A Creative Writing Program to Enhance Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy in Adolescents

Genevieve E. Chandler, PhD, RN

PURPOSE. To describe the rationale, content, and results of a group creative writing program to increase adolescent self-esteem and self-efficacy.

METHODS. Subjects were low-income, at-risk minority youth (N = 11). Free writing in response to specific exercises, sharing their own stories in their own language, and responding to their peers were used daily for 2 weeks as part of the high school English class. The program was oriented toward health rather than problems, with the content created by the adolescents.

FINDINGS. The opportunity to tell their own story, in their own language in a safe, structured setting with positive feedback led to higher self-efficacy and self-esteem.

CONCLUSIONS. This study suggests that a writing intervention focused on building self-in-relation self-esteem and the four aspects of self-efficacy resulted in increased sense of well-being.

Key words: Adolescents, self-efficacy, self-esteem, writing

One of the primary goals of transition from childhood to adulthood is to develop a positive sense of self. Miller (1991) maintained that a person's self-concept is the single most important factor that affects behavior. Meisenholder (1985) acknowledged that self-esteem and self-efficacy are key components in the restoration and maintenance of health. In 1992, Hardin, Carbaugh, Weinrich, Pesut, and Carbaugh reported that one of the most important stressors for teens was threat to self. The authors concluded that because adolescents identified negative coping strategies that were life-threatening, there is a vital need to develop interventions that reinforce adolescents' healthy coping and a solid sense of self. It is critical to provide the next generation with knowledge and skills that will facilitate internal strength and resilience.

To date, the majority of interventions with adolescents have been problem focused and administered through verbal techniques such as lectures and discussion, with the content determined by adults. This author designed a nursing intervention, Writing for Resilience to Increase Self-Esteem (WRITE), that was oriented toward health rather than problems, using material that came from the adolescents themselves, with the goal of enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Literature Review

Sorrell (1994) documented that traditionally, research on composition has focused on the written product. In the 1960s, however, the focus shifted to the writing process. Observations have shown that in this process there is a complex interplay between thinking and writing in which initial ideas are reworked into new meanings and unformed thoughts are given form and clarity (Sorrell). Writing then enhances thinking and has value as part of the learning process. Emig (1983) observed that writing slows down thinking, transforming the passive thinker...
into one who is actively, physically engaged with the creative process. Fulwiler (1987) noted that writing facilitates the thinking process, thus allowing the writer to think something through completely. Brown and Stephens (1995) support the notion that writing is a valuable vehicle for reflecting on one's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. They contend that authentic writing is the merger of thought and feeling; when students have both cognitive and affective responses to subject matter, they construct important connections. This construction of meaning is personally transformative, growth-producing, and essential to the learning process (Brown & Stephens). Atwell (1987) observed that writing can provide a neutral way to solve problems, capture feelings and inner experience, exercise power and freedom, and know one's own voice. Pipher (1994) argued that "knowing one's own voice" (p. 5) is a critical part of the process of learning who one is. Writing thoughts and feelings can strengthen one's voice and sense of self.

There are three categories of writing: transactional, expressive, and poetic. Transactional writing is the typical language of science — factual, impersonal — and the main mode used in most school curricula. Expressive writing is the written form of everyday speech, the language of the personal narrative, the mode in which new ideas are tentatively explored and from which more specialized writing can be developed. Poetic writing evokes feeling. A piece of expressive writing that recollects a significant past experience often emerges as poetic writing in a story or poem.

The personal poetic narrative is an ideal mode for reflection. It is a fundamental way to search for meaning, value, and truth, all of which become clearer when set in written form (Nicolini, 1994; Sorrell, 1994). Exploring and defining the self and its relationship with others, becoming aware of structuring one's thinking processes, and recognizing how the past has influenced and will continue to affect one's life are the benefits of writing the personal, poetic, narrative (Nicolini).

The poet James Baldwin (1991) wrote of his childhood, "Growing up in a certain kind of poverty is growing up in a certain kind of silence . . . in the silence one cannot name the sensations, fears, injustices and simple facts of daily life because no one corroborates it. Reality becomes unreal because no one experiences it but you" (p. 38). When Baldwin read the work of another black author, he commented, "When circumstances are made real by another testimony, it becomes possible to envision change" (p. 38).

There are three categories of writing:

Transactional, expressive, and poetic.

