



HEALING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of creative writing, particularly poetry, as a therapeutic tool for emotional healing among children who have experienced trauma in secondary schools in Enugu State, Nigeria. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Narrative Therapy, the research explores how writing enables children to externalize trauma, construct positive identities, and find emotional relief. A quantitative survey design was adopted using a structured 15-item questionnaire distributed to 300 randomly selected students across five secondary schools, excluding JSS3 and SS3 students who had vacated. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation with a cut-off mark of 2.50 for interpretation. Findings revealed high levels of agreement on the healing benefits of creative writing with grand mean scores ranging from 2.83 to 2.87 across all research questions. Students reported feeling emotionally lighter, safer, and more resilient when engaging in poetry writing, especially when given space to express emotions they could not verbalize aloud. The study confirms that poetry offers a powerful outlet for symbolic storytelling, emotional regulation, and psychological support in trauma-sensitive classrooms. It further affirms the relevance of culturally responsive school-based writing interventions as accessible mental health strategies. The paper concludes with recommendations for integrating poetry therapy into school counselling programs, training teachers as facilitators, and creating safe writing spaces that affirm students' voices. Creative writing is affirmed not just as an expressive activity but as a low-cost high-impact method for promoting mental well-being and resilience in children recovering from trauma.

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Introduction

Childhood trauma is an invisible wound that quietly reshapes the developmental trajectory of affected children. Experiences such as physical abuse, sexual violence, loss of a parent, emotional neglect, war, or displacement deeply impact a child's emotional and cognitive growth. The inability to articulate these experiences in a structured or socially accepted manner often leads to silence, suppression, and in extreme cases, psychological disorders like PTSD, anxiety, or depression. Traditional talk therapy, while effective for some, is not always accessible or culturally appropriate for all children, especially in low-resource or stigma-prone environments. In such contexts, creative methods of communication and healing, like writing, offer significant promise (Clark, 2020). Creative writing allows children to engage with their emotions in ways that are safe, imaginative, and non-confrontational. It grants them symbolic distance from traumatic experiences, allowing them to process pain indirectly through metaphors, characters, or imagined worlds. Through poetry, short stories, and journaling, children are given space to explore difficult themes like loss, betrayal, fear, or abandonment without directly reliving them. This expressive distance is essential, especially for younger children who may lack the emotional vocabulary to name their trauma directly. Structured writing programs help children reclaim agency over their stories, turning pain into narrative and narrative into purpose (Okonkwo, 2021).

Research in expressive therapies has shown that writing is not just a passive outlet but an active agent of transformation. It allows children to move from victimhood to survivorship by re-

authoring their identities. As they write, they learn to make sense of chaotic internal experiences, regulate emotions, and practice cognitive reframing. Poetry, in particular, condenses emotion and meaning into brief, manageable units, which is ideal for children dealing with overwhelming feelings. The rhythm, repetition, and metaphorical possibilities of poetry mirror the brain's need for structure and coherence during trauma recovery (Ahmed, 2022).

In group settings, creative writing can become a medium for building community and trust. Peer-based poetry or story circles allow children to share without pressure, listen to others, and realize they are not alone in their pain. This sense of solidarity reduces isolation and creates what many trauma theorists describe as "communal containment"—the idea that healing becomes more powerful when done in the presence of compassionate witnesses. In such spaces, children are seen not just as victims but as storytellers, creators, and agents of change. Facilitators, whether teachers, counselors, or therapists, become midwives to these new stories of strength (Adebayo, 2023).

In many African societies, including Nigeria, storytelling is already an indigenous method of teaching, healing, and passing down values. Creative writing rooted in these traditions provides culturally relevant tools that resonate more deeply with children. By incorporating elements of oral storytelling, proverbs, and

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native languages, writing becomes not just therapeutic but affirming of identity. This matters greatly for children who have experienced displacement, cultural loss, or rejection, as trauma often fractures both the self and its connection to community. In this way, creative writing becomes a bridge—linking past to present, pain to healing, and isolation to belonging (Ene, 2019).

