



Let's Start with Heartbreak: The Perilous Potential of Trauma in Literacy

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This column explores the complexities of considering trauma in literacy classrooms and the need to foster pedagogies that approach children's trauma critically and compassionately.

I'll start with a moment from last fall. I am sitting in the hallway of an elementary school where I'm talking with Tiana, a fourth grader, about writing and all of the poems that were filling her writer's notebook.

How My Heart Explodes

The day
She passed away my
hart exploted into
little peaces. Her
name was writin all
over my hart. I just
can't believe my hart
exploted. How can
anyone servive ther
hart exploting

So, let's get to know Tiana. Let's start with heartbreak. A broken heart, a shattered heart, a heart in pieces, a wounded heart, a bruised heart, a torn heart, a rended heart, a severed heart. It is the image of poetry—despair, cliché, grief, eulogy, silence, the most exalted prose, and the everyday poetics and prosaics of coffee-shop conversations. It's what we call up, what we read and say, after 9/11, after a break-up of a 20-year relationship, after the massacre of little children in Stonyhill, Connecticut, after the breakup of a 2-month relationship, after centuries of colonization, after one more foster home doesn't work out, after a beloved long-lived grandmother's last breath, after another Amber Alert ends in a shallow grave, after the crush goes to the dance

with someone else, after Trayvon Martin is stalked in the dark and murdered, and after his murderer walks out the door. Heartbreak is the everyday and the once in a lifetime. It is in the fragility inherent in the human condition and in the pain humans so adeptly inflict on some bodies more than others. Like so much of the language we bring to human experience, "heartbreak" may be bursting with specificity or hollow with ubiquity. The experiences that crack us to the core are far from comparable. But weighing others' wounds is always precarious and often connected to power. As Tiana asks in her poem, how can anyone survive their heart exploding? It is the heart, after all, so it gets at the center of things.

In what follows, my goal is to delve into the complexities of trauma and what it might mean for language arts classrooms. I first turn to the important challenges of defining what counts as trauma and wrestling with the ways difficult experiences so often elude categorization. I then discuss some of the important work literacy educators and researchers are exploring in this area and examine some of the prevailing ways trauma is discussed in relation to children in schools, including why those approaches must always be interrogated for the damage narratives they may fuel about some children and families. Finally, I explore what it might look like for literacy educators to lead the way in approaching this terrain centrally, critically, and compassionately—in just the ways its complexity demands.

What Is Trauma?

Tiana brings her baby sister into her classroom, the sister whose arrival, they found out just before she was born, had to be both joyful welcome and wrenching farewell. The baby is in her poems, but also there in the baby blanket Tiana keeps in her backpack and gently rubs against her cheek when she pulls it out to show me. It's made of that thin, but cozy material, made for swaddling, with stripes of white, pale blue, pink. It couldn't be more familiar. It must be bought in bulk by every hospital—boxfuls and boxfuls, for babies and babies, arriving every day. It is the blanket that swaddled my children in all of those first stunned-and-giddy-new-parent-smile pictures, along with exhaustion and the still-sharp memory of pain just barely veiled by the joyous relief in my eyes; it's the same blanket in that picture right there on my desk of me cradling my newborn nephew; and it's the blanket burrito-wrapped around my friend's brand new tiny one in the texted photo she sent me last week. Tiana moves the blanket from cheek to nose, buries her face in it, and breathes in that new baby smell.

Tiana's poem, the scent of a baby sister's presence and absence, the comfort that blanket surely brings—is that part of what we mean by trauma? In contemplating that question, does it matter to know that Tiana's eyes sparkled as she shared her poems? Is it helpful to share that she read and reread her poems aloud, pencil hungrily scratching at the pages of her notebook, as we talked about the power of the refrains she was crafting? "Refrain," she repeated, after I pointed it out, suddenly seeing her own repeated lines of "Can't be without her" "Can't be without her" not as something to be revised out of her writing, but part of the power of her poetry. Joy in the writing is inseparable from the sorrow of her content.

