

# Electing to Heal: Trauma, Healing, and Politics in Classrooms

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Among the lessons that emerged after the recent presidential election is a recognition that teachers are generally not prepared to address the intersections of healing, politics, and emotion in classrooms. Now, more than ever, English educators must address trauma in classrooms, while also recognizing how individuals and groups are positioned differently in the material and emotional stakes of this election. Drawing on research, the voices of teachers, and our experiences over this past year, we call for more expansive conversations among English educators across perspectives concerned with creating safe, relational, anti-oppressive classrooms.

*I am struggling with how to teach today and the next few days.*

—First-year middle school teacher

**I**n the late hours of November 8, 2016, as it became clear that Donald J. Trump was on his way to winning the electoral college and becoming the 45th president of the United States of America, questions about the meaning of this win and an uneasiness about its immediate effects in classrooms began spreading across our various networks—online and face-to-face conversations, text messages, and emails. The days and weeks that followed the historic night only furthered the flood of teachers expressing concern and uncertainty. Writing now more than a year after the election, a deluge of inequitable policies, words, and actions continue to shape the tensions, fears, and contours within which classrooms exist today.

We write this reflection acknowledging our personal dismay with the outcome of the election, even as we also recognize that some readers *did* and, perhaps, still do support President Trump. However, we also write

mindful of the thoroughly documented symbolic and rhetorical violence of the president's campaign and the physical and psychological threats many have experienced since the election. We write, then, not to bemoan the partisan differences that fracture U.S. civic discourse but to recognize the increased stakes for students and families who were already marginalized in the United States and to address the needs of *all* students in our English classrooms today. Although this is an issue that affects students and teachers in all content areas, it is the oppressive and symbolically violent use of the essentials of our discipline—words, rhetoric, and modes of communication—that sticks to us most in the ongoing aftermath of the election (see also Sealey-Ruiz, 2016, p. 294).

The morning after the election, in triage, with bleary eyes and minds foggy in disbelief, we answered phone calls, responded to emails, and visited classrooms where students and teachers were crying together, holding each other, or, in some cases, having to confront that others were jubilant over an outcome that left them stunned and terrified. But at least we had our supportive networks; we know that for many teachers and teacher educators the experience was the inverse of ours, with colleagues and families triumphant and very few sharing a sense of devastation. Across contexts, however, many colleagues in schools were struggling to help students of all ages unpack the questions and uncertainties they had learned in the hours since the election was called for Trump. Listening to teachers and students that day and in the weeks leading up to and following the 2016 election provided striking and poignant reminders that students of all ages carry with them into school the myriad worries, ideas, and oft-repeated phrases of indoctrination spouted on television, websites, and in neighborhoods.

Among many other lessons that emerged during the election and stayed with us in the following year is an across-the-board recognition that teachers are generally not prepared to address the intersections of healing, politics, and emotion in today's classrooms. Teachers across career trajectories have raised questions about how to help students cope with the lasting trauma leading up to and following the election alongside teachers' aching spirits. English educators need support in addressing the emotional dimensions of teaching and learning in punctual moments like these, but also in the day to day of classroom routines and relationships. Students—like much of the American public—have questions, uncertainties, and mistruths that circulate around them constantly. To shut these out is more than simply passing up a missed pedagogical opportunity. Rather, not discussing the social fallout after the election is an act of denying the full humanity of students in schools.

Reckoning with the fractured democratic spirit felt by some students and teachers in schools right now points to the pressing need to address trauma in classrooms in ways that draw on research literatures and theoretical lenses that do not always occur in conversation with one another. Reflecting on these past months has required our profession to address a needed question: What do politics, trauma, emotion, and their intersections *do* in English classrooms? In our remaining space, our goal is to open expansive conversations among English educators and researchers about supporting students' well-being and positioning in classrooms.

## **Emotion, Healing, and Trauma in Classrooms**

*Definitely draining conversations with kids about real fear. Teachers too.*

—11th-year high school teacher

Social and emotional learning (SEL) tends to be grounded in educational psychology and the cognitive and sociocultural theoretical traditions of that discipline and its expansions over time. Addressing similar concerns from different perspectives, critical studies of care, trauma, and the body are most often grounded in critical, feminist, and poststructural theories and philosophical traditions. In our observation, these areas of research each offer generative approaches and certainly intersect. However, perhaps because of their sometimes different disciplinary and theoretical roots, these areas may exist in parallel with one another, rather than in conversation. We believe this historical moment demands reading *across* these perspectives as a productive and necessary opportunity for dialogue and debate across fields in educational research, including attending to tensions that may exist in how English teachers and teacher educators address issues of trauma and healing in our classrooms.

