

Teacher Perceptions of Supporting Students Placed At Risk Socially and Emotionally Through a Virtual Writing Camp

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Abstract: Students' social and emotional well-being can impact academic performance, the college planning process, transition to college life, and college retention. Many students have had their mental health and well-being negatively affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, especially within the educational setting. When instruction was shifted from in-person to virtual settings during the pandemic's onset in March 2020, students across the world found themselves disconnected from school, teachers, and friends. Leaders of schools and extracurricular programs sought online alternatives for connecting with others while physically separated. More than a year after the onset of the emergence COVID-19, educational leaders are still working to provide quality academic experiences while implementing safe approaches to instruction. The Improving the Blank Page (IBP) writing program was one such organization that shifted to a remote setting with facilitators hosting the first-ever virtual writing camp in Summer 2020. The researchers examined perspectives of teachers involved in the virtual writing camp about their beliefs regarding social and emotional impacts for participating students, all of whom attended high-needs high schools (Title 1 schools with all students receiving free or reduced lunch). Findings, including establishing a virtual writing community and opportunities for self-reflection and confidence building, are detailed within this article, along with recommendations for supporting social and emotional needs of students placed at risk. professionals, it is critical that these professionals understand and incorporate the unique perspective of youth in foster care.

Educators know schools are more than a place for academic learning; they are where students explore new interests, discover passions, form bonds with others, and prepare for their lives beyond the school setting. Additionally, schools are a setting in which students' social and emotional competencies can be fostered (Lawson et al., 2019). Since students' social and emotional well-being can influence their academic performance, it is crucial to recognize that schools can serve a vital role when it comes to providing students with needed emotional supports (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). The possession of social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies can influence a student's academic success; whereas, barriers to social and emotional well-being can lead to poor educational outcomes (Dymnicki et al., 2013). While teachers can and should support all students in SEL skills, they can be particularly impactful for students who are considered "at-risk" (Spiegel, 2017).

Some schools have partnered with programs focused on SEL or have implemented SEL-based curricula and researchers have reported positive impacts of SEL programs for students (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Zins & Elias, 2006). In a meta-analysis of 213 intervention programs focused on SEL within schools, researchers have cited positive impacts on SEL, "such as emotions recognition, stress-management, empathy, problem-solving, or decision-making skills" (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 417). Furthermore, Durlak and colleagues (2011) noted SEL intervention programs enhanced overall student academic performance. Nurturing SEL competencies can also aid students when it comes to their working

memory, critical thinking, emotion and behavior regulation, and conflict resolution (Jones et al., 2021).

When COVID-19 spread across the world, many instructional leaders called for a shift from in-person to online instruction. Students found themselves removed from the physical school setting to which they were accustomed (Hamilton et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2020). Researchers predicted children from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds would experience greater impacts due to the pandemic, compared to their more affluent peers, (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020) and that inequalities would likely increase for these students (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). This is important to recognize as this could result in potentially meaningful impacts for low SES and at-risk students. Although efforts to provide quality instruction in response to school closures were made, concerns were voiced regarding learning loss (Shafer, 2020), an increase in students experiencing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Bryant et al., 2020), and a lack of physical, mental, and emotional supports (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Ultimately, these factors could contribute to a widening achievement gap that disproportionately impacts at-risk students (Dorn et al., 2020). As such, immediate efforts must be taken to stop the widening of the already existing achievement gap.

With the wide adoption of online or remote instruction in response to COVID-19, learning experiences became more self-directed (Sahlberg, 2020), and for many, isolating. Polizzi et al. (2020) dubbed isolation "a signature of the COVID-19 epidemic" (p. 59), as physically distancing was largely enforced to reduce spread of the virus. This isolation has been felt by adolescents

