Teaching literature following loss: teachers’ adherence to emotional rules

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore how teachers changed literature instruction in English language arts (ELA) classrooms following personal loss, and identifies factors influencing those changes. The author argues teachers regulated their responses to literature according to emotional rules they perceived to be associated with the teaching profession. Understanding teachers’ responses helps educators, teacher educators and educational researchers consider what conditions and supports may be required for teachers and students to share emotions related to loss in authentic ways in ELA classrooms.

Design/methodology/approach – To examine changes teachers made in literature instruction following personal loss, the author conducted a thematic analysis of 80 questionnaire responses.

Findings – The author found teachers changed literature instruction related to three areas: teachers’ relationship to students, teachers’ instruction surrounding texts and teachers’ reader responses. Responses highlighted how teachers adhered to emotional rules, including a perception of teachers as authorities and caretakers of children. Teachers considered literature instruction to require maintaining focus on texts, and avoided emotional response unless it aided textual comprehension.

Originality/value – Scholars have argued for literature instruction inclusive of both loss experiences and also emotional response, with particular focus on students’ loss experiences. This study focuses on teachers’ experiences and responses to literature following loss, highlighting factors that influence, and at times inhibit, teachers’ authentic sharing of experiences and emotions. The author argues teachers require support to bring loss experiences into literature instruction as they navigate emotional response within the relational dynamics of the classroom.

Keywords Teacher education, Emotion, Teaching literature, Emotional rules, Literature response

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In 2020 and the years following, people in the USA suffered dual pandemics: the COVID-19 virus and continual systemic racial violence, especially anti-Blackness (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 73). By April, 2021, hundreds of teachers had died from COVID-19 (Kaur, 2021) and an estimated 40,000 children had lost a parent to the virus (Jenco, 2021). Schools also looked different during the pandemic: some students attended in person, masked and following new health protocols; some attended virtually; and some attended in ways characterized as somewhere in between these two options. These changes, amidst loss of life, meant teachers and students also grieved the way schools were (Berinato, 2020).

The global health crisis coincided with continual police violence, including the murders of George Floyd and Ma’Khia Bryant, though Ladson-Billings (2021) noted schools...
“straining from the problems of anti-Black racism, police brutality, mass incarceration, and economic inequality” (p. 71) has been the norm. These dual-pandemics contributed to a heightened burden of loss for teachers and students in schools in recent years.

Though the pandemics magnified the influence of loss on teachers and students, I have been studying loss and its interplay with curriculum since 2016. I became interested in teachers’ loss experiences during my spouse’s recovery from a serious car accident. Drained by caretaking demands, I found teaching particularly challenging during this time, and sought solace in talking with teachers who had experienced trauma and loss. My conversations with teachers, and my background as a former English language arts (ELA) teacher, led me to study how ELA teachers navigate loss in the context of their work (Dunn, 2019).

In ELA scholarship, research has already begun to explore how people’s identities and experiences, including loss experiences, interplay with curriculum (Dunn and Johnson, 2020; Dutro, 2019; Falter and Bickmore, 2018; Rosenblatt, 2005). Dutro (2019) and Falter and Bickmore (2018) argued ELA curricula could provide opportunities for processing or healing from loss when teachers and students acknowledge emotions such as grief and sadness. This scholarship centers students’ loss experiences. Scholarship attending to teachers’ experiences grieving at work remains critical for developing balanced understandings of how human beings in schools might bring loss experiences into literature instruction.

In this study, I focused my analysis on teachers’ experiences to understand factors influencing teachers’ sharing of loss during literature instruction, with particular emphasis on teachers’ emotions. Understandings of how teachers regulate emotions during literature instruction illuminate emotional rules (Zembylas, 2002) teachers follow, and how those rules might be disrupted, creating more space for teachers and students to bring their identities and experiences into ELA classrooms. To do this work, I explored two research questions:

**RQ1.** What changes did English language arts teachers make in their teaching of literary texts following loss?

**RQ2.** What emotional rules seemed to influence the changes English language arts teachers made?

**Theoretical framing**

My understanding of ELA teachers’ adherence to emotional rules (Zembylas, 2002) is situated in theoretical framings of emotions as social sites for ascribing or reifying power. Though cognitive approaches to learning have positioned emotion as occurring inside individuals, social approaches suggest emotions are not just individually felt, but also circulate in social interactions, and come to define how people expect to feel in particular encounters (Ahmed, 2015; Boler, 1999; Lorde, 1984; Hochschild, 1979). People display emotions based on what is expected in the social situation and from a person’s social positioning. Hochschild’s (1983) sociological approach to emotion in the workplace, for example, identified how service professionals, in this case flight attendants, displayed expected emotions, such as cheer, to provide comfortable experiences for clients. Hochschild (1983) theorized service workers engage in emotion management to suppress or change emotions to prioritize client’s needs.

