“Death didn’t come up at center time”: Sharing Books about Grief in Elementary Literacy Classrooms

Four educators reflect upon sharing children’s picturebooks about grief with students and colleagues, encouraging others to take up similar brave and difficult conversations.

I was kind of embarrassed. I wasn’t looking forward to reading it, because I read about everything... There’s literally nothing off limits, so I was like, “Oh my gosh. How, as a critical literacy educator, am I refusing to read this book?”

—Meredith

Many children encounter challenging life experiences that they carry—sometimes overtly, sometimes discreetly—into classrooms daily (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2013). Childhood trauma takes many forms but includes abuse or neglect, witnessing violence, and, of particular interest in this work, the death of a parent or loved one. Despite the overwhelming frequency with which bereaved students are present in classrooms—one survey found 70% of participating teachers taught students who recently experienced the loss of a loved one (American Federation of Teachers and New York Life Foundation, 2012)—teachers continue to feel unprepared, reluctant, and even resistant to engaging students in talk about grief in the classroom (Mahon, Goldberg, & Washington, 1999).

We draw upon experiences of four educators sharing picturebooks about grief with elementary and adult audiences to illuminate insights, tensions, and strategies these educators utilized to engage their respective audiences in open-ended discussions. We begin by situating grief within a multidisciplinary perspective before delineating the reasons we must tackle these hard conversations in classroom spaces, shifting toward acknowledging, rather than policing, emotions. We then turn our attention to the experiences of the educators as they shared these books with their audiences, paying particular attention to why they engaged in this daunting task, when they engaged in this activity, and how these read-alouds and ensuing discussions were enacted. Our aim with this work is to move beyond book recommendations (e.g., Corr, 2004) to the complex use of books in classrooms to create opportunities for all students to collectively talk about death and grief as part of regularly occurring literacy routines. Our exploration can be positioned as a response to Wollman-Bonilla’s (1998) call in the pages of Language Arts: “How are these texts actually used and discussed in classrooms?” (p. 294, emphasis added).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framing
Situating Death and Grief

Death is often conflated with grief and is mostly addressed with reactive intervention—that is, support to help a child maintain an even-keeled emotional state. By considering a more complex view of grief informed by work in the fields of psychology, sociology, philosophy, education, and medicine,
educators are invited to critically (re)consider the role of classrooms in providing space, time, and resources to engage children in talk about both death and grief as part of the regular curriculum.

We use the terms death and grief conjointly, though we recognize their discrete characteristics. Death is a biological imperative (Poling & Evans, 2004): living things are born and, subsequently, die. Grief, conversely, is a social phenomenon. People learn how to grieve through their participation in/ across meaningful social communities. Within a social constructionist frame, grieving is a “situated interpretive and communicative activity . . . [whereby] the narrative processes by which meanings are found, appropriated, or assembled occur at least as fully between people as within them” (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014, p. 485). Consequently, children experiencing grief seek to make meaning through interactions with families, religious institutions, and the broader communities and cultural spheres—such as schools—in which they participate.

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Previous scholarly work exploring death- and grief-related literature for children can be sorted into two strands. The first strand includes book lists, book reviews, and analyses of picturebooks addressing themes of death and grief (Bargiel, Beck, Koblitz, O’Connor, Pierce, & Wolf, 1997; Corr, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Poling & Hupp, 2008; Wiseman, 2013). The second strand involves theorizing about potential uses, benefits, and issues of bringing these books into classrooms (e.g., Klingman, 1980; Wiseman, 2013; Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). Johnson (2004) noted the significant increase in the diversity, number, and specialization of these books for children over the last hundred years; however, the paucity of scholarly work examining actual classroom interactions around these books suggests continued cultural/social reluctance to bringing these texts into classrooms.

Tackling Hard Conversations

The literacy field has been active in theorizing and examining questions around the inclusion of “risky” (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015), “traumatic” (Dutro, 2008), and “controversial” (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018) books and topics in the classroom. Critical literacy advocates have long advocated a sociopolitical focus within the literacy curriculum, illuminating “the risky topics that surround children’s lives” (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015, p. 170, emphasis added) and working to help children consider multiple perspectives. The “risky topics” are commonly connected to questions around race, gender, class, language, religion, politics, and power. Death and grief are rarely presented as possible topics, raising the question of whether some social issues are simply too risky for elementary classroom spaces.