generally (Magson et al., 2021) and more specifically adolescents within the education sector specifically, as many students have reported experiencing the effects of isolation (Raza et al., 2020; Tasso et al., 2021). As time outside the classroom continued, those in charge of schools and extracurricular programs looked to online approaches as alternatives for connecting with individuals (Darling-Hammond, 2020; Goagoses et al., 2020). The formation of positive, high-quality relationships between children and adults is one characteristic of beneficial SEL and out of school programming (Jones et al., 2021); therefore, opportunities for students to connect with peers and teachers beyond the physical classroom can be a benefit during an otherwise isolating time. More than a year after the start of the pandemic, educational leaders are still working to determine safe approaches to instruction while simultaneously providing a quality academic experience. Though it is evident efforts are still being made to understand and address impacts associated with the pandemic, there are numerous unknowns, given the radical changes that have occurred in response to COVID-19 in a relatively short period of time.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to critically examine teachers' experiences as part of a virtual writing camp, Improving the Blank Page (IBP), in which they provided writing instruction to secondary students and also engaged in their own writing. As IBP facilitators, it was our belief that teachers and students needed the opportunity to come together for their camp in Summer 2020 and express themselves through writing. We hoped to gain an understanding of ways to better support the social and emotional needs of at-risk students, as well as understanding the perceptions of teachers that could be used to improve the experience for in the future. Within this article, we showcase voices of teachers who worked in low-income schools that have an ongoing partnership with the federal college-access program, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). This research is vital since it can be used as an example for ways that those in schools and community organizations can come together to support social and emotional needs of students placed at risk. This information can be beneficial in times characterized by such uncertainty and during "normal" times as well.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Over the past several decades, interventions, policies, and practices on emotional intelligence (EQ), character education, soft skills, and noncognitive skills have coalesced into what is now widely known as SEL (Garcia, 2016). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2015) defined SEL as:

the process through which children and adults gain and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others,

establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (p. 5)

There are many programs that were designed to help educators promote the SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, social management or relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Lawson et al., 2019; Philibert, 2016). Since social, emotional, and mental health barriers can negatively affect students' academic performance as well as success in life (Dymnicki et al., 2013), it is evident there are benefits to embedding SEL into instruction as a means of combatting these potential challenges. Furthermore, many SEL programs were created with the goal of preventing issues students might experience in favor of promoting more positive choices (Zins & Elias, 2006). Anxiety, stress, isolation, and low self-efficacy can impact students socially and emotionally (Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, when enrichment designed to build social and emotional competencies is implemented, there is potential to support students coping with social and emotional stressors.

According to Schonert-Reichl (2017), teachers' social-emotional competence can impact their students. Teachers with high levels of SEL competence build stronger relationships with their students and foster warmer classroom environments (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Since the environment in which SEL is taught can influence the effectiveness of instruction (Zins & Elias, 2006), SEL competence is important not just for students, but should extend to teachers. SEL competence can be learned by both teachers and students, so programs designed for teachers and students to practice these skills together could be an effective model that supports social and emotional development.

Benefits of Developing SEL

Students who are considered at-risk can benefit from SEL instruction (Zins & Elias, 2006), including the low-SES, first-generation college student (FGCS) population. There is an association between poverty and negative effects on mental, emotional, and behavioral health, which can negatively impact peer relationships, academic performance, and the transition into adulthood (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). Basic needs (i.e., food, housing, and safe environments) must be met first before the benefits of SEL strategies can occur (Philibert, 2016; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). In addition, stable, intensive interventions (e.g., classroom interventions) provided over time have been recognized as effective in mediating the mental, emotional, and behavioral effects of poverty (Yoshikawa et al., 2012).

SEL is important since students can apply these skills to life beyond the K-12 classroom, including the college planning process, transition to college life, and college retention (Dymnicki et al., 2013), as well as during times of transition. Self-awareness involves a sense of self-motivation and satisfaction in goal attainment and, students with a high sense of self-awareness can benefit when it comes to setting and meeting college

and career goals (Dymnicki et al., 2013). Possessing self-management skills can help students transition to and cope with stressors common in postsecondary environments. A sense of belonging, reduced loneliness, and contributions to retention are all benefits associated with well-developed social management and relationship skills. Given the connection between SEL competencies and college and career readiness (Dymnicki et al., 2013), involvement in SEL programs could be beneficial in assisting students as they seek success beyond high school.

Negative Impacts of COVID-19 on SEL

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated cities and communities around the globe, and concerns surrounding this virus have continued to include impacts on education. Teacher and student mental health and well-being have been noted areas of discussion during a time when many have coped with loss, experienced isolation or instability, or had increased feelings of anxiety (e.g., Baloran, 2020; Magson et al., 2021; Yoder et al., 2020). Social isolation has led to feelings of loneliness, isolation, depression, and anxiety for many (Tasso et al., 2021), as well as increased levels of anxiety, particularly for those who felt socially disconnected (Magson et al., 2021). However, students who reported feeling socially connected had more life satisfaction than those who felt disconnected (Magson et al., 2021). As such, efforts to remain socially connected could be one way to support students' social and emotional health. To combat struggles with mental health caused by isolation and stress, researchers have noted the importance of staying connected with others, recognizing mental health problems and getting necessary support, and providing positive and safe environments (Magson et al., 2021).

