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Empower! A Poetry Curriculum for the 21st Century Learner

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Empower!

A Poetry Curriculum for the 21ˢᵗ Century Learner

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———————————————————— Abstract ————————————————————

By providing today's high school students with a multimodal curriculum centered around critical inquiry, worldview, personal relevance, and by providing students will many opportunities to respond to these principles with their own writings, students will be empowered to engage with their learning and the world in meaningful and intentional ways. *Empower!* poetry curriculum is designed to help students ask questions about themselves, their immediate surroundings and influences, and about the world around them. Students will be encouraged to take the time and energy for deeper thinking and reflection as they engage with the activities of *Empower!* While there will be aspects of traditional poetry analysis, the goal of *Empower!* is to cultivate student voice and inquiry. Students will explore poetry and songs crafted by a diverse body of contemporary multicultural writers whose works explore relevant real-world issues that our students often face today. The works students explore will serve as mentor texts, enabling students to read poetry as writers of poetry and aiding their creative reading and writing skills. This scaffolded multimodal curriculum can be used as a devoted six-week poetry study or each unit can supplement existing English Language Arts (ELA) literary studies. *Empower!* is housed on its own website where accompanying and supplementary poetry resources are available for teachers and students.

Full access to *Empower!* Poetry Curriculum, associated research, and resources are available at www.empowerpoetry.com or at https://sites.google.com/view/empower-poetry-curriculum/home.

Keywords: poetry, curriculum, critical inquiry, worldview, mentor text, English language arts

Access to Empower! Poetry Curriculum

This honors thesis is a multimodal project comprised of scholarly research, original curriculum, and a creative website. Full access to *Empower!* Poetry Curriculum, associated research, and resources is available at www.empowerpoetry.com or at https://sites.google.com/view/empower-poetry-curriculum/home.

Honors Thesis Literature Review

A call for creative critical pedagogy is circulating in English Language Arts scholarship. Educator-scholars believe poetry provides an essential gateway into critical inquiry and reflection, expanding students' worldviews and improving literacy and writing skills. To facilitate a creative critical pedagogy, teacher-scholars advocate for teaching diverse works that go beyond the literary canon. Scholarship confirms that students need to relate to the texts they are studying – they need to see themselves in the words and images, they need to hear their languages, they need to connect personally to the issues that literature presents. Scholars also propose that students' own works should be included as critical texts in the classrooms, giving students meaningful engagement in the making of curriculum. A primary goal of this literature review is to situate my thesis work, a poetry curriculum for secondary education ELA classrooms, within the context of this current scholarship.

Based on the research, the result should be a poetry curriculum that (1) examines diverse, contemporary authorship, (2) expands students' worldview, (3) develops critical inquiry, and (4) discusses issues that are relevant to students' lives. As I conduct this research, I find that these four concepts interlock – they mingle and inform each other in a dynamic relationship. As students encounter diverse authors, their worldviews expand and allow them to freshly examine their own lives and their perspectives on the world. This examination encourages critical inquiry and reflection. Likewise, as students consider issues relevant to their lives, they'll look at the world and the people around them with greater understanding. Each concept connects to the others in a dynamic of learning and growing. By including students' writing as part of the curriculum, students become co-creators of their knowledge.

Diverse Authorship: Going Beyond the Canon

Expanding beyond the canon need not detract from academic excellence; including poets whose works will connect with the diverse backgrounds and identities of today's students increases learning. Educators champion the inclusion of diverse authorship in ELA classrooms, and more specifically, in poetry curriculum (Christensen, 2009; DiMarzio and Dippre, 2011; Jordan, 1995; Kirkland, 2008; Tanner, 2015; Wissman, 2009). There is also a push to include student works as central texts within the classroom, acknowledging that students' lives are important contributions to the learning environment. Christensen (2009) advocates for students to learn literary analysis through crafting poetry, arguing that students will be more invested in learning literary concepts when it applies to their own work. Jordan (1995) extolls the study of poetry written by authors from diverse cultural backgrounds and supports the inclusion of students' work as part of multicultural poetry in the classroom. She argues that diverse authorship in the classroom, including the writings of students, will expand students' worldviews and facilitate learning about the people around them. DiMarzio and Dippre (2011) also advocate for the use of students' work as primary critical texts, with a focus on relevant issues that surround students' lives and age groups.

