

Engagement Through Poetry: A Qualitative Study of the High School Literacy Project

Raina J. León

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Approved by Committee:

Dr. James Trier, University of North Carolina - CH                      Chairperson

Dr. George Noblit, University of North Carolina - CH

Dr. Lynda Stone, University of North Carolina - CH

Dr. David Iasevoli, State University of New York - Plattsburgh

Dr. Aldon Nielsen, Pennsylvania State University

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## ABSTRACT

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Under the direction of Dr. James Trier

The teaching of poetry is not important. That is what an analysis of the four of the top journals in English Education – *English Education*, *English Journal*, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* and *Research in the Teaching of English* – says. The work of the High School Literacy Project combated this notion while seeking to encourage the development of critical literacy in adolescents who did not identify as writers or active readers. This writing as inquiry dissertation explores some of the curricular nuances of the project. Through conquering words and studying the work of contemporary, multicultural writers, students were challenged to become engaged learners and change agents. They were pushed to recognize voice and work to establish their own writing voices, and invest in becoming writers and readers.

## DEDICATION

To my mother and father, Dr. Norma D. Thomas and Edwardo León

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## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction to the Study**

In 1995, Lauren Muller and the Poetry for the People Collective published a remarkable book, *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint*. Within it, the work of June Jordan and the Poetry for the People Collective was detailed. The workshop environment that Jordan cultivated inspired students to reveal the deepest parts of themselves through poetry. They became engaged participants in the creation of a poetic community, one that was safe and in which all could partake. They examined the work of contemporary authors critically and wrote poems in response and organized poetry readings, making them student action events. They were socially-engaged and drew in others to their community.

There have been many collectives that have developed since then, which fostered the work of those who already considered themselves to be poets and have a voice within society. The Dark Room Collective, Cave Canem, The Carolina African American Writers Collective, Kundiman, and The A centos Foundation are just some of those organizations that have come to the literary scene since 1988. All of them built a poetic community stemming from particular ethnic communities. The reasoning behind this was that literary circles have a history of being exclusionary in regards to the work of writers of color. In order to combat that reality, collectives formed where writers could work together on crafting more aesthetically sound work, exchanging ideas and information about publishing opportunities. Not since Jordan, though, has there been a workshop that specifically encouraged marginalized youth to be critical readers and writers by cultivating a poetic

community and engaging individuals in the expression of their own particular voices. The High School Literacy Project, the subject of this dissertation, endeavored to take up that charge by teaching contemporary, multicultural poetry to adolescents with the hope of creating poetic community and fostering critical literacy. By contemporary, it is meant that all poems within the curriculum were selected from authors who lived during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, if possible, are currently living (Moynihan, 2009; Newman, 2009). This was done to contribute to a sense of accessibility within the poetic community. Multicultural refers to the immense range of cultural backgrounds and life experiences from which the selected authors come. In the name of accessibility and engagement, authors were chosen to which adolescents could find a point of commonality.

### **Description of the Case**

The High School Literacy Project began in 1997 under the guidance of Dr. Madeline Grumet at the University of North Carolina. In the final two years of the program, it was administered through the University of North Carolina School of Education in area schools with the specific purpose of developing and enacting a poetry curriculum over several weeks rather than the previous one-day event. In 2005, the program was instituted in two high schools, Cedar Ridge High School in Hillsborough, NC and Chapel Hill High School in Chapel Hill, NC, reaching over 50 students. By 2006, the amount of involved students had grown to over 300. In that year, the program shifted to Jordan High School in Durham, NC, East Chapel Hill High School and Phoenix Academy, both in Chapel Hill, NC. Both years, a 10-week poetry curriculum was instituted. Students were taught poetic form through the use of contemporary, multicultural writers. They were instructed in reading poetry for form, language, and content. They analytically approached each poem, identifying the poetic

devices and how they aided in accomplishing the purpose of the poem and the author. They also examined the language chosen by the author for meaning. Finally, they were encouraged to delve into the meanings and how they revealed the layers within society. This dissertation seeks to explore the process of creating curriculum. It will examine the texts created by the students for content, language and form and their perceived evolution from mere understanding of poetic form into engagement and critical literacy exemplified. The narrative that unfolds will challenge conceptions of poetic knowing and meaning making and provide an example of critical literacy in practice through the execution of a poetry program.

### **How the Study was Done**

The particular methodology used in the dissertation to explore the High School Literacy Project is that of writing as inquiry. Through writing as inquiry, a methodology delineated by Laurel Richardson (1994), the narrative of creating a poetic community unfolds. Narrative sharing or story-telling is an activity that unites all of humanity. We tell stories to come to a better understanding of the world. Human beings first organize their experiences in temporally meaningful episodes through narrative (Polkinghorn, 1988, p. 1). Events are chained together through stories. This happened and *then* this happened. There is a sequence of events. In addition to the sequence, there is a causality evident within narrative. This happened, *because* this happened. Narrative attempts to answer the question, *Why?* while also acknowledging that there never may be an answer to that question. In defining writing as a method of inquiry, Laurel Richardson (1994) wrote in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*:

Language is a constitutive force, creating a particular view of reality and of the Self... Writing is no exception. No textual staging is ever innocent (including this one). Styles of writing are neither fixed nor neutral but rather

reflect the historically shifting domination of particular schools or paradigms.  
(p. 960)

Writing those stories is a process of meaning-making , though this seems contrary to the research paradigm, which dictates that “Academic work should be systematic, goal-oriented, and subject to the rules of logic” (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002, p. 407). Using writing as a method of inquiry coupled with autoethnography allows for a transparency within the dissertation. The final portion of the dissertation takes the form of a poetic autoethnography, uncovering the teacher/research perspective in the creating of poetic curriculum. Autoethnography allows for conducting research that frames itself around self-inquiry in relation to a specific occurrence. Simpson (2006) writes, “Methodologically, autoethnography both centers agency and holds complexity, and in turn leaves room for change” (p. 71). In addition, it allows for the researcher to investigate subjectivity and power. While writing as inquiry allows for agency, complexity and change, its focus is more on the sociological phenomenon, the community involved in relation to the narrative.

Sherrick Hughes (2008) offers an autoethnographic study that gives focus to the final chapter of the dissertation. He identifies three connections between autoethnography and education that are essential to this dissertation:

First, autoethnography may teach one about self in that it challenges our assumptions of normalcy, forces us to be more self-reflexive, and instructs us about our professional and personal socialization and how we participate in socialization at our schools. Second, it may teach one to write to practice and share emotions with audiences and to improve our craft for its own sake. Third, autoethnography may also teach one to inculcate and model by breathing self-critical attitudes, offering self-disclosure in teaching and learning and checking inequity and oppression in our classrooms. (p. 127)

Within the final chapter, the teacher/researcher self is revealed, particularly the reasoning behind curricular decisions, answering Hughes's call for reflexivity in answer to participation in a larger community. Autoethnography allows for one to consider action as a change agent, to critically examine the relationship between self and phenomenon. The narrative of the experience unfolds sequentially within this dissertation, intertwined with subjective revelations, endeavoring to delve into a subjective consideration of the research questions.

### **The Research Questions**

This dissertation, which uses writing as inquiry methodology, endeavors to answer the following questions, divided by the three informing frameworks:

1. Teaching of Poetry using Contemporary Authors
  - a. How does one critically engage adolescents using poetry?
2. Critical Literacy
  - a. What evidence was found for achieving critical literacy with the students?
  - b. What evidence demonstrates critical pedagogy at work in the High School Literacy Project
3. Multicultural Education
  - a. How can execution of the five tenets of Banks for multicultural education be shown through the High School Literacy Project?

### **Data**

In this dissertation, the cultural understanding of a poetry community is developed, while at the same time exposing the experiences of the teacher and students. To that end, poems produced by students during the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years are used in

answering the questions in addition to texts created by and memories recovered by the researcher. Journal entries, lesson plans, and letters to students, both handwritten and typed, from the researcher will be used as sources of information. Selection of participant texts was based on past involvement with the High School Literacy Project as shown through the publicly available products: the 2005 and 2006 chapbooks.

Textual analysis flows from strong traditions in literature studies and cultural studies. In particular, points of interest are what text may reveal, the multiple meanings within it, and the consideration that each text – lesson plans, journal entries, poems – must be seen in terms of the dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings as noted by Stuart Hall (1979). The dynamics of power that push through the texts will allow me to consider the discourses that at-risk adolescents explore, bridging the gap between school and home literacies by considerations of race, class, identity and American politics among other topics:

These codes are the means by which power and ideology are made to signify particular discourses. They refer signs to the ‘maps of meaning’ into which any culture is classified; and those ‘maps of social reality’ have the whole range of social meanings, practices, and usages, power and interest ‘written in’ to them... They are, if you live, the fragments of ideology. (Hall, 1979, p. 134)

The poems themselves may speak to the thoughts of and social interactions that affect the lives of at-risk adolescents, topics which may engage them in desiring to be more literate and more expressive. This use of Hall (1979) and semiotics is incredibly important particularly in thinking of the literacy practices, which are mediated and reflected by culture (Willis, 2000).

## **Making Meaning from Texts**

In order to come to a greater understanding of multicultural and contemporary poetics and poetry, students must be engaged in the process of self-understanding and move from this understanding into a direct relationship with texts in a social environment. They must read poetry from their own understanding of self and then investigate what they know with what they have learned from that text. They must explore the text with pen and in a community space. Vygotsky (1978) noted that all identities are constructed through social exchange. A self does not become itself in isolation alone; rather, the self learns its reality through interaction with the other. Neither does a poem become a poem without being made so through the text itself and those who read it claiming that identity for it. This identification/naming process is extremely powerful. As Vernon (1979) explains:

First of all, a name penetrates a thing and brings it forth so that it can be handled by language, so that language will have a world to avail itself of. A name is not identical with the essence of something, but it does extract that essence so that we can deal with it. Essence means not only substance or identity, but the source of power of something. (p. 63)

While the source of power for a person remains inside of the person, that power can be tapped or augmented by the social naming process. This goes, too, for a text: words have already within them a certain power, but it is through the interpretation of those words and the action that those interpretations inspire that words are given an even greater power. Take for example all of the interpretations of a passage in the Bible. One passage can mean a number of different things to a number of different people, all of whom act on their interpretation of that passage. The making of meaning in this case and in most cases can have an incredible effect on real lives.



## **Purpose**

The study is not intended to lend itself to the production of generalizable data; rather it is to set the scene for further research in respect to the intersection between critical literacy, poetry, and pedagogy. The pairing of poetry linked by metaphor to the critical literacy prose may seem particularly innovative, but it lies, too, within the realm of “writing as a method of inquiry” as noted by Laurel Richardson (1994) in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. She explains that the author imbues the text with a particular purpose, to be a representation of fact or fiction. In the creation of the text, the author has the potential to move beyond the reporting of data. This is especially true when using “creative analytical processes”, which Richardson (1994) writes: “displays the writing process and the writing product as deeply intertwined; both are privileged” (p. 962). What is in question is not only the search for knowledge but how the researcher comes to that knowledge. Within this type of writing, the self is acknowledged as ever present. It, too, must be questioned. She writes: “Self-reflexivity brings to consciousness some of the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing” (p. 964). Still the need for standard research practices is required, which is answered through the use of texts. The work is written in a manner that exemplifies the researcher’s multiple identities, an exploration of the writing process that plays with metaphor even in the critical analysis of self and others.

This dissertation does allow for the textual analysis of poetic works and the exploration of poetic community creation through writing. When political poetry is discussed, it is localized to that of the twentieth and, now, twenty-first centuries. What are of interest are social explorations of power and its exchange. To that end, the work of contemporary, multicultural authors who echo and challenge the backgrounds, life

experiences, and opinions of High School Literacy Project students were used to encourage engagement in bridging the gap between home and school literacies (Volk & Acosta, 2003) in the act of fostering critical literacy: ““Multicultural,”” when used to designate devalued cultures, inserts a historical consciousness into discussions about cultural representation ... In this respect, the multicultural engages with postmodernism in ways that challenge institutionalized notions of culture, knowledge, and tradition” (Pérez-Torres, 1993-94). Through the critical reading of texts in context of their creation as well as the initial reaction to them and growth from them – humans develop, too, from interaction with the concepts within texts created by others, perhaps far removed from the field of experience of the reader – readers continue on their journey towards becoming more human through engagement with another’s experience. It is important to use contemporary, multicultural poems so that discussions of political issues relevant to the lives of my students can take place, often without some of the challenges of imagining one’s self in a different time and place: “The act of autobiography and the act of poetry, both as creation and as recreation, constitute a bringing to consciousness of the nature of one’s own existence, transforming the mere fact of existence into a realized quality and a possible meaning. In a certain sense, autobiography and poetry are both definitions of the self at a moment and in a place ...” (Olney, 1972). It is extremely important to find reflections of one’s self within the work studied as well as to read and listen to voices completely different from one’s experience. It is a political decision to teach with this agenda in mind. This dissertation also pushes the boundaries of qualitative research methodology, particularly in its use in the final chapter of poetry linked thematically to reflections:

Poetry that is expressive and autobiographic in a deeper than personalistic or historic sense draws metaphors, or accepts and adopts them, from the self as it

is becoming, and then displays all the world to the reader through the glass of these metaphors. (Olney, 1972, p. 301)

In this passage from James Olney, one understands the reflection of self and the self's development able to happen within the poem as it cannot happen, or occur in a different form, within prose.

Interesting to note, too, is the merging of local adolescent narratives through their literacy practices. This process conjures up obvious postmodernist philosophical examination. The narratives in poetic form question the metanarratives of home, justice and community that American society would like adolescents to embody. Instead, the writings push readers and listeners to question the reasoning behind the existence of inequalities that create the harsh conditions in which these adolescents live. Written exchanges (poetry) are situated within particular places, but they are not limited by these places (Vasudevan, 2009). The self, too, is defined, and yet the multiple meanings to be found within the texts are important as well. Even the process of adolescents writing lends itself to a forced acknowledgment of multiple and marginalized voices. Again, poems and identities are formed through exchanges within communities. A poem is not simply a confined receptacle of meaning. These communities may encourage the individual to accept or reject the scripts at work within them. Barbara Sparks notes that hip hop can create for some a sense of belonging:

The rhythmic dialogic style of hip hop and rap is a magnetic draw for many but the sense of communication and community that is created and the sense of being connected to a long line of poets and rappers can be even more powerful in that it stops the isolation and confinement. (2002, p. 4)

Elizabeth B. Moje (2000) defined and complicated the construct of community in relation to literacy research, which is especially relevant. A community, as with a place, is not necessarily a geographic space, which is certainly a consideration in the complication of the community construct. Adolescents, in truth, must negotiate their identity formation (Vyas, 2004; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield, 1992; Wigfield, 1991) process through interactions with a number of different communities, which may overlap or be diametrically opposed to one another, such as is occasionally the case when it comes to youth membership in home and school communities. This, too, is a political negotiation, where philosophies that are in-line or in conflict may come to collide within one body through traveling from home to school and back again. This can be a daily happening.

But why use poetry as medium for the promotion of literacy anyway? If we go to the poetic interpretations of the possibilities inherent within poetry, we might find an answer in James Olney (1972):

Poetry, as Coleridge remarked, is a creative act analogous, in its own realm, to the divine *fiat*, bringing into being a symbolic self and with it an entire universe. Though he may be its creator, the poet, like any man, can exist only in his own universe. (p. 331)

In essence, the poet, while confronting an outside world, has the potential of creating an entirely different universe and an entirely different self. Moving to a more concrete understanding of the choice of poetry, Wendy Luttrell and Caroline Parker (2001) found in an early study of the High School Literacy Project that students were already invested in literacy practices outside of school; writing poetry was one of those practices. Unfortunately for many students, the bridge between home and school literacy practices is nonexistent.

The High School Literacy Project curriculum allows students to stem from the home narrative and couple it with lyrical styling of surprising metaphor and simile or simply the truthful revelation of the declarative, which Sartre would support. They glory in using their home languages of Spanish, Ebonics or American slang within the context of a well-developed poem, one which projects who they have been, are, and hope to become. They fluidly create intense treatises on societal ills using regular rhyme scheme and the metrical structure of rap. They learn the language of poetry – poetic devices, form, critique – and become willing and able to critique the technique within their own work, that of their peers as well as that of published poets. Poetry is deceptively simple. In the confines of just three lines (haiku) or fourteen (sonnet), in the limits of a pantoum, ghazal or villanelle, students must labor over word choice and content decisions, decide when to use figurative language, and battle within themselves enough to let fear go and tell their stories without it. Poetry allows students an opportunity to immediately engage in the reading and creation of texts that reflect their own human becoming. It embodies the journey to become more human in content and form more easily than within prose, which generally does not acknowledge the essential breath of the writer and reader. Poetry unifies the breath through line breaks and spaces and allows for one person to breathe for another to a time, and through that exchange and the conflict that arises from one person with another, negotiations of meaning happen. In the end, the purpose of this dissertation is to tell the story and cull out the lessons and truths one can learn from that story.

### **Summary of Analytical Frameworks**

This dissertation lies at the crossroads between these three disciplines: teaching of poetry using the work of contemporary authors, multicultural education and critical literacy.

Because there are many theorists who particularly influenced the considerations within this dissertation and they do not always mesh well together, rather than lose those theoretical pieces, in this dissertation, theory is used as inspiration and muse. This is inline with the poetic sensibility of the researcher as well as a writing as inquiry format, which allows for the literary exploration of community and social relationships. In this case, the community is academic and the exchanges are exchanges of ideas within a virtual space. While Gramsci and Foucault would not necessarily agree, for example, some of their core ideas are used to inspire this work and considerations of it. Just as the poet is inspired by nature, sound, conversation, art, so is the poet-researcher inspired by theory. In both cases, the inspiration is used simply as inspiration to allow one to delve further into a conceptions of a particular circumstance. In this case, that is the High School Literacy Project.

### **Framework 1: Teaching of Poetry Using the Work of Contemporary Authors**

While the teaching of poetry using the work of contemporary authors may seem a somewhat obvious tactic, it is not. Recalling high school English experiences, the researcher could not identify more than a handful of contemporary – defined as living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – authors used in the curriculum. Not one of those was still living at the time that they were discussed in her classes. It was not until her collegiate experience that she was introduced to contemporary authors. There was an absence, a lack of engagement in the poetic works of these authors, distanced by time, background, gender. It was an absence addressed in the High School Literacy Project as a teacher. This is not to say that the poetry within the Western canon, generally laden with more dead, white men than poets from other backgrounds, is totally useless or not relevant; rather, in the experience of the researcher, there has been such an absence of contemporary, multicultural work. In the opinion of the

researcher, students from diverse backgrounds are more likely to identify with and engage in the poetry of contemporary, multicultural writers particularly because the work is centered on the present or the author is accessible.

If one disregards the personal experience of the dissertation author, there is still a lack of theorization, curriculum design and practice, and program/lesson evaluation on the teaching of poetry using the work of contemporary authors. In an analysis of four leading journals in English Education – *English Education*, *English Journal*, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* and *Research in the Teaching of English* – from September 1995 to May 2009, not one even mentioned the teaching of poetry more than 5% of the time in its articles. In one journal, the majority of articles within that group centered on the analysis of poetry, not its writing. It seemed that while the journal encouraged the writing and publication of poems from teachers and professors, there was little space for the exploration of how to teach those skills. Poetry seemed to just have to come organically to a person without tutelage in content, form and language beyond the analysis taught in high school classes. This dissertation challenges the conceptions that poetry cannot be taught, that poetry arises in a poet on occasion, and that analysis is all that should be taught at the high school level. It takes up the charge that the true understanding of poetry as a form of written and spoken expression can open up the doors to realms of critical thinking and critical literacy.

**Research Question:**

1. Teaching of Poetry using Contemporary Authors
  - a. How does one critically engage adolescents using poetry?

## **Framework 2: Critical Literacy**

It is critical literacy that is the central framework for this dissertation. Stemming from critical theory - which refers to a “process of critique” (Giroux, 2001, p. 8), is socially transformative, attempts to work towards a consensus, is dialectical, and calls for an examination of the self in addition to and in relation to the other - critical literacy encourages a critique of the world through words (Freire and Macedo, 1987). While the analysis can be enough, people are also encouraged to be agents of change, specifically identifying problems and solutions through critical thought and dialogue (Arias, 2008; Behrman, 2006; Glasgow, 2001; Young, 2001; Robertson and Szostak, 1996). Resistance and the creation of counter-texts/counter-narratives (Acosta, 2008; Wissman, 2008/2007; Anzaldúa, 1987; Freire, 1968) are encouraged in this area. The empowerment of the disenfranchised and marginalized (Pescatore, 2008/2007; Gramsci, 1999; Vacca, 1998; Foucault, 1995; Shor, 1992) through an analysis of the powers at work and resistance to them also takes a central role through critical literacy. Critical literacy does not allow one to only think of the other and its power; one must also consider the self in relation to that other. Only through self-reflection does true transformation occur (Freire, 1968; Mullen, 1995; Hooks, 1994). One becomes a human being (Freire, 1968) and combats dehumanization through self-reflection and the practice of acting contrary through oppression. In critical literacy, this process occurs through written and spoken exchange, dialogue and analysis, critique and change. Critical literacy challenges one to delve beneath the surface of meaning (Pescatore, 2007) to identify the ideology behind the statement and the bias that informs it (Unsworth, 1999). It challenges the metanarrative (Lyotard, 1992; Lyotard, 1984), the knowledge on concepts that is handed down to the populace. *Here is justice. Here is power.* Critical literacy explores those narratives, those



concepts, the meanings of the texts and the ideology encoded beneath those texts (Hall, 1979). Critical literacy, in the end, requires an active engagement in the world and the agency to enact positive and transformational change (Michell, 2007; Pescatore, 2007).

### **Research Question:**

#### 2. Critical Literacy

- a. What evidence was found for achieving critical literacy with the students?
- b. What evidence demonstrates critical pedagogy at work in the High School Literacy Project

### **Framework 3: Multicultural Education**

Also, deeply at root within the writing of this dissertation is multicultural education. According to James Banks (2003; 1994), multicultural education is a field of study aimed at increasing educational equity for all students, which calls on the constructs, theories, concepts from all disciplines toward that aim. He offers five elements to understanding multicultural education and how to accomplish it. According to Banks, content integration, prejudice reduction, knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, and empowering of school structure and social structure are all essential to multicultural education.

In content integration, Banks calls teachers to bring into the classroom culturally responsive materials. He writes that there is a continuum of content integration, which Sonia Nieto (1999) would echo. At the first section of the continuum, there may be diversity signs and teaching philosophies that state that the teaching and learning community seeks to include diversity, but reality may conflict with these statements. In reality, diversity may take the shape of a reading list of Black authors during Black history month or a lesson on tolerance one week in class. In that sort of inclusion, of course, there is no extraordinary

change that happens as a result, definitely no transformational pedagogy or learning. On the other end of the spectrum there is full content integration of multicultural and culturally responsive materials. Teachers may have training on the inclusion of texts from a range of experiences. They may also include different ways of knowing in their lesson plans. They may bring in speakers and involve them fully when teaching about something of which they know little. Languages would be celebrated within the classroom as an entrance into deeper understanding of particular texts.

Prejudice reduction pushes teachers to actively examine their own prejudices as they encourage their students to admit and defeat theirs. In this way, through self-reflection students would become better able to fight against intolerance and the marginalization of peoples.

Banks further writes of knowledge construction. He particularly refers to several different types of knowledge. There is personal knowledge, political knowledge, transformative academic knowledge, and popular knowledge among others. Only through the negotiation of what has been given and what one is and the final decision as to what to accept and what to negate does one develop as an individual (Marcia, 1966). Nieto (1998) adds that according to constructivism, knowledge builds when a learner is engaged in their own learning and can build one concept onto another. This combats the notion that Freire (1968) wrote at length about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: banking education. In this type of education, knowledge is not constructed, rather it is given to learners and expected to be recalled as a parrot recalls: with no real understanding of the meaning and no investment.