Building on Hochschild (1983), Zembylas (2002) identified teachers as service professionals who engage in emotion management to fulfill students’ needs. Zembylas (2002) argued teachers self-regulate in classrooms according to emotional rules, which “delineate a zone within which certain emotions are permitted and others are not permitted,
and these rules can be obeyed or broken, at varying costs” (p. 200). For teachers, displaying emotions outside what might be expected or sanctioned within institutional spaces poses risk. For example, a teacher may hide a feeling of irritation they have toward a student because they perceive teachers as caring for all students to help them learn (Noddings, 2005).

Teachers may not explicitly name work they do to manage emotions. Instead, emotional rules are “disguised as ethical codes, professional techniques, and specialized pedagogical knowledge” (Zembylas, 2002, p. 200). For example, a teacher may focus on a poem’s form rather than on readers’ emotional resonances, and may evoke a curricular standard for analyzing poetry to support their focus as what readers do in the ELA discipline.

This study is informed by social theories of emotion and an understanding of teachers as workers responding to emotional rules (Zembylas, 2002). Teachers believe certain emotions to be sanctioned at work and others to have costs, and display emotions as response to what they perceive as their appropriate relationship to students and curriculum.

**Emotional rules and English language arts**

Prior research called for increased attention on the role of emotions in literacy curriculum (Boldt, Lewis, and Leander, 2015; Lewis and Tierney, 2011). Answering this call, scholars studied how emotions influence literature response. Then, Guise, and Sloan (2015) argued emotions always circulate in conversations about literature, and found students and teachers regulated emotions, such as anger and confusion, because they perceived them as inappropriate. These scholars argued working with emotions when reading literature was one way to disrupt the status quo of whose ideas and identities get represented in literature response. Similarly, Neville (2018) found, in response to reading *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012), three young women of color used “outlaw emotions,” including anger and disgust, to resist White normed ways of reading. Then et al. (2015) and Neville (2018) accounted for how emotions circulated in ELA spaces, with focus on how students regulated emotions while reading literature. These studies foregrounded students’ adherence to emotional rules, or what teachers should do to attend to students’ emotions, rather than teachers’ emotions as they are experienced as part of the work of ELA teaching.

**Grief, loss and responding to literature**

ELA scholarship has advocated for literacy classrooms as sites for processing and healing following loss (Dutro, 2008, 2011, 2019; Falter and Bickmore, 2018). Dutro (2019) advocated for teachers to make intentional space for stories of loss and trauma, because leaving these experiences out “relegates isolates or evades certain *children* in literacy classrooms” (p. 11). However, Dutro (2019) cautioned the power dynamic between teachers and students requires reciprocal sharing, where both share vulnerably and witness each other’s stories. Similarly, Garcia and Dutro (2018) argued “students and teachers carry […] losses and disruptions into classrooms” and these losses must be taken up “as a collective imperative” (p. 378). Garcia and Dutro’s (2018) call echoed Zembylas (2007) assertion that emotions are “not only a private matter but also a political space in which students and teachers interact with implications in larger political and cultural struggles” (p. 293). These studies positioned emotions as sites where individuals respond to the world, and teachers as workers responding to particular visions of professionalism. Building on Garcia and Dutro (2018), I, with my colleague Ashley Johnson, found ELA teachers used emotion management to “silence their own potentially disruptive emotional responses to literature” (Dunn and Johnson, 2020, p. 4). In my work with Antero Garcia, we have called for teachers to center their needs following loss to engage in discussing literature in ELA classrooms in healthy ways (Dunn and Garcia, 2020).
Given Dutro’s (2019) call for reciprocal sharing, and my and Garcia’s (2020) call for teachers’ humanity to be honored in sharing loss experiences, research and scholarship would benefit from understandings of how teachers respond to literature following personal loss, and how emotional rules for reader response afford or constrain teachers’ responses.