Elizabeth Dutro (2008, 2009, 2017) has written extensively about the “perilous potential of trauma” (2017, p. 326) in literacy classrooms, leveraging ideas from trauma studies to better understand “how challenging life experiences . . . are carried into and lived within classrooms” (Dutro & Bien, 2014, p. 11). Though trauma has a range of causes—poverty, food insecurity, abuse, family separation, etc.—many of Dutro’s examples of students sharing trauma in classrooms are connected to the death or illness of a loved one. She theorizes children’s stories of trauma are a powerful, often overlooked, and discounted form of response to literature, whereby a child’s “testimony” invites others to engage in “critical witnessing” (Dutro, 2008, 2009, 2017).

Notably, the literature prompting a child’s testimony does not fall into neatly defined labels/categories. One of Dutro’s (2008) most searing stories involves two fourth-grade girls intimately discussing their respective parent’s death during a small-group meeting about an American Girl book. Because teachers cannot always predict when a child might feel compelled to provide “testimony” in response to a shared book, Dutro focuses less on identifying specific texts and more on developing “pedagogies of reciprocal testimony and critical witness” (Dutro, 2013; Dutro & Bien, 2014). The aim is to create literacy instruction and classroom
spaces where these stories/testimonies are welcomed in response to literature rather than dismissed or pathologized as something more appropriate for a private session with the school counselor. Rather than an either/or scenario, we advocate, through the use of read-alouds, that the classroom teacher can support a grieving student in tandem with the school counselor.

Acknowledging Rather than Policing Emotions

Certainly death- and grief-related literature is not the only way to invite children into sharing and collectively processing traumatic experiences in the classroom, but inclusion of these books sends a clear and explicit message to children that this is a classroom where these topics, experiences, and testimonies are welcome. The reality is often quite the opposite: providing “testimony” about a personal experience with death and expressing typical grief-related emotions (e.g., anger, guilt, despair, anxiety) are not welcome in many public settings, including classrooms. One of the reasons death doesn’t usually come up in classroom literacy instruction is the implicit and explicit policing children, teachers, and families engage in: “society polices bereavement . . . control[ing] and instruct[ing] the bereaved [in] how to think, feel, and behave” (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014, p. 493). Teachers “self-censor” (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2018) the books they choose to share with students, their own grief in the classroom (Rowling, 1995), and which parts of the grieving process children are invited to make public (Dutro, 2008; Boler & Zembylas, 2003). One of our teachers shared a powerful, yet familiar, example: while trying to help a young child struggling to process the recent death of his mother, the child reported, “I’m not supposed to talk about [my mother’s death] here at school.” As educators, we can be complicit in policing when we censor the personal stories we decide to share or not share, the texts we select or reject, and the ways we move toward or away from glimpses of grief in classroom spaces.

Bole and Zembylas (2003) recommend educators examine their “emotional habits” to interrogate the ways they—unconsciously and without malice—“enact and embody dominant values and assumptions in [their] daily habits and routines” (p. 111). By examining what is censored from classroom life, educators can identify “unconscious privileges as well as invisible ways in which one complies with dominant ideology” (p. 111). In some ways, resistance or reluctance to centering death and grief as topics/books for classroom discussion can be understood as part of an “inscribed habit of inattention” (Boler, 1999, p. 16), whereby teachers (like all humans) choose/learn/teach which emotions to notice and attend to. All of us are caught up in/by this emotional phenomena, but for educators the implications are significant: “[T]hese inscribed habits of inattention [become] embedded in discourses and in educational practices and philosophies” (Boler, 1999, p. 16) that influence how and what teachers choose to see, or conversely, not to see, all of which have long-lasting, life-altering impacts on children’s health and well-being. We expand on this idea to explore how educators’ inscribed inattention influences “how and what is chosen to be read, or conversely, not read” in school about death and grief, and what happens when inscribed inattention is disrupted through sharing and discussing a single picturebook.

