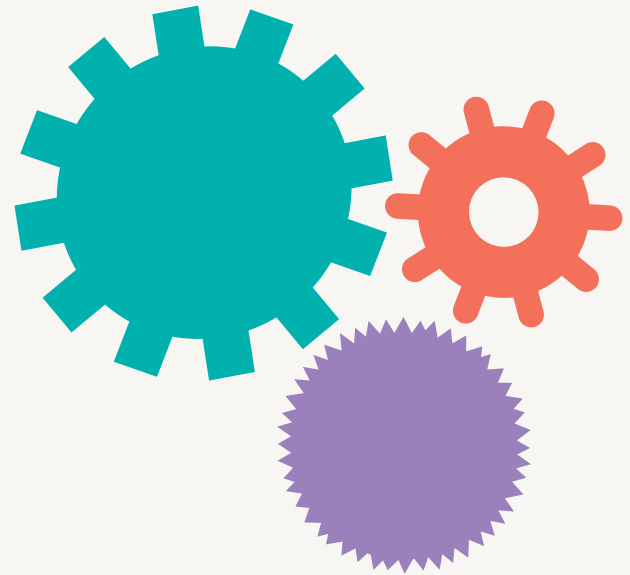


**StoryFACTORY**

# **Creative writing and wellbeing literature review**

2023





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# Summary

## Background

This literature review on creative writing and wellbeing was prepared by String Theory, an evaluation and research consultancy, for Story Factory, a not-for-profit creative writing centre that delivers programs for young people in under-resourced communities in Sydney and New South Wales. Story Factory wanted to know:

***What are the wellbeing benefits of writing creatively for young people, especially those with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) and First Nations heritage?***

Young people are at a life stage where they are still trying to make sense of who they are and where they fit into the world. This is a time that can be confusing and distressing – and more so when compounded by other intersecting oppressions, such as racism and classism. Silencing and disempowerment is a common experience of these kinds of marginalisation. In this context, creative writing programs have significant potential to improve wellbeing.



# Key findings

1.

**Creative writing** programs, especially those with a group workshop component, can **help participants be present in the moment** and with others.



2.

**Writing creatively can facilitate a closer connection with and discovery of self.**

Especially when creative writing deals with your personal experiences in some way, it can give insight about yourself and emotional clarity.



3.

**Creative writing programs can help young people gain a sense of agency:** the feeling that they can 'do something.' These programs do so by increasing self-efficacy, sparking hopes and aspirations, and developing the ability to shape narratives.



4.

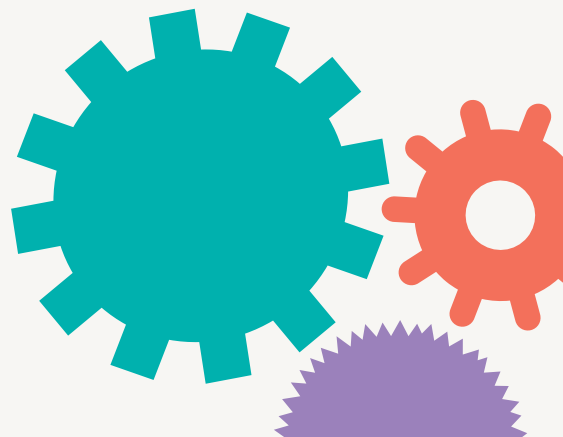
**Creative writing programs can facilitate a sense of belonging** and shared experience for participants, not just within the program itself, but within communities beyond it as well.



