

The write to well-being: A mixed methods case study integrating SEL into academic content
through journaling to promote adolescent well-being

by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 2008
M.S., Kansas State University, 2019

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

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Approved by:

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Dedication

To my husband Carl for your continuous support and unwavering confidence in me. To my parents Rod and Debbie for taking care of my little boys so that I could steal hours away to write and for harnessing my love of storytelling. To my boys for the reminder of the kind of future education I envision for you and hope to shape. I love you all dearly.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In the summer of 2022, I spent weeks journaling daily with a small group of other educators, each of us quietly scribbling away in lined notebooks as someone's timer silently ran down, its eventual incessant beeping bringing us all back together. Slowly the pages of my journal filled as I wrote in response to short quotations and prompts each day for professional development through a local site of the National Writing Project. The summer institute leaders had chosen a mentor text, *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott (1995), and often our group wrote in response to Lamott's reflections and advice on writing.

At the end of our two-week journaling, I thumbed through the pages of what I had created and felt intrigued, perplexed, and entertained by the different ideas I had written. I had not been a serial journaler at any point in my life, with the exception of brief stints of writing in my diary as a teenager, so the practice was fairly new to me. However, writing has always been important to me and something I have practiced both personally and professionally. The expectation to write each day during the institute felt self-indulgent, and it was obvious to me that I found journaling, and the dedicated time to writing, enjoyable.

The thought was shared among the other educators—we all valued the time to write. I started wondering what journaling could do for my middle school students and if they would find the same sort of happiness that I did. It seemed telling that *Bird by Bird*, a work that is devoted to the writing craft, was a national bestseller. If such a topic could appeal to the masses, perhaps writing was something that most, if not all, of my students could also find worthwhile.

Until then, I had always considered writing a necessary skill for communication and expression of thoughts, and I taught it in such a way that focused solely on academic skills. I wanted my students to like writing like I did, but I had never considered the act of writing to be

something that could make them feel better. I had never thought of there being another piece to writing instruction besides academic pursuits.

My curiosity led to a larger project that explored, broadly, if writing and happiness were somehow intertwined. What started out as a lingering question led to a more detailed and passion-driven approach to instruction that involved journaling about social and emotional topics to potentially improve well-being.

Rationale for the Study

Besides my own interest in the topic, the implications for the study exist beyond the students in my middle school classroom. Adolescents today are in a Mental Health Crisis as declared by the United States Surgeon General in 2021 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). According to data on youth from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, depression and anxiety have increased over time and statistics of substance abuse and suicide are of serious concern (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). While some staff, such as counselors and social workers, exist within school buildings to help students in areas of social and emotional health, this type of support in schools is in a shortage (St. George, 2023). Despite this overload of student mental health needs, studies show there are ways in which educators can intervene that lead to positive effects for students, specifically through social-emotional learning (SEL) (Greenberg et al., 2017).

Schools are places where social and emotional skills can be taught and developed in order to help better support students other than strictly through academics (Jones and Doolittle, 2017). Furthermore, schools are ideal places to model and teach social and emotional skills, which lead to positive outcomes for students (Weissberg, 2019).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has defined five competencies that schools should explicitly teach, model, and practice in order for students to develop the skills and thrive both in the short- and long-term (CASEL, n.d.). The CASEL five include the following: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, n.d.).

Students need effective implementation of SEL to benefit, and it is essential that SEL is woven throughout the day and integrated into classrooms rather than just through standalone programs (Todd et al., 2022). Writing instruction could be a possible opportunity for such integration. Writing-to-learn about content areas has been used to deepen student understanding of academic content and has increased achievement (Graham et al., 2020).

Journaling is a tool psychologists have used to help adolescents struggling with mental health, although most studies on writing interventions like expressive writing have been used with adults and have focused writing on negative life experience; additionally, this journaling might only impact students at risk for psychological problems (Travagin et al., 2015). Studies with undergraduate students have shown that journaling has improved well-being when focused on writing about positive life events (MacIsaac et al., 2023) and gratitude (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012). Writing interventions for adolescents have been done to benefit well-being, such as journaling for mindfulness (Crawford et al., 2021) and to develop empathy (Montgomery, 2018). However, no studies have been done exploring teachers integrating social-emotional journaling into classroom content.

As districts and educators look at how to help support students with mental health, and how to teach social and emotional skills in a cross-curricular manner, journaling could be a method to marry the two.

Research Purpose

Most educators have paper and pencils available in a classroom, so the idea to tie together specific content and writing is a plausible plan. The purpose of this case study is to understand if and how journaling on topics related to social and emotional learning has an effect on student well-being.

Research Questions

- In what ways, if any, is subjective well-being impacted from all students journaling on topics associated with social-emotional competencies?
 - What are student perspectives on journaling?
 - What are student perspectives on happiness/well-being?

Operational Definitions

Adolescent: persons aged 10 to 19 (World Health Organization, n.d.)

Foundations for Success: a course that teaches students skills, habits, and traits that contribute to a successful educational experience and future; the course is offered at a middle school in northeastern Kansas

Journaling: the act of writing one's thoughts, observations, or stories

Makerspace: “a [place](#) where [people](#) can come together to [create](#) or [invent](#) things, either using [traditional crafts](#) or [technology](#)” (Cambridge University Press and Assessment, 2023)

Middle School: fifth through eighth grade students

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): “an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge,

skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, n.d.).

SEL Competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, n.d.)

Subjective Well-Being: the subjectivity of one’s own experiences, the experience of positive emotions known as positive affect, and life satisfaction (Diener, 1984)

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical framework for my study stems from John Dewey’s theory of experiential learning where students are active rather than passive participants in the learning process and obtain information through doing rather than by listening (Gibbon, 2019). Ord (2012) further defines Dewey’s notion of experience as one that is lived and “at the heart of experiential learning... therefore (it) is not something separate or additional but something which embraces the lives of individuals” (61). When journaling in the classroom, prompts often ask students to relate topics to their own lived experiences. Writing responses require students to construct their own thoughts rather than simply receiving information in the classroom. Additionally, Dewey’s work discussed the importance of relating educational material to student interests and backgrounds. The personal nature of journaling and the choice allowed opens up a space for students to write about what they want in the context of their own lives. Dewey also wrote about the central component of reflection in the learning process.

Reflective learning is a central piece of this study as students think about their lived experiences and evaluate knowledge of themselves when writing in their journals and when later

revisiting their entries. Several different educational boards and commissions have emphasized the importance of reflection during the learning process (Rodgers, 2002). Reflection can involve both projection and review where a person thinks about past events as well as looks forward to future goals (Ghaye, 2011). Dewey discussed reflection as a rigorous and intellectual process, and Rodgers (2002) qualified four areas that Dewey names as essential to reflection: 1) a meaning-making process that leads to a deeper understanding with connections to other experiences; 2) a systematic and rigorous way of thinking; 3) collaborative; and 4) requiring a disposition of personal growth. The social nature of the study's journaling and aim for an improvement in well-being are grounded in the beliefs of reflective learning. Additionally, the act of writing about experiences and thinking through connections referenced in prompts demands a writer to develop deeper connections between events and to think rigorously.

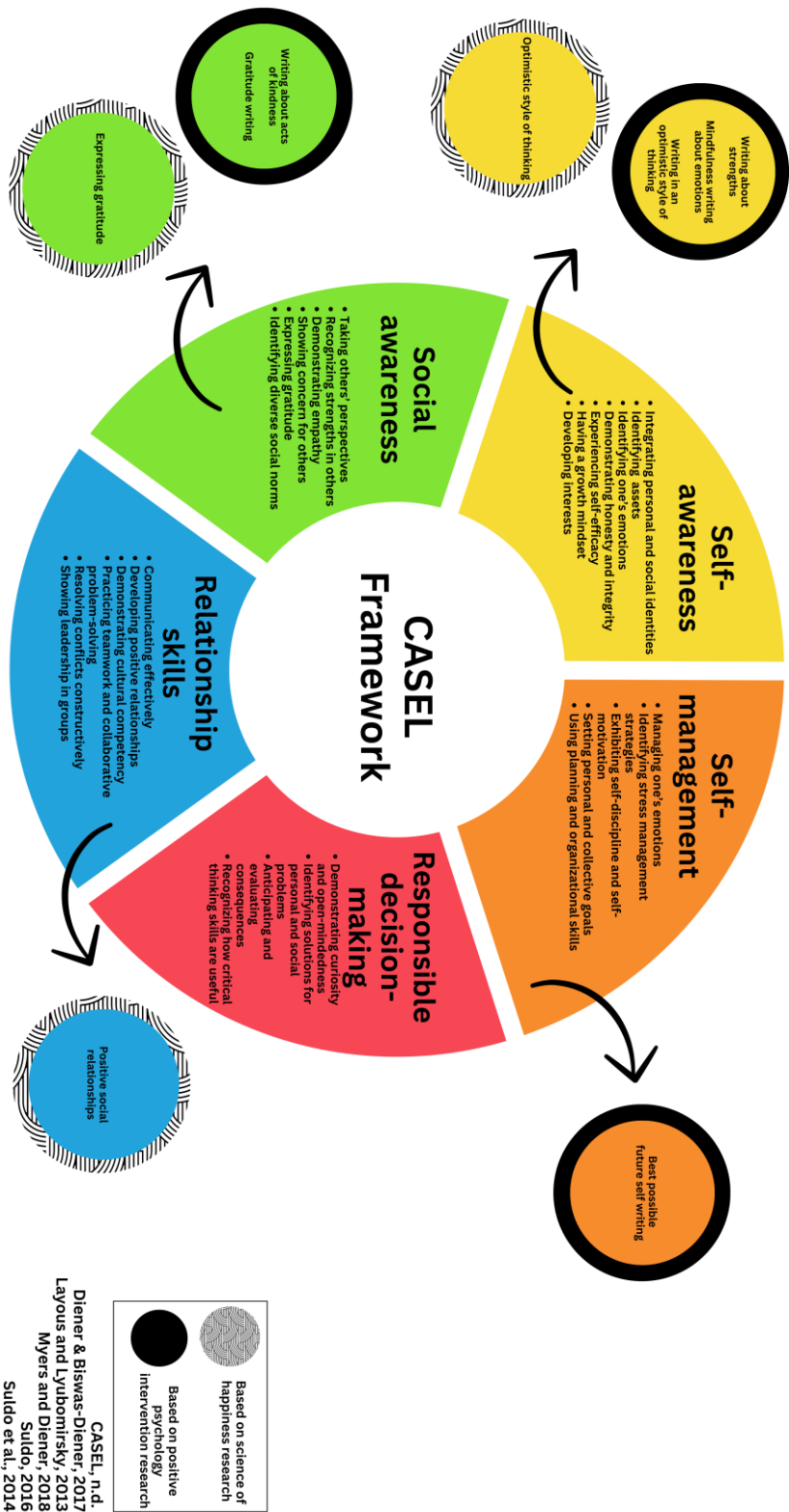
Reflection, which requires introspection and is foundational to higher-order thinking like problem solving, leads to self-knowledge that "fuels metacognitive knowledge because it encompasses the beliefs learners hold about themselves and how they exist in the world" (Cloude et al., 2021, p.52). Self-knowledge can lead to self-regulation, personal growth, and the ability to adapt to adversity (MacIsaac et al., 2020). Through writing and reflecting about SEL topics, students can learn about themselves and how different competencies affect their well-being, potentially changing their thoughts, actions, or mindsets to improve their well-being.

The study's focus on well-being is supported by positive psychology, which Martin Seligman pioneered when emphasizing the need for a positive shift in psychology, rather than focusing solely on suffering and mental illnesses, to help people lead productive and fulfilling lives (Linley, 2009). Various positive psychology interventions have been tried with students that have shown improvements in well-being, including studies on gratitude, mindfulness, acts of

kindness, and goal setting (Suldo et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2021; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Additionally, many of the ideas on well-being stem from the work of Ed Diener who first coined the term subjective well-being (Suldo, 2016). Diener's research found that one's well-being is affected somewhat by objective circumstances, "but it also depends on how people think and feel about these conditions" (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008, p.4). The research points to contributors to psychological wealth and describes happiness as a process and not a product that depends on how life is experienced; facets to psychological wealth include the following: life satisfaction; spirituality and meaning in life; positive attitudes and emotions; loving social relationships; engaging activities and work; values and life goals to achieve them; physical and mental health; and material sufficiency to meet our needs (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008, p.6).

When studying the different positive psychology interventions and contributors to happiness, there appeared to be areas of overlap with the social-emotional competencies. With the research-backing of the interventions, the correlates of happiness, and the recommended teaching of the competencies, the intersection of the three helped develop ideas for prompts within the journaling study. The CASEL wheel was frequently used to help align journal prompts to class content. Figure 1 shows the apparent juncture of positive psychology interventions, contributors to happiness, and competencies.

Figure 1 Overlap of social-emotional competencies and research on happiness and positive psychology.



Through a lens of positive psychology, and supported by research on the science of happiness, students reflected and practiced by journaling about areas related to the five CASEL competencies to increase their well-being.

