Heartsongs Across the World: Using Literacy and Emotional Pedagogy to Empower Communities of Compassionate Learners

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Introduction

I, the lead author of this article, am a widow of a veteran who was killed during Desert Shield. I have lost several close friends. I have experienced loss of my own unborn children as well as the deaths of several of my young students. I was a teacher in the school in Northern Virginia that witnessed American Airlines flight 77 fly over before it slammed into the Pentagon, resulting in multiple deaths of my students’ parents. This tragedy was shortly followed by the “DC Sniper,” who struck fear in our entire school community.

Nothing, however, has hit me as hard as a recent death in my community. The loss felt at so many of our local schools, as well as by my own daughter, has impacted me in a way I have never experienced. At the age of 10, my daughter’s classmate lost her mother to domestic violence, and my thoughts have turned to classroom teachers as they support their students. When we take community tragedies such as this and consider students’ own routine, daily, personal struggles, along with additional fears about things like the spread of Ebola and seeing journalists beheaded by Islamic

*This article is mainly told from the vantage of the lead author. However, both authors connect the examples to research and best practices by offering a theoretical framework for understanding the role of emotions in learning and providing educational strategies that simultaneously equip students to cope with painful emotions and empower them to embark upon higher-order thinking and learning.

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State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorists on social media, it becomes clear that our teachers and students have a lot on their minds that can interfere with learning if left unaddressed. I have thought about my role as teacher when 9–11 occurred, and my epiphany is this: adults (even teachers) are not trained to deal with this deep grief. In fact, there is an underlying professional legacy of sorts that instructs teachers to only think of the business of the classroom even while ignoring the reality of a need for being attuned to our students’ emotions (Cooper and Hill 2002). What adds to the difficulty in my community is that many of us educators are in crisis mode ourselves. It is my hope that sharing these stories, along with a context of theory and research-based practices, might help educators and others reflect on grief and how to help our children survive and grow from it. What will not be of any surprise to fellow educators is that I learned a lot about surviving grief from paying attention to my students.

I remember the events of 9–11 as if in slow motion. As I was teaching that day, the guidance counselor handed me a slip of paper that chronicled the mornings’ events, while instructing me not to turn on the television or let the students know. I knew my job was to keep teaching. Although successful for a while, the intercom announcements took on the rapidity of gunfire, as the office was calling students to check out because parents were flooding the school. I will never forget the face of Erin (pseudonym), first row, last seat. “What is going on? You have to tell us. Every person in this class has been checked out except for five people.”

Luckily, I was saved by the intercom. Our principal did a remarkable job of describing the events of the morning to our school. Although we offered counseling services, there was a change in all of us that day. The eighth-graders in my class represented a wide variety of learners from English as a Second Language (ESL) to students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), ranging from those who needed accommodations for learning disabilities to the gifted and talented. That day our differences did not matter. We all felt intense shock and confusion.

**Theory: Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Pedagogy**

The ever-increasing push to more fully integrate technology in our classrooms is well intentioned and perhaps even useful. However, the coauthors of this essay believe that technology should be viewed as merely another tool to be used to meet learners’ needs. In using this particular tool, the focus all too often is on the tool rather than its function. Educators must not focus so much on technology (or any other teaching strategy flavor of
the month) that we forget we are not teaching technology or math or science or literature—we are teaching human beings with emotional needs.

With approximately 2.5 million deaths in America every year (not to mention additional stresses and triggers for grief, loss, and negative emotion), there is an enormous segment of the population experiencing grief at any given time (Friedman 2012). When grief or sorrow results in clinical major depression, only 50% of sufferers in the general population are ever treated (Friedman 2012). A teacher can look out at his or her students on any given day and know with certainty that some of them are filled with sorrow. This makes both emotional health and emotional intelligence a concern of all teachers.