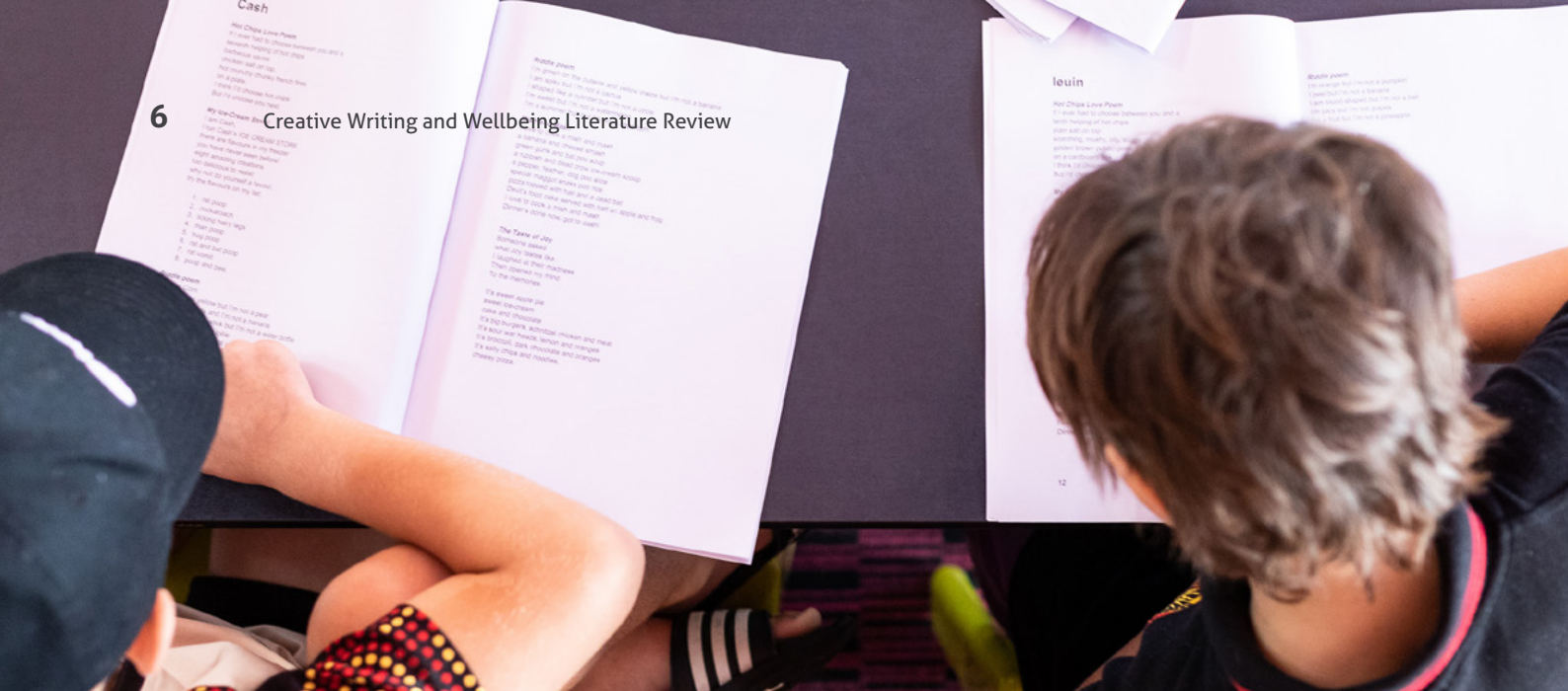
# Introduction

## About this review

Wellbeing has many dimensions, which can be emphasised differently depending on the context. There has been much research on how writing about one's feelings in a private therapeutic setting can help people recover from mental health issues or process traumatic experiences. To align with Story Factory's aims and intended program outcomes, our review focused mostly instead on how writing creatively for an audience can enhance wellbeing in a myriad of ways outside of a therapeutic setting. For this reason, we cast a wide net to consider how creative writing can influence a sense of self, relationships, agency, skills, and state of health.