Impacts of the pandemic may be even greater for students who are categorized as at-risk. Dorn et al. (2020) explained that "[t]his virus is disrupting many of the supports that can help vulnerable kids stay in school: academic engagement and achievement, strong relationships with caring adults, and supportive home environments" (p. 6). The researchers noted that students will likely be impacted socially and emotionally, even if harder to formally recognize, due to physically isolating for safety and worrying related to the virus (Dorn et al., 2020). Since social and emotional struggles caused by the virus have the potential to result in long-term impacts (Magson et al., 2021), these concerns cannot be taken lightly. Another worry is that while confined to their homes, some children might face an increased risk for experiencing ACEs, including trauma from abuse or neglect (Bryant et al., 2020). Trauma researchers acknowledged the sizable impact that such a global event will have on the mental health field (Horesh & Brown, 2020), as well as the lasting nature of these impacts (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). Like social-emotional implications, ACEs can have long-term impacts on children (Bryant et al., 2020), which is an important reminder that even once the virus is "under control," it will continue to have a lasting influence. To lessen potential negative

impacts, Bartlett and Vivrette (2020) suggested opportunities for check-ins with influential adults, connecting virtually with others, and recognizing positive things to help children during this uncertain time.

Addressing SEL and implementing SEL-based programs are potential ways to support students coping with effects of COVID-19, including students placed at risk. In their work, Yoder et al. (2020) reported that many states across the nation are working to provide supports aimed at the social-emotional health of students and the adults who work with them. Communicating the importance of SEL, sharing practices to promote social and emotional health, and providing learning opportunities and support for adults so they can more effectively support the students with whom they work has been encouraged (Yoder et al., 2020). Researchers have found evidence of the importance of SEL generally and for students placed at risk specifically. Furthermore, the pandemic has impacted individuals' social and emotional wellbeing and is anticipated to have a lasting influence. Despite this, there is reason to believe students' mental and emotional health can be supported through social connections via technology, the influence of a caring and encouraging adult, and opportunities to check-in with others. In the next section, we describe a program in which secondary students from low-SES schools, many of whom would be considered at-risk, had these experiences through their involvement in a two-week virtual writing camp.

IMPROVING THE BLANK PAGE: BACKGROUND

During seven years of the IBP and GEAR UP partnership, IBP facilitators have worked to provide engaging writing experiences for GEAR UP students. The College and Career Readiness Model that was implemented by program facilitators is depicted in Figure 1, along with an explanation of the types of experiences that have taken place each year from 2015-2020. A central component of the model is a summer writing camp with a final writing showcase. During this first iteration of the creative writing camp, recruited teachers came together for a week-long intensive writing experience. In the second week of camp, a cohort of sixth and seventh-grade students joined teachers and camp organizers and participated in creative writing experiences. As the culminating event, teacher and student participants showcased their writing in the presence of family, friends, educators, and community members. Each summer following the initial camp, camp organizers, teachers, and students complete the seven stage process presented in Figure 2. The same cohort of students has been followed by GEAR UP coaches and invited to attend camp each year, along with enrichment opportunities throughout the academic year.

In Fall 2019, camp facilitators began planning for the 2020 summer writing camp, not knowing we would not be able to gather in-person. However, as we continued to learn about the virus, we knew we needed to do something for the students and teachers with whom we

worked, some of whom had been participating in the camps for years. After much discussion and planning, we announced the first-ever virtual IBP summer writing camp. The virtual camp followed the same format with only teachers present during the first week and students joining in the second week. During the first week, teacher-participants engaged in synchronous writing exercises over Zoom, prerecorded asynchronous writing exercises, and online partner work, which involved the creation of asynchronous writing lessons to be shared with students during the following week. In week two, student-participants logged into Zoom along with teachers and camp facilitators and everyone began the session by engaging in writing. Students were invited to complete teacher-created writing tasks asynchronously and encouraged to log onto Zoom for guidance as needed. These teacher-created writing tasks were designed with an emphasis on creative writing to prepare students to meet academic and professional writing needs. In the afternoon, participants gathered to share writing, debrief, and hear from well-known writers who served as guest speakers.

METHODS

For this study, we employed an exploratory case study research design to learn about participant experiences and beliefs. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from our institution so data could be collected in a systematic fashion to analyze participants' experiences while being involved in a process-oriented approach to writing and writing instruction.