Kirkland (2008) examines the cultural influences that hip hop and poetry offer students, identifying them as valid English artifacts worth of study. He claims that students who see themselves in the creative ELA curriculum will engage in the work of critical inquiry and exploration. Kirkland argues that while the canon and English standards have an important place in student learning, English pedagogy cannot stay focused only on the canon and standards. Students should not learn solely by reading a literature written centuries ago by culturally

homogeneous authors. Rather, their learning should include works that are contemporary and relevant to student's realities, including a deeper study into culturally diverse authors.

Tanner (2015) discusses the need for diverse authorship as a way to reveal and disrupt white privilege or the imbalances of power within the student body and encourages students to engage in antiracist actions and paradigms. His article encourages educators to consider a critical poetry pedagogy where students are empowered through poetry to examine and engage in discourse pertaining to racial issues. Tanner claims a primary objective of studying multicultural poetry is to promote and engage in antiracist ideas and actions.

Wissman (2009) furthers the call for diverse authorship, arguing that students should be exposed to poets with multicultural backgrounds who are living, contemporary authors. She purports that including living authors in ELA poetry curriculum helps students engage in discussions of current events that shape their lives and impact their futures. Students learn how current poets talk back to the issues in life and give students a fresh, relevant look at the world around them. By offering students diverse living authors, Wissman claims students will engage in "discourses of race, sexuality, culture, and schooling" and further develop their understanding of society and their poetic and metaphoric language (2009, p. 43).

These educators reveal the importance of crafting a poetry curriculum that centralizes diverse, living authors – including students' own works. In doing so, students will have opportunities to see themselves in their learning process and expand their critical abilities to read the world around them. They'll learn how to talk back to the issues that are important to them through author-mentors who have walked similar paths. Students will confront biases that limit them, and they will learn how to employ language as a vehicle for action in their lives. The

potential for these results are important to me as a future educator; thus, my thesis will be focused on a diverse authorship of contemporary poets – including student works.

Expanding Worldview and Developing Critical Inquiry

An examination of the scholarship on poetry reveals a connection educators make between providing students opportunities for expanding their worldview and developing and strengthening critical inquiry skills. Carlson (2010) argues that songs and poems aid students in reading the world critically and reflecting on their own situations in the world. He encourages educators to tie in songs that contribute to the theme of literature being studied. Carlson advocates for students to have opportunities to examine how the spoken and the written word of songs and poetry contribute to the functions of society and pop culture around them. He claims that through a critical approach of songs and poetry, a more meaningful experience will be created for both the students and the teacher.

DiMarzio and Dippre (2011) discuss the importance of incorporating creative writing projects that focus on student-led critical inquiry about students' personal mid-teen experiences and their views about the world around them. These authors reveal a common "false dichotomy" in education between creative writing and textual analysis, and counter that students can engage in critical inquiry through a creative writing curriculum. Both DiMarzio and Dippre support student collaborative learning as a way to engage in diverse perspectives and backgrounds that are found within the classroom. These teachers report that students engage in multifaceted views of the world as they collaborate through creative writing activities. Dippre offers his observation that students in his class choose to engage in poetry and songs more than any other creative writing genre, solidifying poetry's relevance in ELA curriculum.

Tanner (2015) asserts the need to utilize poetry as a way to challenge students' biases on race and encourage students to adopt antiracist stances. Tanner uses collaborative poetry writing as the vehicle for critical inquiry and disrupting what he calls "organizing logics of race" (2015). Tanner encourages the inclusion of multicultural poetry to examine white privilege in society while engaging in democratic problem solving in student collaboration. Tanner supports the incorporation of critical pedagogy where student works are part of critical texts and gives his students opportunity to respond to research and critical inquiry through creative expression in the form of poetry and drama.

Seale (2015) claims poetry is a useful tool to help students locate and examine worldviews that differ from their own. Through multicultural poetry, Seale encourages students to take on the perspective of the poet and grapple with views that are unfamiliar. She advocates the use of poems that critique the status quo of society and that disrupt unchallenged mindsets that are prevalent in students' communities and the world. Seale encourages a critical approach to poetry that allows students to expand their human experience through the passionate words and voices of diverse poets.