According to Nicolini (1994), "the writer is on a search for himself. If he finds himself, he will find an audience, because all of us have a common core" (p. 60). Onwum, a storyteller, felt that bringing stories out into the public realm is transformative and healing, reminding people of their commonality and creating community. Santiago-Welch (1995) believed that sharing one's self through creative writing and receiving positive criticism are therapeutic. The writing process gives power to the writer in a community of people coming together for the purpose of writing, to be heard and affirmed. Writing is a tool that can bring people to a place where they feel empowered. Writing can give access to one's own self, knowledge, experience, imagination, and voice. Most theorists agree that writing has great potential to contribute to the mental, emotional, and social development of the writer (Nicolini; Sorrell, 1994).

Nicolini (1994) observed: "Teachers can't inject self-esteem, can't inject a self-concept serum . . . but through success in writing students' sense of self-esteem improves naturally" (p. 61). Based on these theoretical notions, the WRITE program was designed to help students use creative writing to know the self and know others, with the goal to increase self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Baker (1996) suggested that the process of reflective learning leads to an increased sense of self-awareness
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and self-esteem and a change in conceptual perspective. Experts recognize that language alone does not lead to reflective, abstract thought. From their study of knowledge development, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) concluded that “in order for reflection to occur, oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen or read and write—sharing, expanding and reflecting on each other’s experience” (p. 26). The authors suggest such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community. Without these interchanges, people remain isolated from others and, even more important, without tools for symbolizing, representing, and sharing their experiences, individuals remain isolated from themselves. Vygotsky (1962), an expert in linguistics, explained that exterior dialogues are a necessary precursor to inner speech and an awareness of one’s own thought processes. Linesch (1988) described the writing process as a way to communicate personal experience, engage in social participation, and explore and experiment with identity. In the traditional school curriculum, there is little opportunity for students to focus on the development of self.

Methods

Purpose

The purpose of the WRITE intervention was to introduce creative writing as an opportunity for adolescents to tell their own story in their own words and to be respectfully heard and responded to without criticism. The goal was to provide a positive behavioral alternative for anger, stress, substance abuse, and violence.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework underlying the design of the program incorporated the self-in-relation construct of self-esteem (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) and Bandura’s (1977) theory of self-efficacy.

Self-in-relation theory suggests that individuals develop a distinct identity and sense of their own capabilities in relation to others. The self-in-relation construct is a shift from traditional theories of self-esteem, which stress separation and autonomy rather than connection and relationship. In self-in-relation theory, self-esteem is described as the intimate connection between the growth and development of the individual self and the interactive development of self and others.

The development of supportive relationships through positive feedback and sharing written work provided a relational context to develop connections to others.

Self-esteem, then, is an evaluation of self (Rosenberg, 1965) and cumulative feelings about the self (Cooper-Smith, 1967) that evolve in the context of relationships. In the creative writing program, the development of supportive relationships through positive feedback and sharing written work among students and facilitators provided a relational context in which to develop connections to others to compare self-concept, values, and goals.

Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as evaluative feelings about one’s ability to carry out a behavior to a successful outcome. Perceived self-efficacy determines the initiation of a particular coping behavior as well as the persistence of that coping behavior in the face of obstacles. Self-efficacy is based on four sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. Personal mastery of particular experiences that results in a sense of accomplishment is the most influential aspect of determining self-efficacy.
A sense of self-efficacy gained from performance accomplishments tends to generalize to other situations in which performance may have been stunted by preoccupation with personal inadequacies. Self-efficacy is generated through vicarious experience, defined as seeing others perform threatening activities without adverse consequences. Negative emotional arousal, such as fear of the impending situation, can inhibit successful performance. Fear-provoking thoughts about ineptitude can be diminished when individuals are persuaded verbally that they have the capabilities to master a task and are provided with the knowledge through modeling and skills development (Bandura, 1977). The WRITE program created the opportunity for performance accomplishment through writing, vicarious experience by hearing others read their writing, and verbal persuasion from both peers and facilitators.

When the program was introduced at the English department faculty meeting at an urban New England vocational high school of 1,600 students, several teachers volunteered to participate. Participation was based on the ability to match the schedules of the high school students and graduate student facilitators.

Subjects

The setting had a high-risk population of minority adolescents. The school has the largest percentage of low-income children (51%) in the city, with the student body mix being Hispanic (41%), African American (35%), and white (24%). Participants in this pilot program were boys (3) and girls (8) in an 11th grade English class.