What a complex word, *trauma*. We know that as humans we are wont to categorize things we encounter, and that impulse to label and sort starkly applies to experiences shared by, lived by, assumed-to-be-lived-by children in classrooms. Thus, pausing on a word like trauma and dwelling on the question of what counts as traumatic has to be part of what we do as literacy educators and researchers invested in

how the stuff of life is lived in and through literacies, both in and out of classrooms. Trauma is both the weightiest and flightiest of words—heavy with the certainty of hurt, loss, pain, despair, violence, yet afloat on the breeze of ambiguity of meaning and implications. Far from just an adjective to attach to literacies, its use is fraught in relation to children in schools, and becoming more fraught all the time as programs focused on trauma in schools gain steam in policy and practice. It is not a word to be used lightly, to toss around. Not in literacy research and practice nor any other realm. It is a red flag raiser, that word. If we are going to use it in relation to children's lives and literacies, we have to mindfully heed and navigate its consequences.



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I have felt the weight of that word in my life, my teaching, my writing, and my research. I find myself at once steering into it and away from it. My work on trauma and how it functions in classrooms draws on ideas from humanities scholarship in trauma studies, an area of research that focuses on representations of physical and emotional pain in art, literature, the media, or other accounts of individual and collective human suffering. The traumas taken up in this work include both large-scale, collectively felt events (for instance, the Holocaust or September 11) and small-scale, personal experiences—of loss, violence, displacement, and oppression. Although biological-psychological impacts of trauma may be present and acknowledged in this work, the focus is the emotional, material, and political stakes in the narratives surrounding life experiences that might be characterized as traumatic (Cacho, 2012; Caruth, 1996; Eng & Kazanjian, 2003; Felman & Laub, 1992; Hartman, 1995; Kaplan, 2005; Leys, 2000; Zembylas, 2008, 2009, 2013). I have found these lenses helpful in complicating and problematizing trauma

within assumptions of what is “normal” or expected in literacy classrooms. As a result, I have found it useful to resist arriving in classrooms with clear or fixed definitions of what trauma *is*, choosing instead to turn my questions toward the lived circumstances and consequences of how difficult life experiences circulate in classrooms and the pedagogies such circulations demand (Dutro & Bien, 2014).

In literacy, much of the work that has directly engaged with trauma studies has taken an explicitly critical stance toward the complexity both of literacies in and out of schools and of life experiences interpreted as challenging. Such research takes up questions of how stories of trauma function in disruptive and complex ways in the norms of literacy practice and inquiry (e.g., Dutro, 2008; Ellison, 2014; Jones, 2012; Wissman & Wiseman, 2011). For instance, Jones (2012) draws on a three-year study of an undergraduate teacher education course to show how engaging with trauma narratives disrupted the normative structures of what could and should be shared in the institutional space of a university course. Engaging with trauma narratives fostered critical discussions and projects that positioned students “now, and hopefully in the future, to bear witness and respond with compassion and non-judgment to trauma narratives they are sure to encounter” (p. 133). Ellison (2014) urges researchers in literacy and other fields to reframe trauma narratives shared by others as agentic texts, shifting those stories of important life experiences from examples of “TMI” (Too Much Information) to “MNI” (Much Needed Information). Drawn from her experiences collaborating closely with a participant in a study of an African American family’s digital literacy practices, her arguments apply as much to classroom pedagogies as they do research.