Data generation
In collecting primary data, I obtained a “true volunteer” sample (Hewson, 2016, p. 66) by distributing a questionnaire via social media and email. In January 2020, I distributed an invitation and questionnaire link via two major online platforms: Twitter, where it was retweeted over 70 times, and Facebook, where it was shared by more than ten users, sometimes by people not connected to me. I also emailed 15 ELA teachers I knew, who forwarded the questionnaire invitation to teachers in their extended networks.

The invitation language explained the context of my study and the inclusion criteria for answering the questionnaire: I was hoping for responses from current and former 6–12 English teachers who had an experience teaching ELA while grieving. I informed participants responses would be anonymous and I would also be asking for volunteers for an optional follow-up interview. The questionnaire remained open for one month.

Questionnaire design
The questionnaire had two major sections. The first section elicited demographic information, such as years of teaching experience, grade level focus, type of school, race and gender identity (see Appendix for demographic questions). The second section included three open-ended questions:

1. Tell me about the loss experience you were thinking of when you decided to take this questionnaire.

2. Tell me about a time you taught a literary text differently following the loss you wrote about in the previous question.

3. What factors influenced the way you taught that literary text following your loss?

I designed these questions based on phenomenological understandings of narrative as a semiotic explanation of the meaning of lived experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Van Manen, 2001). Therefore, I designed questions to elicit accounts of what happened, not accounts of abstract meaning. I did not, for example, ask teachers to identify emotional rules they may have been following. Instead, I wanted to know what teachers did in their classrooms, and in looking across the descriptions of their experiences, to understand what changes they made teaching literature following loss. To identify emotional rules teachers followed, I analyzed their narrative responses, explained in more detail in the data analysis section.

The online questionnaire was a deliberate choice allowing participants to share anonymously about vulnerable and sensitive topics where emotional rules might constrain what a participant felt comfortable sharing. I acknowledge the questionnaire was only available to teachers who had access to internet, email and social media platforms. It is also possible teachers with negative or challenging experiences may have been more likely to respond. Finally, it is also true teachers’ responses to the short answer questions ranged from 1–14 sentences, meaning some teachers’ responses provide a fuller picture of their experience than others. Despite these limitations, 80 questionnaires provided fruitful data for analysis of changes teachers made in literature instruction, and for understanding patterns in emotional rules influencing those changes.
Analysis

I removed incomplete questionnaires and questionnaires completed by participants outside the inclusionary criteria of being a current or former 6–12 ELA teacher (for example, a principal had responded).

In analyzing the remaining 80 questionnaires, I first coded each short answer response based on the research question *What changes did English language arts teachers make in their teaching of literary texts following loss?*

I used multiple readings of the data set to arrive at categories of changes. On the first reading, I used respondents’ wording to pull out types of changes. Some samples of teacher descriptions from round one of coding were “during that time, my questions were a little more about the emotions of the characters than usual” and “I flat out avoided the material.” In the process of pulling out participant language, I noticed teachers described changes in relation to three major areas: how they saw their relationship to students, how they engaged with texts in the context of teaching and how they responded as readers to texts. Across a second reading and analysis of the data set, I coded each response into these three areas. For the second category, changing how they engaged with texts in the context of teaching, I identified three sub-codes: changing discussion, changing activities and changing the text itself. For a summary of the coding categories, see Table 1.

After coding changes teachers made, I looked across each coding category to answer the second research question: *What emotional rules influence the changes English language arts teachers made?* I identified patterns in factors influencing changes by first asking what the teacher was trying to avoid or gain through each change. Examples of what teachers hoped to avoid included negative emotions, loss of control and being uncomfortable. Examples of what teachers hoped to gain included student empathy for characters, connection to students and control over emotions. I also coded for emotion words, following Saldaña’s (2016) conception of emotion codes as “emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant, or inferred by the researcher about the participant” (p. 124). Example emotion words included surprise, relief, inspired and cynical. For an example of how I coded for emotional rules and emotion words, see Table 2.

Findings and discussion

To summarize findings across responses, I first describe patterns in changes teachers made, and then identify emotional rules contributing to those patterns. I include discussion with findings to highlight particular emotional rules in the same section with examples most related to those rules.

Changes in relationship to students

The overwhelming pattern in teachers’ descriptions of changes in relationships to students following teachers’ personal loss was they felt deeper empathy for students who may have experienced loss. For example, one teacher described how losing their father to brain cancer resulted in being able to “approach the discussion with a different level of compassion or empathy when my students have also lost a parent.” Another teacher who lost a student to suicide described being aware from that point forward that grief was “right under the surface” for students. Increased empathy for students is perhaps expected: empathy is generally an acceptable emotion in ELA curriculum, and has been suggested as a goal for reading (Mirra, 2018).