While the study's overarching question focused on student well-being, a piece that was also impacted through reflection and experiential learning was student perceptions of the act of writing and themselves as writers. As students developed a habit of journaling, and as they looked through their journals throughout the course of the study, their thoughts and responses to targeted questions about the writing process and themselves could have caused them to change their views about writing and their confidence in their ability to write.

Methodology

The methodology was a mixed methods case study that aimed to seek an in-depth view of a group of students and their perspectives of journaling on topics related to the SEL competencies. Participants in the study were fifth-grade students enrolled in one class called Foundations for Success and another called Makerspace at a middle school in northeastern Kansas. The study took place over two academic years with different sets of students.

Methods

The study took part using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitatively, students took a pre-assessment and post-assessment of two different surveys. One was the Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1991) that measures overall life satisfaction, found in Appendix 1. The other survey was the CORE Elementary Student Survey (CORE Districts, 2017) found in Appendix 2 that measured SEL competencies. Statistical analysis was run to look

for correlations in the data. Quantitatively, students participated in ten-minute semi-structured interviews at the study's end. Student notebooks were reviewed for document analysis and field notes were taken. Data analysis was done through an inductive process of chunking and labeling data until themes were identified through a narrative description (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Subjectivity Statement

The middle school where I currently am the reading interventionist, and where the studies took place, is in a district where I have worked for seven years. I have been a teacher for 14 years with experience in grades kindergarten through eighth. Particularly in the past five years, I have worked to deepen my knowledge about literacy best practices through a master's in Curriculum and Instruction with a Reading Specialist endorsement. I also became a teacher consultant through the National Writing Project.

Reading and writing have been long-time hobbies of mine, and they are areas where I desire for my students to find joy as well. Writing is a subject I ensure fits into my schedule even when it is not common around my colleagues. I strive to build a love for literacy with my students through choice and meaningful content. I enjoy creating lessons for students that are timely, relevant, and tailored to what they find interesting. I also look for ways to make instruction engaging and authentic and aim for school to be a place where my students want to be.

Happiness, a term that scientists prefer not to use due to its varied definitions (Suldo, 2016), is a topic I have been interested in for many years. In my first five years of teaching, I worked in different negative environments. Because of those experiences, I have pursued the factors that impact happiness and have wanted to share that knowledge with my students.

Although this study's research questions did not focus on the word happiness, due to the varied definitions of the word, the term well-being relates to one's happiness.

Limits and Possibilities of the Study

One limitation of the study was the self-reporting of information on the surveys. Well-being is a subjective measure, so the information students provided ultimately relied on their own perceptions of their well-being. Additionally, although the surveys asked students to consider the questions in the context of the past 30 days, it is possible students might still have ruminated on a more recent positive or negative event, which would cloud their overall ratings. The studies' participants were students of mine, so it is possible their responses in the surveys and interviews aimed to please me as their teacher. Ultimately, these limitations could affect the reliability of the findings. An additional limitation is the small size with 21 students participating in total in the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years.

This study has possibilities of informing other educators searching for ways to incorporate SEL and improve the well-being of students.

Summary

Students today face many stressors of the modern world (Layous et al., 2013), and educators are searching for ways to best support students holistically. One way schools aim to help students in areas of social and emotional health is through learning and practicing SEL competencies. Journaling has been done with students in some areas that relate to the competencies, such as gratitude, but an approach to join together journaling and SEL could improve student well-being.

Chapter 2 - Manuscript 1: The Well-Being and Typical Teacher Cross-Curricular Intersection: A Case Study Exploring Supporting Students Socially and Emotionally by Journaling in the General Education Classroom

This article is intended for submission to the *Middle School Journal*.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) and its integration into classrooms is on the minds of educators across the nation, increasing in prioritization in recent years (Hanover Research, 2021). Finding ways to educate students beyond academic purposes is on the rise for various reasons, including states incorporating social-emotional competencies into standards (Stanford & Meisner, 2023) and federal funding for SEL (Bergin et al., 2023), but the increasing motivation for supporting students lies in the immediate need for schools to address the Mental Health Crisis (Ragan, 2022).

Adolescent Well-Being

Youth have increasingly been reporting feelings of sadness and hopelessness in the past decade leading up to the pandemic, with psychologists seeing high rates of suicide and depression, and COVID-19 piling additional mental health challenges for this younger population (Abrams, 2023). Adolescents already face challenges as they undergo many changes, including biologically, cognitively, and socially, and negative outcomes are not uncommon during the transitional period of life (Green et al., 2021).

In an advisory from the Office of the Surgeon General, youth mental health is listed as a critical area of focus due to increasing rates of psychological distress (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Since the Mental Health Crisis was declared in 2021, the situation

has not improved, and there are not enough mental health professionals to address the need (Berkowitz, 2023).

There are ways for schools to intervene and help students in the midst of the crisis and shortage of support. Harrison and Bishop (2021) emphasize a framework for middle school educators that outlines 18 characteristics of schools that lead to advancing student learning and supporting well-being. The authors list one of the 18 key characteristics as curricula and school-wide programs that support wellness and social-emotional competence.

Approaches to SEL

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework identifies five social and emotional competencies that make up the fundamentals of SEL to “help all young people and adults thrive personally and academically, develop and maintain positive relationships, become lifelong learners, and contribute to a more caring, just world” (CASEL, n.d.). The CASEL five include the following competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills.

SEL is taught in schools through universal whole-class programs and to targeted at-risk students with benefits of positive outcomes in social-emotional development, behaviors, and academic performance in both the short- and long-term (Green et al., 2021; CASEL, n.d.). Supporting students through SEL does not come without controversy; some states have moved to ban or limit content (Abrams, 2023), and some families have their reservations about this subject matter being taught in schools (Stanford & Meisner, 2023).

However, the Office of the Surgeon General names mental health challenges as the “leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024), requiring all of society’s support as “systemic change is essential”

including implications for those who “surround young people and shape their day-to-day lives” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021, p.5). The Surgeon General’s Advisory includes recommendations for educators, such as creating safe environments and expanding SEL programs to promote healthy development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021).

Frey et al. (2019) declare that all learning inherently includes social and emotional aspects, and “because teachers unquestionably influence students’ social and emotional development, they have a responsibility to do so in a way that is positive and deliberate” (p.4). Teachers have reported that SEL can be challenging to implement due to a lack of feeling confident with the content, desiring professional development on the competencies, and struggling with time constraints in the daily educational schedule (Todd et al., 2022).

While evidence-based curricula programs exist to support teachers in leading students in lessons on social and emotional topics, not all schools have implemented these. In a 2021 report, just 56 percent of educators said their schools had implemented an SEL plan, and just 34 percent of administrators were using a standalone SEL program (Hanover Research, 2021). With the use of curricula, some schools have found success by collaborating with colleagues and adjusting prescribed lessons to better fit the context of classrooms, which increased student engagement (Aidman & Price, 2018).

Frey et al. (2019) discuss ways for SEL to be a tier 1 approach that involves instructing all students through integration into mainstream academic learning; “the most important questions to ask about SEL are not about which program to use, but about how teachers will integrate the tenets of SEL into the fabric of their lessons” (p.13-14). This kind of universal prevention is “essential to a public health approach” as it benefits all students, and then more

intensive and targeted interventions are aimed at students showing risk (Greenberg et al., 2017, p.18).

When discussing the types of SEL programs, Bergin et al. (2023) discuss an interactional approach, which can be combined with a curricular program approach, that incorporates SEL “into existing daily teaching practices by transforming the way educators interact with students and how they support students’ interactions with each other” (p.51).

SEL integration into daily educational scheduling requires teachers to get creative and be effective, and one such approach could be through writing. Writing interventions have been used in various settings, including in one study with post-secondary students where journaling about emotions and gratitude had positive effects on well-being (Booker & Dunsmore, 2017). In another study, journaling improved students’ mindfulness, which positively impacts well-being (Crawford et al., 2021).

In my own previous study with fifth-grade students, I found that the participants responded positively to the experience of writing and reflecting on their journal entries. Students expressed confidence and pride in their work and described the journaling practice as an opportunity for freedom, a method for self-discovery, and a time to become better writers. Additionally, journaling made students feel better.

While participants reported benefits they experienced through writing after the study was complete, it didn’t match the observations I made during the writing time in the classroom. Some of the students were visibly engaged in the process, but others didn’t display characteristics of enthusiasm while journaling. The discrepancy made me wonder what was going through students’ heads while writing. Were they experiencing positive emotions that simply weren’t

apparent to me? Or were the feelings not always positive, but the time away from the entry and the reflection brought a new appreciation?

In my study, the students completed pre- and post-assessments over six weeks measuring their life satisfaction, but there wasn't any immediate measure of students' in-the-moment feelings.

All of the prior research led to the following research question: How does journaling about SEL topics impact, if at all, students' emotions and overall well-being?

The Current Case Study

The mixed-methods case study explored the question with a small group of fifth grade students in a northeastern Kansas middle school, which has a population of 420 students. The school population is comprised of 85% White, 11% Hispanic, and 1.5% African American. There are 28.4% of district students who qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Five students participated in the study in the fall of 2023. Permission for the study was obtained through the school district, parents/guardians, and the participating students. All names and identifying information have been changed to protect students' privacy.

Curtis was a student who often looked for opportunities to attract the attention of others in class, always seeming to be in motion. Breanna enjoyed opportunities to socialize with a close friend she had in class, and Kayla was always compliant, quiet, and introspective. Russ had a sense of silliness that he could turn off and on that needed reigning in occasionally, and Jeremy was hesitant to engage in activities until fully invested, and then he was all-in.

The participants were enrolled in a nine-week long Makerspace exploratory class that met twice a week. Makerspace is defined as "a place where people can come together to create or invent things" (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d.). The course introduced different

challenges for students to complete that required them to create in various settings using various methods. The class incorporated the use of journals to reflect upon different topics related to the Makerspace challenges and in alignment to SEL.

The journal prompts occurred at the start of class and aimed to get students into a quiet and creative mindset before they started crafting different items for Makerspace challenges. The SEL prompts aligned to the CASEL competencies as well as topics that have been shown to increase well-being, such as mindfulness (Crawford et al., 2021) and goal setting (MacLeod et al., 2008).

One journaling example involved students reflecting upon and then writing about their strengths. This required them to have self-awareness and allowed an opportunity for pride in their abilities as they had the option to share with others in the class. Students voluntarily spoke aloud what they wrote about, and then they moved on to their Makerspace project of creating an informational booklet on a topic of their choice of which they knew much about for someone younger than themselves. The prompt and classroom activity aligned because both discussions centered on the unique qualities each person possesses, whether they be strengths, abilities, or interests. Additionally, many students chose content from the journal response to incorporate into their idea for an informational booklet, such as choosing to teach a younger friend about the different skills involved in horse-riding because the activity was a self-identified strength and interest.

Another prompt involved students practicing creativity with an intriguing story starter. When students take on the challenge of creation, there are many social and emotional skills at play and benefits for well-being (CASEL, n.d.). Once again, students could read their journal entry to others if they chose. This aligned with the next activity where students were tasked with

inventing an item for the betterment of others, another task requiring managing the challenges of creation. Class discussion involved the feelings at play when trying to invent something—whether it be a story or a societal benefit—and how to overcome the obstacles of creation.

To measure well-being in youth, scientists often use the Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Suldo, 2016) as one’s well-being includes a global rating of satisfaction, presence of positive emotions, and a lack of negative emotions (Diener et al., 2017).

Students completed pre- and post-assessments on the Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1991) and participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews at the end of the study. During each week of classes, students responded to exit tickets where they self-measured their mood before and after writing and reflected upon statements and questions, including Likert-scale statements such as ‘I see myself as a writer’ and ‘I am a good writer’, and questions like ‘Did you learn anything about yourself?’

Data from the assessments and exit tickets was analyzed by calculating the change in student scores from pre- to post-assessments per question and overall assessment (Table 1). A statistical analysis was used for individual questions to determine the significance of the change. An inductive analysis was used with transcripts from the interviews, and the information was coded for themes using descriptive labeling (Bhattacharya, 2017). Student journal entries and researcher notes were also used for data analysis.

Table 1 Student Life Satisfaction Scale results from first study.

	My life is going well.		My life is just right.		I would like to change many things in my life.*		I wish I had a different kind of life.		I have a good life.		I have what I want in life.		My life is better than most kids.	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Russ	6	6	6	6	5	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	5	4
Jeremy	6	5	6	6	3	5	6	6						
Breanna	6	6	5	6	2	5	4	6	6	6	5	5	5	6
Kayla	5	5	6	5	2	3	2	4	5	5	5	5	6	5
Curtis	6	6	6	6	4	5	4	6	6	6	6	5	6	6
Mean	5.8	5.6	5.8	5.8	3.2	4.8	4.4	5.6	5.75	5.75	5.5	5.25	5.5	5.25

The Findings

Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale (1991) has seven statements that students measure themselves against using a Likert scale. Jeremy did not fill out all the survey in the post-assessment, so his scores for three of the questions were not included. For each student's overall score on the survey, only one saw a positive change by several points. However, as a group, student scores had the most positive difference for two statements that specifically related to making a change in one's life. The two statements are as follows: "I would like to change many things in my life" and "I wish I had a different kind of life." All students had a positive change for the former statement, and a t-test showed a $df=4$ and a p-value of .02. For the second statement, a t-test showed a $df=4$ and a p-value of .07. Therefore, in relation to the statement "I would like to change many things in my life", the data suggests there is a statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-assessment scores.