In other relevant veins of research, literacy researchers explore crucial questions about the emotional and material toll of oppressive policies and practices in schools and classrooms (e.g., Blackburn, 2015; Campano, 2007; Kirkland, 2013; Nieto, 2013). That body of research includes children’s and youth’s leadership and participation in the uses of literacies to reimagine what is possible and to speak back to the pathology narratives, destructive

policies, histories of colonization, and racial and economic disparities impacting communities (Ghiso, 2015; Vasudevan, Kerr, Hibbert, Fernandez, & Park, 2014; Winn, 2011; Zenkov et. al., 2012). In addition, research points to how the texts of literacy classrooms crucially matter in inviting children to make their lives and knowledge count in learning and in challenging exclusions and silences of particular histories and experiences in curriculum (e.g., DeNicolò & Gonzalez, 2015; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015; Saavedra, 2011). In this way, creating a space for students to encounter and craft narratives of both individual and historical trauma can generate knowledge, foster multiple perspectives, and create more complete and accurate understandings of our entangled histories and worlds. As made apparent in the articles appearing in this themed issue of *Language Arts*, the crucial and careful work in literacy research and practice holds close the complexities of engaging with trauma in relation to children’s experiences in schools and classrooms.

However, when a term like *trauma* becomes increasingly ubiquitous and etherized, it is harder to detangle its nuances; it becomes more challenging to pull through only the threads we believe honor the children with whom we share our lives in literacy classrooms. An Internet search on trauma and schools brings up a list of proliferating programs and commentaries and suggests we are in a period in the US in which trauma is visibly infusing conversation in education practice and policy. Literacy educators have a huge investment in this conversation, as literacy practices are the means by which life stories are, by turn, harnessed as resources, sublimated, represented, and interpreted. The stakes are high in stories of difficult experiences in literacy classrooms, with potential to support or complicate children’s opportunities to connect with and flourish within school-valued literacies. Thus, we need to grapple with the complexities of that laden word.

The Tricky Terrain of Trauma’s “Impacts”

I posit that a key reason why the stakes are so high in some of the recent discussions and efforts related to trauma in classrooms is the emphasis on

biological and clinical dimensions of trauma (precisely what the authors cited above do *not* do). In medical-centered arguments about trauma and its impacts, traumatic experiences may serve as evidence of damage that requires healing and/or may remain bound tightly to “cognitive effects” stemming from brain-based research (e.g., Chandler, 2016; Dwyer, 2016). If mis- or over-used, that clinical lens can risk quickly and inappropriately pathologizing children or families. I contend that we cannot know how “trauma” will be perceived and interpreted by others and who gets to categorize whose experiences as traumatic. Below, I briefly turn to a few themes within some efforts to focus more centrally on trauma in children’s school experiences and learning in order to tease out some of the questions it raises for me and to point to what I believe educators invested in elementary English language arts can bring to those discussions.

Trauma, Neurobiological Impacts, and Healing

Although a number of organizations and texts are taking up the idea of trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive schools, the way authors and organizations frame trauma and its impact on children varies widely (e.g., Craig, 2015; Duncan-Andrade, 2011; Soures & Hall, 2016). For instance, some programs and authors take a much more biological and clinical approach to trauma than others. A simple “trauma and schools” Internet search yields many examples of programs and research designed to understand and address cognitive and behavioral impacts of trauma on children’s learning. A large proportion of that work is published and led by health professionals (e.g., Jaycox, Kataoka, Stein, Langley, & Wong, 2012; www.childtrauma.org). This makes sense, of course, as trauma *is* a medical term, as well as a common word in everyday lay conversation. In fact, we would hope issues of childhood trauma would be on the agenda of public health experts and pediatricians. The question for literacy educators, then, is how that literature is understood and taken up in practice in schools and classrooms.

In addition to the explicitly medical and clinical discussions of trauma’s impact on children, there

are organizations, programs, scholars, and educators situated outside of the health sciences that draw on medical and brain research as rationale, explanation, or framework for the kinds of interventions and practices they advocate. Some of those programs and approaches involve extracurricular group and individual supports for students assessed to be impacted by trauma, while others call for trauma-informed practices to be infused across the curriculum and contexts of classrooms and schools (e.g., Soures & Hall, 2016). Some authors and organizations focus primarily on schools and school staff, whereas others very explicitly involve parents, families, and communities (e.g., WestEd, 2015).