## The issue

Marginalised peoples experience significant health and wellbeing inequities when compared with majority groups. Many forces and structures of oppression – such as racism, capitalism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia and ableism – intersect to limit opportunities for certain people, including those for self-expression. In Australia and other settler-colonial countries, racism in its many forms (interpersonal, institutional, internalised, and structural) is a particularly pernicious form of oppression for people of colour, and especially First Nations people. A common experience of these various intersecting types of marginalisation is one of silencing and disempowerment, in which others control the dominant narrative – one often loaded with negative and/or inaccurate stereotypes.<sup>1</sup>

**‘Young people are at a life stage where they are still trying to make sense of who they are and where they fit into the world.’**

Young people are at a life stage where they are still trying to make sense of who they are and where they fit into the world. This is a time that can be confusing and distressing – and more so when compounded by other intersecting oppressions. Society views marginalised youth – especially people of colour – through a deficit lens,<sup>2</sup> which may contribute to low self-esteem and confidence. Some marginalised youth also experience social isolation and difficulty forming relationships, whether due to not having the opportunity to connect with others with similar experiences,<sup>3</sup> or due to having low confidence with English.<sup>4</sup> Youth are also likely to experience a lack of agency stemming from an inability to change their short-term situation.<sup>5</sup>

## Arts programs to improve wellbeing

Creative arts programs – including those for music, visual art, dance, photography and writing – have significant potential to address the abovementioned experiences and improve the wellbeing of marginalised youth. These programs facilitate creativity and personal



development; increase self-esteem, confidence and social networks; foster a sense of independence and autonomy; and promote resilience by increasing social support and coping skills.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, arts programs are a way to engage young people in meaningful learning experiences through exploring creative freedom outside the more rigid school environment and curriculum, because these experiences are decoupled from any pre-defined 'learning outcomes'.<sup>7</sup>

While there is some overlap with other arts programs, creative writing programs enhance the wellbeing of marginalised youth in distinctive ways. In this review, we explore four ways in which creative writing programs contribute to wellbeing:

## Four ways in which creative writing programs contribute to wellbeing:

### 1. being present

### 2. connecting with self (identity and emotions)

### 3. agency

### 4. connecting with others.

<sup>1</sup> Hanley & Marchetti, 2020; Stickley et al., 2019; Chandler, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Reinhardt & Rafael Garcia, 2017.

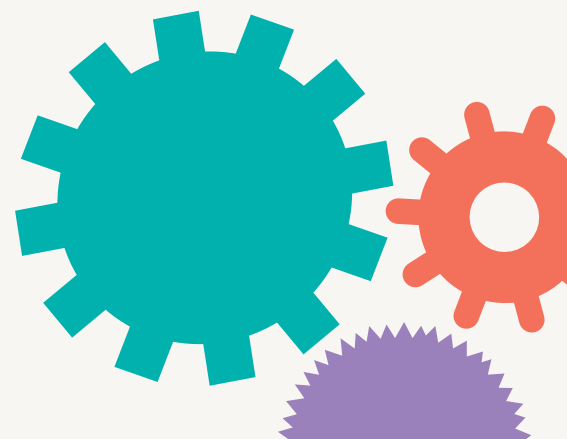
<sup>3</sup> Harrison, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Stickley et al., 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Harrison, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Gillam, 2018; Hanley & Marchetti, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Chandler, 1999.



# 1. Being present

**Creative writing programs, especially those with a group workshop component, can help participants be present in the moment and with others.**

## **Being present in the moment**

Creative writing is often described as a fun and pleasurable activity by those participating in writing programs.<sup>8</sup> This may be because, through creative writing, participants can achieve a mental state similar to flow states, Zen practices, and peak experiences.<sup>9</sup> This state is characterised by a sense of absorption in the moment, in which time seems to pass more quickly, and a sense of wellbeing. In one study, participants used words such as 'balance; 'a centred kind of excitement,' 'withinness' and 'calm elation' to describe this frame of mind. These kinds of mental states are not only able to promote wellbeing, but can also reduce stress symptoms.