While there are a variety of emotional intelligence (EI) theories that place emotion in the realm of intelligence (Salovey and Mayer 1990), personality (Bar-On 1988), or performance (Goleman 1998), it can be generally agreed that EI is the combination of what is typically considered purely cognitive reasoning, motivation, and emotion (Joshith 2012), as well as the ability to regulate emotion in ourselves and the presence of empathy to understand others’ emotions (Daniel Goleman, as cited by Cherniss and Goleman 2001; see also Eyler 2002).

In education, the application of EI theory means that good teaching encompasses not merely content area expertise and a command of pedagogical strategies but also understanding students’ emotional intelligence in such a way that results in the ability to deliver instruction that positively impacts students’ feelings (Joshith 2012). Therefore, a truly good teacher is a subject matter and instructional delivery expert who understands how his or her students think, what motivates those students, how they feel—and how teaching can influence those students. Interestingly, even students with high emotional intelligence are not more likely to make wise choices (Skaar and Williams 2012), but they are better equipped to deal with stressful situations (Joshith 2012). In any case, better understanding emotional intelligence will help teachers not only educate their students but also reach them.

V. P. Joshith (2012, 55) explains that teachers must be aware of the emotional context of teaching, as well as the emotions of their students, and their own emotions:

Emotional intelligence in education probably depend[s] at least as much on the way teachers publicly respond to their own shifting moods and stresses, the way they deal with the learners in the classroom. . . . They have to use social and emotional abilities. . . . The process of learning in any context can involve struggle, frustration,
...and with the perception that there is the prospect of success or failure, the potential for strong feelings is heightened.

Josith goes on to explain that teachers can foster development of their students’ emotional intelligence by modeling positively dealing with stress and effectively coping with emotions. Teachers need to be transparent and real. Teachers need to show their students that we all face challenges and that how we deal with those challenges is important.

Being able to understand our own emotions and those of our students should not be a one-sided proposition. Both positive life events (e.g., celebrating a new relationship, moving to a nicer home) and negative life events (e.g., dealing with heartbreak, addictive behaviors, tragedies) are stressors that provide a sense of disequilibrium that motivates individuals to improve their feelings, their understanding of themselves, and their purpose in life (Yocum 2014). This motivational aspect of life stressors speaks directly to one of the three components of emotional intelligence. Linda Christensen (2009, 1) approaches emotional intelligence with a “pedagogy of joy and justice,” encouraging students to joyfully explore language, multiculturalism, and self-empowerment. Understanding that positive and negative life stressors play into the development of emotional intelligence, we should be just as ready to teach from what our colleague and mentor, Mary Rogers, called “a pedagogy of sorrow.” Toward this aim, we suggest that a more holistic emotional pedagogy should be embraced that encompasses providing instruction with knowledge of the whole spectrum of emotional motivators and outcomes from joy to sorrow. While we may use strategies such as shared narratives for providing students an outlet to express joy about their cultural identities, we can also use these strategies to give students a venue for venting negative feelings they encounter when coping with tragedy. Samples of strategies that can be used under the umbrella of emotional pedagogy are provided below.

**Practice: Educational Strategies That Empower and Teach**

Hornby and Atkinson propose a four-tiered, schoolwide approach for promoting students’ mental health that includes (a) *school ethos*: a shared vision of positive mental health by school staff and students, (b) *whole-school organization*: school policies that support the shared vision, (c) *pastoral provision*: the availability of in-school counseling services and partnerships with community agencies that can assist students with developing
mental health, and (d) classroom practice: strategies used by teachers that support students’ mental health (Hornby and Atkinson 2003, 4). Garry Hornby and Mary Atkinson’s framework for mental health would serve as a way to promote students’ emotional intelligence. The strategies offered herein are intended to be suitable for the “classroom practice” tier of Hornby and Atkinson’s framework (2003, 4), and as such, it would help teachers facilitate students’ emotional and mental health while helping them learn.

