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# Violence in our community: Middle level students' voices on Walmart shootings in El Paso, Texas

**Roberto Tinajero, Anjanette Todd, Josefina Villamil Tinajero, & Sarah E. Peterson**

**Abstract:** On August 3rd, 2019, a racially-charged mass shooting occurred at Walmart in El Paso, TX that killed 23 people and injured another 23. Following the Walmart shooting, students in this borderland region wrote essays related to their experiences. We used the themes we identified to inform implications for teaching writing and composition for middle school level instruction. Student themes reflected affective, behavioral and cognitive reactions to violence. Students' proposed actions to address violence included themes at the national/global level and personal level. Essential attributes from *This We Believe* and critical expressivism provide insights for writing pedagogy which encourages students to connect their experiences with violence to their own personal thoughts, emotions, and solutions. Some recommended critical expressivist activities educators can include in their work with students are: low-stakes writing focused on experiences with violence, specific readings connected to experiences of violence, journaling about encounters with violence, poetry, and the creation of a research paper on the effects of violence.

**Keywords:** *critical expressivism, mass shooting, middle level education, solutions to violence*

**The Successful Middle School: This We Believe: characteristics:**

- Instruction fosters learning that is active, purposeful, and democratic.
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse.
- Educators are specifically prepared to teach young adolescents and possess a depth of understanding in the content areas they teach.

“...I may just be a little kid to the rest of the world, but this little kid has a voice and I intend to use it.”  
(DtWT, Middle School Student Quote, 2020)

On August 3rd, 2019, a gunman entered a Walmart store in El Paso, TX, killing 23 individuals and injuring 23 individuals in what was described as “the deadliest attack to target Latinos in modern American history” (Murphy, 2019). It is devastating to hear of racially-charged violent incidents such as the Walmart shootings and to think of their effects on children. Unfortunately, mass shootings have become commonplace in the US and, as educators, it is important to keep at the forefront that each of these mass shootings have undoubtedly left unbearable suffering and lasting trauma on the victims, families, and communities where they occurred. As research shows, experiences of violence can lead to significant issues for young people, including disrupted friendships and family life, anxiety and depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and poor academic functioning (e.g., Holt et al., 2008; Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Therefore, examining how students responded to the Walmart shootings, through writing, contributes to our understanding of how early adolescents process and respond to these violent events and can help inform writing pedagogy. Specifically, a look at the affective, behavioral, and cognitive impacts of violence on students, which is an area of growing concern (Armsworth & Holaday, 1993; Holt et al., 2008; Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Zona & Milan, 2011), can inform the use of critical expressivism as a pedagogical model to incorporate in the English Language Arts classroom at the middle grades level.

In this article we first examine the feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and proposed actions of young adolescents who wrote essays about the Walmart shooting through the Do the Write Thing (DtWT) program, in order to provide insight to educators on the impact of violence on students. Secondly, we use the analysis of the essays to suggest the

value of using critical expressivism pedagogy in the middle grades. Understanding the impact of violence on the El Paso students and integrating critical expressivism pedagogy can serve to promote prosocial behaviors, and research has shown that promoting prosocial behaviors yields positive academic outcomes and increases opportunity factors for students who have experienced trauma from violence exposure during childhood (Atkinson & Sturges, 2003; Garbarino, 2001; Zins et al., 2004).

We grounded our analyses and recommendations in the following: students' participation in the national DtWT program, *This We Believe* essential attributes (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), and critical expressivism as a writing pedagogy (Roeder & Gatto, 2015). Whether or not other communities have experienced this level of violence, we believe that hearing the common humanity in the words of the middle school students of this targeted community may provide valuable insights into using writing as a crucial outlet to teach and reach middle school students.

## Background on DtWT and This We Believe

The DtWT program, sponsored by the National Campaign to Stop Violence (NCSV), is a nonprofit organization committed to reducing violence in the lives of early adolescents (<http://www.dtw.org>). Its primary goal is for middle school students to make a commitment to help end violence in their lives, schools, homes, and communities. The program uses writing as a cathartic and therapeutic exercise as it asks students to write about experiences with violence in their lives. Specifically, students write essays addressing (a) how violence has affected them, (b) the causes of violence, and (c) their proposed solutions to violence.