All of these proliferating programs, books, and articles on trauma’s presence in children’s lives and learning in schools and classrooms have at least one thing in common: all are crafted from well-meaning and compassionate intentions. The imperative to take seriously the experiences children bring to school permeates this movement. However, the language of the arguments is deeply embedded in the disciplines and discourses in which the authors are immersed (as, of course, is mine). For instance, some educational psychologists emphasize the neurological effects of trauma on children’s development (e.g., Craig, 2015). Authors situated in social work may point to the need to develop resilience in children in light of the traumas they have experienced (e.g., Soures & Hall, 2016). Duncan-Andrade (2011), a scholar who examines and conducts critical studies of race and racism in schooling and pedagogy, is an example of an educational researcher who infuses critical perspectives into his arguments related to the neuro-biological impact of trauma on children and youth. Pointing to medical and psychiatric studies, he emphasizes that urban youth of color are twice as likely as soldiers returning from Iraq to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He locates this “state of perpetual trauma” in long-standing racist and classist policies that have systematically oppressed those communities.

Reference to “healing” is also common terminology used in relation to trauma in schools. That word points to overlaps between what some forms of narrative therapy are designed to accomplish

and what may be similarly accomplished for any of us when we are able to bring our lives into a space where our experiences can be witnessed (Angus & McLeod, 2004). Those perceived intersections are explicitly signaled by those who characterize their work as bibliotherapy, a practice with a decades-long history of use by clinicians, social workers, and educators in many contexts working with youth and adults (e.g., Marrs, 1995; Rozalski, Stewart, & Miller, 2010). So, why might we also want to tread carefully when making comparisons between therapy and what occurs in a literacy classroom in which children's testimonies to the challenges of life are invited as source and resource for connection to content, processes, and others?



With a conscious reframing, we can dissolve any binary between who needs healing and who is wounded.

As with all discussions of the impact of trauma, it is impossible to unravel the word *therapy* from its history of use—as a treatment prescribed or sought when something is wrong and needs to be addressed. It may be that it is a useful analogy that literacy educators choose to embrace. However, in considering the deep connections between the texts encountered and composed by children in literacy classrooms, it is important to thoroughly and thoughtfully engage with why and how a teacher, a school, a district might believe it is useful and important. Part of that unpacking can involve closely examining the implications of any metaphors and analogies taken up in work surrounding trauma and literacies for how that language positions children, families, and teachers. The word *healing*, for instance, is often associated with how literacy practices might function in relation to difficult experiences. Healing calls up physical and psychic wounds and fractures and is a word associated with what therapy is designed to assuage. Literacy classrooms as spaces of healing position both literacy and teachers as healers—of something, of someone. That is a weighty role, indeed, but with

a conscious reframing, we can dissolve any binary between who needs healing and who is wounded (Dutro, 2011; Frank, 2013).

I understand some may question whether it is fair to associate some of the trauma-focused efforts in schools with the risk of perpetuating pathology narratives about students and families. When I use the word *pathology*, I mean it in its dictionary definition: “to regard or treat (someone or something) as psychologically abnormal or unhealthy.” It is important, of course—sometimes, in some cases—to include a treatment lens in responses to the serious impacts of the kinds of life experiences a child may bring to the classroom. However, again, the stakes are high in these conversations because it is children from historically disenfranchised backgrounds who are most often positioned in these conversations as most in need of healing. With the current rising tide of efforts to address trauma in schools, I fear using trauma in relation to children and their literacies will be assumed to mean *they* are disordered and in need of treatment. As I discuss further below, trauma's terrain is treacherous because language in itself, of course, can construct damage narratives, no matter how convinced those using the language are that they/I believe in resilience and resource.