## **Social and Emotional Learning as a Lens on Healing**

Considering the ongoing needs in classrooms and schools today, one recognized pathway for addressing the uncertainties and fears of teachers is the deliberate integration of SEL in schools. SEL is “the process through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life tasks” (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004, p. 6). From an SEL lens, learning in classrooms must be grounded in safety and comfort before the transitional processes of learning and transfer may commence. However, such settings can be paradoxically fraught for both

teachers and students in classrooms (Fecho, Collier, Friese, & Wilson, 2010, p. 445). The nuances of a “safe space” for SEL in our classrooms requires looking across social, political, and cultural factors for all members of a school community.

The immediate and far-reaching effects of the 2016 election provide an important context for examining SEL approaches *across* age and subject areas as well as for students and teachers alike. At its core, education must be focused on the relationship between teachers and their students “and the extent to which that relationship nurtures the longing of the child to matter in the world” (Shriver & Buffett, 2015, p. xv). The fundamental role that SEL plays in classrooms hints at a broader consideration: What does it mean to *matter* (or *#matter*) in this world? In this way, SEL must address what it means to cultivate belonging in a broken world. Far more expansive than developing students’ emotional skills, English educators and the children, youth, and families with whom they work must help remake and repair the world.

### Testimony, Witness, and Trauma as a Lens on Healing

Another approach that speaks to stories of trauma in post-election classrooms centers critical concerns with power and politics as always present in how emotion and life stories are taken up in classrooms and other contexts of learning (e.g., Zembylas, 2007). One area of this work that is particularly resonant with our concerns here is the exploration of the intersections between shared, collective traumas and more intimate, personal traumas; witnessing of and testimony to life stories as pedagogy; and classrooms as sites of vulnerability and embodied experience.

Trauma studies draws useful distinctions and relationships between shared, large-scale events and more personally experienced hardships (e.g., Caruth, 2010). As one example, Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster felt by a nation through the images and stories in the media. In this way, it was a shared traumatic event that, we might hope, prompted widespread empathy and despair. However, each affected child carried his or her highly personal experience into whatever post-hurricane classroom he or she entered. Personal traumas, in turn, are felt individually, but students and teachers carry those losses and disruptions into classrooms in ways that must then be viewed as a collective imperative, not only for the particular classroom community but also for the ways individual challenges are often connected to political systems and shared oppressions such as local, state, and governments’ responses.

This relationship between the collective and individual experiences of trauma provides a lens for teachers and researchers to consider the varying ways that members of classroom communities are positioned in the aftermath of the election. Any sense of shared pain and fear post-election that was shared by many or most in their schools must then be coupled with awareness of the different stakes for individuals and groups in what has and will continue to unfold over the coming years. The fear and dread may be shared by a few, some, or many teachers and students in any given school community, but the risk and threat falls very differently.

In considering emotion and trauma in classrooms, witnessing serves as both action and metaphor for the kind of presence necessary in classrooms in light of life stories and the pain and fear caused by material and symbolic violence like that experienced through the election and the ensuing social and political chaos. Enacting witness depends on the presence of testimony, a sharing of experience by another. In classrooms, testimony to experience is always present, whether explicitly invited or authorized, as the bodies of teachers and students tell stories of connection, disconnection, care, dismissal, belonging, and exclusion. Thus, as literacy scholars have argued, classrooms should be spaces of intentional invitation and opportunity for students to testify to and engage with their experiences and histories (e.g., Cruz, 2012; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012; Saavedra, 2011). Teachers must extend such invitations as “critical witnesses” (Dutro, 2013) who not only listen deeply and compassionately but also analyze how students are positioned in relation to power and oppression in schools and society, particularly when teachers are living the privileges of whiteness, economic stability, heterosexuality, citizenship, and other advantaged identities not shared by students. While shared vulnerability is crucial in building humane and anti-oppressive classrooms, the election spotlighted the ever-present and different ways vulnerability affects particular members of classroom communities who are already positioned precariously in the inequitable structures and histories of oppression within and outside of schools. In this way, not only is knowledge itself embodied, but the body is the site of the convergence of the pedagogical and political in classrooms. Election vitriol placed bodies at the center of violation and violence—bodies under threat of increased surveillance and expulsion; bodies ridiculed in word and performance on the twinned stages of rallies and Twitter. Bodily responses and sensations are also central in accounts of teachers’ and students’ experiences of the election and its aftermath: eyes spilling, voices quivering, limbs trembling, arms embracing, feet marching.

