

Introduction

Students who have experienced long-term or repeated trauma throughout their childhood often exhibit harmful behavior at school (Maschi 2006). Students are likely to be unable to access the “upstairs brain”—the part of the brain used for critical thinking—because they are stuck in their “downstairs brain”, which focuses on survival. This means that they cannot access content or obtain skills, even when they are in a safe classroom (Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P., 2016). Living in the “downstairs brain” becomes compounded when school itself is an unsafe place, a place where students re-enact trauma on one another and when school policies reinforce systematic oppression (Noguera, 2003). Because many students in low-income urban areas are coming into the classroom with high levels of untreated continuous trauma, they are often re-traumatized by the public school system (Freire, 2000), and are not being explicitly taught social and emotional skills to cope with their disabilities; students spend most of their time in the classroom coping instead of learning. This study examines student trauma and empathy in order to prove a necessity for social emotional learning in high-trauma urban areas.

I conducted a study on journaling and empathy growth in order to see if students could grow social emotional skills (SEL) by writing to one another. Students attempted to journal to an anonymous partner by giving and getting advice and by discussing difficult or traumatic life events to help students grow empathy for one another, thus stopping the cyclical process of re-enacting lived traumas on others. This journaling project lasted for eight weeks during a 20-week unit on empathy while studying genocides throughout history with a focus on Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. The three research questions that guided the study were:

- Can students learn to foster empathy by becoming one another’s friend, mentor, and advisor?
- How can students benefit from processing trauma through journaling in the classroom?
- How can routine, non-academic writing help my students process their experiences when no one else has listened?

The intention of this study was to explore students’ relationship to trauma, trust with one another, and to explicitly grow students’ social and emotional skills and ability to empathize.

Positionality

I am a white female educator working intentionally and solely in low-income communities. While conducting this study, I was completing my master's in education and was a first year, full-time teacher. I was an English Language Arts teacher for all 10th graders at a small charter school in a low-income Los Angeles neighborhood. I will refer to this charter as Rounded Child Academy or RCA. My students were 75% Latino, and 25% African American from households with an average annual income of \$17,000.

This study was conducted with careful attention to my own privilege and with a critical view of race and income inequality. I grew up in a primarily white, small town in Northern California. I am a product of divorced parents and a lower-middle class upbringing, but I had the immense privilege of attending successful local public schools. Unlike my students, I regularly benefit from my white privilege. However, like my students, I also grew up with distress at home. As a child, I experienced long-term unstable conditions which affected my early abilities to learn. As a teenager, I often journaled to handle the traumas in my life. This coping mechanism sparked my interest in journaling as a vehicle for processing emotional disturbance.

I have spent significant time in the classroom encouraging discussion about systematic oppression, white privilege, and discussing my own privilege. In doing so, I have tried to open the door to having difficult but meaningful discussions about race, politics, and social norms. Because of this, I believed I have earned many of my students' trust, despite my unearned privilege.

Literature Review

Complex Trauma and Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD)

Classroom management addressing erratic behaviors can be extremely challenging in neglected and underserved communities. As students shared partial stories, talked about their weekends, and had conversations amongst themselves, as well as during our one-on-one conferences, the students in this study often discussed continuous trauma—the trauma that informs those behaviors.

Students I spoke with articulated that they are exposed to drugs and alcohol very early on in adolescence. Seventy-one percent of my students have at least one relative or friend who is incarcerated (Trauma Survey, 2016). Many are in a large and notable gang in the area. My students and local police officers have testified that crack is made and sold in the housing projects where some students live, and that testing new batches on students is not uncommon. Because of the prevalence, accessibility, and acceptability of drug experimentation within their community and immediate environment, my students can access and/or sell drugs

easily. In this housing project, gang subsets kick entire families out of their homes so that the gang can use the project housing to produce drugs, using death threats to ensure that the families do not report the incidents. My students can and do get jumped on the streets regularly: 20% admit to having been jumped and 35% report physical abuse of some sort (Trauma Survey, 2016). My students have explained that drive-by shootings are normal and frequent. In this community, parents are often ripped from families by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) because they are targeted as undocumented immigrants. My students often get shuffled between family members and do not have stability at home. Many live with extended family, taking care of brothers, sisters, nieces, and nephews all hours of the day. Several of my students miss school for extended periods of time because they have no health care, and so they end up in the hospital for untreated illnesses or take care of parents in the same condition. Seventy-five percent have had a parent or close family member die (Trauma Survey, 2016). Many have discussed their experiences of sexual assault with me and exhibit behaviors that demonstrated hyper-sexuality. Sixty percent report verbal abuse (Trauma Survey, 2016). At RCA, teenage pregnancy is common. Many students have shared that African American students experience overt racism from family members and community members, and are ostracized even at school. In short, the overwhelming majority of my students experience complex trauma and are likely to have Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD) if ever diagnosed.

Complex trauma as defined by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network is:

...children’s experiences of multiple traumatic events that occur within the caregiving system—the social environment that is supposed to be the source of safety and stability in a child’s life. Typically, complex trauma exposure refers to the simultaneous or sequential occurrences of child maltreatment—including emotional abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and witnessing domestic violence—that are chronic and begin in early childhood. Moreover, the initial traumatic experiences (e.g., parental neglect and emotional abuse) and *the resulting emotional dysregulation, loss of a safe base, loss of direction, and inability to detect or respond to danger cues, often lead to subsequent trauma exposure* (e.g., physical and sexual abuse, or community violence). (n.d.)

Complex trauma has severe consequences mentally, emotionally, and even physically because it leads to “deficits in emotional self-regulation” which affects a “sense of self,” leads to impulse control problems including “aggression against self and others” and deep-seated distrust of others leading to “social isolation” (van der Kolk, 2010, p. 6-7). In addition, the National Child Traumatic Stress

Network adds that CPTSD includes, “increased susceptibility to stress (e.g., difficulty focusing attention)” and “altered help-seeking (e.g., excessive help-seeking and dependency or social isolation and disengagement; i.e., deficiencies in affiliation and in exploration)” (p. 10).