Teachers also sought connection with students. A teacher who had lost her mother wrote “I was still so awash in grief at that time . . . the exercise may have been sort of veiled by my own personal need to talk about my grief experience and desire to form human connections between students. The outcomes were mainly positive, however.” Another teacher whose husband had died suddenly in a car accident described how she “sometimes need[ed] to talk
about the emotional toll for almost therapeutic reasons.” These responses suggested teachers had emotional needs that surfaced in the context of literature instruction.

In responses where teachers sought connection, though, there was often qualification. For example, the teacher who described a “need to talk with students” about her loss also stated “responses were mainly positive, however.” This response seemed to suggest she did not see her need to talk with students as completely sanctioned, nor did she think it was admirable to be “awash” with grief as though she had no control. Her qualification “responses were mainly positive, however” supports she perceived her desire to share with students as questionable, so she clarified the effect was positive. Similarly, the teacher who described discussing loss for “therapeutic reasons” also wrote “other times I can’t talk about it all because I wasn’t emotionally able to get through the lesson.” This teacher connected with students about her loss only when she could maintain emotional control.

Across responses, personal loss increased teachers’ desire to connect with students about emotions and experiences, but teachers often specified students were not negatively affected or they maintained some control over emotions, supporting Hochschild’s (1983) assertion that service professionals work to preserve comfort of clients.

Changes to discussion and activities
Teachers changed what they discussed with students related to texts, with many spending more time discussing characters’ motives or circumstances to assist students in developing
empathy for characters. For example, following the stillbirth of her nephew, one teacher wrote “I wanted to make sure that students understood Anne Donne’s potential anxiety about her husband going away, and John Donne’s efforts to console her.” Similarly, following the loss of a student to gun violence, one teacher explained how in a “unit dealing with Animal Farm, [he] had students discuss loss and empathize with characters as the student who passed was known by students in class.” Teachers’ loss experiences inspired them to emphasize characters’ circumstances in discussions.

Across descriptions of changing discussion to draw attention to characters’ experiences, teachers did not mention sharing their personal experiences. For example, one teacher described how after having a miscarriage she could no longer see Macbeth as “anything but haunted,” but explained changes in discussion with students this way:

By drawing my students’ attention to the infertility and loss mentioned in Act I, and making that a motif that they could track in the subsequent acts, during our class discussions and debates . . . there was a clearer sense of empathy, or at least, causality, that students drew between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s decisions and the possible causes of those decisions.

This teacher described loss as a motif students followed, helping them understand characters better. However, she did not mention sharing about her miscarriage, the experience that inspired this discussion focus. While it is possible she shared and just did not write about it, her response still suggests she sees literature instruction as focused on characterization, motifs and empathy for characters’ loss experiences. The teacher’s personal experience is missing, though she described having “never before thought about” infertility being connected to Lady Macbeth’s motivation and it being “impossible” to miss these references to infertility after her experience. Empathy for characters was an acceptable emotional response, but empathy for teachers themselves was not foregrounded.
Teachers’ responses in this category suggested emotions should be part of literature instruction when they were productive, such as when they increased comprehension, understanding of characters or other literary forms. Responses suggested teachers often kept loss experiences private even when loss inspired changes to how teachers addressed texts.

Teachers also described changing activities or assignments. The most common change was teachers asked students to read sections of texts the teacher had typically read out loud prior to loss. Teachers explained they did not feel they could make it through reading out loud without crying or becoming upset. One teacher wrote following the death of her grandfather, she could not read certain passages from The Giver (Lowry, 1993): “I knew that I was going to be far too emotional to read aloud outright. I also knew that sharing in the grief is part of community building.” Instead, the teacher had students “read independently.” She experienced conflict between perceiving she should stay in control of her emotions and believing she should share vulnerably from her experience to build rapport with students. However, because she could not do both simultaneously, she opted to stay in control of her emotions.

