

## Writing through Pain: How Teachers can Support Writing as Therapy for Students Processing Trauma

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### Background:

- When she was a 10<sup>th</sup> grader in my English class (a public high school in Southcentral PA), Maria\* wrote a revealing, vulnerable, and well-written personal essay about witnessing the aftermath of her uncle murdering her aunt. The essay was her culminating assessment for a choice creative writing unit (she selected the genre and topic), and, additionally, she chose to submit her essay to the extracurricular Scholastic Art & Writing Awards contest.
- Now a rising sophomore in college, Maria\* reflected on why she chose to write about such a traumatic topic and how she benefitted from writing it.
- **A disclaimer:** as educators, most of us are not trained or licensed in therapy and should therefore partner with school counselors, provide access to mental health resources, and disclose our responsibility as mandated reporters.

*\*Participant-selected pseudonym*

### Selected Citations:

- My previous work (Griffith, 2017) makes a case for reading and writing creative nonfiction (and includes resources and unit planning tools) in secondary curricula. A follow-up case study (Griffith, 2018) features the perspectives of two students who wrote high-quality personal essays about vulnerable topics. The students reported that writing personally generated more investment than a traditional academic assignment, controlling the level of sharing was key to being able to write honestly and openly, and mentor texts and writers' notebooks were key tools which empowered their successful writing.
- Wilson (2015) posited that we can better understand and benefit from our lived experience by writing it down.
- Pennebaker and Evans (2014) claimed, "[e]motional writing... can positively affect people's sleeping habits, work efficiency, and their connection to others" (p. 3) and suggested that written work doesn't have to be shared to achieve these benefits; even writing in a journal which no one else reads can produce them.
- Soliday, Garofalo, and Rogers (2004) reported that, "expressive writing [is effective for] processing emotions related to normative adolescent stress" (p. 799).
- Reese, et. al. (2017) asserted that youth who reflect on their stories experienced a correlation with overall wellness.

## Selected Quotes:

- *On the value of indirect sharing through writing rather than direct sharing verbally and in-person*; “[Writing this essay] took me out of the equation, and it was definitely less stressful that way [than sharing it verbally].”
- *On why she trusted me with the topic*; “you were willing to do things outside of class to help the students, and that’s when I knew you were the most trustworthy person to work for. I just was going through a rough time in 10th grade... I didn’t really have anywhere to go, so I figured going to an adult would be better because it wasn’t a teenage girl who’d go around and start gossiping.”
- *On how she grew over time and learned to be selective in sharing*: “In 10th grade, it had been a little bit. Nothing really destroyed me emotionally writing it, but I definitely had to go back and think about things. And thinking about how I thought in 7th grade was really interesting because if I were older I probably would have done things differently... 7<sup>th</sup> grade me, I told a lot of people in the very beginning. I told a lot of friends and I told a lot of family. 10th grade me would probably have only told people that I really, really, really trusted. [in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, people were] either freaking out, overreacting, or telling me that I was going to be a murderer just like my uncle. I was really having a lot of trust issues with people in general, and then I would keep everything in, which wasn’t helping me mentally at all. So writing was the best in-between option.”
- *On Writing as Therapeutic*: “Writing was definitely therapeutic in that it took people out of the equation if I didn’t trust them, and then [the events were] out of my system.”
- *On not being the subject of pity*: “None of the teachers I worked with were like, ‘I’m so sorry honey. This was probably a really awful experience for you.’ They just took the experience as it was and went with it. They didn’t ask any questions to get into my business. They only asked questions to better the writing, not for their own benefit or to make me upset.”
- *On no-holds-barred writing*: “Even if it is something as crazy as suicide, or abuse, don’t hold back. You don’t have to go and share with your teachers and submit this to a contest, but writing, in general, is one of the best ways to get through a certain situation.”

## Conclusion:

Maria’s experience suggests that a teacher or other audience member’s willingness and ability to hold space for a student writer is one factor that can enhance the therapeutic value of writing about trauma. “When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control” (Platt, 2017). Furthermore, Nelson (2000) highlighted the ideal characteristics of the listener or reader when “Deep Listening” occurs; “To Listen. Not: To Grade. Not: To Psychoanalyze. Not: To Solve” Just: To Listen” (p. 45). Practicing such deep listening can help us to hold space.

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