Equity pedagogy is the fourth element and calls for teachers to teach their students so that all are successful, truly believing that all students can learn. While this seems at first like an obvious concept, so often it is ignored.

Last but not least is Bank's conception of empowering the school structure and social structure. Banks calls for teachers and students to develop the critical skills needed to find ways to bridge the gap between the two structures. By respecting home cultures, he writes that students will become more engaged in their schooling (Freire, 1968) and by developing critical thinking skills students can find ways to positively affect their school and home communities (Moje, 2002; Moje, 2000; Lee, 2000; Bizzell, 1982).

### **Research Question:**

#### 3. Multicultural Education

- a. How can execution of the five tenets of Banks for multicultural education be shown through the High School Literacy Project?

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

The dissertation takes form through the following five chapters. The next chapter incorporates a more detailed literature review on each of the analytical frameworks noted above. At the end of each literature review, the literature will be used to support a supposition about the High School Literacy Project and what might be accomplished through the application of critical literacy practices in a poetry curriculum. After the three literature reviews, there is a synthesis section of how the three intermingle and how they inform the High School Literacy Project and its particular approach to critical literacy.

In the third chapter, the research procedure is outlined. This includes an explanation of the collected evidence and the analytical procedures used. Because the dissertation uses

writing as inquiry as the methodology of construction, the process of narrative construction will be described, particularly centering on the chronological events and the stories that evolved from each point in time as well as the thematic explorations that stemmed from the poems themselves. Here the evidence gathered in relation to the teaching of poetry and its application will be examined.

In the fourth chapter, the High School Literacy Project will be described more fully, allowing for a chronological narrative of the history of the project up to the last two years of it in which the particular curriculum was set into place.

In the fifth chapter, themes that arose from the research will be explored such as those of meaning making, agency, engagement, poetic voice, poetic community, and empowerment . The three analytical frameworks will be used to inform the analysis on the evidence presented and note what the High School Literacy Project might contribute to the literature.

Finally, the sixth chapter will allow for expression of the High School Literacy Project and its personal meaning. This section will more fully incorporate the researcher's own poetry, which will be thematically linked throughout the dissertation. In this chapter, recollections are recounted. The collaborations with the poets, the challenges, and successes will be more fully detailed and related to personal experience. Here, too, is the reflection, the thought of one's own work and what the project itself contributed not only to research but to the self.

## **CHAPTER 2: Literature Review of the Analytical Frameworks**

The particular field of interest that concerns this dissertation is the teaching of poetry with contemporary authors as it relates to critical literacy and multicultural education. These three analytical frameworks relate directly to the last two years of the High School Literacy Project, which saw the design and implementation of a poetry curriculum designed to engage students in the development of their reading, writing and critical thinking skills.

### **Teaching of Poetry Using Contemporary Authors**

This concentration does stem from a particular absence within the literature. Spanning from September 1995 to September 2009, an examination of all articles that focused on the teaching of poetry in *English Education*, *English Journal*, *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, and *Research in the Teaching of English* revealed a lacking area in regards to the teaching of poetry and its use as a literacy method. In *English Education* (examined February 1997 to July 2009), 1.87% (6 out of 320) articles mentioned the teaching of poetry. In *English Journal* (December 1995 to September 2009), while 20.98% of the content of the journal was made up of poetry (636 out of 3031, the total number made up of the number of poems and research articles together), the percentage of articles on the teaching of poetry stood at 4.09% (98 articles out of the total of research articles 2395). A curiosity developed. Is poetry only for the elite, something to be dabbled in by the few, the scholars, the outsiders with the some native ability to see beyond borders? It would seem from *English Journal* that the writing of poetry is something that cannot be taught, metaphor belongs only to those that would claim brilliance. For high school students, the primary concern was teaching how to

interpret and read the poem, rather than how to write one. The support for this theory was found through further research. In *Research in the Teaching of English* (February 1997 to August 2009), the number of articles on the teaching of poetry fell to 1.32% (4 out of 304). Finally, in *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, (September 1995 to May 2009) the percentage stood at 1.21% (12 out of 994). In all of the journals, nearly all those that focused on the teaching of poetry delineated only further methods for interpreting and reading a poem. There were articles on the acceptance of poetry as a valid form of expression in writing classes, but very few that delved into the *how* of writing a poem

When one considers the confluence of fields that the High School Literacy Project addressed - teaching of poetry using contemporary, multicultural authors that affects or addresses the development of critical literacy skills - all of the percentages drop. When looking for articles that addressed the teaching of poetry, critical literacy, contemporary and multicultural authors, *English Education* fell to 0% (0 out of 320); *English Journal* fell to .67% (16 out of 2395); *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* fell to .10% (1 out of 994); and *Research in the Teaching of English* fell to .33% (1 out of 304). After doing this analysis of over 4000 articles, one cannot help but come to the conclusion that the teaching of poetry with the aim of improving critical literacy through the use of the work of contemporary, multicultural writers, is an area that requires more research. It is virtually nonexistent within the literature. This dissertation answers the call through a discussion of the High School Literacy Project and its implication in the aforementioned fields.

Teaching of poetry in regards to critical literacy is discussed in a large number of articles. However, only a few articles approach all three areas as necessary for a successful High School Literacy Project: the teaching of poetry through contemporary, critical literacy,

and multicultural literature. In the following section, I will develop this framework through a reading of previous exemplary work on poetry and literacy.

In 1999, Lowry Hemphill did a quantitative and qualitative study on narrative style, social class and responses to poetry. Focusing primarily on the literacy of marginalized youth she examines the poetry responses of middle and working class students. All of the students were high achievers to minimize the effect of limited literacy or the inability to grasp a poem on the study itself. The students were honors students, selected by the host teacher. Hemphill focused on the differences in narrative development – point-driven versus story-driven responses – different responses to poetry based on class. Of interest, too, was how discourses informed the narrative and meaning-making process of the adolescent. *Primary discourse* was defined as the communication style acquired from early socialization in families and communities while *secondary discourse* was defined as discourse developed in an institutional setting such as school. Within this dissertation, these discourses are identified as home/local literacy and school literacy (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2000; MacCleod, 2004; Heath, 1983; Street, 2006, 2005, 2001, 1984). Hemphill’s study was guided by the belief that primary discourse informs the acquisition of secondary discourse and social class is intrinsic to this process. Oral language, reading and writing assessments were done on a group of 10 students first through an interview where students had to describe a disaster that had happened to them to examine their narrative styles and then in a recorded think-aloud where students were given an individual poem to analyze line by line. These oral portions were coded and analyzed by separate researchers until agreement was found between them in the analysis. Hemphill found that working class students generally related lengthier stories that provided richer description, explanatory information and attempts to relate to the story or

poem personally. Middle class students often responded in both exercises with more distance, giving the point rather than revealing their own stance or subjectivity within the incident or poetic understanding. Working class students also tended to use more intensifiers such as “really” or “very” to ensure that their points came across to their audience. They also more frequently related the stance of characters within the story. Middle class students, on the other hand, used abstracts to introduce their stories more often (as in a research paper, a short summary of the topic), less intensifiers, less end summaries to specifically tell the meaning of the story and less frequent reporting of intentions of story characters.

In “Slam: Hip-Hop Meets Poetry – A Strategy for Violence Intervention” by Heather E. Bruce and Bryan Dexter Davis (2000), two teachers unite with a particular aim in mind: to foster peace. In answer to the school shootings and violence that plagued the day, the two decided to develop a curriculum that used poetry to promote the expression of emotion. After watching *Slam* (1998), a fictional film in which a poem literally saves the life of an inmate by causing rivaling gangs to have their violence hushed by wonder, the two decide to institute a weekly slam at the local high school:

We can teach English so that people stop hurting and killing each other and themselves by embracing diversity, developing inclusive curriculum and creating conditions in our classrooms that encourage our student to use the power of language rather than the force of fists or weapons of self-destruction to intervene symbolically in violence. (2000, p. 121)

Within their class, Bruce and Davis called upon the home literacy, that of hip hop and rap, and combined it with a school literacy in the study of poetry. They noted with their students that popular rap songs are simply poems to a beat. The most innovative metaphors, puns and turns of phrase gather the most attention in a rap as is the case in a poem, which uses very few words to pack the most amount of punch as possible. While the two teachers experienced



some reluctance at first to the idea of poetry – groans and rolling eyes on the part of the students – their audience quickly warmed up to a program that combined two literacies. The weekly slam provided an opportunity for students who had disengaged to conquer a form that seemed impenetrable. They created a community of writers. In preparation for weekly slams, they offered one another constructive critiques, treating each other with respect and dignity, which was the purpose of the use of slam in the first place. While the form encourages competition, it also challenges one to develop and to be a part of a poetic community. The teachers even further pushed students through the inclusion of contemporary, multicultural authors in the classroom and on the page. Pre-writing exercises were encouraged as was group sharing of poems. Students were encouraged to use their pens as weapons for peace while, at the same time, learning the names for the poetic devices, tools they could use within their own work. They also learned performance techniques such as how to project one's voice, the importance of proper posture, eye contact and showing pride in one's work. While the two wrote that they could not predict the long term effects of the experience on the students, they did notice that within the class students demonstrated more tolerance and respect for one another.

Bruce and Davis (2000) offer a significant example of the positive effects that a poetry program can have on adolescents, particularly those who have disengaged from school. Confidence is built. Students engage in the writing and reading process. They can identify with the authors chosen, because they are contemporary and multicultural. They can explore the conflicts and meanings at play more easily, because they are similar to those at work within their own lives. They develop a cohesive community, one that is collaborative and challenging. They invest more in their own learning and share parts of themselves that

previously they hid out of fear. Tolerance through dialogue is cultivated. A strength in home literacies is identified so as to scaffold the school literacy in which poetry analysis, tropes and devices are taught. In this way, both literacies are in balance rather than one privileged over the other.

The final article that gives context to my work reveals an English education practice detailed by Mary Lynn Hule (2006) in *English Journal*. In this article, Hule offers an exercise that she did with her students using a poem from Nicolás Guillén entitled “Ballad of the Two Grandfathers”. In this poem, Hule offers her students a Spanish poem in English translation that explores the conflict of a child with grandfathers from different sides of an age long battle. One was a slave and the other a Spanish slave-holder. Within the speaker, both sides exist. He is the fruit of different cultures. Within the poem, the speaker must come to grips with these two conflicting sides of his identity so as to claim his own self. Hule uses the power to demonstrate inherited conflicts, tensions that are passed down to the speaker. After an in-depth and critical reading of the tract, Hule instructs her students to write two sides of a conflict story using a folded piece of paper. At the bottom, across both sections, the students are to write a solution to the problem if there is one. In her work with “shadow poems”, Hule offers an exercise in critical literacy, the teaching of poetry, contemporary (20<sup>th</sup> century) and multicultural literature, all the areas in which the High School Literacy Project worked in its final two years. She also engages the students, empowering them to share their struggles with difficult and personal conflicts:

Students recognized the paralysis that is the product of unresolved conflict; some realized the difficulty – and necessity – of forgiving and embracing the “grandfathers” who have made us who we are; others discovered the potential of writing for finding ways to resolve and embrace conflicts so that they might move beyond them. (2006, p. 33)

Students became agents in their own struggles, able to take action to resolve those conflicts with words. The activity enabled students to have power within situations in which they were powerless, those which were inherited. Freire and Macedo (1987) write of the power of reading the world through words. When students are able to decode (Hall, 1979) the meanings present within the words and word exchanges around them, they are able to question them. From the act of questioning, they can choose to become participants in the society represented by those words or act against that society through the creation of counternarratives (Dominguez, Duarte, et al, 2009).

While extending from a longer tradition of critical literacy approaches and the more recent use of poetry as a literacy tool, the High School Literacy Project is unique, as it focused on fostering critical literacy in adolescents who did not identify as writers or active readers. Through conquering words and studying the work of contemporary, multicultural writers, the project attempted to engage high school students so that they would become agents in their own writing, recognize voice and work to establish their own writing voices, and invest in becoming writers and readers.

### **Possibilities in the High School Literacy Project**

While many have dabbled in the *teaching of poetry* (Dressman and Faust, 2007; Perry, 2007; Kryder, 2006; Skelton, 2006; Sowder, 2006; Wyhe, 2006; Brewbaker, 2005; Keil, 2005; Jewell, 2004; Barbieri, 2002; Haba and Farawell, 2002; Haugh, et. al., 2002; Salam, 2002; Sniderman, 2002; Wendelin, 2001; Darvin, 2000; Feder, 2000; Wyhe, 2000; Myers, 1998; Ericson, 1997; Willis, 1997; Perreault, 1996; Wiedmann and Machtan, 1996) *as a method of critical literacy*, generally using poetry as an expression of another aim, few have concentrated on the teaching of poetry itself and what it can add to the discussion of

development of critical literacy skills. Kristin M. Comment (2009), for example, used the analysis of the poetic works of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman to explore conceptions of sexual identity, difference, prejudice, and writing within that frame. *Others use the poetry of multicultural writers to provide a connection to a longer tradition of poetic form*, such as in the case of the sonnet and the work of Claude McKay (Denizé and Newlin, 2009). *Poetic responses to oppression and resistance and research concerning such responses are in no shortage* (Miller, 2009; Reilly, 2009; Staples, 2008; Baker, 2007; Alexander-Smith, 2004; Jocson, 2004; Nelson, 2000; Bartel and Grandberry, 1997; Greenway, 1996) as is there no shortage of research on analyzing texts from the Western canon, such as Shakespeare's or Chaucer's poems and plays, through poetry (Smith, 2009; Lynch, 2007; Mellor, 2000). While research on the classics and responses to them are in no short supply (Courtney-Smith and Angelotti, 2005; Dyson, 2005; Kane, et. al, 2004; Jolley, 2003; Knoeller, 2003; Kammer, 2002; Lubarsky, 2002; Brown and Miskin, 2001; Thomas, 1998), *there is very little in the teaching of poetry outside of the traditional Western canon* (Goebel, 2002; Kammer, 2002). *There is also very little on the teaching of scansion* (Cobb, 2006) or listening to the rhythm of a poem (Cobbs, 2005). *There have been those who have written on the teaching of poetry, curricula, lesson plans, and engagement* (Webb, 2009). *While often excluded, there have been some examples of the study of the poetic works of contemporary authors* (Wissman, 2009; Kirkland, 2008; Schwalb, 2006; Blasingame, Jr., 2002; Kammer, 2002) in relation to the present society that informed their writing. Theorizing the effect of poetry on the development of metacognition appears once in the literature (Eva-Wood, 2008) as does preference for narrative style (Lowry, 1999). Few explore the multiplicity of meanings that can be present within even one line of poetry and the process of encoding and decoding those

meanings (Figgins and Johnson, 2007; Glenn, 2007; Wilkinson, 2006; Polette, 1997/1996). *Another area in which there is an absence is that of adolescent engagement through poetry* (Young, 2007). While rap and performance poetry (Lindblom, 2007.2; Fisher, 2005; Cooks, 2005; Ellis, Geer, and Lamberton, 2004; Paul, 2000; Lardner, Sones, and Weems, 1996) has been researched and used as a social action practice (Weinstein, 2007/2006; Jocson, 2006; Bruce and Davis, 2000), *little has been done on the process of teaching how to create such pieces*. While there is a hunger for more poetry and a resurgence in the publishing of poetry geared towards youth readers (Gallo, 2007; Allender, 2005), *few articles on the teaching of such works or the teaching of poetic writing appear in the literature*. Rather than pedagogical treatises on the teaching of poetry beyond analysis, there should be more focus on the evaluation of poetry (Griswold, 2006; LeNoir, 2002) and creating rubrics to do so. On occasion, the performance of poetry is researched (Elster and Hanauer, 2002). *Unfortunately, most teachers are familiar only with the teaching of haiku* (Apol, 2002; Cheney, 2002; Jago, 2002; Tweedie and Kolitsky, 2002) *or sensory poems* (Baart, 2002) and so are filled with anxiety (Cline, 2001) at the prospect of teaching poetry beyond this form. There are some exceptions to this (Ruggieri, 2007; Womelsduff, 2005) such as in the case of teaching shadow poems (Hule, 2006), *writing poetry as a way to connect to literature* (Hunt and Hunt, 2007), *rewriting the social world through poetry* (Jocson, 2006), *visual art-inspired poems* (Orzulak, 2007; Moorman, 2006; Gorrell, 2000), *multiple voice poems* (Bintz and Henning – Shannon, 2005; Greenway, 1996), *musically-inspired poems* and (Jewell, 2004; Hutchinson and Suhor, 1996), *found poems* (Commeyras and Kelly, 2002), hypertext poems (Gruber, 2002). *Few theorize poetry as a literacy method* (Kinloch, 2005). *Only four articles from the four leading research journals in English education explored the creation of a poetry*

*community* (Strever, 2007; Jocson, 2005; Frazier, 2003; Dickson, 1999). Only one focused on student-led workshops (Mayer, 2002). Only one considered poetry as a narrative methodology (Furman, 2004). Also, only two focused on the practice of teaching of poetry, geared towards encouraging the development of teachers as poets (Moore, 2002; Shafer, 2002).

All of the italicized portions were present in the High School Literacy Project. The High School Literacy Project puts into practice the teaching of poetic form, the study of the poetic work contemporary, multicultural writers, and the writing of poetry in response to that study and a critical analysis of the world.

### **Multicultural Education**

The second analytical framework that informs this dissertation is that of multicultural education. According to James Banks (2003; 1994), multicultural education is a field of study aimed at increasing educational equity for all students, which calls on the constructs, theories, and concepts from all disciplines toward that aim. He offers five elements to understanding multicultural education and how to accomplish it. According to Banks (2003; 1994), content integration, prejudice reduction, knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, and empowering of school structure and social structure are all essential to multicultural education.

In content integration, Banks (2003; 1994) calls teachers to bring into the classroom culturally responsive materials. He writes that there is a continuum of content integration, which Sonia Nieto (1999) would echo. At the first section of the continuum, there may be diversity signs and teaching philosophies that state that the teaching and learning community seeks to include diversity, but reality may conflict with these statements. In reality, diversity

may take the shape a reading list of Black authors during Black history month or a lesson on tolerance one week in class. In that sort of inclusion, of course, there is no extraordinary change that happens as a result, definitely no transformational pedagogy or learning. On the other end of the spectrum there is full content integration of multicultural and culturally responsive materials. Teachers may have training on the inclusion of texts from a range of experiences. They may also include different ways of knowing in their lesson plans. They may bring in speakers and involve them fully when teaching about something of which they know little. Languages would be celebrated within the classroom as an entrance into deeper understanding of particular texts. For example, bringing in a text with Spanish would empower the Spanish-speaking students who might understand more of what the actual words in the original language connote rather than trusting the translation fully.

Prejudice reduction pushes teachers to actively examine their own prejudices as they encourage their students to admit and defeat theirs. In this way, through self-reflection students would become better able to fight against intolerance and the marginalization of peoples. This could take the form of an activity that first starts with distance: reading a text on Black-Jewish relations in New York after the killing of two men and then watching the work by Anna Deveare Smith (2000; 1993; 1992) that was done using interviews. This could lend itself to the reading of other works that include prejudices and then a self-examination. Students could then be challenged to come up with ways to combat prejudice in their own communities. In this way, they would be active in their own knowledge construction.

Banks further writes of knowledge construction. He particularly refers to several different types of knowledge. There is personal knowledge, political knowledge, transformative academic knowledge, and popular knowledge among others. Vygotsky

(1978) would say that learning develops through social interaction. Applied to Banks's (2003; 1994) conception of knowledge construction within the context of multicultural education leads to the idea that knowledge develops through social interaction and self reflection. It is only through the negotiation of what has been given and what one is and the final decision as to what to accept and what to negate does one develop as an individual (Marcia, 1966). Nieto (1999) adds that according to constructivism, knowledge builds when a learner is engaged in their own learning and can build one concept onto another. This combats the notion that Freire (1968) wrote at length about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: banking education. In this type of education, knowledge is not constructed, rather it is given to learners and expected to be recalled as a parrot recalls: with no real understanding of the meaning and no investment. It is important in knowledge construction in multicultural classrooms (Solsken, Willett, et al, 2000) that it be counterhegemonic (Gramsci, 1999), which calls for an awareness of power and structures that affect the individual or group through power.

Equity pedagogy is the fourth element and calls for teachers to teach their students so that all are successful, truly believing that all students can learn. This seems at first like an obvious concept, which is why it is often ignored. Teachers treat their students as if they cannot learn or as if they have no business in the classroom. Just see Jonathan Kozol (1996; 1992) and his sobering writings on the state of education in the United States for examples of this.

Last but not least is Banks's (2003; 1994) conception of empowering the school structure and social structure. Banks calls for teachers and students to develop the critical skills needed to find ways to bridge the gap between the two structures. He calls for the



transformation, for schools and society to become more equitable and accepting of difference (Sleeter, 2004). By respecting home cultures, he writes that students will become more engaged in their schooling (Freire, 1968) and by developing critical thinking skills students can find ways to positively affect their school and home communities.

Sonia Nieto (1999) writes that multicultural education must lie within a sociopolitical context, be antiracist, be geared to the basic education of all students and be committed to social justice and transformation. According to Nieto, multicultural education must have a space for students to examine subjects within a sociopolitical context. They cannot be divorced from history. They should be deeply steeped within it in order to act as social change agents. Of course, Shor (1992) would agree, adding that it is imperative that students develop the ability to critically analyze within a historical context (Walach, 2008) and to seek out different viewpoints. Anzaldúa (1987) adds to this in her considerations of borderlands and multiplicities of identity even within the body of one person.

Within her book *The Light in Their Eyes*, Nieto (1999) also writes at length about equitable education and confronting racism through education. Indeed, racism must be confronted and there is no better place than in the classroom. Tied to racism, too, are classism, and the marginalization of students dependent on sex/gender (Sitler, 2008; Williams, 2007/2006; Taylor 2005/2004; Styslinger, 2004; Williams, 2004; Slack, 1999; Tatum, 1999) or language. She calls, too, for education for all students, equitable education, and transformation of education and society for the better. In her book, she writes that teachers should create classrooms where all students can learn. I would add that teachers should also be reflective on the choices made in those creations. In Banks's (1999) introduction of the book, he gives the example of one science teacher asking the class, "what

is a multicultural atom?” with the answer being that it is one that can be understood by all the students in the classroom. Using the cultural capital of students, what they come to the classroom with, she encourages teachers to invent lessons that engage all students in their own learning.

### **Possibilities in the High School Literacy Project**

The High School Literacy Project takes multicultural education theories and puts them into practice through curriculum. To begin, the content of the High School Literacy Project uses contemporary and multicultural resources. Under the aim of content integration, multicultural literature has been used. It was a conscious decision to use the work of contemporary, multicultural writers in the execution of the High School Literacy Project curriculum. All writers were living at the time that their work was present. Through an analysis of the prejudices/bias present within the literature and those that the reader brings to a leader, a dialogue can begin, that is challenging and transformational. Multicultural literature in the hands of critical literacy researchers and pedagogues becomes a way to counter oppression through exposing hidden prejudices (Stallworth & Gibbons, 2006; McDiffett, 2001; Fairbrother, 1998), examining them, and fighting against them through education and social action. This dialogue lends itself to the sharing of experiences, the construction of knowledge that bridges the gap between home and school literacies, those noted by Banks’s (2003; 1994) conception of empowering the school and social structures.