Constructing and Disrupting the Traumatized Other

It is striking that almost all of the discourse surrounding trauma's impact on children and how schools and teachers should respond implicitly or explicitly creates a dichotomy between the traumatized “other” and the un-traumatized supporter. Although the arguments in the trauma-informed schools literature are not of a piece with the recent trend toward fostering “grit” in schools (Duckworth, 2016), the two movements often sidle up to one another, particularly in creating binaries (whether or not intentional) between those in need or damaged and those who are doing just fine. In both movements, it is children living in poverty and children of color who are the primary focus and this, as critics of “grit” have argued, and this focus only perpetuates already prevalent deficit perspectives born

of historic and ongoing racial and class oppressions in the US school system (Strauss, 2014). In the trauma-informed schools movement, the ubiquity of the research on trauma as bio-neurological damage to children and their learning only furthers the potential destructive and insidious nature of those assumptions.

Regardless of intent and despite the (of course) physical and emotional impacts of events and experiences no child should have to endure, there is simply no way around the risks surrounding the language of trauma when applied to children in classrooms. Trauma comes with its bags already packed with notions of deficiency and pathology. Those assumptions too often already lurk within the narratives surrounding educators' work in schools serving children and families who experience the consequences of centuries of unconscionable economic, racial, and gender inequities. I am left with no doubt, then, that disrupting binaries in approaching trauma in classrooms is crucial at every turn. As I explore below, literacy educators are perfectly positioned to enact that necessary commotion in these conversations.

Why is that disruption so necessary? Here is one of many recent examples. Not long ago, a colleague and I presented a paper in which we shared stories young children of color had written that included themes of threat and fear of authorities such as the police and INS. During the discussion, a well-intentioned literacy educator said something like, "It does seem helpful to invite children to write about those topics to identify those who need professional help." The colleague's response is not uncommon and, I know, is an opening to an important conversation that is ever-present in this area of inquiry and practice. I think my voice was calm and collected as I tried to craft a version of an oft-repeated response:

Well, in some circumstances, those resources certainly may be important and not yet tapped. If it's something very traumatic, teachers very often already know the child has support from psychologists, social workers, or others. But, most often, children write and share stories of their experience that reflect the joys and sorrows of human life and the realities of persistent and destructive systemic and institutional inequities. Yes, these are

difficult experiences, but most don't require intervention from a different professional. Teachers are important witnesses to stories like these, stories that we hope children would feel they could draw from in literacy classrooms.

Anyone who engages research and practice that includes the word *trauma* will recognize similar kinds of responses. When fellow educators raise various phrasings of their trepidations—"that is an issue for the counselor" or "It would be inappropriate for me to respond. I might do more harm than good"—they are raising crucial cautions, indeed. These are just the kinds of fears, in fact, that some critical approaches to teacher education are designed to take up with novice teachers whose histories, privilege, and life experiences may be different from those in the communities where they will teach (Chapman, 2011; Ghiso, Spencer, Ngo, & Campano, 2013; Jones & Vagle, 2013). I respond the way I do because I believe there is a bottom line to this discussion: children's stories are already in the room, whether acknowledged, invited, or not. If sharing a story of loss, separation, fear, or pain means being identified for treatment, those stories will remain silent (Dutro, 2013; Jones, 2012; Wissman & Wiseman, 2011). Let's be clear, though. For some children, violence and the threat of violence or neglect that endangers their well-being are stories they are living. Such stark and persistent realities are just what Duncan-Andrade (2011) is emphasizing in his experiences with youth in the communities in which he lives and teaches. In those cases, we have to form a team of committed colleagues and family members and, possibly, community members to provide those children with the support they need and deserve. In those efforts, some of the resources offered by programs addressing trauma in schools could be very helpful. However, it cannot be the starting point to view children's lives shared in classrooms as signs of trauma that require diagnosis and treatment. If a loss or fear carried into the classroom connects with someone else's words or images (whether that connection was anticipated by a teacher or not, was invited or not), I hope the body carrying that story is not assumed to be cognitively impaired or sent out of the classroom altogether (Collins, 2013).