The exit tickets asked students to use a Likert scale to measure statements about seeing themselves as writers and if they believed they were good writers. Student individual totals and statement totals did not show any significant changes as the weeks progressed with values staying mostly stagnant. The exit tickets also asked students to write anything they learned about themselves while journaling. Most students didn't write anything. One week after learning about a visualization technique and writing about their best possible future selves (Layous et al., 2013), Jeremy wrote, "I learned that I can be a positive person." Breanna almost always answered the question, writing that she "felt a lot better and happier" after journaling about her strengths. Another time, after journaling about the nicest thing someone has said to them, she wrote that she learned that she is a good person.

One of the trends from the interviews described the journaling process as a way to reduce stress by writing down thoughts. Curtis expanded upon this, stating that the easiest part of writing was “just letting everything go; letting the stress off your shoulders.” Kayla said when she writes down what she is feeling, it feels like she is talking to a friend. She planned to continue journaling once the class was over “because it does help me get everything out of my mind and put it in the journal so I don’t have to worry about it.”

Two of the students talked about the calmness that journaling brought, and several named writing in a journal as a way to beat boredom. Additionally, many of the students discussed drawing during their interview, equating it to writing when talking about content they put into their journal.

Throughout their interviews, students discussed different entries that stood out to them, and they named varying reasons for their choices. Russ selected an entry to share about important things in his life, such as his family, friends, dogs, and video games. “It makes me remember what I love the most,” he said.

Both Breanna and Jeremy talked about their entries on their inventions, enjoying the freedom they had in their creation and the opportunity to make something to help others. Jeremy also appreciated his notes on the book he made for a younger student. “I thought that someone was really going to like it and ask me to read (it),” he said. Curtis liked his entry about goals he set for his future self because he often thinks about what his future looks like.

Discussion

From observations, students showed apathy and annoyance at the exit tickets, and there are several possible reasons for this. First, the use of the word exit ticket might hold a negative connotation for students as it’s typically used to assess knowledge and might be associated with

quizzes, which students don't typically favor. Second, the assessments asked students to reflect on their emotions before and after writing. To students, the frequency of the mood-meter questions might have felt repetitive, like an adult constantly asking, "How are you? And how are you now?" Third, in hindsight, the exit ticket question was worded in a way that allowed students to easily opt out since it was a yes or no question. Some participants expanded upon their 'yes' or 'no', but most students gave one-word answers. It's possible that having students spend minutes writing in their journal resulted in a slim chance of them writing full-length responses to questions.

The mood meter was intended to understand the presence of positive emotions before and after journaling sessions to see if any change occurred since positive emotions are a piece of subjective well-being. However, as students did not seem to seriously consider the exit ticket statements and questions, the same could be said for the mood meter. Rarely did students report a change of emotions, and oftentimes they selected a handful of feelings since our first lesson focused on how a person can have more than one emotion at a time.

An analysis of the Student Life Satisfaction Survey showed the most positive change for statements around making changes in one's life. An interpretation of this change is that through mindfulness and gratitude prompts, specifically those where students reflected upon the important things in their life and what brings them happiness, students became more grateful for their current statuses and less focused on changing elements of their lives. While only two out of the seven statements had positive changes, it still suggests that students' life satisfaction was impacted through their gratitude practice, which as a result positively improves their well-being (Suldo, 2014).

The discussions with students revealed much about their views on journaling and on their own entries. Merriam-Webster (2024) defines a journal as “a record of experiences, ideas, or reflections kept regularly for private use” with “diary” listed as well in the definition, further defined as “a daily record of personal activities, reflections, or feelings.” These varying uses for keeping a journal were echoed in the student interviews.

For Russ, a journal is used to relieve stress or to write for fun, like haikus. For Curtis, it is a place to doodle things that make him laugh, his comic strip being a place where I saw him write more than he had the duration of the class. To Jeremy, the journal was something that he sometimes felt interested in filling out and other times not, but mostly thought of as a way to pass time when bored. Kayla thought of her journal as a place to write down details about her days, and a method to make one feel better. Breanna said her journal was an outlet for thoughts and emotions.

These words from students describe just how personal and individual student journals are, meaning something different to each person regardless of the intention of the class’s incorporation of them.

Student sharing of favorite entries was surprising. In a previous study, students referenced the prompts tied to the SEL lessons, but many of the students in the current study shared notes they had made about our Makerspace activities. Even though they didn’t share the entries that aligned with SEL topics, they were giving reasons for their favorite creations in the class, and their reasons showed more about their social and emotional skills. For example, Russ talked about the Lego creation being one of his favorite because he worked with a good friend in class. Curtis talked about an outside art scavenger hunt creation as his favorite because it combined his favorite things of art and being outdoors.

Implications for Practice

In my 14 years of classroom experience, SEL has become more prevalent recently, and it is a topic that can divide teachers in the same building, challenging the philosophical and personal beliefs of those teaching next door to one another. My colleagues list discomfort leading SEL topics as a challenge, even when using a scripted curriculum.

Teachers in my building have noticed students unwilling to discuss their thoughts on social and emotional topics, noting that students aren't enthusiastic at addressing personal situations, leaving classrooms silent and educators carrying the weight of such conversations. Journaling offers a different approach that offers privacy and security, where students can reflect on topics and avoid the perceived judgment of peers. Journals also offer a way to integrate SEL content throughout the day outside of scripted programs to include conversations about the competencies in the context of the class setting.

My colleagues have also expressed worry that they aren't prepared to handle heavy topics that social and emotional discussions can veer toward. While teachers feel equipped to instruct their content, they feel unfamiliar and inexperienced with subjects other than their academic content. Collaboration is important when implementing SEL, and in my experience, I had several teachers, including our school counselor, I could talk with about any worries or challenges I encountered.

Journaling isn't meant to be a magical solution for all the challenges youth face, especially students at higher risk levels. The way I used them in my classroom fits the universal, interactional approach previously described (Bergin et al., 2023) and is not an intervention for targeted at-risk students. While our journals were a place for privacy, students knew that if they

shared their writing with me and I found it concerning, I would need to tell their family or our counselor about my concern and follow up as a mandated reporter if needed.

The struggle I had with aligning SEL content with my Makerspace content is an issue I would anticipate other educators experiencing. I had better luck when finding social-emotional competencies that mirrored skills used or relevant to our Makerspace activities compared to times when I felt like the writing prompt and the daily creation activity were a stretch.

Limitations of the Study

There were just five participants in the study, and each of their experiences with journaling was different. Another study with a different set of students would have students reporting their own sets of individual reflections. Overall trends were found with this set of participants; future studies with similar settings and methods would need to explore if the same patterns of journaling benefits were discussed in interviews and measured on assessments.

This study measured student ratings of their satisfaction and thoughts about their journaling at the study's completion. Since the study was short, a longer-term project might have different findings of students' experiences.

Final Thoughts

While students did not experience or value the same things when writing in their journal, they each crafted their own interpretation of the practice and how it can be useful to them. We were still able to have discussions around social and emotional skills, and the assessments and interviews suggest that well-beings were being fostered as students learned more about themselves and the people and things they care about. The journaling practice, when carefully aligned to topics on SEL, allowed students to develop skills academically, socially, and emotionally.

Chapter 3 - Manuscript 2: Building Social and Emotional Skills

While Constructing Bridges and Paper Towers: A Case Study

Linking Journaling and Well-Being in a Makerspace Class

This article is intended for submission to *The Journal of Educational Research*.

Two students sit in the same, gray-walled classroom with speckled composition notebooks in front of them, listening to directions about their journal prompt and waiting for the start of the timer on the screen to begin their writing responses.

Clint is an active 11-year-old, considering himself a good basketball and football player, and he is happiest when spending time with his animals, specifically his goats. He shows animals at the county fair. Writing isn't something he does on his own time, and he hasn't tried keeping a journal before. He doesn't really identify as a writer because when given opportunities to write, he doesn't produce much, and he doesn't think his entries are interesting. In addition, he doesn't think his writing is good because he often makes mistakes.

Emily is an identical twin who spends much of her time practicing facial and landscape art and writing haikus, and she owns a handful of journals and a special pen just for them. Drawing is what brings her happiness, to which she credits the benefits of dopamine and serotonin. She mostly considers herself a writer because of her imaginative storytelling, and she thinks it is a skill of hers, despite spelling challenges.

These two fifth-grade students were enrolled in a Makerspace class and completed different creation challenges during the nine-week course. Before each class challenge, they responded to a prompt that asked them to reflect and journal on a social or emotional skill that related to the day's activity.

This case study explored how these students, with vastly different experiences and interests, responded to the same situation. How would journaling on social-emotional topics affect these students and their well-being?

The State of Adolescent Well-Being

Well-being is comprised of one's quality of life and having a sense of meaning and purpose (World Health Organization, 2024). Researchers use the term well-being as a measurable term (Suldo, 2016), which Diener (1984) further describes by its three hallmarks: the subjective experience of the individual, positive measures, and life satisfaction. Scientists detail positive measures as positive affect, which include a person's pleasant emotions, and subjective well-being includes those positive emotions and low negative emotions (Diener et al., 2016).

The developmental years for children as they enter middle school bring a slew of challenges biologically, cognitively, and socially (Green et al., 2021), but youth today face unprecedented difficulties (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Adolescent well-being is a concerning area for the nation, evident by the U.S. Surgeon General's declaration of a Mental Health Crisis and heightened levels of psychological distress in youth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). Adding to the issue is a shortage of mental health care providers (Abrams, 2023).

These challenges have left schools searching for ways to positively intervene and promote well-being for all students with recommendations from the U.S. Surgeon General, including expanding approaches to social and emotional learning that promote healthy development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Well-Being Crossover

Social and emotional learning (SEL) involves teaching, practicing, and fostering social-emotional competencies (Weissberg, 2019). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework features five social and emotional competencies, including the following: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. The CASEL framework focuses on integrating SEL into instruction to “articulate what students should know and be able to do for academic success, school and civic engagement, health and wellness, and fulfilling careers” (CASEL, n.d.).

SEL has many benefits and is worthwhile as social-emotional competence is malleable; students with social and emotional skills have healthier relationships with others, are more engaged in class, and benefit academically (Bergin et al., 2023). In a meta-analysis of students from kindergarten to high school, researchers found that the social and emotional skills developed were the highest indicators of well-being in a follow-up after the study (Taylor et al., 2017). Furthermore, “while SEL does not replace the need for mental health interventions for students who need it, SEL can cultivate important ‘protective factors’ that buffer against mental health risks” (CASEL, n.d.).

Social and Emotional Integration

School districts are weaving SEL into classrooms in various ways. In a 2021 survey, 56 percent of educators reported their schools implementing an SEL plan, and 34 percent of administrators reported that their institutions were using SEL programs (Hanover Research, 2021). Through the tiered system approach, school systems provide different levels of intensity of support, including a universal approach at the tier one level that provides support for all students (Bergin et al., 2023).

Universal programs exist for teachers to deliver SEL content, but not without their challenges. Schools have reported issues such as time available for implementation, teacher buy-in, and family support; for those schools where students do not receive SEL curriculum, obstacles have included funding, lacking resources, and districts not supporting such implementation (Prothero, 2024).

However, meta-studies have shown that when well implemented and when using recommended practices, students benefited by the positive outcomes, such as an increase in academic performance and a reduction of negative behaviors (Weissberg, 2019). In addition to quality implementation and programming, students need SEL woven throughout lessons in other content areas as “classroom learning always includes cognitive, social, and emotional aspects” (Frey et al., 2019, p.4).

In one school’s successful case study story of SEL integration, whole school efforts, such as collaboration and schedule adjustments, were combined with teachers customizing prescribed lessons to better fit the context and engagement levels of their students; additionally, teachers worked to move beyond a standalone program and incorporate SEL throughout the school day (Aidman & Price, 2018).

A possible way to integrate SEL into academic content classes is through writing. Writing therapies have been used to treat mental disorders, but more recently these therapies have been used to promote a positive well-being (Ruini et al., 2022). Writing has been used in various studies to impact well-being, such as through mindfulness (Crawford et al., 2021), gratitude (Seligman et al., 2005), and future goal-setting (Layous et al., 2013).

Studies on writing and well-being and the call for SEL daily integration to help support the dire needs of youth today drove the purpose for this study. The research aimed to integrate

SEL into a Makerspace classroom through journaling by addressing topics aligned to the CASEL competencies. The following research question guided the study: How might journaling on SEL topics aligned to class content impact student well-being?

Journaling in Makerspace

A makerspace is a broad term and can look differently in various settings, but generally, it is a place where people can create on their own or with others to produce physical or digital products using tools and materials; makerspaces have the potential for cross-curricular learning and to positively impact students physically, emotionally, socially, and academically (Mersand, 2021).