The fourth element in Banks’s vision of multicultural education, equity pedagogy does have a place within the curriculum of the High School Literacy Project. As noted above, the analysis of four leading journals in English Education in regards to the teaching of poetry yielded paltry results. A question arises: is the writing of poetry and its publication

only for select few? The High School Literacy Project curriculum takes poetry from the parlors and upper echelons and puts it into classrooms, challenging all students to create, to critically examine the world and produce narratives and counternarratives within it. The High School Literacy Project challenges, too, all students to create poetry that does not exist separate from them, a staid phenomenon that is analyzed for a standardized test or studied simply for the use of poetic devices and conventions. The project calls for the transformational experience that comes from dedication and the development of a critical eye.

### **Critical Literacy**

Critical. In today's academic circles, it is a particularly hot buzzword. This dissertation alone uses the word in association with literacy and pedagogy. Lankshear and McLaren (1993) warned that critical may be used as a qualifier without meaning, that the state that is described will be drained of its essential meaning through the dissolution of the term. For that reason, it is necessary to define three fields, which are interconnected both in their development and in this dissertation: critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical literacy.

Particularly resonant within this dissertation's considerations of critical theory are the following aspects. It refers to "a school or thought and process of critique" (Giroux, 2001, p. 8). Critical theory calls for socially transformative and liberating work that questions basic assumptions. It may attempt to work towards a consensus. Critical theory is dialectical. Critical theory calls for an examination of the self in addition to that of the other.

Critical theory extends into the applications promised within critical pedagogy. Freire (2002; 1987; 1968), of course, would add to the notion of consensus from his own liberation

theology, that of communion, where parties share ideas and come to one accord. Critical pedagogy stems from critical theory, particularly in the work of Paulo Freire (1968). Peter McLaren (1999) writes of him:

Freire was able to effectively recast pedagogy on a global basis in the direction of a radical politics of historical struggle, a direction that he expanded into a life- time project. Freire's followers are undoubtedly due to the fact that Freire firmly believed educational change must be accompanied by significant changes in the social and political structure in which education takes place. (p. 49)

Again, in addition to the relation of educational change to social and political change, Freire believed in the importance of the investment of multiple parties in attempting to make change.

In critical pedagogy, teachers and students work towards becoming more empowered (Shor, 1992), through the acquisition of critical literacy skills. While this may be naturally relegated to the dominion of English Education, critical literacy belongs in every educational endeavor as it calls for students to be able to read the word and reread the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Through engaged pedagogy such as that delineated by hooks (1994), teachers aide students in the questioning of hegemonic structures and ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971) towards the envisioning of something more beneficial to humanity. There is something incredibly important in hooks's recognition of the self versus the other, her constant self-reflection, even to the point of questioning the language that separates her from her students and her conscious attempt to ally herself with those students, which separates her from what she deems to be an oppressive academy. She even invites emotional response to perceived ills, a practice that June Jordan (1995) also did, both encouraging students to channel those responses into action. This critique of practice, this

dialectical growth through dialogue, must be directed towards the self as much as it is to state apparatuses. Freire (1968) wrote, too, of the process of becoming a human being and being dehumanized, which, according to him, is the first step of marginalization, abuse and oppression.

In essence, critical pedagogy should foster safe spaces for dialogue and critique of society, encourage self-reflection and self-critique and allow students to question the structure of the classroom as well as the structure of society, and allow students to change those structures if they are oppressive and do not foster growth. Critical pedagogy should also respect the dignity, ways of knowing, and frames of knowledge present and encourage students and teachers to act as leaders in their own arenas of authority. Critical pedagogues should encourage their students to be action-oriented through doing transformative and political work. Finally, those involved in the process should create work that evokes emotional responses to community issues and find ways to channel those responses to better the community, whether those emotions be joy, sorrow or anger

Christine Pescatore (2007) provides an excellent definition of critical literacy in a recent article entitled "Current Events as Empowering Literacy: For English and Social Studies Teachers" published in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. In this article, Pescatore writes about her experience using current events to trigger the responses and investment of students within the reading and writing practices. She writes that

Critical literacy involves ways of thinking about the written and spoken word that go beyond the surface meaning in order to discern the deeper meaning, ideology, and bias expressed therein. It means taking a critical stance toward "official knowledge," and it is an understanding of how word choice and language creates meaning and influences our thoughts. Critical literacy involves "applying that meaning to your own context and imagining how to act on that meaning to change the conditions it reflects." (Shor, 1992, p.129) It offers a way to speak out against

injustice and unfairness. Critical literacy builds awareness of how power is used to marginalize and silence certain groups in a society, and engenders a willingness to reveal that situation in order to bring about change. Critical literacy is an active engagement with the world as well as with text and requires the ability to think critically. (Pescatore, 2007, p. 330)

Critical literacy is especially concerned with the development of critical thinking skills addressing issues with an acknowledgement that everyone has a particular stance on an issue stemming from the context in which they were raised and educated. Critical literacy strives to push students and teachers to examine social ills and confront them. Critical literacy, stemming from critical pedagogy, also seeks to examine the use of power, a topic taken up by Foucault in his later writings.

Finally, critical literacy should encourage self-reflection and allow students to critically examine texts and the world in which they are created. It should provide a space to “discern deeper meaning, ideology and bias expressed” (Pescatore, 2007, p. 330) within texts and question and challenge assumptions, including the encoded and decoded meanings of words. Critical literacy must be action-oriented, allowing for action based on deciphering meaning and applying it to a particular context. It must transform and liberate and be conducive to developing awareness of the uses of power. Finally, critical literacy should also acknowledge that it is not a set of rules that can be applied to any situation, rather critical literacy as theory can guide praxis.

There are some powerful applications of critical literacy within the research, such as that done by Linda M. Christensen (1999). She defines critical literacy throughout a short article through word and action, noting that critical literacy explores both social and historical frameworks. According to her, critical literacy does not accept the assumptions within society; rather it moves beyond them through the cultivation of critique. Christensen is

also known for her particular approach to critical literacy, which addresses class issues (Williams, 2005/2004), themselves often brushed aside in favor of critiques that center on race and ethnicity (Traino , 2005; Williams, 2004).

Street (2006) is particularly interesting because of his ethnographic style in approaching conceptions of critical literacy efforts and programs throughout the world. Street, throughout his work, has professed an investment in bridging the gaps between home and school literacies, acknowledging that those home literacies have power and should be valued (Street 1984; 2001; 2005; 2006). Somewhat postmodern in this approach, Street (2006) encourages the use of local literacies to question assumptions. In a recent study in *Convergence* (2006), Street writes of his efforts to teach ethnography to trainers within a particular program in India, where teacher-educators taught other teachers, who, in turn, taught literacy and numeracy skills to the local population. Teacher-educators were instructed to observe the literacy and numeracy skills of the local population to develop an understanding of the local knowledge present and how to make connections to other literacies, particularly literacies that had been identified as desired by the participants themselves. For example, there was one group of women who measured their products according to capacity within a particular vessel. When they brought their wares to shopkeepers, they were confronted with a different measurement system, one built on the kilogram, a measure of weight. They identified their particular interest as wanting to learn how to make connections between their measures of capacity and the shopkeeper's measure of weight so that they would not be cheated. This is a socially situated concern, one that has a true significance, the significance of survival and personal thriving, based on the different literacies and numeracies within the society. This reinforces the importance of bridging the

gaps between home and societal/school literacies and how the successful bridging of that gap can lead to human flourishing.

### **Possibilities in the High School Literacy Project**

Critical discourse calls for the critique, reflection of practice, a dialectical exchange of ideas that attempts to reach consensus, and social action. Whether through critical analysis (Dworin and Borner, 2008; Smith, 2001) or imaginations of a classroom based on dialogic beliefs (Fecho and Botzakis, 2007), conceptions of critical discourse and critical inquiry can span a full continuum. Rather than simply applying the term “critical” and allowing it to mean whatever it will to different parties, researchers theorize the limits of the term as in the field of critical literacy (Lewis, 2006), English education (Morrell, 2005), or even teaching within the first year (Fecho, Price, Read, 2004). Locating critical discourse within the classroom (Fecho, 2001) effectively also calls for a critique of established power dynamics (Foucault, 1995; Foucault, 1990; Gramsci, 1999).

Critical literacy encourages the critique of the world through its words (Kahn, 2008; O’Quinn, 2006/2005; Beck, 2005; Lesley, 2005/2004; McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004; Luke and Elkins, 2002; Rogers, 2002; Luke, 2000; Luke, 1999; Lesley, 1997; Freire and Macedo, 1987). In addition to this, people are encouraged to be agents of change, identifying problems and solutions through critical thought and dialogue (Lewis-Berstein Young, 2009; Arias, 2008; Behrman, 2006; Glasgow, 2001; Young, 2001; Robertson and Szostak, 1996). Literature of every genre is examined for form, content, and language (Iasevoli, 2007; Stairs, 2007; Pace, 2006; Bean and Moni, 2003; Greenbaum, 2002; Gere, 1999; Petersen, 1999; Shaheen, 1999; Schiller, 1999; Schulten, 1999). From street fiction (Hill, Pérez, and Irby, 2008) to poetry (Kirkland, 2008; Staples, 2008; Lindblom, 2007; Hule, 2006; Wilkinson,



2006; Barton, 2005; Jocson, 2004; Jolley, 2003; Paul, 2000), from letters, opinion pieces and nonfiction (Nicolini, 2008; Snair, 2008; Spector and Jones, 2007) to tattoos (Kirkland, 2008), from popular fiction (Lindblom, 2007; DeBlase, 2003) to customer reviews (Rice, 2008) and bibliographic citations (Herro, 2000), all warrant a close examination, especially with struggling readers (Lesley, 2001; Tatum, 2000.1; Tatum, 2000.2). There is even a genre specifically devoted to resistance (Acosta, 2007) and a space within critical literacy for the practices of writing (Weber, 2000; Greco, 1999) and reading (Coe, 1998). Critical literacy does not only belong to the critique of words. Critical literacy also includes the critique of the visual arts (Long, 2008), media literacy (Webb, 2008; Trier, 2006; Trier.2, 2006; Trier.3, 2006; Alexander-Smith, 2004; Wallowitz, 2004; Myers and Beach, 2001; Alvermann and Hagood, 2000), science fiction (Zigo and Moore, 2004), and drama (Whitney, 2006; Shosh, 2005; McCann and Flanagan, 2002; Tabers-Kwak and Kaufman, 2002; Worthman, 2002). Teachers, too, must be dipped in the fires of critical literacy, cultivating the practice of questioning through their praxis (Michell, 2007), perhaps even fostering the development of student voice (Easton, 2005; Lyman and Figgins, 2005; Mantle-Bromley and Foster, 2005; Petrone and Gibney, 2005; Winkler, 2005; Osburg, 1999; Goodburn, 1998).

Within the High School Literacy Project, first curriculum was created that used poetic form as a method for promoting critical literacy, engagement in reading and writing with generally struggling students, and agency in the transformative power of poetry. In order to promote open discussion, communal spaces for analysis of contemporary, multicultural writers were built within the regular school curricula. Students were challenged to study the form, content and language within the poetic works of contemporary, multicultural authors. This was a conscious departure from the traditional English Education curriculum with its

focus on analysis of work from the Western canon. Students were challenged to write poems within that form using all the tools available to them. They were expected to share their work, give constructive criticism, dialogue about how the poems they studied and those they wrote answered the challenge or what they said about society. After this, and the gathering of selected poems to create a collective anthology, the students attended workshops with contemporary, multicultural writers, challenged again to create. At the Day of the Poet, they learned from poets from all over the country and shared their work to the applause of their peers across schools.

### **Synthesis of Three Disciplines**

The three disciplines of the teaching of poetry using contemporary authors, critical literacy and multicultural education informed the curricular decisions and their execution in the High School Literacy Project. Those decisions stemmed from an observed absence in high school English Education practices and a desire to bridge school and home literacies for disenfranchised and marginalized youth (Street, 2006; Street, 2005; Moje, 2002; Street, 2001; Moje, 2000; Lee, 2000; Street, 1984; Bizzell, 1982). In addition, in order to inspire educational engagement (Webster, Ihde, et al, 2006) and the development of transformational agency (Webb, 2009; Pescatore, 2007; Young, 2007), a curriculum was designed that would extend the one day event of the Day of the Poet, which had previously been the primary focus of the High School Literacy Project, to a ten-week series of poetry workshops held in the traditional English classroom. During those poetry workshops, students were invited into a poetic community where the ways of knowing, home literacies and viewpoints were respected and shared. They were taught poetic forms, including haiku, sonnets, ekfrastic (Gorrell, 2000) poems, and multiple-voiced poems, and challenged to write within them.

They learned poetic devices and studied the work of contemporary, multicultural writers. It was expected that all students were able to create great work. Many times their writing received personal feedback with companion poems that were thematically linked to their efforts.

Answering Banks's (2003; 1994) aims within multicultural education, the High School Literacy Project sought to integrate multicultural literature into the standard English curriculum, challenging the students and teachers to find connections between the texts and their own lives. Through the analysis of a variety of texts, prejudice reduction occurred. Dialogue evolved from analysis that informed the creation of new work. This process of learning to discuss to learn more again lent itself to the knowledge construction within the classroom, again, joining two worlds through poetry, the school and home literacies with the purpose of engaging students in their own education. As an example of equity pedagogy, all students were seen as potential writers with a richness of voice that was particular to each individual. Despite prior disengagement from the curriculum or less than exemplary grades, the students were continually pushed to create and to value their work and the work of others. Finally, the school and home structures were empowered through the creation of safe creative spaces where metanarratives and ideological state apparatuses could be critiqued, challenged, and confronted. Students and teachers acted as leaders within the program through the creation of transformational texts, at times responding to community or personal issues and concerns.

The High School Literacy Project allowed three disciplines to intermingle with the final product of increased engagement, more creative response, increased ability to maneuver words in the creation of engaging texts, and agency and connection to one's community.

### **CHAPTER 3: Research Procedure**

In this chapter, the research procedures used in the collection of evidence and its analysis are detailed. Because the dissertation uses writing as inquiry as the methodology of construction, the process of narrative construction will be described, particularly centering on the chronological events and the stories that evolved from each point in time as well as the thematic explorations that stemmed from the poems themselves. Here the evidence gathered in relation to the teaching of poetry and its application will be examined.

#### **Writing as Inquiry and Narrative Construction**

The particular methodology used in the dissertation to explore the High School Literacy Project is that of writing as inquiry. This methodology delineated by Laurel Richardson (1994) allows for the exploration of the narrative of the High School Literacy Project. While the methodology was delineated by Richardson (1994), it has been taken up by other researchers. Jane Speedy (2005) writes that the roots of writing of inquiry are in postmodernism and post-structuralism. Postmodernism allowed for the questioning of authority and metanarratives and privileged telling local stories (Melville, 2004; Sim, 2002; Schiralli, 1999; Lyotard, 1992; Norris, 1990; Silverman, 1990; Lyotard, 1984). Post-structuralism challenged researchers to explore the relationships between human beings. Writing as inquiry takes from both schools attempting to engage the reader in a conversation: “It assumes and articulates a reflexive, situated stance, but does not necessarily dwell there. It assumes and expresses a curiosity or even thirst for knowledge about the contents of the study, but has no illusions that this might speak for itself” (Speedy, 2005, p. 63). Writing as

inquiry does not push a conclusion of tied ends. The research must balance the form chosen and content, such as Carolyn Ellis (2004) in her methodological novel. There she chooses to use past teaching and mentoring experiences to create a novel on the process of doing autoethnographic work. Writing as inquiry can be described as many things: playful, poetic, experimental, fictional, literature in research, eccentric, challenging, risky. “It tends towards distillation and description rather than explanation or analysis” (Speedy, 2005, p. 63). It is scholarship, presenting research in an alternative form. Speedy (2005) offers more than an explanation of writing as inquiry; she offers an example in the journal, *Counseling and Psychotherapy Research*. In that article, she works alongside of participants in the creation of three united texts: an interpretive text, a poetic account and a descriptive retelling, all situated in landscape format on the page to engage the reader in a playful, conversational exchange. The three texts center on conversations with the dead and the counseling of a patient who continues to talk to her dead mother by a counselor who has yearly birthday celebrations with her dead brother. In essence, the article allows for three texts that are interwoven to explore grief, dying and the concept of moving on.

There are several such works that experiment with writing as inquiry, revealing parts of a life through the sharing of a life, such as in the case of Pelias (2000). While phrased as an autoethnographic essay, it could also be seen as an example of writing as inquiry. Using the second person throughout the piece, Pelias (2000) explores several questions:

What does it mean to live with a critical eye, an eye that’s always assessing questions of worth, always saying what’s good or bad? What does it mean to judge others? What does it mean to say someone else does not measure up? By what right do you set certain standards? How can you not? What does it mean to judge yourself? By what right do you evaluate? What is at stake? (2000, p. 220)

Here, yes, is an autoethnography, one situated in the critical questioning of one's own life. The balance between that form and content could allow it to stand as an example of writing as inquiry. In the text, too, Pelias (2000) writes that performance is a way of knowing. The lesson plans and poems, their critique and analysis are also ways of knowing.

As noted by Polkinghorn (1988), often narratives are revealed sequentially. Such is the case here. Writing those stories is a process of meaning-making. In the organization of this dissertation, the narrative was first constructed chronologically. By allowing the High School Literacy Project to unfold almost as if on a timeline, the intermediary steps and narratives were more easily linked. The narrative unfolds from just before January 2005 until May 2006. Within that framework of a timeline, a series of lesson plans are used to organize the dissertation and the analysis of the poems. These lesson plans were created to build upon one another, providing students with necessary skill sets to proceed to the next poetic form or exercise. Four of the ten lessons for high school students are outlined with examples of poems that were created from that work. Rather than simply list lesson plans and provide poems that came from them, in between each lesson there is a careful consideration of the poem, its importance, its form, language and meaning within a greater context, sometimes connecting the poem to recollections of the individual students and personal growth as a teacher. In addition, the poem is analyzed in reference to larger considerations such as identity, agency, place, metaphor, and engagement.

In addition to chronological storytelling, there are points within the dissertation, particularly in the conclusion, where there is story-within-a-story structuring (Stockburger, 2008). In this way, the story is added upon by small side stories that add thematically or through added information to the story as a whole. Bruner (1993) describes these brief

sojourns from the overarching narrative as “patches”: “Most [lives] are accounted for ‘locally’ and patchily in the form of excuses for this particular act, or justifications for having that particular belief or desire. The local patches provide glimpses of a more general narrative about a life that is largely implicit” (p. 39). Within the dissertation, there are often small stories that add to the understanding of the whole. This is in line with the method of storytelling preferred by the researcher in normal conversation. In the telling of “small stories” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 307), one can come to a greater understanding of the researcher’s place within the larger narrative of the High School Literacy Project narrative, even exploring bits of the researcher identity. Also, the researcher construction of meaning and value can be further investigated through the storytelling process.

The analysis of the work of the High School Literacy Project attempts to construct meaning from the experience through the creation of a narrative located within a greater social struggle, one in which poetry is resigned always to the “other” and the “outsider”. This dissertation challenges the concept that poetry belongs only to the elite or the rejected, the revolutionary or the damaged, or that it is too difficult or unimportant to teach. Writing as a method of inquiry allows for this challenge of authoritative discourses, but not without cost. Laurel Richardson recounts in *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (1997) that writing even within a different format can cause negative lashings. After her poetic transcription of an interview, she received feedback that she was undisciplined in ethnography, encouraging the aberration of ethnographic rules in others, and not checking her pretensions as an artist (p. 146). In “Educational Birds”, Richardson (1997) writes at length about the academic life in an ethnographic play. Over and over the protagonist is

confronted with a challenge to her academic work: “but is it Sociology?” (p. 198).

Throughout the play, others define sociology as primarily quantitative, absent of the narrative or literary engagement with which she fills her work.

Writing as inquiry allows for an intermingling between the methods used in literature and those used in the social sciences, not so much to entertain, rather to engage in the story itself. Throughout this dissertation, the reader will be engaged in the High School Literacy Project. Included are lesson plans and student examples, personal work and reflections to reveal the process of creating a curriculum geared at promoting critical literacy, while at the same time exposing students to contemporary, multicultural writers, not the dead, white men to which most would have been accustomed to studying.

There is precedence for writing as inquiry that stems primarily from the lived experience, one which acknowledges and celebrates one’s own subjectivity. According to Keith Green and Jill LeBihan in *Critical Theory and Practice* (1996), defining the self as represented by the term “subjectivity” is complicated as this practice of narrowing down to the core of a person is something that has been considered at length by many philosophers in several different fields. They invoke the work of Paul Smith in *Discerning the Subject* (1988), which attempts within its pages to demarcate the self. Within the preface, he writes:

In some instances the “subject” will appear to be synonymous with the “individual,” the “person.” In others – for example, in psychoanalytical discourse – it will take on a more specialized meaning and refer to the unconsciously structured illusion of plenitude, which we usually call “the self.” Or elsewhere, the “subject” might be understood as the specifically subjected *object* of social and historical forces and determinations... The “subject” is generally construed epistemologically as the counterpart to the phenomenal object and is commonly described as the sum of sensations, or the “consciousness,” by which and against which the external world can be posited. That is to say, the “subject,” as the product of traditional western philosophical speculation, is the complex by nonetheless unified locus of the constitution of the phenomenal world... In any case, the “subject” is the



bearer of a consciousness that will interact with whatever the world is taken to consist in. (1988, p. xxvii)

Further within Paul Smith's conception of the subject/self there is a potential resistance to power that attempts to shape the self, the ever present other. The subject is also not fixed, for to be so would be an assumption, a metanarrative. Lyotard (1992; 1984) wrote that all metanarratives should be critically examined, questioned and challenged. Gramsci and Foucault (Darder, Baltodano, Torres, 2003; Gramsci, 1999; Foucault, 1995; Foucault, 1990) would add that they should be critically examined for the power dynamics at play. By power, this dissertation points to the ideological state apparatus phenomenon outlined by Gramsci (1999) and the fluid nature of power delineated by Foucault (1995; 1990). This dissertation questions the lack of research and practice in the teaching of poetry, supposing that this absence is due to primarily to lack of knowledge of poetry and engagement with contemporary, multicultural writers. The English literature and English education canons are challenged through such inclusion. Gramsci (1999) wrote about his concerns that violence and physical restraint was being used less and less in the preservation of oppressive power. He pointed to the encouragement of consensus through the moral authorities such as schools in preserving an ideological hegemony within its students. The students internalized the dominating ideal and then reproduced that idea within society. For Foucault (1995; 1990), power could not be followed in a simple, top-down model. Rather, it was an active exchange that was located in relationships, bodies, sexuality, and knowledge construction. Darder, Baltodano, Torres (2003) write: "However, it is important to note that power in Foucault's conceptualization is not solely at play in the context of domination, but also in the context of creative acts of resistance – creative acts that are produced as human beings interact across

the dynamic of relationships and shaped by moments of dominance and autonomy” (p. 7).

The subject is shaped by these power exchanges and acts of resistance. The subject can resist power in creative acts.

Needless to say, the subject can be defined in many different ways depending on the particular field, school within the field or even person writing. When speaking of subjectivity, I am referring to the presentation of a particular identity in relation to the world and perceived reality within that world. A person, for example, having lived in the same area, grown up with the same socioeconomic status or even race as another person may have an entirely different perception of the world and reaction to that world based on other mitigating factors. Within this dissertation, I attempt to be as clear as possible as to the influences upon my actions.