## Being present with others

For marginalised people participating in creative writing workshops, being present in the moment is a welcome respite from other hardships they experience – especially when they feel powerless to change their situation more broadly. This was the case for an online 2SLGBTQ+ youth writing program run during COVID-19 lockdowns in Canada.<sup>10</sup> It was also true for a group of refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK participating in a writing program.<sup>11</sup> For both these groups, much of their enjoyment and respite came not only from the activity itself, but from the connections with others in the workshop space.

Part of the pleasure of participating in a creative writing program can stem from the connections made with other group members and the experience of being present with others.<sup>12</sup> For those who have few opportunities to connect with others, especially those who have shared experiences of marginalisation, creative writing workshops can be a space to connect, make friendships and feel belonging. Sharing a piece of writing in a group setting can feel vulnerable, but doing so can develop trust and intensify the group bonding process. One participant in the 2SLGBTQ+ youth group said, 'I can honestly say we came as strangers and left as family.'<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, at least one study found that for marginalised youth who were disengaged from school, strengthening friendships with peers through writing workshops drastically improved their school attendance.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hanley & Marchetti, 2020, Teravainen-Goff, 2021; Stickley et al., 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Hilse, Griffiths & Cor, 2007.

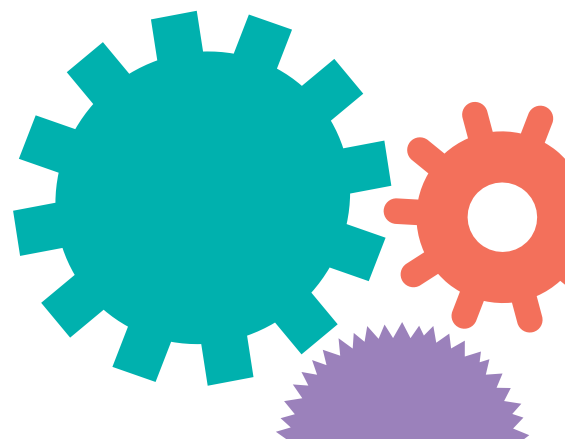
<sup>10</sup> Harrison, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Stickley et al., 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Hilse, Griffiths & Cor, 2007, Stickley et al., 2019; Harrison, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Harrison, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Chandler, 1999.



## 2. Connecting with self

Writing creatively can facilitate a closer connection with and discovery of self. Especially when creative writing deals with your personal experiences in some way, it can give a) insight into your identity and b) emotional clarity.<sup>15</sup>

### Identity

Creative writing programs can be an avenue for youth to explore possibilities for self-expression and understanding. These programs also contribute to positive self-esteem.

### Self-exploration

Writing can be a way to express oneself without fear of social consequences or repercussions.<sup>16</sup> This is particularly significant for marginalised youth, who might not have other opportunities to do so and for whom social consequences might be particularly negative because others view them through a deficit lens. Creative writing programs can allow marginalised participants to express thoughts and feelings they cannot express in other settings.<sup>17</sup> By facilitating freedom of self-expression, creative writing programs can also offer marginalised youth a safe space to explore their identity through writing.<sup>18</sup>



In this context, identity exploration occurs through writing down ideas, emotions, and thoughts and making sense of them to communicate them compellingly to an audience. This is the main distinction between creative writing and expressive writing. Drafting and polishing a written work based on your experiences facilitates insight about yourself, because reorganising, evaluating and presenting text more coherently leads to an increased understanding of the experience.<sup>19</sup>

### 'Drafting and polishing a written work based on your experiences facilitates insight about yourself.'

Creative writing groups can also contribute to exploring one's identity in relation to others. Several studies suggested this occurs through developing one's voice and having it heard

and recognised by others.<sup>20</sup> In particular, one study of low-income, minority youth creative writing participants suggested that the process of the students reading out their work to the group was crucial, because they heard their thoughts expressed in their own voices. The study's authors write, 'Voice in writing implies words that capture the sound of the individual on the page. Learning to use their real voice leads to growth and empowerment in using words and relating to others and self.'<sup>21</sup> The social aspect of developing one's voice is particularly important, as entering into dialogue with others who have similar yet divergent experiences opens up possibilities for one's identity exploration.<sup>22</sup> We discuss how entering a social dialogue through writing contributes to a sense of belonging later in this review.

