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When grief teaches: A trauma-informed autoethnographic study

ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersections of personal grief, secondary trauma and compassion fatigue within the teaching profession, drawing from my experience as a K–12 art teacher who returned to work shortly after a family loss. I use visual autoethnography and arts-based research to examine how trauma shaped my pedagogical presence and emotional capacity. Through mixed-media artworks, wood-cut, painting and digital collage, artmaking became a site of inquiry and reflection, allowing emotions that resisted language to surface visually. Grounded in trauma-informed pedagogy, this research highlights the often-invisible emotional labour of teachers and repositions artmaking as a reflective method for sustaining well-being and professional growth. It contributes to discussions about teacher care, emotional resilience and the ethical possibilities of art-based reflection. Ultimately, this study offers both personal and pedagogical insights into how visual storytelling can serve as a tool for healing, meaning-making and humanity in emotionally demanding educational contexts.

KEYWORDS

visual autoethnography
arts-based research
teacher emotional
labour
pedagogies of care
compassion fatigue
grief expression in
education
educator well-being
reflective art practice

Teaching is relational work sustained by emotional labour in daily classroom life (Yin et al. 2019). Yet research and practice often position teachers as caregivers within the ‘helping professions’ (Ormiston et al. 2022: 2). Compassion fatigue (CF) in such settings can involve ‘ignoring a teacher’s own emotional needs’,

and limited preparation for supporting students' mental health (Ormiston et al. 2022: 12). This imbalance contributes to emotional exhaustion and burnout among teachers (Yin et al. 2019). When teachers' grief is not acknowledged in institutional settings, a condition that grief scholars' term 'disenfranchised grief' (Albuquerque et al. 2021: 2), the absence of adequate training and formal support heightens emotional strain. Studies highlight the need for clearer policies and professional guidance to promote teachers' sense of competence (Frei-Landau 2024) and teachers 'hiding certain negative emotions' to meet role expectations (Dunn 2022: 315). Longitudinal research further links emotional labour to teacher well-being and student engagement (Wang et al. 2021).

This literature aligns with growing attention to the emotional toll of teaching in trauma-exposed contexts. Without trauma-sensitive preparation, teachers may lack the emotional resources needed to care for themselves while supporting others, thus heightening the risk of re-traumatization and burnout (Honsinger and Brown 2019). Such strain is intensified by the performative demands of teaching; 'surface acting was negatively related to teaching satisfaction and positively related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization' (Yin et al. 2019: 9). Even pre-service teachers face similar risks when insufficiently equipped with self-care strategies during their training (Miller and Flint-Stipp 2019).

Personal grief, secondary traumatic stress (STS) and CF intersect, yet they remain distinct. Personal grief arises from direct loss, while STS reflects indirect exposure to others' suffering, and CF from the gradual depletion of empathy through prolonged caregiving (Figley 2013; Ormiston et al. 2022; Reeves 2019). Together, these conditions reveal how teachers internalize both personal and relational forms of pain. Recognizing these intertwined experiences allows a deeper understanding of teaching as emotional labour, where vulnerability and care coexist and sometimes conflict. This conceptual overlap explains the recurrent patterns of exhaustion and burnout reported in education research (Yin et al. 2019)

Several years ago, I experienced the sudden loss of a close family member while working full time as a K–12 art teacher. Supporting students while carrying my own grief forced me to confront difficult questions: 'How do educators navigate personal trauma in professional settings' and 'What happens when the roles of caregiver and mourner collide?' These tensions illustrate how vulnerability can become both a pedagogical strength and an emotional burden. As Gravett noted, 'by sharing our vulnerabilities, challenges, and identities, we present ourselves as fallible and as ongoing learners, alongside our students [...] and create openings to disrupt traditional student–teacher binaries and power hierarchies potentially' (2023: 38). This experience led me to seek a form of inquiry that could hold emotional complexity while remaining pedagogically meaningful.