Style (2014) discusses the use of dialogue poems that offer students multiple perspectives on an issue and a way to talk back to statements or questions that have limited or demeaned students due to their socio-cultural identities. Style uses dialogue poems to counter texts, images, and voices that communicate racial ideas or that perpetuate dominating ideology. This author explains how students' worldviews are challenged and enlarged when they encounter each other's dialogue poems, claiming that one life-story will not be identical to another, which invariably exposes students to differing perspectives and develops their critical inquiry about the world around them.

These educator-scholars confirm how worldview and critical inquiry are directly tied to the inclusion of diverse authors, including students works as primary texts. They emphasize poetry's relevance to expand students' worldviews and allow students to adopt new perspectives. Through reading, examining, and writing poetry, students learn how to make stronger connections between their lives and how society functions around them. Students are also empowered to identify and respond to social limitations that are prevalent in their lives. A primary aim of my thesis will be to encourage the expansion of students' worldviews and develop and strengthen their critical inquiry skills about the world around them. It is my hope that students who encounter my poetry curriculum will be more open-minded toward other members of their community and that students will be encouraged to confront the issues that limit them in school and in society.

Personal Relevance of Poetry in Students' Lives

Poetry, when taught with a focus on student voice and creativity, empowers students to engage with language in risk-taking, authentic ways. According to educator-scholars, poetry is relevant to students in both a personal and academic way. Christensen (2009) believes poetry offers equity in literacy education where other genres do not. She is a strong advocate for the inclusion of poetry in every unit of the ELA classroom because poetry provides students with opportunities to "play with language, develop strong verbs, and saturate their readers with details" (Christensen, 2009, p. 15). Christensen also uses poetry as a way to create community in the classroom. She claims that, as students share their creative works, students also share in their joys, their hardships, their sorrows, their challenges in life. Poetry becomes relevant when used as a vehicle for students' life stories. Christensen supports teaching poetry that discusses and empowers students' heritage, background, and home language(s). In her book, Christensen

provides various ways students can use poetry to "affirm their place in the world" while building their analytical and linguistic skills (2009, p. 28). Christensen argues that the inclusion of poetry in ELA classrooms will result in more authentic writing and literacy connections for students.

DiMarzio and Dippre (2011) advocate for an all-inclusive approach to a creative writing project that takes into account the different skill and interest levels of each student. The authors report three key results they observed while conducting their own creative writing project: (1) students who are not typically engaged in other writing styles and assignments were more engaged in a creative writing unit, especially poetry; (2) students showed a greater commitment in examining and sharing their thoughts, ideas, and beliefs; and (3) there was an increase of communication from students throughout the unit. DiMarzo and Dippre's final observations reveal high-quality production of authentic works from students and their increased engagement in ELA activities that were meaningful and relevant to students. Their results line up with Christensen's claims that poetry "levels the playing field, and "unleashes their verbal dexterity" (2009, p.14).

Seale (2015) offers insight on how poetry can help students examine their own identities, offering students opportunity to celebrate their unique personalities, backgrounds, and hopes for the future. Style (2014) reaffirms Christensen (2009), DiMarzo and Dippre (2011), Jordan (1995), and Seale's (2015) claims that poetry allows students to see how they are situated in the world and gives them a mentor-genre of literature for engaging in society. Wissman (2009) expounds these ideas further by stating that poetry gives students a way to identify and relate to human experiences in deeper, more meaningful ways. Her claim is that poetry, especially multicultural poetry, offers a context of "mutual knowledge" for students to pull from and contribute to.

An examination of this scholarship confirms that poetry, if taught with students' identities and experiences as the focal points, is not only relevant to their personal lives but also valuable to their academic growth. Poetry provides students with a way to express their human experiences and challenges. Poetry also gives educators a way to build community within their classroom, where students can contribute to and pull from a pool of mutual knowledge. My aim is to craft a curriculum that offers students a way to encounter poetry in meaningful and relevant ways. It is my hope that students will take risks in their writings, play with language, and learn new ways to express their life experiences.

Conclusion

The goal of this research is to situate my thesis, a poetry curriculum for secondary education ELA classrooms, within the context of current scholarship. Educator-scholars confirm a need for secondary education poetry curriculum that (1) goes beyond the existing literary canon to examine diverse, contemporary authorship – including students' works, (2) expands students' worldviews, (3) develops and strengthens critical inquiry, and (4) offers students meaningful, relevant poetry experiences. My thesis will address these main needs while incorporating activities that will place students' lives as central figures in their study of poetry.

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