an active stance vis-a-vis feeling" (p. 561). This description sets up feeling as something people might control or shape; people have a desired feeling they are attempting to arrive at. Hochschild (1979) provides examples of verbs used to indicate attempts at feeling, such as "psyched myself up," "squashed my anger down" and "tried" or "tried not to" (p. 561). Using this framing, initially we highlighted verbs in transcripts, seeking to identify places where teachers were engaging in emotion work. For example, Tara described how she had to "psyche herself up" to read *The House on Mango Street* the year her mother died, and each of us highlighted this description as an

indicator that Tara was doing emotion work to teach literature while she was grieving her mother.

In this first iteration of coding, we struggled to identify verbs as solely doing emotion work or not, because teachers used verbs in various ways in speech to convey, for example, events that happened in the classroom, events they imagined, emotions they felt, or emotions they tried not to feel. We wrote memos about different examples within the data that could not be immediately easily classified as a teacher doing emotion work or not.

Based on these memos, we developed an analytic framework for coding the full data set based on four functions described by teachers in the interviews. This framework was based on Hochschild's (1979) theory of emotion management. In this analytic framework, we distinguished between excerpts that explained actions in the past, such as what a teacher did in their classroom, and excerpts that described actions related to emotions. We also developed codes that distinguished between naming an emotion a teacher felt from excerpts that included emotion management as defined by Hochschild (1979). Finally, we developed two separate codes for emotion management: one for emotion suppression, defined as an effort to "stifle or prevent" feeling (p. 561); and one for emotion work, defined as an attempt to "shape" emotion by changing it. For a detailed description of the analytic framework for coding, see Table 3.

Each sentence of each interview excerpt was first coded by each researcher separately. After coding all sentences, we checked and marked sentences for which they did not agree and discussed these sentences until they reached agreement. Agreement was reached by returning to Hochschild's (1979) explanation of the difference between emotion suppression and emotion work.

Table 3

Analytic Coding Categories

Code Category	Definition	Examples
Curricular or interview context	Included an action verb that that named a procedure of teaching or that indicated a process taking place in the oration of the interview.	We <i>talk</i> a lot about imagery with that chapter. I <i>think</i> I was in a lot of ways focused much more so on myself.
Naming emotion	Included a verb that indicates how the participant feels or felt. These excerpts indicate that an emotion is present.	I sometimes would <i>well</i> up with tears. I think it probably is a good thing that I <i>was still in</i> that, you know, first couple of weeks after her death, actually. That sort of <i>numbness</i> .
Emotion suppression	Included a verb that indicates that a feeling was avoided, prevented, or suppressed.	I <i>couldn't even handle</i> that, you know... I would <i>skip</i> over that part. There were some moments where it was <i>tough</i> for me to ... where I <i>had to step out</i> for just a second.
Emotion work	Included a verb that indicated an effort to change feeling (as Hochschild defined it: an attempt to “shape” emotion, p. 562).	There’s a chapter of the House on Mango Street that I had to really <i>psyche</i> myself up for. [I was] <i>trying not to delve</i> into it too much because I didn’t know how emotionally stable I would be while we continued the discussion.

The sentences coded under the categories “interview context” or “naming feelings” provided insight into *how* and *why* teachers engaged in emotion suppression and emotion work during literature instruction. These included a sentence where a teacher named an emotion they felt provided the contrast to the emotion they presented to students, thus revealing the emotion work a teacher did to “shape” (Hochschild, 1979, p. 562) their emotion as part of their instruction. Another example would be when a sentence providing curricular context enabled insight into what the teacher considered an expected response to literature, such as analyzing the text for a theme.

Findings

Findings revealed that Rachel, Tara, and Rose all described engaging in emotion management, including both emotion suppression and emotion work, during literature instruction. All three teachers experienced emotions as unexpected responses amidst grief, but they did not see these emotions as appropriate in their professional roles as teachers or as possible responses to share as part of literature instruction. Teachers instead suppressed or changed their emotions in several ways, including avoiding texts, avoiding sharing about personal loss, and suppressing or changing an emotion by focusing on other aspects of literary analysis in the classroom.