The Intervention

The WRITE program uses the creative, narrative, poetic writing method developed by Sneider (1993) in which individuals write in a group with the purpose of "developing their voice." This creative writing method has been used for more than 10 years with a variety of populations, including low-income women, English as a second language students, adolescents, bereaved parents, and professional writing groups. Sneider comments on the low-income women's group: "All have gained confidence, are working together and acting as role models for their children in the struggle against poverty" (personal communication, November 10, 1995). The author, who served as the faculty facilitator of the WRITE program, is certified as a group facilitator by the Amherst Writers and Artists Institute. The co-intervenors participated in 8 hours of training to implement the program.

WRITE was introduced to the high school students by the faculty facilitator as a creative writing workshop, with the goal being to "tell their own story in their own language." The students were assured the workshop was not concerned with technical writing, punctuation, or spelling. Following a brief description of creative writing, students were asked to "free write" by putting their pen to the paper and writing for 10 minutes, whatever came to mind in response to an exercise. The exercises (Table 1) used topics ranging from objects placed on a table (e.g., a clock, toy car, rosary beads, hammer) to lines of poetry read aloud. Following the written part of the exercise, students and facilitators were asked to read their writing aloud. After each person read, class members provided positive feedback by commenting on what they liked and what they remembered. Table 2 outlines the specific steps to the writing/reading process.

Analysis

To assess students' response to the program, mid and end evaluations were conducted in the form of a paper in which the students were asked to write for 1 minute to the question, "What is this experience like for you?" (Angelo & Cross, 1993). The evaluations were anonymous to encourage students to write both positive and negative reactions. Table 3 summarizes the student's midpoint and final evaluations.

Results

The content written in response to the exercise fell into three categories: memories, affect, and ideas.
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Table 1. Exercises for Creative Writing Program for Adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Stimulus Object</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Respond to a collection of objects (e.g., toy car, old watch, shell).</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Draw a map of a remembered place (e.g., room, house, neighborhood, and write to what you recall).</td>
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</tbody>
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| 3   | Respond to one of these lines from a poem:  
  - “I’ve never seen the place I was born.”  
  - “Among my mother’s things I found…”  
  - “My soul is like a well of deep water.”  
  - “You are asking me where am I going with those sad faces.” |
| 4   | Write about something from your childhood that you had and don’t have now. |
| 5   | Respond to, “If I woke up tomorrow and I was the opposite sex…”  
  - “It is very funny to me, my mom was very noisy,” and she went on to describe a scene of her mother telling her father it was time to go to the hospital and her father going crazy, jumping in the car and leaving the writer and her mother on the front steps. Another participant drew a map of a beach and began his story with “sea shells remind me of my family’s last trip to Puerto Rico,” and ending with “life in Vieques (Puerto Rico) is very simple.” |
| 6   | Write down three things you’re afraid of and three things you are comforted by, and write about one or several of them. |
| 7   | Write to “In the summer when I was…”  
  - “It is very funny to me, my mom was very noisy,” and she went on to describe a scene of her mother telling her father it was time to go to the hospital and her father going crazy, jumping in the car and leaving the writer and her mother on the front steps. Another participant drew a map of a beach and began his story with “sea shells remind me of my family’s last trip to Puerto Rico,” and ending with “life in Vieques (Puerto Rico) is very simple.” |
| 8   | Respond to a collection of objects (e.g., checkers, rosary beads, spatula).  
  - “It is very funny to me, my mom was very noisy,” and she went on to describe a scene of her mother telling her father it was time to go to the hospital and her father going crazy, jumping in the car and leaving the writer and her mother on the front steps. Another participant drew a map of a beach and began his story with “sea shells remind me of my family’s last trip to Puerto Rico,” and ending with “life in Vieques (Puerto Rico) is very simple.” |
| 9   | Pick a postcard and write about where it takes you.  
  - “It is very funny to me, my mom was very noisy,” and she went on to describe a scene of her mother telling her father it was time to go to the hospital and her father going crazy, jumping in the car and leaving the writer and her mother on the front steps. Another participant drew a map of a beach and began his story with “sea shells remind me of my family’s last trip to Puerto Rico,” and ending with “life in Vieques (Puerto Rico) is very simple.” |

Memory

In the memory category, students generally wrote about happier, simpler times of the past, such as going to the beach, a trip to their home country, or special family moments. For example, in response to the stimulus object, “Draw a map of a remembered place,” one participant drew a map of a labor room and wrote, “When I think about the birth of my brother, I will never forget that moment. It was very funny to me, my mom was very noisy,” and she went on to describe a scene of her mother telling her father it was time to go to the hospital and her father going crazy, jumping in the car and leaving the writer and her mother on the front steps. Another participant drew a map of a beach and began his story with “sea shells remind me of my family’s last trip to Puerto Rico,” and ending with “life in Vieques (Puerto Rico) is very simple.”