Shared Narratives

One of our answers to dealing with the grief resulting from the loss of so many in our community on 9–11 came from an 11-year-old boy named Mattie Stepanek. Mattie, a young man battling a rare form of muscular dystrophy, was on national television that week, and several of my students saw him. The author of many books, revolving around “Heartsongs” (2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2009), allowed us to grapple with the events of that fall. Students in my class struggled with trying to make sense of the loss incurred from terrorism: Why had such terrible things happened to their loved ones? How do we cope in the face of such loss. How do we get our world to make sense again? When Mattie was asked why something as traumatic as his illness could happen to anyone and how he managed to live his life despite his illness, the sage boy replied in a way that helped my students answer the similar questions they had been asking themselves; “Every person has a heartsong. I think we often do not listen to each others’ hearts and don’t respect that we all have different songs. If we would begin to listen closely, we could better connect and form a peaceful community” (Oprah Winfrey’s interview with Stepanek).

What can be learned from Mattie? That we are all different. We have different ways of dealing with stress and grief. It is important for all of us to take time to listen to each others’ songs.

After hearing Mattie’s explanation and suggestion for peace, my students wanted to read his work and compile their own “Heartsongs” in a class book. As an English teacher, this was a dream come true. Not only were my students coming together as a caring community of learners, but they wanted to read and write. The problem that felt insurmountable just days before finally had a solution: the use of bibliotherapy and writing as a crisis intervention approach.

This became a year-long project that involved other students throughout the school and around the world. Students who were most vocal about the
cause began contacting students from other countries and asked for their own “Heartsongs” to be shared with us. The students decided to compile these into a book to give Mattie as a gift. The Stepanek family lived near us, so we planned for a visit with him at a local bookstore. This experience was a turning point for our school, as the reading and writing helped us all deal with something beyond the imaginable.

My fellow teachers and I learned that no matter how well prepared our crisis intervention plan was prior to an event, whatever we had to offer our students was not enough. Educators who were left to help their students were victims and witnesses to the terror attacks. The media deluge added to the stress, as students were constantly retraumatized by the Hollywood-like quality of the newscasts.

A Story a Day

Another powerful educational strategy is reading aloud to students. This cuts against the mistaken notion that suggests that reading aloud is just a time filler for teachers. This could not be further from the truth. Reading Mattie’s writings aloud motivated student readings of not only his work but the work of others.

Picture books are especially helpful, as they are a microcosm of life. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (as cited by Manifold 2007) contends that aesthetic education assists in making sense of pain through the unfolding of sequenced events that include a sensory stimulus and emotional response. Artwork from books, the narratives told in these short pieces of text, and metaphoric associations both engage and heal students (Manifold 2007).

These books are also powerful tools for modeling and teaching reading strategies that allow for students of all ages to become better readers, writers, and critical thinkers (Block and Pressley 2007; Cunningham and Allington 2003; Pressley et al. 2007). Reading aloud should not be seen as a waste of instructional time; it is a strong method for developing deep thinkers and proficient readers and writers.

Communicating and Connectedness

Through both shared narratives and read-alouds, what helped most was giving teachers and students a common language, and these books were a catalyst for students’ writing and discussions. Communication trickled into homes, as students began to talk to parents about what they were creating at school. Mattie Stepanek, unknowingly, was able to build a social sup-
port system for our school by providing us with his book series, *Heartsongs* (Stepanek 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2009). As we know, individuals handle grief in their own ways; what worked with this project was that those students who did not want to talk could instead read and write responses to include in the book. Those who needed to talk talked. It gave me a way to teach students to be supportive of their peers and how to react to differences in emotions. Those who wanted to share their work did, and those who wanted to keep it private knew that was an option. Establishing this network of communication helped create a sense of community in the classroom that spoke to students’ need for connectedness (Yocum 2014). This fulfillment of the need for connectedness helped students grow emotionally as they learned more about one another and themselves.