Another teacher who had lost both her mother and father in a short period, explained: “After both deaths I have been unable to read aloud a number of poetry texts, especially texts that deal with parents (Harwood’s Father and Son or Judith Wright’s Woman to Child). I can teach these texts but I tell my students that I won’t read them out loud.” Here the teacher suggested she tells students’ texts affect her emotions, but does not go so far as to show certain emotions. This teacher went on to write she would “cry reading Frost’s Out, Out, but that kind of emotion was more easily dealt with than what I described above.” For this teacher, it was not crying itself she avoided, but uncontrollable crying or emotions that could not be “dealt with […] easily.” When teachers avoided overwhelming emotions, the emotional rule was teachers should suppress emotions that may require response or care from students. Instead, teachers showed emotions they could reign in or deal with themselves. Teachers felt they could show some emotions, such as empathy or being moved by a text, but not others, such as “being too emotional” or getting “upset.”

An infrequently mentioned change to activities was including units or resources on mental health. One teacher described including information about counseling services and two teachers mentioned they began including trigger warnings about texts addressing death and loss. These changes seemed to be positive supports for teachers and students, and their inclusion acknowledged loss and accompanying emotions, as well as provided resources and supports.

**Avoiding texts**

Out of 80 responses, 15 described text avoidance: ten teachers described avoiding texts entirely, either permanently or for some time, four described avoiding specific passages and one described administration denying her request to change a text.

Teachers avoided texts to prevent showing what they perceived as taboo emotions and to avoid texts that might be upsetting to students because they addressed suicide. I discuss these two types of text avoidance separately because teachers’ personal loss was distinct from teachers’ addressing collective loss following suicide.

**Avoiding taboo emotions**

Many teachers avoided texts when they believed they would be overcome by what they perceived as unallowable emotions, such as sadness or despair, often manifested through crying. One respondent described how, following her mother’s death, and while reading a
passage from Night (Wiesel, 1960), she “wept in front of students” and then “never taught [Night] again.” The teacher seemed to want to prevent crying in front of students again. Another teacher wrote about avoiding Ordinary People (Guest, 1982) following his adult son’s death by suicide, which students did not know about: “I’m not a fan of the novel in general and because of the intense parallels between the book and events in my life I flat out asked the administration for a change. They agreed.” He went on to explain he taught other texts where characters die but none of them were “flat out suicide.” For this teacher, the experience match in the text seemed to be the strongest factor in his desire to teach something else. Another teacher shared after her mother’s gradual decline and death, she “stopped teaching King Lear. [She] just couldn’t. [She] still can’t.” While it is unclear what exactly troubled this teacher about the play, she explained her reasoning for avoiding the text was “maintaining the appearance of ‘professionalism’ . . . not showing weakness (ahem emotion=weakness, apparently?).” She named showing certain emotions as “weakness” in the context of work, with “emotions” seeming to be a catch-all for emotions perceived as negative. For most teachers who avoided texts or passages related to a personal loss, they seemed to be interested in avoiding crying, or overwhelmingly intense emotions.

One teacher described slightly different reasons for text avoidance following a second miscarriage. She described “taking a break from teaching One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and The Bell Jar for one year” and wrote teaching was “[her] territory—the place [she] felt most at home” and she “needed to escape from reality at home when [she] walked into the classroom.” She suggested addressing the texts mentioned would not have provided an appropriate escape and went on to write: “I could not teach some of my favorite poems or novels that dealt with pregnancy, birth, or parenthood until I was in a better frame of mind.” For this teacher, avoiding texts seemed to be about work as a refuge from grief. Her response focused on protecting her peace and well-being following loss, and yet still emphasized how texts evoke emotional responses deeply connected to personal experiences and identities.

Avoiding texts about suicide following suicide
Several responses where teachers avoided texts were about teaching following a collective loss of a student by suicide. One teacher described avoiding Hamlet’s (Shakespeare, 1992) “To Be or Not to Be” soliloquy and “tip-toeing” through the remainder of the text. Another described skipping a lesson on the word-stem cide: “I couldn’t personally talk about suicide at the time because this girl was a great presence in our class. Also, I didn’t want to be the source of more grief for my students.” These responses suggested uncertainty surrounding discussing suicide with students and worry that it would result in student discomfort or grief.

Another teacher described avoiding “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (Salinger, 1953) following a cluster of student suicides because it “felt too soon” and including a text addressing suicide raised concerns about teacher–student power dynamics:

... having a class read about suicide right after a suicide seems like an authoritarian way to bring up the topic. It would be like saying, here’s this tragedy, so what do you want to say about that? It just seemed too on-the-nose, and I didn’t want to communicate that the curriculum should take precedence over the students’ own experiences [...] I’m not going to presume that a piece of literature dealing with suicide is helpful or productive or ethical to give anyone in the immediate wake of tragedy.

