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**Promoting Literacy and
Critical Writing Skills
Through Poetry**

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Promoting Literacy and Critical Writing Skills Through Poetry

Korina Jocson, U.C. Berkeley

*Rage consumes me
As the noose of past generations
Is tightened around my neck...*
—Naier, age 15 (2000)

*Listen to me
When I tell you / What's on my mind
The truth
Twisted up but I spit it out...*
—Carolyn, age 16 (2001)

*I can whisper
I can whisper sweet nothings
Only loud enough for hearts to hear...*
—Antonio, age 17 (2002)

Background

For many youth, including those above, poetry is a much-valued form of expression. Over the last decade, the popularity of hip hop culture and the (re)emergence of spoken word poetry has resulted in a proliferation of national and local youth poetry “slams,” as well as television programs such as Russell Simmons’ Def Poetry Jam. In major cities across the United States, poetry-writing workshops have become available inside schools and have become increasingly embedded in English Language Arts curricula. One example is a program based on the late June Jordan’s Poetry for the People (P4P) at the University of California, Berkeley. P4P is a university writing program in partnership with a nearby high school in the East Bay Area. Similar to other arts and outreach programs, it is currently threatened by state budget cuts.

Examining Literacy and Poetry

In today’s technologically advanced world, literacy is, and continues to be, at the forefront of education. It is all the more important to explore the myriad ways of incorporating—successfully—culturally relevant teaching practices and curricular materials. Poetry provides a way for young people to develop critical writing and thinking skills, gain confidence, and become empowered citizens in their communities and beyond.

Poetry is a form of literacy. Before words are spoken, they are often written; and, in today’s “slam” world, the spoken is preferably performed. The construction of words into poetic stanzas requires skills and knowledge that are linked to one’s ability to think, read, write, and communicate. An examination of poetry to engage urban youth in school, improve their

academic outcomes, and develop characteristics that can lead to college-going prospects is much needed and has implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and educational policy.

A Close-up Study of Youth Poets, Identity, and Literacy

This study looks at the different identities that seven high school youth adopted as they read, wrote, published, and performed poetry. The following are questions that guided this study:

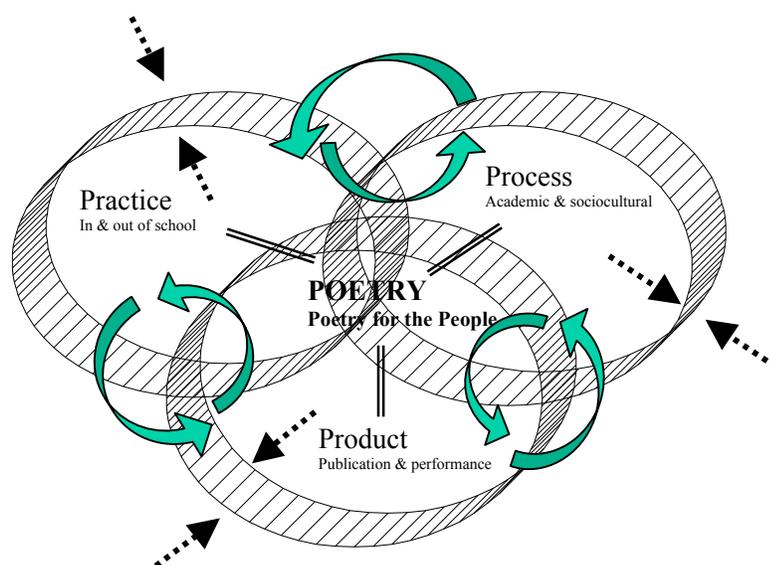
1. What is the nature of the learning processes involved in P4P? How do students become participants in the process?
2. What kinds of meanings do students create in their production of poetry? How are these meanings manifested in the actual poetry products?
3. What are the various literacy practices in which urban high school students engage that are connected to their participation in P4P? What do these practices reveal about students' identities?

The study takes place in one urban California high school within the context of P4P across several English/language arts classes. Findings and recommendations from this research provide an alternative to traditional views about teaching and learning in diverse urban settings.

Lessons from Youth in Poetry for the People

This research illuminates the unique pathways of seven students as they transition through and beyond high school. A common thread between these students is their participation in P4P, once or twice between 9th and 12th grade. This study focuses on the perspective and experience of the youth themselves to understand the various processes, products, and practices associated with the creation of poetry. For analytical purposes, I use a framework of poetry as a process (academic and sociocultural), a practice (in and out of school), and a product (publication and performance), to tease apart students' perspectives and experiences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Poetry within larger spheres of practice, process, and product



Most notable in this framework is how P4P provides a place for unrecognized students to shine in a form of literacy practice that is highly respected among youth of all races. Another salient feature is how P4P, as a university-school partnership, contributes to a college-going culture by having college students and faculty work side-by-side with high school students. Key findings are described below.