Visual autoethnography has become a key reflective method in arts-based teacher education (Chien 2023; Kulinski 2024), helping educators connect practice with emotion and identity, but rarely applied to educators' experiences of personal or secondary trauma. Reviews highlight a lack of research on CF and STS, urging deeper qualitative inquiry (Oberg et al. 2023; Ormiston et al. 2022). This article explores how visual autoethnography can be used as a reflective and meaning-making tool for educators navigating personal and professional trauma. Framed within a trauma-informed pedagogical lens (McMahon et al. 2024; Sheppard et al. 2025), it

positions artmaking as both method and care practice. Rather than offering a detached analysis, I examine emotional labour from within lived experience through visual and narrative forms. As Walters and Anderson (2023) suggested, classrooms are not immune to the emotional realities of teachers, and the impact of trauma can surface in both subtle and visible ways. With this in mind, I ask: 'How can visual autoethnography help educators process and reflect on the impact of personal trauma, STS and CF in their teaching practice?' Drawing on my lived experiences of grief and CF, I use artmaking within a trauma-informed framework to examine how creative processes support reflection and more sustainable forms of teacher self-care. In doing so, this work contributes to ongoing conversations about how arts-based inquiry can foster emotionally honest and embodied professional learning in education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that weaves together autoethnography, arts-based research (ABR) and trauma-informed pedagogy to understand the emotional experiences of educators navigating personal grief.

Autoethnography and narrative inquiry

Starting from a stance of lived experience, autoethnography situates the personal within cultural and institutional contexts through self-reflection and storytelling (Adams et al. 2017; Ellis 2004). I write as a teacher grieving the loss of a close family member, treating classroom emotions not as private burden but as part of a wider conversation about care, labour and vulnerability in education. To make experience analytically tractable, I pair autoethnography with narrative inquiry, 'an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding' (Clandinin 2022: 17), and I analyse episodes through the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space – temporality, sociality and place (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 50). This combined methodological approach allows me to 'story and restore' particular classroom moments after bereavement (Clandinin 2022; Clandinin and Connelly 2000) and to ask how care and vulnerability are negotiated in practice (Riessman 2008).

ABR and visual autoethnography

Some aspects of grief resist purely textual description. For that reason, I turn to ABR as a complementary methodology. Leavy (2020) emphasized that art can surface affective insights that traditional academic language may obscure. For educators processing trauma, creating, through visual forms, movement or sound, can become a means of release, reflection and reconstitution (Leavy 2020; McMahan et al. 2024). Here, ABR is specified as visual autoethnography – making images as inquiry and reading them alongside fieldnotes and reflexive memos within a trauma-informed orientation (Barone and Eisner 2011; Leavy 2020; McMahan et al. 2024). Specifically, I work with relief printmaking, digital recolouring, painting and digital collage, as well as ink and watercolour, analysing the images through narrative-visual interpretation, attentive to motif, sequence, composition and palette (Barone and Eisner 2011; Leavy 2020; McMahan et al. 2024; Rose 2022).

Method notes and reflexive process

Visual autoethnography functioned as both a method and a form of inquiry. Data included personal journal entries, reflexive memos and artworks produced during and after bereavement. Fieldnotes recorded observations of classroom dynamics, emotional fluctuations and material choices, serving as textual companions to the visual works. Analysis followed a narrative–visual interpretation, attending to motif, sequence, composition and palette (Leavy 2020; Riessman 2008; Rose 2022). The artmaking took place in two stages. The first stage occurred alongside my daily teaching during the period of bereavement, and the second emerged afterwards as reflective re-engagement with those memories. This sequence created a temporal layering between live experience and analysis. Rather than formal coding, I used embodied reflection to trace affective patterns across pieces.

Throughout the making process, I kept analytic memos that captured immediate sensory and emotional responses, the temperature of colour, the resistance of carving or the weight of the brush on paper. These reflective notes served as both data and dialogue, helping me to recognize how emotion and materiality co-shaped the process of inquiry. Returning to the image weeks or months later, I annotated changes in feeling and meaning, noticing how new insights emerged as grief softened into reflection. This recursive engagement allowed artmaking to function not only as expression but also as analysis, deepening the autoethnographic inquiry through cycles of making, writing and re-reviewing (Adams et al. 2017; Leavy 2020). Acts of layering, tearing and pressing mirrored the cumulative weight of grief and the labour of re-composition (Barone and Eisner 2011). The aim was not resolution but a tolerable holding of contradiction, consistent with trauma-informed pacing and choice (McMahon et al. 2024; SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative 2014).

Trauma-informed pedagogical ethic and design

Trauma-informed pedagogy provides the ethical and methodological frame for this study, grounded in safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment, and recognizing that trauma may be acute, repeated or long term, shaping how people teach as much as how they learn (Carello and Butler 2015; SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative 2014). In practice, trauma-informed education positions the school as a predictable milieu for healing and growth (Stokes 2022). Acknowledging that educators carry their histories into teaching underscores the need for reflexivity, pacing and self-care as essential components of sustainable practice.