This teacher worried about timing and students’ readiness to discuss suicide, but also about the teacher’s role as someone in a position of power. He did not want to set parameters for
how and what should be discussed. Undergirding this concern were emotional rules suggesting teachers should be helpful for students, and their interactions with students “productive,” which seemed, for this teacher, to mean that students experience a positive outcome by discussing the text or sharing emotions.

Across teachers’ responses where they avoided texts, they described avoiding becoming overly emotional or protecting students from potentially upsetting material or topics. Teachers positioned their roles as helping and caring for students. The prevalence of responses where teachers avoided texts highlighted uncertainty and discomfort teachers experience in addressing loss in English classrooms when loss elicits taboo emotions.

**Changes to teachers’ reader response**

Though teachers often did not see overwhelming emotions as appropriate responses to literature, a particularly salient finding was most teachers – 53 out of 80 – described a change in their responses as readers, including overwhelming emotions. Responses ranged from teachers simply sharing how texts had different meaning, to noting they understood characters who had been through loss better, to sharing new overwhelming emotional responses to texts. One teacher who lost her child to suicide wrote “My loss affected every single day of my teaching from that point forward. Specifically, texts that dealt with death, particularly of a child, were different.” Another teacher who had lost his mother explained how loss made “texts feel more vital, and in particular, “[As I Lay Dying] feel really real” and he “related” to it in new ways. Teachers’ responses pointed to the power of reading: readers engage with texts by bringing their personal experiences and identities to their understanding of texts (Rosenblatt, 2005).

Some teachers described unexpected overwhelming emotional responses while reading with students. For example, one teacher described having a “major panic attack” in the middle of class while reading *The Crucible* (Miller, 2000) following their step-dad’s death by suicide. The teacher described an “urge to flee the room and claw the images out of [their] mind.” At the same time, they noted the experience “opened [their] eyes to what kids may be experiencing when they are assigned a text.” Another teacher “broke down and cried while teaching *Fences*” following her mother’s death, noting she typically “avoids texts that could be triggering.” Teachers had overwhelming emotional responses to literature, and then seemed to impulsively hide them from students by leaving the room or avoiding particular texts in the future.

**Conclusions and implications**

Teachers’ changes to literature instruction following loss raise considerations in two domains of ELA teaching and learning: teacher beliefs about the role of emotions in literature instruction; and challenges teachers face addressing loss and accompanying emotions in literature instruction.

**Emotions in literature instruction**

Though scholarship has suggested emotional response should be included in literature response (Thein, Guise, and Sloan, 2015), teachers seemed to see only certain emotional responses as sanctioned for teachers. Sharing loss was described more positively by teachers who identified a reading benefit for students, such as more understanding of characters’ motivation or emotions. Developing empathy for teachers was never described, though teachers described developing empathy for students. Some teachers sought connection with students through sharing loss experiences, but only when perceived negative outcomes for students, such as discomfort, could be avoided. Teachers’ reticence to
express or accept a full range of emotional responses remains a major obstacle to inviting loss experiences into literature instruction. Indeed, many teachers described tentatively addressing loss or avoiding it, especially when they envisioned losing control of emotions or potentially causing students to experience undesired emotions. Teachers avoided sadness, guilt, grief or despair in particular; teachers’ uncertainty about these emotions suggests including more expansive emotional literature response requires teachers explicitly discussing what to do when these specific emotions surface. Perhaps considering how sadness, despair and other associated emotions might benefit teachers and students would be one way to change the narrative that these emotions should be prevented.

When teachers adhere to emotional rules by limiting responses to those producing “positive” outcomes, such as increased comprehension or empathy, they limit who can respond to texts and how they can respond. Emotional rules therefore have potential negative consequences for teachers and students. Hochschild (1979) theorized when workers engage in significant and continual emotion management, a disconnect between what workers feel and what they show about those feelings persists, creating harmful dissonance. Many teachers in this study exerted considerable effort managing and limiting their emotional responses, sometimes with detrimental effects, such as exhaustion or guilt, or in one case, leaving the teaching profession.

Teachers regulating emotional responses also sends messages to students that some of their emotions should not be shared in the classroom. When teachers position some emotions as taboo, addressing loss becomes sanctioned for some people with some feelings, leaving some teachers’ and students’ experiences out. Considering emotional response from this perspective helps illuminate how hiding emotions can indeed be harmful.