When children experience continuous trauma in childhood, the brain halts in its development, “Complex trauma can have devastating effects on a child’s physiology, emotions, ability to think, learn, and concentrate, impulse control, self-image, and relationships with others” (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d). Children remain in their “downstairs brain,” the part of the brain responsible for basic functioning abilities and “survival mode”. The “upstairs brain” is the part of the brain that promotes analytical and critical thinking. It is incredibly difficult to develop an upstairs brain if every day is a test for survival (Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P., 2016). When students are stuck in the downstairs brain because their upstairs brain is under-developed, not much deep learning or skill building can take place in the classroom. Students’ brains are concerned with their day-to-day safety and they cannot prepare for college or careers.

In my observations as a teacher, many of these effects are visible and present within my classroom. The students in my classes often spoke to the constant stress they live under at home. In the classroom, I observed many of my students struggling to cope with any additional momentary or daily frustrations due to the high volume of pre-existing, constant stressors. Unfortunately, because my students are below grade-level with their reading and writing skills, most of what we do in class can become frustrating, adding on yet another stressor. Often my students shut down entirely, refusing to speak or to look at any adults. Occasionally some students responded with “harmful behaviors” (Maschi 2006). This “susceptibility to stress” can result in emotional outbursts. Frustration triggers a sense of being overwhelmed, and my students often do not know how to cope with those difficult feelings.

In part due to CPTSD, my students had a difficult time interacting with one another. Certain students often could not sit next to other students, work in pairs, or work in groups. Sometimes they even refused to speak to each other. On bad days, when these students spoke to other students, they mostly said put-downs and created feuds in class. This is particularly painful for students who tried to get reassurance and help from peers, as they were shut down by those who seek isolation. Neither party had yet developed strong emotional skills to either express need or calmly reject an unwanted social interaction.

However, the problem is much greater than not yet having grown that level of emotional maturity. Many of my students live in a constant survival mode, often relying on the “fight” mechanism:

When children are unable to achieve a sense of control and stability they

become helpless. If they are unable to grasp what is going on and unable to do anything about it to change it, they go immediately from (fearful) stimulus to (fight/flight/freeze) response without being able to learn from the experience. Subsequently, when exposed to reminders of a trauma (sensations, physiological states, images, sounds, situations) they tend to behave as if they were traumatized all over again—as a catastrophe. (van der Kolk, 2010, p. 5)

The same behaviors continuously arise because students are stuck in this “fight/flight/freeze” cycle, and they are not able to learn from the experience. My students appear stunted: they are not in a safe environment that allows them to grow, especially as they reenact their traumas with each other. Because they have grown up in a traumatic neighborhood and in an oppressive school system, they often become oppressors to one another: “[b]ut almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or ‘sub-oppressors.’ The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped” (Freire 2000). My students live in a world where experiencing trauma is the norm; they come of age in a school system that inherently negates their identities and challenges as black and brown children in low-income communities. They have little access to therapy, which leaves coping mechanisms to play out oppressive power dynamics at school and in turn create more trauma from student to student. School becomes yet another place where students are traumatized. Not only do students—who are still children—need to worry about the livelihood and survival of themselves and their families, but also they must come to school every day where they receive harsh messages from peers about their existence. Students reproduce offensive and degrading language toward one another regularly in the halls. Even the best of friends will jokingly tear one another down. My students call this act “shooting on each other,” a now normalized term and behavior.

In addition, school is a place where their perceived unintelligence (a product of interrupted and trauma-fueled schooling, not a mirror on students’ abilities) is reaffirmed. Most of my students have had sub-par and frequently interrupted education for the majority of their lives, moving from school to school or class to class, and so most of my students have failed or are failing at least one class. If my students are able to stay at a single school for any prolonged period of time, they are likely to see very high teacher and administrator turnover as well as monthly or yearly change in school policies, both of which only add to students’ unstable environments. RCA high school students often work at an elementary school level in reading and writing but are expected to be at grade level, and all of their curriculum reflects this. My students often *know* that they are not up to grade

level and feel that they have a very small chance at succeeding in high school, college, or future careers. Students' teachers, even the most loving and dedicated ones, become their oppressors by taking part in the banking notion of education (Freire 2000), standardized testing, and by repeating grade-level expectations over and over. In an effort to get more funding, administrators emphasize student scores over student identities: reading scores, testing scores, attendance. In order to break this cycle, Freire calls for teachers to be revolutionary—a task that is daunting for the most experienced teachers, and highly difficult in a school of struggling first year teachers:

But the humanist, revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them. (Freire 2000)

Unfortunately, due to high turnover rates, unexperienced first year teachers make up at least half of the RCA staff from year to year. Because these teachers are only beginning to navigate the difficulties of the classroom, they are often not equipped to be the "humanist, revolutionary educator" that Freire stresses the classroom needs. Students' lives are highly pressurized and they have been traumatized repeatedly, both at home and at school. This creates additional stress, an even greater sense of danger immediacy, and heightened unease at school. There is the danger of being judged and cut down by peers, by teachers, and by administration day in and day out.

In addition to feeling overwhelmed, angry, embarrassed, or ashamed, “[d]eprivation of responsive caregiving due to persistent maltreatment, neglect, or caregiver dysfunction (e.g., maternal depression) *can lead to lifelong reactivity to stress*” (Cook et al., 2003, p. 10). The stress then becomes cyclical. Because students have grown up in difficult and often dangerous environments without stability in the home, and often without a primary caregiver, they are physiologically hardwired for stress. Because they are not removed from these unstable environments and have heavy, stressful responsibilities that are difficult even for fully developed adults to manage, their norm becomes a high stress environment. For children that cannot handle more stress, more stress is constantly thrust upon them, thus causing even more mental and emotional setback.

This stress feeds directly into the emotional outbursts stated above: “[u]nder stress, their analytical capacities (left brain based) disintegrate, and their emotional (right brain-based) schemas of the world take over, causing them to

react with uncontrolled helplessness and rage” (Cook et al., 2003, p. 11). Teachers are taught and most frequently use “Tier Three Interventions” —planned interventions or responses for the extreme behaviors—because they address students that have lost emotional control. These reactions may be more heightened than the original conflict, and, more significantly, their experience of these interactions creates new traumas.