Moreover, incorporating poetry and expressive writing into school settings helps normalize emotional literacy and well-being. When teachers invite writing activities that focus on feeling, memory, and imagination—not just grammar or spelling—they help students develop self-awareness and resilience. Schools that integrate therapeutic writing into their curriculum report better emotional regulation, peer empathy, and academic engagement among students. In this light, the classroom becomes not just a site of learning, but a sanctuary for emotional restoration. Teachers are thus repositioned as facilitators of healing, not just knowledge (Umeh, 2020).

Unfortunately, many Nigerian schools still view emotional expression as a distraction from academic performance. The emphasis on discipline, competition, and rote learning often leaves little space for emotional exploration or recovery from trauma. Children suffering silently may be misdiagnosed as stubborn, slow, or disruptive, when in fact they are processing deep emotional wounds. The lack of psychological

support in schools, especially public institutions, further compounds the issue. This is why creative writing, a low-cost and high-impact strategy, holds such promise for large-scale trauma-sensitive education (Chikwendu, 2024). This study explores how poetry and creative writing can be used to promote healing and create safe emotional spaces for children in selected Nigerian schools. It draws on the experiences of children who have encountered trauma and participated in guided writing programs in Enugu State. Using a narrative therapy framework and a quantitative approach, the study assesses children's perceptions of writing as a tool for emotional support. Ultimately, it aims to show how storytelling and symbolic language empower children to name their pain, reclaim their agency, and imagine a future beyond trauma. Healing begins not only in telling the story, but in writing it into wholeness (Mordi, 2021).

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the effectiveness of creative writing in facilitating emotional healing among children with trauma.
2. To explore the role of poetry as a medium for safe emotional expression and coping among traumatized children.
3. To assess the perceptions of children regarding the therapeutic value of creative writing activities in school settings.

Research Questions

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1. How does creative writing influence emotional healing in children who have experienced trauma?
2. In what ways does poetry offer a safe space for traumatized children to express emotions and build resilience?
3. What are the perceptions of children toward the use of creative writing as a tool for emotional and psychological support?

Theoretical Framework

Narrative Therapy Theory (Michael White & David Epston)

Narrative Therapy, developed by Michael White and David Epston in the 1980s, is a therapeutic approach centered on the idea that individuals make sense of their lives through the stories they construct and tell about themselves. For children, especially those who have experienced trauma, these narratives can become distorted by fear, shame, and powerlessness. Narrative Therapy helps externalize the problem, allowing the child to separate their identity from the traumatic experience. Instead of seeing themselves as "broken" or "damaged," they begin to view the trauma as something that happened to them—not something that defines them. This externalization is critical in reducing self-blame and encouraging healing. In creative writing, especially poetry, children are guided to construct symbolic versions of their pain through characters, metaphors, or imagined situations, mirroring this therapeutic distancing (Madigan, 2019).

A core principle of Narrative Therapy is that people hold multiple stories about themselves, but trauma tends to dominate and silence alternative, more hopeful narratives. This approach emphasizes the identification and amplification of "preferred stories"—those that highlight strength, resilience, or hope. In poetry therapy, children can explore such preferred identities in symbolic ways, constructing new meanings from past events. For example, a child who writes about surviving a storm may later realize they were expressing their endurance through metaphor. Poetry enables this kind of double vision—simultaneously distancing the trauma and reinterpreting it through a new lens. Such narrative reconstruction is at the heart of psychological recovery and identity renewal (Brewster, 2020).

Narrative Therapy also places significant value on the role of audience and witnessing. The presence of a compassionate listener—or in the case of writing therapy, a reader or peer group—can validate the child's emotional truth and foster a sense of safety and solidarity. In classroom-based poetry therapy, the act of reading one's poem aloud or sharing with a small group offers children both visibility and voice. This sense of being heard disrupts the isolating effects of trauma, which often leaves victims feeling invisible or misunderstood. Group writing circles, when well-facilitated, mirror the narrative therapy ideal of a "community of concern" where children co-create supportive

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meanings and recognize shared emotional experiences. The poetry becomes a vessel for both individual healing and collective empathy (Speedy, 2020).

