

Overlooked Literacy Tools for Sustenance and Well-being in Teachers and their Students: Reading, Writing and Poetry

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Abstract

Recent studies have shown that educators are stressed at double the levels of other professions [1]. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, mental health disorders itself became its own epidemic among teachers [2]. While well-meaning administrators and health advocates encourage mental health and self-care training for educators, beyond the well-known practices of adequate sleep, eating right, and meditation, is a body of research untapped. Poets, authors and philosophers remind us that literacy, through reading, writing and poetry, can also be a balm in times of uncertainty and traumatic experiences. Reading, writing and poetry can prompt us to slow down, change ourselves, bring a sense of connection and discover meaning - all of this leading to increased well-being [3], [4], [5]. The findings in this two year collaboration suggest that we make shifts from extraction, product-centered and analysis driven literacy practices and also emphasize literacy as a way for hearing and speaking our truths, savoring moments, for finding meaning in our chaotic lives and for our personal well-being. When teachers embody these literate ways of well-being, they can then be a model for their students, who need these well-being life supports as well.

1. Introduction

Our research study narrates how two teachers draw upon reading, writing and poetry as a way of connection, discovering meaning, intellectual urgency/learning, and well-being as they journey through the complex and uncertain world during a pandemic. It highlights how they use these literacy modes, personally, as daily bread to give them sustenance, meaning and balm on weary days. In times of crisis, meaning gifts us resilience and strength to carry onward for the students in our classrooms, who need us as both an anchor and a buoy during these times. This project was born out of conversations between a university teacher education faculty member and a first year elementary teacher, upon discovery of their shared passions of reading, writing and poetry during teacher preparation literacy courses as teacher and student. Continued mentorship and conversations held virtually, throughout a two year span of time during the pandemic, brought an awareness of

common threads and themes of how their personal literacy lives supported their well-being and mental health, while their colleagues and teachers throughout the country were voicing their own mental health challenges and turning in their resignations. We wondered specifically how literacy, as a self-care practice, does this. What follows is a collaborative case study, narrated in two voices, capturing the individual journeys and collaborative conversations of two teachers across the miles and of different generations explored this question:

How can literacy practices; reading, writing and poetry, support teachers as a self-care practice in times of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty?

2. Literature Review

Teaching has always been a stressful profession. A 2017 survey of nearly 5000 teachers found that almost two-thirds of educators felt stressed, twice the level felt by workers in the other fields [1] with 58% of teachers citing poor mental health as a result of high stress. During the pandemic, a survey of teacher mental health by the Trauma Informed Schools Learning Collaborative, found that “more than a third of educators met the threshold for a diagnosis of depression or anxiety, with one in five exhibiting significant symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder” [2]. We recognize the multitude of factors that contribute to the increased stress and mental load for educators today, systemic and political, and do not intend to diminish or ignore these factors. They are real and require attention beyond the individual teacher/s control. In some cases, self-care in any form cannot sustain a teacher’s well-being [6]. In this paper, we focus on the less obvious practices of individual teachers, as an advocate for their own well-being and mental health in times of crisis and calm, when the ground seems groundless.

Articles, programs, and workshops currently flood teachers' inboxes and professional development time urging them to practice superficial self-care during the pandemic [6]. While exercise, adequate sleep, eating healthy, social interaction, meditation and connecting with nature seem to dominate these well-meaning authorities, some practices were absent that we perhaps disregard as self-care. These are the same practices we expect our

students to engage in on a daily basis - reading, writing and poetry. For many, literacy can be both an anchor and buoy that give nourishment as daily bread and balm for weary souls.

Schwalbe [7], wrote in *Books for Living* how books allow us to:

“slow down, savor and ponder. . . they can change lives, creating a shared universe for people who are otherwise spread by culture and age and by time and space”.

To be truthful, there is no greater time than during a pandemic for us to hold space for slowing down and at the same time find connection with an author, and the lives of those we read about. When we feel isolated and alone, books can bring us together, if only through story.