DtWT provides educators with a tool to motivate students to express themselves through writing to positively impact the world around them. The Association for Middle Level Education's (AMLE) *This We Believe* core principles also support this aim, which encourage educators to design curricula that inspire students to simultaneously think about and offer solutions for societal and global issues that impact their world (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Dever & Raven, 2017; Lounsbury, 2010). The five *Essential Attributes* of *This We Believe* serve as a foundation for educators who are implementing the DtWT essays within their curriculum and include education that is: (a) responsive (b) challenging (c) empowering (d) equitable

and (e) engaging. In our experience with the DtWT program we have seen these *Essential Attributes* reflected in classroom activities as well as students' essays.

Although DtWT's creators did not develop it based on *This We Believe* (2021), important features of the program address both developmental characteristics of young adolescents and implications laid out in the document. For example, one feature of a developmentally responsive curriculum is that it be integrative, offering students opportunities to examine relevant problems and develop steps to solve them. DtWT activities offer the opportunity to focus on both "inquiry and action" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 30) by discussing causes of violence and developing solutions to reduce violence. When teachers "recognize that students face many challenges that can be traumatic and...design schools that are spaces of healing for students" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 12), they support students' social emotional learning. As an example that is particularly relevant in this study, young adolescents develop an increased understanding and awareness of racism, which can lead to trauma for those from racially diverse backgrounds. An implication from *This We Believe* is to "provide opportunities from historically marginalized backgrounds to tell their own stories about their experiences as a way of helping youth to develop their voices and critically examine their experiences in supportive, affirming, and safe spaces" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 62).

## This We Believe: Essential attributes

The Essential Attributes of *This We Believe* are built upon the importance of teachers creating educational environments that are: responsive to the unique needs of students' multiple and intersecting identities, challenging students to reach their full potential, empowering students to take personal responsibility for their learning and make a positive difference in society, fostering equitable and inclusive environments that are affirming to all, and engaging students by fostering participation and a positive learning environment (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). These attributes are fundamental to middle level education standards. Research shows that integrating reflective writing/essay opportunities in class assignments supports some of the key essential attributes found in *This We Believe* (Wright et al., 2020). More specifically, through DtWT essays or similar writing activities, teachers can create opportunities for in-depth student reflection/writing that examines how violence has impacted homes, schools, and community environments. The Walmart shooting was a significant event

that collectively traumatized the entire El Paso community due to the level of violence that ensued. The DtWT essays were grounded in *This We Believe* essential attributes (shown in parentheses below) and served as a powerful outlet that utilized writing as a way students could safely express a range of difficult emotions and thoughts surrounding this mass shooting. Developmentally, early adolescence can often be a time of confusion as students are beginning to develop and form their identities (Klimstra & van Doeselaar, 2017). For culturally diverse youth, this is also a pivotal time where they begin to make meaning of their ethnic or racial experiences in relation to those around them (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). As such, this period can impact and shape students' racial and ethnic identity in lasting ways. Keeping these developmental characteristics at the forefront, teachers can help their students process these racially-charged events through the lens of the Essential Attributes of *This We Believe*.

This mass shooting was a racially/ethnically motivated attack by an individual who targeted Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. As a result, students described their experiences through multiple and intersecting identities (e.g., middle school kid, son, daughter, Mexican, Mexican-American). To support needs of their students (responsive), teachers used the writing of an essay to help students acknowledge the pain they were experiencing while simultaneously providing students with a platform to share their pride in who they are as a culture and a community (equitable). Students were encouraged to write about how violence had affected them (challenging), what they believed were possible causes of violence, and how to prevent future violence. Through the process of writing, students discovered their own ideas for solutions (engaging), fostering a sense of agency within these young adolescents, while also empowering them to generate ideas for creating a more peaceful and hopeful future (empowering).

## Middle school students' responses to violence

To provide context for our teaching recommendations, we reviewed DtWT essays written by students in fall of 2019 following the Walmart shootings. Nine school districts in the greater El Paso area participated in DtWT that year, with approximately 8,000 students writing essays. Each participating middle school submitted their top ten essays ( $N=456$ ) to the director of DtWT in El Paso and a Blue Ribbon Panel tasked with identifying semifinalists for consideration in the national DtWT essay competition

judged them. After receiving IRB approval, we identified all these essays that made mention of the Walmart shootings, and they comprised the data source for this project ( $N=215$ ). Because the essays were anonymous, we do not have exact demographic data, but all participating students were in the 7th or 8th grade, and according to the United States Census (2019), 83% of the population of El Paso County were Hispanic.