Another key element of Narrative Therapy is the emphasis on language as a powerful tool for constructing reality. The way we describe events shapes how we experience them. Children who can shift from saying “I am broken” to “I went through something hard” begin the process of emotional restructuring. Poetry, by its very nature, invites new language—metaphors, symbols, rhythm—that can provide more empowering ways of speaking about pain. Through structured prompts or open journaling, children are taught to craft language around difficult emotions, transforming fear or grief into images that can be seen, held, and understood. This capacity for metaphorical rewording is essential for working through early-life trauma, especially in non-verbal or emotionally repressed children (Mitchell, 2021).

The Narrative Therapy model also values the concept of “thickening” identity stories by anchoring them in lived experiences and cultural resources. For Nigerian children, whose healing may draw strength from communal values, religious imagery, or proverbs, creative writing allows them to integrate local symbols into their healing process. A poem written in part-English, part-Igbo, for instance, can reclaim cultural pride while processing personal grief. Such integrations make writing therapy not only

psychologically healing but also culturally affirming. The flexibility of the narrative model allows each child to root their healing in what is familiar and empowering, further enhancing the effectiveness of poetry and storytelling (Nwankwo & Ibekwe, 2019).

In sum, Narrative Therapy provides a robust foundation for understanding how and why creative writing can promote healing in traumatized children. It offers a framework that honors the child’s agency, validates their emotional truth, and uses story as both mirror and medicine. Poetry becomes more than art—it becomes therapy, pedagogy, and advocacy all in one. This study, grounded in narrative therapeutic principles, explores how Nigerian children facing trauma can use writing to reframe their pain, rebuild their identities, and create safe emotional spaces within and around them (Guse & Vermaak, 2023).

Empirical Review

A growing body of empirical research confirms that creative writing, particularly poetry, serves as a powerful therapeutic outlet for children experiencing emotional and psychological distress. Brewster (2020), in a study published in the *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, explored poetry workshops designed for children experiencing grief. The findings showed that the structured expression of emotion through poetry reduced anxiety and facilitated emotional regulation.

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Participants reported feeling “lighter,” more “in control,” and less isolated after the sessions, underscoring poetry's unique capacity to externalize pain in manageable ways.

Mitchell (2021) examined the implementation of poetry-based curricula in trauma-informed classrooms across three schools in the United States. The study revealed that children with histories of abuse, domestic violence, or neglect demonstrated increased classroom engagement, better peer relationships, and improved self-concept after participating in weekly poetry therapy sessions. The research emphasized that the poetic process helped children reframe their trauma narratives in empowering and creative terms.

Speedy (2020) performed a narrative-based study that analyzed the writing of students in a UK secondary school to determine the way trauma appears and is overcome using language. It was concluded that metaphoric writing helped students to express all the complicated feelings such as shame, fear, and guilt which students used to repress in any way possible. Poetry was considered by students as a battlefield of sorts where they could slay the beast of painful recollection without getting close to it, and behavioral incidents were reported by teachers to decrease in observable degrees.

As a cross-sectional study (Langley and Brown, 2022), the authors focused on examining the effects of the creative expression intervention in the trauma-informed schooling system. The

study found that athletes who took part in writing therapy experienced better emotional literacy levels and were more inclined to seek help whenever distressed as compared to their literary counterparts. The authors summed that creative writing would be an early intervention method to assess the children at risk of an emotional breakdown.

Chowdhury (2023) concentrated on children exposed to war in the post-crisis areas and analyzed how poetry-based therapeutic storytelling could improve their coping process. As recommended by a study, children seemed to record increased hope and reduced flashback-fear overwhelmed feelings after engaging in group-based poetry therapy sessions. The symbolic strength that symbolized changes like from darkness to light or brokenness to wholeness was found in their poems indicating inner psychological changes.

Guse and Vermaak (2023) investigated how narrative therapy and poetry can be used by South African teens who have to cope with parental loss and violence in their communities. It was the study which has found two things one is that people can form positive self-identities and redefine their future aspirations via guided poetry. This healing was particularly observed when the children resorted to culturally familiar images and their native language in writing.