Books also are an avenue for invoking change in ourselves and how we see others and the world. Beers and Probst [3] in their book, *Disrupting Thinking* assert that books:

“should allow us to change ourselves, rethink and reshape who we are and what we do... clarifying, changing or strengthening our commitments”.

During riots, political division, conspiracy laced media and the uncertainty of the pandemic, books can help us to make sense of the world and ourselves. There are multiple ways of seeing what we experience, many angles, complexities which can prompt us to revise our interpretations [8]. In this way, Making sense out of what is happening in the world, along with shifting our beliefs towards a more inclusive and compassionate lens, opens our hearts and gives us a sense of clarity, especially when our future seems so uncertain. Most importantly, we reach for books as a source of pleasure and escape, especially when daily lives are stressful and full of anxiety. Fractured attention due to daily news breaks, internet use and social media streams have increased our cortisol levels [9], and technology use before and during the pandemic has interfered with our dopamine levels while being linked to increasing depression and mental health concerns [10].

In addition to reading, the practice of writing also can also be a source of connection, well-being, discovering meaning and a way to satisfy curiosity and intellectual urgency [4].

“In times of crisis, meaning is strength” [5].

We wish to give voice to our stories and feel heard, if only through our notebooks, and experience the mystery of what our pens have to say. The more we write, the more human we become, releasing a poison from our systems [11]. Poetry can offer this same solace. Poetry gives us permission to feel our pain and truths while recognizing this truth is true for

everyone. Through poetry, both reading and writing, we nourish our capacity for surprise, uncertainty and the mysterious. These are in direct correlation to our times.

3. Methodology

Our process for reading, writing, sharing, discussing and learning together rest on a collaborative autoethnographic methodology.

In autoethnography, Le Roux [12] describes the data collection for the researcher-participant as a more inborn quality where researcher-participants embody the data. Knowledge results organically, which for both researcher and readers may have a therapeutic effect. As we articulate our own self-hood through narratives, through reading, writing and in discourse with others, we gain a deeper understanding of ourselves. Collaborative autoethnography brings an individual’s critical self-reflection communal sharing in order to interpret the pooled data and seek common insights and themes [13].

3.1. Participants

Participants include an elementary school teacher in her second year of teaching as a 5th Grade Teacher in a 5th-6th Grade Intermediate School in a relatively affluent Midwest suburban community and a faculty member in the teacher education department at a Midwest university. Participants met as student and teacher in literacy education courses in a teacher prep program. What began as a mentoring relationship in a first year teachers’ journey, grew into a friendship connected through common passions of reading, writing, and poetry.

3.2. Data Collection

Our process unfolded organically through monthly meetings virtually via Zoom. Due to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic, we opted for sharing our experiences processing the pandemic and other events due to social unrest and virtual instruction. We listened to one another, offering questions and feedback for critical reflection. We then asked the question, “How is reading, writing and poetry supporting you right now?” and we would share these findings with one another. We would follow each session with documentation and reflection in our notebooks as both participant and researcher.

3.3. Data Analysis

In May 2022, we gathered our notebooks, reading notes and reflections and individually open coded [14] them, adding our notes/codes to a shared google

doc. We then met virtually to share what we noticed across the themes, both comparing and contrasting our notes. Through emails, text messages and phone conversations, we continued to examine and interrogate the data, the themes and study of our individual patterns across time led to greater conceptualizations and broader universal themes [15]. We considered how these themes, patterns and conceptualizations intersected with one another and connected to various literacy models and previous research. This process was collaborative, to ensure trustworthiness and validity in the data, and inductive. This process of naming and determining themes adheres to the tenets of collaborative autoethnography [13]. This process allowed our individual identities as readers, writers and teachers to evolve while also fostering a sense of kinship and acceptance within our partnership.