Furthermore, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network states, “[b]y middle school and high school, maltreated children are more likely to be rated as working and learning below average, and they exhibit higher incidence of disciplinary referrals and suspensions ... Maltreated children are found to have significantly higher rates of grade retention and dropout; they have three times the dropout rate of the general school population” (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993, p. 15). Schools are stretched thin: too many services needed, not enough funds or staff members to cover those services, too many standards to meet or state and federal hoops to jump through. Instead of caring for these children as individuals with real and serious conditions, there is greater emphasis on reactions to inappropriate behaviors enacted by these individuals, “[t]oo often, schools react to the behavior of such children while failing to respond to their unmet needs or the factors responsible for their problematic behavior. In so doing, they contribute to the marginalization of such students, often pushing them out of school altogether, while ignoring the issues that actually cause the problematic behavior” (Noguera p.342). This is true both for RCA and greater urban areas in Los Angeles.

The long-term effects of complex trauma or CPTSD reach further than the bounds of the classroom or the school. Children suffering with CPTSD have a higher chance of ending up in jail, “[p]eople with childhood histories of trauma, abuse and neglect make up almost our entire criminal justice population: physical abuse and neglect are associated with a very high rates of arrest for violent offenses” (van der Kolk, 2010, p. 3). This is reflected in high community crime and jail rates. The Trauma Survey revealed that seventy-one percent of my students have had a family member go to jail, and 33% of students have had a friend in jail (2016). More broadly, children will suffer from unhealthy lifestyles: “The study unequivocally confirmed earlier investigations that found a highly significant relationship between adverse childhood experiences and depression, suicide attempts, alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, domestic violence, cigarette smoking, obesity, physical inactivity, and sexually transmitted diseases” (van der Kolk, 2010, p. 3). The issues following CPTSD are grave and life-long, and are impacted more severely by our school system. Even more than being able to spend greater time teaching and less time on classroom management, educators and school staff need to be able to handle complex trauma in the classroom and break the trauma cycle before students fall into these statistics.

Finally, Noguera shows the parallels between prisons and our school

system, a system that feeds directly into the statistics stated above:

Consistent with the way we approach crime in society, the assumption is that safety and order can be achieved by removing "bad" individuals and keeping them away from others who are presumed to be "good" and law abiding. Not surprisingly, those most frequently targeted for punishment in school often look-in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status—a lot like smaller versions of the adults who are most likely to be targeted for incarceration in society (Noguera, p.343)

Students who know that they are not going to receive the benefits of their education (a diploma, college admission, high paying career) will not want to abide by school rules because there is no payoff for them; they are stuck in a system that doesn't serve them. These are our "defiant" students who "[f]or many, the cycle of punishment eventually leads to entanglement with law enforcement and the criminal justice system" (Noguera, p. 343). The American school system sorts children based on academic ability—tracking them for certain colleges, careers, and opportunities—and then socializes the tracked children with "norms and values" for that given track (Noguera, p. 344). This sorting and socializing system, in addition to students CPTSD and histories of traumatization, set entire communities up for failure.

"Rough all over" is a term I coined to signify the difficult realities my students face in every aspect of their lives. When they are not safe and furthermore constantly exposed to trauma at home and at school, there is very little that promotes or furthers student health and wellbeing. My students are treated as adults far before they are mentally or emotionally developed, and often experience immense obstacles that limit student growth.

Bringing the Whole Student into the Classroom

In the average school year, there is no time for individual or group counseling, no teaching of health or sex education, no teaching of "I" statements or calming strategies, no overt work on communication, responsibility, future planning, or choice-making, and very little discussion of "self" in the classroom because of the push for a hyper-rigorous, memorization-based curriculum. Many schools, RCA included, do not invest in the social education that Wenger promoted, "We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning" (2000, p. 4). He elaborated on this education saying that learning is an overlap of meaning, practice, community, and identity (p. 4) —of which my students only receive the practice portion. Students are pushed out of their education because they cannot access the academic level, the content often

does not reflect them or invite them to have an affirmed identity in the classroom in any way, and they are given no health or social education that they often miss out on because of the instability of their childhoods.

It is imperative to bring the whole student into the classroom—to make the classroom student-centric, not the students classroom-centric, especially in marginalized communities. Social Emotional Learning is “when schools attend systematically to students' social and emotional skills, the academic achievement of children increases, the incidence of problem behaviors decreases, and the quality of the relationships surrounding each child improves. And, students become the productive, responsible, contributing members of society that we all want” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.). SEL demands that we teach the whole student because the student cannot exist in the vacuum that the classroom is supposed to be. The current education model expects students to drop their identity when they step into the classroom and act as well-mannered adults, even when that education system inherently rejects these students of color through curriculum choices, testing, classroom setup and management, and discipline practices. Students at RCA drop out at a rapid rate in their eleventh grade year when they cannot or do not leave their identities at the door. That traditional education—education without SEL, student choice, and learning communities—fortifies the oppression more.

Of the six core competencies that SEL is centered around, social awareness and relationship skills are the two that I will be focusing on for this inquiry. CASEL describes social awareness as “[t]he ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports” (CASEL, n.d.) and relationship skills as, “[t]he ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed” (CASEL, n.d.).

I chose social awareness and relationship skills as my emergency competencies because I wanted students to become conscious of the idea of re-traumatization. Since they interact with each other primarily through “shooting on each other,” understanding their impact on others was vital to helping them start growing relationships. Healing may occur with the growth of relationships, and learning how to communicate, understand, and empathize with others could be the first step in regulating emotional reactions in the classroom. If students are able to foster relationships with each other, they will learn and model healthy reactions, and that sense of self and peer-regulation within the classroom will strengthen. Once students saw their reproductions of oppression as serious and detrimental to

others, and once students had an investment with their peers, I hoped to observe students growing in an emotional capacity, readying them to start meaningful academic work in the classroom.

Furthermore, education should not take place in the absence of social interaction. Diaz and Flores assert that social interaction should be at the heart of learning environments, “Vygotsky’s view that development of mind is a social construction helps us to understand that social relationships are key to the mental and personal development of individuals” (2001, p.30). Instead of trying to incorporate group structures or paired structures into lectures and individual handout work—strategies only used to rectify our antiquated Industrial Revolution assembly line model of education—I wanted the learning to be invested in and woven into social work.

In conclusion, it is imperative to continue the study of trauma in the classroom because many of our black and brown neighborhoods have students that live in this devastating CPTSD cycle. Without breaking the cycle, without teaching students how to reach the upstairs brain, without the therapy and the explicit teaching of social skills, the population of low-income black and brown students will not succeed after high school. Prison rates, dependence on welfare, addiction to drugs or alcohol, gang affiliation, and young motherhood will continue to plague the under-resourced minority populations in this country as the self-fulfilling cycle continues. This study investigates journaling as a tactic to disrupt these devastating cycles of systemic inequality that make life “rough all over” for students.