Challenges in teaching following loss
To ask teachers to expand literature response to be inclusive of emotional responses related to loss requires attending to the challenges teachers face in these efforts. Teachers seemed to see discomfort, overwhelming emotion and crying as inhibiting students’ learning, in part because they do not always see emotional response as literary analysis, and also because they see their professional roles as preserving positive emotions or outcomes for students. To change these perceptions therefore requires not only strategies for including emotional response in literature instruction, but also conversations about what it means for teachers to be professional, where emotional rules for teaching come from, and how they might be disrupted.

Teachers also deserve to be treated as human beings who may want to keep some experiences private. Teachers sometimes wrote they did not want students to know what they were going through or explained when loss was fresh, and they preferred to take time to process before sharing with students. I am not suggesting that teachers always share every experience and emotion. Rather, I believe teachers should spend time considering why they are hiding certain experiences. When the motivation for privacy is about boundaries, it should be respected. Sometimes, though, hiding may be about fear – fear of being off topic with curriculum, of judgement or of not knowing what to do next. These moments of following emotional rules are worth reconsidering and disrupting.

Implications
Teachers addressing loss in literature instruction will only become more necessary in years ahead, as teachers and students process the aftermath of the global pandemic and work to address the continued racial violence in our country. Literature can provide opportunities for
connection and understanding, but only when teachers and teacher educators carefully consider how to share loss and accompanying emotions, and acknowledge the emotional rules that often regulate responses and relationships in schools.

One possibility for supporting teachers in sharing emotional responses to literature is for teacher educators and professional development leaders to work with teachers to explicitly name emotional rules, understand them and where they come from, and when appropriate, disrupt them. I have tried to do this work in my classroom by explicitly naming emotion work as the work of teaching, and engaging preservice and in-service teachers in conversations about how emotional rules affect them (Dunn, 2021). I, with my colleague [name removed], developed a guided reflection to assist teachers in considering whether they want to share their loss and what motivates that desire. In this work, we avoid prescribing what teachers and share and when, and instead ask teachers to consider what they want to do and how it effects students (Dunn and Garcia, 2020). Teacher educators should consider how they might include processing and managing emotions in their courses as important topics deserving of attention and class time.

When teachers have the opportunity to name the emotional rules they adhere to and consider the validity of those rules, they may be more likely to identify moments in their teaching where they ask students to share without reciprocating, a practice Dutro (2019) has cautioned against. Explicit discussions about emotional rules for literature instruction invite teachers to consider how they address loss and what it would look like to do so in ethical and equitable ways, where both teachers and students contribute.

I also believe supporting teachers in expanding emotional responses in literature instruction requires more research, especially scholarship exploring what other benefits, besides increased comprehension, might be gained in classrooms where teachers and students more freely share their emotional responses to literature. In the meantime, English teacher educators might engage prospective and practicing teachers in activities that invite them to respond emotionally to literary texts. Practicing emotional response encourages teachers to include them in their instruction. Such activities will also surface implicit emotional rules; reflecting on these rules may help prospective and practicing teachers identify uncertainty or tension they feel surrounding sharing about loss with students.

Identifying ethical ways to attend to loss as part of curriculum remains critical. Indeed, when teachers ask students to share loss without doing so themselves, they take advantage of a power dynamic without disrupting it. As one teacher in the study wrote, for example, “students shouldn’t feel forced to share their traumas with other classmates, akin to emotional porn... as if students’ tears [are] the upper echelon of [teaching] effectiveness.” At the same time, teacher educators cannot ask teachers to include loss experiences and share their own experiences without supporting them and working through challenges they face. I call for more thoughtful care and attention to how both teachers’ and students’ emotional responses to literature can be encouraged and supported without cost for either.

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Appendix. Demographic questionnaire questions
(1) What is your job title?
(2) How many years have you been teaching?
(3) What is your age category?
   • 25 or younger
   • 25–36
   • 36–45
   • 46–55
   • 56 or older
(4) (Optional) What is your racial and/or ethnic identity?
(5) (Optional) What is your gender identity?
(6) What grade level(s) and subject(s) do you teach?
(7) What school district or region of the country do you teach in?
(8) What type of school do you teach in?
   • Public school
   • b. Private school
   • c. Charter school
   • d. Other
(9) You would characterize your school as
   • Urban
   • Suburban
   • Rural
   • Other

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