So much of what is published in this journal and others in literacy, and what committed, equity-centered literacy teachers are doing in their classrooms, is designed to counter deficit assumptions about children and families. That work arises from the recognition of how those destructive presuppositions about some children are fueled by and fan the flames of racism, pathology of poverty, heterosexism, and xenophobia. Yet, we cannot escape the fact that education, as a system, has been schooled to view some children's stories as already imbued with trouble and trauma.

Too Much Presence *and* Absence of Stories of Children's Lives

You and I respond together, though, a chorus of voices: schools *have* to be sensitive to children's traumatic experiences, including trauma's physiological impacts. Yes, of course, and literacy educators can be leaders in complicating assumptions and binaries that lurk in the discourse of trauma and children in schools. I see this advocacy every day in my collaborations with equity-invested teachers who think so carefully and thoughtfully about how to be present as witnesses for all the stories, the lived knowledge, children embody and perform in literacy classrooms. As literacy educators and researchers, we know even more than most that humans are story-driven beings, bodies always telling their stories and always being interpreted by others. We tell, seek, and encounter stories everywhere, all the time; stories give shape and meaning to the worlds we inhabit.

There's a reason why the narratives of life—life as narrative, counter-narratives, *testimonio*, digital storytelling—are at the heart of some of our most critical processes and practices in literacy research and teaching. We know that stories—how they're told, by whom, where, when, and with what stakes—are the textual spaces for seeing who we are and might be, for feeling our way through the world, for shifting or doubling down on our assumptions of how power and privilege function for us and others. Here, too, difficult stories from lives are particularly consequential because we know that difficult experiences are already in the room, whether or not

acknowledged, invited, or made to matter in some explicit way. In literacy classrooms, those important life stories are sometimes visible in whole recognizable pieces. Other times, they are tiny shards, a shimmering presence, like a jar of glitter dropped on the rug, impossible to grasp and inadvisable to try. We have to marvel at the sparkle and the way it sticks to everything it touches.

However, we also know how it goes with narratives about children in classrooms, always both too absent and too present. On the one hand, discussions of literacy in policy documents or reports of achievement often occur at a remove from narratives of students' and teachers' lives. On the other hand, we traffic in children's hard stories in our culture. There is nothing like a good inspirational tale, the rags to riches, trauma to triumph stories, to make privileged folks feel pretty good about our system and what it offers. Thus, in discussions of trauma and literacies, we have to grapple with the crucial difference between invitation and requirement in what forms those ever-present stories might be made to matter in classrooms.

I was struck anew by that crucial distinction while listening to a podcast interview with author Nell Bernstein on her book about juvenile prisons, *Burning Down the House* (2014). She describes how kids' access to therapy in prisons is almost always in group support situations. As kids shared with Bernstein in interviews, they are expected to share their deepest stories and challenges. If they aren't perceived as sharing genuine stories, they may be "written up," not seen as participating in the ways expected. She said many kids lamented to her that the adult leaders of these therapy groups have "a key to my cell." In other words, anything they say in the group can be used against them, yet they are punished if they do not share. Many of them have learned that the stories of their experiences *are* used against them, thus placing them in the impossible situation of needing to guard against vulnerability while feeling required to share the most vulnerable stories of their lives.

That phrase, "a key to my cell," really struck me and made me think about the complexities we have to consider in relation to trauma and life stories in

classrooms, and certainly when we create programs and curriculum for addressing trauma in schools. Adults in positions of authority in schools and classrooms most definitely have a “key” in relation to kids, and we decidedly cannot expect trust to be given based merely on our own sense of providing “access” to support or connection in response to the presence of difficult experiences in schools.

Trauma and Testimony, Reciprocity and Critical Witness

How, then, can we detangle the two intersecting storylines in what I’ve written thus far? Pull one thread: the already a priori storylines of trauma imposed on children must be interrupted and rewritten. Pull on the other: difficult experiences, including those we would all agree must and do count as traumatic, must be recognized, honored, and witnessed in ways that enfold a child in support. Perhaps this image of threads *is* the metaphor I’ve been reaching for. Because when I tug on those two threads, I want to feel them go simultaneously taut from my own pulling. I want to realize that it was just one thread after all. These are not two separate, oppositional issues. They are not singular. They are of a piece, plural.