Rachel

Rachel, a middle school English teacher, lost her mother over a period of several months to cancer that ate away at her mother’s brain. Rachel spent several months driving over an hour after school each day to sit in her mother’s hospital room and then her mother’s hospice room. By late April, her mother had died, and Rachel was busy handling her estate. At work, with Mother’s Day around the corner, Rachel began her unit centered on *The Giver*, a text she had

read as a young teenager and had taught for many years in her middle school classes. The year her mother died, though, the themes in the novel around end-of-life care and aging made her think about her mother’s condition and the many days she spent surrounded by dying people in her mother’s hospice center. In fact, Rachel described having a “new connection” to *The Giver* because she had a new skill: “taking care of a dying person.”

Yet Rachel described feeling uncomfortable sharing the new response she had to *The Giver* in the context of literature instruction:

And at the time that this was all happening, and there’s some really deep themes in that book. We’re talking about euthanasia and all of that stuff, and parental units and family and stuff. I mean I did it ok, but I remember sometimes I felt pretty, sometimes I was just, I would want to say something about my mom but I wouldn’t because if I started talking about her I didn’t a) want to make the kids feel uncomfortable because they knew she had just died and b) emotionally not be able to finish the discussion. Does that make sense?

Rachel suggested that in the context of talking with students, she connected the themes about end-of-life care in the book to what she went through caring for her mother while her mother was in hospice. Rachel indicated that she “wanted” to share that connection with her students, but she didn’t want to make students “uncomfortable” or become “emotionally not be able to finish the discussion.” Rachel named the emotion management work she did, identifying the “discrepancy” between what she felt and wanted to share and what she did instead (Hochschild, 1979, p. 562). Rachel seemed worried that the emotions brought up by that sharing would not be appropriate. In particular, Rachel seemed to be concerned about

how students would respond to her sharing of an emotional response, pointing to how professional norms might be influencing what Rachel felt was appropriate to share in response to reading: As the teacher, she was supposed to be leading the students and taking care of their needs and learning. Rachel also seemed to be concerned about disrupting the discussion of the text and seemed to anticipate that sharing about her mother would make her emotional, which she identified as a disruption. In this way, Rachel did not consider becoming emotional part of the discussion of a text. Rachel engaged in suppressing her emotions regarding her connection to the text and prevented what she perceived as negative emotions from becoming part of her literature instruction.

Following Rachel's description of her response to teach *The Giver*, Mandie asked Rachel what it would look like to "emotionally not be able to finish the discussion." Rachel replied, "I just mean I think I might cry or I think I can't emotionally, like I can't continue speaking because I'm overwhelmed with how I feel in that particular moment." Here Rachel emphasized that her emotional response to the text would prevent her from speaking and cause her to be "overwhelmed" with feeling. Thus, Rachel's response suggested she prioritized maintaining control over her emotions in the classroom and suppressed the potential for what she perceived as a possible negative emotional response that might result from sharing about her mother. Rachel did not seem to think crying would be appropriate in the context of her literature instruction with students. Rachel's description of having a discussion relied on "finishing" the discussion. Rachel explained later in the interview that she encouraged students to connect personally with what they read in class: "Yeah I mean that's one

"You always want to add that personal connection, and I was suddenly much more connected to it and I wanted to add to it, but I just couldn't."

of the things we stress with them, is making text-to-self connections when they need to or text to text connections or text to world connections." In this description of text-to-self connections, Rachel seemed to position these types of connections to texts as in service of some other textual response: Students made personal connections "when they need to" and in the context of assignments that helped them to clarify comprehension of texts or understand themes.

Rachel went on to relate that she often shared with students her stepfather's experience in Vietnam while reading about war in *The Giver*, but this personal connection was distinct from the one about her mother. She explained that when it came to talking about her mother's death, the connection was particularly intense: "I struggled with wanting to add,

because you know you always want to add that personal connection, and I was suddenly much more connected to it and I wanted to add to it, but I just couldn't." The decision to share or not share about her mother did not seem to be easy for Rachel. She described struggling,

and she also noted that as a reader, she was more connected to the text because of her experience with her mother. Still, she ended this turn of talk by saying "she just couldn't," which appeared to suggest again that she could not share about her mother without becoming overwhelmed or crying. Throughout Rachel's interview responses about *The Giver*, she emphasized not sharing and suppressing the emotions the text brought up for her in favor of avoiding making students feel uncomfortable, finishing the discussion, and maintaining composure by not crying.

The way that Rachel talked about suppressing emotion suggested that she did not see particular emotions as appropriate for her to have as a teacher

or as an interpretive possibility for literature instruction in English classrooms. Although her own reading of the text while grieving her mother's death oriented her differently to the text, bringing her into a more visceral connection with it, the interplay of that feeling and understanding with her role as a teacher meant that her emotional response was not shared openly in the classroom. For Rachel, managing emotions required her to hide the emotional response she had to *The Giver* from her students. Managing emotions also required Rachel to prioritize the comfort of her students over her own "struggling."