As a framework for reviewing essays, we conducted a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) driven by the Triage Assessment System (Myer et al., 1992), which posits that people experience affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to crises. First, the authors became familiar with the essays individually by adopting a close reading, making notes to begin identifying examples for each category of reaction. After unanimous agreement that theoretical thematic analysis was appropriate because students wrote about affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions, one coauthor independently identified all examples in each of the three categories of impact. Third, all coauthors came together to review and discuss the identified quotes and were unanimous that each clearly reflected the identified theme. Using the same process, we also identified themes representing students' proposed actions for addressing and reducing violence. Although we did not have a theoretical framework for this portion of students' essays, our extensive experience in scoring DtWT essays suggested that students' proposed actions usually reflected one of two perspectives – solutions on a higher level and on a personal level.

## Impact on students

Through our multistep process of analyzing the essays, we confirmed that participants' essays fell into the three broad categories of impact posited by Myer et al. (1992): affective, behavioral, and cognitive. Affective impacts were those that focused on feelings and emotions, behavioral impacts focused on observable actions, whether actually carried out or proposed by students, and cognitive impacts focused on thoughts and understanding. Within each of these three categories of impact, we identified more specific themes when patterns were detected.

### Affective reactions

These included personal feelings of fear, anger, sadness, shock, disappointment, hope, alertness, and relief. Some students recalled exactly what they were doing that day

and how they felt in the immediate moments after hearing about the shootings. Many also reported that they continued to experience these feelings several months later when they wrote their essays. Although less frequent, students also addressed the affective reactions of others which reflected some of the same themes (See [Table 1](#) for exemplar quotes).

## Behavioral reactions

These revealed immediate behavioral responses, as well as behaviors that occurred later. DtWT activities took place in November and December 2019, so these later behaviors occurred up to approximately 4 months following the shootings. Common behaviors on the day of the shootings and soon after included staying at home, going to church,

watching the news, talking with family and friends, and texting, as well as physiological reactions such as not being able to sleep and rapid heartbeat. Later behaviors included fear of walking out of the house, terrifying nightmares that kept students awake at night, fear of going to the mall or store, and scoping out random shoppers to figure out their motive for being there. Several students also discussed behaviors that reflected their resilience over time. (See [Table 2](#) for exemplar quotes).

## Cognitive reactions

These focused on students seeking to understand what happened and why it happened. The tragedy left many students wondering what caused such horrific and

**Table 1.** Affective Reactions to Walmart Shootings.

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Quotes
Personal Feelings	Fear	The shooting at Walmart petrified me. It terrifies me to this day. Almost 4 months have passed and I am still afraid to walk out of my home. Never once did I feel scared to go to school. Now I can't walk into a store without feeling afraid. Fear, it's an ugly feeling.
	Anger	It makes me panic with this festering feeling inside my gut. I fear not just for me but for my family as well. I was especially angry because I came to find out that the shooter was not even from El Paso. If they had known what a beautiful city this is, they would've changed their mind-set, maybe things would've been different for everyone. When I heard what happened that morning my heart sank, not only with fear but anger. All I could do was look at my news and see how many more people were harmed how more many people were sent to hospitals or even killed. It made me angry.
	Sadness	Knowing that 22 innocent people lost their lives through this selfish act, makes my heartache. I was saddened by how I had to live in a country where you weren't accepted by your race or your skin color.
	Shock	I felt devastated and was in great shock of what had happened on this day, and didn't know what to feel for all the families that lost. The shooting that transpired in El Paso on August 3, 2019, was a shocking and even traumatizing incident. I never expected that such a terrible act could harm an entire community, my community. My community was hurt, affected, and consequently that hurt, and affected me too.
	Disappointment	I was disappointed with humanity.
	Alert/ Cautious	The violence here in El Paso has made me be more alert and more watchful around my surroundings. Now, I have more caution of where I am and who I'm with. I am more prepared and take things very serious. My school, which was a place where I went to learn, make friendships, gain knowledge and also have fun, was now filled with precautions and even somewhat of strictness. I understood, and understand now that this strictness was, and is, for my good and the good of my peers.
	Relief	As we were leaving I saw my childhood best friend. I was overwhelmed and excited to see her. As we left, I felt a sense of rejoicement and sadness.
	Hope	The one thing that gave me hope was how many people were at the memorial, and the celebrities were donating. Seeing how sad people were after the shooting broke my heart; many of us were very distraught and nervous to be in public for fear of something similar happening.
	Others' feelings	On the other hand, I have noticed my parents became more protective of me in public situations...I haven't been able to stay in the car alone anymore and their response has always been "I don't know there's just been too many shootings happening lately mija."