Like many of us, I have found myself on a continual quest for language and pedagogies that can get at the complexity of the imperative to explicitly and deeply attend to the difficult in literacy classrooms, invite children to draw on all knowledge and experience as resources for their learning, and continually critique how children are positioned in those efforts. In collaborative classroom inquiries, a team of us engaged in teacher-research on these questions came to a set of practices we call “pedagogies of reciprocal testimony and critical witness” (Dutro, 2013; Dutro & Bien, 2014). By *testimony*, I mean the multiple ways children provide insights into their life experiences, including the explicit and overt as well as the implicit and subtle. Thus, examples of testimony in the way I use it here include children’s talk and writing as part of instructional routines, their informal conversations with adults or peers, and the nonverbal (silence, gesture, body position, facial expression, etc.). In turn, I use

witness here to refer to how those testimonies children share are responded to and interpreted by those who surround them in schools, particularly, in this case, their teachers. By working directly with children, our inquiry team learned ways to invite children to bring the full spectrum of their lives into school literacies and to build the trusting, mutual relationships required if children are to feel that invitation as genuine.

We believe this requires reciprocity in bringing deeply felt experiences into classrooms. Reciprocity means that teachers must lead with their own difficult stories—not because they will be the same as children’s, but to show that hard stories are present and welcome, that vulnerability does not lie solely with students, and that children can also serve as witnesses to teachers’ humanity. For instance, in a mini-lesson on organization of personal narrative, Megan (a 2nd-grade teacher and collaborator) purposely focuses her modeled writing on the day she learned of her grandfather’s death. At the end of the mini-lesson, she invites children to write stories that matter to *them*. But, by inviting children to witness a significant experience in her life, loss is explicitly included in what counts in school writing. And children do take up those invitations, writing about the various forms separation takes in their own lives (deportation, incarceration, death, foster care, separation and divorce, moves across town, state, or national borders), but also writing of the joys of connection (to family, to friends, to pets, to video games). A teacher’s testimony to difficult experiences does not happen every day, but it does need to happen early and periodically as reminders to children that all aspects of life are valued as resources in this classroom.

Such pedagogies require both deeply connecting through shared experiences of the tenderness and fragility of human life *and* the conscious, critical analysis of how human-constructed disparities impact lives very differently and require active and activist advocacy for students and social change. Indeed, that explicit awareness of how power and privilege function in opportunity and access, as well as how life experiences are interpreted by others, is what we mean by “critical” in critical witness (for

examples of that work, see Dutro, 2008; Dutro, 2011; Dutro, 2013; Dutro & Bien, 2014; Dutro & Cartun, 2015). In our view, this indicates the absolute necessity of bringing anti-oppressive frameworks to our preparation and ongoing work as teachers.

Our team's inquiries into a pedagogy of testimony and critical witness is one example of an effort to explicitly engage with and reframe trauma in children's literacies. But, it connects with the vast, long-standing, and ever-growing resources our field brings to this imperative to identify and actively pursue pedagogies that recognize, invite, witness, nurture, support, and celebrate children's immense knowledge and insights, compassion and critique, stunning turns of phrase, and novel ways of seeing the world. Literacy educators can be trailblazers in this crucial territory, supporting each other to always see the trails as tricky and watch for the critical paths of advocacy and activism wherever and whenever these questions of trauma, children, and literacies arise in our work and lives. It is in the stories lived and told in literacy classrooms that we feel the tautness of that single thread.

We Are Undone

In one of our conversations about her sister-filled writer's notebook, Tiana asked if I wrote poetry about my brother, another sibling gone too soon, and I said, "Sometimes I do, but it's been awhile." She said she'd like to hear one, so I told her I'd write a new one, and we could share our poems with each other next time we met. That weekend, wrapped in a blanket on the couch in my parents' living room, I wrote this one.