Unexamined patterns of inscribed inattention can lead to avoidance of emotions associated with bereavement, creating potential for both students and teachers to experience disenfranchised grief, “grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (Doka, 1989, p. 4). In classrooms, some emotions are seen/taught/encouraged as acceptable parts of the official literacy curriculum (empathy, enthusiasm, confidence), whereas other emotions are seen as deterrents to learning (anger, frustration, fear, despair, sadness) (Lewis & Tierney, 2013).

There are significant opportunities to consider how schools might become places where grieving and processing grief with others is not only allowed but expected and encouraged. When framed as a social issue, critically minded educators are challenged to invite riskier texts and discussions into their classrooms—texts that allow for
sharing multiple perspectives, diverse narratives, and a range of experiences with death and grief that can be developed as part of an interpretive community.

**Teachers Review Books and Share Stories**

The impetus for this project emerged from a themed issue of the children’s literature journal *First Opinions, Second Reactions*. Nicholas (first author) edited this volume centered around five children’s literature titles grappling with issues of death and grief, with invited scholars providing a first opinion on the books and educators offering a second reaction on the books’ use in classrooms. When inviting contributors, Nicholas sought a wide range of perspectives, recruiting Beth (second author), Christy (third author), and Sarah (fourth author) to contribute as first opinion writers and, drawing from his professional networks, recruiting novice and veteran educators ranging from early childhood teachers to districtwide administrators. Each contributor received a copy of a text chosen by Nicholas (see Table 1). As these books were considered by scholars and shared in classrooms, educators expressed feelings of tension and uncertainty beyond what was communicated in their reviews. Wanting to understand the experience of sharing these books in classrooms, and buoyed by our own experiences with the books, we invited the educators to participate in a semi-structured interview (Kvale, 2007). Four educators, Clara, Allyson, Meredith, and John, agreed to be interviewed. A brief biographical sketch of each participating educator can be found in Table 2.

An interview protocol (Carspecken, 1996) initiated the conversation. Questions invited personal responses to their book and an opportunity to elaborate on challenges related to sharing the book (see Table 3). All four interviews, ranging from 33 to 48 minutes, were transcribed as part of the analysis process. We reviewed transcripts independently to explore potential codes to explain the mechanisms undergirding the experiences of sharing these books with classrooms; then we collaboratively debriefed before confirming themes in several face-to-face analysis meetings. The conversation continually moved between and across interview transcripts and the books in our analytic process.

The four educators provided rich descriptions of the strategies they enacted to share these titles and reflected on how death and grief might be recognized at school in healthy and supportive ways for students. Interviews further illuminated the difficulty and grace in addressing heavy topics like these in schools, particularly when addressed

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Author / Illustrator</th>
<th>Synopsis</th>
<th>Read By</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Duck, Death, and the Tulip</em></td>
<td>Wolf Erlbuch</td>
<td>When Death appears to Duck on a summer’s day, she is surprised he has not come to fetch her. The two spend time together over the season, with Death bearing witness as Duck dies at the onset of autumn.</td>
<td>Meredith</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>The Heart and the Bottle</em></td>
<td>Oliver Jeffers</td>
<td>When she loses someone important to her, an unnamed little girl places her heart in a bottle so she may not be hurt again. It is not until she is older and meets a young girl not unlike her younger self that she works to free her heart from captivity.</td>
<td>Clara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Scar</em></td>
<td>Charlotte Moundlic / Olivier Tallec</td>
<td>Awaking to find his mother has died, the unnamed boy in the story becomes sad, angry, and fearful. Afraid to forget her, he hypothesizes ways to keep her near him. His grandmother, visiting, provides another channel through which he can remember her.</td>
<td>John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cry, Heart, but Never Break</em></td>
<td>Glenn Ringtved / Charlotte Pardi</td>
<td>With their grandmother ill upstairs, four siblings attempt to distract Death from claiming her. Death tells them a story, helping them say their final goodbyes.</td>
<td>Allyson</td>
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Table 2. Biographical sketches of each educator interviewed