Brewster and Hardy (2021) used a longitudinal study to determine the therapeutic effects of a one-year-long poetry therapy in five schools in

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an urban area. The results indicated that there was continuous development in self-expression, conflict solving abilities, and interpersonal communications. Children consistently reported that poetry gave them a voice they didn't know they had, particularly in articulating experiences of neglect and abandonment.

van Westrhenen and Fritz (2021) used a mixed-methods approach to evaluate creative arts therapy (including writing) as a trauma intervention for South African children. The study concluded that poetry writing promoted trauma processing and emotional resilience, especially when integrated with play-based learning in classrooms. Children were more likely to verbalize needs and demonstrate empathy after participating in these sessions.

Nwankwo and Ibekwe (2019) analyzed how Nigerian children recovering from domestic abuse responded to metaphor-rich poetry. The children who were taught to write poems using traditional Igbo and English metaphors displayed signs of emotional restoration and improved social interaction. The study emphasized the power of indigenous narrative forms in strengthening identity and emotional regulation.

Finally, Madigan (2019) reviewed the application of narrative therapy across multiple therapeutic contexts and reaffirmed its effectiveness in promoting healing among trauma-affected children. In cases involving creative writing, children re-authored traumatic memories using

symbolic and imaginative elements, resulting in decreased self-blame and increased agency.

The reviewed studies consistently affirm that poetry and creative writing are not only therapeutic but also accessible and adaptable tools for childhood trauma healing. Whether delivered in classrooms, therapy groups, or conflict zones, these interventions support identity reconstruction, emotional regulation, and psychological resilience. They also reveal that culturally sensitive writing practices—those that incorporate local language, metaphors, and community values—enhance therapeutic outcomes.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative survey research design to assess how creative writing and poetry contribute to emotional healing among children who have experienced trauma. The design was chosen to enable the collection of objective data from a structured group of students, with the goal of identifying measurable patterns in their emotional and expressive responses to creative writing. A questionnaire instrument was used to gather data on how children perceive poetry and storytelling as therapeutic tools for processing trauma.

The study population comprised students from five selected secondary schools in Enugu State, Nigeria: Godfrey Okoye University Secondary School, St. Patrick Secondary School Emene, St. Joseph Secondary School Emene, College of the Immaculate Conception (CIC), Enugu,

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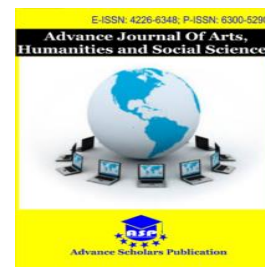
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and Enugu Preparatory College. These schools were purposively selected based on administrative approval, accessibility, and the presence of facilitators willing to support the study. The schools represent diverse student populations across both junior and senior secondary levels, offering a broad perspective on the impact of poetry and writing therapy on adolescent emotional development.

A total sample of 300 students participated in the study. In each school, 15 students were randomly selected from each class, excluding JSS3 and SS3 students who had vacated after completing their final examinations. This ensured representation across multiple year levels, including JSS1, JSS2, SS1, and SS2. Informed consent was obtained from both school authorities and the parents/guardians of the students. Ethical considerations such as anonymity, voluntary participation, and psychological safety were strictly observed throughout the research process.

The research instrument used was a structured questionnaire containing 15 Likert-scale items designed to assess emotional relief, self-expression, sense of safety, and coping through

Data Presentation and Analysis

Research Question One

How does creative writing influence emotional healing in children who have experienced trauma?

Item

1. Writing helps me understand my feelings better.

Mean Std. Deviation

2.91 0.67

creative writing. The response options followed a four-point scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The items were developed based on themes from previous studies in poetry therapy and trauma-informed education, ensuring both face and content validity.

Questionnaires were administered in-person with the support of classroom teachers who were trained to facilitate the process without influencing the responses. Distribution occurred during free periods and after academic activities to minimize disruption. Teachers ensured a calm environment, while the researchers remained available to clarify questions or provide emotional support to participants, should any writing-related memories evoke discomfort.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics—specifically, mean and standard deviation. A cut-off mean score of 2.50 was used as the benchmark for agreement or acceptance. Items with a mean of 2.50 and above were interpreted as positively affirmed by students.