With the book, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, Carolyn Ellis (2004) using the construct of the novel with its characters, plot, rising and falling action as the framework for presenting further delineations of autoethnography and its multiple facets. In this recent book, Ellis reveals her fictional mentorship of the autoethnographic projects of others. Each uses as the entrance point and central concern the personal experience, whether it be the experience as a hearing impaired woman or that of a married man exploring the possibility of sharing child-rearing responsibilities with a lesbian couple. The performance of research is intimately woven with the content. This dissertation adds to the performance of research through a joining of narrative, pedagogy, resultant texts and poetry, further exploring the performative limits within the form and serving as an exploration of my process of understanding within the tradition of writing as inquiry. One could say that this methodological novel is also an example of Richardson’s writing as

inquiry in that a narrative is woven through the practice of writing that reveals a community and a struggle.

### **Evidence and Collection**

The High School Literacy Project curriculum was administered by the researcher from January 2005 to May 2006. The research questions broken down by framework are as follows:

1. Teaching of Poetry using Contemporary Authors
  - a. How does one critically engage adolescents using poetry?
  - b. EVIDENCE USED: Lesson plans, journal entries and poetic analysis, correspondence
2. Critical Literacy
  - a. What evidence was found for achieving critical literacy with the students?
  - b. What evidence demonstrates critical pedagogy at work in the High School Literacy Project?
  - c. EVIDENCE USED: Lesson plans, poems and textual analysis, correspondence, personal recollection
3. Multicultural Education
  - a. How can execution of the five tenets of Banks for multicultural education be shown through the High School Literacy Project?
  - b. EVIDENCE USED: Lesson plans, poems and textual analysis, journal entries, personal recollection

Journal entries, lesson plans, and letters to students, both handwritten and typed were all used as sources of information. In the construction of the narrative itself, personal memory was

used. Although student poems are publicly available in the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill library system from both years under consideration in this dissertation of the High School Literacy Project and within the schools served, pseudonyms for students are used for letters and poems. They are marked by an asterisk and are consistent throughout the dissertation.

All evidence was developed first for use in the administering of the program. The texts were need-based. They were created or collected to address the curricular needs of the program. A particular curriculum was developed that focused on teaching poetic form to high school students that used readings from and experiences with contemporary, multicultural writers. To that end, a number of resources were invoked including Def Poetry Jam recordings, newspapers, selections of music, copies from poetry anthologies and workshop experiences with poets during the Day of the Poet. Lesson plans were written down, sometimes in full form, but often times as notes jotted down in a journal before their execution in the classroom. Four of the lesson plans from the project are noted here. They were developed to hit at three objectives: a desire to teach form, a desire to introduce students to multicultural, contemporary poets, and a desire to improve literacy skills through bridging the gaps between home literacies and school literacies. In accordance with the need to write grants for the program, a report for Dean Thomas James of the School of Education at the time was assembled as well, which also served as key material for this dissertation as it gathered reflection and evaluation pieces done during and after the High School Literacy Project. Also used within this text are the poems by students that were published within the two chapbooks created during the High School Literacy Project. Both are publicly available at the representative high schools and at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill,

thereby opening them up for textual analysis by many parties outside of the researcher. Participants were asked to sign a release for such participation in the chapbook and analysis as part of the program itself. Only those students whose parents gave such permission to be published appeared in the chapbooks. Informed consent forms are included in the appendix.

Finally, researcher poems that were written during the time or were thematically linked are included throughout the dissertation to give further illumination to the process of meaning making, curriculum development, and personal response to both.

### **Analytical Procedures**

In the 2004 – 2005 year of the High School Literacy Project, 54 students between Chapel Hill High School and Cedar Ridge High School participated in the program. Students who submitted poems in addition to their parent releases were included in the chapbook. The commemorative chapbook holds 40 poems. In the 2005-2006 year of the High School Literacy Project, 227 students at Jordan High School, 17 at East Chapel Hill High School and 27 at Phoenix Academy participated in the program. Early College High School submitted the poems of 85 students Day of the Poet chapbook, but only a third of them submitted work. In the chapbook of that year, 121 poems are included. While careful examination of each student poem composed through the program was done while engaged in the teaching and learning process as evidenced through the letters noted in the next chapter, more detailed textual analysis of the poems for the aims of this dissertation happened after the High School Literacy Project had ended. A sample group of poems was selected. This group represented responses to the prompts; differences in location, language, economic status and gender; and perceived engagement in the program.

In regards to the texts, the analytical approach taken was more closely linked to that of transactional reading theory as delineated by Louise Rosenblatt in *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* (1978). In this theory, situated on the reader response, the reader interacts with the text, bringing to that reading, his or her background, beliefs, and context to an interpretation of the text. In fact, there is a transaction that takes place between the text and the reader. There is a different reading process enacted when one is simply reading for information versus when one is reading for the aesthetics present within a text: “In the nonaesthetic reading, the reader’s attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue *after* the reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out” (p. 23). Rosenblatt used the term “efferent” to refer to this reading action. “In aesthetic reading, in contrast, the reader’s primary concern is with what happens *during* the actual reading event” (p. 24). The central focus is the transaction between the text and the reader, the critical thoughts that arise, the new knowledge that takes shape, the change in perception and opening of the world. The writing about the poem reveals as much about the reader as about the poem or poet. Hall’s (1979) considerations of the encoding and decoding of meaning played out in the analysis of the texts. Each line was read for its possible meaning to the writer and to the researcher and set within a larger understanding of the context, that of the High School Literacy Project and the possible revelations about the lives of the authors. Students, in the construction of the texts, were instructed to think carefully about their word choice and poem composition.

In the textual analysis, these poems were examined for what those choices might reveal. Alan McKee (2003) writes that textual analysis allows a researcher to gather information from the “sense-making practices” of the world (p. 63). By this he means, that

societies engage in dialogue and dialectic growth through the creation of materials such as poems, articles, stories, videos and more. Through these impressions of thought, others can see, witness, learn, argue and then add their own versions of the story. Textual analysis is the methodology that sorts through all of this message and meaning exchange to make sense of the world. The key is to also remember that there is no one way of interpretation: “Every description of a text is an interpretation. If two researchers described the same text, they would do it in different ways. It’s very unlikely that they would come up with exactly the same words in exactly the same order to describe it” (p. 64). One person may see and experience a text entirely differently from another person. This is not a methodology that is likely to be repeatable, but it is still valuable. A methodology does not have to produce statistics or results that can be tabulated to still say something significant about a culture (McKee, 2003). Also, delineating a project that focused in critical literacy, meaning making, agency and engagement among other things does not necessarily lend itself to codifying results through quantitative measures. To this end, this dissertation endeavors to make the analysis of the texts as transparent as possible, to situate them within the researcher’s subjectivity.

Here is where I begin to let the third person fall away. I am a poet, and so I am most comfortable with the meanings at play within texts, listening to the language of an interview and working from that language. Glesne (1999) writes of the view behind qualitative research, saying that behind qualitative research is an understanding that the world is “socially constructed, complex, and ever changing. To understand the nature of constructed realities, qualitative researchers interact and talk with participants about their perceptions” (p.

5). This study allows for interaction with texts through various data sources. Needless to say, critical literacy practices were used in the development of the curriculum and in its execution.



## HIGH SCHOOL LITERACY PROJECT TIMELINE

2005 High School Literacy Project	June – December 2005	2006 High School Literacy Project	2006 Summer
December 2004 Meeting with Dr. Trier concerning the High School Literacy Project	2005 Summer Grant writing project	January 2006 Phoenix Academy portion of program ends	Reviewed evaluations
December 2004-January 2005 Developments in curriculum: 10 lesson plans	August 2005 Meeting with Dean James to discuss possible grants	February 2006 – April 2006 Administered the High School Literacy Project curriculum at Jordan High School, and East Chapel Hill High School	Grant writing project
February - April 2005 Administered the High School Literacy Project curriculum	Partnership with the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History was established	February – March 2005 Poet Workshop leaders selected  Students submitted work for the chapbook	August 2006 The Dean decides that the project would not be continued despite projected growth to up to 600 students affected.
February – March 2005 Poet Workshop leaders selected Students submitted work for the chapbook	September 2005 – December 2005 Revised the curriculum Partnership with Communiiversity and the Ackland Art Museum established	April 2006: 3-day event <b>Day 1:</b> evening reading for workshop leaders at Quail Ridge Bookstore <b>Day 2:</b> Day of the Poet workshops and evening reading at Market Street Bookstore in Chapel Hill, NC <b>Day 3:</b> Workshop with Chapel Hill High Slam Team and Evening reading at the Stone Center, Chapel Hill, NC	
April 2005 – Day of the Poet conducted with only Chapel Hill High School attendees	November 2005 – January 2006 Administered program at Phoenix Academy	May 2006 Chapbooks are distributed	

#### **CHAPTER 4: Description of the Case of the High School Literacy Project**

The project was begun by Dr. Madeleine Grumet during her tenure as dean of the School of Education at the University of North Carolina. Under her administration, the project came under a partnership between the School of Education and the local schools, The Research Triangle Schools Partnership. It was funded through various, large grants from the university as well as outside grantors. The main program of the High School Literacy Project was The Day of Poet, a day in which high school students would come to the university for a day of readings by local poets and participate in reading their own poetry.

In that first discussion with Dr. Trier, I addressed my concern that the main focus of the project was one day. Stemming from a newly formed interest in the Poetry for the People work of June Jordan that I developed by chance in the summer of 2004, I explained that I wanted to expand the High School Literacy Project to include a 10-week series of poetry workshops at area high schools and then recruit poets from across the country to give a day of workshops to those high school students much in the way that professional poets seek out workshops to take from master poets. It was my hope that this extension of the program would aid in the development of critical literacy more substantial than that attainable in a one day series of readings. He agreed to support my enthusiasm and put me in contact with two teachers from two area high schools.

### *High School Literacy Project, Spring 2005*

Beginning in February 2005, I was matched with teachers at Chapel Hill High School and Cedar Ridge High School. The students at Chapel Hill High School were generally students who were developing reading and writing skills at the tenth and eleventh grade levels. The students represented a cross-section of wealth across the Chapel Hill school district. Many of their parents were employed by the University of North Carolina in positions as far-ranging as groundskeepers to professors. When asked if they would consider themselves poets or writers, generally 2 or 3 students out of classes ranging between 15 and 25 would raise their hands. When asked if they had ever written a poem, that number would double or triple, but generally only after saying, "Everyone's written a haiku." When asked if they liked reading and writing, most would say no. The Cedar Ridge section of workshops was taught to only one class of generally wealthy students. There was only one student from a minority group there: African American. There the students represented the full range of high school grade levels, and they had developed a strong skill set in terms of reading and writing. Most of them identified as writers having chosen to take the creative writing class where the workshops would take place. When asked if they enjoyed reading and writing, all said yes. I had to admit a sense of relief that at least one group of students was reacting positively to this endeavor.

During the 10-week workshops of the first year, students were challenged to uncover their understandings of poetry and write an ode or acrostic; to use music within their poetry and write a bop; to learn about substantive rhymes and write a villanelle; to understand the connection between art and poetry through the writing of ekfrastic poems; to observe the natural world and process the observations through haiku, haiga, tanka, senryu and low-coup;

to work purely within a form such as the sonnet while learning more about scansion; to experiment with form through the use of the corpse poem that inspires further poetry; to study the work of other authors and write similar poems in form, syllable count, content, and to explore publication and learn about how to read poetry in public. Again, I developed these lesson plans to hit at three objectives: a desire to teach form, a desire to introduce students to multicultural, contemporary poets, and a desire to improve literacy skills through bridging the gaps between home literacies and school literacies.

Due to the small sizes of the workshop of between 10 and 25 students and the small number taught per week (5 per week), I was able to collect poems at the end of each workshop and return feedback to the students based on their poems. I would offer criticism, encouragement and would supply copies of similar texts or texts that might inspire the authors from published poets. I did this to build a close relationship with the students that showed that I cared as much about them as individuals as I did about their poetry. I wanted the students to feel challenged and directed. I was committed to teaching the students literacy skills through the use of multicultural, contemporary poets, and, to that end, generally only used texts written by living, multicultural poets as inspiration texts. I wanted them to become engaged in the work of poets with similar backgrounds. I hoped to bridge those gaps between school and home literacies by challenging them with texts, based in vernacular language or familiar landscape that would make them think and dialogue. I also wanted them to feel accomplished as writers, able to maneuver words through forms that are not generally truly explored until the college level.

From the very first week of the program, students were taught a different poetic form or series of forms through the work of a contemporary, multicultural poet. During the second

to last week of the workshop, I collected the poems of the students within the program to contribute to a cross-school chapbook collection. Most students submitted poems or art. Before submitting the project to the university copy center, I typed all of the submissions and laid them out in a 4-page spread format. The mock-up was then sent to the printer with copies of the chapbook being delivered on the Day of the Poet itself. Poems were later identified as responses to the lesson plans. They were analyzed for poetic choices and what those choices revealed about the growth of the writer as well as for the content and how the content spoke to a greater concern with the outside world.

### ***Day of the Poet 2005***

Speaking of the Day of the Poet, I recruited four poets to lead the students in three separate workshops throughout the day: Tara Betts (Chicago), Rich Villar (New York), Dasan Ahanu (Durham) and Lenard Moore (Raleigh). All of the poets were friends or acquaintances through various organizations of which I was a part. For this reason, they were willing to travel to the University of North Carolina for very little in the way of an honorarium. The out-of-state poets were housed at my own apartment and dined with me. Their honoraria were less than 200 dollars each for teaching three workshops. They also were promised a lunch during the Day of the Poet and the High School Literacy Project purchased five of their books if they were available. All of the poets were also promised that their work would be taught to the students, which is of value to any poet, since many multicultural, contemporary poets are generally not taught to high school students.

All of the poets were introduced to the students through their work as well as through their biographies. The students were able to choose the workshops that they wanted to attend, though, in the end, they were assigned two poetry workshops determined by their own

choice and one determined by who I thought might challenge them. I decided to do this primarily, because I did not want students to only go to workshops with their friends. In one of the workshops, I tried to place the student in a workshop with someone who generally wrote in a similar style, someone with whom they might identify, though they might not have known that based only on the bios given to them.

Unfortunately as it turned out, on that first Day of the Poet, the only students that were able to come were from Chapel Hill High School. The Day of the Poet occurred during an activity day at Cedar Ridge High School, so the majority of students elected to not take part in the event at the University of North Carolina. Several of the Chapel Hill High School students were not able to attend because one of the athletic teams was placed within the finals. Still, the day continued.

The Day of the Poet began with introductions by me and by Dr. James Trier. The students were given their programs and schedules as well as introduced to the poets themselves. At that point, they were led by their first workshop leaders to their respective rooms within Peabody Hall, all of which were quite close to one another. After about an hour, the students switched to their next workshops, running about the halls with smiles on their faces. After the second workshop, Rachel Winters and I served lunch to the respective workshop sections. The students then switched to their last workshops, after which they closed out the day in the large assembly room, reading their poems in front of their classmates to cheers and encouragement. Some read from the chapbooks they had just received. Some read new work. All seemed to leave energized.

What began for me as a day of anxiety – my hands shook that morning and I kept losing papers, pens, and my agenda as I struggled to keep all of the plans together while

worrying about the late arrival of the students – ended as a day of witness and affirmation. I received phenomenal feedback from the teacher and students as well as the poets themselves. The students had excelled as writers, artists and poets, embracing humor and gravity within the work. At the end of the day what remained was way too much food, rooms that were scattered with papers, and a sense of release and fulfillment within all who participated.

### ***High School Literary Project, 2005-2006***

Once the culminating experience happened, there was still much work to be done to prepare for the next event. That summer I dedicated myself to writing a grant proposal that could be sent to multiple agencies. In August 2005, Dr. James Trier and I met with Dean James of the School of Education to discuss the possibilities of locating grants. The project was given the full support of the Dean, including a much larger budget, while the grant-seeking process was taken over by the respective parties within the School of Education itself. Through previous work relationships with other organizations on campus, Communiversities, the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History and the Ackland Art Museum sponsored the project through the use of resources, office space, free classroom space, a poetry contest at the Ackland Art Museum, videotaping and the awards for high school student contest participants. The Ackland Art Museum also supplemented the honorarium of one of the poets recruited for the Day of the Poet through offering him the opportunity to teach a creative writing workshop to museum educators. The Research Triangle Schools Partnership and the School of Education, of course, continued to sponsor the High School Literacy Project as the primary funders.

To this day, when I think of that final reading, my arms cover over with goose bumps. Within my memory and my body's memory, that moment is ever charged with excitement.

hooks (1994) writes in one chapter of *Teaching to Transgress* that often we forget the erotic within pedagogy. She is not only considering the sexual. She talks about the bodily experiences and reactions. For me, again, that final day evokes a body-memory. I remember the heat of the room, the rawness of my voice, my sore muscles after running the campus several times to deliver supplies or check on workshops. I remember my frizzed hair from the humidity that day and that I, too, seemed electrified by the engagement and risky poetic offerings of the students.

In addition to the final reading and workshops, there were three public readings from the invited poets. There was a community outreach session where several of the poets gave critique to a youth slam team just before it was to leave for a national competition. There were the numerous conversations about craft and life over dinner. There was the publication of the year's chapbook. All of this happened in addition to the controlled flurry of pen and voice on the Day of the Poet itself, and this all followed weeks of workshops at Jordan High School, East Chapel Hill High School, and Phoenix Academy. As a little background, Jordan High School is located in Durham, NC. The complex is spread out over several buildings. The classrooms felt overcrowded with about 30 students in each class, though considering the size of today's classrooms across the nation, 30 students was reasonable. The majority of the population within the classes were African American, approximately 80 percent of the students were Caucasian with Asian students making up the remainder. At East Chapel Hill School, the complex was also huge, but the class served had only 17 students. It was an AVID classroom, geared towards students who were in the middle, making Cs, with the goal of pushing them towards college. Phoenix Academy was a small, alternative school located near the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill campus. It was comprised of a series of



gray trailers with about 8 students per class. These students had been expelled from other schools for various behavioral reasons and were attending Phoenix Academy with the purpose of catching up and eventually graduating from high school rather than just obtaining a GED. Most of the students in the program were African American. These schools were included in the program through connections with the faculty advisor, generally because former MAT students worked as teachers at the high schools. Through their willingness to participate in this curriculum, one could see an initial openness to critical literacy applications, multicultural education and the teaching of poetry using multicultural resources. Throughout the program, the teachers would often participate in the writing exercises given to the students as models of writers in development. They would share their work with the class and replicate the lessons in classes that were not reached through the program itself. They also engaged the students, encouraging their buy-in of the program. They were co-teachers within many classes, adding much to discussion.

In those weeks before the Day of the Poet, nearly 300 students in all poured out their hearts and emotions through careful dedication to craft. In some cases, they wrote their first poems ever and read those first poems with an eye for analysis and critique, an eye for what happened in the poem and what they could learn from it. Students worked individually and in groups to uncover the mysteries of a poem and apply what moved them, those techniques, to their own work.

Over the course of the workshops, several thousand poems were produced, and most received detailed critique. At first, students even received inspiration poems that related to their own work in either theme or style. On the Day of the Poet, many of those who struggled with public speaking and reading their work in front of others conquered their fears

and read in front of a crowd of over 200 teachers, students, volunteers, and professional poets. Students were introduced to the UNC campus, while also being introduced to one another across schools. While Jordan dominated the group in numbers, they were overwhelmingly supportive of their peers from East Chapel Hill High School.

At Jordan High School, three teachers participated in the program: Rachel Cummings (4 classes), Anne Olivar (1 class), and Jaime Cook (4 classes). Students numbered 227 who participated in the program. At East Chapel Hill High School, 17 students participated in the program. At Phoenix Academy, class sizes ranged from 5-7, with two individual classes reached, and one whole group lesson with all 27 students, because the program was ended in the spring due to concentration on testing. At Early College High School, all 85 students wrote poems for the chapbook, while only about a third submitted them to the chapbook.

To give an idea of the numbers of the three day event: on the Day of the Poet 2006, there were 159 students from Jordan High School, 15 from East Chapel Hill High School with 13 teachers attending not including the 11 poets, and the volunteers of Katie Hart, Kit Meyers, Kathleen Rand, Joy Gonsalves, Nina Collins and UNC faculty and staff members Lotticia Mack, Raquel Cogell, Greg Moore, Dr. Trier and Rachel Winters. At the Quail Ridge Bookstore reading on April 20, 2006, there were 23 attendees. At the Market Street Books and Maps reading on April 21, 2006, there were 28 attendees. At the final reading at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History, there were 36 attendees. When the poets Oscar Bermeo, Rich Villar, Mara Jebson, Aracelis Girmay, Ebony Golden and I went to Chapel Hill High School to aid in critique of poems, there were 6 students and 1 teacher in addition to a two person film crew.

Counting the students who did not attend the Day of the Poet (over 50), the students at Phoenix Academy who received workshops but did not attend the Day of the Poet (27), and the students at Early College High School who submitted poems to the chapbook (85), that adds up to nearly 500 students, teachers, college students, UNC faculty and staff and poets affected in one way or another by the High School Literacy Project.

After meeting with Dr. Trier and Rachel Winters in 2005, after that first year of the project, I began the process over the summer of writing grants and envisioning a larger future for the program. I wanted to do a full year of workshops before the final day of the poet. Logistics and school schedules were unfortunately against me, and I was only able to get into the first school, Phoenix Academy in November. After 6 weeks of workshops from November through January, the principal determined that it was not in the best interests of the students to continue with the program. She, too, was under a great deal of pressure to ensure greater test preparation, and so ended the program in January. I was devastated as the students had already begun to show a great deal of potential and growth within their writing. They consistently did more work than was called for, and I was prepared to work with the entire student body (only 27 students).

Just as one door closed, another opened in the form of my beginning relationship with the teachers at Jordan High School facilitated by Dr. Trier. After introductory meetings with the teachers, Anne Olivar and Jamie Cook, in December, it was determined that the High School Literacy Project workshops would begin in late January, after course testing. Anne Olivar and Jaimie Cook, in discussion, linked another teacher, Rachel Cummings, in to the workshops. Ms. Cummings' asked for biweekly workshops with her four classes of freshman English, which capped at 30 students per class, as did all of the classes at Jordan.

The workshops at Jordan actually began one week after the workshops at East Chapel Hill High School in the classroom of Walker Hicks, another introduction facilitated by Dr. Trier. Mr. Hicks led a class of 17 students in the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program. Again, this is a program that targets students who are at the middle of the grading curve and pushes them to develop better study habits and utilize learning techniques with the goal of becoming college-bound students.

While exercises done at each site were the same, students created individual and highly innovative work in response to those first prompts. Lessons that could not be taught to one class (due to changes in teacher/school/workshop leader schedule) were often replicated by the teachers themselves at a time convenient to them. This happened organically, particularly in the classroom of Rachel Cummings, who would guide students through a lesson if I was unable to lead them that week. She would even take what she had observed and adapt the lesson to her needs, teaching the lessons to other classes that were not directly involved in the program.

Teaching within this particular school offered different views of the teaching experience. While Rachel seemed particularly engaged within the program, Anne and Jaime definitely struggled with it, particularly juggling the curricular goals within the standard English Education classroom with the goals within the High School Literacy Project. Rachel was an experienced teacher within the Durham school district, while Anne and Jaime were relatively new teachers with less than three years of service.

### ***Day of the Poet 2006***

In regards to the Day of the Poet, all workshop leaders were chosen through application. Each poet provided a curriculum vita, biography, poems, and workshop ideas or

some combination of them. Local writers were generally approached by phone or in-person conversation, while out-of-state writers were generally approached through an email to a larger poetry organization like Cave Canem or the LouderArts Collective in New York. From beginning correspondence, writers were chosen who had experience teaching adolescents in a regular classroom setting or as a poetry workshop leader and:

- whose poetry would appeal to the representative group of adolescents from these high schools (musical, sensory, narrative work, for example, are all styles in which students often work)
- whose poetry would challenge the group (lyrical or abstract verse, for example)
- who would benefit themselves from and be able to participate in interactions with other poets, students and the local audience
- who had experience teaching groups of students, particularly high school students and
- who would be able to stay within travel allowances.