Tara

Tara, a veteran teacher of high school English for over 26 years, had a difficult year teaching when her mother died suddenly of a heart attack just before the start of a new school year. Tara described thinking and crying about her grief on her forty-minute commute each day and then having to "switch" into "teacher mode." She described her year as difficult and worried that she didn't build strong relationships with students because she felt closed off from them. In the context of Tara's literature instruction, Tara described hiding her loss from her students while reading *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984) and then shaping her emotion to suit what she perceived as appropriate for the context of literature instruction:

There's a chapter of *The House on Mango Street* that I had to really psyche myself up for. (*laughs*). If that makes any sense. It's really early on in the book, That's my mother's hair, and it smells like bread and when she makes space for you in the bed beside her, and it's still warm (*sighs*). So, yeah. I remember just knowing that was coming and, I think it probably is a good thing that I was still in that first couple of weeks after her death actually.

That sort of numbness. I could push myself through reading that chapter and I was really worried that I was just going to, like I said before, lose it. I had to do a lot of self-talk about how to do it without crying. And I think it probably just was more about the text than any kind of personal connection to the text in that case.

Tara's explanation of this chapter from the novel suggested that she responded to the mother-daughter relationship in a new way following her mother's death. In fact, she shared that what came up for her while reading the chapter was that she would never feel the warmth left behind by her mother's body again, a realization that left her simultaneously numb and worried she would "lose it." As Tara pointed out, the vignette from the text does not address death and loss directly, but the description of the close relationship between a mother and daughter brought up feelings of loss for her. In the context of talking with students about *The House on Mango Street*, however, Tara's use of the verb "psyche" suggested that she actively did emotion work to change how she felt to be different for the purposes of engaging in the literature with students. Tara described being worried about crying, as did Rachel in the example in the previous section. However, Tara discussed actions she took to "push" through the text, including doing self-talk.

Tara seemed to decide to do what she considered "focusing on the text" to keep from sharing her emotions of sadness or numbness. In subsequent turns of talk, Tara identified focusing on the text as comprehending the story and connecting the new reading to previously identified themes. Tara described what she did with students surrounding their reading of the specific chapter "Hairs" this way:

We talk a lot about imagery with that chapter ... and it's also a chapter ... that has this

surface description of the family's hair that underlying it is really more a message about family love and family closeness. So we talk. It's mostly class discussion and reading and referring back to the text for what's the author, why is she talking about hair? What's she trying to say about her family? What in particular is she trying to say about her mother? Why would she describe that her mother's hair smells like bread? So we have a lot of discussion and close reading in that chapter.

For Tara, her focus on the text had to do with what might be considered traditional aspects of literary response: identifying figurative language and determining a theme, as well as using figurative language and theme to develop a deeper comprehension of the chapter. Sharing her emotional response to the chapter following her mother's death seemed outside what she considered her role as a teacher engaging in literature instruction. She described her emotion work as work that allowed her to make the discussion of the chapter "more about the text than any kind of personal connection to the text." Tara's explanation of teaching *The House on Mango Street* while grieving seemed to be about creating distance between her experience and her discussion of the text with students.

Rose

Now we return to Rose, a high school teacher whose story about reading *The Crucible* in the context of having lost her own babies to miscarriage opened this paper. Rose importantly did not necessarily hide the fact that she has lost babies to miscarriage from her students. In some cases, she had no choice, because students knew she was pregnant before she lost her baby. Rose also has a tattoo on her inner wrist with eight buds, of varying levels of bloom, each representing a different child and how many weeks

along she was with each of them. Two of the buds are in full bloom, representing her two living children. When students ask what her tattoo means, she tells them about her losses.

When Rose read *The Crucible* with students, however, she was not always easily able to talk with students about how and why she empathizes with Ann Putnam. Rose described at first being unable to explain the experience of Ann Putnam to students:

I remember particularly the *Crucible* unit and we just actually, ironically, read this part today. The part where Ann Putnam talks about, how do you explain? I have had seven babies who shriveled in my arms the night of their birth. How do you explain that? Even in the movie version, but even just reading the text, her trauma, her grief, just especially those first few years after it happened, just struck me and stayed with me. I sometimes would well up with tears. I couldn't even ... Usually you comment and talk about the scene or whatever. I couldn't even. We just had to get through it because I couldn't ... I know how it feels.