4. Findings

Shari's Story - The summer of 2020 was filled with unrest, uncertainty, and injustice. As a privileged, white female living in northern Minnesota, unanswered questions and cognitive dissonance swirled through my notebook pages day after day. As breaking news stories, health worries and political division robbed any focused attention I had, I turned to my daily writing practice, reading books and poetry for solace, and finding understanding.

The Black Lives Matter movement following the George Floyd protests made me aware of my surface level understanding of systemic oppression. I devoured, with pen in hand, the words of Beverly Daniel Tatum, Robin Deangelo, Layla Saad, Ibram X. Kendi, and Resmaa Menakem. I imagined myself in situations encountering microaggressions that Tatum [16] described in her book, *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the*, scripting these scenarios in my notebook and allowing the insidious rage build in my body. Resmaa Menakem described his grandmother's embodied ancestral trauma, I imagined my own ancestral traumas I perhaps carry, acknowledging the contrast of the ancestral traumas of European immigrants and African American slaves. I learned about redlining, systemic incarceration to the language we use to gaslight, offend and invalidate Blacks and POC. My eyes developed a new way of seeing and suddenly I saw injustices everywhere I turned, in the media, in the classroom, in Target, in family conversations. Every new episode, I documented in my notebook to reveal another layer of unconscious bias, prejudice and racism in my own self, others and in the world.

Our country is growing more divided, I sought to understand how we got to this place and studied books by Susan Jacoby (*The Age of American Unreason*), and Richard Hofstadter (*The Righteous*

Mind), then wondered how we might bring people together. Parker Palmer (*Healing the Heart of Democracy*), Mark Nepo (*More Together than Alone*) and Priya Parker (*The Art of Gathering*) all write about connection, belonging and healing our democracy. Taking this learning to the classroom required me to first write in a way that would deepen my understandings of them and then play out scenarios for the classroom and in my personal life.

My personal well-being suffered. Mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. A daily writing practice enabled me to attend to the various parts of my "self" through dialogue, unsent letters and whole self-scanning techniques. I tracked my well-being over time in my notebook and studied the workings of my own mind and how it impacted the rest of me. These documentations kept me connected with my truths and provided a grounding I returned to again and again. Like being lost in the woods, my notebook became my safe tree - a place of knowing.

Finally, poetry became a way for me to still my mind and pause to attend to nature, language, and the micro moments in my life. Because it seemed my attention became fragmented, these truffle sized bits of language were always at the ready when I needed some nourishment, through either reading poems or writing them. In the summer of 2021, I began to adopt one particular poet each month as my Poetry Guide. After my daily writing practice each day, I'd read a poem from my Poet Guide seeking wisdom or some response to the dwellings in my notebook. Mysteriously, these poet relationships felt like a friendship with a wise mentor on how to live. Each poet seemed to align with the themes, rhythms and seasons of my life and I have continued this practice as my most fulfilling strategy for well-being.

Poetry instilled awareness, cultivating neural pathways for presence. Small poems turned into a capturing system of delights in my days. I wrote a poem a day choosing one small episode and I now have a storehouse of memories chronicling the most ordinary of moments. In rereading these poems I can relive the past and I am filled with gratitude for giving attention to who I was each day and for capturing a moment to explore into the mystery of a poem.

In the spring of 2022, I designed a course for incoming freshmen at our university to learn how to use writing for life support. I incorporated many of the techniques that I use myself in my writing life and used entries from my own notebook as models. Student responses were affirming to me that writing as a personal practice is a powerful tool for all ages and that modeling how we use literacy practices to support our lives can be our most impactful method of teaching.