The two students in the study were enrolled in a Makerspace class in spring 2024 in a 5th through 8th grade middle school in northeastern Kansas with a population of 420 students. The school is comprised of students who are 85% White, 11% Hispanic, and 1.5% African American; there are 28.4% of district students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. Student participants and their parents/guardians gave permission for the study and for use of pictures taken of journal entries, and all names have been changed to protect privacy.

In the Makerspace nine-week course, students met twice per week and tackled challenges where they were asked to create something, sometimes alone and sometimes with others. The tasks were sometimes challenges involving physical materials, such as making a subjectively beautiful scene on construction paper by only using items found during an outside nature walk. Other challenges used technology, such as using an animation app to show the demonstration of a proposed invention made by the student. Both mentioned activities were done solo, but participants also had to work with their peers for activities such as building a tall paper structure

while remaining silent and creating an outdoor physical activity challenge for someone else to complete.

When the course began, each student was given a composition notebook to use for planning purposes but also for journaling. Students were told they would be given writing prompts each class period that would get them into a creative mindset and prepare them to reflect on aspects related to the class activities. Routines and procedures for journaling were discussed, such as keeping the room quiet during writing time and using the entire writing time to journal, whether that be adding more to an entry, illustrating it, or writing about something else.

The journal prompts aligned to the class activities and touched on social and emotional competencies. For example, before students worked in small groups to build the tallest paper structure, they journaled about effective ways to problem solve with others. The writing time lasted about two minutes, serving as a quick write, and then students were given an additional prompt, asking them to add on to their initial answer once they found out they wouldn't be able to talk to their group during the problem-solving process. After students wrote in response to both prompts, the class had a brief discussion where students shared out silent communication ideas, such as using gestures or grabbing white boards in the room to allow them to write on while they worked.

The journal prompt, and discussion it brought forth, exemplify conversation aligned to the CASEL competency "relationship skills" which includes communicating effectively, listening actively, and collaboratively problem solving (CASEL, n.d.). Once students shared out their ideas, they started applying those skills when the task started, practicing ways to work together on their silent build of the paper tower.

Measurements and Methods

While all students in the Makerspace course participated in the journaling and creation activities, Clint and Emily were the only two partaking in the study. They each took a Student Life Satisfaction Survey (Huebner et al., 2022) that gives seven statements for individuals to measure themselves on a Likert-scale. The survey was given as a pre- and a post-assessment. The two students also participated in semi-structured interviews once the study was complete. Their journal entries, and the researcher’s journal of observations, were analyzed as artifacts.

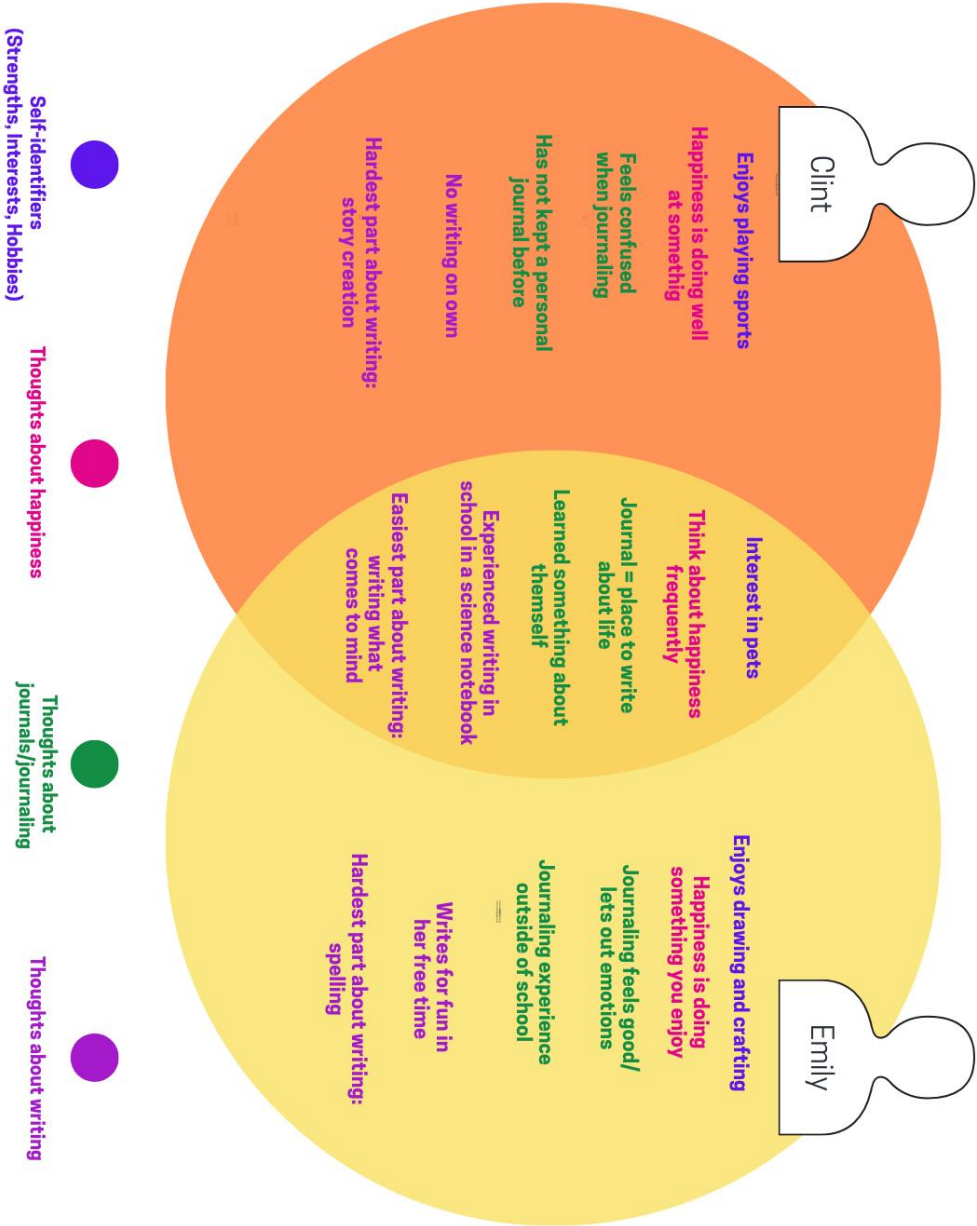
Data from the surveys was analyzed by comparing the change in value per question from pre to post; the results are shown in Table 2. The data was examined using statistical analysis tools. The transcripts from the interviews were coded for themes by searching for common phrasings and then categories in an inductive analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017). Since there were two sets of data, similarities and differences were analyzed and displayed in a Venn Diagram chart (Figure 2).

Table 2 Student Life Satisfaction Scale results from second study.

↷

	My life is going well.		My life is just right.		I would like to change many things in my life.*		I wish I had a different kind of life.*		I have a good life.		I have what I want in life.		My life is better than most kids.		Total score	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Clint	4	5	4	4	1	3	2	4	4	5	6	6	2	4	23	31
Emily	3	4	4	5	3	4	4	4	3	5	4	6	3	3	24	31
Mean	3.5	4.5	4	4.5	2	3.5	3	4	3.5	5	5	6	2.5	3.5	23.5	31

Figure 3 Venn Diagram on student attitudes, perceptions, and habits.



The Findings

Student Life Satisfaction

The results from the two participants' Student Life Satisfaction Surveys showed a statistically significant difference from the pre-assessment score (M=23.5) to the post-assessment score (M=31) with a p-value of .042. Therefore, quantitatively students reported improvements in their overall life satisfaction from the beginning to the end of the nine weeks.

Student Interviews

The student interviews, which took place independently of one another, revealed multiple similarities between Clint and Emily and their responses, despite how different they seemed observationally. They share an interest in animals, and each took time in their interviews to talk about their pets without being prompted.

In reference to journals, the two students view them similarly, describing them as a place where one can write about their life. When asked about the easiest part of journaling, they both discussed the ability to write down whatever ideas or random thoughts come to mind during a journaling session. Although they are in different classes outside of Makerspace, Clint and Emily brought up their science journal to explain the kind of writing they do in other academic settings, describing how the notebook is used to learn new vocabulary words. From the experience, both students said they learned something about themselves through the journaling process.

Their similarities existed in a broad sense, from naming an interest in their animals (for Clint, goats and dogs; for Emily, a guinea pig and dogs) to reflecting on how they can use journals to write down random thoughts to learning new characteristics about themselves. In the details of their responses, however, they each described vastly different experiences with writing and thoughts about themselves.

There were many differences in Clint's and Emily's attitudes and behaviors about their journals. Clint did not have previous experience using a journal while Emily claimed to have at least five at home, the habit she picked up after seeing an older sibling writing in one. In addition to having previous experience, Emily, unlike Clint, writes outside of school by choice as a hobby. They also had different thoughts about how they felt while journaling. Clint reported feeling confused while he wrote, while Emily said the process felt good. She said, "I get to write my feelings down on a piece of paper, and it's actually really good because I can take my thoughts and put them down in a journal for me to see or other people." Her responses during the interview indicated that she was aware of some of the benefits of journaling, citing that they can be used to help keep track of things, such as for "people with ADHD or for people who like to keep everything organized and write stuff down."

When they talked about the writing process, they differed when explaining the most difficult part. Clint's answer dealt with the overall content and ideas of journaling, specifically stating story creation. Emily's biggest challenge was knowing how to spell what she wanted to write. Their Likert-scale answers were only one point apart when reflecting on the statement 'I see myself as a writer,' with Clint answering 'somewhat true' and Emily 'mostly true.' However, more can be learned from their explanations. Clint said he responded with that choice because he doesn't write often. He added, "And because my writing is not really interesting, and I'm not really focused while I'm writing."

Through our conversations, it appeared that Emily's previous practice with journaling, interest in the activity, and experience during writing made her feel like a confident writer, choosing to ignore her challenges with spelling as she continues writing on her own time. Clint, on the other hand, did not appear to have previous success and/or interest in writing, and

therefore didn't ooze the same level of confidence or enthusiasm when describing himself and his experience.

Emily's Likert-scale response only increased by one point, but her explanation of her choice demonstrates more about her differences in how she identifies as a writer. She said, "I do like to write stories and come up with like, fairy tale, imaginative stuff, and realistic stuff, too. I do like to write poetry a lot. And I will sometimes look for inspiration—sometimes my drawings, and sometimes the Internet."

The interview conversations also focused on ideas of happiness, the term chosen since it is better known for students compared to the more scientific term of well-being. Both Clint and Emily reported thinking about their own happiness quite often, which for Clint meant "most of the time" and Emily "every other day." In their self-definitions of happiness, the students differed in how they understood the word. Clint explained that the feeling occurs when a person does well at something, like gets a good test score; Emily described happiness as a feeling one gets when they are involved in an activity they enjoy. These responses could simply be succinct answers, or they might show a slight difference between Clint and Emily. Perhaps Clint believes happiness, or well-being, to be a state that one must work for to attain while Emily believes it to be a concept that one discovers by searching for interests.

Classroom Observations

Watching students during their journaling time gave insight into their ability and effort, as did glances at their notebook entries. Emily often wrote at length in her notebook when given journal prompts, adding illustrations to her thoughts, and frequently craved opportunities to share what she crafted. Clint needed reminders to continue working during the full journaling time along with suggestions for ways to continue responding to a prompt. I recognized similar

patterns when each student created independent class activities—Emily worked at length on something, especially if art was involved, but did not stay on pace with completing tasks; Clint was the opposite, commonly the first one finished and appearing rushed while meeting the minimum requirements.

The support each student needed differed, and for Emily that looked like chunking projects into smaller tasks and giving time after journaling to share her ideas with others. For Clint, it meant frequent check-ins during independent time and honest conversations about his effort level.

Journal Entries

They each shared examples of journal entries from the class and talked about their favorites, and both said they learned new things about themselves from their journals. Their samples and rationales for choosing them provided further insight into their personalities and experiences.

Clint’s proudest entry entailed the design he planned for a partner bridge-building challenge. The task had started with a journaling reflection asking students about their strengths and how capable they believed themselves to be at building a bridge (Figure 3). The CASEL competency that aligned with the prompt is self-awareness which includes the ability “to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts”, including the capacity to recognize one’s strengths and limitations (CASEL, n.d.). Clint shared another favorite prompt about things in our world that were invented to help others, which set students up to brainstorm ideas for things that should be invented to help a societal need. One commonality between the entries he shared was an element of problem solving. He said something he learned about himself during the journaling process was the different ways he

can solve problems; he discovered new strengths of his such as the ability to come up with ideas and multi-tasking. When asked how journaling helped him learn those things, he answered, “By exploring my brain.”