Invited research participants consisted of teachers who participated in the 2019 or 2020 summer writing camps, along with program facilitators who led the camps (excluding researchers/article authors). In total, 22 potential participants were eligible to be part of this research study. For those potential participants who had been involved in the project beginning in Summer 2019, two separate recruitment emails were sent in December 2019 and the study was also explained at a face-to-face event during Spring 2020. Participants new to the project in Summer 2020 were introduced to the research study over Zoom and then received a follow-up email. When introducing potential participants to the research project, we explained the goal of the project, the voluntary nature of the research, and the informed consent process. For those who chose to participate, an informed consent form was signed by the participant and collected. Nine teachers participated along with three project facilitators (N = 12). Years in teaching experience ranged from two educators who just finished their first-year teaching to one veteran teacher with 35 years of experience. Additionally, several teacher participants were returning to IBP after having been part of the project in previous years.

Our data collection process consisted of document analysis, observations, and participant interviews. Teacher participant application data and end-of-camp evaluations were collected using a Google Form. We recorded

observation notes during a pre-institute Zoom session, as well as during the teacher-only week (i.e., Week 1) of the virtual writing camp. Observations were conducted following an observation protocol, which was designed to ensure observer focus on writing activities and instruction provided, as well as participant work. To collect this data, we took turns taking observation notes that were typed into a Word document and later imported into a qualitative data analysis software program.

Interviews were conducted before and after the virtual writing camp. Before camp, teacher participants who were previously involved with IBP were invited to take part in a virtual focus group interview. Our goal in conducting this interview was to learn about participants' beliefs regarding writing and writing instruction and perceived benefits and challenges of writing experiences for teachers and students involved in the IBP program. Prior to camp, we also conducted one interview with each participant who served in a facilitator role, follow-up interviews were conducted with two teachers. After camp, teacher participants were invited to take part in a second focus group interview. Six teachers, including the same four from the first focus group, participated. For this focus group, our aim was to learn about teachers' perspectives regarding the IBP 2020 summer camp for both teachers and students, including the virtual nature of the camp. Similarly, two of three participant facilitators were interviewed after the conclusion of the camp to identify their experiences with and beliefs about the virtual summer camp.

As part of data analysis, the qualitative software analysis program, MAXQDA, was used to code collected data. We co-created a code list, then individually coded the same two documents (one interview and one observation) before discussing the codes to strengthen inter-coder reliability. As we continued to code the remaining data, we had on-going discussions to note patterns and initial research themes.

FINDINGS

After collecting qualitative data and engaging in analysis, we discovered a shared focus among study participants regarding social and emotional impacts of the virtual writing camp for student attendees. Based on this research, the following sub-sections highlight the value of creating a virtual community of writers and perceived impacts for students who participated in the virtual writing camp.

Creating a Virtual Community of Writers

IBP camp facilitators saw the virtual writing camp as an opportunity for participants to form a community of writers. During the pre-camp meeting, it was explained that students would receive care packages with a writing journal, book of poetry, and letters from each of the teachers and camp facilitators to get students excited about the upcoming camp. Tom (pseudonym), a camp facilitator, stated that while there would be new challenges, there would also be "opportunities we never had [before]." The importance of establishing a writing

community was also shared by teacher participants. One teacher wrote, “my ultimate goal is to cultivate community around our writing and show students that what they have to say is important and that it is okay to make mistakes. In the end, my goal is to cultivate authentic writers.” Another described the importance of identifying as a writer and writing with their students. In talking about IBP, one teacher explained “writing as community is different from what I was used to... I think that our students can really, truly benefit from that because it’s not just a literacy skill in terms of academics...it’s an empathy building opportunity in processing.”

Prior to the start of the 2020 camp, Steve (pseudonym), a facilitator largely responsible for student recruitment, expressed worry over student participation. It turned out that he was pleasantly surprised as this new approach “really opened up opportunities.” He explained that students did not need to worry about transportation and could still be available to attend to other responsibilities at home that might arise. When reflecting on the camp, Steve said “the student experiences were so positive that students were looking for ways to keep in contact with each other after.” Tom echoed this, noting “the students really seemed to bond quite a bit.” Tom also acknowledged that students might be more used to bonding through virtual platforms. He acknowledged the impact of COVID-induced isolation, referring to it as “devastating” for teenagers and said that he believed the camp was a needed opportunity for “being around other people, even if it was virtually.” Although it appeared students made connections with one another, teachers seemed divided on whether they felt connected with the students. See Table 1 for examples of teacher comments.