Affect

In the affect category, participants tapped into a whole range of feelings, from sadness to disappointment to delight. In response to the statement, “Write about something in your childhood that you don’t have now,” a participant started with, “Something I had in my childhood and I don’t have now is a father… me, I love and hate him at the same time and that’s because when I was 11 years old he walked out on my mother, sister, and I.” The participant ended with, “I wish everything could go back to around when my sister was born, everything seemed so perfect then.”

Ideas

Writings in the creative idea category were poems, short stories, and commentaries that came from the heart. One student started her poem with, “Words can
Table 3.  Student Evaluations of WRITE Program

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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Self-Esteem</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Self-Efficacy</th>
</tr>
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| Mid-eval| I like:<br>"Writing what's on our minds."
"Writing what we want to write."
"Not being told a topic."
"Getting to know each other like this."
"I wish it wasn't just two weeks." | I like:<br>"To write, and it's helping me to write at home."
"I never thought of myself as a writer, I like learning about myself."
"I hate to write, but I am trying." | "These writing assignments were great. It made me express myself better on paper, it makes my schoolwork easier."
"My writing skills have improved, it has helped me be more creative." |
| End-eval| "I really enjoyed opening up and telling people a little about myself."
"It helps me remember fun things."
"I've learned to write about my feelings, express myself, it also brought back years of memories."
"It makes me understand myself more and look back on some of the things I did wrong. It makes me realize how much I love my son and how precious memories can be."
"It's given me a chance to talk about my life. I also like listening to the other students writing and learning a little about them." |                                                                                              |                                                                                  |

hurt, words can wound, words can break a heart in two, when we speak before we think.”

Facilitators’ Response

Throughout the 2-week period, there was one consistent facilitator, with a different graduate student co-facilitator every session. The overall responses of the co-facilitators were very positive. After our first meeting, the co-facilitator wrote, “At first the students were not impressed, but as the session progressed they were relaxed, liked what they were doing, and were feeling good. By the end, the students were all buzzing with curiosity and excitement about the next day’s exercise. Something good is definitely happening here.” In response to the second session, a co-facilitator wrote, “I think it’s good to have something unstructured like this. I think most of their classes are probably very structured. I wonder how much they are encouraged to use their imaginations, to be creative and, most of all, have fun with it?” Following the third session, another facilitator commented, “The group as a whole was quite a bit more interactive than I expected. I was, frankly, surprised to see that all of the students engaged themselves in reading in front of their peer group. This experience made me realize how this alternative method of instruction would enable these adolescents to feel more in control of their life. It afforded them the opportunity to reflect on what had and is happening to them.” The fourth facilitator observed, “Most of the kids gave
each other positive feedback. They laugh at each other a little but it seems all in good humor, and no one seems offended."

In the second week of the program, facilitator responses included not only a reaction to the individual writings but also several observations of the collective experience of the group: "Writing came easily, (students) were very eager and excited about sharing. I was impressed with the sensitivity to each other’s writing and feelings of closeness that came through when commenting on their peers.” After the second day, the facilitator had a similar response: “Overall, I thought they did great! They seemed very enthusiastic and anxious to read; I was amazed how quickly they responded with their input. They appeared to be such a tight group and seemed to enjoy each other.” The writing was affecting not only the individual, but also the group dynamics of the class. Group cohesion had increased markedly.

“I have read articles about adolescents who think they will never live until they are 20, so they live dangerously because they feel they are going to die early anyway. Reading about it is one thing, but listening to an adolescent say this is more shocking,” was the observation of another facilitator. A facilitator on the following day observed, “I was struck by the responsibilities these adolescents have. One 16-year-old worried about her baby’s father taking him away, while another wrote about paying regular household bills.” The eighth facilitator related her knowledge of the literature to the experience: “I was startled that very young people had a fear of death. It was interesting to hear both boys and girls list embarrassment as something they were afraid of. Additionally, each sex spoke of their fears equally, which goes contrary to the assumption that boys would not talk about feelings or admit them.” All the facilitators recognized that the literature suggested there would be a gender difference in level of participation as well as the content of the writings. Throughout the program, however, there was no discernible gender difference in writing or responding. Following the final session, the facilitator wrote, “It felt like it went too fast, it was over before it got started. I wanted to spend more time with the kids, get to know them. It was neat to hear a little snippet of their lives: being sad, proud, uncomfortable, excited.”