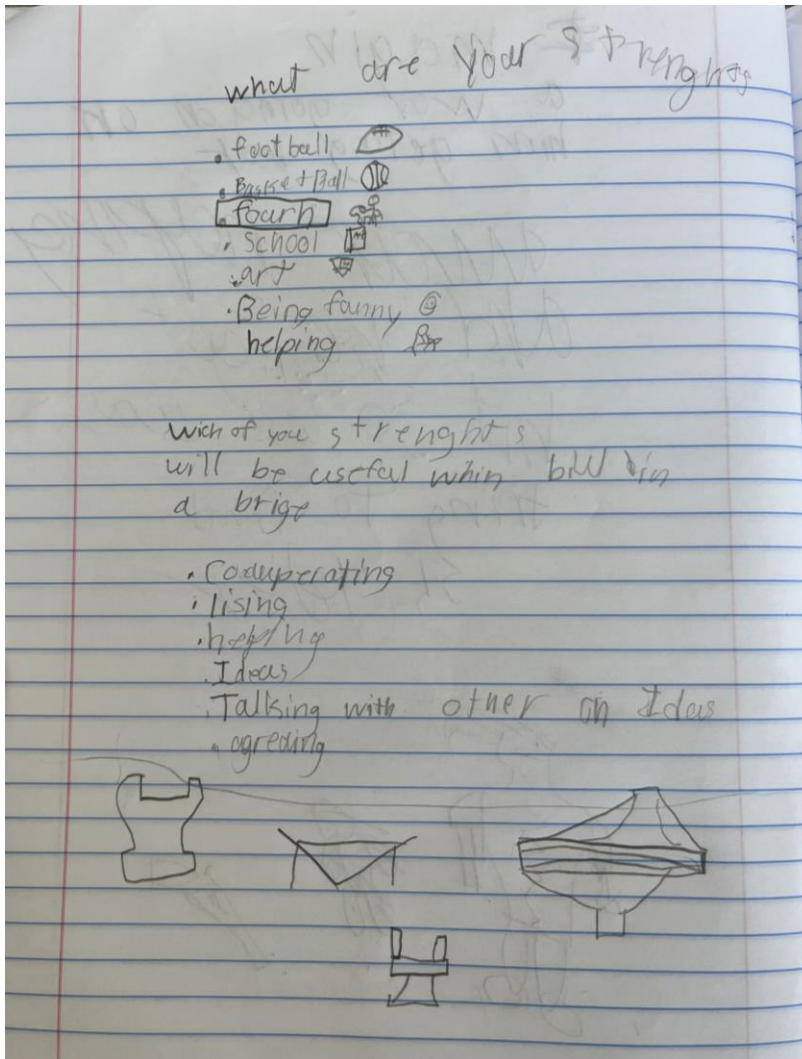


Figure 4 Student journal sample on strengths.

Emily shared her favorite entry that detailed her ideas for improving the lives of others with her clothing invention that benefited girls who were menstruating. She said she enjoyed thinking about how to help others and planning out the different details in her design. There were

several others that Emily wanted to share, including an entry about important people in her life where she talked about the bond she has with her twin. Emily said journaling taught her that writing helps her think better and that she can write more.

Implications

Students enter classrooms with widely different life experiences, interests, knowledge, and skills. In writing activities, it is no different. Despite displaying varying levels of enthusiasm about journaling, the students in this study showed growth in multiple aspects of well-being.

In the category of overall satisfaction levels, both Clint and Emily made significant growth from their pre- to post-assessment survey scores. The conversations in the interviews revealed that while Clint did not feel as confident about his journaling, both he and Emily discovered something about themselves in the process, finding types of writing enjoyable. For Clint, writing to critically think about an issue feels meaningful and interesting, and for Emily, opportunities to merge drawing and writing are her favorite.

With each student noting that they learned something about themselves, this suggests that both were developing self-awareness; in addition, other entries they discussed suggest they also were developing relationship skills since their writings talked about ways to communicate effectively. A third competency affected, according to their interviews, was responsible decision-making, which has a definition that includes considering the well-being of the collective by identifying solutions for social problems (CASEL, n.d.).

The improvement in Clint's and Emily's life satisfaction suggests that their well-being was positively impacted in the study. The social and emotional competencies they reportedly were developing are linked to their well-being, too. Studies show social and emotional skills are

both protective and promotive for individuals (Green et al., 2021) with the capability to positively affect both academic performance and happiness (Kaşıkçı & Ozhan, 2021).

This has implications for teachers as journaling on topics that have students reflect upon social and emotional competencies has benefits, and by integrating writing and discussions with class content, it can be an effective way for students to not only make academic achievements and build content knowledge but also improve their well-being.

However, this does not come without careful thought and planning. For the Makerspace lessons, much was considered for how to integrate social-emotional journal prompts. The CASEL framework was continuously referenced, specifically the breakdown of each competency, to discover areas where a particular Makerspace activity would nicely align with a specific skill. When attempting this practice before with a different class, academic content suffered when an alignment was not targeted and when journaling was taught as a separate part of the class period. In this previous scenario, the journaling became in competition with content for class time. Therefore, it is best to merge the two together as best as possible.

Limitations

While much knowledge was gained from the two student participants, the sample size was small, and the experiences of Clint and Emily could differ from the experiences of other students. The generalizability of the study may be difficult due to the analysis of just two students who both attended the same school. Additionally, the students knew they were part of a study and so might have been more likely to say they learned something about themselves if they felt the need to please their teacher. It was evident that Emily was more likely to respond to interview questions with lengthier answers than Clint, and perhaps he didn't feel as comfortable speaking about personal matters like those discussed in the interview. Additionally, Emily's

enthusiasm for writing might have been a reason she was more willing to discuss how she felt about journaling.

The nine-week course had many class interruptions, such as a local natural disaster and end-of-year school-wide activities, which shortened the number of classes the students received. Future research could explore a similar study over a longer period so that students had ample opportunity to develop writing habits. Other studies could also explore the possibility of integrating SEL into other academic contents; Makerspace was a class with flexibility, but teachers of subjects that are deemed ‘core’ such as math or science would likely have different experiences implementing the practice and aligning writing to their content.

Conclusion

Adolescents today need attention and support from all stakeholders, and schools have different approaches to integrate SEL to best help. With the overlap of social and emotional competencies and well-being, students can positively develop and benefit when these skills are taught. Journaling on SEL topics is a way that well-being can be promoted in the classroom, and when teachers identify ways to tie social and emotional skills to content lessons, students have the potential to benefit holistically.

Chapter 4 - Manuscript 3: An Educator's Perspective on Using Journals to Integrate Social-Emotional Competencies and Content: Implications for Schools and Student Well-Being

This article is intended for submission to the *Journal of Positive Psychology and Well-Being*.

“There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy.” Robert Louis Stevenson proclaims that our state of happiness is something for which we are responsible. It is that idea that has driven my curiosity in the past 15 years to read books like Dan Harris's 10% Happier (2014), which led to trying meditation, and to complete a miniature venture mimicking Gretchen Rubin's The Happiness Project (2015), which included dedicating time to seeking a passion and praising others.

When telling others about my pursuits, opinions ranged from curiosity to doubt to questions about why I had been spending time in such selfish acts. The latter perspective made me quizzical, and more careful and quieter about sharing my ideas with others as it had me wondering: Was it selfish to work towards one's own happiness?

Happier people personally benefit from the state of being as it leads to better health and immunity, makes them more sociable, and makes them more successful at work (Myers & Diener, 2018). While this list could indirectly affect others positively, there are additional advantages for the greater good, including happier people being more likely to volunteer and help others at work, and less likely to quit their jobs (Diener, 2017). Furthermore, “happy people are successful and flourishing people” (p.845) with happiness leading to success, and happy individuals are more likely “to have fulfilling marriages and relationships, high incomes,

superior work performance, community involvement, robust health, and a long life”

(Lyubomirsky et al., 2005, p.846).

The evidence for reasons to work toward happiness has woven into my professional life where I have allowed myself time to explore, reflect, and plan career goals and habits that I believe will continue to help me cultivate a positive state of being. In extension, I often consider the happiness of my students. As a reading specialist and former elementary teacher, the desire for my students to have a positive school experience has been paramount to the content I have taught.

But the aspiration for my students is not enough—to help my students achieve happiness, I have had to learn what specifically that means and what contributes to it. During the past two years, my teaching load has included courses with some flexibility of content, so I started pursuing the answer to those questions.

An Autoethnography Approach

A method that allows researchers to critically review their thinking and their research is autoethnography as researchers recognize at times they are part of a study and affected by their fieldwork experience; autoethnography is a study of culture from the perspective of oneself (Adams et al., 2015). In this method, autoethnographers become part of the study and “focus intensely on their own life circumstances as a way to understand larger social or cultural phenomena” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p.1665).

Ellis et al. (2011) describe autoethnography as both a process and a product. The process involves using hindsight to write about epiphanies in the research experience, and the product is a written work using thick descriptions and storytelling of the experience using patterns discovered from interviews and field notes.

After spending time studying the question of impacting student happiness, the autoethnographic approach required an internal analyzation of my beliefs, actions, and student interactions, attitudes, behaviors, and opinions (Cambridge University Press and Assessment, n.d.). This method allowed me to understand myself in the context of the classroom, how my understandings shifted, and how my teaching decisions impacted my students.

Sparking an Idea

The idea to take my curiosity about my students' happiness more seriously started as part of a National Writing Project (NWP) inquiry. In the summer of 2023, I participated in a regional NWP site summer institute for developing teaching consultants and was tasked with forming an inquiry question aligned to one of my core values.

After completing activities that led to introspection of my values, happiness fell within my top three. Simultaneously with this act of discovery, our group of educators participated in daily "Writing into the Day" journaling (National Writing Project, 2016) and discussed readings from several book studies, including the focus text, Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* (Lamott, 1995).

In keeping a daily journal, I thought about the joy that it brought in the moment, though admittedly not 100 percent of the time as there were occasions where the prompt given didn't capture my enthusiasm, or my state of mind kept me from getting into the writing flow. Outside of the joy that journaling brought, it was in the reflections of my growing journal that I found a different kind of joy. I had a record of stories I told to only that journal and a place where memories and ideas were kept, and while looking through the pages, I remembered the decisions I made and the emotions I felt while jotting down thoughts and discovering revelations. The value I found in reflection is supported by other studies that have shown reflecting promotes

making meaning of life experiences and ideas and deepens understanding, with writing often used as a method (Asfeldt et al., 2018).

Countless pages in Lamott's book are starred and marked by my different symbols where I felt compelled by her words about writing, such as her advice on how to get into a writing frame of mind by putting yourself at the center, telling the truth, and trusting yourself in the process despite anxiety and self-doubt. She explains the importance of writing as it motivates one to look closely at life, and she shares knowledge that she gives to students in her writing workshops: "Writing brings with it so much joy, so much challenge. It is work and play together...(Writers) see the world through new eyes." (p.xxix).

The journal and discussions around Lamott's work had me wondering. I was struck by the notation on the book cover claiming it as a national bestseller. For a book whose advice was aimed at writers as the audience, I was fascinated that there might be so many people like me interested in the craft. All these thoughts around writing, along with the lingering assignment of an inquiry project, merged into a question: How could my students benefit from a happiness project centered on writing?

My journey started by outlining tasks to complete before the start of the school that fall, and then I detailed resources I already had and information I needed to find. My research started with the idea of happiness and what already has been done to support students.

From Happiness to Well-Being

A fellow teacher consultant and I discussed what we anticipated students thinking about the meaning of happiness, and she guessed that some students would equate the word to spending hours in front of a video game. The conjecture, part joke and part truth, pushed me to find a solid and clear definition of the word.

The time I had spent in past years reading about ways to impact happiness hadn't left me with a succinct description of the word due to its abstractness. Happiness has different meanings for different people. Since children and adults use various words, both concrete and expressive, and experiences to attempt to define happiness, scientists have agreed upon a term coined by Ed Diener known as subjective well-being (SWB), which is comprised of cognitive and emotional aspects (Suldo, 2016).

Diener et al. (2017) described SWB as “people’s overall evaluations of their lives and their emotional experiences”, including life satisfaction and presence of positive emotions and low negative emotions (p.87). For youth, a self-assessment survey is frequently used to measure life satisfaction, such as Huebner’s Student Life Satisfaction Scale that is appropriate for children ages 8 to 18 (Suldo, 2016), which contains seven general statements with six Likert-scale options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For adolescents, life satisfaction is a key indicator of SWB and a predictor of educational outcomes (Hueber et al., 2022).

An important aspect of studies of SWB and its contributors is that “SWB is malleable at both the individual and societal level...it has become abundantly clear that circumstances and the choices people make in life can, and do, influence their long-term SWB” (Diener et al., 2017, p.89).

Well-Being and Social and Emotional Learning

Adolescent well-being is an area needing attention in our country. In the last decade, student levels of hopelessness and sadness have risen (Abrams, 2023), resulting in a declaration by the U.S. Surgeon General of a Mental Health Crisis (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Youth at this transitional period of life already undergo numerous changes and

challenges (Green et al., 2021), including a time in their development when patterns of behavior are developed for either risky or protective health and well-being (Avedissian & Alayan, 2021). To help support the well-being of adolescents, an approach is needed by all of society, and for educators, this includes expanding programs on social and emotional learning (SEL) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “an integral part of education and human development” where “young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, n.d.).