Implementation operated on two levels: classroom routines and institutional conditions. At the classroom level, enactment involved predictable structure; careful pacing of emotionally charged tasks; opt-in creative activities; clear support and reflective supervision or peer support for the educator-researcher (Brunzell et al. 2016; Carello and Butler 2015; McMahon et al. 2024; SAMHSA 2014). Institutional-level sustainability depended on policy, staff training and resource allocation, which was supported by whole-school initiatives and blueprints for trauma-informed service delivery (Chafouleas et al. 2016; Dorado et al. 2016).

Together, these perspectives form a framework that honours both the intellectual and emotional labour of teaching. They allow for a fuller exploration of how grief and care coexist in the classroom, and how creative, reflective

practices can offer pathways towards healing and resilience. Building on this framework, the following section turns from theory to lived experience, using visual artworks to trace how grief and care take form within classroom life.

GRIEF AND THE TEACHING SELF IN A WORLD OF OVERLAPPING CRISES

This section situates my bereavement within art-teaching practice and a wider climate of global anxieties, using trauma-informed and arts-based lenses to examine how care, professionalism and vulnerability are negotiated. When my close family member passed away, I did not take a formal leave. I returned to my classroom quickly – out of obligation, perhaps, but also because I did not know what else to do. I tried to maintain routines: morning greetings, warm-ups and group critiques. On the surface, I was teaching. Underneath, I was barely holding together. I became distracted, forgetful and emotionally volatile, including forgetting materials, and found myself unable to focus on meetings. I often cried alone during my planning periods, then wiped my face and returned to class as if nothing had happened. I felt both exposed and invisible at once, surrounded by people but entirely unseen in my pain.

While my grief was not explicitly disclosed to students, traces of it surfaced through changes in pacing, tone and attentiveness in the classroom. A few colleagues noticed my withdrawal and quietly offered gestures of care, a shared silence, a note left on my desk or a brief check-in. These small moments of acknowledgement became a form of co-witnessing, a mutual process of recognition in which students, colleagues or peers acknowledge emotional realities without demanding disclosure or resolution. It is an ethics of presence rather than intervention, allowing pain to be seen and held rather than fixed. Such co-witnessing helped me sustain teaching amidst loss.

What struck me most was the absence of space to grieve within professional life. The ideal of the capable, composed teacher leaves little room for sorrow. Yet art teaching, in particular, demands relational presence and emotional openness. Grief, by contrast, slows us down and fractures our attention. I was caught between performing normalcy and navigating disorientation. This tension is embodied in *Tearing* (see Figure 1), a woodcut print whose repetitive mirroring reflects the slow accumulation of loss. Eyes recur across the surface, some open, some closed, some full of tears, while deep reds and blues convey the sense of heaviness and distance, and a small flash of yellow to hold a moment of clarity. In the centre, a large eye weeps into a pool where another eye lies half-submerged – tired but still looking out. A broken star drifts between the tears and water, symbolizing fractured hope. Combining hand-carved impressions with digital layers allowed me to hold two states at once, the steadiness I aimed to offer my students and the quieter unravelling beneath it.

This internal tension aligns with what Britzman described as ‘difficult knowledge’ (1998: 117), describing how I taught and how I understood care. It transformed sorrow into pedagogy, revealing that vulnerability can be a condition for learning rather than a failure of professionalism. Building on Britzman’s notion of difficult knowledge, hooks’s engaged pedagogy treats teaching as care for the whole person and invites hard conversations as part of learning (Britzman 1998; hooks 1994). As hooks stated, ‘teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualisation that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students’ (1994: 15).



Figure 1: Tearing. Woodcut print with digital recoloring (Photoshop). Repeated eyes and carved, irreversible marks figure hypervigilance and cumulative weight; deep reds/blues convey heaviness while a broken yellow star signals brief clarity within loss.

In this sense, co-witnessing becomes an ethic of relational presence – moments of recognition that honour emotion without insisting on recovery.

Teaching now unfolds amidst overlapping global crises. Environmental degradation and climate anxiety, public health disruption, conflict and displacement and democratic uncertainty place additional stress on parents, carers and teachers (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF] 2021). Reviews during COVID-19 likewise record heightened anxiety, depression and

stress among teachers (Silva et al. 2021). In contexts affected by conflict and forced migration, educators who support traumatized students face risks of STS and call for trauma-informed training and organizational support (Alisc 2012; Rossen 2020). Even within climate education, studies note that teachers themselves can experience anxiety and ask for educator-facing supports (Clayton et al. 2024). Viewed through this broader horizon, my own bereavement becomes part of a shared ecology of care and strain. Practices that slow the pace, normalize emotional check-ins and offer opt-in making are not only supportive of individual educators but also responsive to the wider climate of uncertainty that students inhabit (Marks et al. 2021; UNICEF 2021).