All writers were chosen by the end of February and from that time up until the Day of the Poet received both telephone and email correspondence to obtain information and also to receive it concerning reading schedules, workshop schedules, filling out invoices, travel and airport pick-up schedules, and more. On arrival at the airport (out-of-state) and at the Stone Center (local, on the Day of the Poet), all poets received a folder with workshop schedules, a map, payment information, an envelope for all receipts, a listing of local restaurants, a bus schedule, certificates for their first groups, names and information corresponding to those groups (in respect to poetry), contact information for me and others, among other pieces of information.

## **Poetry Curriculum**

In developing the curriculum of the High School Literacy Project, it was essential to use contemporary, multicultural writers, particularly through form. I chose this approach to the curriculum for a number of reasons stemming from my own experience as a student and teacher and from my own awareness of the lack of this exposure for young people. As a student in elementary, high school and to a great extent college, I rarely read a poem or other piece of writing by a person of color. There was no diversity in the textbooks. While British literature was understandably a little paler – although Linton Kwesi Johnson, Kwame Dawes, Derek Walcott, among others could have been included - there seemed to be no reason behind the exclusion of diversity in American literature, besides a few poems from Langston Hughes. I was born in 1981, not so long ago, and yet as I progressed in schooling, I rarely saw any materials by a person of color besides that of Hughes. The Harlem Renaissance was a note taken on a rainy Tuesday, a bullet point on a test. Contemporary, multicultural writers did not exist or so it seemed. Where was my reflection in writing? It was covered over in the ink of other writers. This is not to say that the study of Edgar Allen Poe or Jane Austen or Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman is any less essential in grasping the breadth and depth of letters. Unfortunately, I was rarely guided to anyone beyond them, the dead, white canon, in nearly two decades of schooling. This comes from someone who was in honors and AP classes in high school and honors classes in college. What of the students who were not in those classes?

As a teacher, the need for contemporary, multicultural material in the classroom became even more pronounced. Because of all this, when I developed the curriculum and lesson plans from which I would teach, I endeavored to make real connections to the high

school standards, but at the same time to infuse the workshops with contemporary, multicultural writers and form. The last addition was because I wanted students to see the patterns within writing. It is my belief that often writers with great pain or stress can use form to write through that block. It was a political decision to center my work on these parameters. By that I mean, that poetry in English Education is often deemed as too mysterious to teach to those who will be teachers as evidenced by my extensive literature review. Their own fear of poetry is rarely replaced with an understanding of tropes, techniques, contemporary and classical work, a confidence as a writer of poetry and the comfort and confidence in the ability to teach poetry to others. It is with this understanding that I built the curriculum around a form of expression that would most likely not be experienced fully by the students in reference to reading, study/analysis, and writing, particularly contemporary, multicultural writers who would be unfamiliar to teachers unless they were subscribers to journals, readers of new books of poetry or members of that community of writers themselves.

Of course, how does all of this influence critical literacy? I would argue that poetry that does not assume a transparent, stable, and self-present subjectivity does still have political effects for reading and writing subjects. Contemporary poetry can challenge society assumptions, expose power relations at play through discourse, and explore the meaning making within particular circumstances. Stuart Hall (1979) is invoked here when one thinks of the field of cultural studies and encoding and decoding of symbols. Some writers may encode their content with representations of reality or political debates as a way of engaging in their own oppositional poetics (Hunt, 1990), while others may use the poetic form to push a political stance, calling into question the primacy of the Western poetics and poetic forms

especially. Encoding is the deliberate or involuntary placing of a particular message within a product shared with others. Decoding is the deciphering of meaning from the content that has been shared. At times, the encoded message is decoded with ease. At other times, the encoded message is decoded by participants to mean something entirely different but based upon prior ways of knowing. Ingrained in both paths is a challenge to power and an investigation of the narratives and beliefs that are empowered within the mainstream production of new work in poetry. For readers, this challenging of the mainstream has immense political consequences. First, readers are able to participate in a more accurate reading of the world in which they live. They are given names for the world through words of generally marginalized writers (Freire, 1968). They are also given alternative views for that world, one which is so often hidden behind icing-coating illusions (Hunt 1990) of peace and prosperity, when much of the world knows no such reality, even within the confines of the United States (rural poverty, gang violence, etc). Readers are encouraged by these politically loaded texts to engage in their own readings of the content and form and examine the world, which those works represent, through their own eyes.

A respect of home literacies was essential in the creation of a curriculum. Again, the lesson plans were developed with the intention of hitting three objectives: a desire to teach form, a desire to introduce students to multicultural, contemporary poets, and a desire to improve literacy skills through bridging the gaps between home literacies and school literacies. I chose to use poetry as a literacy method for several reasons. First, as a poet and working formalist, I am incredibly familiar with a number of poets, forms and practices that have helped with my own writing. Also, as a former student, I have always noticed the lack of in-depth work in poetry as well as the use of contemporary, multicultural writers. As a



teacher, I have noticed a tendency to gloss over poetry in the standardized high school curriculum. As pointed out in “Poetry in the Curriculum: A Crisis of Confidence” by Barrie Wade and Sue Sidaway (1990), poetry is partly glossed over due to teacher feelings of pedagogical inadequacy on the subject. While teachers give students a solid basis in analysis, this is often rejected by students and not applied to their own work. Within this dissertation, I do not claim that students suddenly became good writers through their study of contemporary, multicultural writers and their resulting engagement. I am also not claiming that while students learned nothing about poetic devices and tropes from their previous years of English student that they suddenly were able to write great works merely by taking part in the curriculum. Rather I am saying that engagement makes a difference and that the teaching of poetry, its analysis and techniques of writing, also make a difference in the creation of phenomenal and critically literate work. Unfortunately, in the loss of substantive exploration of poetry, students also lose out on the poetic devices that could so improve their writing in other contexts. The reality is that the most remembered pieces of writing are rich in allusion, figurative language, metaphorical connection, and re-imaginings of the world through colorful language and the choice of the precise word to describe a state. Without the poetry, even the best prose becomes empty. In addition to all of this, poetry workshops had been used from the inception of the High School Literacy Project, making the transition to heading the project a relatively easy one.

During the 10-week workshops, which were replicated or received additions in the second year, students were challenged to uncover their understandings of poetry and write an ode or acrostic; to use music within their poetry and write a bop; to learn about substantive rhymes and write a villanelle; to understand the connection between art and poetry through

the writing of ekfrastic poems; to observe the natural world and process the observations through haiku, haiga, tanka, senryu and low-coup; to work purely within a form such as the sonnet while learning more about scansion; to experiment with form through the use of the corpse poem that inspires further poetry; to study the work of other authors and write similar poems in form, syllable count and content and to explore publication and learn about how to read poetry in public. In the following pages, I will discuss those lesson plans in context with the literature on the various outshoots.

But why teach form? Students come into contact with poetry on a regular basis. We all do. We all listen to the radio or are able to recognize the music within a particular sentence that uses consonance, assonance or alliteration. This could be within a rap song or the advice a mother gives. Rarely are the musicality and the beauty of common phenomena combined with the beauty present in drawing all those influences together in a poem. Even more rare still is the coupling of a critical lens with the practice of creative writing.

I took what I learned to conferences and infused my teaching with bags of tricks to draw students in to the practice of writing: “To become what we are not, we can only, then, begin from what we are; but the process of becoming must be an evolution and growth, never a disruption, from that potential and inherent being-in-the-beginning” (Olney, 1981, p. 33). To become a critically thinking teacher aimed at improving the literacy of adolescents, I had to begin with what I was: a poet. For the students to become more invested in their own reading and writing, they had to start with themselves.

I began developing a curriculum by brainstorming:

Poetry Curriculum for High School Students, Specifically Low Literacy Students

What is poetry?

Love poems metaphors and similes, comparisons

Name poems, Odes  
    Books from poets  
Rhyme and Rhythm  
    Rhyming Dictionary, Metrics of Rap,  
    Political Poems/Rap  
Haiku, Tanka and Renga  
Corpse Poems, Found Poems  
Defining Music, Language and Story  
    Blues Poems and Using Language/Dialect within a story  
Website Publication and Rewrites  
Rewrites and creating art for the chapbook  
Chapbook release party and readings

Outrageous gifts poetry  
    Poetic devices and writing a poem, finding poetic devices  
Fairy Tales and poetry  
Multimedia Stations  
    Music, Art, Video  
    Bop and the Villanelle  
Metrics and Contemporary Sonnets, creating poetic forms  
Odes to favorite poems coming  
Rewrites and website publication  
Rewrites and art for chapbook  
Class poems and creating them  
Performance and speaking in different voices  
Day of the Poet  
    Lenard D. Moore  
    Mendi and Keith Obadike“ (Computer Journal Entry, June 5, 2005)

In this brainstorm, I included as many exciting lesson ideas as I could, focusing primarily on the teaching of form. I knew that I would be able to find work by contemporary, multicultural poets that would fit the forms. In the brainstorm, I decided to begin with the most essential elements of poetry, metaphor and simile, and go from there into progressively more difficult poetic concepts. It made sense to begin with the self and to extend into observations of the other from there as it is my belief that it is easier to write basing one's observations from a well-developed sense of self.

## Curriculum

Lesson	Content
1 <b>Ode and Acrostic</b>	Define Poetry; Poetic Form; Metaphor/Simile
2 <b>Bop</b>	Anaphora/Epistrophe; Chorus; Repetition; Authentic Texts; Critical Reading
3 Villanelle	Rhyme/Rhyming Dictionary; Difficult Forms
4 Ekfrastic Poetry	Muses; Critical Reading; Discussion
5 Haiku, Tanka, Senryu, Low Coup	Natural inspiration; Form; Syllabic challenge
6 Sonnet	Scansion; Critical reading
7 Experimental forms	Muse; S+7; Dictionary; Found Poem
8 <b>Author Study (2005); Political and Historical (2006)</b>	Author study; Discussion; Homage; Witness; Voice to the Voiceless

9 Publication	Preparing work for publication
10 Performance	Reading work in public

***Selected Lesson Plans 2005 - 2006***

While the curriculum allowed for breadth and depth of lesson plans, which were improved over time, this dissertation presents only a select few: Lesson Plan 1 gives an idea of the format of lesson plans; Lesson Plan 2 demonstrates the connections between home and school literacies and the importance of remembrance and naming; Lesson Plan 3 integrates language and background in the creation of poetry; and Lesson Plan 4 was developed to challenge students with the creation of historical, political and persona poems.

***Lesson Plan 1: Poetry, Metaphor and the Ode***

In my journals, my lesson notes often look like this:

Metaphors     10  
 10 minutes to make observations  
 Make poem  
 10 to read  
 Go back, secret  
 10 minutes, 10 to read  
 Haiku/Symbolize (January 19, 2006)

Any teacher would understand that each has a personal style, a way of shortening notes so that lessons can be repeated. The above notes refer to a lesson on metaphors as applied to the haiku form. It's generally a lesson that I use early in teaching poetry. First, I make a table. On the left side, I work with the students to develop a list of nouns. One can use a list of linked nouns or totally different ones. Below, you'll find two examples. After this step, we come up with adjectives and verbs that correspond with those nouns. Finally, we cover up

the first list of nouns and develop a list of nouns that corresponds to the list of adjectives and verbs. Of course, these nouns must be totally different from the previous nouns.

Noun	Adjective/Verb	Noun
Cat	Sly/sings	Thief/ contralto
Claw	Sharp/scratches	Samurai sword/ itchy child
Couch	Leather/tears	Skin/chisel at the quarry
Mouse	Invisible/Scampers	Ghost dog/children

Noun	Adjective/Verb	Noun
Bottle	Empty/breaks	Mind/ body
Chair	Wobbly/Waits	Woman with a cane/a father past curfew
Pillow	Soft/Cushions	Feathers/Lips
Castle	Formidable/Rises	Warrior/Sun

With this type of activity, nouns, adjectives and verbs and their functions are stressed within the practice of creating metaphors and similes. After this step, we can use them in a poem. Take the first table. Our poem might look something like this:

Wicked, the sly thief, sings contralto,  
 an opera from the iron grate balcony.  
 an affair with a leather couch, its skin that tore  
 with every embrace. Like the chisel adores the mountain

and mars it in the same embrace, so that Persian  
scratched its still lover, wishing that it was that invisible  
mouse, scampering like playful children in the night,  
unable to be traced, like the dog howling ghost somewhere  
out in the darkness.

Using the second table, one might be able to make several different poems, using each line, from left to right, as the root of a metaphor or simile. James Olney (1981) points to the importance of metaphor in the understanding of self, which itself is essential to critical literacy and the critical observation of the world:

Metaphor is essentially a way of knowing, New sensory experiences – or their consequence, emotional experience – must be formulated in the mind before one can grasp and hold them, before one can understand them and add them to the contents of knowledge and the complex of self. (p. 31)

The envisioning of new experiences in relation to the familiar is a common technique in the teaching of well-versed writing. Rather than rely on simple sentence structures, students express the diversity of language available to them through metaphor. While taught through the guise of poetry, it is a concept that can be connected to all writing.

After writing a collective poem, I would give the students time to write their own work and then to read from them. There most likely wouldn't be time to complete their poems, but they would receive encouragement and guidance in order to finish their poems that night. If there was time enough, I would teach the haiku form, challenging students to use metaphors and similes within their haiku after instructing them on the nuances of the form. If there was not enough time, this lesson would be continued in the next class with the addition of haiga and ekfrastic poetry.

Students within this workshop were challenged to write an ode, a poem in praise of something or someone. They could even write odes for poetry or themselves. Here are two examples:

**B-Ball, only if they understood by Harlan Thelen \*, Chapel Hill High School**

Dear Basketball,  
The love I obtain for you I only know  
The way you fall of my fingers  
And come back like a yo ...  
Yo, I love the sound you make  
when my jumper is fallin'  
Some cats call you Wilson  
But I'll call you Spalding  
I love the way you stay with me  
on my way up  
And how you hug the backboard  
On my lay-ups  
Only if they understood  
What me and you can do  
Only if they understood  
What we've been through  
Only if they understood  
The love I have for you (*Thousand miles from the sea*, 2005, p. 15)

In the first poem, Harlan \* addresses a beloved, praising it through the use of the senses, touch and sound specifically. This praise song maintains a regular rhyme scheme and a solid rhythm. As a first poem, I often received poems that had a jilted rhyme, parroting that of Shel Silverstein or Dr. Seuss, the nursery rhymes and rhyming stories of much younger days. Often times, when asked whether they read regularly, it would become evident that those were the books that they remember most, those where they had last invested their time. Because of this, it was no wonder to me that much of what they thought of poetry would be attached to an earlier time. As a teacher, I have often heard from student after student that poetry is difficult, incomprehensible. They are often not able to find roots in the poem and



so break off from its considerations early. The reality is that the treatment of poetry in schools today is in crisis (Wade and Sidaway, 1990). In Harlan's \* poem, I saw an immediate ability to connect words with an actual occurrence. The poem is narrative, it tells a story, while praising the innate qualities of the basketball. As a first poem, this was an inspiring effort. The poem, too, immediately illustrates the joining of "home fronts" and "contact zones" (Moje, 2002; Moje, 200; Guerra, 1998; Pratt, 1991; Bizzell, 1982). Harlan \* uses the familiar as a way of bridging into the unfamiliar territory of poetry and form.

One thing that I was able to incorporate to greater success in the first year of the program was the writing of personal letters to the poets, praising their work, giving constructive criticism, and providing a similar poem, connected in subject matter or form. The first year was, of course, more manageable, because the size of the program increased by 5 times in the second year to over 250 students. In the first year, there were only 57 students between two schools. I chose to write personal letters to immediately develop a dialogue with the students through writing. I sought to encourage an active and engaged dialogicality (Duncan, 1996; Bakhtin, 1986), one where the students wrote with an audience in mind, one that was made up of a stranger who had high expectations of their work nonetheless. As Moje (2002; 2000) wrote, literacy happens within community. It was important to develop a writing community early within the program. This concept of the stranger, too, I believed always had immediate positive and negative effect on the workshops and the resulting writing. On the positive, the students were more attentive and eager to write as I was not the familiar teacher who had control of their grades. On the negative, because I had no control over grades – this later was changed in some classes as the assignments were made to carry the weight of regular class assignments for many of the teachers in the second year – some

students would elect not to complete a poem begun during a workshop. I always respected that decision as I believe that a person has a right to not speak as much as they have the right to speak.

In response to Harlan's \* poem, here was my letter:

Dear Harlan \*,

Thank you so much for allowing me to read this incredible poem. It was specific in subject, had innovative rhymes, a regular rhyme scheme, and really got me involved. I'm not sure if your classmates told you, but we had a chance to read it last week, and it even read really well. Even the line breaks were well executed. I really can't wait to see what you next bring to the class. You have a real gift for verse man. Keep pushing it. It's hard to find good verse these days these days, but you are gifted in this capacity.

I figured you might like to read some more poems that focus on basketball so I gave you some Quincy Troupe, in the form of "A Poem for 'Magic'". Let me know what you think. It's free verse, but you might find some inspiration there for more poems on basketball. Also, if you are interested in more poems on this topic, pick up John Edgar Wideman, Daniel Wideman or Ross Gay.

I can't wait to read what you next bring.  
Peace and Blessings,  
Raina

Quincy Troupe (2000)

A Poem for "Magic";

for Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Donnell Reid, and Richard Franklin

*(text omitted because of copyright)*

(Computer Journal Entry, March 10, 2005)

I chose this poem particularly for its form and connection to basketball. An ode to a particular player, it executes all of the elements that I seek to teach in that first lesson. There are rich details, metaphors and the author uses the senses to make the player come alive to the reader. Some of the words would not be immediately recognizable to a high school student, which I sought as a way of improving the vocabulary, but there was enough

basketball language that someone who loved the sport would struggle through the unfamiliarity to get to the magic of the world the author was creating.

### ***Lesson Plan 2: Poetry, Name and Perspective***

At another point in my notes, another lesson appears like this:

Intros

HSLP into = perspective

writing prompt / Talk about

What is poetry?

[If you were to meet]

What topic do you most care about

Nikki Gio

Talib Kweli

Write a poem from your perspective  
about a woman

Write a poem

14 7W 7M (generally 16)

11:40 → 12:30 (January 26, 2006)

This was an introductory lesson at East Chapel Hill High School. In the class were 14 students, 7 young ladies and 7 young men in addition to the teacher, Mr. Hicks. I introduced myself, gathered information from the students – the students were divided into groups with their own names like “Smack”, “Superfluous”, “CSH” and “Dream Team” – before discussing the question, “What is poetry?” In 10 minutes time, the board was covered with notes from the students. They listed poets that they knew, literary devices, forms, etc. After that point, I handed out a poem, “Nikki-Rosa” by Nikki Giovanni (2003). We also listened to Talib Kweli’s “Black Girl Pain”. It was from an album, *Beautiful Struggle* (2004), that had just come out, a song noting the difficulties that Black women have to face beginning with their names and others not understanding them. We examined the poem and song together, line by line and then they were given the challenge of writing their own autobiographical poems from the perspectives of a biographer. These students who wanted to be dancers, play

soccer, artists, veterinarians, what would their biographers say of them in the future? What difficulties did they face? Zuleika\* was one of the students who endeavored to answer those questions.

**Young Trapster by Zuleika H.\*, JHS**

young boy on da blocc  
young boy on da grin'  
young boy says "I'm lookin' out fa mine"  
young boy gots a couple a dimes  
young boy don did time  
young boy says "I don committed crime"  
- young man -  
young boy gotta a kid name Shawn  
young boy name is Juan  
young boy gotta Benze  
candy blue fa which he calls dat tru  
young man gotta watch out fa cops  
so he stays low on da blocc  
sellin white-n-weed  
just ta feed his seed  
HIV/AIDS took Janine  
- young man -  
young man got caught by da cops  
young man got caught with drugs on a burner  
resisting arrest -n- drug trafficking with intent to sell  
10 years in da pen  
thinking; about his son  
young man got out to find out  
Shawn got popped tryna be like Dad  
snitchin on Bloodz  
callin himself banging Crip  
- young man -  
Juan bacc on da blocc  
tattooed up with 6 points - n - tears wit a swagga  
harder dan eva longin fa his seed  
lookin fad a Blood that killed his Lil Gangsta  
6 months lata he found de Blood called Bam-Bam  
clacc-clacc Bam-Bam dead on da ground  
Juan three a C tad a sky fa Shawn  
for his 15 yr old son  
Juan got knocked up by dem 93<sup>rd</sup> gangsta's  
but you know he went out like a 83<sup>rd</sup> gangsta  
- young man - (America, p. 47)

In this poem, Zuleika\* tells the story of a man trapped in the life of a gangster. As someone who worked in a school for incarcerated youth, many of whom were facing long prison terms for gang activity, Zuleika's\* story rang of truth. Here we follow the life of John, as his woman falls to AIDS, he is incarcerated, his son is killed, he kills those who killed his son and then is killed himself. In the last few lines, we learn of a tattoo that Juan gets to honor his son, a sky, and one has to wonder at the religious implications of that even within all the bloodshed, sorrow and violence (Tendero, 2000).

It was specifically located, too, within Durham and within the Crip culture (notice that there are no "ck"s used within the composition, which translates to "Crip Killer" in gang terminology. It was evident that the Juan in this poem was a Durham Crip and that Zuleika\* had some connection or understanding of that culture. It's hard to imagine a place with so many trees as one divided by strife, but even in Durham there were definite gangs. Here is an example of place identity. Place identity is that which develops through a dialectical relationship between the self and the other or the surroundings (Manzo, 2003). Adolescents may respond to this identity through various means of experimentation, one of them being through poetry. Research in this vein, however, tends to focus on the positive implications of connection with place, whereas in some poetry, most notably hip hop lyrics or spoken word pieces, the poet responds to a negative relationship with place. An exploration of the negative/ambivalent feelings associated with place has yet to be fully conducted. (McAndrew, 1998) On the other hand, the creation of a home or haven concept within poetry provides one with a greater understanding of the forming identity of an adolescent. When an adolescent can describe home experiences and also create an ideal home through

words, that adolescent has shaped their own world, again laid claim to it through naming.

This act reveals a dynamic relationship:

Indeed, the very term 'relationship' suggests a dynamic process whereby different 'worlds are drawn together in a lasting way' (Seamon, 1993, 219). Concepts of movement, rest and encounter, and the interrelationship among them, describe relationships to place as dialectic processes that form the foundation of our being. (Seamon, 1979) (Manzo, 2003, pp. 51-52)

This negotiation of identity through dialectical exchanges merges with the literacy practices of adolescents easily through poetry. Adolescent identity formation is a complex process that cannot rely on the theories of yester-years alone, but, instead, must move beyond them to the exercise of creative discourse for the purpose of originating new theorems as appropriated.

Gruenewald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place is one specific example of a new theorem that has to be appropriated for use within the development of this critical framework for understanding adolescent identity development, literacy and meaning-making. In an article that seeks to find an intersection between critical pedagogy and the place pedagogy, he points out the limitations in the vision of both:

On the one hand, critical pedagogy often betrays a sweeping disinterest in the fact that human culture has been, is, and always will be nested in ecological systems. (Bowers, 1997; 2001) In a parallel story of neglect, place-based education has developed an ecological and rural emphasis that is often insulated from the cultural conflicts inherent in dominant American culture. (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 309)

Focus of place-based education on the local story, reading the world as a political text notation lends itself to a historically enriched critical theory and pedagogy that also pushes one to act much in the way of the oft quoted by critical pedagogues, Freire and Macedo (1987).

