

5-2023

## **Breaking the Silence: What Isn't Being Said About Grieving Students**

Robin Farian

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**Breaking the Silence: What isn't being said about Grieving Students**

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LS400: Capstone

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May 18, 2023

### **Abstract**

The focus issue addressed in this Capstone Project is how well teachers are trained to support a student who is grieving. This is an important issue for teachers because a student who is grieving is in a very vulnerable place, and the way a teacher responds can be very beneficial or detrimental to the student. An argument is made that teachers should be better prepared for a situation where a student is struggling with grief. Considerations of the issue should include the perspectives of teachers who have experience teaching grieving students. Three action options emerged from an analysis of the data and were explored as ways to address the issue presented. Sharing resources and helpful information with teachers using a digital poster is argued to be the most effective way to achieve the goals of preparing teachers with the constraints such as time, reach, and probability of impact.

### **Breaking the Silence: What isn't being said about Grieving Students**

It was my seventh-grade year when my father battled and passed away from cancer. It started shortly after the beginning of the school year, and it ended just days before the end. I can still remember it, although I don't like to. I had thought that seventh grade was bad, and then one very short summer later eighth grade began. Eighth grade was different because I was no longer hoping for a recovery, I was facing grief unlike I had ever known, and there were times I just didn't know what to do with myself. I was 13 years old, and my father was gone forever, and while there was nothing that anyone could do to make things okay, I had a community that made things better. It was my teachers that were a large part of that community, they were there for me and I've never forgotten it.

Although it was mainly my eighth-grade year that I dealt with the loss, the support began in the seventh grade when my father became sick. If I ever would have struggled with school, that would have been the time, but because of my teachers I found wonderful passions instead. My physical education teacher pushed me to play volleyball, and I continued to play and love the sport for several years. My math teacher helped me fall in love with math, she had me join the math decathlon team, and it's been my favorite school subject ever since. My language arts teacher began my love of both reading and writing, supplying me with books that I still love to this day and inspiring me to write poetry and short stories. These were my teachers that saw me everyday, they helped me stay positive and busy during a horrible time in my life, and when my father died they came to his funeral. They were there for me, they kept me engaged in academics, they were understanding and most of all they were kind.

Just like my seventh grade teachers, my eighth grade teachers were exceptional and they were just what I needed at that time in my life. The year prior, they had taught my older sister, so

they all knew quite well what had happened, and most of them already knew me very well. My teachers were incredibly involved in my life, from day one they made their support for me known. When I wanted to write about my grief for my classes poetry slam, my language arts teacher was so encouraging, she helped me feel brave enough to do it. By the end of my eighth grade year, I had kept my grades and my morale up. On my graduation day, I was surprised when I won my school district's Trustees Award. With that one plaque, I felt honored beyond belief, I felt like people could see my struggles and efforts, that they were being recognized. I was so moved, and it was my teachers who nominated me. They saw me struggle in my grief and come out the other side and continue to succeed, and they made me feel acknowledged. I'll never forget that feeling, and it was because of my teachers.

Going through such a significant loss at such a young age is something that no one should have to go through. Nothing can change the amount of pain that grief causes a child, but a supportive community can help more than most people realize. I had my family, I had my friends, and I had my teachers. Teachers are in such a unique position in a child's life, their compassion and understanding goes such a long way for a child who needs it. It went such a long way for me. It's been years, but I still remember my teachers from that hard time in my life. Their kindness is what inspired me to be a teacher, they are the reason I chose this path. I am who I am because of them.

### **Literature Synthesis & Integration**

As human beings, we create relationships with one another. We thrive together, we love each other, we all have people we care about. It is a tragic truth of life that with those relationships, we are also setting ourselves up to feel immense loss and grief. Grief, a great sorrow caused by a death, is not limited to family members, spouses, or close friends—anyone

can feel this sorrow after a death. Children, too, often must face grief. In a typical class, it is estimated that at least two students may be grieving a loss (Lawhon, 2004). Schonfeld and Quackenbush (2010) made the assessment that when a student needs guidance, it is often a teacher they will go to. The same is true for grief, students need teachers' help and guidance. Having a large support network is a privilege that some students have (Perschy, 2004), and it is often teachers that play a big role in that network. Teachers spend a considerable amount of time with their students, they have a chance to be there for their students when they are struggling, but often teachers do not know the best way to help. This lack of knowledge can make it very difficult for teachers to help their students in effective ways that will be beneficial to their growing minds.