Caitlin's Story - Beginning in January 2020, my life changed drastically. Having just finished my

collegiate athletic career, I found myself feeling as if my identity had been stripped from me. For the first time in my life, I was completely rudderless. This feeling would soon be compounded, as, unbeknownst to me, I was about to transition into being a “COVID” teacher, with my first year being the 2020-2021 school year. Therefore, everything I had known and everything I had learned would prove to be quite useless in a world that was entering unprecedented times. The ground had leveled for everyone, which left us all looking at ourselves in the mirror and asking, “Who are we?” and “What matters?” Through continuous conversations on Zoom with Dr. Daniels, the same question arose: “How are you holding yourself up?” Expectantly, we talked about exercise, nutrition, adequate sleep, sunlight, connection with others, and meditation. But, over time, I found myself saying that literature - reading, writing, and poetry - were some of the brightest parts of my day, and I didn’t even realize it. I looked forward to the time I spent with words.

Reading, writing, and poetry were passions of mine from a young age but were practices I lost over time due to the demands of life as a collegiate student-athlete. However, that life was no longer a reality, and I began to rekindle this old passion after recognizing just how much it fortified and sustained me. I became more aware of when, why, and how I used these different practices as my crutch, I was able to become more intentional with them. Much like I know when my body needs more sleep, sunlight, or exercise, I now also know when I need to use reading, writing, and poetry to revive my soul.

Reading became both my escape and a way to fill my intellectual urgency.

“Books - fiction and nonfiction - can either take you to a completely different world or they meet you in your world and help you make sense of things.” (Notebook entry - February 2, 2022).

When I didn’t feel capable of facing either personal or societal issues, “I ran off to my (fiction) books - my temporary fake home - where I didn’t have to be me. I could live in each of the characters and more importantly, I could help solve the crime. I could predict, ponder, and wonder.” (Notebook entry - July 21, 2021).

Shari Lapena’s mysteries gave my mind a distraction to attend to. On a different note, nonfiction books helped me to fill my desire to learn, and ultimately provided me with tools that made me healthier both physically and mentally. For example, *The Joy of Movement* [17], gives fascinating information on the neuroscientific and physiological effects of movement and just how crucial it is for our health. As a former athlete, this was information I was unaware of, but always reaped the benefits from

because of my lifestyle. Much of the mental health struggles I faced beginning in 2020, I now attribute to substantial decrease of movement in my daily life. The practice of reading itself sustained me, while also providing me the knowledge necessary to improve my overall well-being.

The routine of writing each day has given me both an outlet for the burdens I carry along with a space to be mindful and present of what I notice in each moment. However, the practice of later re-reading what I had written after a long period of disassociation from it is what helped me to clearly see threads, recognize patterns, and ultimately change and grow as a human. Through reflection and conversations, it has become clear that without having written, separating from it, and then coming back to it, this growth would not have been possible.

Being an athlete, my entire life gave me a sense of confidence that I was unaware of until it was over. Without that identity, I began to question myself in every capacity - personally, socially, relationally, and professionally. I participated in the March Slice of Life Challenge in 2021 and 2022, put on by Two Writing Teachers, which is a blogging challenge to post publicly for as many days as possible in the month of March. Posting in the public eye for the first time was both nerve-wracking and exhilarating. In doing this, I realized that writing also gave me my confidence back. It gave me the opportunity to interact with others who reacted positively to my writing. It restored a sense of purpose and meaning that not only what I am doing as a person and teacher matters, but that my writing and sharing of stories has the power to move and positively influence others.

To me, poetry is everything else. Poetry fills in the gaps. It gives light where you think there is only dark. It gives words to the things you cannot describe. Poetry makes you feel at home and reminds you with certainty that you are not the only one. It forces you to pay attention to everything - what is good and beautiful and what is heartbreaking - but being present and mindful, nonetheless. Reflecting on the last two years, the practices of reading, writing, and poetry have not only sustained me, but have transformed me, given me confidence, a voice, and ultimately helped me to return to my truest self; the person we are all meant to be.

“At the root of all arts and literature is the common human experience that we won’t always talk about or admit. It’s all the things we avoid in casual conversations. The arts remind us that we are not alone because they are always created and based on things made by another human. I think - actually I know - this is why I fell in love with words. There is something relieving about reading something you are going through. It releases something in your soul and oftentimes, I have sighed a sigh of relief and

thought, "It's not just me." All we really want is to be seen and loved by others." (Notebook entry - February 2 2022).