Elizabeth B. Moje (2000) defined her conception of what exactly literacy practices are. Though the focus of this paper's work is on the power of poetry in adolescent identity formation, Moje's definition helps to define the space of literacy practices: "By referring to literacy *practices* rather than simply to literacies, I include in my analyses the social situated beliefs, values, and purposes that shape how and why people use literacy" (Moje, 2000, p. 655 cites Barton, 1991; Street, 1984). It cannot be stated strongly enough that adolescent identity formation and poetry are socially situated. They cannot happen in isolation. Both are informed through a constant dialectical relationship between the self and the outside world. At times, the self must be sublimated in the creation of another facet of identity or a stanza that more fully reflects the world outside of that self. At other times, the self dominates despite the intrusion of the other. Though the self is essentially negated in favor of the creation of a text and encouraging multiple readings and the resultant multiple meanings of said text, there is room within conceptions of identity for a divergence from set tenets.

In this one poem by Zuleika\*, she celebrated the self and the other while locating an ode in a place. Throughout the year, this was the only poem that Zuleika\* wrote, but I remember how validated she seemed to feel through sharing the poem and having it applauded as a solid piece of work. She entered this poem into a poetry contest hosted by the Ackland Art Museum and was one of those who won. She was invited to the museum along with 12 other students to read her poem. She brought her father. When she began her poem, her hands shook, but there was an immense pride in her after she finished reading the poem. After the reading, I remember that her father came up to me and said that he had never seen his daughter in such a light before. She had had many difficulties in high school and out of it, but in that one moment, Zuleika\* shone bright for the work of her mind. I like to think that

had a huge effect on her investment in reading and writing, but who knows how a moment affects an individual?

***Lesson Plan 3: Language and poetry***

What languages are students most comfortable with using? How can they use this home knowledge to impact their writing? These were the questions that I sought to answer in this lesson. I began with a corpse poem, a familiar technique after a number of weeks, and then instructed the students to use their own language to write a poem. It would be a poem about self and identity. To teach this, I gave the example of Martín Espada's "En la calle San Sebastián" (Espada, 2003) and one of my own. I chose to teach this lesson as a method of validation for the identities of students, particularly the Spanish-speaking students who often shied away from reading poetry aloud. Here is an example of a self-defining poem that resulted from this lesson plan:

**Yo Soy Latina by Esperanza Linares \*, East Chapel Hill High School**

I was born in the United States  
Yo Soy Latina  
My parents were born in Mexico  
Yo Soy Latina  
I take pride in both my cultures  
Yo Soy Latina  
I learned English as fast as I can remember  
Yo Soy Latina  
As a child I was ambitious to become someone  
Yo Soy Latina  
I work hard and make an effort in school  
Yo Soy Latina  
Some people were skeptical, but I'll prove them wrong  
Yo Soy Latina  
I'll succeed in what I want to be  
Yo Soy Latina  
I will also help others  
Yo Soy Latina  
I'll chase my dreams to the end of the world  
Yo Soy Latina  
My dreams, I will succeed



Yo Soy Latina  
With the help of my parents, teachers, friends, and mentors  
Yo Soy Latina  
I won't be the miserable one  
Yo Soy Latina  
I am a person with deep feelings of hope  
Yo Soy Latina  
And with my feelings I will achieve my dreams  
Yo Soy Latina

Poetry can be a literacy activity that adolescents engage in to integrate with dialectical identity formation exchanges. Adolescents create for themselves a critical space to examine the competing scripts that they are provided by society. These scripts may compete with one another, such as in the case of listening to “Young, Gifted and Black” by Nina Simone versus reading fashion magazines where the Black body is often under siege. These scripts, too, provide information within the political and cultural realms that affect adolescent lives. In Esperanza’s \* poem, for example, we have a determined speaker competing with the scripts provided by others. The other is skeptical of her abilities. The other may look at her as “the miserable one”. The other questions her background and her goals, but the self that Esperanza \* creates combats all of these notions, even going so far as to connect that self with a larger group, Latina women. The scripts, in essence, are metanarratives of a sort, questioned by the emerging critical lens of the adolescent: “Youth in the United States, positioned by color, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class and age must negotiate their power and social identities since not all groups are valued equally” (Sparks, 2002, p. 5). Power relations, too, are at play within this identity formation process as evidenced through aforementioned scripts. Adolescents, in truth, must negotiate their identity formation process through interactions with a number of different communities, which may overlap or be diametrically opposed to one another, such as is occasionally the case when it comes to youth

membership in home and school communities. It was Juan Guerra (1998) who delimited this reality through borrowing Pratt's (1991) understandings of "home fronts" and "contact zones" with the understanding that home fronts were haven spaces created by or for the individual in which common values and practices were shared within a community; and "contact zones" were uncomfortable spaces that challenged these shared values and practices. Guerra also drew from Bizzell's (1982) mapping of discourse communities as "dialectical" spaces "in which literacy and other social practices operate according to norms and conventions of the group, but are also always evolving as group members interact in multiple, competing, and conflicting communities of practice simultaneously" (Moje, 2000, p. 90). Dialectical adolescent identity formation exchanges function within these community structures, while the understanding of these exchanges can be gained through the use of a multicultural postmodernist lens. This lens is useful, too, in examining the literary expressions of adolescent identity, where words reflect through writing and influence through reading the identity formation process.

#### ***Lesson Plan 4: Historical and Political Poems***

This plan was developed directly in relation to the concerns of one of the teachers in the second year. She was teaching American Literature, particularly relating her curriculum to historical events. To blend her needs and the aims that I developed within the curriculum of using contemporary, multicultural poets, I used a poem, "A Poet is Not a Jukebox" by Dudley Randall (1981) as an introduction. Together we read through the poem and I pointed to the historical significance within it. After that, I handed out pages from that day's paper. In groups of two to three, students were instructed to choose an article and write a poem about

it, particularly attempting to give voice to the voiceless. I first taught this lesson in the second year of the program in the spring when the Duke Lacrosse team was in the midst of a legal battle after being accused of rape. It was a polarized issue with students split on opinions. In addition to this, the five-year anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> destruction was approaching and Hurricane Katrina had only happened a few months before the workshops began. When discussing political issues, students came up with lists that included the end of the critical process, sweatshops, and the corruption of the American government. This was one of the most productive lessons, because it seemed every student had an opinion that needed to be expressed. Whereas in previous lessons, about half of the students would put little to no effort in their work, the number of poems written in response to these exercises was incredible. I've included a small sample of the representative work below.

**'C' for Corruption (Amerika) by Shaliza Randesh \*, Jordan High School**

Hooray for American culture.  
For short attention spans,  
For wasteful use of resources,  
For sitcoms and for spam!

God bless the "nuclear" warheads,  
The overpaid politicians,  
Wall Street and the WTO,  
Stockbrokers and their commissions.

Hooray for narrow-mindedness,  
We're all dressed to impress,  
Three cheers for wonderful sweatshops,  
Gosh America's the best!

God bless Gap and Abercrombie,  
Nike and American Eagle,  
Bless the cigarettes and marijuana,  
(I hear they'll make it legal!)

It's too late to fix American corruption,  
The s\*\* has hit the fan,  
And being corrupt makes me all the more proud,

To be an American!

(Inspired by “God bless America”  
(America, p. 36)

Shaliza \* is another student that I remember quite clearly. While some students were hesitant to think with a questioning mind, to be critical of the world around them, Shaliza \* naturally took up the mantle of social commentary. This poem which questions the smarmy manifest destiny complex of American society reminded me first of Ogden Nash, “Love Under the Republicans (or Democrats)” (1930). There, too, there was a regular rhyme scheme, though Nash wrote his as a parody of “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” by Christopher Marlowe (1599, accessed February 20, 2010), a classic within the Western canon. In Shaliza’s \* poem, she calls attention to all those markers of success and difference in American society – the clothes, sitcoms, the cigarettes, the corruption – and shouts with an ironic joy. In the end, she writes that it is too late to fix all of these problems and that all of the ills rob the speaker of the ability to truly say that she is proud to be an American. Within this statement, there is a political agency and a statement of identity. She is an American and yet unwilling to fully accept the societal ills as her owns. She critiques them and in that critique becomes an agent for change.

**The Average by Amir \*, Jordan High School**

The populous seems to grow more and more ignorant,  
Instead of trying to cure AIDS, they care about impotence,  
How is that, such a large group of people can’t read?  
And why are we led, by morons who can’t lead?  
You hear the obvious stupidity, but even if it’s apparent,  
You still don’t notice, these people are parents,  
So now, the children are gripped to hell’s bones,  
And even if they’re idiots, they carry their cell phones,  
Simple words, these people with such brevity,  
Unless it’s about popularity, or their favorite celebrity,  
Ignorance creates enemies, confusion heavily,  
Because they have memory, like they were seventy,

Years old, these people just feel bold,  
They don't care about poverty, just if the beer's cold,  
Form the great things in life, many are locked out,  
Oh, you want a better job? Maybe you shouldn't have dropped out  
(America, p. 59)

Dialogicality (Duncan, 1996) refers to acts – whether they are speech or written acts – directed to someone. An audience and a perceived response within the act are essential to this concept. Hip hop lyrics and spoken word pieces most notably engage this notion within their forms (Sitomer & Cirelli, 2004). They allow generally disempowered voices to, again, name the world and entreat the audience for attention to problems and joys within the community. These poetic forms, though definitely formal in nature, still allow poets the opportunity to create original work inspired by foundation texts and fired by contemporary experiences. This is exemplified in the work of Amir \*, an Arab American student with an incredible love of hip hop lyrics. In this poem, he calls upon that familiarity by using an innovative rhyming couplet structure. Very few of his rhymes are one syllable; rather they flourish, playing on slant rhymes, the multiplicity of meaning available within the language, while the message of each line shifts according to his will. The central theme of his poem is that the populous is losing its agency (Metcalf, 2007; Dowdy, 2006; Lankshear and McLaren, 1993; Lawrence Grossberg, 1989). All thought seems to gather around a central concept but not to the improvement of the body. Rather, the dialectical exchange is missing from this communion of ideas (Moje, 2000; Giroux, 2000; Freire, 1968). In essence, he is observing the death of the critical process. Amir \* wonders freely with his poetic speaker, calling attention to the fact that the body politic seems to be more worried about impotence than literacy, the temperature of beer versus the spread of poverty, celebrity lives versus international diplomacy.

## **CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS**

In the analysis of the data, the following questions were used to center the work:

1. Teaching of Poetry using Contemporary Authors
  - a. How does one critically engage adolescents using poetry?
2. Critical Literacy
  - a. What evidence was found for achieving critical literacy with the students?
  - b. What evidence demonstrates critical pedagogy at work in the High School Literacy Project
3. Multicultural Education
  - a. How can execution of the five tenets of Banks for multicultural education be shown through the High School Literacy Project?

### **FRAMEWORK 1: Teaching of Poetry Using Contemporary, Multicultural Writers**

The research question that stemmed from this framework was “how does one critically engage adolescents using poetry?” The High School Literacy Project answered that through the creation of a poetic community. It was a community inexplicably linked to a large community of writers, contemporary and multicultural. Students whose particular voices were generally not acknowledged in traditional classes were respected and challenged as writers. The development of their own particular poetic voices within the strength of a supportive poetic community was encouraged. Because of this, many participants, including myself, developed a certain agency.

## **Agency and Metaphor**

Through my experience with the High School Literacy Project, even I developed a certain agency, an investment in a belief about poetry and a plan of action to use it as a literacy tool. I wasn't the only one. The signs of agency in adolescent writing can also be found in the printed poems of the youth themselves (Miller, 2008; Miller, 2005). Agency, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is defined as "The faculty of an agent or of acting; active working or operation; action, activity." It does not reference the awareness of the subject in taking a particular action or making a particular choice. This definition also lacks a reference to the negotiation between the will of the self, the expectations of society, and the resultant choice that is made in concerning those two poles (Metcalf, 2007).

Agency also refers to the feeling that individuals have concerning the ownership of their actions, which has psychological implications (Metcalf, 2007). One can see that throughout the dissertation: my ruminations on the poetry curriculum as well as the self-defining poems of students such as Esperanza\* or Shaliza\* , each defining herself in subjective terms, in relation to the other. In Esperanza\*'s poem, "Yo Soy Latina", we come to understand clearly how she defines herself despite the doubts that others may have. She also extends this definition, infused with pride, to all other Latinas, a group of women capable of creating its own destiny and following it to its completion. To that end, she infuses her poem with agency, an empowered self-call to action, which, by her use of the collective, extends to the group as well. Shaliza\* , in her poem, critiques the American culture, but does this from the standing of a concerned American citizen. Though she offers no resolutions to the problems she sees, she does bring to light a number of subjects that most Americans would like to avoid. This setting up of the critical lens is itself an act of agency.

Returning to my own work, I have been quite candid about my choices in respect to curriculum. The problem for me with the literacy of marginalized youth had many parts all paired down to this: lack of engagement on the part of young people due to the disconnect between their lives and the material and the nonexistent space to be critical of the world around them. Topics that were considered to be too political, too polarizing in the class, generally remain outside of the realm of English curriculum. Poetry was and continues to be glossed over in classrooms because of teacher discomfort in teaching it. Students are lead to believe that poetry is too elusive, that it is a private practice or just to be done in the classroom alone and that they have nothing to add to the poetry/literary community if they even know that it exists. Through the High School Literacy Project, all of these notions were combated. Students not only become participants in workshops in the classroom, but they also became readers of poetry in the outside world. Through the partnership with the Ackland Art Museum, students were able to participate in a contest and read their work, to feel it honored, within a museum. They were also able to see those poems grace the walls of the museum and, later, fill the pages of a chapbook surrounded by the work of their peers and students that they had never met before the Day of the Poet.

My engagement in change, my own sense of agency stems from my own dissatisfaction as a student and teacher. Though I was ever surrounded by books and words, stories and the workings of a vivid imagination, I noted that if I could be convinced that I had nothing to add to the public literary sphere, I had to believe that disenfranchised and marginalized youth would have a similar, if intensified, critique as well.

But, there are also a number of other factors and differentiations to consider when outlining agency and its application within critical literacy. In researching applications of



poetry programs that address politics and critical literacy, I located a dissertation that offers a framework for understanding the concept of agency. In 2006, Michael Dowdy completed a dissertation entitled, *From Printed Page to Live Hip Hop: American Poetry and Politics into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. He writes:

The framework for understanding both hip hop and printed poetry is derived from theories of agency that negotiate the individual's ability to act according to her purposes in relation to the determining economic, political, and social forces that constrain action. The strategies considered thus emerge from various types of poetic agency: embodied agency, including both experiential and authoritative agency; equivocal agency, including comprehensive and particular varieties; migratory agency, and contestatory urban agency, which includes strategies indigenous to hip hop. (2006, p. 4)

Dowdy goes on to outline the characteristics of these types of poetic agency. According to him, *embodied agency* within poetry may be informed by the lived experiences of the speaker or poet (*experiential*) or may be informed by individual or collective experience while also calling for action on the part of the reader (*authoritative*). Dowdy (2006) notes that *equivocal agency* is one that allows for the poet to write outside of the human experience and create a world, to imagine: "Instead, they generally center on a speakerless scene, create a fantastic picture, imagine a world that may or may not exist referentially. They exaggerate, stretch, invent, and play with the world as it is in order to create worlds as they may not be in the future or as they *seem* in the present" (p. 113, emphasis author's). *Migratory agency* within poetry stems from the utilization of a bilingual and bicultural identity "in which the various registers of the two languages vector into and out of each other and into and out of the multi-ethnic social worlds from which they originate" (p. 176). Dowdy applies this especially to Latino writers, which is particularly relevant in my future considerations of critical literacy and politicized identity in respect to adolescents. *Contestatory urban agency*

is defined as challenging of hypermaterialism and hedonism, though Dowdy admits that the opposite can be witnessed within hip hop. His argument within the dissertation here is that hip hop has greater agency than political poetry that is printed and meant to be printed for distribution to a reading audience. I disagree with him here, instead applying to both hip hop and political poetry with equal importance as venues for societal critique.

In this dissertation, though, Dowdy's (2006) outline of *embodied agency* and that of *migratory agency* are especially poignant. An embodied agency is one that extends from the lived experiences of the individual. A migratory agency thrives on the bicultural identity of the speaker. Consider Zuleika\*'s poem that serves as a sort of biography for a man, himself given life and death by the streets, using the language and manner of writing that stems from gang familiarity. This is a street memoir in poetic form. We learn of his motivations, how his choices affect those of his son, the marks he takes to pay homage to the dead and the actions that lead to his own death, honorable because he avenged his son. In addition, all of this is done using the language of gang familiarity, that of violence and codes of honor and behavior, as the language of poetry. Could this poem have been written without the lived experience? Surely, but I think that it was especially poignant that the subject matter was familiar. Ostriker (2001) writes that there is a trend within poetry of confession, an embodied voice that speaks only of its own experience, as if the sins of the self and the washing clean of one's personal laundry in the central square are the only ways to prove successful as a poet. Zuleika \*, in her poem, takes up Ostriker's implied challenge of extending beyond the personal into a stance of witness. Yes, the poem is still based upon her experience – again, her adaptation of language is evidence of this - but she allows the poem to become that memoir of a man who would otherwise be voiceless, one who might only be remembered in

a newspaper's crime report or a rap sheet in a file. In her careful hands, her poem becomes an ode, though the white spaces may be bloody and red. She supplies the man with a tender and wracked heart, a caring not generally associated with a "gangsta".

### **Agency, Engagement and Empowerment**

At one of the High School Literacy Workshops, a student said to me something that changed my life. It was the lesson using stations, and the students were reading an article on the Duke lacrosse team. This was at Jordan High School in Durham. Most of those students had been raised on allegiances to Duke University or the University of North Carolina and their respective basketball teams. Such allegiances easily could divide a school or a classroom to the point that I never mentioned the basketball team that received my cheers. If I did so, from experience, I knew that much of the class would be spent arguing about the value of the teams and their players rather than the metaphors and symbolism at use in the poems.

This one day I came up to the group of students as they were talking about the accusation levied against the Duke lacrosse team of rape. They were speaking with such fervor that the first time I passed their group, I said nothing. On the second time, I tried to redirect them to the task at hand: writing. Each station was set to take up to 15 minutes, so making good use of that time was essential. One of the students turned to me and said, "This is bigger than poetry." Though I have forgotten the student's name, I'll never forget her face. It was triumphant and filled with light. She was engaged as her peers were engaged in a dialectic conversation about their political space, a space beyond allegiances that considered women's rights, victims, victors, crimes, justice and injustice. That group was doing a critical reading of the world right in front of me, and they were engaged.

A few years later when I went to teach in Las Vegas I taught a lesson on writing proposals. The lesson called for students to identify problems in the world, make solutions, write a business proposal and cover letter to address those problems and then present that proposal to the power who could change the problem. I hoped that the students would become engaged in the world around them as throughout the time that I taught, for months of that year, the students repeatedly said that their opinions didn't matter. For some of them, that was a lesson that turned on the switch of societal engagement just like the lesson I taught at Jordan High School. I keep looking for more lessons like that.

Engagement and critical literacy are inextricably tied for me in my understanding of adolescents and literacy. I have seen so many students just tune out of their lives as if they were characters in a television show. The world beyond their school walls and that of their homes, the literacies of survival, did not exist; even those literacies of school and home did not connect (Moje, 2002; Moje, 2000). As Laub (2006) showed, even elementary school students are capable of reading the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987) and acting upon that reading.

For me, the most successful lessons were those that allowed the students to draw upon this new expertise. They were given that first permission to look beyond the textbook, beyond survival on the streets, or the cultural readings of home, to join everything that made them up into reading the world and acting as change agents within it. Their opinions mattered. They were a part of that dialectical growth rather than onlookers in someone else's public. One way to act, to become empowered, centered on the act of writing. As evidenced by the poems that came from that lesson and the others that encouraged the students to look

outward with a solid foundation on their own, individual identities, their investment and fluidity of language even increased with this newfound voice.

While Dowdy provides a framework for understanding the different types of agency that are appropriate to the textual analysis of poetry, there are others that have written on the subject of agency, particularly within the fields of cultural studies and critical literacy.

Lawrence Grossberg (1989) clearly connects agency to empowerment, both negative and positive, writing:

In this respect, we need to recognize that empowerment can take a variety of forms; in particular, there is a difference between positive and negative empowerment.' Most cultural criticism focuses on culture's critical relation (negativity) to the dominant positions and ideologies. Politics becomes defined as resistance to or emancipation from an assumed reality; politics is measured by difference. But empowerment can also be positive; celebration, however much it ignores relations of domination, can be enabling. (p. 170)

It is important that agency can both be positive and negative depending on the point of view.

Lankshear and McLaren (1993) write of Grossberg's interpretation of agency by distinguishing the three parts within agency. Within *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern* (1996), they write:

By *subjectivity* Grossberg means "the site of experience and of the attribution of responsibility." *Agency* refers to "the active forces struggling within and over history." *Agenthood* signifies 'actors operating, whether knowingly or unknowingly, on behalf of particular agencies" (p. 398)

Within the concept of agency, too, there is an implied agenthood, an implied action by an actor to participate within the making of history, whether that be within small or large acts.

Others have written of the complications when considering agency and empowerment within cultural studies. Jessica Simpson (2006) recently wrote of the confluence within cultural studies of discourse on agency, race, justice and transformation: "A central theme of

cultural studies' attention to agency has been the tension between determinism and "non-essentialist theor[ies] of agency" (Grossberg 1996, p. 156), between structures that constrain and structures that enable. Cultural studies theorists see agency as a "culturally intelligible way of understanding ourselves'..." (p. 78). Agency goes beyond this development of understanding; it relies on action to inform that growth. In the case of the High School Literacy Project, agency and understanding extended from the act of writing, both for me and, based on the readings of the texts of students, the students. Simpson (2006) writes that agency is dynamic, that it reveals itself through the interplay of individuals. I would add that agency also can occur through the act of writing, the act of creating a text that must stand alone, dialogue with the world independently of the author. While the production of the text is socially situated, the context that provided for that production is preserved within the text as a moment in time. The individual continues on, learning and growing independent of the text, but the text is a representation of the agency of that individual within a particular moment. It is an example of "agethood" (Lankshear and McLaren, 1993).

## **FRAMEWORK 2: Multicultural Education**

How can execution of the five tenets of Banks for multicultural education be shown through the High School Literacy Project?

According to Banks (2003; 1994), content integration, prejudice reduction, knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, and empowering of school structure and social structure are the central tenets of multicultural education. So how did the High School Literacy Project fare?

## **Content Integration**

Content integration was the first of the tenets and the first that was used with the project from the curriculum design stage. At that point, contemporary, multicultural resources were pulled to be paired with lessons on poetic form. Multicultural literature (Webb, 2009; Thein, Beach and Parks, 2007; Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber, 2006; Louie, 2005; Wartski, 2005; Hinton and Berry, 2005/2004; Allender, 2002; Carter, 2002; Coltrane, 2002; Downing, 2002; Kerschner, 2002; Abair and Cross, 1999; Cruz, 1999; Wolf, Ballentine and Hill, 1999; Foster, 1998; Goldblatt, 1998; Kelly and Kelly, 1998) embraces the full gambit of experiences, noting that within any strong society, there is difference. These differences can be a resource. Unfortunately, difference can lead to the privileging of one race (Stairs, 2007; Greenbaum, 2002; Jolley, 2002; Ewing, 1999; Barron, 1998; Charles, 1997; Martin, 1997), ethnicity (Acosta, 2007; Petit, 2003; Bender-Slack, 2002; Bingen, 2002; Hernandez, 2001; Johannessen, 2002; Gorrell, 1997; Mossman, 1997; O'Malley, 1997; Stotksy, 1996), sexual identity (Blazar, 2009; Breu, 2009; Ressler and Chase, 2009; Comment, 2009; Ellis, 2009; Freedman, 2009; Letcher, 2009; Meyers, 2009; Michell, 2009; Miller, 2009; Parker and Bach, 2009; Sieben and Wallowitz, 2009; Suhor, 2009; Weinberg, 2009; Zanitsch, 2009; Hardy, 1997), class (House, 2008; Greenbaum, 2002; Hernandez, 2002; Jolley, 2002; Pace and Adkins, 2002), sex (Drew and Bosnic, 2008; Petit, 2003; Greenbaum, 2002) over another.