Methods

The school that this study was conducted in is a low-income, minority-majority school receiving federal Title I Funds, given to schools with high percentages of low-income families to aid students in reaching grade-level goals. The student demographic breakdown is roughly 85% Latino and 15% African American. RCA is a charter school in a larger charter organization that seeks to serve low-income communities. Though this charter organization is to humanize and uplift communities that have been deprived of sufficient educational resources, it is run from a business model and relies heavily on data, primarily test scores. Students live in the neighboring projects and have a household income below \$20,000 on average. There are high crime, violence, gang activity, and incarceration rates in this community.

As an English Language Arts teacher, I am responsible for growing the 10th graders of RCA to become analytical readers and writers. However, so much of our curriculum focuses on trauma unrelated to my students’ experiences. My

students read *Lord of the Flies*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Night*, and *Macbeth*, all tales centered around trauma, but not any traumas that look or feel like what my students experience day in and day out. *Writing and Healing Toward an Informed Practice* posits that having writing that negates our students' traumas "necessarily marginalizes, isolates, and alienates the writers who create those texts, valorizing our own illusions of academic sanctuary over their invitations to engage in the complex material, cultural, and socio-personal worlds of actual and virtual experience ..." (Anderson and MacCurdy, p. 16-17). Anderson and MacCurdy believe that "this work, difficult, scary, and messy, is important and worth doing...writing has the potential to help survivors deal with these events in a way that mitigates their traumatic consequences" (p. 17). Lastly, Anderson and MacCurdy state:

...stories about painful, traumatic events in the lives of students do appear in our classrooms, they have always appeared, and they will continue to appear, not because we want or don't want them to, but because writing is quite simply the medium in which, for many people, the deepest, most effective, and most profound healing can take place. (p. 22-23)

Because writing can be a tool for understanding, processing and sharing traumatic stories as a vehicle of healing, I designated writing to be at the foundation of this study. Students needed to be at the complete center of this study in order for real, authentic sharing to take place. Too often the teacher's voice dictates what kind of sharing or what language to use during that sharing and so it was critical for students to be in dialogue with one another, using their own chosen language to express their stories and to share authentically.

Two ELA 10 classes of 33 and 31 students journaled to each other once a week and responded to the other's journal entry once a week for three months. Partners were strategically paired based on common communication styles, language, interests, and worldviews. Each pair had one journal labeled with a number, such as 11891. During one period, one class authentically wrote on a journal prompt or free journaled on their day or feelings. Then, the other class responded to that entry, and wrote their own on the same topic. The following day, the first class had the opportunity to read their partner's response, read the partner's new journal entry, and respond to both. Lastly, the second class read these responses to complete one entire conversation cycle. Students were instructed to respond by giving sentiments of understanding, by giving advice, and/or by asking follow-up questions. For both the journaling and the responding, students used sentence stems to help them along. Students were also allowed to draw school-appropriate pictures or doodles to their partner, give their partner an agreed-upon nickname, and sign off on the letters however they chose.

I hypothesized that this dialectical journaling process would allow the students to grow in multiple ways. First, I hoped that students would feel as if their lives and experiences were valued. The prompts focused on their experiences, their feelings, and their funds of knowledge. Students were not asked about academic situations, but instead about how they have handled situations in their own lives. I wanted students to have a space to discuss with a peer—hopefully, at some point, a trusted peer—the difficulties and celebrations of their daily lives. This space was meant for students to start processing their lived traumas. Second, I hoped that students would be able to realize that their words and actions affect others. By reading someone else’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings, I hoped that students would be able to relate to their partner’s writing and reflect on their own actions. Being in direct contact and conversation with another student in an intentional way might push students to grow social awareness. Third, I hoped that in learning how to authentically respond to another, in learning how to give advice, students would be able to foster empathy. If students could grow in these three ways, they could potentially feel some relief from their own traumas, social awareness of others’ traumas, and an urge to empathize with those around them. These three growths can make the classroom a safer, healthier place to learn. I hope that this method will validate students’ experiences and create worth in identity within the classroom.

To ease students into the idea of journaling to an unknown partner, an anonymous write-around was practiced with students in each class. In the first round, students responded to different prompts that included quotes and situations. In the second round, students were encouraged to respond to the person who wrote first (directly above the new, second response). In the third round, students responded to either of the top two responses. The papers were redistributed around the class without order and without names, so that students could get used to writing to peers that they cannot identify. In addition, lessons on the difference between gossiping and journaling about experiences, journaling anonymously, and “I” statements were given to prep students for the study.

Elizabeth Dutro has done similar research in her work, “Writing Wounded: Trauma, Testimony, and Critical Witness in Literacy Classrooms.” She states, “[i]n my university teaching and through my research with students in high-poverty schools, I have come to believe that such an explicit acknowledgement of the hard stuff of life is important in classrooms” (2011, p. 193). Moreover, “[w]e cannot be complacent about how difficult experiences function in schools, because, if my data from urban classrooms are any indication, the hard stories pile up” (2011, p. 195). It is necessary and vital to allow a space to process those hard stories.

Dutro posits that bearing witness to a testimony is critical for the testimony to be validated and processed. This act of bearing witness may create a

cycle for more testimony and more witness: “In this view, the circle of testimony-witness begins when someone’s difficult experience enters the classroom (in whatever way that occurs) and demands that others bear witness. Faced with such testimony and in acting as witness, the listener may respond with personal testimony that, in turn, must be witnessed and, again, may prompt testimony from her witnesses” (Dutro, 2011, p. 197-8). She goes on to discuss how without this “reciprocal process,” if you only focus on the testimony—say in writing a narrative story or creating a poem or speech— then the processes can otherize the author or speaker even more (Dutro, 2011, p. 203). The witnessing of the testimony is necessary for healing to occur. The response writing will act as witnessing to each student’s testimony (e.g. each journal entry), in addition to fostering empathy and advice giving skills.

