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## Healing Through Expressive Writing

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On a hot spring day, a group of students—as well as teachers, administrators, and community members—sat outside on the front lawn of Asbury Park High School (APHS) in a giant U-shape. Paper tablecloths flapped in the wind, held to the tables by packages of cookies and water bottles. The creative writing teacher, Christine DeMarsico, checked the microphone for sound. Jennifer Chauhan, executive director of Project Write Now (PWN), a local literary arts nonprofit, held the printed anthologies, titled *Let Us Share*, like trophies as the students found their seats for the Writers Celebration. Meredith Z. Avakian, a spoken word artist and instructor, had spent the past year inspiring the 22 students in grades 9 through 12 to put pen to paper. The weekly class had become a sacred space in which each student was heard and respected; they poured their hearts into their notebooks and then polished their writing for publication.

A young man, J., volunteered to read his story first. Christine and the other students knew the intimate details; the class had become a family, and the sharing of words throughout the year strengthened their bond. Christine held J.'s hand as he read "The Story of Us," tears welling in his eyes, about the tragic day his sister died.

*My world turned upside down after all of the hell that happened that very day, and I still can't get over that day. ... The only way I now see her is through a photo on top of our counter. ... M., I wish you were here to meet your little*

*brother and get to hang out with him. Thank you for the memories, and for the good times, and I hope to see you again sometime.*

After he finished, Christine gave him a hug as the entire class erupted in applause. You could feel the love for J. permeating the space. Storytelling releases trauma; it creates a safe space for healing (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). And in these moments, it even brings joy. Joy and gratitude for our shared humanity—our genuine connections with one another.

Three years earlier in the fall of 2020, Christine had welcomed Project Write Now into her classroom. PWN was founded by Jennifer, a former high school English teacher, who was dealing with her own trauma after the loss of her parents and subsequent divorce. She wanted to give young people supportive spaces to explore their authentic selves through writing and sharing their stories. Christine had been participating in PWN's teacher writing group and immediately said yes when Jennifer suggested they co-create the Spoken Word Project for Christine's creative writing class. They both recognized the heightened anxiety and stress students were navigating due to the pandemic and the increased racial tension in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Each week over Zoom, Christine and Jennifer guided students to write how they were feeling that day; they also invited spoken word artists to join them, to perform for the students and share their inspirations for writing. One by

one, students began reading their words aloud, and a flood of thumbs-up and heart emojis appeared in the tiny black screens. At the end of class, students dropped their favorite lines they wrote into the chat and PWN's instructors wove them together into collaborative poems. For example, from "If I Ruled the World":

*If I ruled the world  
I'd stop world hunger  
No shortages of food  
We'd all be in a good mood  
I would make everyone smile  
And change the world  
To a better place  
For every color of face  
In this one human race*

Students were expressing their emotions—their fears, their hopes, their dreams. And in these shared experiences, they were feeling less alone. In a 2021 survey of the creative writing class conducted by PWN, 70 percent of students said that writing and sharing with the group made them feel more connected to one another. Eighty-three percent said they were likely to use writing when working through strong emotions. One student shared: "I noticed that now I can make myself feel relaxed from stressful things. I can feel my mental health improving."

English classes need to be authentic and healing spaces to transform education in this post-pandemic reality where anxiety, stress, and depression are hurting our kids. According to a recent report by YouthTruth, "depression, stress, and anxiety are the most prevalent obstacles to learning for secondary students at every grade level for six through twelve." (YouthTruth, 2023) How can we educate our children when they are living in a society where they can no longer be kids, are not given a voice, and are succumbing to unrealistic pressures and expectations?

Expressive writing must be at the heart of this change because writing is a means for

healing and growth. Words are powerful—they create connections, love, empathy, and understanding (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). The partnership between Project Write Now and the creative writing class at APHS started during the pandemic when it seemed impossible to keep students engaged in teaching and learning as traditionally done. This partnership opened the door for healing and restoration during the most challenging of times.

To this day, Christine begins her class with a check-in question, followed by a writing prompt. Most days, she uses poems (poets.org is a fantastic resource), asking students to pull a line, a phrase, an idea, or an emotion and to write from it. She also uses thought-provoking questions. The prompts range from light and funny to deep and introspective. One day the question was "What is on your never to-do list?" The students engaged in a lively discussion about skydiving, snakes, and flying. Each question breaks the barrier between students and helps the group develop a bond. As September moves to January, the students become more deeply connected. The mutual respect and love invite soul growth and joy. As the school year progresses, students are empowered to learn in a safe space—to be heard, respected, and loved. If we don't see and accept our students for who they are, we cannot teach them. Expressive writing is the bridge to this transformational education.

#### Works Cited

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JENNIFER CHAUHAN Jennifer Chauhan is co-founder and executive director of Project Write Now, a literary arts nonprofit transforming individuals, organizations, and communities through writing.

CHRISTINE DEMARSICO is an English and Creative Writing teacher at Asbury Park High School. They both believe that writing can be a powerful tool, unlocking the potential for personal growth and deeper connections with others. Jennifer can be contacted at [jennifer@projectwritenow.org](mailto:jennifer@projectwritenow.org). Christine can be contacted at [christine@projectwritenow.org](mailto:christine@projectwritenow.org).