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<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Biographical Information</th>
<th>Book Audience</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>In her 28th year of teaching, Clara currently teaches kindergarten in a southeast Michigan public school. She views her work as a challenging and joyful privilege with the core goal of teaching to ensure making the world a better, more equitable place for all.</td>
<td>Kindergarten Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meredith</td>
<td>Currently a kindergarten teacher in St. Louis, MO, Meredith also teaches literacy courses at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Her work focuses on early childhood literacy and critical literacy, and much of her research is conducted in her own kindergarten classroom, where she enjoys learning from an amazing group of five- and six-year-olds.</td>
<td>Kindergarten Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allyson</td>
<td>An educator with the Farmington R-7 school district in southeast Missouri, Allyson is a former librarian and reading teacher. She currently serves as a curriculum and instructional practice coordinator, supporting students and teachers throughout the district.</td>
<td>K–8 Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>A graduate of the elementary education program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, John engaged in this work during his second semester of student teaching in a St. Louis metropolitan area elementary school.</td>
<td>5th-Grade Students</td>
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</table>

Table 3. Examples of interview prompts

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<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Interview Prompts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Response to the Book</td>
<td>Death and grief are particularly tricky concepts to address in the classroom, one of the reasons the issue of First Opinions, Second Reactions was brought together. We are interested in your personal take on the book. In other words, what are your thoughts on the book? What did you enjoy or not enjoy about the book and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges to Sharing the Book</td>
<td>We are interested in the tensions you may have experienced while sharing this book with the children you teach and/or your colleagues. If you shared the book with an audience, tell me about that experience.</td>
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outside of an immediate need, like the death of a student’s loved one. As Meredith commented, “Death [doesn’t] come up at center time.”

Teachers’ Key Insights

These educators’ experiences do not weave together into a morality tale, where good and bad are clearly delineated. Rather, they form an imperative tale, urging all educators to take up this work and to move forward with best intentions, understanding it will rarely be wholly good or bad, but will impact students and teachers alike. In this section, we share insights from across the interview data in relation to three key questions, exploring the why, when, and how of bringing these books and conversations into classroom spaces.

Why Educators Shared Books with Themes of Death and Grief in the Classroom

Addressing death and grief in the classroom is not simply a matter of having the courage to use a book about these topics with children, it is also a larger commitment to work with children in a classroom environment where they are made comfortable to speak to their experiences as human beings. For Clara, reading books that reflect this range of human experience, regardless of her own comfort, is an aspect of keeping a diverse classroom library and is, therefore, a social justice issue:

I want my kids to see themselves in the books. I think there needs to be inclusion of experience as well. That’s what I think some of these books will provide. This happens, and though not everyone’s life is like this . . . at least you can learn some empathy for the people who have [experienced it]. And if this has happened to you, then you get to hear you’re not alone.

Clara’s insights reflect the National Institute of Health’s (NIH, 2015) claim that “death is lonelier” than ever before. Whereas adults and children once “mourned together, and comforted each other” (NIH, 2015, p. 2), some children are now left to experience grief alone, following cultural norms about where, when, and how death can be processed.
and discussed. In light of these cultural and historical changes, access to the space and time to experience/examine/explore death and grief within a supportive interpretive community are not add-ons to an already packed curriculum, but an issue of social justice and equity related to the healthy development of all children.

She had concerns that the topic had been too risky, or, more specifically, the topic would be viewed as too risky by other adults.

Given the social nature of grief, teachers seeking to bring this topic into their classrooms may experience discomfort, a sensation each of the participating educators needed to work through. This discomfort manifested in different ways for each educator. To understand why educators might bring these books into their classroom conversations, attention also needs to be paid to why educators may not. Meredith, for example, felt uneasy after providing space in her kindergarten classroom for discussion in response to Death, Duck, and the Tulip (Erlbuch, 2011). She had concerns that the topic had been too risky, or, more specifically, the topic would be viewed as too risky by other adults, especially for the parent(s) of one of her kindergartners whose brother had died recently.

I immediately talked to her mom: “I just want to let you know what happened today in kindergarten,” and the mom said, “Oh, I’m so happy that happened. . . . I’m glad she felt like she could tell her classmates.”

Rather than policing expressions of grief, this caregiver was relieved at her child’s ability to convey her loss, illuminating that potential caregivers may welcome, rather than reject, these opportunities.