Common Themes

In the analysis of our reading, writing and poetry journals over the stretch of two years' time, we discovered several overall themes, or impetus for our pursuit of these literate occasions. During times of crisis or calm, we sought to:

- i. discover / find meaning
- ii. connect with ourselves, others and the world
- iii. satisfy our intellectual urgencies, epistemological curiosities and
- iv. most importantly, to tend to our well-being.

The daily practices, an overall sense of joy and pleasure was frequently expressed through the preparation of, experience of, and following the act of reading, writing and through poetry. While the actual act of reading, writing and being immersed in poetry gave rise to the intertwining of these four dimensions, later when rereading our notebooks, not only for reflection, but much later, when the context had shifted, we were able to recognize our growth as human beings. We noticed transformations in how we viewed others, the world and ourselves, which might not have been recognized had we not kept a record of our experiences and thoughts as we went through them. These dimensions of writing/reading were sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious at the time of writing/reading. Once we recognized how literacy practices supported our well-being, we became more intentional about creating time through our days to weave in literate occasions and recognized the importance of modeling and teaching these practices to our students.

5. Implications

Implications for our findings can be viewed and applied through three lenses:

- human lens - using reading, writing, and poetry as personal sustenance
- classroom teacher - modeling, teaching and guiding students to use reading, writing, and poetry as sustenance
- colleague and leader - guiding and teaching and supporting other teachers to use reading, writing, and poetry as sustenance

From the human lens, being intentional in adopting literacy practices as a way to sustain yourself begins with carving out the time and space in your life. Creating a daily routine with a specified amount of time dedicated to these practices will build stamina. To start, it might be 15 minutes, or even 6, as Lewis' study suggests is enough to reduce cortisol levels in our bodies. Carry a book with you at all times and reach for it opposed to a phone. Keep poetry handy. And cultivate an awareness of the world around you to capture in your writing notebooks. We begin with ourselves.

As classroom teachers, from kindergarten to graduate students, we have the unique opportunity to model and teach these practices with our students, not only creating time within the classroom day, but explicitly teaching how literacy practices benefit them mentally, physically, socially and emotionally. Adopt the practice as a self-care opportunity in your classroom exclusive from the product-based teaching we are tied to through curriculum. As a colleague and leader in school, we can be a model, generate conversations, offer professional development and begin reading / writing / poetry groups that read and write together to share experiences and feel how literacy practices support one another.

6. Conclusion

Our findings show that our literacy practices became a source of our mental, physical, and emotional well-being during times of stress and in moments of calm as well. Social psychologist James Pennebaker, suggested in his research nearly forty years ago, that expressive writing has positive effects [27]. Since then, hundreds of subsequent studies have followed up Pennebaker's work to suggest writing also benefits us physically [18], physiologically [19], psychologically [20], socially [21], and can influence our behavior in positive ways. Reading for just 6 minutes has also proven to reduce stress [22], more than listening to music, walking or drinking a hot cup of tea. And, recent studies have shown that being immersed in poetry can lead to significant reductions in fear, sadness, anger, worry and fatigue [23], [24].

In our classrooms and for our own personal lives, we may neglect to model and teach our students these psychological, social, emotional and health benefits of literacy practices. Pressures of time, testing and curriculum mandates emphasize extraction of information in reading, product centered writing and analysis of poetry. Yet, we know that when we read and write for intrinsic and authentic purposes, motivation increases [25], [26]. If we are neglecting the deeper purposes of these literacy practices, especially in times of crisis, we are doing a disservice not only to ourselves, but to our students. Reading, writing, and poetry are at our

fingertips, and available to us when other ways of self-care may not be and we can integrate it into our academic days, perhaps when we need it most. What greater gift can we give to our students than to be well ourselves through the sustenance of literacy and also model and teach how our students can practice these ways of being as well.

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