### **Why is it an Issue?**

When students are grieving, a door is opened bringing the possibility of great personal change to that student. This student can change for the better, but it is also true that this student can change for the worse. It is summarized well that “the emotional turmoil of grieving can be unnerving for even the most secure teen. Intense and frightening mood swings make some question their sanity” (Perschy, 2004, p. 3). A deep loss is not a temporary pain, it is something that will follow these students for the rest of their lives. Both their behavior changes and memories will linger, and they will never be the same as they were.

Emotions can have a very strong influence on even adults, and there is no question of the influence emotions can have on a child. Even if they should know better, students who are in an emotional state are prone to act out and misbehave (Perschy, 2004, p. 121). As authority figures, a first instinct may be to punish a student for misbehaving, but teachers must be mindful of the emotional impact that loss can have. It is recommended that accommodations may be made for a

grieving child in participation, assignments, and other areas (Lawhon, 2004). These are all areas where students are prone to do poorly after a loss, teachers need to be aware of that likelihood. They may miss a deadline or decline to participate, which is incredibly natural, but teachers still should do their best to help them improve.

Having a grieving student is difficult enough on its own, but it becomes more difficult still when the cultural practices of said student are different than your own (Schonfeld, Quackenbush, & Demaria, 2015). Different cultures often have different customs after a loss, and while one's first instinct may be to reach out to a family after a death, some will hesitate. They may fear saying something that may be offensive or inappropriate, and some let that fear prevent them from connecting with those who are grieving (Schonfeld et al., 2015). This can be a struggle for teachers who do not know how to approach a student of a different culture, sometimes even the best intentions can make things worse.

One more issue that teachers may come across is that children may be hesitant to discuss their grief at school (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2010, pg 23). For many students, the subject will simply feel much too personal to discuss with a teacher, and some may not even consider that their teachers are open to discuss such issues (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2010). A teacher cannot properly help their students if their students do not feel comfortable communicating with their teachers.

### **What Has and/or Should Be Done?**

In regard to what has been done to help this issue, I found one main thing, and that is that people have written about it. Those who had ideas of what should be done took to writing to get their ideas out there and provide resources for other teachers. Perschy (2004) not only wrote a

book with the purpose of helping teachers navigate these rocky waters, but she also provided a list of books for people of all ages that are meant to help. On top of that, she provided multiple helpful diagrams, such as Figure 1, a chart depicting the feelings of grief. A list of helpful kids books is also provided by Lawhon (2004) . In an article about cultural grief, the Coalition to Support Grieving Students is recommended as a resource for addressing not just grief, but grief in multiple cultures as well (Schonfeld et al., 2015).



Figure 1: Feelings of grief

The writing and resources that have been done lead nicely into what should be done in a K-12 classroom, as all of the readings provided opinions and suggestions. Three different sources recommended teaching about loss and grief in the classroom. One discussed two ways to teach students about grief, through lesson plans and books (Lawhon, 2004). Another recommends journaling about grief, and discussions in class as a way to establish connections between students (Perschy, 2004). The third recommended laying a base by teaching all students about



loss, and then using teachable moments when they arise (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2010). It is also encouraged that teachers work with the parents as they can help teachers understand what may be going on in a student's life and get information that they may need to know (Lawhon, 2004). When parents and teachers come together with the common goal of helping students, so much good can be accomplished.

There are so many great suggestions for what should be done from these sources and many more, but most teachers will never come across them. Some teachers may look for resources if they suddenly have a student who is grieving, but it takes time for them to find all these options. One last thing that should be done is teaching future teachers about this subject in university so that they are prepared for the possibility. There are so many details that would be beneficial for teachers to know, details that are in these sources. In their book, Schonfeld and Quackenbush (2010) discussed common reactions that students may have and different factors that might affect those reactions. They also provide a list of things that teachers should not say to grieving students, such as, "I know what you're going through," and provide alternatives like "I can only imagine how difficult this must be for you" (Quackenbush & Schonfeld, 2010). The fact that boys and girls are likely to have different reactions in the face of grief is something that would be very beneficial for a teacher to be aware of ahead of time (Lawhon, 2004).