Meredith’s dilemma over why relates to the more global concern that young students aren’t “ready” for the themes, images, and storylines in these kinds of books. Allyson experienced this pushback firsthand when she shared Cry, Heart, but Never Break (Ringtved, 2016) with fellow educators enrolled in a course on childhood trauma. As the course’s assistant instructor, Allyson felt this group was the “perfect audience” for considering how this book might be used in a preK–12 classroom. Surprisingly, when she read the book to her class, “They just pretty much said, we hate this. . . . They didn’t feel it was appropriate for children to have this book in their hands, parents would object. They thought we could let middle school and higher look at this.” Their responses surprised Allyson because the course had spent weeks exploring support for children experiencing trauma, and she felt the educators shared her concern for students’ need for safe school spaces to process grief.

This section began with an explicit claim about why these books should be brought into classroom conversations; when translating this belief into action, the educators interviewed found themselves confronted with the various reasons why death- and grief-related books should be excluded, resulting in reluctance and resistance. In examining their own initial reluctance/resistance to reading these books aloud, these educators acknowledge how grief, both in students and within ourselves as educators, works against several characteristics of the identity kit that comprises teaching. Put another way, teachers often view themselves as needing to “be ‘all knowing,’ that is, having all the answers; and of being ‘in control’ of their reactions and the situation” (Rowling, 1995, p. 323).

Death and grief can neither be known nor controlled, creating a nearly impossible situation for any teacher who feels they must be “all-knowing.” The claim children are not ready may have as much or more to do with teachers'/adults’ own patterns of inscribed inattention (Boler 1999), leading to feelings of being unready, underprepared, and/or ill-equipped to engage with these issues themselves.

How Educators Decided When to Share These Books in the Classroom

For all four educators, finding the “right” time to share the books was less pressing than finding and making time to read the book at all. Prior to reading these titles to their classes, all teachers experienced varying degrees of trepidation. Clara wrote:

I wanted to, I really did. I wanted to read this book, The Heart and the Bottle by Oliver Jeffers, multiple times...
to my twenty-three kindergarten students and share it with my empathetic, intelligent, caring colleagues. But I didn’t. Instead, I carried it in my bag to and from school for weeks. I read it to myself. I promised myself, “I’ll start tomorrow.” Why the hemming and hawing, the reluctance? (Thiry, 2018, p.27).

Meredith hesitated similarly, recalling, “Actually, I waited until the last minute to read it to the class. . . . I just kept the book on my desk and I just really didn’t want to read it.” Despite this hesitation, both Meredith and Clara moved forward in reading the books with their kindergarten students.

While “the inhibitions and the protective tendencies of adults that reinforce the misconception that it is unhealthy for a child to be openly curious and fearful about death” (Reisler, 1977, p. 332), teachers worked against these inhibitions and protective tendencies to ensure students developed the ability to work through and manage their grief. Clara drew upon her own grief to connect with children’s grief:

In my life there’s a fair amount of grief, mostly loss, mostly recently . . . . I think I grieved pretty well, and I feel like I can be present to it, but I can also keep moving. It allows me to feel empathetic. I don’t know what it’s like to be a young child and lose somebody super significant.

Leveraging her own experiences grieving and recognizing the way she carried her own invisible weight of loss day-to-day, Clara reflected on and initiated a conversation with a grieving student in her class:

I said, “I miss people at Christmas, do you miss anybody?” “Yeah, I miss my Mom.” I said, “The nice thing is you love your brother and sisters, and your dad and your grandma. You have all these people coming over and that’s like me, too. I miss my mom but I’m also super happy so there’s a mix of feelings.” I said, “I just want you to know that I remember. I remember that you miss your mom.”

Clara recognized—and became a witness to (Dutro, 2008)—her student’s grief, as well as her own, as a precursor to creating opportunities for her class to engage with The Heart and the Bottle (Jeffers, 2010). Rather than wait for the student to approach her about his grief, she initiated discussion, grounding it in her own mixed emotions of the holiday season. Perhaps most important is Clara’s assertion she wanted her student to know she knew he missed his mom, an availability to repeatedly bear witness to grief as a member of a community across time. The conversation doesn’t end with the first read-aloud. Clara sees a read-aloud like this as an opportunity to begin relevant, supportive, ongoing discussions with children: “We don’t have to get mired, to let it drag us down. We acknowledge it and . . . I can follow up one-on-one with them.”