Findings

I define a successful partnership as two journalers who trust in their partner and reveal personal experiences or opinions, give advice to each other, ask follow up or “get to know you” questions, and who journal to each other consistently. An unsuccessful partnership is when writers stay at the surface level and do not get to know each other. This partnership often talks about media, sports, or videogames, but the journalers do not ask probing questions or give advice to each other. Of thirty-three pairs, sixteen were highly successful (showing both care and compassion), eight were mildly successful (surface level conversations but with high engagement), and eight partnerships were unsuccessful (negative comments or “shooting on each other”). Two of those partnerships did not complete the journaling project because they left RCA to attend other schools. All other partnerships completed the journaling project.

Seventy-seven percent of students who took the post-journaling exit slip enjoyed journaling (Appendix). From my experience at RCA, 77% of any given class enjoying an activity is a success in itself. On an average day, my students average about 50% engagement and so to have the majority of my students enjoy the writing process itself is significant. In addition, 61% voiced that they have benefitted from the journaling, and 45% felt a sense of relief in being able to talk to another person about their problems. Not only did students enjoy the journaling, but they were also reflective about the benefits they received. The connections these journalers made with each other allowed students to process their daily problems, relieve stress, and grow positive communication skills, *and* they could see those benefits. Sixty-six percent expressed excitement in seeing what their partner had written to them—an investment further than just completing the task at hand—and 68% would want to do this journaling activity

again. Lastly, only 2% of all journals found this process to be hurtful or negative in any way. This is very important because I did not want this study to create any additional trauma for students. Overall, most students recorded more positive experiences with this journaling project than negative.

Broadly, the most successful journaling partners attempted the following: advice-giving and fostering trust, question posing, investment in responses, openness and making connections, and checking up on partners.

Limitations

Though this study shows that this journaling process was helpful and enjoyable for many partners, and that they were able to grow or show empathy through the five different avenues listed above, there are some limitations for this study. First, this study was conducted with a small sample size of students from two of my five classes. These students had been with me as their full-time teacher consistently for 6 months, and were used to the expectation of personal sharing and writing. This study may look different if replicated with a variety of teaching styles, environments, or teachers, and different journaling questions should be chosen based off of knowledge of students' experiences and community experiences.

Second, a severe limitation was student absences due to sports games during Sixth Period. This directly affected my results significantly because with high student absences in Sixth Period, the journaling partners in Fifth Period had higher obstacles in growing trust or investment in their partners. Often times, the absences were detrimental to my students in Fifth Period. Because my Fifth Period students had nearly full attendance and were journaling with fidelity, they would express disappointment and frustration when they did not have partners that would journal back regularly, or shared with them very little. One student told me that she really wanted to keep journaling, but wanted a different partner because her partner wouldn't write back. The absences impacted trust, openness, connections, and advice giving. The students who were frequently absent were less empathetic and less engaged with their partners, which also impacted their partners' experience.

The third limitation is the length of time journaling. I think that the longer students can journal to one another, the more trust and empathy they can share. The last two journal entries for most pairs were much deeper as students started to talk about real traumatic events in their lives. I believe that this happened because students felt that they could trust their partners. If I could expand the journaling project, I believe that students would have more space and time to start processing their traumas. Students spent most of the eight weeks getting to know one another and building that trust. I would like to expand this project to an entire semester

(20 weeks) so that students can move more into processing their pre-existing trauma in a positive and safe space. In the latter journal entries, most partners also got better at creating empathetic responses that related to their partner to let them know they were not alone, and in giving advice to help their partner. I hypothesize that the longer students journal to each other, the more empathy they will gain for each other.

Analysis

Advice-Giving and Fostering Trust

Two aspects of journaling where I found students showing strong empathy with their partners were through giving advice and consequently growing trust. Students were required to not only write their own journal entries, but also to read their partner's and give advice back. For giving advice, optional sentence stems were provided since this was a new skill for many students. I provided sentence stems like "I suggest that you..." and "I can relate when you say..." in order to help students voice their support.

Students offering advice to one another is not an easy task for developing high schoolers, and especially for the students of RCA who suffer CPTSD without aid or sufficient counseling. My students inflict pain on one another in the hallways, in classrooms, at break, during lunch, during office hours through put-downs and slurs. The National Child Stress Traumatic Network states that this re-traumatization is a symptomatic need of CPTSD that makes it difficult for students to be empathetic toward one another and therefore to trust one another (n.d.). For students to step outside the pressurized war zones of the hallways to give their partner genuine and authentic advice, often based on their own experiences and insights, shows much social and emotional growth. Several pairs offered advice regularly, and their partners responded with continued openness and sharing creating trusting, healthy relationships.

Catherine and Samantha frequently shared personal experiences, and supported one another through continuous advice. In the early journals, Samantha tried to relate to her partner and show that she cared, "Hey partner. Im sorry your weekend was horrible. :(Mine wasn't any better... So what makes you mad or happy and how do you handle it? Write back <3" (Journal 11976). Samantha followed up on what her partner said with empathy, and shared her own weekend experience vaguely. She also inquired with another question to get to know her partner better. By week four, she was giving advice to Catherine, "Anyways I know the feeling but your strong and that's what amazes me. You keep 'walking' forward but you still have a spot on your heart. <3 that's amazing. I'm proud of

you. When I say I know the feeling, well I think you can guess" (Journal 11976). When prompted by Catherine's response to a time where she had had her trust betrayed by a friend, she said,

I understand on what your saying with 'friends' I should know. I had experience when I was small. And my advice is to forget them. The 'friends' that aren't friends anymore are not really loyal. They are fake people. You get me. (Journal 11976)

Lastly, she extended her listening ear in the future without question:

Hey thanks for understanding, I really appreciate that. Your welcome, I really understand what your going through. Like even though we don't know each other, I'm always here to listen/read your problems. If you need someone to talk to, help with Im here <3. (Journal 11976)

Catherine received this support well, "Well get my support from my friends, family, you :), and also at church" (Journal 11976) and seemed to appreciate Samantha's listening ear. Every time Catherine answered a question like "What is on your mind?", "What is your favorite animal?", "What is your favorite color?", "Are you okay?" she asked it back to Samantha, showing her unwavering interest. I hypothesize that this continued interest and Catherine's openness with sharing specific moments created trust between the two. At the very last entry, Samantha decided to share with Catherine what she had declined to state in an early journal, "My hardest moment is when I told you before is that my dad and I got into an argument and he said that he wishes I wasn't his daughter. I cried that's that hardest moment in my life. Please can we keep it between us. Thank you" (Journal 11976). Samantha supported Catherine and Catherine showed she trusted Samantha through the experiences she shared. In return, Samantha was able to share a very personal and traumatic event with Catherine because of that earned trust through empathetic advice giving. Both partners were sensitive towards each other's needs and empathetically responsive. This is growing both SEL competencies at once: the ability to empathize with others and growing healthy relationships through active listening. Just like in Dutro's reciprocal story sharing experience, these two students show relief in testimony and witnessing testimony.