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<sup>15</sup>Hanauer, 2022; Harrison, 2021.

<sup>16</sup>Lepore & Smith, 2002.

<sup>17</sup>Hilse, Griffiths & Cor, 2007.

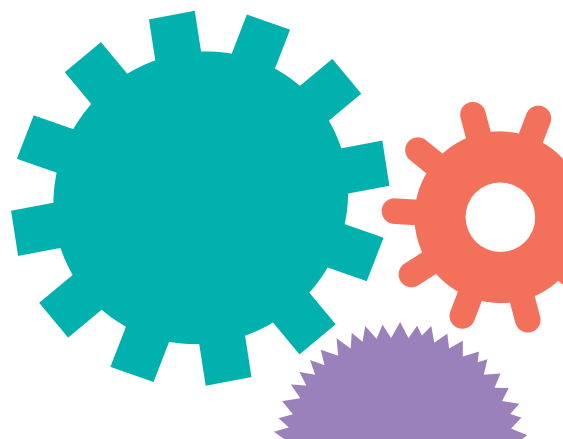
<sup>18</sup>Harrison, 2021.

<sup>19</sup>Hanauer, 2022.

<sup>20</sup>Chandler, 1999; Harrison, 2021; Hilse, Griffiths & Cor, 2007.

<sup>21</sup>Chandler, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Harrison, 2021.



**Creative writing programs can be an avenue for youth to explore possibilities for self-expression and understanding. These programs also contribute to positive self-esteem.**

### Self-esteem

Creative writing programs can also contribute to developing a positive regard for the self, ie self-esteem. As self-esteem is developed relationally in the context of writing programs, it can be generated through supportive relationships, a structured setting, and a strengths-based approach to feedback.<sup>23</sup> As others read their writing in the group and receive positive comments, youth shore up a favourable concept of themselves, an important component of resilience.

Several studies also mentioned that the publication of participants' work at a creative writing program's conclusion significantly contributes to pride and self-esteem for marginalised people.<sup>24</sup> In Hanley and Marchetti's study on a creative writing program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in prison, all 80 participants surveyed said that publication greatly improved their self-esteem.<sup>25</sup> Another study of university creative writing students suggested that students were proud to see their pieces published, which inspired them to achieve writing goals they might not have aimed for previously.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the effect

of creative writing programs on self-esteem is intertwined with their effect on self-efficacy (belief in your ability to complete a specific task), which we discuss later in this review.

### Emotions

It is well-known that writing about one's experiences and feelings can help one process and cope with difficult emotions.<sup>27</sup> Yet there is increasing evidence that creative writing, which involves polishing the work for an audience and may include fictional elements, can also improve emotional awareness and regulation. This process has been researched in a therapeutic setting concerning expressive writing, where participants journalled about their feelings.

**'Several studies also mentioned that the publication of participants' work at a creative writing program's conclusion significantly contributes to pride and self-esteem for marginalised people.'**

<sup>23</sup>Chandler, 1999; López-Bech & Zúñiga, 2017; Hanley & Marchetti, 2020; Stickley et al., 2019, Hilse, Griffiths &

<sup>24</sup>Cor, 2007.

<sup>25</sup>Hanley & Marchetti, 2020; Dollieslager et al., 1993; Teravainen-Goff, 2021.

<sup>26</sup>Hanley & Marchetti, 2020.

<sup>27</sup>Dollieslager et al., 1993.

<sup>28</sup>Deveney & Lawson, 2021; Clark, Picton & Lant, 2020; Harrison, 2021.

<sup>29</sup>Hanauer, 2022.