**Table 2.** Behavioral Reactions to Walmart Shootings.

Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Immediate behavior	Waking up and hearing my phone screech that horrendous beeping sound, made my heart jump a million miles per hour. Glancing at my phone, there was an emergency alert in which I would never forget those words, "Active shooter in Cielo Vista area. The day of the El Paso shooting I was there with my dad and sister when the whole thing happened. We drove one man to the hospital and we took another to an ambulance. I saw what my dad's job was like in addition I got to see how he had to make quick decisions. My dad dropped us off with my mom and went back to help. It was the most horrid day of my life.
Later behavior	One thing that I commonly do is always scope out random strangers and question if they are really here just to buy groceries or something worse.
Resilience	Cruises' [Cruscus'] goal was to hurt us and deplete our Mexican heritage, but we stand together and we fight against this racism and gun violence. I have learned that talking about it helps heal and silence destroys. Healing is very important for our physical and mental wellbeing and so that we don't follow the cycle in our adult lives.

hurtful behavior. Of particular interest is students' thoughts on the racist motivation for the shootings. For the first time, students wrote about racism as a cause for violence and expressed thoughts of one race not being better than another. They wrote about the incident being a hate crime against Mexicans and hatred for others because of the color of their skin and for being members of a different culture – Mexican or Mexican-

American in this case. They became aware of hatred toward immigrants by members of our society. They wrote that race and skin color shouldn't matter and called for respect for people no matter their race or skin color. Additional themes included resilience and impact on mental health. Throughout these themes, there was a call for change. (See [Table 3](#) for exemplar quotes).

**Table 3.** Cognitive Reactions to Walmart Shootings.

Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Seeking understanding	Knowing that the shooter could have easily entered my sister's school and hurt more people makes me wonder if the next generation will always have to fear for their lives if another crazed person comes in armed, ready to start a massacre. On the other hand people who do such things like this are people who were raised incorrectly, who want others to hurt usually because of hurting themselves because of bullying or abuse
Thoughts on racism	I realized this was the reality of our world. The only reason this happened was because the person thought that immigrants didn't belong here. Walmart's shooting happened just because of racism, just because our skin [and] our eyes are different from what we usually see doesn't mean we are not humans.
Mental health	I have learned that talking about it helps heal and silence destroys. Healing is very important for our physical and mental wellbeing and so that we don't follow the cycle in our adult lives. Mental health issue like attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD, and conduct disorder all have aggressive behaviors or angry feelings as common symptoms
Change	I truly believe that our world will fall apart if we don't do something and do it now. It's sad that kids and teens are experiencing and witnessing [this] behavior, they're just children. We are scaring them for life, they are watching murder and war. What are we doing to stop it? This has made me value every second of my life [PSE4] because I know that every day is a blessing and we are in no way promised tomorrow. It's given me an unwanted eye to this kind of savagery. I've always known that there were "bad guys" in the world doing "bad things" but having a villain terrorize the people in my own story stripped me of everything I thought I knew. I see my world differently now, in a way that I can no longer see the good, but the bad first.



## Students' proposed actions to address violence

As previously mentioned, we found that the students' proposed actions fell generally into two main themes: solutions to violence on a higher level (society/country) and specific actions that the student/family could take. (See Table 4 for exemplar quotes).

### Solutions to curb violence on a higher level (society/country)

This first theme reflected ways students addressed violence from a societal perspective, with three sub-themes identified: (a) address mental health issues, (b) create legal solutions/stricter gun laws, (c) increase police presence/security. Some students described the need for more available counseling in the schools to help kids with mental health concerns. They also voiced the need for stricter gun laws, background checks and increased police presence and security as this tragedy left many feeling unsafe in their own communities and world.

### Specific actions by the student/family

The second main theme, specific actions on the part of the student/family, included more personal ways that students and their immediate families could provide meaningful solutions to violence. Within these two themes, eight sub-themes were identified: (a) limit exposure to youth violence, (b) have a voice on a social/group level and personal level, (c) acts of kindness, (d) support one another, (e) safety/alert of surroundings, (f) creative ways to express emotions, (g) report bullying/suspicious behavior and (h) positive self-talk/self-care.