Question Posing

Another element of successful journaling where students were able to rely on their partner emotionally, and grow empathetically was through question

posing. When students asked questions to one another, especially questions that were not included in the prompts, they showed sparks of curiosity and interest—an essential part of SEL’s healthy relationship building. Many students would answer a prompt and then ask about favorite colors, animals, movies, books, video games, hobbies, etc. Partners often asked each other how the other was doing, how their weekend was, or if they were okay. Question posing showed me that students were invested in getting to know their partners, and invested in their partners’ emotional well-being, that they wanted to create positive, healthy, trusting relationships. The need for question posing for successful partnerships became clear in an unsuccessful partnership. Nina (from Sixth Period) was not invested in the partnership, but Kathleen was. Nina often said that she just “wasn’t feelin it” or that she didn’t want to talk, and never asked Kathleen questions. However, Kathleen frequently asked Nina questions, trying to get to know her better and making sure that she was okay.

On three separate occasions, Kathleen asked Nina “Are you okay?” (Journal 11008) after hearing that her partner was having a bad day or had a bad weekend. Even though Kathleen got minimal response and received no engagement or interest from her partner, she still wanted to support her partner. She was also interested in one of Nina’s journal prompts about trust. Kathleen followed up with a question, trying to probe for advice or further information about her partner, “How do you deal with people losing your trust?” (Journal 11008). Kathleen’s question posing showed that she was invested in the journaling. Nina’s lack of trust and sharing with her partner, essentially disengagement in the project as a whole, made their partnership unsuccessful because she never allowed her partner to have a safe space to express her experiences and emotions—a common effect of CPTSD. The National Child Stress Traumatic Network states this happens when “having learned that the world is a dangerous place where even loved ones can’t be trusted to protect you, children are often vigilant and guarded in their interactions with others and are more likely to perceive situations as stressful or dangerous” (n.d.). Nina did not support Kathleen when Kathleen did share more intimate moments and so Kathleen withheld often in response. Without question posing on both sides, a partnership is not likely to be successful because questioning shows interest and support.

Investment in Responses

All successful partners showed an investment in their partner through their responses. The most successful partners were those that went beyond the prompts. These students answered the prompts, but then pushed further to promote continuous conversation with their partner and showed interest in their partner’s

lives either through asking about shared interest, suggesting new activities, or providing a safe space for their partner to express her/himself. Alonso and Carla did this through having continuous conversation with one another outside of the required prompts; they invested in one another as a potential friend.

Alonso prompted Carla to provide information about their possible shared interests such as colleges, coffee, bakeries, stars, and amusements parks:

Mimi's cafe is far, really really far. I'll look up the exact location later. The 5th Wave huh, I'll check it out. I've seen a handful of cafés Downtown, I don't know which one to go to. It's just a bit packed. Downtown. Stars. How do you feel about the stars? Disneyland on Saturday and California Adventure park...you must really like rides huh. I personally don't like rides at all. Too many crowds, just too much of everything. You should read more often it's really cool. (I've probably said this already). (Journal 11176)

He nicknamed her “Drawbucks” because she mentioned that she liked to draw and also loves Starbucks and was open about all questions that Carla asked him back:

I just don't have people 'cheering' me on. I've only been to the Griffith Observatory about three times. I wonder how the stars look from there? I heard this you really want to see stars good then you should try camping. I really like stars, a lot. You should try to get closer to your friend, not forcefully but slowly. Oh and start trusting your mom more, it helps a lot. Everyone is going to judge you no matter what you choose to do. You can choose to care or not care. I just learn to stop caring. (Journal 11778)

Carla responded to the positive support and engagement by becoming very trusting,

My hardest moment/day/experience was when about almost 7 years ago when some people had kidnapped my uncle in Mexico and it affected us to the whole family. It was my hardest because due to how seeing my dad would be everyday the past and seeing all my uncles sad and depressed... (Journal 11778).

Alonso and Carla are an exceptional journaling pair because they answered all prompts *and* had a side conversation to get to know each other that lasted the entire journaling process without pause. Alonso and Carla support Barbara Rogoff's community of learners theory, “the idea of a community of learners is

based on the premise that learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavors with others, with all playing active but often asymmetrical roles in sociocultural activity” (1994, p. 209). They made meaning of each other’s interests and disinterests together. They grew their communication and empathy skills through being the self-guided learners. Though they had prompts, and they answered these prompts, they had a rich and full conversation outside of those topics; they actively centered the writing around their discovery of one another.

Of all journalers, Alonso and Carla seemed to have grown the most authentic and engaged relationship that depended heavily on regularly and reliably responding to one another. Each partner was equally invested in continuing the conversation and so both were highly successful.

Openness and Making Connections (“Going Deep”)

Another vital element of a successful partnership was the courage to be open with a writer’s partner, as well as the willingness to make connections to his or her own life when responding to that partner.