Research suggests that when teachers talk with students about traumatic feelings, shared narratives can help them cope with the psychobiological characteristics of stress, especially if using familiar people and visual aids (Nash et al. 2008; Nelson et al. 2004). I will never forget what Mattie said to me when he met with my class: “I love owls.” I gave him a collectible owl, and he smiled from ear to ear as he attached it to his wheelchair, proclaiming it to be his new favorite accessory. Although on the surface, this exchange seems fairly innocuous in the context of Mattie’s example to me and my students, his words struck a chord in my heart. Upon further reflection, I have come to realize that this exchange is a beautiful illustration of exactly the kind of emotional cognizance that teachers should display. Sometimes it can be just as simple as giving someone a trinket, being mindful of students’ wants and needs, providing engaging lessons that are fun and that can transport their thoughts from sorrow to happiness. This kind of emotionally aware instruction provides students with a focus to help them transcend both routine stressors and more deeply ingrained grief (Greene 2001).

Before Mattie visited our class, two of my students took the initiative to correspond with Mattie by e-mail, sharing class poems throughout the project and obtaining Mattie’s input on the design of our book. This developed into a relationship that was meaningful to not only my students but others from around the world as Mattie expanded our network from schools to Buenos Aires and England, then Russia and many more. After all the anticipation and correspondence, my students were eager to meet Mattie when he visited our class. His inspiring example helped my students transition from a dark time in their lives to one of light again. With his
smile and hopefulness still present, Mattie read a selection to my students, and several of them reciprocated by reading their poems from our classroom book that Mattie inspired, *Heartsongs across the World*. Students that I am still in contact with from that year tell me how important Mattie’s visit was to them. Not only was Mattie a young person with whom they could identify, my students also seemed to innately realize that if Mattie could overcome his personal pain and excel, so could they. His writings gave them inspiration to respond with their own shared narratives. The *Heartsongs across the World* project finally led to some discussions that allowed for healing.

Service learning is another strategy that can equip students to communicate and connect. As with the aforementioned strategies, the most successful service learning projects that resonate with students and promote their emotional intelligence are those that give students a voice and include a reflection component (Byers et al. 2000; Terry and Bohnenberger 2007). Additionally, Janet Eyler’s (2002) application of experiential learning theory with regard to service learning makes both the educational and emotional benefits of this strategy clear. Service learning helps students learn to solve problems and develop higher-order thinking skills while providing them with the means for developing positive attitudes toward community engagement, instilling a sense of self-efficacy and commitment, and empowering them to better understand social issues (Eyler 2002).

Early in my teaching career, I was afforded the opportunity to lead the student government association (SGA). When the time came to select a service learning project, the majority of the students wanted to spend their time with the elderly at our local nursing home. All students, that is, except one. Jenny was the type of student who always helped others, so it was surprising she showed such dislike for this project. In order to reach Jenny and to help prepare other students who had never visited a nursing home, we read the picture book *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* (Fox 1992), relating a tale of a young boy who visited with the residents of a nursing home. He is confused and saddened when he overhears that his favorite resident has lost her memory. Not knowing what this means, Wilfrid asks others the question “What is a Memory?” As each person defines memory differently, Wilfred makes it his mission to help Miss Nancy find hers.

I asked students to write responses to this book that shared their excitement for, and fears about, our upcoming nursing home visit. Jenny did not respond. She did, however, turn in a permission slip and decided to attend the trip.

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On the bus to the nursing home, Jenny told me her MawMaw was a resident there and was suffering with Alzheimer’s disease. She trusted me enough to tell me her family did not talk to her about it, and she did not know how to handle the situation. I shared the story of my grandmother, and together, we visited with her MawMaw that day.