Woven throughout their responses was the idea that students have the ability and the power to make a positive difference in their own lives, even after such a horrific event. Students described this realization by writing phrases like, "I want to let all of the abuse or violence survivors know that we have a voice to be heard." The students seemed to have an understanding that necessary change begins with themselves. Students also wrote about the importance of having a voice to create a movement of change in society. Students wrote that this need for change was bigger than just their own community, it was about uniting with others and

amplifying their voices to demand justice and a just society. Acts of kindness such as smiling at a stranger and treating people the way you want to be treated are other ways students wrote about addressing violence. They wrote about the need to support one another through education, donating to organizations and providing hope and love to people in need. Students also mentioned the importance of being alert of their surroundings and that it was important to report suspicious activity and bullying behaviors. The trauma that this community experienced seemed to impact the students' sense of safety and this continued for months after the shooting. Some also reported the importance for families to monitor their child's technology and set limits on social media so that children are not exposed to violence or inappropriate information.

Additional sub-themes included using creative ways to express emotions such as using art, cartoons, and journaling as a form of expression for those who are struggling. Also reported as ways to help cope with difficult emotions and stressful situations were positive self-talk and the importance of self-care such as practicing gratitude. In summary, students' essays offered a window into how they expressed their suffering and also demonstrated their resilience.

## Critical expressivism: Implications for teaching

I want to let all of the violence survivors know that we have a voice to be heard. Our stories may not be happy fairytales that every person want[s] to hear but it's ... valuable. (DtWT, Middle School Student Quote, 2020)

I have learned that talking about it helps heal and silence destroys. Healing is very important for our physical and mental wellbeing and so that we don't follow the cycle in our adult lives. (DtWT, Middle School Student Quote, 2020)

Examining student essays on the Walmart shootings can inform the use of critical expressivist pedagogy in the writing classroom. This pedagogy is focused on student writing that connects personal-social experiences with students' deeply personal thoughts, emotions, and ideas, in this instance, for solutions to violence. This pedagogy not only takes into

**Table 4.** Solutions to Violence.

Theme	Subtheme	Quote
Solutions to violence on a higher level (society/country)	Address mental health issues	If schools were to actually try to assist students when they are having difficulty with their mental health and such, everything would've been so much different ... I believe that providing counseling for children who face discrimination might be helpful since it gives them another way and solution to solve the negativity in their lives.
	Legal solutions/ stricter gun laws	One person cannot change the perspective of certain laws, but a group of determined individuals can. And if laws are changed people can emerge from their homes feeling safe and secure. Creating an environment without these problems isn't that difficult if we can do background checks to all who purchase guns
	Increase police presence/Security	Another resolution to violence would be an increased number of police officers on the force in highly violent areas ... What I really think will help the community is just having more security and having events so we won't be scared to go out and thinking that something bad is going to happen.
Specific actions on the part of the student/family	Limit exposure to youth violence	One way we can stop violence caused by media is by making sure adults know what the youth groups in their house are watching so they do not watch anything there not supposed to
	Have a voice (social/group)	If more people began to speak up for themselves, it will become harder for the authorities to ignore the voices demanding justice. People will try to silence you, but you have to be the voice. For kids out there like me, being tormented with no safety.
	Have a voice (personal)	I may just be a little kid to the rest of the world, but this little kid has a voice and I intend to use it. I want to let all of the abuse or violence survivors know that we have a voice to be heard. Our stories may not be happy fairytales that every person want to hear but it's so much more valuable than one. Us sharing our stories and putting awareness out there will be the only way we can prevent future generations from going through what we have. But if we want society to change we have to start with ourselves.
	Acts of kindness	In order to get rid of a weed, you need to pull it from its roots, that root being negativity. Instead of belittling ourselves and/or others, we should try to spread as much positivity as possible, whether it be by doing something as simple as smiling to a stranger or making the life of someone you know has been having a hard time easier. By spreading an overwhelming amount of positivity, we can slowly drown out the negativity that fills our lives.
	Support one another	First and probably most obvious is just treating people how we want to be treated. Preventing violence can be a tough thing to do, but one thing that can help is fundraising money and donating the income to organizations that help prevent violence. It can sound simple but can have a large impact on others, by setting my example to other children, teens, and even adults ...
	Safety/Alert of surroundings	My solution is to be more alert and safe with your family and friends. I can stop gun violence by being aware of my surroundings. If I go on social media I can report or tell an adult
	Creative ways to express emotions	Think about it, we can save a life one step at a time. I was thinking, and people who cause violence are most likely going through a hard time. They take it out on other innocent people. Well maybe there's a better way to do that. An art class! Yes I know there's art classes in most schools, but this one will be different. They will not have to be assigned what to draw, they will get to draw their feelings. They will no longer express their feelings on others. Instead they will express themselves through beautiful art. We will hang them up and raise their confidence. Think of a way you can try and help who knows, maybe you can make a difference.
		Share awareness and set up free online meetings to where we can help people with mental problems and also help them if they are upset