Clara’s tactic—following up one-on-one with a child experiencing particularly relevant struggles after the read-aloud—is a proactive way to show grieving children that an adult cares and their feelings matter. Creating supportive conversations, and reciprocally supportive relationships, is the real impetus to opening up conversations on death and grief in elementary classrooms. To “witness” (Dutro, 2008) grief in the classroom requires teachers to subvert portions of their identity, to acknowledge their own vulnerability, and to make that known to their students, while also resisting cultural policing of grief by defining which life spaces and times are suitable for grieving.

How Educators Read and Discussed These Books in the Classroom

While intentional decisions and some degree of thoughtful preparation for reading books on death and engaging in discussions about grief may help, uncertainty about how to do so lingered for these educators. Allyson, who received pushback during her read-aloud, sees it as important to read books on death, regardless of how prepared one feels. (See Table 4

| Table 4. Additional titles of picturebooks dealing with grief |
|----------------|----------------|
for additional books about grief suitable for the elementary classroom.) She advises:

If I were to share with another book, I would have more than one book, so I could back up what I wanted to convey. This is one of several things you should consider having access to, not if, but when, you will need this.

Reflecting on her colleagues’ resistance, Allyson decided an important additional step would be frontloading:

I didn’t do enough activating of prior knowledge. It would have been good for me to mention, upfront, the church shooting in Texas, . . . the little girl who died of cancer in our school district, and different things where they would be set to make mental connections before they were exposed to the book.

Allyson felt sharing risky books with colleagues might be made easier by connecting to current traumatic events at school and frontloading the importance of a book to address such events.

Remembering one’s own personal experiences with grief, or imagining how children might experience grief, was also a helpful preparation exercise. Clara has experienced the death of significant people in her life, creating an ability to resonate with bereaved students and providing her insight into helpful empathetic responses to the child in her class who surely missed mom at Christmastime. Humanizing grief became important for John, a preservice teacher, as he prepared to engage his fifth graders with grief. Remembering one’s own personal experiences with grief, or imagining how children might experience grief, was also a helpful preparation exercise.

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If supplying key questions for children to think through proves difficult, preparing and asking authentic questions you wonder about as a reader is a starting point for discussion. John did just that. He diligently approached preparation for using this text in reading groups with 5th graders as he would with other texts, noting points in the story he wondered about himself:

Well, I read it a bunch of times. I tried to put myself in the place of the reader and think about when I would need to stop, what questions I would ask as we read, and where we would stop. I anticipated a lot of questions about why [death] happened, and there’s not a good answer for kids. Death just happens, and sometimes there’s not necessarily a reason. I anticipated having a lot of questions about why the kid was acting the way he was because, as someone who has not experienced that, it seems like his behavior didn’t make sense, like him lashing out at his father and his grandmother at times when they were trying to help. . . . We had a lot of discussion about that, and the more we discussed it, the more it made sense to the readers about how he was acting.

John also considered how to integrate the book into existing literacy routines and student groupings, deciding this text would work best in small reading
groups, not a whole-class read-aloud with his 5th-grade students:

I chose to read it in small groups so we could have a closer discussion around the book. . . . Kids might feel more open about discussing it in a small group instead of in front of the whole class. Because I was with fifth graders, they do a little more emotional guarding than other grades would. . . . I don’t think anyone wanted to comment first, but the more we read it, the more the students knew the plot already, so they were looking for details to discuss.

John, Meredith, Allyson, and Clara all indicated that however uncertain the first reading felt, increased exposure and invitations to talk more would be key for their students to dig deeper into the ideas in these books on death and subsequent experiences of grieving.