## Creative writing can help improve emotional awareness, self-regulation and self-empathy.

Creative writing can contribute to greater awareness and insight into your emotions. Drafting a text based on personal experiences involves putting a memory, thought or feeling that was not fully verbal into words.<sup>28</sup> This process helps you pay attention to those thoughts and feelings in a focused and intentional way, bringing them into relief. Poetic writing prompts that require the writer to draw on rich sensory information can particularly help in gaining insight and emotional clarity.<sup>29</sup>

Creative writing's wellbeing benefits don't just come from writing down emotions and experiences creatively – they also come from creating coherent stories about one's life

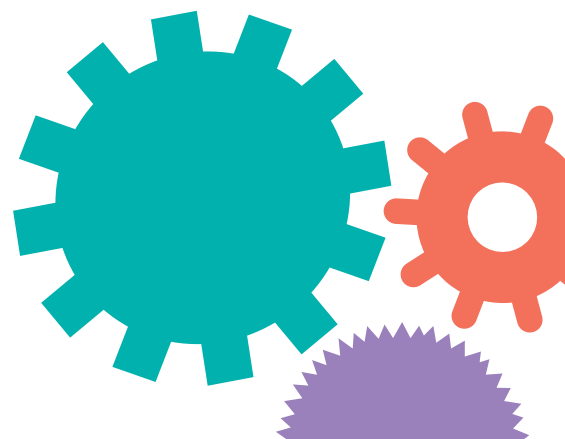
and considering how the meanings of one's emotions fit into this narrative.<sup>30</sup> For instance, when writers create fictionalised stories based on their own traumatic experiences, this can help them gain distance from the experience. The resulting detachment can allow them to objectively analyse the situation, the many contributing factors, and their emotions. As the authors of one study articulate, 'The writer is required to use rather than describe their emotion, to stand outside it rather than in the middle of it, thereby transforming the writing from an unburdening about a subject to an illumination of it.'<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Gillam, 2018; Stickley et al., 2019; Hanauer, 2022.

<sup>31</sup>Deveney & Lawson, 2021.

<sup>32</sup>Lepore & Smith, 2002.

<sup>33</sup>Lepore & Smith, 2002.



## 3. Agency

Creative writing programs can help young people gain a sense of agency: the feeling that they can 'do something.' These programs do so by increasing self-efficacy, sparking hopes and aspirations, and developing the ability to shape narratives.

The sense of agency for youth can be augmented by co-designing and/or co-facilitating programs with youth.

### Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to your belief in your ability to accomplish a particular goal or task. Creative writing programs can effectively build self-efficacy for marginalised youth, contributing to an increased sense of agency in the world.<sup>34</sup> By being mentored to polish a piece of writing for an imagined audience, youth start to believe that they can do the same or a similar thing in future. Developing a sense of self-efficacy in creative writing may increase confidence in other aspects of youth's lives.<sup>35</sup>

### Hope and aspiration

Several studies mentioned that a positive experience with creative writing sparked a desire to keep writing in the future and broadened participants' aspirations more generally.<sup>36</sup> In a study of a creative writing program for refugees and people seeking asylum, broadened aspirations was significant for participants, who had uncertain futures and little hope for the future.<sup>37</sup> In this study, improving the participants' English language literacy gave them more confidence to participate in broader society, navigate bureaucracies and gain employment.

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<sup>34</sup>Chandler, 1999; Harrison, 2021.

<sup>35</sup>Harrison, 2021.

<sup>36</sup>Teravainen-Goff, 2021; Hanley & Marchetti, 2020; Dollieslager et al., 1993.

<sup>37</sup>Stickley et al., 2019.

<sup>38</sup>Johnson, Reinhardt & Rafael Garcia, 2017.

<sup>39</sup>Deveney & Lawson, 2021; Hanauer, 2022.