(Continued)



**Table 4.** (Continued)

Theme	Subtheme	Quote
	Report bullying/ suspicious activity	Reporting suspicious activity could help prevent dangerous or even fatal acts of violence ... I can help stop violence by being the bigger person and settle arguments with words, stand up for people getting bullied and report violence that gets out of my hands
	Positive self-talk /Self-care	When you get up in the morning tell yourself something good, draw a mental list of what you're thankful for, if you don't have something that you're thankful for off the top of your head, you work up and didn't choke on your tongue. With this you will have a better day, and a good day is everything.

consideration the mental and emotional needs of students but aims at reducing violence in their communities, and in society in general. A central characteristic of critical expressivism “[foregrounds] writing that is simultaneously based on personal experience and intimately connected with how individuals relate to one another” (Wagar, 2015, p. 131). Therefore, implementing this approach to writing instruction suggests that student writing can help students express their own feelings, connect those feelings to social realities, and help transform society into a more peaceful place.

**Therefore, implementing this approach to writing instruction suggests that student writing can help students express their own feelings, connect those feelings to social realities, and help transform society into a more peaceful place.**

Ultimately, “the best expressivist practices have always been about complex negotiations between self and other, and the dismantling of the public/private binary that still seems to too often haunt our conversations about writing and pedagogy” (Roeder & Gatto, 2015, p. 8). In turn, using critical expressivism in the writing classroom allows students to critically express their experiences with violence, and connects directly with the five Essential Attributes put forth by the AMLE in *This We Believe*, a document that lays out core educational principles.

While the creators of the DtWT program did not directly build it on critical expressivism, it deeply connects with the goals and ethos of that writing pedagogy while also connecting with the essential attributes put forth in *This We Believe*. The writing that DtWT asks students to do, as mentioned above, leads to written expression that is responsive, equitable,

challenging, engaging, and empowering. The writing is also deeply personal *and* social which is the central characteristic of critical expressivist pedagogy.

Middle level writing instructors, and instructors of all disciplines that assign student writing, can incorporate the tenets of critical expressivism in their writing assignments. These types of assignments will ask students to begin with personal expressions of events in their lives and then, through discussions and editing, push students to make connections between their lived experiences and the social structures around them. In the case of DtWT essays, students are asked to write about violence. Students may encounter violence in or outside the home, but in either case, that violence leads to personal emotions, psychological effects, and thoughts on how to avoid or end the violence. As adults and educators, we understand the connection between violence, and the effects of it on our students, and social structures. In this context, “social structures” generally refer to things such as socioeconomics, history, psychology, sociology, parenting, media, race, education, etc. Ultimately, violence does not happen in a vacuum and neither does our response to it, whether individually or socially.

Critical expressivist pedagogy works at breaking down the private/public binary in student writing and activities connected to their writing/editing. The DtWT essays were doing just this; highlighting how a very public occurrence of violence impacted the student. So, by asking middle level students to begin from a very personal place in their writing, and then connecting their writing, thoughts, and emotions to social structures or events, we can create a learning environment where students can safely connect the private with the public. Ideally, these types of writing assignments, and the class activities surrounding them, can help students find their personal/social voice which spawns moments of presence, of being awake, and will involve self-understanding but also the