This broader horizon informs *Dreaming among Beasts* (see Figure 2), which I created while teaching through these intersecting pressures. I laid an acrylic ground of layered, swirling brushstrokes to hold a restless atmosphere, then digitally collaged Chinese-ink drawings of a lion, a fox, a flamingo and a hybrid creature, each embodying shifting states of strength, protectiveness and vulnerability. The contrast between the fluid ground and the sharply defined animals mirrors the dissonance between inner turbulence and the composed professional self. Working across paint, ink and digital collage allowed me to hold those contradictions without closure – modelling a pedagogy of presence, pacing and co-witnessing when the world itself feels unstable.



Figure 2: *Dreaming among Beasts*. Acrylic with digital collage. Animal stand-ins stage role conflict – protection, vulnerability, distortion – linking global uncertainty to classroom presence; composition supports paced, opt-in engagement and co-witnessing.

Secondary trauma and CF in practice

Teaching through grief gradually revealed the quieter forms of exhaustion that accompany care work. In daily practice, emotional strain often surfaces not through dramatic moments but through small erosions of attention, patience and energy. Trauma-informed pedagogy provided a framework for noticing these shifts, reminding me that care must include the carer. As Carello and Butler remind us that educators also carry the emotional weight of the classroom: 'As instructors who teach classes on both trauma and trauma-informed practice, we recognise the importance of modelling trauma-informed principles ourselves' (2015: 263). Yet this expectation to 'model' trauma-informed care can also produce invisible emotional labour. When institutions prioritize students' well-being without providing reflective space or support for staff, a contradiction arises: teachers are expected to care for others while their own needs remain unacknowledged. To truly embody trauma-informed values, pedagogy must be reimagined not only as a student-focused intervention but also as a shared ethic of care that includes and honours educators' emotional lives as well (Carello and Butler 2015).

Over time, I began to feel drained – emotionally numb, disconnected and unable to bring my full self into the classroom. I still cared deeply about my students, but I sensed my empathy fading. It was not a lack of commitment but a gradual wearing down of empathy, a slow, almost invisible depletion that can emerge in the work of sustained care (Reeves 2019). Teaching, particularly in trauma-exposed classrooms, is deeply relational and emotionally demanding. The effort to support others while carrying one's own grief creates a weight that is both emotional and ethical. Within art education, this toll often goes unspoken, even though it shapes how teachers show up, listen and sustain presence.

Turning to the image, *Fading Faces* (see Figure 3) visualizes CF as a gradual fading. Working with ink washes and watercolour on handmade paper, I let the surface guide how the pigment bled and broke apart. Masked faces emerge from a deep black field, suspended between presence and disappearance, while soft yellow haloes hint at brief contact or hope. The image reads as gradual depletion – quiet, cumulative, almost unnoticeable – mirroring the need for reflective supervision and peer support so that care does not erode the capacity to care.

This silence surrounding teachers' emotional well-being is not incidental: it signals a structural issue. Educational systems rely heavily on teachers' emotional labour but offer little recognition or recovery for the toll this labour takes. For educators in the arts, where vulnerability, creativity and emotional presence are central to the work, this imbalance can become particularly unsustainable, pushing many to the edge of burnout or early departure from the passion.

Together, these three works trace the emotional arc of teaching while carrying personal grief. *Tearing* captures the rawness of rupture – the shock of loss and how it disrupts the ability to stay emotionally present. *Dreaming among Beasts* enters a more surreal space, where emotions blur, roles overlap and the line between control and chaos dissolves. *Fading Faces* arrives at a kind of quiet fatigue – a depiction of how even care, when stretched too far, can leave you feeling dimmed and distant.



Figure 3: Fading Faces. Ink, watercolour and handmade paper. Bleeding pigment and receding faces render CF as a gradual erasure; faint haloes mark connection without closure, aligning with trauma-informed pacing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND INSTITUTIONAL CARE

The recommendations that follow emerged directly from the autoethnographic process of artmaking. Each stage of creation served as both inquiry and reflection. During printmaking and painting, I recorded analytic memos about gesture, colour, texture and resistance – how the pressure of carving or the movement of pigment paralleled the rhythms of classroom emotion.