Broken Toe

Soon after my little brother died, my Grandma Klein broke her toe.

I'm not sure which one, but it was broken bad.

I think it was within weeks of when he died,

I think she still had a brace on when we went to see her in the summer.

She didn't get around so great anyway, those seven pregnancies

and all that time since sitting on the couch in the dark-paneled living room,

and not leaving much, because we all came to her

the aluminum screen door creaking open and slamming shut all day long.

all of those babies and all of that sitting had taken its toll on her still-slender legs

and they bowed dangerously in at the knees, the bottom half giving up on handling the top.

I think my mom told me that grandma had broken her toe and

I think, not then, but later, I heard that she hadn't *just* broken her toe.

I think an uncle said grandma was walking from the fridge on the back porch

through the kitchen, headed back to the living room couch,

and she caught her toe on the table

and it just snapped

and she had a picture of my brother in her hand

and she was walking and looking at the picture at the same time

and she couldn't afford to walk and do anything else at the same time.

and that made me think about grandma

and how she lost a grandkid, her one-baby-girl-out-of-seven's little boy

and she had to see her daughter in that much pain

and she couldn't do anything about it.

That toe was still black and blue when I saw it.

And she had to keep reminding all the little cousins, be careful of grandma's toe.

Children and teachers carry stories into classrooms—joys and sorrows, struggles and triumphs, connections and loss—like a picture clutched in a grandmother's hand, like blankets to wrap in or that threaten to smother, but there nonetheless, seen or unseen, whether or not they are ever pulled from the backpack. In my collaborations with teachers, children, and undergraduates, particular stories arise again and again in our inquiries in literacy classrooms. For Megan, it was her grandfather's death when Megan was a young adult and her parents' separation when she was 10; for Kristen, it was a period of despair in high school and her family's shifts through her parents' divorce, remarriages, and new siblings; for Victoria, there was the story of how she narrowly missed being pushed into a non-college track in high school, if not for the vigilance and advocacy of a teacher who responded to

the system with outrage and action; for Carlton, it's his cancer, right on the heels of separation from his birth family; for Wren, it's the death of her father when she was a baby; for Malina, it's the absence of her father; for Enrique, it's his cousin's death; for Lara, it's the threat of deportation; for Cheyenne, it's her brother's deployment to Afghanistan; for Sabrina, it's the abuse she survived and the testimony she must provide at her abuser's trial; for me, it is the death of my younger brother when I was 16 and the incarceration of my other brother two decades later.

When the documentation of a school year or multiple years is gathered, these stories can be tagged and the tags add up (tagged like a toe or tagged like a breathless backyard game). They are stories of difficult experiences, some intensely more difficult than others, but all meaningful and none easy. Trying to learn from those stories, we do code them, trace them, linger over them, watch them fly by, miss them altogether, discover them hiding behind the bookshelf, mourn their absence, chase them as they skitter down the hallway and tumble down the stairwell. Surely it is impossible to convey the magnitude of what is so importantly incomprehensible to all but the storyteller, stories so bound up in shared humanity and decidedly unshared oppressions. That tagged toe is such a tiny part of what is wholly grievable. The glancing brush of finger on fabric dashing by is barely enough to claim "you're it!"

Yet, precisely because literacies and life experiences are not separable things, we have to be concerned with what counts as trauma, for whom, and what it *does* in classrooms. Joy and pain, connection and disconnection, the visceral and the intentional, the invitations and the exclusions, the safe and the dangerous, the emotional and the academic, the necessity of wrapping children in support and of questioning what and who is deemed damaged. These are not binaries, not one or the other propositions. Tiana beams, glows, as she shares her poems of impossible sorrow. And I am undone, for as Judith Butler (2006) writes, "let's face it, we're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something" (p. 19).

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