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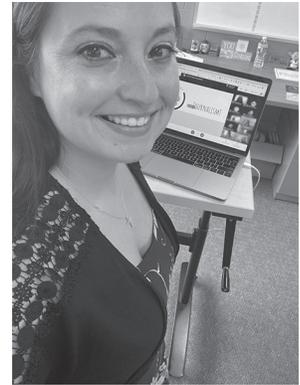
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Teaching and Learning Through Shared Grief and Loss During COVID-19

by Amanda Thorpe



Amanda Thorpe

Abstract

The closure of Michigan's schools and the emergency learning that followed no doubt kept students and teachers safe during a global pandemic, but the fallout from these transitions is differing amounts of shared grief and loss among students and teachers. Giving staff and students time, space, and resources to process this grief will be essential in any plan for returning to learning in the fall.

When the school year abruptly ended on March 13, my non-teacher friends said things like, "Looks like you get to start summer vacation early," and "I bet you love working from home." Neither of those thoughts actually crossed my mind: I was too busy grieving the loss of my time with my students and processing everything that the closing of schools for the year really meant.

I have two children at home, ages 5 and 8. One never got to finish preschool, to have graduation, to have the confidence that they were kindergarten-ready. The other lost the opportunity to finish second grade with their favorite teacher and missed the dance season competition that they had worked all year for. While trying to process my own family's losses, I grieved the ending of the year in as many different ways as I had students.

My newspaper editor-in-chief was also on the school's defending state championship baseball team. The last time he would wear a Huskie baseball uniform would be last year, hoisting the trophy. He was one of 156 student stories that weighed heavy on my heart. While society as a whole thought teachers had it made working from home, I cried tears for other people's children.

This story is my own, but I found that it is shared in whole or in part by countless others in the profession. We were sad, yes, but we didn't have time to fully process what we felt; we were pivoting quickly to online emergency learning, working with our colleagues to make a curriculum that was designed to be facilitated entirely in person magically accessible online without skipping a beat. At the same time, many of us were facilitating the district-provided learning-at-home coursework for our own children. Instead of having the time and space to work through how we felt, we were on to the next thing—and the kids were, too. They had little time to process what they had lost, from senior proms to spring sports seasons to the simplicity of the daily grind of classes with their friends. They were expected to transition seamlessly to remote learning, which they had a wide range of prior experiences with depending on the teachers that they had had. They were expected to engage at a high level in their coursework, despite the fact that our country was now a part

of a deadly pandemic and regardless of whether their parents or siblings were essential workers or had been quarantined or ill. Teachers and students were expected to be high-functioning in their roles despite the fact that the world around them was on the verge of collapsing into division and fear.

No season lasts forever, and the school year eventually came to an end. As I write this, we are officially midway through what would traditionally be summer break. I had hoped that the time after the official end date on the calendar would bring a sense of normalcy, but it has provided anything but. In any other year, the end of the school year would feel like a welcome and earned respite, and then Fall would feel like the start of something new. This year, I keep waiting to feel like the school year is over. Instead of an ending and a new beginning, it feels like an awkward and anxious transition period. This is the baggage that teachers and students are carrying into the start of the new school year. This is where the Fall will start: with teachers and students having not only experienced differing amounts of a shared grief and loss, but also trying to move forward together amid the disappointment that the return to normalcy that they were hoping for has yet to come to pass.

The pressure to jump back into academics is strong, particularly when there is the fear that students need to “catch up” on missed learning, but schools as institutions have to recognize the shared experiences of their staff and students and start by focusing on the who (teachers, students, families) and the why (what are the many different purposes of school), not only on the what (curriculum). We will be remiss if we jump right into our pretests and standardized test preparation instead of building a supportive, cohesive classroom climate where social and emotional learning is just as much a priority as academic learning. Simultaneously, administrators and institutions need to put teacher well-being at the forefront, allowing them to be major shareholders in the decisions that impact them and their students and giving them space and resources for self-care. When we return, social and emotional support for all is not *something* we have to do, it's *the thing* we have to do. Only once we have acknowledged and

processed the feelings of the past few months will we be able to move forward toward healing and learning together. And this re-centering of schools, teachers, and students could prove to be especially valuable in the event of a second wave resulting in new school closures and virtual learning. We were largely caught unprepared the first time, but we have a considerable upper hand the second time around if we are willing to be intentional—and human—about it.

Author Biography

Amanda Thorpe has led alternative and traditional secondary education English classrooms for the last 12 years as a remedial, core, and International Baccalaureate teacher as well as a scholastic newspaper adviser. She is a former Michigan Journalism Adviser of the Year as well as a Dow Jones News Fund National Distinguished Adviser. She completed her doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins with a focus on diversity, inclusion, justice, and equity in education, and in addition to being a full-time high school teacher, she is also a faculty member within Cornerstone University's Masters in Education program.