CASEL defines the following social and emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, n.d.). Various approaches to teaching the competencies exist, and one method for instruction is known as an interactional approach where SEL is incorporated into daily teaching practices (Bergin et al., 2023). Frey et al. (2019) discuss that because all learning is social and emotional, teachers should weave SEL into “the fabric of their lessons” (p.13-14). Greenberg et al. (2017) discuss how schools are an ideal place to teach such skills and that SEL is a public health approach, particularly because “to become the kind of citizens the founders wanted public education to create, children need more than the ability to read, write, and do arithmetic. They also need skills that will help them develop personal plans and goals, learn to cooperate with others, and deal with everyday challenges, setbacks, and disappointment” (p. 15).

SEL has shown many benefits for youth, including increases in academic achievement, promoting protective health factors, and promoting future readiness (CASEL, n.d.). By

integrating SEL into classrooms, there is a bridge to the gap between traditional instructional practices and social-emotional needs (Todd et al., 2022). As teachers search for ways to incorporate SEL, writing instruction could be a possible means.

Journaling and Well-Being

Writing is one method used to impact well-being with youth and adults. In one study by Crawford et al. (2021), journaling was shown to be a valuable tool for adolescents to practice mindfulness, which can lead to well-being (Zarbock et al., 2015). Another study by Booker and Dunsmore (2017) showed positive impacts on well-being for groups of college students focused on writing about emotions and gratitude. Therapeutic writing has often been used with success to benefit the well-being of adults suffering from mental or physical illness, including in a study on older adults where creative therapeutic writing was found to have multiple benefits for the participants (Malyn et al., 2020). Ruini and Mortara (2022) found in an analysis of studies involving writing techniques in therapy that while the method has benefits for psychological treatment, it also promotes well-being. Montgomery (2018) found that by journaling to one another, students in a high school class developed social-emotional skills and positive feelings toward writing.

Studies have found writing to be useful in supporting individuals' well-being, and thus my research question became more focused as I prepared to start exploring the idea with my students. How might subjective well-being be impacted from all students journaling on topics associated with SEL competencies?

Over two years, I completed three different studies to learn more about my research question. After the studies' completion, I focused on my own thinking to better understand the questions supporting this autoethnographic study:

- What impact would planning and aligning journal prompts on SEL topics for potential student SWB improvement have on me?
- How might my instruction be altered, if at all, from the results of the various studies?
- What knowledge could impact future work for myself and others?

Classroom Studies

All the studies took place in a 5th through 8th grade middle school in northeastern Kansas with 420 students just outside of a mid-sized university city. The school is approximately 85% White, 11% Hispanic, and 1.5% African American with 28.4% of district students qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

Permission for the studies was obtained through the school district, parents/guardians, and students. The participant information has been changed to protect students' privacy.

First Study:

The first study took place in the spring of 2023 with 5th grade students enrolled in a Foundations for Success class whose purpose was to discuss topics for success, including being aware of grades and assignments in other classes, positive ways to interact with peers, and ways to take care of themselves physically and emotionally. Fourteen students participated in the eight-week study; eight were female and six were male.

Second Study:

The second study took place in the fall of 2023 with students enrolled in a Makerspace class, which involved challenges that tasked students to work alone or collaboratively to create items using various tools and materials. Five students participated in the nine-week study; two were female and three were male.

Third Study:

The final study mirrored the second study, taking place in a Makerspace class in the spring of 2024. The two participants, one male and one female, took part in the nine-week study.

Methods and Data Analysis

In all the studies, students kept a journal and participated in “Writing into the Day” modeled after the NWP practice (National Writing Project, 2016). Writing prompts were given that aligned to topics centered on social-emotional competencies.

Students took Huebner’s Student Life Satisfaction Scale (2022) at the beginning and end of each study. Additionally, they participated in semi-structured interviews and shared samples of their journal entries.

The pre- and post-assessment data was analyzed using statistical descriptive and inferential analysis (Pathak, 2011), and the transcripts were coded using an inductive analysis using chunks and codes (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Throughout the studies, I took notes of my observations and reflected after the completion of each study. In my interpretation of the overall data, I searched for patterns and trends in the style described by Ellis et al. (2011) to help determine overarching themes from the three studies.

Themes

Writing and Reflection are Worthwhile for Well-Being

Many times, self-doubt had me question if my efforts mattered for my students. I am not a licensed therapist or an educator with a counseling specialization, so I worried that what I was trying was too far out of my realm of expertise. However, in both the data from student pre- and

post-assessments and information learned from interviews, the findings suggest that students gained from the experience.

Across all three studies, students reported learning about themselves, including learning about strengths they possessed, hobbies they valued (with several proclaiming writing as a newly discovered interest), and future goals. Students also frequently discussed the positive aspects of the writing environment and the experience of journaling, such as finding peace in the quiet space, having a place to write down thoughts they needed to release, and enjoying the freedom that the journal provided.

Students' life satisfaction scores varied, but the biggest positive changes from pre- to post-assessments, in all three studies, occurred on the statements regarding the desire to change things in one's life and wishing for a different life. This trend could be a result of the mindfulness and gratitude writing that students did in each study.

I cannot say for certain what the experience would have been like without student reflection on their journals, but it was this reflection that brought forth the most colorful nuggets of information. Students were asked to look through their journals in the interviews, and during these moments, feelings of pride, surprise, and appreciation of self-humor were common when reviewing past journal responses.

This was part of my experience in keeping a journal during the NWP summer institute. Even a year later, I still find joy in the entries and think about what I might learn from my past notes. This value of reflection is supported by studies that have shown it allows for a deeper understanding of life experiences and new content (Asfeldt et al., 2018).

SEL Integration, Not Imposition

Many of my own journal entries throughout the studies reference balancing social-emotional competence topics with class content. This appeared easier in my first study because of the goal of the course, teaching students about the foundations for success. Much of the class content beautifully aligned with social and emotional competencies, so our “Writing into the Day” prompts set us up nicely for other class activities and discussions. The course description and content also made discussions about well-being natural as I explained to students that underlying success was our own well-being.

However, the alignment did not come as easily with the Makerspace course that students were enrolled in for the second and third studies. Particularly in the second study, my journal notes describe the struggle between journaling on SEL topics and class creation challenges. I had modeled the prompts in the second study after those I gave in the first. Students learned about components contributing to well-being and then journaled about them before diving into Makerspace tasks. This created a severe separation between the two parts of class and made the journals feel unnatural and imposing upon what we would later create. When I realized what I was doing, I tried to link prompts more intentionally to our classroom content.

By the third study, I had formed a better plan to start with the Makerspace challenge and then study the social and emotional competencies to see what best fit together. For example, before students started a project visually displaying their interests and strengths, they completed a prompt about individuality, answering what characteristics made them stand out. While this change made the overall class experience, including journaling, flow nicely, it also left me wondering in my journal if I was doing enough explicit instruction on the benefits to our well-

being. My focus was like a swinging pendulum, and I struggled to find the right balance between integration and purpose.

Integration is crucial if attempting to link SEL with academic content, particularly for student clarity and sake of class time. However, it does not always come easy and requires careful planning and understanding of each class's purpose and goal.

Building a Writing Classroom Culture Takes Time

After more than a decade of teaching writing to kindergarten students and fifth, sixth, and seventh graders, I felt well prepared to integrate writing time into my Foundations for Success class in the first study. The class met all year, with sections of students rotating through my schedule weekly. I followed the protocol I had used in previous years, modeled like a writer's workshop, where routines and expectations were set and investment in our writing was developed. By the end of the year, the students in the interviews remarked on all of the reasons they enjoyed journaling time. They had built stamina to write, had many opportunities to share their writing with others, and had countless journal entries that varied in content and product. The success of this initial study, gleaned from the student interviews and the observations of student enthusiasm during writing time, followed me into the second round of the study.

The second study, however, took place in a course in a shorter time period. Instead of a yearlong course, Makerspace was a nine-week class. The time to create a welcoming and safe class culture that valued a shared experience of writing became rushed. I tried taking shortcuts to the process, such as jumping in to longer writing times and even lowering expectations. I needed to build student investment in writing quickly, so I offered up changes to the journaling expectations, such as allowing whispering during writing and doodling.

I thought the more laidback the environment and the more choice given would create a love for journaling fast and furiously, and I was wrong. The whispering quickly disrupted the quiet, reflective act of journaling. The doodling became students' sole focus as they were no longer interested in responding to prompts about topics like their individuality or future goals, and sometimes the drawing turned into random scribbles to fill the void as our timer ticked down.

Drawing in the journals had become a conundrum for me, and there are multiple places in my researcher journal where I pondered its use and sought out advice from others. Students valued the freedom of their journals and the choice it offered, and while I didn't want to destroy either of those, I also needed students to focus on the purpose of the lesson. I also did not want to ignore the advantages of self-expression and discovery that drawing provides. Instead, I offered drawing as an addition that could be used with words to answer the prompts. I never gave requirements of length or format, and so I demonstrated to students that art had its place in their journals, too, as long as they also used words, either through captions or in the format of a comic. I gave various examples of how pictures could accompany ideas in a notebook. I saw success when I gave clearer expectations and explained the purpose of those expectations. And I felt more productive from our lessons when I recognized and reminded myself about the true purpose of our lesson, which wasn't for students to simply leave the classroom proclaiming that journals were fun, but rather, that journals are useful tools that can help us think better about our ideas and understand ourselves better. I think of my students' appreciation of journals as a slow burn; over time, with more exposure and practice, they came to see the value of journaling.

Happiness and Well-Being and the Unnoticeable

After speaking to the 21 students that participated in the studies, it is abundantly clear that one cannot guess at what students experience in the journaling process. Many of the students surprised me in their interviews when they spoke about the joy writing brought them. In several instances, these students were not ones volunteering to share their writing aloud to the class, and they did not appear overly enthusiastic during writing time.

Furthermore, the kinds of entries students were proud to read aloud to me taught me more about them. They enjoyed sharing unique details they had written about themselves, searching for ways to show the individuals that they are. Some students desired to be noticed for their sense of humor, and others for their out-of-the-box thinking. Some students wanted their carefully crafted words to be heard and seen, eager for praise or acknowledgement of talent. Other students wanted to show off their accomplishment of writing complete, original stories.

Much of what was happening during the journaling process was hidden from me and not revealed until students were willing to show their journal entries and discuss what they had written and why. Similarly, many of my students' levels of happiness, or states of well-being, were not evident from class observations. However, in their conversations about their journals, there was plenty of evidence of positive emotions from the experience.

Implications for My Future Instruction

When thinking back to my original questions about my own learning during the course of the three studies, I realize one of the impacts of my instruction was a sense of empowerment. I recognize that journaling is not a replacement for all levels of SEL instruction, just as I recognize that I do not have the expertise or skillset to serve all students needing mental health support. Plenty of research shows students need quality implementation of quality programming that is

evidence-based (Weissberg, 2019), but scholars also have emphasized that SEL should exist throughout the day and not solely in standalone programs (Frey et al., 2019). When I read through the comments students made about the positivity of the experience and the knowledge they gained about themselves, I know that journaling on SEL topics has the potential to be a valuable tool for general education teachers.

The integration requires thoughtful planning, as does the implementation. As a new practice, it's important to constantly evaluate the effectiveness, and by making observations during writing time and listening to what students have to say, much can be discovered.

Additionally, journaling and the discussion that it offers opens up a new world of understanding about students. Through their writing, students can discover what matter most to them, and what makes them feel important and valued. And when feeling comfortable to share those thoughts, teacher-student relationships deepen.

Limitations

Subjectivity lies at the heart of autoethnographies (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004), and the experiences and findings described are of my own interpretations. It is uncertain if other researchers would recognize the findings that I did since our teaching experiences and epiphanies are through our own lenses. Additionally, all of the studies conducted took place at the same middle school—an educator or researcher conducting the same study at another district with different demographics may or may not experience the same findings.

Conclusion

To look back upon Robert Louis Stevenson's quote, I might include additional words for fellow educators today. While I do believe it to be true, that it is a "duty" to be happy, I also believe that it is my duty to share the wisdom of how to be happy with others. While adolescents

today are in dire need of support with well-being, SEL is an avenue for an approach to benefiting all. Journaling on SEL topics, when carefully linked to academic content, has benefits for students in a classroom where a writing culture has been built. Much can be discovered about students through the writing process, and potentially much can also be gained.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Implications

Think of one thing you have done recently that you got lost in, where time was irrelevant, and the activity and all of your senses were heightened. How often do you engage in that activity? What emotions does it invoke?

The thought process you just engaged in follows a form of social and emotional learning (SEL)—a phrase for some that signals negative feelings, whether it be fear of the unknown or hesitancy of a politically charged word. But in truth, the words social and emotional as they relate to education strive to teach us about ourselves in order to reach the highest state of flourishing.

The topics of my research did not start out centered on the integration of SEL, but instead a topic that has intrigued me for more than a decade: happiness. When I think about what I want most for my students, it's a year and a future life of meaning and enjoyment.

We can improve our happiness and have some level of autonomy as it's our subjective experience that makes up our overall happiness (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008). With the current state of adolescent well-being (Abrams, 2023), it is important and appropriate for educators to find ways to help support students socially and emotionally (Weissberg, 2019). To support students holistically, teachers should integrate SEL into the daily classroom experience (Frey et al., 2019), and journaling about social and emotional competencies that align to academic content is one proposed way to do that.