Specifically looking at different cultures, future teachers should be given the helpful tips and reassurances that these resources provide. It would be really helpful for a teacher to remember that "chances are quite good that a school professional who is thoughtful, sensitive, and respectful will be able to help grieving students and provide meaningful support to their families, even if unfamiliar with their particular cultural practices" (Schonfeld et al., 2015). Through working with the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, Schonfeld and

Quackenbush (2010) have often worked with families of different cultural backgrounds. Their two main suggestions are “be competent and comfortable in your own culture, and, second, know that every family is unique” (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2010, p. 27).

## **Conclusion**

When a student faces a loss, it is bound to have a great effect on them, and they need support from those around them to get through the hard times. Teachers are in a position to be there for their students, but they may not be properly equipped with their education to help students in this specific scenario. In years of school, Liberal Studies students are taught over and over again about diversity and equity, learning the same concepts in multiple classes, but no class equips them with the methods to help a grieving student. People go to college to learn how to be effective teachers, and helping students deal with grief is something they should be taught. If a teacher is lucky, they will never need to use those skills, but we must always be prepared.

## **Method**

For this Capstone Project, I investigated how teachers view grieving students and what they think could be done to improve the support of grieving students. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, I used what I have learned to formulate an action that responds to the support provided to students dealing with grief in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

## **Context**

The interviewees are all teachers, though they teach different grade levels and some of them are in different cities. Ms Cash<sup>1</sup> and Ms Maxon both teach at Huskie Middle School in CowTown. According to the SARC, this school's staff is about 81% white and 13.5% Hispanic,

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all people and places have been changed for anonymity.

about 78% female and 22% male, there are about twenty students per every one teacher, and the average teaching experience is ten years. Ms Word teaches at Big Tree Middle School in Frostville. According to the SARC, this school's staff is about 83% white and 7% American Indian, about 55% female and 45% male, there are about twenty students per every one teacher, and the average teaching experience is eight years. Mr Cruz teaches at Artie Elementary in Artieville. According to the SARC, this school's staff is about 48% Hispanic and 44% white, about 89% female and 11% male, there are about twenty-three students per every one teacher, and the average teaching experience is nine years.

## **Participants and Participant Selection**

### **Researcher**

When I was in seventh grade, my father passed away from cancer. In my time of grief, I found that focusing on school work and extracurriculars was incredibly helpful. It was my teachers who supported me and helped me get through the difficulties and stay on track. That is why this topic is so meaningful to me, I was the grieving student and I was helped by my teachers. I thank God they knew how to comfort me in my time of need.

My participants will all be teachers, so we will be different in that my experience was as a student. I saw student grief from my perspective as a student, I want to understand now how the teachers see it.

I need to be careful to stay factual with my research and not let emotions cloud things, this can be a very emotional subject. It is very emotional for me, specifically, because I was a young student dealing with grief after my father passed away when I was 13 years old. And because of my own experiences, I need to be careful to not make assumptions about other student experiences. When interviewing teachers, I can not let my emotions get in the way of my

open mindedness to their answers.

### **Participants**

The participants were invited to participate in the study because of their relevant experience or expertise.

**Ms Cash.** A white female teacher, she is 59 years old. She teaches eighth grade english and language arts and she was my teacher when I was in eighth grade

**Mr Cruz.** A Hispanic male teacher, he is 27 years old. He is a kindergarten teacher.

**Ms Word.** A white female teacher, she is 26 years old. She is a seventh grade math teacher.

**Ms Maxon.** A white female teacher, she is 41 years old. She is a seventh grade English and language arts teacher and she was my teacher when I was in seventh grade.

### **Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions**

The following questions were asked to the participants.