The co-facilitators’ responses indicated that over the 2-week period, the group interaction went from students being withdrawn and reticent to participate to a cohesive group that responded enthusiastically to each exercise while competing to read and respond to their peers.

**Teacher Evaluation**

Initially, it was not anticipated that the teacher would be present in the room during the intervention; however, she chose to work quietly at her desk for the 40-minute sessions. An unexpected benefit was her daily verbal support and the final written evaluation. Before the intervention she reported that attendance in class was very erratic. In fact, the day the program was initiated only 25% of the class was present, with additional students attending every day, so by the last week there was 100% attendance. After the final session, she commented:

It was good for them, they came to understand themselves. These kids have a plethora of problems in their personal life and no one to talk to. They want to talk, writing gives them the opportunity . . . when they write about their personal life, they begin to reflect, they look back and gain an understanding of themselves . . . it brings back stuff from the past that you might not remember . . . it helps to free write to get thoughts down . . . it relieves frustration.

When asked if there was anything that surprised her, she said, “I was amazed that there was no resistance at all . . . The kids looked forward to it every day, they enjoyed it a lot . . . One girl, who never talked before, told another teacher that she loved this class!”

**Discussion**

The purpose of this program was to pilot a creative writing intervention program designed to enhance self-
esteem and self-efficacy. A basic assumption of the interventions was that to maintain or enhance health, adolescents need to develop a strong sense of self through self-knowledge and the ability to express themselves. The goal of the intervention was to facilitate self-knowledge through relating to others in a structured safe environment with positive feedback that would increase self-esteem and self-efficacy. Through their writing and responding, participants combined cognitive and affective responses to construct important connections between themselves and others.

Sironkik (1983) recognized that most schools provide meager opportunities for dialogue. Verbal interchanges tend to be teacher initiated and dominated, constrained, and unilateral. The WRITE program provided an opportunity for student-initiated voice and reflection. Baker (1996) described reflection as a process of thinking and exploring an issue of concern, which is triggered by an experience. In this case, the students' concerns were triggered by the introductory exercises, followed by a 10-minute “free write.” When the students read aloud, they heard their thought process describing their values, priorities, and preferences expressed in their own voice. Voice in writing implies words that capture the sound of the individual on the page. When people learn to use their real voice, it leads to growth and empowerment in using words and relating to others as well as self. The student and teacher evaluations supported Atwell’s (1987) claim that writing helps solve problems, capture feelings, and know one’s own voice.

Conclusions

Through the writing process, students increased their writing efficacy. The four sources of self-efficacy—performance accomplishment, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal—were part of the intervention. The students experienced performance accomplishment once they engaged in the exercise, voluntarily read aloud, and received interested, positive responses. Several students learned to trust the process through vicarious experience. For example, the majority of students were not in the first session when the project was explained; however, as absent members joined and observed their colleagues immediately responding to the exercise in writing and voluntarily reading their work, the late-arriving students participated enthusiastically. The feedback method was designed to provide positive verbal persuasion. As indicated in the evaluations, through mastering the skills of free writing and having their stories “heard” through reading out loud and responded to with genuine positive feedback, the students’ potential negative emotional response was diminished.

Both adolescence and poverty have the potential to maintain a silence. The sharing of writing through reading aloud and receiving positive feedback provided the students with a different way of knowing each other, a new way of interacting. They heard each other’s stories. Most adolescents, especially those at risk, believe they are alone in experiencing their pain, confusion, and angst. Nicolini (1994) wrote, “How comforting then to discover they are not alone, that they and their classmates have a pool of shared experiences” (p. 60). In support of the self-in-relation concept of self-esteem, which emphasizes the centrality of connecting to others as a way to enhance self-esteem, students reported an increased sense of well-being from hearing about the lived experience of their peers.

The WRITE intervention holds much promise in enhancing adolescents’ self-esteem and self-efficacy. This project laid the groundwork for a study with an increased sample size, which will obtain additional qualitative data as well as quantitative pre and post measures of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

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Author contact: gec@nursing.mass.edu, with a copy to the Editor: Poster@uta.edu