Similarly to Tara and Rachel, Rose indicated that a text that she taught frequently, including on the day she was interviewed, took on a new meaning for her following a personal loss. Her response highlighted the difficulty she had processing her emotional response to *The Crucible* in the immediacy of loss. She seemed to identify two reasons for the difficulty she had in explaining her connection to Ann Putnam's character and experience: She did not seem sure that she would be able to make her students understand the experience, and she did not seem to be able to control her emotions, including her tears. She said "she couldn't even," phrasing that suggested she was not able to explain the experience. Rose described instead engaging in emotion suppression

to “get through” the text, moving quickly through the pertinent passages in the text with students and avoiding talking about her connection to the text or her emotional response to it.

Rose went on to describe how her discussion of the play changed over time:

We wouldn't talk about that part really, which was probably doing them a disservice. I mean, of course we would talk about it briefly.... But I wouldn't necessarily.... It wasn't until probably at least two years that went by that I was able to stop and say, "I know how she feels. If it was you and you had lost all these babies, wouldn't you be seeking some sort of reason why this was happening?" Anything ... I mean, we have to have some sort of compassion for her, as a character, because of what she's been through, you know. So I was able to then be like, "I get it. I get where she's coming from now. You should too."

**“When you're a teacher...
you have to be on.
Sometimes you just don't
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Rose indicated that in the time period closest to her loss, she would not talk about her personal understanding of Ann Putnam's character. She stated that this was “probably doing [students] a disservice,” which suggested that how she felt was different from perhaps how she might have wanted to feel, and that she was engaged in emotion management. Rose went on to explain that over time, she was able to talk with students about her experience and relate that she knew where Ann Putnam “was coming from.” Rose's explanation highlights how she was able to share the personal connection to the text once she had more time to process her loss and could approach sharing from a perspective that allowed her to focus on asking students to consider Ann Putnam's situation and

develop empathy for her situation. Rose did not consider her own tears or difficult emotions as appropriate responses to share in connection to the text.

For Rose, the purpose of literature instruction was also tied to what she felt her role as a teacher was. Rose explained:

You know, when you're a teacher and I bet a lot of people say this, you have to be on. Right? Sometimes you just don't want to be on. You can't muster the emotional strength to be on.... to be on is just taking it off myself and putting it out into the world. My stuff doesn't matter. It's all about you now. So you have to be entertained. You have to feel safe.

You have to feel loved.

Here Rose indicated that by doing emotion suppression and emotion work, she was preserving a professional role as a teacher who cared for students and put their needs first.

Therefore, her emotion of care for students became more important than her feelings of being overwhelmed with grief or tears.

Discussion and Implications

Teachers' stories about reading and teaching literature while grieving a death demonstrate the potential power of emotion as a response to literature. However, teachers' stories here also make visible the work teachers did to keep those responses out of the literature classroom, especially because emotions prompted by grief, such as sadness or worry, were perceived as negative. Teachers' accounts of engaging in emotion management—both suppression and work—clarify the complexity involved in asking teachers and students to engage

with death and loss in the literacy classroom and shed light on why these topics might not always be easily included by teachers. The emotion management that teachers do in sharing about death and loss must be addressed in order for English language arts classrooms to be spaces where sharing around death and loss might be healthy and meaningful.

Limits Persist in Literature Instruction

Findings in this study indicated that teachers viewed suppressing or changing emotions as critical to maintaining focus in their literature instruction. Teachers seemed to believe that teaching texts in classrooms was about comprehending the text and its themes. Though one teacher, Rachel, advocated for making some personal connections to texts, she framed those personal connections as being useful only when they did not cause the teacher to lose control of their ability to discuss the text. For Rachel, Tara, and Rose, then, bringing themes of death and loss into literature instruction was only an option when emotions could be controlled. In other words, when there was appropriate distance between the reader and a text, death and loss could be discussed. These interviews suggest that there is a distinction to be made between sharing personal connections to texts (Rosenblatt, 2005) and sharing emotions as responses to texts and also suggest that teachers' perceptions of emotions limit the possibilities in their literature instruction.