## The Politics of Healing

The harm caused by Trump's words and actions during and after the election makes clear how politics connect with and exacerbate the trauma and pain felt in schools. Bridging this work to the politicized present, sustaining healing in classrooms can mean meaningfully engaging youth in civic learning. As Zembylas (2007) explains, emotions in classrooms are "not only a private matter but also a political space in which students and teachers interact with implications in larger political and cultural struggles" (p. 295).

While it is clear that healing and politics are intertwined, discussing either one of these elements can feel treacherous for English teachers. It is striking that the greatest unmet needs in classrooms are not reflected in policy documents such as the Common Core State Standards. When absent in teacher education programs and national policies, it is little wonder that many English teachers may be both stymied and fearful about addressing the civic, healing needs of classrooms. Educational policy has placed teachers in a precarious corner of *needing* to address the ongoing needs and questions in their classrooms while also navigating worries that administrators, parents, and observers may see these efforts as indoctrination. Similarly, teacher educators may often feel vulnerable to students' or administrators' criticisms when addressing crucial political issues in their courses. Potential for resistance is always present when educators pursue necessary healing of pain wrought by policy and politics. Our field—particularly our expertise with modes of communication—is uniquely suited for sustaining ways to help each other navigate the risks while holding ourselves accountable to take up the work. To be clear, we cannot untangle trauma from the politics our nation has *witnessed*.

In the context of the recent presidential election, teachers have verbalized their fear about speaking to the origins of the harm persistent in their classrooms: comments of xenophobia, racism, religious intolerance, and misogyny all regularly issued by Trump. If teachers are to take up the task of collective healing in classrooms, such work must begin by establishing trusting relationships "within which the wounded of divided communities can engage in critical and productive dialogue" (Zembylas, 2007, p. 119).

Post-election, the country and our field are faced with a moment of civic reckoning. A mandate, to recognize and guide youth's politicized identities within classrooms, must be taken up by teacher educators. English education can investigate civic possibilities and engage with new teachers in civic education research as well as the political activity that drives youth (Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015; Mirra & Garcia, 2017). Such work

does, however, require teachers and teacher educators committing to healing work within the political.

### Hope in Darkness: Continuing Work *in* and *with* Schools

*I went to sleep exhausted and anxious . . . woke up sad. Now I'm angry. I have had 3rd and 4th graders tell me they are scared for their lives, for their homes, for their parents. This election result initially made me want to leave. With my anger now, I feel a strengthened resolve to teach. What am I going to do to change things?*

—Elementary classroom student teacher

In light of the needs we have heard in classrooms and the opportunities we hold as teacher educators in guiding healing and civic dialogue nationwide, we are at a crucial intersection of threading several lines of educational research into pragmatic action. Although they differ in theoretical commitments and the history of their application to classroom practice, the areas of research we discuss above collectively underscore that supporting healing for youth in classrooms requires dialogue, relationship, space, and time. If this necessary and intensive work is to be accomplished amid the ongoing accountability demands placed on teachers, attention to healing, humanizing practice and political and civic engagement must be reflected in how teacher education and professional development are shaped. Building the space and time for such dialogue means affirming welcome of all students and creating a nurturing and validating space within which to navigate the varying identities lived in classroom communities. At the same time, recognizing the potential limits of teachers creating safe environments is also important: The sociopolitical systems beyond our schools press messages on students that cause harm even as teachers try to repair it.

As the consequences of this election continue to directly affect students and families, healing requires not offering false reassurances. We cannot suggest the certainty of a more hopeful future for all members in our classrooms. Rather, such work must be framed in English education as a continual process that is never “done.” Healing is not a singular journey of moving from hurt to being fully healed, but an ongoing path in which attention to healing and critical youth development have to be made part and parcel of teaching and learning in classrooms.

As teacher educators, we have to find a way to navigate in the dark spaces of fear and pain that crease the fabric of our work, noting intersections between our disciplinary commitments, theoretical traditions, and democracy. What does it mean to do teacher education and study literacy

in a democratic society in which the lives of many are continually disenfranchised? We need to locate the political in our work, and locate ourselves within it. We need to find places to highlight how classrooms are spaces of inclusion *and* oppression, are spaces that value *and* actively resist diverse identities, histories, and knowledges. This is a moment that can and must be harnessed for change, for coalition building, for electing to heal.

## Acknowledgment

We would like to thank Dr. William Penuel for his support and feedback on early versions of this manuscript.

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