These embodied observations guided later written reflection, revealing patterns between material process and pedagogical experience. For example, while carving *Tearing*, the repetitive and irreversible cuts mirrored the exhaustion of maintaining composure, leading to the recommendation for pacing and permission to pause. *Dreaming among Beasts* developed amidst overlapping roles of protector and mourner, prompting insights about shared witnessing and opt-in engagement. *Fading Faces*, created when fatigue deepened, illuminated the need for reflective supervision and institutional care. In this sense, the artworks were not post-hoc illustrations but iterative acts of analysis – sites where emotional experience became pedagogical insight and where creative practice generated the trauma-informed strategies that follow.

Read alongside the artworks, this study suggests that healing in education need not mean moving on but moving with. Practically, this involves slower pacing, attentiveness to affect and a shift from performative positivity to authentic presence. Arts-based visual autoethnography legitimizes emotion and supports embodied ways of knowing, offering a restorative counterpoint to purely data-driven approaches (Leavy 2020).

Trauma-informed care must include teachers. Schools often treat resilience as an individual trait, leaving educators to carry emotional burdens alone. Suppose emotional labour is shared across the profession. In that case, institutions should provide workable systems of support: regular space for peer reflection, access to mental-health services and professional development that recognizes the emotional demands of teaching and offers practical tools. Trauma-informed practice, therefore, extends beyond students to teachers' well-being (Carello and Butler 2015; SAMHSA 2014).

In classroom practice, trauma-informed teaching can take the form of low-stakes, opt-in making, brief regulation before critique and co-witnessing protocols that help pace engagement with difficult material while safeguarding agency (Carello and Butler 2015; SAMHSA 2014). In arts classrooms, the studio can act as a refuge where feeling is worked through materials such as collage, paper-cutting and stitching, where making functions as a pedagogical tool for surfacing the unsayable and cultivating empathy (hooks 1994; Leavy 2020).

At the level of individual educators, small steps with real effect: set and communicate emotional boundaries; keep a brief reflective journal to track triggers and recovery; maintain a personal creative practice as regulated, opt-in making; and build circles of mutual support for regular debriefing. Identifying early signs of burnout and sharing them with trusted peers interrupts isolation and encourages timely help-seeking (Reeves 2019). These approaches enact trauma-informed principles of choice, pacing and safety (Carello and Butler 2015; SAMHSA 2014).

Within teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning, trauma-informed reflection should be integrated from pre-service coursework to in-service development. Embedding arts-based inquiry, mentorship around boundary-setting and coursework that frames vulnerability, identity and care as professional competencies would better equip teachers to navigate their own emotional landscapes alongside those of students (Carello and Butler 2015; Leavy 2020). Sustaining teacher well-being and retention requires attention to STS and CF: cumulative exposure to students' distress and ongoing care work can erode empathy and drive attrition (Ormiston et al. 2022; Reeves 2019). Designing for well-being entails predictable structures, clear referral pathways and reflective supervision or peer support.

Finally, institutional policy must anchor these practices within broader educational systems. School-level commitments to policy, staff training and resourcing, aligned with whole-school frameworks for trauma-informed service, are essential for long-term sustainability (Chafouleas et al. 2016; Dorado et al. 2016). In a period of overlapping global crises, including climate anxiety, public-health disruption, conflict and democratic uncertainty, these supports are not add-ons but conditions for equitable learning (Marks et al. 2021; UNICEF 2021).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that emotional labour is not peripheral to teaching but constitutive of it. Working through bereavement, I showed how visual autoethnography makes perceptible the textures of grief, fatigue and resilience in classroom life and how a trauma-informed ethic can hold this difficulty without forcing disclosure or premature resolution. Methodologically, the study specifies arts-based inquiry as a visual and narrative process where making becomes thinking, allowing reflection to unfold through material encounter. Pedagogically, it sketches practices that sustain learning under pressure – predictable structure, paced and opt-in engagement and co-witnessing routines that safeguard agency. Institutionally, it reframes teacher well-being as a collective responsibility supported through policy, training and time for reflection.

Set within a world of intersecting crises, ecological, social and emotional, the findings affirm the arts as a space for holding difficult knowledge and cultivating care. The study remains situated: a single-author account in a specific context, but it gestures towards comparative and collaborative possibilities across settings. Ultimately, healing in education is not always about moving on but remaining responsive, staying with what is tender, allowing it to teach us and designing classrooms that are steady, compassionate and open enough for shared becoming.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This article was researched and written to the standards of Intellect's Ethical Guidelines: <https://www.intellectbooks.com/ethical-guidelines>. No approvals or subject consent were required.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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