Expanding aspirations through creative writing for marginalised youth was also discussed in another study by Johnson, Reinhardt and Rafael Garcia on the Barrio Writers program. As part of shaping narratives about themselves that countered negative stereotypes, the teenage participants were compelled to develop a political consciousness and envision what they saw as a successful future.<sup>38</sup>

### Shaping the narrative

Writing creatively – especially fiction – gives the writer control over how the narrative is shaped and how the characters and events are portrayed. They can make decisions about what happens and what the outcomes will be. Some studies found that this helps with dealing with difficult emotions and traumatic situations because it helps regain a sense of control.<sup>39</sup> As Deveney and Lawson write, 'Creative writing gives a God-like sense of control in the writer's imaginary world that contrasts with their helplessness in the real world. Instead of being the puppets, they become the puppet master pulling the strings.'<sup>40</sup>

**'Creative writing gives a God-like sense of control in the writer's imaginary world that contrasts with their helplessness in the real world.'**

Other research has focused more on how creative writing can help marginalised youth shape counternarratives that resist dominant, negative stereotypes. The study on Barrio Writers discusses how young participants from low-income, minority backgrounds participated in critical discussions with their peers, leading to shifts in their critical consciousness.<sup>41</sup> This led to a sense of agency to make a change in their community through writing as young people. The authors wrote that after the workshops, one of the participants 'expressed that teamwork and patience are part of what it takes to "shape the image of what we want the world around us' to see... this young man said, 'the power of youth is incredible.'"<sup>42</sup>

### Creative freedom

Just as it was important for young people to have the freedom to express themselves creatively through writing, it was also important to run the workshops in a way that gave youth a sense of agency. Several studies pointed out that, especially when working with marginalised people, it is important to co-design the workshop's aims with the participants and/or facilitate part of the workshops together.<sup>43</sup> Whilst this is auxiliary to the writing itself, it is another way of developing agency in marginalised youth and improving engagement in learning.

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<sup>40</sup>Deveney & Lawson, 2021.

<sup>41</sup>Johnson, Reinhardt & Rafael Garcia, 2017.

<sup>42</sup>Johnson, Reinhardt & Rafael Garcia, 2017.

<sup>43</sup>Stickley et al., 2019; Harrison, 2021.

## 4. Community

**Creative writing programs can facilitate a sense of belonging and shared experience for participants, not just within the program itself, but in communities beyond it as well.**

Creative writing is a form of communication, and as such, it is also a form of connection. Participants in creative writing workshops often draw on their experiences, sharing these with others through their writing – either within the workshop space or beyond it through publication. In a context where participants may be socially isolated or feel misunderstood by those around them, sharing some of their inner life and discovering that others have similar experiences can be a way to feel less alone.<sup>44</sup>

Wider sharing of the stories written in creative writing programs, which usually takes the form of publication (and sometimes a public reading), can be a way of speaking with one's community, creating a sense of belonging beyond the confines of the workshop space.<sup>45</sup> As one article put it, 'The act of writing and sharing personal stories embeds a natural human necessity to enter into dialogue (with oneself and others) and, most importantly, to start wiring social networks and relationships that are the melting pot for new ideas in society.'<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Teravainen-Goff, 2021; Johnson, Reinhardt & Rafael Garcia, 2017; Hilse, Griffiths & Cor, 2007; López-Bech & Zúñiga, 2017.

<sup>45</sup>Dollieslager et al., 1993.

<sup>46</sup>López-Bech & Zúñiga, 2017.