1. What do you know about or what have been your experiences with students who are grieving? What do you see as the challenges with attending school while grieving? What do you see as the challenges of teaching a student who is grieving?
2. What is currently being done to improve teachers' ability to support students who are grieving - by whom - and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?
3. What do you think should be done about improving teachers' ability to support students who are grieving?
4. What do you think are the challenges to improving teachers' ability to support or help students who are grieving?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about grieving students in classrooms

and/or the improvement of teachers' ability to support said students?

### **Procedure<sup>2</sup>**

Participants were interviewed. All interviews were done individually. When it is not possible to interview participants in person, they were invited to complete a phone interview or paper and pencil survey of the same questions. Face-to-Face interviews took less than half an hour, were audio-recorded (with participant consent), and took place in a location of the interviewees choice. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting or unexpected responses. All interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee and took about 20 minutes to complete.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

## **Results**

For this Capstone Project, teachers were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve support for grieving students. This is important because grief can greatly impact a student's life, both personally and academically, and teachers are in a position to be compassionate and supportive of them. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: reach; time; and probability of impact. Reach is being considered because unless I am able to spread ideas to many people, the change will be insignificant. Time is being considered because as the end of the semester nears, I do not have a lot of time left to choose and carry out an action. Probability of impact is being

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<sup>2</sup> <http://my.ilstu.edu/~jhkahn/>

considered because if nothing comes of my efforts, then there is no use for them. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

*Evaluation of Action Options*

	Reach	Time	Probability of Impact
Request for Credential Programs to teach about grief	Low	Medium	High
Create and distribute informational pamphlets	Low	High	Low
Create a digital informational poster and send it to schools to share with teachers	Medium	Medium	Medium

**Request for Credential Programs to Teach about Grief**

A few of the interviewees, when asked what they think should be done, specifically stated that grief training should happen in the credential program. Ms Word (personal communication, April 12, 2023) shared that she thought the credential program was the best place to train teachers on grief, “so that we are not having to learn by trial and error with students who are going through real trauma.” By going to their early training, there is a good chance of equipping teachers properly, but it would have an incredibly small impact as it would be impossible for me to send this request to every teaching credential program.

**Create and distribute informational pamphlets**

A couple interviewees talked about training that they receive yearly, Ms Maxon and Mr Cruz both mentioned training that school staff receives to train them for trauma responses. Ms

Word, however, revealed that her district does not have this kind of training. Ms Cash talked about counsellors being readily available, but also acknowledged that though that is good, “students who have not seen the counselor on a regular basis may not feel comfortable talking with someone they don't know” (personal communication, May 1, 2023). “Teachers need to be up to date on the research regarding trauma informed practices,” Ms Maxon (personal communication, April 18, 2023) stated, and it made me consider what could help the teachers like Ms Word who are not being trained. Informational pamphlets could provide them with important information they would have gotten from training. A small easy to read pamphlet could make resources more accessible. However, it's important to note that humans have a tendency to ignore and throw out pamphlets, and there is no way for me to spread them widely.

### **Create a digital informational poster and send it to schools to share with teachers**

A very similar idea to the last, many of the same points lead me to this possibility. It was something I learned from Mr Cruz that pushed me to go digital. He told me about how his school's website is utilized to submit concerns about a student's well-being. Technology is an excellent new tool that would make it easier to disperse good resources. With a digital poster, I can also include direct links to resources I have included in my literature synthesis. It has all of the same applications as the pamphlet, as it will share important resources, only with it being digital, I can share it with more efficiency. Still, in the scope of the whole country, or even the whole state, this probably would not spread far, but it would go much farther than a physical pamphlet. Although it must be noted that it is still likely to be ignored by many.

### **Conclusion**

**Recommendation.** Due to factors such as reach, time, and probability of impact, I recommend the creation of a digital informational poster that may be spread among teachers and

schools. This poster will contain information and resources for teaching students who are grieving.

**Concessions.** It is unfortunate that reaching out to credential programs would have a small impact, because I truly think that if credential programs taught grief changing that would make a huge difference. There is no way, sadly, that I can request this from every credential program or even a majority. As for the pamphlet, it would have been nice to have something tangible, something that teachers can put up on bulletin boards in break rooms.