Artistic Expression

What I learned from students’ emotional struggles throughout the years has served me well as an educator, as I have always continued to make communicating and connecting with students my number one priority. I have often asked myself, other educators, and prior students what made our class different. What made them a community of learners? Was it the books they read? The time spent writing? The collaborative work? I can honestly say that I think it was the time spent listening to their “Heartsongs.” One of my former students wrote, “What made me trust you so much was the fact that you got on my level. You didn’t talk to me or treat me the way many others did. You cared. We talked about my problems at home, and you helped me with my other school work (even math!). You went beyond what your job asked of you. You even bought me books because I am such a picky reader.” Other students noted that the books gave them starting points for discussions and helped them learn life lessons. Previous research has indicated that personal and educational role models are both contributing factors to motivation along personal and spiritual paths (Yocum 2014). Likewise, the students from 2001 reported that the presence of a hero, such as Mattie, providing an answer for why we have tragedy and pain gave them a sense of hope.

I am still in contact with students from throughout my teaching career, but no other students stay in touch as much as those from the year of 9/11. Just recently, I contacted the authors of the works I share herein. They still speak of the importance of “Heartsongs” and how that year shaped them, not only in terms of character but in skills gained for their careers. Engaging in shared narratives and activities such as journaling, writing poetry, and other forms of artistic expression provides students with an outlet for their grief while allowing them to learn and connect with others (Cohen 2005).

A sampling of student work from that year is presented below, illustrating how reading and writing provided a vehicle for students to move beyond grief toward hopefulness. The first poem is written by a woman who is now a teacher. The second author, a student who lost his father on 9–11, now holds a job as a copy editor for a major publication.
The first piece, “Starting Over,” was written by a student who was grappling with her parents’ divorce. Gabrielle was a student who felt comfortable expressing herself verbally in class, and she had already written a personal narrative about her father’s abandonment of the family. When 9–11 occurred, her writing in class revolved more around her parents’ divorce than about the current tragedy. The strategies applied and connections built in class can be seen in her work and give voice to the emotional benefits for students. Gabrielle moved from narratives filled with anger to this poem showing signs of hope. This facilitated a long-lasting emotional health: Gabrielle was in college when the Virginia Tech school shooting occurred in 2007, and she shared that the event made her revisit the healing offered by writing poetry. Gabrielle is currently teaching poetry in New Zealand at Christchurch.

Starting Over (Gabrielle [Pseudonym], Grade 8, 2001)

It’s those spiteful words
That pierce the heart.
It’s the raging war,
But just the start
It’s the pouring rain
Falling on your parade
It’s the feeling of sorrow
Of being left or betrayed
It’s the brimming eyes
Close to leaking tears
It’s the release of panic
And the trapping of fears
It’s the pain
It’s the stitches on hand
To mend the soul
It’s the feeling of unity
The emotions under control
It’s the sun rising slowly
It’s the tissues and that shoulder
It’s the smile on a face
Knowing you are a bit bolder
It’s the dove flying
Above a painted sky
It’s the hand of another
The encouragement to try
It is peace and a new beginning.
“Lovelight” was written by Matthew. As a student in my gifted and talented class, he was usually first to participate and share his thoughts. Matthew’s father was killed during the attack on the Pentagon during 9–11, forcing Matthew to silently withdraw into a world of his own grief-filled thoughts. Matthew missed the initial project instruction regarding our class “Heartsongs” book due to his family’s loss. When Matthew returned, the class project was near its end, as students were binding the book and creating the pages. At first, I did not think he would complete work for Mattie’s book, but at the last minute, he handed in this piece. The students in the class would not allow Matthew to withdraw. Each day, I watched as students built connections by including him, having him proofread, and asking him for suggestions for their writing. Matthew was my strongest student in terms of writing, so this peer-assisted teaching role allowed him to express himself from an area of strength. There is no doubt that the love and acceptance given to him that year was instrumental in facilitating the emotional intelligence and well-being displayed by his hopeful poem.