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Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
2. I feel less angry or sad after writing poems or stories.	2.84	0.73
3. Writing helps me remember happy things, not just sad ones.	2.80	0.68
4. When I write, I feel like I'm letting out something heavy.	2.93	0.69
5. I feel calmer after writing about how I feel.	2.89	0.70
Grand Mean	2.87	

Interpretation:

All mean scores for this cluster are above the 2.50 cut-off, indicating that the students agree that creative writing contributes positively to emotional healing. The grand mean of 2.87 confirms strong perceived emotional benefits. Standard deviations (0.67–0.73) show a moderate consensus, suggesting that while responses were not perfectly uniform, there was no significant deviation across student responses.

Research Question Two

In what ways does poetry offer a safe space for traumatized children to express emotions and build resilience?

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
6. I feel safe writing about things I can't say out loud.	2.95	0.66
7. Poetry helps me say things without getting in trouble.	2.87	0.69
8. Writing poems makes me feel stronger inside.	2.81	0.72
9. When I share my poems, I feel people understand me better.	2.78	0.75
10. I write better when I'm emotional or hurting.	2.79	0.70
Grand Mean	2.84	

Interpretation:

This table shows that students widely perceive poetry as a safe and empowering space. The highest mean (2.95) indicates that writing gives them an outlet for unspoken thoughts. With a grand mean of 2.84, the perception is strongly positive. Standard deviation values (0.66–0.75) suggest moderate variability, reflecting differences in emotional intensity but a shared sense of relief and empowerment.

Research Question Three

What are the perceptions of children toward the use of creative writing as a tool for emotional and psychological support?

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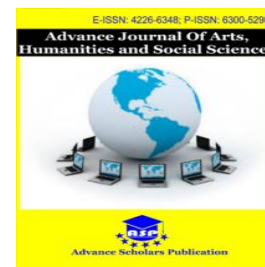
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Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
11. Writing helps me not feel alone with my problems.	2.86	0.68
12. I feel supported when I write about my life.	2.80	0.70
13. My teacher encourages me to write about my feelings.	2.73	0.76
14. Writing makes me believe things will get better.	2.85	0.72
15. I think schools should have more writing sessions like this.	2.91	0.65
Grand Mean	2.83	

Interpretation:

Students generally perceive creative writing as an effective tool for emotional and psychological support, with a grand mean of 2.83. They feel less isolated, more encouraged, and hopeful about their experiences. The relatively high agreement on Item 15 (2.91) suggests students want writing activities institutionalized in school settings. The standard deviations (0.65–0.76) again reflect moderate response diversity, indicating some variation in the level of support received, possibly due to differences in teacher involvement or writing opportunities.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study strongly affirm the therapeutic value of creative writing, particularly poetry, in supporting the emotional healing of children who have experienced trauma. Each research question generated data that exceeded the cut-off mean of 2.50, indicating widespread agreement among students in the five selected secondary schools in Enugu State. These findings align with the narrative therapy framework, which emphasizes story-making, symbolic

distancing, and emotional reconstruction as key healing processes for trauma-affected individuals (Madigan, 2019; Guse & Vermaak, 2023).

In response to the first research question—*how does creative writing influence emotional healing in children who have experienced trauma?*—the mean scores ranged from 2.80 to 2.93, with a grand mean of 2.87. This suggests that students overwhelmingly perceived creative writing as a means of emotional relief, clarity, and calm. This result aligns with one of the studies conducted by Brewster (2020) and published in the journal *Science* who emphasized the importance of writing in allowing children to cope with complicated emotions including anger and sadness by providing a psychological release. The way the students describe being light and being able to release something heavy signifies the essence of narrative therapy the externalization of problems, which in children means that they will perceive trauma as an outside phenomenon rather than part of the self-identity (Speedy, 2020).