**Limitations.** In my choice, I am making an assumption that could be wrong, and if that were the case then my choice would not work at all. I am assuming that when I distribute this digital poster, people will both read it and share it with others. I have already acknowledged the fact that people tend to toss out physical pamphlets before reading them, but I am hoping that with a digital poster, rather than ignoring it people may take at least a moment to look at it. Since it is digital, I would also be able to share it on social media, but again I am making an assumption that people would actually read it, and there is no guarantee of that.

**Potential negative outcomes.** If a teacher were to misunderstand any of the information from the poster and try to connect with a grieving student under the wrong guidance, that could be unfortunate for the teacher and student's relationship.

**Conclusion.** This issue is one that affects the entire country, and it is unfortunate that I simply do not have enough reach to make a large impact. But by supplying even a handful of teachers with this information, I can still make an impact, even if it is small. By supplying the information in this method, I have the best chance of getting it to the most possible teachers, and therefore having the greatest possible impact. That is why I have chosen to create digital informational posters, which I will then email to schools, teachers, and post on social media.



### **Action Documentation & Reflection**

The issue this project focuses on is how teachers are not properly prepared to teach students who are grieving. To learn more about this, I interviewed a few teachers who have experience in teaching grieving students. From what I learned, a few options for an action emerged, which were to request the training from credential programs, create and distribute pamphlets, or create and distribute a digital informational poster. Ultimately I decided to create and distribute a digital informational poster as I thought that would have a better chance of reaching teachers directly and it would have a wider reach than a physical pamphlet.

### **Action Research Project Documentation and Reflection**

After reviewing my options, I've chosen to create and distribute a digital poster, seen in Figure 1, meant to provide helpful information and resources for teaching students who have experienced a loss. I used the research I did for this project to pinpoint details about grieving students that I think all teachers should be aware of, and I incorporated those details into the poster. Beyond that, I included resources that I think would be very helpful for teachers to have. Once the poster was done, I sent it to teachers that I know via email, seen in Figure 2, and I put it on twitter, seen in Figure 3, for a larger reach. So far, I've only gotten a few responses promising to pass it along, and there's not much more I can expect than that. I expect it would take a long time to see any real outcome, and I wouldn't even see it myself. If I had known how little time I would have towards the end of this project, I would have started earlier. If I had started earlier then I would have had more time to see my action play out, and maybe plan to do even more.

# Grieving Students: How Teachers Can Help

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"At the national center for school crisis and bereavement (ncscb), we have worked with families from many different cultures and have found two general guidelines to work well in virtually every interaction. *First, be competent and comfortable in your own culture, and, second, know that every family is unique*" (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2010).


Teaching about grief, journaling, and encouraging students to connect are all recommended by Perschy (2004).

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Team up with parents! Work together with them to understand what's going on in a student's life and how best to help them.

**"The emotional turmoil of grieving can be unnerving for even the most secure teen. Intense and frightening mood swings make some question their sanity" (Perschy, 2004).**

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At a given time, it is estimated that about 2 students may be grieving in an average class. (Lawhon, 2004)



Boys and girls tend to grieve differently from each other. Girls are more likely to talk and cry, while boys are more likely to take action. (Lawhon, 2004)

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The Coalition to Support Grieving Students provides guidance not just on helping students who are grieving but also on addressing grief with students from different cultures specifically. [grievingstudents.org](http://grievingstudents.org) (Schonfeld, Quackenbush, & Demaria, 2015)

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 Schonfeld, D., & Quackenbush, M. (2010). The grieving student: a teacher's guide / by David J. Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush. Paul H. Brookes Pub. Co.  
 Schonfeld, D., Quackenbush, M., & Demaria, T. (2015). Grief across cultures: Awareness for schools. NASN School Nurse, 30(6), 350-352.

Figure 1: Digital Informational Poster

## Please Share Resource



**Robin Farian** <rfarian@csumb.edu>

to [redacted]

Hello, please enjoy and share this free resource with other teachers!