George and James connected profoundly over their shared depression. Both partners had been wrestling with daily life and were able to talk extensively about their feelings to one another. George showed James how lonely he feels in his life—a difficult subject to confront or express for many teenagers:

I almost always get support from my home, friends, and in my family, but I almost always feel alone. It's like a fire without a trace of smoke, I am where I am because of them all. But frankly, it's made me feel different, like I don't belong. I mostly feel this way because the one person I had that made me feel right is gone and I feel like an alien. I think I've had 'support' all my life, but more than anything, they were lies so I never had any, and now that I do, I don't know what to do with it. (Journal 11940)

He expressed a very unsettling feeling that many have, but few feel confident confiding in others. George was honest and creative in his response, calling his loneliness a “fire without a trace of smoke,” an elusive feeling that most teenagers have a difficulty pegging down. George rarely speaks in class, but found his voice in his journal. He said that he “feel[s] like an alien” which is a large jump in trust. He trusted James to be empathetic with that feeling since he leaves himself very vulnerable. James rose to the challenge by responding with openness through kind words of advice and reassurance. In James’s entry to the same journal topic, he also opened up about feeling unsupported and failing in his goals,

When things are usually bad as they are, I try to reach out for support from

places such as home, school, family, and/or the temple I go to. With all these options, it's not hard to not feel like I have support but surprisingly I feel like I don't have support. Not having support has helped me try to work harder but I always seem to fail with this elusive goal that is starting to break me apart inside. Even if I have no support, I still feel like it's important to have. (Journal 11940)

James struggles in his classes. He is very intelligent, but lacks a confidence in his intelligence so he often gives up before trying. Since James was in my honors class, he faced a lot of competition at the academic level. To cover up his feelings of continued failure, he acted as the "class clown," cracking jokes left and right on a good day. The open relationship that they had created allowed James to be honest about his struggles and fear of failure. He bared a deep and scary feeling to George because of this mutual trust they grew through "going deep." Both George and James connected over loneliness, failure, and disillusionment throughout their journaling process. Because they were so open with each other, it led to reassurance and valuable advice about how to deal with those feelings.

Lupe and Barry also showed high vulnerability in their last journal entry. In response to a prompt that asked students to think about their hardest moment or experience, both Lupe and Barry showed more openness than most any other partnership. Lupe wrote about when he witnessed a shooting in middle school,

The hardest day or moment was when one of my friends got shot. this happen... when I was in 8th grade he was in 11th. We were walking down the street he had his gun he would always carry it. Then when we were almost at the corner a car pass by and started shooting. I was closer to a car so I got down. My friend got down to but he was a few step away from the car so one of the bullets hit him right in the left arms. The cars was still there so he told me get my gun. I was so scared I didn't know what to do but I got the gun and started to shoot. I only hit the car but they hear the police sirens so they left. We didn't get arrested because my dads friend had the paperwork for the gun. A few days later my friend go out of the hospital and we found out the ones who shot at us were arrested and they said they were not trying to shoot at us. They made a mistake, they were looking for someone else. (Journal 11567)

Lupe retold the story with immense detail. Walking another through a memory like this can be painful and triggering, but Lupe did it for Barry to really show him his most painful moment. In doing so, Lupe seemed to start to process this traumatic event. Barry also wrote about a shooting he witnessed as a child,

My hardest moment was when my friend got killed in front of me. I was 6 and he was about 16 or 17, he was friends with all my brothers. We were planning to go out play soccer outside and we were in front of apartments and we were all talking, when all of a sudden we saw a dark red car pull up and my brother ducked with me when the window rolled down. It was a black guy who usually hangs around a McDonalds that was in the corner. Well while we ducked under a car the guy shot with an Uzi and shot my friend right in the head while a bullet passed right where I was. He was really close to me...(Journal 11567)

Both journaling partners dived deep into highly traumatic events and did not spare the details to their partners. They showed more trust and openness in reliving these events than most other students who vaguely talked about their hardest moment, or declined to answer. Lupe and Barry were willing to share with each other by the end of the journaling process, relaying to one another that they have had similar experiences.

Openness and making connections, or “going deep,” is important for a successful partnership because being vulnerable creates higher levels of trust. When students take a leap to trust their partner and open up, they are able to start processing their lived traumas.

Checking Up on Partners

Lastly, I found that the students who were concerned with their partner’s well-being created some of the most successful journals. The journaling prompts often asked students to think about painful memories or struggles in their lives as an attempt to have students reflect on these experiences and process them. In answering the prompts, many students relayed experiences that were emotionally taxing for that student to go through and so they often expressed sadness, loneliness, regret, anxiety, disappointment, or fear. There were several partners who went beyond by following up with their partner on that response entry, or during the next entry cycle to make sure that they were doing okay. This showed me that they had established care and an attachment to their partners because they showed an interest in their partner’s emotional well-being. This demonstrates both of the SEL tenets because students are authentically practicing social awareness and attempting to grow emotionally-connected relationships despite struggling through the effects of CPTSD which causes disengagement and distrust.

One journal partnership in general excelled in this care and attachment. Selena was going through a hard breakup with her boyfriend, and Martina vigilantly kept up with the journal to comfort her partner; Martina even came in during lunch one afternoon to check in on her partner and write an entry that she

had missed. When Selena expressed that she was worried about her boyfriend, she wrote back with love and openness,

It's fine and I'm sorry to hear that. Why would you think that your boyfriend doesn't feel the same for you? I also I feel you, I wasn't heart broken but I felt like I wasn't here, like I just felt empty. That's how I felt today. I was by myself on the stairs just thinking who cares about someone like me. Sometimes I feel like crying but I find it better to hold it in. I think the worse thing I can do is to cry in front of that person that made me feel like this. Partner, dont be sad :) its going to be alright. Sometimes I just tell myself the only person that go you is you. I also think it cool to talk to you, you sound layed back. Also why do you need support from him when you have family 3 friends, in my opinion just leave that mf and find someone else who will feel the same for you and won't make you think about that kind of stuff. (Journal 11004)

Martina showed her investment in her partner, and her partner responded with more entries about this big, emotional decision. They created a bond over Selena's crisis that allowed both girls to connect more than the average partnership. Not only did Martina respond in a timely manner, with empathetic and well-thought out responses, and with palpable care, but she also shared with Selena to help her out. In this entry, she told Selena about her bad day too, and shared a vulnerable moment of disheartening self-doubt when she spoke of having someone care about "someone like me." She made it easier on Selena to lean on her because she was interested and shared back passionately. In their writing, they seemed close, almost as if they were friends to begin with and not strangers. Because of Martina's investment—her frequent "check-ins" with Selena—Selena responded to Martina's distresses with a similar kindness and love:

Why are you feeling bad you could talk to me if you have a problem or anything. Sometimes I do get mad cause there annoying. Something that's made me happy is talk to you... It made me happy because I can talk to you about things and it will stay with us... Love your partner hope your feeling better :((Journal 11004).

Unlike other partnerships where the journaling was engaged and polite but journalers remained reserved or partially distrustful, the two girls relied on one another for support and genuine friendship. A few other partnerships had moments of these "check-ins" or moments of investment as well, and these were the partnerships that had the most successful journals.