ability to transmit that self-understanding to others. Students will not simply be learning to write for some disconnected reason but learning to write so they will be read, valued, and understood by others, which ultimately vitalizes both the self and the community (O'Reilly, 2009). Simply put, implementing critical expressivist pedagogy into the writing classroom, or on specific writing assignments, creates an environment where students explore writing from personal *and* social perspectives (Collins, 2015). Students who participate in DtWT are, whether knowingly or unknowingly, making deep connections with the social reality of violence and their personal lives. Furthermore, in cases where one can connect racial or ethnic motives to the violence experienced, writing about these experiences helps in the development of middle level students. After all, ethnicity plays a critical role in identity development, and ethnicity identity development can moderate the impact of discrimination and prejudice on the student's self-esteem (Romero et al., 2014). Teachers can learn from the writing done in the DtWT program and enhance it, since they have more time to work with the students on their written work. Ultimately, critical expressivism can infuse every step of the writing process, from brainstorming to outlining to drafting to editing, and teachers can engage students with information and materials that will help them connect their personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions to the social structures that surround them. This may involve their writing on violence but could also involve numerous other experiences, both positive and negative.

## Practical pedagogical recommendations

Critical expressivist writing pedagogy focuses on student engagement and expression of thoughts, feelings, and life experiences. Instead of focusing on grammatical correctness or prescribed techniques, expressivist writing classrooms encourage students to find their voice throughout the writing process. In turn, critical expressivist writing classrooms allow for the expression of deep and more critical life experiences including encounters with violence.

Expressivist writing pedagogy may seem trivial to some instructors, yet they often forget to include it in their curricula, distracted by more pressing issues of grammar, standardized assessment, or state requirements. Yet, by switching our focus to expression and the writing process, rather than on academically prescribed products of writing, we can improve student interest in and proficiency with writing. By

practicing expressivist writing techniques on a regular basis, teachers can train writers of all backgrounds and abilities to use writing as a tool for self-expression and communication rather than fear it as a looming threat from the authorities (Boulos, 2021).

Here are some recommended critical expressivist activities:

*Low-stakes Writing Focused on Experiences with Violence:* students are engaged in short, low-stake writing exercises such as freewriting, pause-and-write, chalk talk, one-minute papers, dialectical notebooks, etc. (University of Toronto, n.d.).

*Writing Poetry Focused on Experiences with Violence:* students write poetry connected to violence and/or their experiences with violence, which encourages writing as a dialogue for understanding identity across time (Litten, 2022).

*Readings on/about Violence and its Effects:* students are lead through thoughtful readings connected to experiences of violence such as the DtWT essay winners, *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice* by Marianne Celano, *Count Me In* by Varsha Bajaj, *The Clue in the Trees* by Margi Preus, and "Dulce et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen.

*Journaling about Encounters with Violence in Popular Culture:* students journal about daily or weekly encounters with seeing violence on television, the internet, and social media. They describe those images and express their thoughts and emotions about the encounters.

*Short Research Paper:* Educators lead students through research, pre-writing, outlining, writing, and editing a research paper on the effects of violence on youth.

## Conclusion

Children impacted by violence in communities such as the Walmart mass shooting that took place in El Paso, TX are not isolated occurrences and the trauma associated with these events can have lasting, long-term impacts on youth mental health (Cecil et al., 2004). Unfortunately, children and adolescents are increasingly exposed to incidents ranging from violence in their communities that impact them on a personal and/or a community level to uncertain global events such as an unstable political world climate. To meet the needs of students during these uncertain times, teachers require more resources on how to foster an environment that acknowledges

and validates how life events are impacting students while also providing a mechanism for students to share their own unique personal expressions. As described within this paper, critical expressivism offers a way for middle school students to connect their lived experiences to the social realities around them. Similarly, the DtWT program provides middle school students with the structure to begin to write about how violence has affected them during these pivotal middle school years. As described previously, the DtWT program was not directly built on critical expressivism; however, it connects with the aim of this perspective as well as to the essential attributes in This We Believe. Through the integration of these different frameworks, we suggest a creative lens for writing pedagogy that encourages students to describe their own personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions about an event within a social and cultural context. For example, using the lens of critical expressivism the student is situated within the perspective of a larger society, so it makes sense then for students to spend time processing and extracting meaning from their own experiences in relation to their communities and society as a whole. As such, the DtWT program encourages teachers to integrate critical expressivist pedagogy within every step of the writing process from free writing to the final version while keeping at the forefront that the core of this framework is to help students express themselves, fostering a sense of agency and providing a space for the student's voice to be heard.

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