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The second question to be answered in the research was the following: How does poetry create a safe space to allow traumatized children to express themselves and develop resilience? The scoring average is a great value of 2.84, indicating that poetry helps to create a safe emotional response system that allows students to deal with challenging emotions. This was on the highest individual item score (2.95) which said that the students felt a lot of safety when they were writing about what they could not say. This is similar to that of Mitchell (2021), who observed that poetry offers a symbolic and less adversarial outlet through which children can present traumatic experiences. Intimations of emotional safety, validation, and resilience mentioned by the students in this research are a key to the therapeutic community model suggested in narrative therapy, where empathy, storytelling, and witness are all considered to be a part of healing (Langley & Brown, 2022).

The third research question was associated with students' attitudes towards creative writing as an emotional and psychological support. There was a high grand mean of 2.83 so this section showed that students see writing as a coping strategy they view as valuable, but they also see writing as a coping strategy with an institutional potential. A strong value on questions like writing makes me believe that things will be better and that schools must have more writing activities like this one should be interpreted as an indication that students consider creative writing not only

as an informal pastime but also as an official support tool. This is similar in case with Chowdhury's (2023) work in post-crisis areas, which showed that poetry provided displaced and emotionally traumatized children with the ability to restore inner strength and look into a brighter future. It also confirms once again the finding of van Westrhenen and Fritz (2021) that writing therapy in school settings encourages psychological safety and community healing.

In general, the results confirm the relevance of the integration of creative writing and poetry therapy into the instructional process, particularly concerning students who might not have access to formal psychological help. Students also see writing as not only an indicator of expressive writing but as a way of being that can help them control emotions, form a sense of identity, and find strength both within themselves and with others. Such evidence again reveals the theoretical basis of the narrating therapy, by arguing that language, metaphor, and narration are important devices in the rehabilitation process of those who have experienced emotional trauma among young people.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research paper was conducted on the effectiveness of creative writing, specifically poetry, as an avenue of treatment for children who experience traumatic memories in secondary schools within Enugu state. It relied on the framework of narrative therapy to

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determine that children described writing as helping them to express hard feelings, project dark situations, and develop favorable notions of themselves. Results demonstrated that there was a significant consistency in the two sets of responses among fellow students on the sources of emotional respite, psychological security, and resilience-creating power of poetry. Creative writing became not only a strategy to cope but also a precious intervention that not only provides short-term emotional support but also identity recovery in the long-term perspective.

In all three research questions, there was a grand mean response that exceeded the benchmark score of 2.50 thus reflecting the broad understanding of students about writing as a healing process. According to students, they became calmer, better understood, and less lonely as a result of creative writing activities. The findings verify the currently available empirical research that validated the usefulness of poetry in trauma intervention programs (Brewster, 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Guse & Vermaak, 2023). Moreover, the consistency of responses across different schools and class levels suggests that poetry therapy holds broad applicability in educational settings, especially in contexts where children may lack access to formal mental health services.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Institutionalize Poetry Therapy Programs in Schools:** Educational

managers and policy makers should incorporate structured creative writing activities into the school curriculum or co-curricular programs, particularly in guidance and counselling departments.

2. **Train Teachers as Writing Facilitators:** Teachers should be trained in basic poetry therapy facilitation techniques to guide children in using writing for emotional expression, especially in trauma-sensitive classrooms.
3. **Develop Safe Writing Spaces:** Schools should create safe, non-judgmental writing environments—such as writing clubs or emotional literacy circles—where students feel free to explore and share their stories.
4. **Engage Community and Cultural Resources:** Poems and writing exercises should be adapted to reflect cultural values, local metaphors, and native languages, which can deepen healing and identity reconstruction for Nigerian children.
5. **Further Research and Monitoring:** Longitudinal studies should be conducted to assess the sustained impact of poetry therapy on students' emotional well-being, academic performance, and peer relationships over time.

In conclusion, creative writing—when thoughtfully applied—can serve not only as an artistic expression but as a psychological intervention. It is a low-cost, high-impact strategy capable of transforming trauma into

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voice, isolation into connection, and silence into healing. Poetry, in the hands of children, becomes both a mirror and a lantern—reflecting their pain and lighting the path forward.

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Dr. Torty Ogbonne and Vitalis Chinemerem Iloanwusi

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