A benefit of the virtual platform included the opportunity for individuals to voice ideas, questions, and writing in varied ways that aligned to their personal preferences; therefore, participants could be part of the writing community on their own terms. Steve shared that some students who enjoy writing “don’t necessarily like to be in the spotlight,” but they still had “a chance to shine in their own way in their comfort factor” through the virtual platform. For instance, during the teacher-only week, it was noted that the chat feature was a great tool in which participants could make comments while someone was speaking and to have back and forth dialogue. Steve also noted that students being able to seek teacher support during asynchronous writing exercises led to great questions from students they might not have felt comfortable asking in front of everyone.

For some, writing can be an isolating task; however, participants were able to engage in a writing community through the virtual camp. While this allowed for flexibility in participation, some teachers expressed feeling disconnected from students. However, others recognized bonds students appeared to form with one another while participating in the virtual camp.

Perceived Impacts of Student Experience

Participants discussed perceived impacts of students’ experiences as part of IBP in general, as well as the 2020 virtual summer writing camp specifically. Major areas of participant focus included the opportunity to express oneself, the chance for self-reflection and discovery, and opportunities for confidence building. One perceived impact was the opportunity for students to express themselves through writing. By participating in the IBP program, those involved were provided with a time and place to write, whether in-person or in a virtual setting. Teachers explained that this helped students to explore writing and also to share their own stories through writing. By engaging in these experiences, students might feel encouraged or prompted to engage in self-reflection and personal discovery.

An IBP facilitator who has been with the project since its inception, shared that her goal for students involved in the 2020 virtual camp was for them to “capture who they are” and “begin to authentically express who they are.” When asked about the virtual camp, Steve shared that “there was something to speak to everyone,” so all participants could engage in self-expression and reflection. Tom voiced his belief that “students responded to their exercises really well” as evidenced in the writing produced throughout camp and showcased on the final day. By providing these opportunities to write, participants suggested the students were able to express themselves and discover something that they might not have otherwise. See Table 2 for examples of teacher comments.

Another perceived impact expressed by teachers was student confidence. Several participants recognized that students might find writing intimidating, but involvement in IBP in general, and the virtual writing camp specifically, was an opportunity to gain confidence. Continued opportunities to write and feeling part of a safe environment were both cited as ways involvement in IBP can influence students’ writing confidence. One teacher explained that students often lack writing confidence “because it is not something they are exposed to enough,” however; she said, “the more you write, the less daunting the task becomes.” Steve used the metaphor of a marathon to highlight the importance of continued opportunities for writing. He said, “if you are going to train for a marathon, you have to start running some time. And writing is the same way...teaching all writers that writing is not a pain or a chore or something to fear or dread.” According to another participant, confidence building was the biggest take-away for students involved in the project, which is important because “confidence writing is going to translate to anything.”

Tom said he thought the students improved as writers through their involvement in the camp and became more vocal as camp progressed, although he acknowledged it was difficult to see specific impacts on students’ writing. Several teachers expressed that the final showcase where camp participants read their writing while logged into Zoom felt more powerful than in past years

when the showcase took place in-person. One teacher noted “there’s a level of trust” that the teachers would be supportive as students read their works, saying “because of the lack of pressure, you can get more confidence and more out of yourself out onto that page.”

Throughout the IBP project and the 2020 virtual summer writing camp, teacher participants highlighted several perceived impacts for student writers. Through these experiences, teachers indicated students can express themselves, reflect upon past experiences, and build confidence. While the perceived impacts are based on students’ experiences with writing and writing as part of a community, participants suggested that these impacts can transfer to other aspects of students’ lives as they continue to learn and grow.

DISCUSSION

SEL has been an area of focus for many researchers, including benefits of SEL interventions and initiatives (e.g., Hagelskamp et al., 2013). Given many individuals have experienced anxiety, isolation, and stress (e.g., Baloran, 2020; Magson et al., 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is particularly important to consider immediate and potentially long-term impacts on students’ emotional health and wellbeing. This is especially critical for students placed at risk, already in high need for SEL interventions.

Need for High-quality, Engaging Virtual Learning Opportunities

The mental and emotional toll of COVID-19 on individuals includes negative impacts on students and other adolescents (Tasso et al., 2021). Ways to mitigate negative impacts include continued involvement in social experiences and supportive home and educational learning environments (Magson et al., 2021). It is also important for students to be academically stimulated and interact with supportive adults, especially for those students who may be considered at-risk (Dorn et al., 2020).

