



Supporting Social and Emotional Wellbeing through Writing

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The Need for Social-Emotional Supports in Secondary Schools

Social-emotional learning competencies—defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as comprising self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (2023)—are critical to students’ success in school, career, and life, and are interwoven with young people’s mental health and wellbeing.

“We are in the midst of a pediatric mental health crisis,” writes Claire McCarthy, MD, a pediatric primary care provider at Boston Children’s Hospital and Senior Faculty Editor of Harvard Health Publishing (2022)—a declaration supported by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children’s Hospital Association.

By the age of 16, it is estimated that two-thirds of teenagers in the United States have experienced at least one traumatic event (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023), which can throw students into prolonged periods of stress, impair higher cognitive function and working memory, and alter brain structure (Teicher et al., 2016). In particular, stress diminishes functioning of the prefrontal cortex—a part of the brain critical to executive functioning, impulse control, decision-making, and emotional regulation—and this part of the brain is still developing in adolescence, meaning teens are more prone to risk-taking, behavioral outbursts, and incomplete forethought even before accounting for experiences of adversity, stress, or trauma that can incite more serious and long term implications (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Siegel, 2013).

In 2021, the World Health Organization estimated that one in seven teens worldwide experience a mental health condition; “more than a third (37%) of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 44% reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year,” according to the Center for Disease Control (2021), underscoring a persistent and worsening crisis that is impacting and impacted by schooling contexts.

Student and teacher stress are reciprocal, meaning one magnifies the other, as demonstrated by studies revealing “stress contagion” in the classroom, a phenomenon whereby students in classrooms with high levels of reported teacher burnout wake up with higher levels of morning cortisol, a key stress hormone (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). And because many schools lack trained support staff (Prothero & Riser-Kositsky, 2022), classroom teachers are often on the frontlines of student support.



An SEL Approach to Literacy Boosts Academic Performance and Wellbeing

Educators are already turning to literacy as a tool to promote social-emotional wellness: “As teacher leaders within the National Writing Project, one of the things that has amazed us in the past year is the way teachers have used writing to support the social and emotional learning of their students online, in person, and in hybrid spaces,” write Jessica Early and Carla Truttman for the NWP (2021). Such interventions impact academics, meaning they are not extraneous from overarching instructional objectives: “SEL interventions that addressed the five core competencies [self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making] increased students’ academic performance by 11 percentile points, compared to students who did not participate” (CASEL, 2023) according to extensive meta-analyses.

These data affirm a need for teachers’ continued use and expansion of affective scaffolds in the learning environment—instructional strategies and curricula that foster students’ social and emotional wellness alongside cognitive development. The power of writing as a tool for doing so is well demonstrated; research on expressive writing, for example, shows that routine personal free-writing can improve mental and physical health (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016) for people of all ages, meaning teachers who model the practice can assuage their own while exemplifying self-care practices and deepening and routinizing literacy.

Expressive writing lends well to more crafted, structured personal narrative writing—aligned with what many students are required to produce for college admissions. Elizabeth Dutro writes in her book, *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy*, “Writing stories from the ‘I’ position lays a path to building a classroom community grounded in testimony and critical witness... We know from many studies of writing and communities of writers that a felt investment in writing is crucial to children’s opportunities to grow as writers (Bomer, 2010; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016; Vasquez, 2016)” (2019, p. 59). Yet students are often dissuaded or penalized for writing from the first-person perspective in academic courses—despite the potential for first-person reflections to deepen students’ understandings of curricular relevance.

The Five SEL Competencies in Action

Write the World supports students’ social-emotional growth by designing all literacy content across the curriculum through an equity-centered lens, addressing the five social-emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Self-awareness

Discipline-specific personal reflection prompts promote **self-awareness** by connecting students' lived experiences to curricular content, fostering metacognition, and encouraging students' considerations of how the various ecologies and "systems" in which they live—from the "microsystem" of home to the "macrosystem" of social norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1997; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006)—impact their lives and identity development, and relate to curricular content.

Self-assessment rubrics, prompts, and frameworks similarly encourage young writers to think reflectively about who they are as learners, fostering awareness of their academic strengths, areas for improvement, and achievement goals. Embedded into formative and summative assessment structures, self-assessment not only promotes self-awareness among youth throughout the learning process by making their thinking visible, it also creates a rich foundation for student-teacher discourse regarding writers' growth in thinking and literacy across time and sharpens teachers' focus when providing feedback.

Self-management and social awareness

Scaffolded peer review resources, guides, and rubrics encourage thoughtful engagement with peers' stories and ideas, necessitating students' **self-management and social awareness** in the construction and delivery of substantive feedback that balances encouragement with actionable next steps. By managing impulses, leveraging self-awareness regarding one's own positionality and competency, and engaging social awareness through considerations of another's perspective—which may be quite different from one's own—students practice developing their "theory of mind" (ToM), or "ability to attribute mental states to ourselves and others, serving as one of the foundational elements for social interaction" (Ruhl, 2023), anticipating the intended audience of their peer writer and shaping their suggestions so that writer will be receptive to them.

Relationship skills and responsible decision-making

Peer review exchanges no doubt require and build **relationship skills** and the cultural competency, emotional responsiveness, and perspective-taking they involve. Additionally, classroom activities that leverage reading, writing, and communication skills across disciplines—for example, an inquiry-based lab report in Biology or a primary source analysis in Social Studies—simultaneously require **responsible decision-making** on the part of students to foster a strong writing community in the classroom.

And publication opportunities, in which students craft writing for an intended, authentic audience in alignment with project-based learning pedagogy, support and solidify SEL



competencies through a culminating social exchange that—whether a poetry open mic, bound chapbook of environmental writings, public debate, or mock trial—requires a distillation and combination of all above-stated skills.

Supplemental Programming to Support Wellbeing

The above strategies and materials embed social-emotional learning directly into literacy content, meaning students engage in and practice each competency naturally, by way of curricular engagement.

Additionally, though, many students and teachers benefit from targeted, explicit teaching regarding the five competencies, and Write the World will offer tailored materials dedicated to the theme of “writing for wellbeing” that teachers, advisors, school counselors, or coaches can use to address youth wellness in or beyond the academic classroom—prompts that support goal-setting beyond secondary school, for example, or that invite students to think about emotional regulation, or invite students to reflect on and write about emotion words (the higher use of which, in writing, is directly correlated with improved wellbeing (Pennebaker, 2017).

Using the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework employed by schools to provide targeted levels of support addressing students’ social, emotional, psychological, and behavioral needs (Prescott, 2022), Write the World materials will align with “Tier 1,” or universal strategies that can be implemented in the classroom/curriculum to benefit the baseline wellbeing of all students, and, by extension, teachers.

A Developmental Approach to Design

At root, Write the World targets the “whole” learner, weaving knowledge of biopsychosocial development into writing programming to support youth mental health and belonging through literacy.

Personal and personally relevant writing fosters “felt investment” (Dutro 2019, p. 59), inviting students to connect emotionally with curricular content, apply their lived experiences to student-centered learning activities, and foster the intrinsic motivation to delve more deeply into science, math, history, English, and other subjects with an understanding of the broader “why” behind the content.

This framework enables students to approach literacy tasks with greater interest and capacity for regulation, access to brain structures implicated in deep learning, and sustained investment in both the learning environment and curricular content.

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