_Love-Light_ (Matthew [Pseudonym], Grade 8, 2001)

Leave a love-light on for me,
It’s frightening in the dark.
Leave a love-light in the clouds and sea,
Hatred always flies with the birds,
It forever swims with sharks.
Leave a love-light on for me,
So I can find my way.
A light so that my heart can see,
“One if by land,
Two if by sea
Save this country dear to me.
Shine across the bay.”
Leave a love-light on for me,
I swear I’ll find your love.
For love is all that we will be
I’ll search from the very deep ocean
To the stars blazing above.
Leave a love-light on for me,
The sun just cannot compare.
Leave a love-light on for me,
Whose music fills the air.
Leave a love-light on for me,
Oh, please don’t pass me by.
Please, just one more light for me,
To flash across the sky.
Leave a love-light on for me,
And I will stay around.
Leave a love-light on for me,
For on my journey
Across a life of heartache and sorrow,
A love-light is most precious of all.

The Common Thread and Suggestions for Establishing Community

Whether it be shared narratives, read-alouds, artistic expression, service learning, or emphasizing communication and connectedness, the thread that runs through these strategies is the concept that in order to help students develop emotional intelligence and empower them to cope with life, we must use pedagogies that encourage them to express themselves, to share, to make connections, and to be able to empathize.

Alice Miller contends that there is an absence in Western culture of a “framework within which the child could experience his feelings and emotions” (as cited by Cooper and Hill 2002, 8). She posits that avoiding recognition of feelings and fears is one reason why suffering occurs. Through researching the work of such individuals as Karyn Cooper and Anne Hill (2002), Donna Gaffney (2006), and Robert Neimeyer and colleagues (2010), as well as using practical experience from the classroom, we have suggestions for educators to use not only in times of trauma but daily.

1. *Establish trust and provide a sense of safety.* As the previous examples indicate, students value trust. It is critical that students first feel safe and are not criticized for thoughts and feelings. Instead of teachers merely giving commentary on events, we can move students forward without criticism, while encouraging them to become aware of their feelings. Giving students a time and place for sensible emotional reflection and expression through reading and writing allows them to make sense of their situations.

2. *Provide a sanctuary of learning.* Play, investigation, and learning are parts of healing. A constructivist approach also allows for students to arrive at their own meaning of events, which is critical to moving forward.

3. *Provide a collaborative context.* Learning in groups helps students feel less alone. Writing allows for collaborative work, while maintaining individual integrity for those who are unable to share.
4. *Get feet back on the ground again.* Help students forward into a supportive post-trauma world by providing them with tools and vehicles that increase their emotional awareness while signaling that the pre-trauma world and subsequent trauma can be viewed with hopefulness in an optimistic post-trauma light. Take students back to a pre-trauma world. Writings from Mattie were of interest to the students, and they could relate to his stories. This interest prompted a unit on Heroes and Peacemakers, without reliving the 9–11 trauma.

5. *Model strategies for your students.* Teacher modeling is one of the best forms of instruction (Block and Pressley 2007; Cunningham and Allington 2003; Pressley et al. 2007). I shared my writings and read aloud from books to allow students to use their senses in order to inspire remarkable writing. This allows for the teacher to be “real” by sharing grief and choosing to read stories which showcase the healing power of books.

6. *Provide writing for a cause.* Once we began work on the *Heartsongs across the World* book, we had order in our lives again. Having a mission allowed us to move forward together. We did not all see the events of 9–11 the same way, yet our project allowed us to work through individual feelings while allowing a united focus on peace.

**Conclusion**

To those who might say there is no place for emotions in the work of school, these strategies and pedagogical choices, along with student narratives, tell a different tale. As I found out with Mattie and my middle school students, Viktor Frankl’s (1992) contention that “the quest for meaning is the key to mental health and human flourishing” (157) is evident in the students’ own writing. When reviewing articles on grief and its place in education, one point kept resounding: the importance of understanding an emotional pedagogy as part of our work in the classroom. Teachers must be mindful that classrooms are not cocoons, shielded from outside influences and sorrows. We must take these outside influences into account as we teach because, as David Smith (1999) so aptly states, “Classrooms are crystallization centers for the broader tensions at work in the culture” (911). It is this crystallization in our classrooms that gives a strong rationale for focus on holistic emotional pedagogy with keen attention on the emotional intelligence and emotional health of our students.
References