The research questions that drove the study looked at journaling and SEL integration and were as follows:

- In what ways, if any, is subjective well-being impacted from all students journaling on topics associated with social-emotional competencies?

- What are student perspectives on journaling?
- What are student perspectives on happiness/well-being?

To explore these questions, a mixed-methods case study was done under a theoretical framework of experiential learning, particularly through reflection, positive psychology, and the science of happiness. The case study focused on three separate groups of fifth-grade students. The first group of 21 students took part in a pilot study, and the research questions were further explored in two more studies that involved 5 students and then 2. All of the students experienced responding to journal prompts created by the researcher that aligned to social-emotional competencies and academic content. To measure any impact on student well-being, students took pre- and post-assessments measuring life satisfaction and social-emotional competencies. Students also participated in interviews and shared examples of journal entries.

After three studies of students journaling on topics aligned to the competencies, various data suggests that the practice improved student well-being.

Conclusions

Through student survey data, student thoughts in interviews, and my classroom observations, there is much to conclude about the use of journals. After combining all of the Student Life Satisfaction Survey results for all 21 students (14 in the pilot study, 5 in the second study, and 2 in the final study), I looked for overall trends on the pre- and post-assessment scores. Each of the three studies differed slightly due to the class content and prompts given, but the premise remained the same: students wrote about an SEL topic aligned to the class discussion and work. In the descriptive table displaying the results of all three studies (Table 3), five of the seven statements on the survey had an increase from the pre- to the post-assessment. One of the

statements, “I wish I had a different kind of life,” had a p-value of .01 from a statistical analysis t-test, suggesting statistical significant difference.

Table 3 Student Life Satisfaction Scale survey results from all studies.

Item	Pre-Assessment (n=21)	Post-Assessment (n=21)	
	M	M	P-value
1. My life is going well	4.43	4.86	.18
2. My life is just right.	4.53	4.57	1
3. I would like to change many things in my life.*	3	3.81	.17
4. I wish I had a different kind of life.*	3.6	4.86	.01
5. I have a good life.	4.63 (n=19)	5 (n=19)	.31
6. I have what I want in life.	4.74 (n=19)	4.74 (n=19)	.90
7. My life is better than most kids.	3.89 (n=18)	3.83 (n=18)	.90

The other survey given to students, the CORE Elementary Student Survey, measures different social-emotional competencies. The results from this survey were not reported in the previous proposed manuscripts in chapters two, three, and four since alignment did not seem to be present with the numerous competencies measured on the 35-question survey. When looking at the results from the three studies, no trends were found overall.

From the interviews, common themes were found between all three studies. In an analysis of words used when responding to a question about how students felt while writing in

their journal, 17 comments were positive, ranging from “happy” to “calm” to “safe”. Four of the comments were negative, such as “confused” and “sad.” Two comments were neutral responses like “I don’t know.” The responses totaled more than the number of students since some participants listed more than one emotion, such as one student saying journaling made him feel happy sometimes and sad at other times, depending on what he was writing about.

On another question about how they felt while looking at their past journal responses, 15 of the comments were positive. There was a negative comment where one participant said he felt confused about what he wrote because he thought he wrote ‘gibberish.’ Several of the comments did not include a positive or negative emotion but described looking back at the comments as reflective of the past. This was an overall common theme that students discussed where they said the entries reminded them of happy times in class and of other memories they wrote about.

Another common theme from the interviews included thoughts about journaling being a time where students felt they could let out emotions and feel less stressed. The majority of students also talked about what they learned from themselves during the journaling process, whether it be a newly discovered strength or a newfound hobby, which sometimes included writing.

Students also discussed happiness in their interviews and gave their own definitions for the word. The majority of students described happiness by naming activities they enjoyed or people they liked being around. A few students differed in that they named instances where they *did* something good. Time with family members was often listed when students attempted to define happiness. Positive emotions associated with happiness, like joy, was mentioned by several students, and descriptions of what it feels like to be happy was often echoed in the interviews, such as smiling widely and laughing.

From my observational data, students were more engaged in the journaling practice when behavioral expectations were clearly set and then followed through. The pilot study that took place toward the end of the yearlong course of Foundations for Success saw the highest levels of observational engagement. In the third study, the integration of SEL skills felt the most natural and easiest to flow into the class lessons due to more intentional planning of journal prompts with class activities.

Interpretations

Lessons for Students

Since subjective well-being is measured through life satisfaction, presence of positive emotions, and low presence of negative emotions (Diener, 1984), those are the components I relied upon when thinking through what my students gained, if anything, from the study. Through student conversations and my own observations and introspection, other insights also were learned from the experience.

Student Life Satisfaction

Student life satisfaction scores suggest their overall global satisfaction increased, particularly in the area that required them to think about if they would want a different kind of life. A possible explanation for this change is all of the journaling and reflecting upon life experiences that we did in class, which always had a positive focus. I never asked them to write about the worst day or about negative people in their life, but the opposite. It might be that the time they spent practicing mindfulness and gratitude had an effect on their overall lives. This supports the theory of experiential learning; students learned about themselves, including what they valued, through writing about their lived experiences.

Student Positive Emotions

Although it was not always evident during our writing time, most students described positive feelings toward the act of journaling and toward reading through their journal responses. When students report feeling “calm,” “forgetting about the real world,” and “not feeling judged,” it suggests that journaling was impacting their well-being.

Students valued looking back at their journal entries, suggesting that they enjoyed keeping a record of their work, though the participants differed in what past entries they were most interested in reviewing. This is in addition to something else that became clear through the interviews—journaling meant something different to all of the participants. While almost all reported positive feelings, in their discussions they talked about different reasons for those positive emotions. For some, journaling let them spend time doing an activity they liked (writing). For others, they enjoyed the freedom to respond in ways they wanted.

Student Perceptions on Happiness

Is it not evident if students were aware or thinking about their emotions and the possible presence of happiness while journaling. In the second study, the exit tickets aimed to measure student emotions before and after writing in response to a prompt, but there were issues with the implementation of the assessment, so little knowledge was gained. However, during the interviews students reported thinking about their happiness often, which for some students meant every day and others every few days. A couple students said they mostly thought about their happiness when they were having negative emotions. In their definitions of the word, students understood happiness to be a positive emotion, but their ideas differed on how to achieve it. The question of what it takes to be happy was not asked in the interviews, so it cannot be determined if students knew more than they offered during our conversation. However, the majority of responses talked about happiness stemming from being around people in their lives and spending

time doing things they enjoy. This suggests that many of the participants are aware of things in their lives that create positive emotions for them, which is one piece of the well-being puzzle.

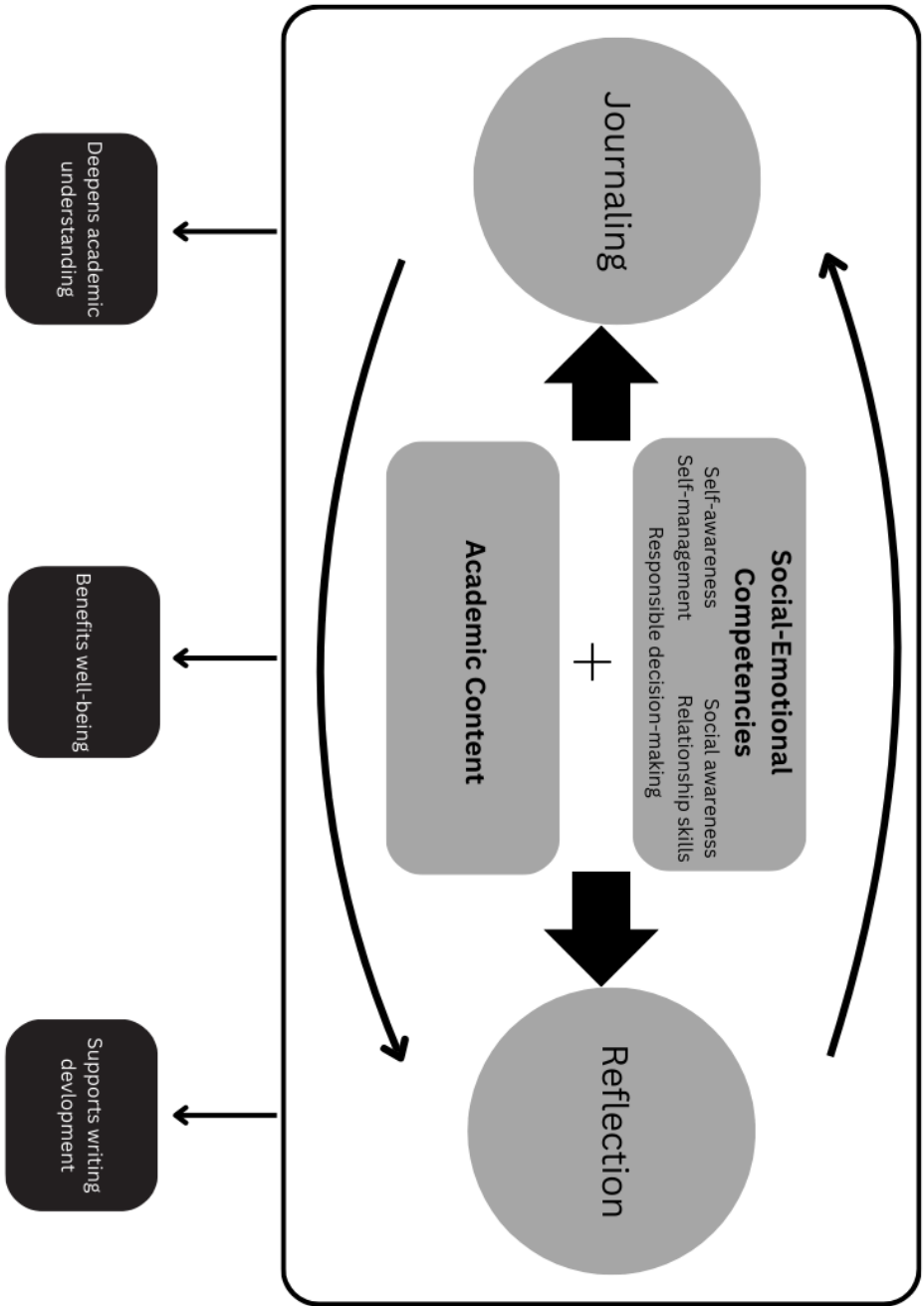
Student Writing Self-Efficacy

Much of the analysis of the findings has focused on suggested improvements in well-being, but students might also have been benefiting through the practice of writing. In the first study, one of the participants reflected that our 10-minute writing, which occurred once a week since that is how often the class met, was the most writing she had done all year. If her experience was similar to other students in her grade, then students who were journaling were practicing their writing skills perhaps more than they were in their other core classes, including in English/language arts.

Additionally, several students reported learning that they liked writing and learning that they can write more than they realized. In these comments, it seems students were developing self-efficacy from journaling, even though no writing skills were being instructed.

Summarization of Benefits

A summarization of student benefits from the study are shown in Figure 4, including improvements in well-being, developing writer self-efficacy, and deepening content knowledge. The first two benefits have evidence from the studies, but the last benefit was not measured or explored. However, other studies like those described in that of Graham et. al (2020) suggest that by writing about academic content, students develop a deeper understanding.



CASEL, n.d.
 Graham, 2019
 Graham et al., 2020
 O'Keefe and Paige, 2020

Figure 5 Framework for social-emotional journal integration into academic content.

Lessons for Teachers

Planning for Integration

My experience as the planner and facilitator of our journaling time taught me several important lessons for myself and other teachers. Careful integration of SEL into academic content takes work, and it also requires confidence and faith in the process. The work involved when creating prompts included looking through the CASEL competencies to find opportunities to discuss and practice social-emotional skills that were present in our academic activities. Additionally, reviewing research- and evidence-based writing interventions used in positive psychology situations gave more facilitator confidence to the journaling time. Being able to share with students that a prompt they were responding to had previously shown success with others gave some students further investment in the process.

There were several prompts that looked and felt successful with the SEL and academic integration, such as asking students to write about how to problem solve with others through silent communication and then having students work on a task with other silently, as in the building of a tall paper structure. This was deemed successful since our class discussion was rich and then students applied the strategies they discussed during the class activity. However, not all attempts at prompts were successful. In one instance, I tried leading students through a writing prompt using an optimistic style of thinking I had read that was used in a positive psychology intervention. My implementation of the method was confusing to students, and I spent more time trying to explain the different steps of the practice than students spent writing.

Building Student Investment

While planning the prompts was essential to set up our class for success, so was investing students in responding. Middle school students can sometimes be quick to roll their eyes when

they sense they are being asked to write about something personal, particularly if it relates to their feelings, in my experience. When I introduced a prompt, I had to frontload the information with the benefits of the exercise, and often I used a video clip to introduce a concept. One prompt where I saw the most engagement from all students was using a visualization technique before writing goals about your best possible future self (Layous et al., 2013). Before asking students to close their eyes and try the technique, they heard from a famous boxer in the video about his success with using visualization. Students were intrigued by the athlete's real-life experiences and eager to write and talk about their own future dreams.