One possible strategy to further open up emotional response as an interpretive possibility for literature instruction would be for English Education scholarship to distinguish between sharing a personal connection and sharing an emotional response. A personal connection may be shared as something a reader relates to in the reading. However, sometimes emotional responses are more about feeling and bodily sensation. One way of thinking about this distinction is to consider Rose's account of teaching

The Crucible. Rose noted that she at times could share her ability to relate to Ann Putnam's experience of infant loss. Rose suggested that she could help students see that she understood how Ann Putnam felt. Yet, Rose "just couldn't" share her response as a reader when that response was to "well up" with tears. Rose's emotional response to the text is a valid response to reading. She was moved by it. Her experience points to a possibility where she shares with students that emotion is part of reading. She might even share with students that she has trouble discussing passages about Ann Putnam's losses because of her emotions.

This study supports the idea that both personal connections and emotional responses have potential value as part of literature instruction. Yet, teachers in this study seemed to feel their sharing should be limited to personal connections with literature, so they engaged in emotion management to keep strong, potentially negative emotions out of their classroom interactions.

Emotion Management Illuminates Perceptions of Professional Roles

One reason that teachers in this study engaged in emotion management is that they seemed to identify their roles as teachers to be about staying in control of their emotions and the curriculum. Their descriptions of teaching suggested that students' comfort and learning were prioritized over the teacher's emotion. As English teacher educators invested in education, we do not disagree that it is the job of a teacher to support students and students' needs. Still, Rachel, Tara, and Rose all expressed uncertainty and guilt over not being able to easily keep control of their emotions during a period of grief.

When considering the role of sharing loss in English curriculum, English educators and scholars should

consider the emotion management teachers may feel compelled to engage in as they navigate their own grief. Identifying emotion management work provides an opportunity to think about the professional norms that regulate interactions in schools and how those norms might be disrupted. When certain emotions are perceived as negative, it means that some experiences continue to be sanctioned in school spaces and others continue to be excluded. English educators might consider talking explicitly about whether crying is something teachers should do in front of a class, and when crying may or may not be appropriate. It's not enough to just suggest that teachers should discuss loss in classrooms. English educators must also emphasize that when and how that sharing occurs matters in terms of making sure teachers and students build a trusting space for sharing.

Attending to how teachers manage emotions also highlights the work teachers must do to engage in reciprocal sharing (Dutro, 2019). The emotion management that teachers do highlights the issue that teachers often hide particular responses due to perceptions of professional norms. It's worth considering that the pressure to do emotion management is a specific obstacle to reciprocal sharing. Students should not be asked to share vulnerably when teachers suppress or shape what they share. Realizing Dutro's (2019) vision for a literacy curriculum inclusive of trauma and loss experiences requires both recognizing that teachers have trauma and loss experiences, too, and also attending to the professional norms that regulate teachers' position within that sharing. We hope as English educators that research focusing on teachers' experiences opens up conversations about how these experiences interplay with curriculum and what

constraints might need to be addressed for experiences to be more fully expressed in classrooms.

Closing Thoughts

Hochschild's (1983) conception of emotion management helped illuminate the work teachers did to suppress or change their feelings in the context of teaching literature while grieving a death. Identifying emotion management exposes a professional norm, because emotion management assumes a discrepancy between what one feels and what one "wants to feel" given the dynamics of a particular social interaction (Hochschild, 1979, p. 562). Thus, the emotion management that Rachel, Tara, and Rose did revealed perceptions of professional norms for teachers that constrain literature teaching and learning grounded in emotional response. Yet, attending to emotion management also helped us imagine how these professional norms demanding that teachers stay in control of emotions might be disrupted.

“Identifying emotion management work provides an opportunity to think about the professional norms that regulate interactions in schools and how those norms might be disrupted.”

Rachel's, Tara's, and Rose's experiences demonstrate that teaching literature in English classrooms is not just about the text or a potential emotional response. It is wrapped up in the interactions of histories of teacher professional norms, goals and expectations for literature curriculum, and teachers' ideas of what teaching literature is for and how they and their students should feel in their classrooms. Their stories highlight the potential for literature to move readers emotionally, but also make visible the challenges that can arise for teachers when too much feeling or what might be perceived as negative feeling comes up. For the teachers in this study, choosing to share or not was both personal and social, and those decisions

afforded and constrained interpretive possibilities for literature instruction that considers death and loss. Yet making these affordances and constraints explicit for teachers would mean that they might be able to act differently: A teacher who was not sharing emotion because they believed it unprofessional might decide that they disagreed with that norm, for

example. Studying emotion management thus provides insight to teachers and teacher educators into potential obstacles for teachers engaging in reciprocal sharing around trauma and loss, but also provides the point of possibility for sharing to become more authentic and meaningful.

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