All four educators recommend facilitating meaningful conversations through repeated readings, encouraging readers’ authentic connections, preparing texts to pair with the book, and inviting questions of all sorts. A common characteristic of these picturebooks is their sophistication. As Meredith reflected on *Duck, Death, and the Tulip* (Erlbuch, 2011): “It’s a great book for critical thinking. It’s not one of those books where you read it and you’re like, *I really understood that*. I’m actually going to admit for myself that I read the book and I don’t think I understand it.” In Allyson’s words, these books take “more than one read to begin to develop a really strong appreciation for what was happening.” These books require readers to return to them repeatedly; for some teachers, like John, this was surprising. He shared:

Students were pretty uncomfortable with it at first; they were being quiet, and yet toward the end of the time reading, after multiple times reading it, students were more open to discussing it. We talked a lot about behavior and how that made sense to the main character.

For John, grounding this initial reading in the book’s basic plot and character development flattens the text’s emotional impact, creating a mirage of it being “safe” for discussion. Through repeated readings, John gives the book dimension; through repeated readings, students are able to unpack emotional aspects of the book.

John’s specifically designed repeated readings came over the course of a week. Meredith, however, was cautious about rereading; even so, the book worked its way into the intellectual fabric of her classroom:

We eventually came back to the book as we, weeks later, read another book. I thought I’d never read books about death, but I’ve become more attuned. . . . we were reading *Tough Boris* (Fox, 1998) about a pirate whose parrot dies and he’s crying. The book is about how it’s okay for even tough pirates to cry if they’re sad. . . . the kids were immediately like “oh yeah, and that’s like *Death, Duck, and the Tulip*” (Erlbuch, 2011), and I’m like “where did that come from? We read that book like over a month ago!” The book stayed with them; they were still pondering it.

Clara also read the book to her kindergarteners once. Throughout the reading, Clara paused to have students turn-and-talk to a friend about a connection they made. She didn’t hear all conversations around the room, but noted, “A lot of them did talk about a pet that died, maybe a fish, and so if your goldfish died, you loved that goldfish.” Other children had more significant experiences of loved ones dying. Clara shared:

I had one little boy who was like “my great grandfather died” and his eyes got all teary. I said, “Tell me about that.” “Well, I miss him.” Part of me was like, well, that’s okay. You know, if [my student] had cried, would that have been the worst thing? I don’t think so.

Conclusion: Be Vulnerable, Be Brave, and Witness

“Because literacies and life experiences are not separable things,” Dutro (2017) reminds us, “we have to be concerned with what counts as trauma, for whom, and what it does in classrooms” (p. 335). We have sought to explore, alongside four educators, what conversations about death and acknowledgment of grief do in classrooms, using children’s literature as a starting point. These conversations are never easy, as demonstrated by these educators as they sought to make sense of their own and their students’ responses to the experience. Despite our own discomfort with the subject matter, as educators, we need to be vulnerable, willing to muck around
in our own feelings of grief, accepting that we do not need to be “all knowing.” We must model for our students how grief is negotiated and managed, and to respond to students’ needs. Through their active engagement in addressing death and grief in their educational spaces, these educators ensured trauma in classrooms was not forced underground, but rather was out in the open, where it could be addressed through everyday classroom activity.

We need to be vulnerable, willing to muck around in our own feelings of grief... We must model for our students how grief is negotiated and managed.

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References


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**Children’s Literature Cited**


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**INTO THE CLASSROOM**

Picture books can be used as vehicles for covering tough topics with children and students. Here are some examples of other topics that can be addressed via picture books:

**Moving toward Acceptance through Picture Books and Two-Voice Texts**

Connecting literature to students’ lived experiences in the school and classroom, this lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn about situations of intolerance and discuss ways to move to a more ideal world in which acceptance is the norm.


**Using Picture Books to Explore Identity, Stereotyping, and Discrimination**

Students analyze the concepts of identity, stereotyping, and discrimination by reading picture books; identify how these concepts are dealt with in each book; and discuss concrete actions to stop discrimination.


**The Children’s Picture Book Project**

In this lesson students plan, write, illustrate, and publish their own children’s picture books. This would be a good strategy if a topic needs to be covered and there aren’t trade books available. Students begin by reviewing illustrated children’s books to gain an understanding of the creative process and the elements that help make a children’s book successful. This lesson ends with a published book that can be shared with peers or younger buddies.

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