Another way I aimed to invest students in a prompt was through modeling my own response. In one example, I gave students a sentence starter "Happiness is..." and finished the thought with a quick stick-figure illustration and words to fill in the blank. I gave light-hearted examples like "extra cheesy pizza" and more thoughtful, serious examples like "reading a bedtime story to my children." I played uplifting, instrumental music and filled a white board with my ideas, modeling without instructing the joy I felt doing the exercise. Students started filling out their notebooks similarly, giggling at their silly examples but also writing down more thoughtful ideas, too. When the timer finished, we shared some of our favorites with each other, and then I told students that not only was the practice enjoyable, but it was helpful as well. We can learn about ourselves and what brings us positive emotions by looking through our ideas to find ways to bring happiness when we need it.

Finally, a key way to investing students was to gauge reactions and behaviors during their journaling time. This helped me discover prompts that led to more effort and enthusiasm from students to help plan future lessons. Sharing responses after we wrote also helped me learn what students enjoyed about a prompt and what ideas it led them to recognize.

Maintaining Quality Writing Time

Another key to successful implementation of journaling was maintaining quality writing time, which required expectations and structures for students to gain something from the practice. The journaling sessions were modeled after the NWP “Writing into the Day” (2016) and my own experience with facilitating writer’s workshop.

While I always desired for my students to have a successful and meaningful writing time, there were actions I was doing that were conflicting with that goal. Building student investment in the journals took time and could not be rushed. I saw the most success with journaling sessions when I clearly stated and upheld expectations, such as not talking while writing and working the entire writing time. For students who struggled with either of these expectations, I found it helpful to give them proximity and prompting when necessary.

Inviting Invaluable Insights

Listening to students and giving them opportunities to share what they are thinking along the journey provided invaluable insights. Many of the participants surprised me during the interviews when they discussed enthusiasm for journaling because it had not been evident from their body language in class. Additionally, many of the students were quiet in class and not ones who wanted to read aloud and volunteer their responses. However, they had intriguing ideas to many of the prompts, and their written words taught me more about their personalities.

Recommendations for Future Research

The different studies I completed were not of a long duration. One recommendation is to lengthen the study and do a follow-up survey months later to see how students’ well-being has been impacted in the long term. Additionally, students could be interviewed to see if any of them have kept up with journaling on their own after the studies were completed.

The students that participated were from the same school population. Other studies could explore if a change in demographics impacts how students respond to journaling about SEL topics. This is particularly important as the U.S. Surgeon General’s 2021 advisory discussed subsets of the adolescent population that were at higher risks of mental health challenges (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021).

In regards to understanding positive affect, or the presence of positive emotions while writing, future studies could better determine students’ emotions before and after journaling on SEL topics by using a measure like the Social Emotional Health Survey (Suldo, 2016) that includes questions about momentary emotions, the Scale for Positive and Negative Experience (Diener et al., 2010), or a researcher-created mood assessment that uses a Likert scale for assessment. The mood meter attempted in the second study became a complicated measure due to both poor implementation and difficulty tracking progress.

More can also be explored between the social-emotional competencies and well-being. Students could be measured on their ability to apply the skills they journal and discuss in class to see if the study efforts are making a long-lasting impact. Additionally, studies could take a closer look at each competency to see how each is directly impacted through journaling on SEL topics and how each impacts well-being.

In reference to the competencies, this study was done without the collaboration of school-wide efforts. Another study could incorporate the scope and sequence of a universal school SEL program and see how the integration affects cross-curricular planning and student development of skills.

Lastly, research shows teacher well-being is important—not only because teachers are humans, too, but because the wellness of teachers ultimately impacts their ability to support the

well-being of students. A similar study involving students journaling about SEL topics and measuring well-being components could involve teachers taking part in the study as well to understand how teacher well-being and student well-being are related.

Final Thoughts

One of the reasons I felt compelled to do this work was because of my belief that, through my literature review I have come to believe more strongly, students need to know about the power they have over their own happiness and what the word ‘happiness’ means. Seligman, the founder of the positive psychology movement, said “happiness is more than just living a pleasurable life full of titillating conversation, delicious food, and soothing massages” and encouraged people to look at other areas of happiness like meaningful lives which “do not always feel good in the short term but that ultimately deliver lasting satisfaction” (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008, p.219).

This reminded me about my conversation with my NWP colleague where we imagined students confident that a day of video gaming would equate happiness. To such a student, it would be important to explain the contributors of happiness.

My inquiry began from my own happiness from writing, which scientifically speaking, I mean the positive effect I experienced during the writing process. For me, I thought those positive emotions stemmed from a combination of getting into the flow of an activity I value and enjoy. While I still believe that to be true, I now think something else was at play, too.

When I journaled in response to prompts given during my time with the NWP, I spent time reflecting on myself and my life experiences. Depending on the prompt, sometimes I created a fictional short story and enjoyed the challenge and thrill of spontaneous creativity and all of its unexpectedness. Other times, I worked something out in my head on paper, finally

leading to a new discovery I had about myself or about a relationship with someone. Past entries in my journal exist for me to look back on and remember revelations, fleeting thoughts, or ideas that felt worthwhile to fill the pages at a given time.

My journal gave me a place to self-discover and better understand thoughts and ideas in my head and sometimes never spoken aloud. My completed journal pages gave me a place to continue my reflection and experience more positive emotions of pride, confidence, and gratitude. I only came to realize these benefits because of the experiences reported by my students. Not all of them said writing was a hobby that brought them joy and pleasure, and some of them may never say that. While not experiencing positive emotions to the extreme of the spectrum, most at least reported some level of positive emotion while writing, and that is part of the happiness, or well-being, equation. Similarly, when reflecting on their writing responses, overall students had positive emotions to report when looking through their journals. They said that they learned things about themselves while writing, and all could find at least one response that they felt good about. And, their ratings on the satisfaction surveys suggest that some piece of life satisfaction—another piece of the well-being puzzle—was impacted by their journaling.

Occasionally when I have mentioned the research I have been doing to a friend, they mistake the ‘journaling’ word to mean that my students wrote down their thoughts for weeks akin to filling a diary. When correcting this misconception, I tell people that my students both did that and did not do that because the journals were something different to my students at different times. Some appreciated the freedom of writing down their thoughts when they needed to without feeling the perceived judgment of others. Some students illustrated and drew in sync, enjoying the self-expression that both allow while demonstrating their thoughts about a topic.

Other students found ways for their humor to shine through, and others compliantly wrote and waited for the timer to ring so that notebooks could be closed.

Journaling is a practice that meets students where they are and allows for differentiation. When integrating SEL into prompts that align to class content, students can reap the benefits of spending more time in their day practicing the writing craft and developing social-emotional skills that set them up for a thriving future. For a method that only needs paper, a pencil, and thoughtful planning, I believe it is worth the time and effort for teachers to try. It could lead to happier and healthier students. And finally, pursuing work that boosts student well-being is important because happiness is a basic right, especially for the youthful population who don't have a lot of control on their outside circumstances that affect their happiness. Teaching students about ways to improve their happiness and inform their thinking about their lives is crucial not only because it could impact part of their well-being, but because it also can set them up for future flourishing.

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Appendix A - Student Life Satisfaction Scale

(HUEBNER, 1991)

Name _____

Directions: We would like to know what thoughts about life you have had during the past several weeks. Think about how you spend each day and night and then think about how your life has been during most of this time. Here are some questions that ask you to indicate your satisfaction with your overall life. Circle the words next to each statement that indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement. For example, if you Strongly Agree with the statement “Life is great,” you would circle those words on the following sample item:

Life is great.

Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
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It is important to know what you REALLY think, so please answer the questions the way you really think, not how you should think. This is NOT a test. There are NO right or wrong answers.

1. My life is going well.

Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
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2. My life is just right.

Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
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3. I would like to change many things in my life.

Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
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4. I wish I had a different kind of life.

Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
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5. I have a good life.

Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
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6. I have what I want in life.

Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
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7. My life is better than most kids.

Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
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Appendix B - Core Elementary Student Survey

(CORE Districts 2017)

Name _____

Introduction

This survey asks about your behavior, experiences, and attitudes related to school. Please mark one answer for each question. Some of the survey questions will ask you about specific periods of time (such as the past 30 days) or specific classes (such as math class). Please pay careful attention to these time periods and classes when you respond.

<p>I. First, we'd like to learn more about your behavior, experiences, and attitudes related to school. Please answer how often you did the following during the past 30 days. During the past 30 days...</p> <p>(Almost Never, Once in a While, Sometimes, Often, Almost All the Time)</p>				
I came to class prepared.				
Almost Never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Often	Almost All the Time
I remembered and followed directions.				
Almost Never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Often	Almost All the Time
I got my work done right away instead of waiting until the last minute.				
Almost Never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Often	Almost All the Time
I paid attention, even when there were distractions.				

Almost Never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Often	Almost All the Time
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I stayed calm even when others bothered or criticized me.

Almost Never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Often	Almost All the Time
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II. In this section, please think about your learning in general. Please indicate how true each of the following statements is for you:

(Not At All True, A Little True, Somewhat True, Mostly True, Completely True)

I can change my intelligence with hard work.

Not At All True	A Little True	Somewhat True	Mostly True	Completely True
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I can increase my intelligence by challenging myself.

Not At All True	A Little True	Somewhat True	Mostly True	Completely True
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I am capable of learning anything.

Not At All True	A Little True	Somewhat True	Mostly True	Completely True
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I can do well in a subject even if I am not naturally good at it.

Not At All True	A Little True	Somewhat True	Mostly True	Completely True
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III. How confident are you about the following?

(Not At All Confident, A Little Confident, Somewhat Confident, Mostly Confident, Completely Confident)

I can earn an A in my classes.

Not At All Confident	A Little Confident	Somewhat Confident	Mostly Confident	Completely Confident
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I can do well on all my tests, even when they're difficult.

Not At All Confident	A Little Confident	Somewhat Confident	Mostly Confident	Completely Confident
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I can master the hardest topics in my classes.

Not At All Confident	A Little Confident	Somewhat Confident	Mostly Confident	Completely Confident
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I can meet all the learning goals my teachers set.

Not At All Confident	A Little Confident	Somewhat Confident	Mostly Confident	Completely Confident
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IV. In this section, please help us better understand your thoughts and actions when you are with other people. Please answer how often you did the following during the past 30 days. During the past 30 days...

how carefully did you listen to other people's points of view?

Not Carefully At All	Slightly Carefully	Somewhat Carefully	Quite Carefully	Extremely Carefully
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how often did you compliment others' accomplishments?

Almost Never	Once in a while	Sometimes	Often	Almost all the time
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how well did you get along with students who are different from you?

Did Not Get Along At All	Got Along A Little Bit	Got Along Somewhat	Got Along Pretty Well	Got Along Extremely Well
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how clearly were you able to describe your feelings?

Not At All Clearly	Slightly Clearly	Somewhat Clearly	Quite Clearly	Extremely Clearly
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when others disagreed with you, how respectful were you of their views?

Not At All Respectful	Slightly Respectful	Somewhat Respectful	Quite Respectful	Extremely Respectful
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V. For the following questions, please think about your time at the school on school property. If a question doesn't apply based on your learning environment, you can skip it.

Please read every question carefully. Mark one choice for each question.

No, never; Yes, some of the time; Yes, most of the time; Yes, all of the time

Do adults at school encourage you to work hard so you can be successful?

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
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Do your teachers work hard to help you with your schoolwork when you need it?

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
Do teachers give students a chance to take part in classroom discussions or activities?			
No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
Do teachers go out of their way to help students?			
No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
Do you feel close to people at school?			
No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
Are you happy to be at this school?			
No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
Do you feel like you are part of this school?			
No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
Do teachers treat students fairly at school?			

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
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Does this school clearly tell students what would happen if they break school rules?

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
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Are rules in this school made clear to students?

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
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Do students know how they are expected to act?

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
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Do students know what the rules are?

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
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Do other kids hit or push you at school when they are not just playing around?

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
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Do other kids at school spread mean rumors or lies about you?

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
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Do other kids at this school ever tease you about what your body looks like?

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
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Do other kids steal or damage your things, like your clothing or your books?

No, never	Yes, some of the time	Yes, most of the time	Yes, all of the time
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How safe do you feel when you are at school?

Very Safe	Safe	Neither Safe nor Unsafe	Unsafe	Very Unsafe
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Appendix C - Semi-Structured Questions For Child Interview

How would you define what a journal is, and why do people use them?

How do you feel when you write in your journal?

Did you have experience writing in a journal before you were required to for class?

What types of writing do you do outside of this class?

What types of writing do you do outside of school?

What do you find easiest about journaling time?

What do you find hardest about journaling time?

Did you more often choose to follow the journal prompt or write about something else?

How often do you think about your happiness?

How do you define happiness?

Take out your journal and look through your entries. Which of your writing reflections stands out to you? Why?

When you look through your journal entries, which writing prompt has been your favorite?

Do you have any examples in your journal that show that show how happy you are with your life?

Do you have any examples in your journal that show how you feel about school or learning?

Do you have any examples in your journal that show your relationship with others, such as with friends or family?

How do you feel when you look through your past writing responses?

Did you learn anything about yourself when writing in your journal?