Particularly for marginalised people, exchanges and dialogue about their experiences is critical for individuals to enter the social and intellectual life of their community.<sup>47</sup> This process was illustrated by Hanley and Marchetti's study of a creative writing program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in prison. The study documents how in the culturally safe environment of the workshop space, the men shared stories and experiences, which developed their connections to mob and a sense of belonging. Publication of their work enabled them to 'talk' to their family and community through their stories and to '[preserve] them historically, outside of the closed prison environment.'<sup>48</sup>

Several studies highlighted that writing for a real audience helped young people feel they could change things for others. One young person – who participated in a nationwide UK creative writing competition during a COVID-19 lockdown – said, 'It made me feel

like I could make a difference to others who may have gone through the same thing.'<sup>49</sup> Another study suggested publication can help with school engagement for disengaged youth because it makes them feel their work will be useful to others like them.<sup>50</sup>

**'Another study suggested publication can help with school engagement for disengaged youth because it makes them feel their work will be useful to others like them.'**

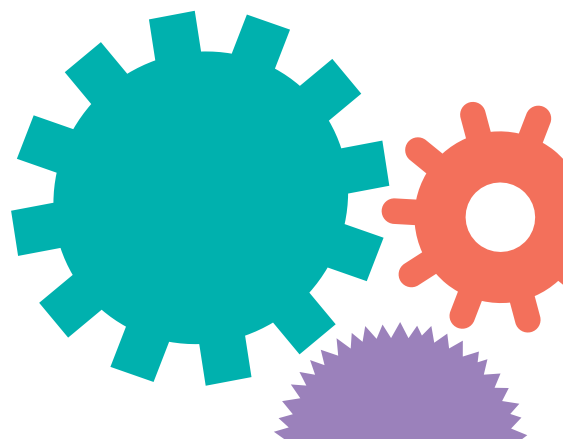
As such, it's clear that a key wellbeing benefit of creative writing programs is the sharing that occurs both within and outside the workshop group and the sense of connection, belonging and solidarity this can facilitate.

<sup>47</sup>Chandler, 1999; see also López-Bech & Zúñiga, 2017, and Hulse, Griffiths & Cor, 2007.

<sup>48</sup>Hanley & Marchetti, 2020.

<sup>49</sup>Teravainen-Goff, 2021.

<sup>50</sup>Dollieslager et al., 1993.



# Conclusion

Creative writing programs have significant potential to improve wellbeing for marginalised youth. Delivered in a participatory and context-sensitive way, they directly address and transform the experience of silencing and disempowerment common for marginalised people.

**‘Creative writing programs have significant potential to improve wellbeing for marginalised youth.’**

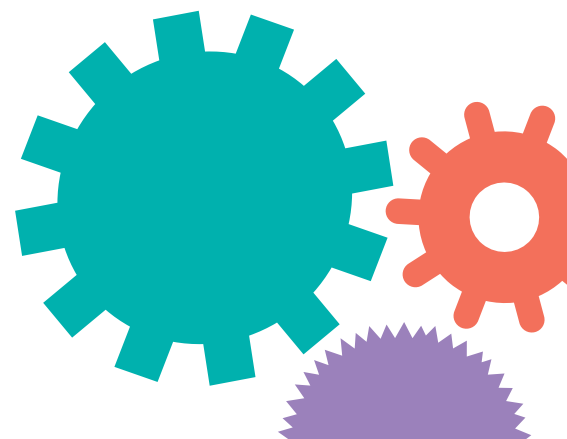
These programs address many aspects of wellbeing. They provide fun and respite for young people who may otherwise have difficult lives by creating the conditions to enter a ‘flow state’. Yet they also can be transformative for participants. By facilitating freedom of self-expression, they offer marginalised youth a safe space to explore their identity in relation

to others and gain a better understanding of their emotions. Importantly, they can also develop a strong sense of self-efficacy, confidence and agency in marginalised young people – qualities that set them up to envision an aspirational future for themselves and make a change in a world that views them through a deficit lens. Finally, creative writing programs strengthen a sense of community, belonging and connection with other participants and their readers.

Many of these aspects of wellbeing are not always easily promoted or facilitated in a more structured school setting, which is constrained by resources and curriculum requirements. Nevertheless, it’s clear that creative writing programs (co)designed for and with marginalised youth can play an important role in improving the wellbeing of participants and enlivening and diversifying the voices that shape our society’s discourse.

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