Thank you,

-Robin Farian

One attachment • Scanned by Gmail ⓘ



Figure 2: Sharing via email



**Robin Farian**  
@FarianRobin



Grieving Students: How Teachers Can Help  
[#education](#) [#futureteachers](#) [#csumb](#) [#Is400](#)

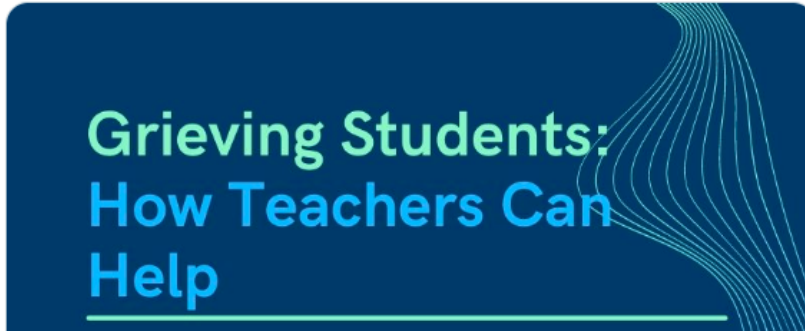


Figure 3: Sharing via Twitter

### Critical Reflection

Throughout this project, there are a few things that I learned about myself. One thing in particular that surprised me was the practical confirmation that I push myself harder than I need to. I promised myself going into this semester that I was going to relax a bit more and not be so uptight about school, and I do really feel like I've done that. I've allowed myself to enjoy my free time and have a great semester, and the surprising part is that I still did very well in all my

classes. Particularly with this project, there were times that I was so concerned that I wasn't doing enough, but ultimately this project has turned out very well. I've learned that I'm able to both take time for myself and my friends and still effectively do everything that needs to be done.

From talking to teachers throughout this project, I've learned that you never really stop learning how to be a teacher. You don't just leave your teaching credential with all the information you'll ever need, it's a never ending process of learning new things and incorporating them into your classroom and seeing how they work. I've also learned that change is something that can take years, both in education and in other aspects of life. If you want something to change, especially big things, it will take a long time and a lot of effort to make that change, even if it's something that no one would disagree with. Getting the message out there alone takes time. It was very hard to think of an action that I could do in a short amount of time, and even now that it is done, I don't expect to see any change anytime soon, if at all.

### **Synthesis and Integration**

Many of the Major Learning Outcomes from the Liberal Studies department have directly had an impact in how I see myself as a future educator. The most general aspect of this comes from MLO 1: Developing Educator. Through my years at this school, I've learned so much about being a California public educator, I've gotten a really good understanding of it from several of my classes and from service learning. From this project, I've gotten a good idea of the training that some teachers go through and the differences among districts. Almost every Liberal Studies class I've had has taught me the importance of diversity and the understanding of multiple cultures, and that comes from MLO 2: Diversity and Multicultural Scholar. In my project, as well, I address grief across cultures, and that has also increased my awareness of other cultural

practices. In regards to MLO 3: Innovative Technology Practitioner, I think mainly of my experience in LS350, as I learned a great deal about technology in that class and about using technology for teaching. I then used some of what I learned in that class to carry out my action for this project, in which I designed a digital poster. The application of MLO 4: Social Justice Collaborator was not immediately obvious to me, even though I've had multiple classes to discuss the topic. In my project, though, I discuss the idea of more widely talking about grief and how it shouldn't be an unspeakable subject. It dawned on me that this would be a social change, getting rid of the stigmas around discussing grief. Lastly, while I don't think my project specifically applies, the required courses helped me to know what subject I want to teach, which speaks to MLO 5: Subject Matter Generalist. Not only have my courses made me proficient in multiple subjects, but I know now that Math is what I want to teach specifically.

The next steps for me are not the same as the next steps for most people in this class, I presume. Before I jump into teaching, I first plan to take some time to grow up a bit more. While I admire those around me ready to jump right in, I simply don't feel ready, and I plan to work and grow as a person before I start teaching. I want to look into other jobs and be sure of my direction before I start walking. If I do become a teacher, it'll be after a significant amount of self reflection and exploration, and I'll be confident in my steps when I finally take them.

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