Students connected with peers through their writing in the IBP virtual writing camp. As noted by one participant, the students planned to stay in touch with one another after the camp was over; therefore, interacting with peers through digital means provided one way for students to feel less isolated. Furthermore, after not physically attending school for more than two months, students connected with educators via creative and critical writing engagement. Through creative writing, students shared their stories, which served as an opportunity for them to process trauma and have periodic check-ins (Bartlett & Vivrette, 2020). Students engaged in writing tasks benefited their preparation for their academic futures, since teachers designed the creative writing experiences with a focus on enhancing students’ critical writing even while not in a traditional education setting.

As remote learning becomes more commonplace, it is important to ensure online instruction is engaging.

Providing teachers who participated in the IBP virtual writing camp with autonomy to design authentic writing tasks allowed for more meaningful learning experiences. One limitation regarding virtual instruction is a lack of equal access to technology (e.g., Kennedy 2020), which has the potential to create a “digital divide” (Darling-Hammond, 2020). While students who have access to a technological device and internet engage in remote instruction, students who lack these resources are likely to fall behind without these necessary tools, resulting in a digital divide. Some students might not have been able to participate if the camp were not virtual; however, limited technology or access to reliable internet was a concern for others. As such, IBP facilitators need to focus on this area in the future to ensure any students who wish to participate will be able to and not be hindered by a lack of access to necessary technology.

Social and Emotional Supports for Students Placed At Risk

Teachers’ perceptions of how the IBP virtual camp provided social and emotional support for students placed at risk was also found. Previous studies have found that writing is a task that can naturally lend itself to SEL competence, as writing can be a way to process difficult experiences and emotions (Gladding, 1987). Relatedly, Ullrich and Lutgendorf (2002) found that reflective writing about the emotional and cognitive effects of stressful events helps individuals to experience growth over time.

Since teachers are the drivers of SEL (Schonert-Reichl, 2017), their perceptions of social and emotional impacts are important. Teachers’ perceptions explored in this study align to prior literature (e.g., Gladding, 1987; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002), as they described opportunities for students to work toward self-discovery, reflect on traumatic events, express themselves, build confidence, and contribute to a community of writers as part of their involvement in the virtual writing camp. All these perceived impacts are highly connected to social and emotional competence. Confidence is a common byproduct of self-awareness, since confident individuals can recognize their strengths and contribute to self-efficacy (Philibert, 2016). The prominent role of reflection as part of evaluation (Cipriano et al., 2020) is essential as students continue to respond to trauma associated with the pandemic, which was embedded into writing tasks during the IBP virtual writing camp. Moreover, the virtual writing community established during the writing camp cultivated relationship skills, which is a major SEL competency (CASEL, 2015).

Overall, more research is needed on social and emotional impacts of writing programs for students considered at-risk. One limitation with the current study is that teachers’ perceptions were based on one week with students; therefore, it would be beneficial to analyze teacher perceptions over a longer period. Additionally, collecting data on student perceptions of the social and emotional impacts could provide additional insights

to supplement current findings. In future research, we hope to examine students' perceptions of similar virtual events on their emotional health and wellbeing, as well as academic impacts for at-risk students.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that approaches once considered standard educational practices have been altered in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there has been a push for a return to normal, it is important to learn from experiences that have occurred as a result of the pandemic. Online learning certainly existed previously, but global responses to the virus contributed to an increase in remote instruction. As such, there is a need for leaders of school districts and educational policy makers to focus on addressing technology accessibility (Darling-Hammond, 2020), as well as the quality of virtual instruction delivered. Facilitators of the IBP 2020 summer virtual writing camp utilized asynchronous instruction so participating teachers and students would not have to sit in front of a computer all day long. There were also times for synchronous instruction to ensure participants would not feel disconnected. Through discussion and shared writing, teacher participants engaged in a virtual writing community, providing opportunities for students, many of whom could be considered at-risk, to feel connected in what could be a very isolating time.