In addition to multicultural resources, the selected poems that demonstrated the forms selected to be taught were selected. These poems also were chosen because of the author and their content. They were supposed to be meaty, able to support in-depth conversations on the content, form and language. Oftentimes, several selections were chosen for students to

review in addition to choosing poems that fit those characteristics and yet also related thematically or stylistically to the work of the students for pairing with individual craft letters, letters given to the student-poets that analyzed and offered positive critique and inspiration based on my own analysis.

The curriculum endeavored to provide safe places for the expression of self and other and the exploration of the ties between the two. Esperanza \*’s poem, “Yo Soy Latina”, serves as an illustration that the self was honored within the curriculum. Students were encouraged to use background knowledge and vernacular such as in the case of Zuleika \*’s poem. This was done purposefully, so that the bridges between home and school literacies could be built (Street, 2006; Street, 2005; Moje, 2002; Street, 2001; Moje, 2000; Guerra, 1998; Pratt, 1991; Street, 1984).

### **Prejudice Reduction**

Challenging prejudice occurred often through the discussions of the art and texts of contemporary, multicultural writers. It also occurred through the analysis of the work of Saar exhibit, located in the Ackland Art Museum, during the 2004-2005 school year. Betye, Alison and Lezley Saar are three African American women, a mother and two of her daughters, who work in the arts. Betye’s primary medium is collage and painting. Alison is a sculptor and printmaker. Lezley works in mixed media, relying more upon painting. The work of all three generally stems from considerations of race and gender. The students were challenged to discuss what they saw in the works of art and then to write poems. The discussions were lively, uncovering meanings in the symbols that were used and then examining them for their truth. Students, throughout the program, were also pushed to critically examine every line of a poem for what it said about the world. For example, when



reading Martin Espada's "Alabanza" (2003), students had to examine those final lines for what they said about music, spirit and pain. They had to uncover what the author was trying to say about September 11<sup>th</sup> and the people who suffered from that blow, before, during and after, and that the loss affected everyone, including those coming from the same ethnic background as the perpetrators. While this dissertation cannot claim that prejudices were actually reduced in the students through participation in the High School Literacy Project curriculum, it does note that the reduction of prejudices was a goal. Even more important was the scaffolding of critical literacy and the process of reading the world through words and using words to report and challenge what was seen.

### **Knowledge Construction**

When Banks (2003; 1994) wrote of knowledge construction, he referred to several different types of knowledge: personal knowledge, political knowledge, transformative academic knowledge, and popular knowledge among others. According to Banks (2003; 1994), knowledge construction develops through social interaction and self reflection. It is only through the negotiation of what has been given and what one is and the final decision as to what to accept and what to negate does one develop as an individual (Marcia, 1966) This process of knowledge construction combats that of banking education (Freire, 1968), which is that which is given to learners and expected to not be questioned. Rather, knowledge construction according to Banks (2003; 1994) and Gramsci (1999) should be counterhegemonic, or rather not transmitting the status quo just because of its general acceptance. Knowledge construction that is counterhegemonic is aware of power and structures that affect the individual and seeks to challenge that power.

Intermingled with multicultural education is the execution of a reflective practice. Educators who emphasize praxis while attempting to achieve the five elements of multicultural education delineated by Banks (2003; 1994) sometimes call themselves critical pedagogues. Critical pedagogy comes from the work of Freire, who most note as the first critical pedagogue. For example, in his work educating adults to greater literacy in Brazil, he wrote that he was working towards liberation through literacy (reference in Nieto, 1999). He used local literacies and ways of knowing to inform his pedagogical practices (Freire, 1968; Street, 1984). He encouraged parties to become critical of the world around them (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Shor, 1992), essentially engaging in critical literacy. He also wrote, at length of banking education and that critical education could be counterhegemonic (Gramsci, 1999). According to Freire (1968), education should allow for reflection and practice (praxis) as well as allow for the multiplicity of views around a certain subject. Over the years, others have applied his theories concerning praxis (Gaughan, 1999), and a critique of ideological status apparatuses (Gramsci, 1999) such as schooling. Miller (2007) applies critical pedagogy techniques within the English classroom as does Stairs (2007) in her article concerning culturally responsive teaching in the English classroom of the Harlem Renaissance. In one instance, a researcher invoked the work of June Jordan in a partnership with an urban high school, particularly focusing on the power of spoken word (Jocson, 2005). Critical pedagogy often inspires educators to use popular culture to engage disenfranchised populations, such as in the use of spoken word, rap, and performance poetry within the classroom (Morrell, 2002; Paul, 2000), but it does not always dwell in the contemporary. Shakespeare has been used to great success in English classrooms that mix popular culture and the past (Mellor and Patterson, 2000).

Through the High School Literacy Project, students were challenged to draw on personal frames of knowledge and ways of knowing in order to make their acquisition of poetry skills essentially their own. Their subjective readings of texts were encouraged as was the sharing of these views through dialogue. One way of interpretation was not privileged over another; rather, students were challenged to engage with the texts provided to uncover meanings within them. Students were also instructed on how to examine the form of a poem and to identify whether the form served the poem's aims or if the poem was subjugated to the form. If the latter was the case, they had the power to break the form or rewrite the poem to express whatever their central concern was. Students learned methodologies of writing, interpretation, reader response in addition to background information about form, authors and historical context.

### **Equity Pedagogy**

Equity pedagogy is the fourth element of Banks's (2003; 1994) multicultural education. It calls for teachers to teach their students so that all are successful, truly believing that all students can learn. In this way, too, one could say that the High School Literacy Project was successful. No one way of thinking was privileged over another. All interpretations and ways of writing were respected and expected to be shared within the classroom. Students who consistently did not turn in poems to those who turned in four at a time were all welcome at the table of discussion. I truly believed and still do that all students can be successful as readers, writers, and critical thinkers and that poetry can unite all of those areas.

### **Empowering of School Structure and Social Structure**

Last but not least is Banks's (2003; 1994) conception of multicultural education of empowering the school structure and social structure. Banks calls for teachers and students to develop the critical skills needed to find ways to bridge the gap between the two structures. This was one of the primary goals in the High School Literacy Project: bridging the gap between home and school literacies (Street, 2006; Street, 2005; Moje, 2002; Street, 2001; Moje, 2000; Guerra, 1998; Pratt, 1991; Street, 1984). A familiarity with street culture can be useful in reading and writing a poem. Once the connection between literacy cultures can be made, engagement is sparked (Myers, 1998/1997). The student does not have to enter a fugue about one space to truly immerse in another. A student should not have to leave behind school knowledge to engage in his or her home life. A student should not have to leave home totally behind when entering the school grounds. Both areas can inform one another in positive ways that push critical examination and growth in literacy.

### **FRAMEWORK 3: Critical Literacy**

The questions that guided this framework were: What evidence was found for achieving critical literacy with the students? What evidence demonstrates critical pedagogy at work in the High School Literacy Project?

### **Evidence for Critical Literacy**

There is one literature review on critical literacy that is particularly interesting in that it derives, from a survey of the research, a series of classroom practices that are centered on student activities. Written by Edward H. Behrman (2006), the review first establishes the influences within critical literacy. Behrman (2006) stresses that critical literacy is often

written about as a series of theories that can impact practice. One cannot "do" critical literacy; rather, one can be guided by the theories of critical literacy within practice and reflection or praxis (Freire, 1968). Behrman (2006) writes:

As a theory, critical literacy espouses that education can foster social justice by allowing students to recognize how language is affected by and affects social relations. Among the aims of critical literacy are to have students examine the power relationships inherent in language use, recognize that language is not neutral, and confront their own values in the production and reception of language (Janks, 1993; Lankshear, 1994, 1997; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Morgan, 1997; Shor, 1999). (Behrman, 2006, p. 490)

The act of writing, too, can accomplish social justice aims and call attention to social ills (Singer, 2006/2005). While no building has been built and homelessness remains, while women are still raped and men are still imprisoned, the act of writing allows students the opportunity to examine the powers that be and seek ways to change that, even through the act of confronting the problems and writing their stance on them. Behrman (2006) writes that theorists who feed into critical literacy may create a discordant symphony of ideas, but it is through practice that these ideas become harmonious: "These practices may include identifying multiple voices in texts, dominant cultural discourse, multiple possible readings of texts, and sources of authority where texts are used and critiquing and producing a wide range of texts" (p. 491).

Berlin (1990) writes, at length, of semiosis (sign making) and significance within texts, the self and subjectivity, challenging ideological apparatuses, and joining all of this within pedagogy, particularly within the composition classroom where texts must be produced. He writes, too, of the "social-epistemic classroom" (1990, p. 26). "The social-epistemic classroom thus offers a lesson in democracy intended to prepare students for critical participation in public life. It is dedicated to making schools places for individual and social empowerment" (p. 26). In this classroom, students – and I would argue teachers as

well – examine their own language, background, and values and note how these values inform their subjectivities and how they view the work. This, of course, has an influence on how texts are read and how they are created. Critical literacy notes that education can support social justice aims by allowing students to recognize how language is affected by and affects social relations. Students should be able to examine the power relationships inherent in language, note that word choice, that use is not neutral, and confront their own biases and values in the production and reception of language.

The evidence of achieving critical literacy with the students stems from the poems that they produced. An example of critical literacy can be found in Zuleika\*'s poem, "Young Trapster". She offers a poetic biography of a young gangster, trapped in his life. Using anaphora, she enchants the reader, drawing one deeper into the twists of this young man's life. She critically examines his lifestyle, identifying Juan with the Crips through the absence of the consonant block "ck". There was a power that was born through her ability to write this story, to read the world and put it down into writing. There was agency.

MacCleod (2004) develops a strong link between literacy, identity and agency, particularly in reference to bridging the gaps between home and school literacies, primarily for the benefit of marginalized children. She divides her article into three, focusing on ethnographers of communication, Vygotskian perspectives and activity theories, and perspectives from New Literacy Studies. When she wrote of ethnographers of communication, she focused primarily on the communication tradition that was concerned with the development of non-mainstream children. "The term 'non-mainstream' referred to pupils from linguistic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds that were different from that of the standard mainstream school" (p. 244). Unfortunately, the research of these

ethnographers was first based in deficit theory, the belief that non-mainstream children were operating from a deficit. These children were essentially blamed for their inability to assimilate to mainstream knowledge and goals. According to MacCleod (2004), the study that resulted from this type of thinking changed with the seminal efforts of Shirley Brice Heath (1983):

Her work also offered a practical way forward for teachers involved in teaching non-mainstream children how to read and write. She helped teachers to understand the perspective of the non-mainstream child on their school experiences by providing teachers with a framework for raising their awareness of the resources these children brought to school. She helped teachers to focus their attention on their teaching approaches and the content of their literacy curriculum as opposed to the child's failure. (p. 244)

Heath allowed teachers to look at home literacies as valid, challenging teachers to include those resources within the classroom as a way of reaching students who had, before this development, always been looked at as almost beyond help.

Within MacCleod's (2004) article, she also writes at length of the efforts of the New London Group, which redefined literacy in relation to the pedagogy of multiliteracies. The pedagogical framework of the New London group was made of four distinct components: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transferred practice. In situated practice, meaningful activities, those that draw from the background knowledge of the learner, are emphasized. Overt instruction refers to the importance of outlining the activities for the learners so that they know exactly what they are supposed to accomplish in addition to building language to describe how they are learning. Critical framing gives participants the opportunity to critically analyze the social and cultural contexts of material in and outside of school. Finally, transferred practice involves applying what has been learned in similar and different contexts. MacCleod's argument within this recital of New London Group beliefs on

pedagogy is that they set the stage for drawing connections between home and school literacies, providing safe spaces for students to grow and learn. In addition, this connection over the gap into which so many students are lost is one on which students can build a dynamic sense of agency.

Consider the poetry of Amir \*. I met him in a class for struggling readers and students, a class which challenged its teachers each day with behavioral issues, the lack of attention to homework and the general disengagement with the class content. It was evident that even they considered themselves to be working from a deficit when it came to reading and writing. But, return to his poem. In a perfect couplet form, he uses commas to indicate breath. With an empowered standing, he calls attention to the ludicrous patterns of behavior within our society, linking them to education as well. The speaker divorces himself from those same behaviors by chastising them. He is an empowered self, viewing the other clearly. He wrote from his particular experience and way of seeing. As this poem will be fixed forever – it was written almost three years ago – I wonder how that person has developed, how his vision of the reality around him has developed.

### **Evidence for Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy comes from the work of Freire, who most note as the first critical pedagogue. He encouraged parties to become critical of the world around them (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Shor, 1992), essentially engaging in critical literacy. He also wrote, at length of banking education and that critical education could be counterhegemonic (Gramsci, 1999). According to Freire (1968), education should allow for reflection and practice (praxis) as well as allow for a dialectic exchange of multiple viewpoints that has, at its root, a desire to reach towards consensus.



The High School Literacy Project, 2004-2006, was immersed in critical pedagogy ideals through its curriculum and the execution of that curriculum. Texts for analysis that would foster intense conversations were identified. These were poems generally outside of the Western canon (Goebel, 2002; Kammer, 2002), chosen specifically because they were outside of the mainstream and had stories to tell as well (Wissman, 2009; Kirkland, 2008; Schwalb, 2006; Blasingame, Jr., 2002; Kammer, 2002). They were also chosen because of their potential to allow students to engage more fully (Young, 2007). All viewpoints and interpretations were welcomed. Form was taught first through the input of everyone in the class. Form included spoken word and rap, which are often not examined and taught in regular English education classrooms (Lindblom, 2007.2; Fisher, 2005; Cooks, 2005; Ellis, Geer, and Lamberton, 2004; Paul, 2000; Lardner, Sones, and Weems, 1996). Student first attempts as well as my own were shared in the context of the classroom. Poetic responses to oppression were especially lauded because of the difficulty inherent in their creation (Miller, 2009; Reilly, 2009; Staples, 2008; Baker, 2007; Alexander-Smith, 2004; Jocson, 2004; Nelson, 2000; Bartel and Grandberry, 1997; Greenway, 1996). To create such work, a student-poet had to read a situation, examine his or her own opinion about that situation particularly considering the power dynamics at play, identify an appropriate poetic form, and utilize it well with adequate word choice and clues to the content. As difficult as they were, those poems were written.

In sum, the High School Literacy Project fostered the teaching of poetry through contemporary, multicultural writers. This practice encouraged the development of agency, engagement and critical literacy on the part of the adolescent participants. The curriculum

itself was designed to aid in these results through putting into practice critical pedagogy and multicultural education tenets.

## **CHAPTER 6: Autoethnographic Reflection**

I am sitting in a café as I write this section, wondering about how to reflect on this past, how to unfold the many selves that intertwined in the creation of a curriculum, teaching poetry, examining the poems, and growing beyond that experience. Where does one begin to unfold the self? I was and am teacher, student, and poet. These are blooms, flowering from the same stem, itself multidimensional. I am also Black, Puerto Rican, a woman, among other things. If the stem dries out, the flowers wilt. But does one really see the flowers individually or as parts of the whole? I am grappling with this, because to see them individually is to focus only on the curriculum itself, the texts that I analyze, the journal entries I wrote. To see the flowers, and by extension, is to see all of my mask and selves as part of the whole. This vision would allow me to be all I am in one space, allowed the freedom to be outside of the direct experience of the High School Literacy Project: teacher, student, poet, socially-situated woman and change agent.

Returning to McLaren (1991), agency, even within the static text, represents a relationship to the social world and to history:

In other words, the agent of history can be understood as the locus for the production of discourses and identifications with these discourses through the process of hegemonic articulation. Identity in this case is neither passive nor self-determining and autonomous but rather radically contingent. The subject's role within critical pedagogy is to question the indeterminacy of the social and develop an awareness of its contingency and historicity. It is to create identities through social strategies rather than the reverse. (p. 466)

Identities are created through interactions with social productions, whether those be interactions or texts, and can be affirmed through the expression and contribution of other

texts, particularly through poetry. Poetry lends itself to short explorations of identity and empowerment actions because of its immediate accessibility as well as simply because of length. Poetry worked particularly within the High School Literacy Project, because it allowed adolescents to try on a particular stance and create narratives and counternarratives (Willaims, 2004) that reflected their experiences in addition to responding to the experiences of others. While the students within the High School Literacy Project were able to participate in numerous discourses through poetry, I found myself able to act as a political agent through my choices as the designer of curriculum and head of the program. I also produced a number of poems that came from my observations of students and my dismay that the innocence of childhood continues to be neglected and not protected. This was particularly evident in my work within a charter school located within a jail where I worked while heading the project. Below are some of the poems and reflections on them. I include them not to point to the success of a particular exercise, but to emphasize the importance of working within the genre that one teaches, to be filled with risk and daring as a writer who is learning to be a writer for the sake of students who have difficulty conceiving of a world where their input matters.

**Assumption Aubade (or risk-taking in words and life)**

Daughters, beware the dawn.  
Parting clouds strengthen for one  
woman alone, tiptoeing on wisps.

Delight in meats that simmer,  
spill out fine juices for heaven  
employs no cooks or butchers.

Count stars from pitched rooftops.  
Call the moon to twist herself  
into a grin you share together,

or if you be unabashed, sing her open mouthed.  
Glorify in Hecate mysteries

with or without the serpent guide.

Daughters, beware the dawn.  
Wail it away for death deals tarot cards  
on your doorstep at rising sun.

This your love, your life, your future.  
Cheeks pale as demise runs forward  
so ride your own stallions now

through thin curtains over waters  
salty from the work of fishermen.  
Defy your fathers, mothers. Claim bewitchment.

Dawn points you to life's duty,  
twists your arm to the end.  
What I'd give to be unbound now  
that I am dead. What I could do at night (León, p. 61)

I wrote this poem in the summer before I began heading the High School Literacy Project. It was picked up soon after for publication by *Tiger's Eye Journal* (2004). For this reason, I often used it as an example in conversation with students. It was one of my first poems published in a journal external to my experience as a student. Because of that, it was my first step into the literary world, that world that I so wish for my students. I vividly remember the joy of opening my mailbox to discover the acceptance letter, and then months later, finding another package, one with a journal within which was my poem. I was living on the second floor of an apartment building nestled into the woods. The leaves were dry and only their brown and ragged ghosts hung stubbornly from the branches. I had a roommate, at the time, and so I took the journal straight to my bedroom to read atop my bed. There I was, there was a part of me, blazoned on the page. This was a persona poem, a form that I would later teach as a part of my giving voice to the voiceless lesson. Here Mary, the mother of Jesus, from her assumption perch in heaven, dead and yet beyond death, challenged women

to be daring and risky. She challenged them to live vivacious lives rather than those of obedience, the kind of dutiful piety the Catholic school nuns pushed me to associate with her.

There was a freedom in imagining the world as seen from the eyes of one of the saints whose silent image had filled my childhood. This is an example of Dowdy's (2006) *equivocal agency* in my own life. In this poem, I allowed myself to tilt the world a bit, envision it based on my subjective self, my particular way of viewing the world. As a Catholic, for years, I thought I had a vocation, that to be a sister. In Catholic school, this is a coveted spiritual experience. In first grade, the boys and girls were separated and "the call" was explained as a voice direct from God challenging one to service. The boys were given a tour of the secrets parts of the rectory, and the girls were taken on a tour of the convent. We saw the chapel with its blue stained glass emblazoned with the name of the order, IHM for the Immaculate Heart of Mary, beneath a lonely rose. We went to the TV room where the sisters gathered. We saw two of the bathrooms with their large sinks and imagined that this was where the sisters cut each other's hair, the short bobs that showed beneath the veils most still wore. We went to the dining room with its large table, the kitchen, the refrigerator was opened. This was how we discovered that sisters drank beer, which shocked our seven year old selves. And after this, we were taken to the main church, to press our knees into the leather covered kneelers. We would reach up with our clasped hands over the rail, our eyes lowered into concentration. I remember watching the shuffling movement of the sisters' shoes, all polished black patent leather, while I waited for the call that was for me. After a few minutes, we were all guided back to school, the white girls covertly feeling my hair, that of the Black girl with a weird accent, while they whispered to see who had heard God.

In the poem that I wrote above, “Assumption Aubade”, I channeled the piety associated with Mary and challenged it. The call she heard was subverted by her own call to women to listen more to themselves, to their own hearts. In Catholic school, I believed I would go on to become a sister on and off until high school. That was the year I challenged the concept of original sin and that of sin totally. I went to confession only to ask a priest to pray with me for my friend, younger than me, who within two years had been raped, had been forced to have an abortion, had been hit by a subway, and finally was dying of a rare form of cancer. In that chapel, I was chastised for my beliefs rather than my need. I received a verbal whipping during a confession meant to cleanse one in preparation for Easter. This was when I realized my religion was run by men who no longer heard the voice of God. They understood only rituals. Perhaps that’s when I begun listening to my own voice. I think Mary would approve.

**Amanecer (or a dawning)**

the world begins in blue  
the deepest hue on the palette  
so dark as to be almost black  
with specks of primed board to peek

then the slow opening  
sky-rock cracks to reveal its bleeding  
burgundy tints night into purple  
maroon then rust, bloody to red-gold  
an eye’s seduction  
herald of the body’s bewitchment

first through wicked tongue  
delight in the word *amanecer*  
so much more than *to dawn*  
or *sunrise* in English  
in Spanish the word effloresces  
captures flourish in its syllabic embrace  
it shakes out its silk  
resplendent colors layered one over the other

revealed in a dance that taunts onlookers  
to singe their own eyes on its skirts.  
(León, 2009, p. 10)

This poem is one of the first in my second poetry manuscript. It calls up Dowdy's (2006) *migratory agency* in an explanation of word in Spanish. *Amanecer* has always been associated for me with *mañana* and *nacer*, morning and to give birth. The word has always been so much more powerful for me than the English words. In the Spanish, for me, all of the colors and the brilliant beauty, sometimes soft and sometimes brutal, of morning comes to be. Hall (1979) wrote about how all symbols are encoded and decoded within words. *Amanecer*, for me, enchants. It casts spells into a pool of sky water. I see the day I rode with my father to high school, the story he told of my santera grandmother and the possessed clown that attempted to kill him and his siblings in a war between her and the santera next door. It, too, conjures the changing sky from my lover's window years later when the world was still but for his breathing.

When I teach, I often challenge students to identify that word that is inextricably tied to memories. I want them to choose the essential words, to pare down the excess, to allow each individual word to build upon the other with no missteps.

### **The disappearance of fireflies (or memory in words)**

We used to catch them in Mason jars  
or beer bottles by the park where the junkies  
hid with their works and fire spoons  
when it darkened enough to sink unseen.

Juanita and I would run around the square,  
gated by iron plumbing, piping screwed  
to the ground, other irons slid through holes  
making a gate that rusted in our hands.