Unexpected Findings: Male Disengagement

I was most surprised and disappointed by some of the male-to-male journalers. I found that several of the male writers did not take the project or prompts seriously and were unsupportive, negative, and degrading to their partners. Other all male partnerships often had surface level conversations about money, video games, and sports without trying to reach deeper or trusting their partners.

In the most unsuccessful partnerships, one party would “shoot on” another, creating an unsafe and harmful space. Michael let his partner know that he should not trust him halfway through the journaling project, “I honestly do not know what 2 say 2 you. So, I am just writing cuz I have 2. I doubt that anything I tell you will be true” and continued to put his partner down based on his idea of positive change in the world instead of encouraging him, “If you did that no one will ever learn 2 work hard” (Journal 11890). Michael also told his partner many times that his writing was illegible, “Again I could not read your writing!!!!!!!!!!!!” (Journal 11890) after which his partner started to rewrite his journal entry, but then gave up. This partner, like a few others, made it difficult for his counterpart to write down open or sharing journal entries for fear of ridicule.

Furthermore, some of the all male partnerships became explicitly demeaning to their partners, often displaying the same behaviors that make RCA a war zone. Many of these partners displayed negatively competitive talk, unnecessary and severe put-downs like “You should kill yourself” (Journal 11443), and used oppressive language. Allen often referred to his partner in a derogatory way, “Yeah anyway you're a d%ck for responding this late I feel like were not even friends because look at how much you wrote to me dude, I feel like Im annoying to you IDK why, its like whatever...” (Journal 11690). He also called another female student at school a “B.I.T.C.H.” and in his final journal reprimanded him for his conduct in other classes, as well as calling him another slur, “Dayumm Bro you know who I am and I know who you are But I shall forever stay unnamed. So just guess who I am you faggot you. Im in your period one you really need to stop talking with Joel and sit in your assigned seat...” (Journal 11690).

Despite clear expectations about language, respect, and empathetic statements (including sentence starters), many of these pairs had a partner who engaged in harmful commentary toward their partner. This did not create a safe space for their partnership and so the other partner would not share deeply, even in answering specific prompts.

These boys’ language is reminiscent of the power struggle represented in Karen Gallas’s “‘Bad’ Boys in the Classroom.” Gallas writes that our so-called “bad boys” are rebelling against their teachers because the classroom has become

more of a power play than a safe and accepting environment where male students are allowed engage in activities that interest them. Gallas hypothesizes, “I believe these young boys have acquired, by a very early age, deep and what seems at times to be unconscious needs to play out over years of schooling a struggle for dominance over other children and the powerful women they encounter” (1994, p. 68). She also states, “I question whether these bad boys are acting out their own agendas or simply the tumultuous world around them” (Gallas, 1994, p. 69). I believe this to be true with several of my all-male partnerships. When reading their entries, it felt more like a subversion of the overall project goal, an intentional sidestepping of our collective work. These all male partnerships overtly broke all of the journaling rules, and in doing so, I feel that they were trying to regain power in the classroom.

Interestingly, I noticed that there were male partnerships that were not actively mean to one another, but also did not reach a deeper level of trust. They spoke of sports and video games instead. These partnerships were not entirely unsuccessful because they had ongoing conversation, but it was surface level. Elvin and Vinn, Lupe and Barry, and Andy and Ben discussed tournaments on Black Ops 3; Jeremy and Enriquez discussed soccer, Jerome and Andre discussed the merit of basketball or football; Jay and Charlie discussed who would win at certain games on their phones. Most of these conversations took place over several journal entries. Many of these interactions seemed to be moments of authentic connections; these students were having prolonged conversations over mutual interests. In its own way, I believe that these entries show promise for future relationship making. What piqued my interest with the boys was their refusal to display deep or difficult emotions. They often evaded prompts to keep conversations surface level. Only my male-to-male partners refused to dive deeper for the duration of the journaling. I hypothesize that my male students are under extreme pressure from their community, and at school, to be hyper-masculine because of the difficult conditions that they survive through.

Jill Heinrich saw similar issues with masculinity in public high school settings in her 2012 study, “The Making of Masculinities: Fighting the Forces of Hierarchy and Hegemony in the High School Setting.” She found that the four boys she studied exhibited behaviors regulated by social norms of masculinity, “[t]he fear of not being able to “measure up” to the hegemonic masculine ideals that regulated school life was evident, and it actively shaped, influenced, and constrained both posture and performance in the classroom setting” (2013, p. 114). Because the journaling pushed students to discuss emotional experiences, an “inappropriate” masculine behavior, these partnerships refused to enter those conversations; they were restrained by their masculinity. The all-male partnerships had a very difficult time breaking through this hypermasculinity to process emotions with another person.

Conclusions

Many journaling partners were “successful” and reaped benefits from journaling. Many journalers discussed rough life events that may have caused initial trauma, were reflective about their own lives, and strived to give advice or empathetic responses to their partners. Only a handful of journalers were not successful, or did not take the project seriously. Many writers learned how to give advice to someone in a similar position or who has had a difficult experience, and many writers left demeaning language behind in order to support their partners. Students expressed more empathetic statements in these journals in eight weeks than I had heard at RCA in the previous eight months. In a life that is “rough all over,” can students learn to foster empathy by becoming one another’s friend, mentor, and advisor? Yes, absolutely.

The implications for teaching both in the classroom, as well as school-wide, lead back to the research on Social Emotional Learning. It is imperative that students, especially students who have emotional disturbance or CPTSD, need SEL integrated into their education. These students who are emotionally stunted because of the chaos of their daily lives need to be explicitly exposed to effective communication, how to make responsible choices, how to take responsibility for oneself to reinforce positive and healthy behaviors or coping mechanisms. This journaling project showed that many of my students are longing for an authentic and vulnerable connection with someone, but do not trust others because of their circumstances. School needs to be that safe place where they can have that trust and start processing their trauma. As educators, it is our responsibility to be responsive to our students’ needs, to halt the cycle of trauma, and to bring the whole student into the classroom, instead of educating with the banking method. Students’ experiences should be center-stage in the classroom so that they can learn to grow mentally *and* emotionally. All students can benefit from Social Emotional Learning and this study is reflective of that need and benefit. Struggling low-income, high diversity students need spaces where they can value their own identity, struggle, and stories and where they are valued in return.

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