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Figure 1

Improving the Blank Page: College and Career Readiness Model

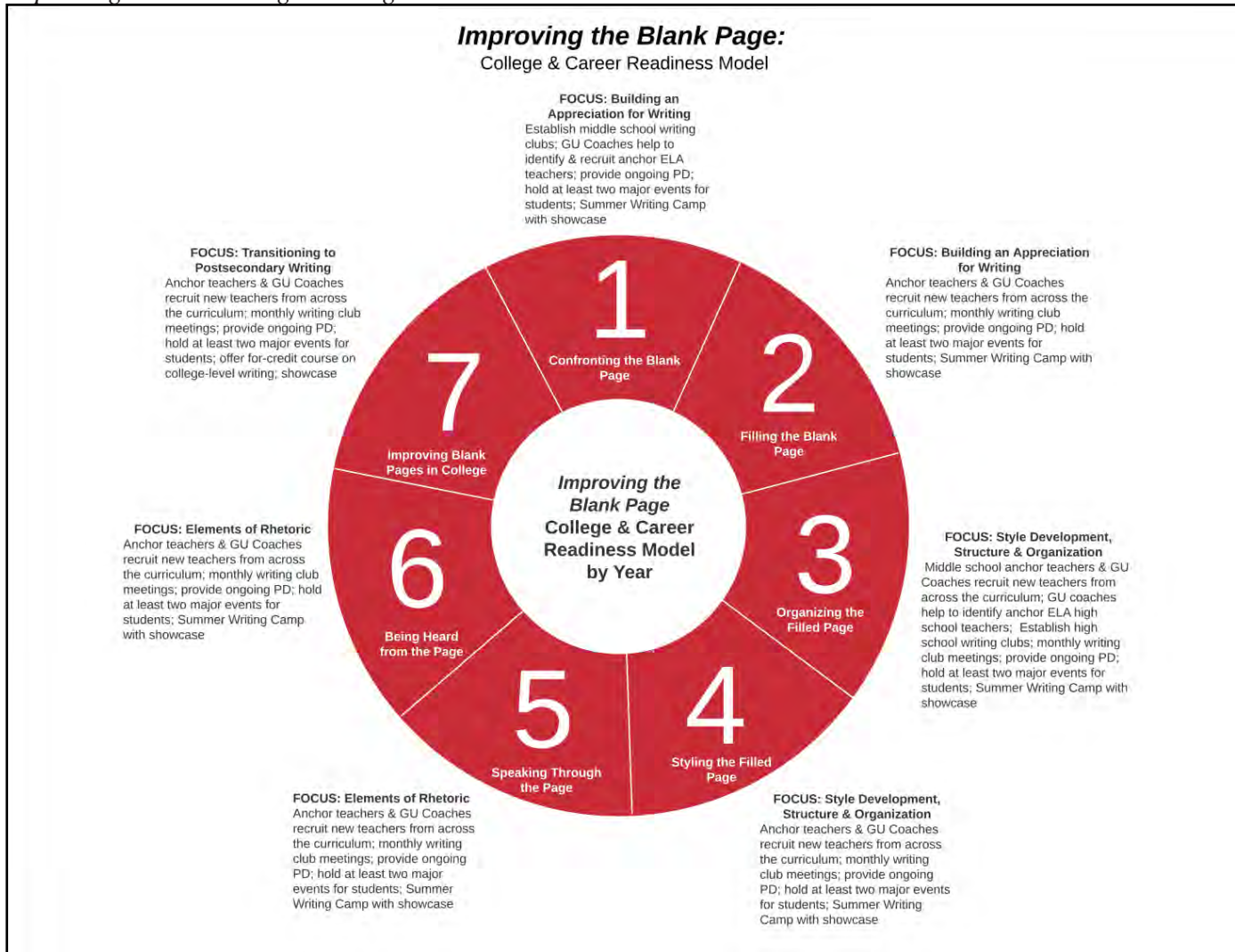


Figure 2

Improving the Blank Page: How the Summer Writing Camp Unfolds

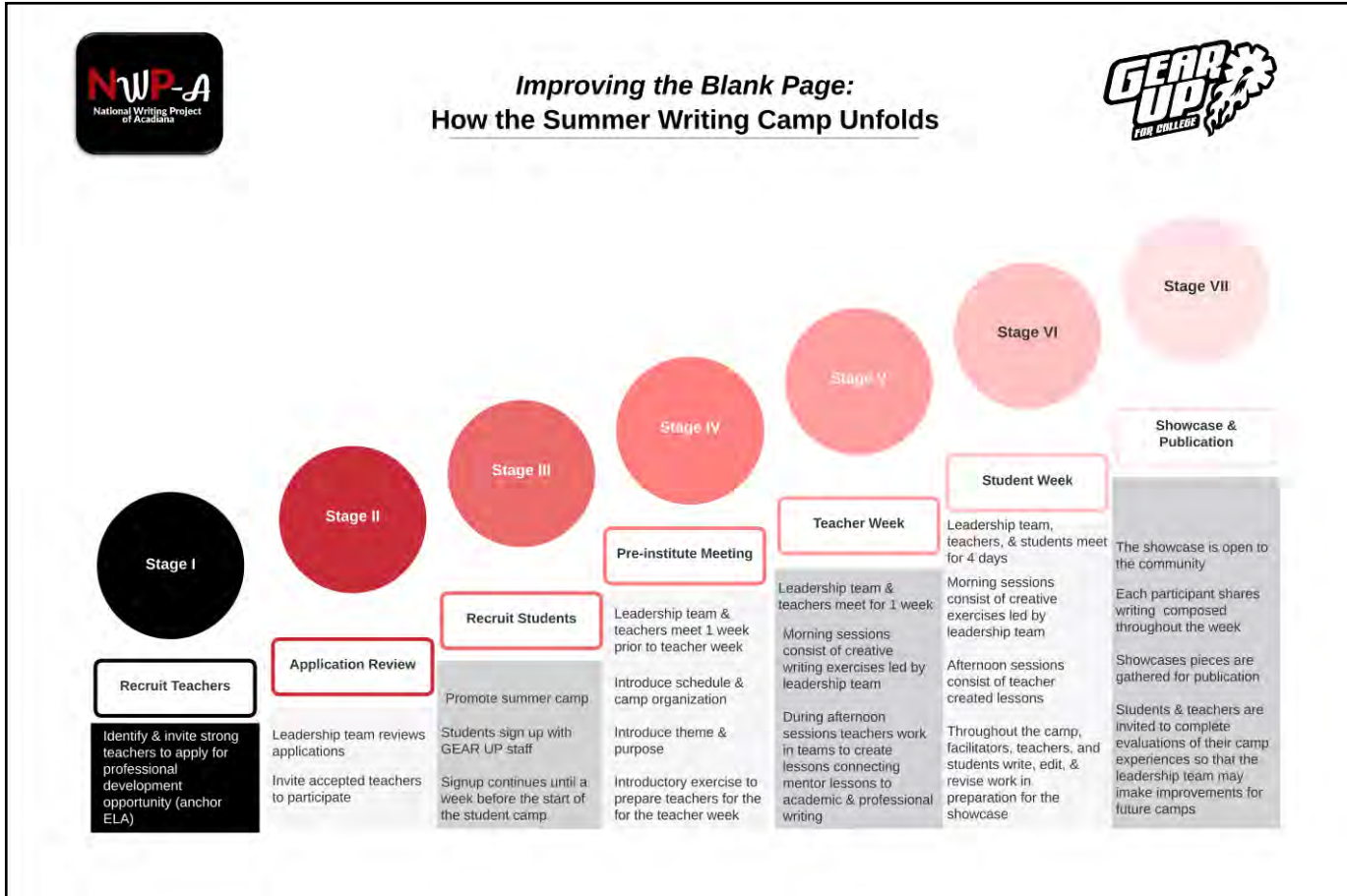


Table 1

Teacher Perceptions regarding Connecting Virtually

- “In comparison to the past, it really felt impersonal with the kids.”
 - “I felt so disconnected. And then on the last day when they’re reading, I was blown away, because I didn’t see that process.”
 - “I do think it might have bothered us [the teachers] more than it bothered the kids because I think the kids are so used to living in a virtual world.”
 - “I grew up with like, the virtual...so, for me, I felt pretty much the same connection with my students in this than I did whenever I see them in person... the way that I get to know my students is done a lot through more writing.”
-

Table 2

Teacher Perceptions of Students’ IBP Experience

Self-expression

- The project “lets them explore writing in a safe environment” and this can “embolden students that are not used to writing and helps equip them with the tools they need to succeed.”
 - “They take these traumatic experiences that they’ve had, and they write about them, they change the characters a little bit. But ultimately, yeah, they wrote about their tragic experiences, and they definitely use that to process what’s happening.”
-

Self-reflection and Discovery

- “You can see that they use these [writing exercises] as outlets to process the difficulties in their lives.”
 - The creative writing activities “help students not only to articulate themselves according to academic standards but to actually articulate and discover their selves as they move toward finding and achieving goals for their futures.”
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