One kid learned what his Daddy taught him,



how to give a good suck in the corner  
by the yellow brick, how to lean against the chip  
of grout, forgetting sidewalks and glass,

how to kneel, close the eyes and moan.  
We used to catch fireflies together,  
run with kites that never flew in the projects.  
Mami would pick me up at eight o'clock.  
I would watch TV and say, *Nothing happened.*  
(León, 2009, p. 17)

Though Ostriker (2001) would challenge me to divorce myself from the confessional, I've always been attracted to the embodied truth. I want to think that this poem is as much about the loss of my innocence as it is about those with whom I grew up. Juanita, my older cousin, and I had our childhood colored by junkie fireflies and yellow brick observations. One of the reasons I felt pulled to teaching in the first place was that my whole life I have served as a protector of someone. Though I was always small, I learned quickly that the way to survive was to cultivate a mask of steel and stone, one that said *I know the violent dark and I'm willing to walk there again*. It's not that no one protected me when I was growing up; they just didn't know what to protect me from and how to do it. As much as I wish I could be there for everyone I know, to protect them from the evils and spit this world spouts out, I know that I can't. It's my belief, though, that we recover a bit of ourselves and our peace in telling the stories.

I teach at a high school in Germany now for sons and daughters of military soldiers. Some of their parents have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan up to 5 times. These men and women have missed out on seeing their children grow up, and the children have seen their parents come home angry and bruised, mangled and broken. My students are some of the most respectful, dedicated, loving kids that I've ever known. They have an immense

capacity for joy and welcoming despite the volatility of their lives. They also have significant anger issues, at times, and have real trouble seeing beyond the present. They have difficulty imagining consequences as much as they have difficulty imagining the future they want to live.

I say all this to tell another story. Recently, there was a presentation on character development given to the school. In that speech, the students were allowed into the life of the speaker. He talked about power and his own child abuse, that becoming better and being the man he wanted to be meant being honest about the man he had been. As a teacher, I use this technique, too. I had just taught my students about publication of poetry and fiction, a continuation of a lesson I developed with the High School Literacy Project. I told them about how I post each rejection on my wall these days. I see them not as a rejection of me, but that my work did not work for that editor at that time. I post the rejections among the acceptances to remind me that my path is not an easy one, but that it is a good one. It is the one that I chose and so each rejection is just a stone on the way to where I want to be. And if there are poems with hard subjects like abuse or abortion or addiction or death, I tell them my stories then, too. I show them the poems I wrote. Sometimes I might cry. I hide nothing. I want them to know that shadows delight in the dark. You own your own shadows when you put them in the light. They have to follow you as you walk your own way.

**On the football field (or bringing shadows into the light)**

*For Tito*

Huddled together, they transform, a saint's flag, blue and white. Boys become Catholic fists, set to pummel each other into the burning belief that comes from a kind of flagellation. Somehow catechism and all its mysteries link to football plays, ever the push forward, the faith that someone will catch and run. My brother slides into his position, a defensive tackle. Though small, he is built sturdy. He carries "The Beast" as his nickname. He devours, claws, tramples down. In this game, the score is tight. 20 to 14, the other team just a touchdown away from winning. Time ticks on. The

boys lock up, foot soldiers on either side. The jeers begin. *That your mother over there? Jumping up and down, looks just like a monkey.* Another chimes in with sound. My brother's lurch forward soon follows. *Off sides.* They line up again. *Your sister is such a pretty piece of ass. Those babies would be fun to shoot.* My brother begins to cry beneath his helmet. He is ten, if that, at the time. *Where the fuck did you come from with a nigger family?* And then the spit, more spit, he cannot wipe away. The play begun he sails to show them he is still steel. He tosses his whole body into tackling, one boy after another. When the teams lock up, we off the field do not know why, just see the play has stopped, the game is over and my brother is jammed in the middle. We can not see the punches from both sides. All my mother knows is my brother weeping off the field, throwing his helmet down and saying, *Never again.* The coach will call, *Boys will be boys. You can't let him quit. We need him* to which she responds, *You can't protect him out there, and he won't tell me what's happening. My son says he doesn't want to play. I won't force him.* That was not the end of the fights. I thought he would be a priest someday, that gentle. The boys made him believe in something different, that his fists had more power than God.

(León, 2009, p. 22)

When is the moment that we grow hard, when we exchange our child's softness for an adult's shell? For my brother, it was when he played football in elementary school. He was battered for belonging so well when his family was different from the families of his peers. I wrote this poem in the months after the High School Literacy Project, when I was at the MacDowell Artists Colony.

After the ending of HSLP due to the loss of funding, I was bitter. I resented the departmental move from established projects to those that focused on "the new economy". The program was set to grow from 300 students to 600 high school students in the third year, from a semester program to a year long with undergraduate and graduate student volunteers. When I learned that the program would not continue, only three days before the fall semester was to begin, I was devastated. I had to quickly find another graduate appointment and found that one was available. It was not one that I would have wanted, but it fit with my research interests. In the end, I had no choice as far as finances were concerned. I sent Dean James an

email begging for the right to operate the High School Literacy Project again, at least in the spring. I would have worked for that project for free. I just wanted to keep the name, I said. I would find the funding to do the Day of the Poet. I was desperate to keep the project alive. I had seen so much growth in the students; they were excited about taking part again. Unfortunately, I was denied. Here was the building of my shell.

**All around, he's there (or the cover against the boogeyman)**

*"Wouldn't it be so much easier if all monsters were ugly?"*

*Thanatos & Eros: The Birth of the Holy Freak* by Karl Nussbaum

The boogeyman sinks through bogs, travels in crud-waters,  
to pristine streams and mirror lakes where cows drink.

Milk, symbol for liquid purity, steals the senses.  
Has the milkman come to your home today?

He's the boogeyman set to thieving your children.  
Outside they are playing on spring green grass.

You call them in for milk and cookies, already lost.  
The shells will return to play outside, but soon enough

the girls are developing breasts at eight - the boogeyman  
knows all about booby traps - and the boys are growing

black wings and pistols from their eyes. The commercials  
ask you if you have it, and you do. The boogeyman,

with his stench, is pale-horse white. He flies, too, on black crows  
with your plucked eyes in their beaks. Haven't you noticed

the mirror has seemed dull? It's the boogeyman who bruises  
the glass. He visits churches and whispers pishogues

to the tune of hymns. He infects the evangelist's husband,  
the immigrant, the stockbroker, the stay-at-home mother,

any mother's child, the recreational addict, the therapist  
and her patients. The boogeyman bogs you down, torturous

submergence. Your cells have been invaded. It is so easy now

to blame the boogeyman. Blame the boogeyman. It's not anyone's fault.  
(León, 2009, p. 41)

I could not understand how a project that was obviously affecting students – their poetry and writing became more engaged, risked more, became less superficial and formulated – and was set to double in number would be cancelled. I was asked after those days if I was still working at the Stone Center and with the Romance Language Department. Both positions I had let go so that I could concentrate on the High School Literacy Project. It seemed I had been pushed out to sea, but within a few days, I received a graduate appointment within the department.

As a graduate student representative for a project outgrowth, I attended the meetings on “the new economy” that I could. Most meetings I couldn't attend as I had returned to work nearly full time at the school located in the juvenile detention agency to make ends meet. Besides that, I needed to feel of use, in control and valued. I didn't want to feel like I was just the minion of a greater organization that seemed so undefined. I had gone from having my own schedule and working primarily independently to being highly dependent on the needs of others, particularly a program with which I had little investment. It was a hard adjustment. When I was able to attend the meetings, I found myself asking caustic questions, expressing my bitterness in disbelief at the feasibility of this new shift.

My new graduate position allowed me a certain flexibility, and I found myself taking advantage of that. After a brief discussion with the school that I worked for, I was allowed to work the anger out of me. I had recently been awarded a fellowship, a residency in poetry at the Montana Artists Refuge (Basin, Montana) for the month of October 2006. I leaped at the opportunity and drove cross-country for three days through the Black Hills and the Rocky

Mountains, past slow freight trains and over lonely roads. I needed to go someplace with peace, far from the politics and disappointment that I had begun to associate with my graduate experience, which had been best exemplified by the loss of the High School Literacy Project.

In Montana, I was supposed to be working on a project about my father, the chameleon storyteller, as solid as an apparition and yet ever present. I wanted to write about his distance when I was a child, how I only understood as I grew older. His sacrifices and sins were mysteries. His triumphs, too, were generally unsaid and unknown. I wanted to write those stories, those that I had picked from him over those rare breakfast conversations we shared, his spirituality and belief in something greater passed to me through story. I couldn't write those poems, though. What I found myself writing were the poems about hardening, about childhood, about violence and innocence. It was a project I started in a wild place, Basin, Montana where there were only 300 people in the town and cattle drives were a common occurrence. When I came down from the mountain, I was less bitter, but it wasn't until I went to the MacDowell Artists Colony from April to May 2007 that I wrote "On the Football Field".

I read the poem less than a year later, 2008 at the AWP Conference in New York City, surrounded by many of the foundational and emerging voices of Latino poetics. I finally broke. I cried, mid-poem, in front of almost 200 people, for my brother, for myself, for all those children who had been battered and bruised to become steel, those who were voiceless, whose stories would not be told (Thacker, 2007). After I finished the poem and sat down, still wounded and yet triumphant, I found Martín Espada holding my hand. Two of my dearest friends, Maria Nieves and Aracelis Girmay, comforted me on either side. Later, Sam

“Fish” Vargas took me beneath his arm and said that hearing my poem, seeing me broken, made him want to break concrete with the faces of anyone who would hurt me. I looked up around me and saw tear tracks on the faces of many I knew, many I didn’t. This was the power of poetry to transform, to connect, and to rip the sadness out until all that was left was a space for joy.

**Surviving the burn (or transformation in poetry)**

*For Bina Akhter and all others*

I.

this is my face  
this is not my face  
the black hole of empty socket  
swallows your grimace without sight  
red rims the throb  
still sulfuric

cheek bones jut out  
once rosy covered mounds  
beneath this black burkah  
sashay of shadow  
now bones of a corpse grin out  
i cannot help the foam that spills  
will no one love me now?

his silent kiss  
a desire sent through air  
lip to hand then blow to me  
face down covered head  
eyes to dust  
my father saw  
imam saw  
my father imam  
our father

my fault the desire  
i must have teased  
I never teased  
I spoke no word  
i must have wanted

I never wanted  
his look his touch  
a whisper of sweat

my father saw  
imam must answer  
fling the stone that burns  
against his only sweetness

God lives in mirrors  
one perfect blue eye  
one black hole

II.

Daughter,  
take off your veil  
bare this waterfall of eye  
I cannot bow enough to sop  
the Devil's water of my hand

You rise still  
stone that the sun warms at morning  
I mourn and tear my hair  
a bloody scalp  
useless poppy bed for dreams

Daughter,  
take off your veil  
show me this sparked rage  
you turn to action  
peel back the skin  
over your lashing tongue  
unconfined  
perfect teeth

III.

twisted so hard  
got to hold have  
not enough money in this womb  
this paltry dowry  
she cheat  
she flirted with him my cousin my friend  
she don't listen she was  
she was not she mine



spoke up fell down  
bruise blue beneath  
her voice sharp breath heavy not sweet  
she read she don't she too  
she not enough  
she run she stay  
she not give me sons  
not sex I say  
I'm a good  
husband no to wife-me  
have to so hard to  
hold control be in her  
I have to throw have to make her know  
understand she place  
my place  
scarred

IV.

Islam does not teach the burning stone  
rather that a name goldens  
makes the tongue glow  
hearts unfold from rib cages in flower-flush  
my name is His name  
His name is mine  
peace, greatest, most lovely  
my womb holy temple that sings out  
hums a low tone  
within my jungle I hide and reveal  
I extend from center  
my body vertical halo that throbs ruby  
burgundy and gold  
I am lash and silence  
hurt and belief  
I know His name  
He knows mine  
the mirror reveals His face  
my face.

(León, 2007, pp. 67-70)

I wrote this poem in those last months of the High School Literacy Project. In addition to my duties as the head of the program, I also was working as a graduate research assistant at the Stone Center. It was the first time that I had ever had my own office, two

computers at my disposal, the trust to help plan programs and correspond with scholars. In those last months, I was also a graduate teaching assistant in the Romance Languages department. I split my time between teaching Spanish three times a week to two classes, assisting in the programming at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center and heading the High School Literacy Project. In addition to this, I was working with short term contracts for a number of different agencies, while going to conferences and working on publishing. The silent moments were spare, usually found as I drove from one location to another. There was one afternoon, though, in the spring when I had no commitments, nothing to call me away from writing. I wrote “Surviving the Burn” in that time. At the time, I had been researching burn victims. It had become an obsession of mine that would eventually lead to a larger poetry project concerning the marginalization and abuse of children. I had written a poem the summer before at Cave Canem that told the story of children meeting in a debriding room, that special place of terror and healing where the dead skin is washed off after severe burning. In every account, it is a torturous process. I was always amazed that one could remain sane after the daily ritual of scraping away the dead skin, the nerves still raw and on fire again.

“Surviving the Burn” stems from an account I read of a sulfuric acid burn survivor, Bina Akhter, who was one of the first to suffer such a disfigurement, remove the veil and talk about what happened. I later used the rough draft of the poem at Jordan High School as an example of a political poem, one that gave voice to the voiceless. In writing the poem, I wanted to stress that the use of sulfuric acid was not endemic to Islam, rather it was about men controlling women. Islam is a religion of peace as are all religions that I know. It is the people behind religion that corrupt it.

I remember that Shaliza \* was in the room when I read this poem. She and the other students, usually boisterous and sometimes inattentive in the workshops that some viewed as a break from school work, were silent, attentive, aware. She turned in her own poem at the next class, a clever critique of American society.

### **The mouths of babes (or facing the devil I knew)**

*She hit herself* he insists, *with her own hand*  
*And now I'm in here.* For three days, he proclaims  
innocence while he sings old R&B love songs  
in the middle of class “*I get so weak in the knees*”  
Everyone in jail is innocent  
He broke into truth today  
*She was sitting on the toilet*  
*Her and her university self*  
*And I said to show me her hand*  
*and I went whack, whack with it.*  
*Don't you ever disrespect me again.*  
*She was like O.* Surprised,  
sometimes I forget that students  
become so used to the teachers  
they, too, forget we are alive.  
They imagine us as walls, which hear and do nothing,  
or stones or maybe insignificant ants.  
Sometimes, they remember we stand  
shocked, listening, wondering how to direct  
them to the work. *Yo, Ms. León, how do you feel*  
*about a woman-beater?* Another student pushes.  
*He's just a woman-beater.* After a while, under my breath,  
I whisper-slip *No woman likes to be hit*, because the first  
student argues that it was her fault again, that some women  
like to be abused. *No woman likes to be hit.* I know it.  
I still dream of my devil's face, the man who choked  
when he wanted love. I think that I have gone to hell  
with the face of the devil all around me, taunting from the bodies  
of children, of angels. (León, 2007)

### **Psychomachia (or writing about the bars and the people behind them)**

The contest for the soul happens on slick cement  
with the penitent in orange slippers and issued socks.

They crave the sizzle-burn of sucked in smoke,  
the green haze cool in the night, and tell me  
when they are free, they will return to the embrace  
of this sly woman. They call her Mary, know her holy,  
fancy her pure. They do not believe in her harlot womb.  
She belongs to no one man, rather tempts them all.

There is no sky to see God here. Temptation lives in memory:  
a thigh, a blunt, the Devil's gang signs still forming on their hands.  
Here is the stage for the soul's conquest: a set of grey rooms  
atop a jail. Here is where angels and demons tip toe between  
the teeth of human children, if they are still human at all.  
I do not know the test, so I teach them collective,  
knowing some of us may be damned. (León, 2007)

The previous two poems were written in those months following the High School Literacy Project. I was a teacher's aid in English, Algebra 1, Algebra 2, Geometry and Biology. Whatever was needed, I attempted to provide. On occasion, I was allowed to teach a short poetry workshop, generally on haiku. It wasn't until I went to Montana and then to Macdowell that I allowed myself the space to write about my experience. As a teacher and as a change agent, I made a pledge to work with the disenfranchised and marginalized students. I want to work with the students who need the most help. I have no interest in working in private schools or those public schools where the students have everything at their disposal. I want to work with those who are rediscovering hope.

This choice carries with it risk. The first poem relates one. As the victim of abuse, it was a strange place to look at a symbolic replacement for my abuser and teach him. Freire (1968) challenged the oppressed to teach their oppressors. I suppose this is what happened in that instant when I chose to forgive the boy who had just walked into the school in chains for his crime. I chose to teach him about poetry, hoping that there might be some tenderness he could reclaim in that. Olney (1972) calls poetry and autobiography both a definition of self.

This is one of the hardest things for students to develop, the ability to use language that truly speaks from their cores. As adolescents, they naturally are still trying on different identities, testing them within social situations. A poetic voice that stems from a solid understanding of self is years away, but in the poems from the High School Literacy Project, I saw the inklings of that force, that powerful self-knowledge at the roots of great poetry.

**Escape (or ... )**

*“Suddenly I realize  
that if I stepped out of my body I would break  
into blossom” James Wright*

pelt so easily unfolds  
with the right blade and slice  
out spills primal red  
splashes of paint on rocky face  
the basis for autumnal leaves  
a woman’s slaying dress

if you could shed your skin  
shatter the bone cage  
how would you blossom  
would you become  
a man with a mountain view  
or a night wing owl (León, 2007, p. 142)

The goal within this dissertation was to discuss the engagement of high school students in their own learning as a result of participation in a project which joined together critical literacy and the teaching of poetry using contemporary, multicultural resources. The students were definitely engaged within the classroom and in their writing. They participated in the letter writing responses. They argued about the meanings within lines and the importance of those lines. They examined the world and used what they discovered to write poetry. In addition, they tackled poetic form, constructs that are not generally taught until the collegiate level. They understood the rules and broke them if necessary. They examined the

purpose of the poem and married it to a particular form that would best be a vehicle for the message. While I cannot claim that these skills came solely from the High School Literacy Project – they obviously had some formal English Education – the application was supported in an unusually focused way through the High School Literacy Project. While I often tried to work with the goals of the teacher – one asked for lessons using contemporary American literature, for example – in the end, I was not guided by district English standards, which was freeing. The High School Literacy Project took place in workshops that happened once a week. Because of that, students often looked at me as the fun, outsider, the one to impress or the one to chat with as a friend. In the end, they accomplished work that many creative writing students in undergraduate and graduate programs would drool over.

This dissertation has incredible ramifications for the future of English Education. To begin, a clear absence in the literature concerning the teaching of poetry has been identified. As a researcher, it is my hope to work within this niche, writing about student engagement and poetry, critical literacy, methods of teaching the writing of poetry, and outlining some contemporary, multicultural resources to use within a curriculum. I am also interested in doing further research into the transformations that occurred through participation in the High School Literacy Project. While this dissertation is limited in its focus on the texts themselves, interviews with former participants would shed a new light on engagement, perhaps answer if that engagement was sustained beyond the project itself, and what other factors could play a part in that.

But could this project be repeated as it was? I do not believe so. Much in the way of June Jordan's *Poetry for the People* (Muller, 1995), the essence of the changes in the High School Literacy Project are too inextricably woven with my passion for poetry, education,

and engagement. The reality is that no project designed can be replicated from year to year in the way that it was originally conceived. Such an initiative would be staid. The High School Literacy Project was not built to be a mechanized critical literacy system. That defeats the purpose of encouraging true agency and ownership in one's own reading and writing process. The act of valuing every poetic contribution of students would be lost. The High School Literacy Project was built to challenge, to take risks, to inspire through contemporary, multicultural texts, and to validate. It was also built to be flexible. As all good lessons, those here are adaptable. They can transform to fit the needs of an English teacher hoping to inspire her students to be better and more engaged readers and writers. They can be used in a History classroom as well that attempts to draw in different sources to understand and react to cultural phenomena. The lessons pull from so many different areas of strength that even a teacher with no familiarity with poetic communities, scansion, poetic form, or contemporary, multicultural writers could find some aspect from which they could grow. A music teacher could teach the lesson on bop. A speech teacher could focus on spoken word and performance. The fantastic thing about the High School Literacy Project curriculum is that each lesson does not need to be dependent upon the other to achieve engagement, critical literacy or poetic growth. They can be broken apart and used to support the aims of the teacher.

In the years since the High School Literacy Project, I have used these lessons in just this way. When teaching students the five paragraph essay in Las Vegas so that they could pass the statewide proficiency exam required for graduation, I used the metaphor table. I wanted them to begin filling their work with more vivid details to show their command of the language. That extended from their understanding of metaphors and similes and how they

can effectively be used in prose. When guiding young writers through the Writers Workshops I started in Las Vegas and here in Germany, I used prompts to guide them in the creation of new work. I also enjoy challenging them with a particular form – prose poems, flash fiction, linked haiku, haiga – to get them out of the rut that they would claim for themselves. Most of my students identify as fiction writers, but it helps a great deal to challenge them to try something else, to show them that they are not limited to one form even though they might be strong within it. In teaching a teleconferenced session at the American Society of Aging yearly convention – this was while I was at the Montana Artists Refuge and my mother, Dr. Norma Thomas, was the other presenter – we used an adaptation of Lesson Plan 2: Poetry, Name and Perspective to engage the social workers and gerontologists in the writing of family stories from pictures and multiple perspectives. The poems produced through that experience called out intense emotional reactions from the participants; laughter and tears were welcomed as the participants shared their work, risking a great deal while creating a safe, poetic community in just the span of three hours. While I could not see the reactions of the participants, to this day, when my mother attends the American Society of Aging conference, she is stopped by former participants in moments where they relive the emotional explosion that was that moment. The poems composed within that workshop were published in a small chapbook distributed to the workshop participants. I have also used these same lessons to inspire educators at conferences, once giving an 8-hour workshop to a small group of teachers in New York City. I encouraged the teachers to include contemporary, multicultural writers in their lessons and brought in writers and friends from the area to share their work with the teachers and participate in the discussions on how to engage high school students in the reading and writing, let alone poetry. These days I have



taken these lessons to inform a graduate course that I am currently teaching, Teaching of Poetry for English Teachers. Each week, students are challenged to write a poem in poetic form and study the work of contemporary, multicultural writers. Most of the resources I use are new and dynamic within the classroom space. We have already brainstormed ways to include the lessons in the classroom. The final project is to do a series of three lessons, teach them in class, bring in the resulting work, and discuss what happened in the classroom.

In conclusion, this work can be life-changing. This is what I have most learned from the High School Literacy Project. It has changed my life and I dare say those of others. Students were inspired by the texts used, the challenge of poetic form, classroom discussion, and participation within a poetic community in the form of the Day of the Poet. One of my students from the High School Literacy Project connected with one of the students I met in 2006 at Chapel Hill High School, who was on the youth slam team at the time. Those two now live together. They guide other poets. They are slam masters and coaches. Poetry fills their lives. There is a power in that. The High School Literacy Project had something to do with that.

**APPENDIX I: Releases**

*The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

*School of Education*

*and*

*Research Triangle Schools Partnership*

***Consent for Use of Photograph, Image, and/or Student Work***

In consideration of the possible use of my child's image and other information pertaining to my child in the media set out below, I hereby give my consent for The Research Triangle Schools Partnership, its member schools, the agents and employees of both (hereafter RTSP), and The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education (hereafter the School of Education) to use my child's image and information relating to my child in the ways indicated below.

I give RTSP and the School of Education the irrevocable right and permission to copyright, use, re-use, publish, re-publish, exhibit, and distribute my child's image (including photographs and videotaped images), interviews with my child, and samples of my child's work **in displays, in RTSP and School of Education publications, in instructional videos, and/or on the internet**. I give this permission on the condition that my child will not be identified by name, nor will my child be identified by my name, for any image used on the internet. I waive the right to approve the final product(s) in which these images and samples may appear.

This release is binding on me, my child, and our heirs, legal representatives and assigns.

I acknowledge that I am the parent or guardian of \_\_\_\_\_ and that I am at least eighteen years old.

\_\_\_\_\_ (seal)

Signature of Parent or Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_ (seal)

Signature of Witness

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

*The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

*School of Education*

*and*

*the Research Triangle Schools Partnership*

*Consent for Use of Photographic Image*

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