The Value of College/High School Apprenticeship

A student-centered approach in P4P allowed for college student-teacher-poets (STPs) to create a form of apprenticeship. Small group poetry-writing workshops provided an intimate atmosphere in which the ratio of STPs to students was often 1:3 or less. In this setting, STPs played an important role in providing scaffolding to students to become experts in creating and revising poems. This pairing of college poets with high school poets is what distinguishes P4P from other poetry writing programs. Additionally, STPs take on the role of mentors and also benefit from the apprenticeship – an experience that has influenced many of them to consider careers in education.

The Importance of Recognizing Urban Youth Voice

Highly charged writing topics in P4P served to advance a self-empowering agenda. Students were able to write about matters of importance related to race, culture, gender – matters that often were ignored in school and society-at-large. Perhaps most importantly, the students began to see themselves as potential agents of change, with the power to improve the very social conditions they critiqued in their poems. One focal teacher, who has collaborated with P4P at least three times, noted:

Poetry gave students a mouthpiece to express some of the things that they found wrong in society...they feel more empowered rather than less empowered...they can say something and it might make a difference, whereas I think that if you don't give them that mouthpiece, then the impression that they get from adults and mentors and from teachers is, "Why say anything, because nothing you say is going to be valuable anyway..."

Building on Diversity and Community Resources

Reflecting upon their participation in P4P, students said they particularly valued sharing their poems with larger audiences. For several youth, performing poems became a way of life. For 18-year-old Jaime, who moved away to attend a four-year college, going to slams helped him to adjust and build social relationships in a new environment. It introduced him to new ways of thinking about what and when to write, as well as how and with whom he would share his poems. Similarly, 17-year-old Antonio's participation in Youth Speaks, a San Francisco-based youth poetry organization, provided support for his writing, and further shaped the multiple identities he had already adopted through his participation in athletics, music, and other forms of popular culture.

Although it is difficult to isolate P4P's influence on academic outcomes, it is clear that focal students were confident in the quality, content, and delivery of their written poems. For those

students who continued to write (but not share their poems publicly), poetry reflected the possibilities of molding a sense of self, place, and history.

Recommendations for Educators

Given the enormous popularity of poetry inside and outside of schools, the findings of this study suggest that poetry can:

1. increase students' interest and engagement with writing.
2. enhance students' academic and critical literacy skills.
3. influence teachers and teacher educators to improve culturally relevant practices and curricular materials in building stronger classrooms, programs, and schools.
4. build upon Poetry for the People's educational objective of artistic and political empowerment for both high school and college students.

Poetry-writing workshops inside urban classrooms—specifically in the context of P4P—provides an opportunity for schools and administrators to understand how poetry can revitalize and bridge the larger school culture. It also offers evidence to government agencies on the local, state, and federal level supporting the continuation and expansion of legislation that funds arts-based, outreach, and other programs, particularly those targeting underserved students attending low-performing schools. Additionally, this study suggests certain alterable conditions on the secondary school level that are key to interventions. These conditions include a “college-going school culture” and “intensive academic and social supports,” as reflected in the P4P program.

Conclusion

Poetry as a teaching and learning tool cannot by itself solve the educational crisis facing urban schools. What this study strongly suggests, however, is that poetry can be used as a form of critical literacy, moving teachers and teacher educators a step closer to improving current educational practices and student outcomes. It also offers a glimpse into how youth can more fully take part in their own learning process.

Poetry can also provide a way for young people to express hard-to-draw-out emotions such as love, confusion, and anger and make better sense of life experiences such as death, social acceptance, and types of profiling. As 15-year-old Naier best put it, “When I write, I write from a place deep inside myself.” Lest we as adults forget the essence of humanity, it is these embodied emotions in poetry that allow us a chance to understand why and how young people make certain life choices, and how we can incorporate this understanding to better serve their needs.

Related Publications:

- Jocson, K.M. (forthcoming). “Best of both worlds”: Youth poetry as social critique and form of empowerment. In S. Ginwright, J. Camarota, & P. Noguera (Eds.), *Youth, Communities, and Social Justice: Toward a National Strategy for Youth Development*. New York: Routledge.
- Jocson, K.M. (2005). “Taking it to the mic”: Pedagogy of June Jordan’s Poetry for the People and partnership with an urban high school. *English Education*, 37(2), 132-148.
- Jocson, K.M. (2004). Urban youth as agents in creating community through poetry. *California English*, 10(1), 20-23.
- Jocson, K.M. (Producer). (2003). *One Night* [Short Documentary]. Berkeley: Graduate School of Education.
- Jocson, K.M. (Producer). (2002). *More Than Words* [Short Documentary]. Berkeley: Center for Urban Education.

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