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Cristina V. Ramirez
Western Washington University

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Give Me a Mic and a Stage:

A Case for Slam Poetry, Identity, and Socio-Emotional Learning in the High School Classroom

Cristina V. Ramirez
Honors College, Western Washington University
Advisor: Dr. Tracey Pyscher
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Abstract

Many research companies in the past decade have been interested in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). In particular, these companies often look at how a lack of SEL education in schooling affects the ability for students to learn and later develop essential skills such as identifying emotions, positive goal setting, decision-making, and many other crucial socio-emotional skills that are often taken for granted. This paper seeks to find and discuss how SEL intersects with teaching a slam poetry unit in a high school sophomore English classroom. Through looking at the connections between slam poetry and SEL, this paper argues that teaching identity-driven units can meaningfully integrate SEL skills into the classroom that focus on an exploration of identity and the self. However, the implementation of these identity-focused SEL skills isn’t limited to solely the English classroom; educators across disciplines should also consider how to integrate SEL into their instruction.

Keywords: slam poetry, socio-emotional learning, Social and Emotional Learning, high school, identity, voice
Give Me a Mic and a Stage: A Case for Slam Poetry, Identity, and Socio-Emotional Learning in the High School Classroom

This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.

— Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”

Poetry has existed for thousands of years, from the epics of long time past to the scribbles of verse on a disposable napkin. In poetry there is the power to, as Lorde (1984) mentions in the quote above, act as an “illumination” to the self in that the verses serve as a measure of illuminating the ideas, thoughts, and emotions that we are unaware of before the verses bring their elusive nature to black ink.

When teaching poetry to high schoolers earlier this year, I had Lorde’s idea in my mind as I created my unit. However, I was largely unaware of how much poetry, specifically slam poetry, overlaps with and shares a conversation with the larger dialogue that is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Through my personal narrative and reflections on my teaching internship, I hope to encourage and inspire other educators to consider new modes of expression for their students as a tool for practicing crucial SEL skills.

Before continuing, I would also like to acknowledge my own positionality. I am not an expert in slam poetry nor SEL. I have not held long teaching positions. I am very much still learning and educating myself in all of these categories. Many other veteran teachers like Brian Mooney have done great work exploring these topics in more depth. The purpose of this paper is to share my novice experience teaching slam poetry and my personal experience as I saw these topics overlapping with one another as an opportunity for change.
Introduction to Slam Poetry

In order to understand my argument for slam poetry, it is crucial to first discuss what slam poetry exactly is and how it functions as its own discourse centralized around the importance of voice and identity.

Although slam poetry’s history is sometimes contested, most will agree that Marc Smith is sort of the godfather if you will of slam poetry as we know it. However, I do want to acknowledge that not everyone gives Smith all of the credit for the creation of slam poetry. Many more papers have discussed the history and roots of slam poetry in more depth, but it is important to acknowledge the previous movements such as the Beat movement in the 1950s and the Black Arts Movement which laid the groundwork for slam poetry (Edwards et al., 2018).

In 1984, Marc Smith, a Chicago construction worker that became a poet (Somers-Willett, 2012, p. 3) decided he was unhappy with the state of poetry in academia at the time. In an interview, Smith said “traditional poetry readings were boring and self-serving because they had poets reading to only hear themselves” (Johnson, 2017, p. 5). Most poetry readings were conducted and curated through universities which acted as a form of gate keeping that is, unfortunately, still prevalent in academia. Regardless, Smith saw poetry readings as boring and self-serving.

He decided to host a poetry reading first at a jazz club called “Get Me High” and then at other local Chicago bars. His goal at the start was just to “merge performance and poetry” (Johnson, 2017, p. 5). His idea quickly caught on as he found other poets with the same ideas in mind. It wasn’t called a poetry slam until two until two years later when Smith ran out of material one night and decided spontaneously to make it a competition. Instead of the quiet,
subdued audience members of traditional poetry readings, poetry slams were rowdy and fun, attracting younger audience members who loved the audience participation and excitement that had never existed with poetry before.

These poetry slams spread across other major cities near Chicago and the first national competition, called the National Poetry Slam (NPS) in 1990 brought in everyone from these cities. TV and documentaries like “Louder Than a Bomb” also helped spread the wildfire that was slam poetry (Siskel, J. & Jacobs, G., 2010). Before, poetry was confined to a small group of traditional readings that had to be curated, but now slam poetry provided a platform for anyone with a poem.

Of course, spoken word poetry has been around for far longer than just the 80s. Poetry meant to be performed has spanned back since stories were first told. In the eighth century BC, Homer's *Odyssey* was orally spoken aloud to an audience, and many different civilizations have passed down oral accounts and history through verse. Spoken word poetry is an umbrella term for poetry meant to be shared aloud with others, and slam poetry fits underneath it, but it’s also become its own discourse that makes it so distinct.

Which leads to the obvious question: what is slam poetry then? While some may want to say slam poetry is a sub-genre of spoken word poetry with its own implicit or explicit rules, there’s much more happening in this discourse that combines performance, community, and competition.

Performing is what makes or breaks a slam poem. Slam poets spend years practicing and perfecting the art of performance. Each decision a poet makes when performing (when to shout, when to whisper, when to slow down, when to talk fast, when to speak casually, when to profess,
when to act out, when to use your body to express) is a decision that took many years of experimenting. Without these tools, the connection to audience members would falter.

It is essential to also consider the role of the audience in slam poetry. Many of the audience members at slams are slam poets themselves in a community they have created amongst themselves.

Yes, of course there is the competitive nature of slam poetry that it is so well known for. After all, part of the excitement in slam poetry is a tangible feeling like there is something at stake—a trophy. However, those that judge slam poetry contests know that a poem is worth far more than mere points or a trophy. The largest youth slam competition located in Chicago called Louder Than a Bomb makes it clear that “The point is not the points, the point is the poetry,” a phrase that other competitions have picked up as well. Louder Than a Bomb worked later with production company Siskel/Jacobs Productions to follow the experiences of several Chicago youth as they competed in the large competition. In the documentary, Lamar Jorden gives his thoughts after his team doesn’t advance to finals:

Without Louder Than a Bomb, people like myself and Adam Gottlieb would’ve never met. People like myself and Nate Marshall would’ve never met. That speaks much louder than victory, that speaks louder than respect, that speaks louder than poetry. (Siskel & Jacobs, 2010)

So when considering the power and influence of slam poetry, the power of interacting and sharing stories with others that are unlike you is one of the most defining features.

As for the actual style and form of slam poetry? Somers-Willett (2012) said it best when she said “The key to understanding slam poetry as a body of work has little to do with form or
style . . . because a range of forms, tones, and modes of address exist in slam practice…” (p. 9). I find that her use of the word “range” here is most applicable in that most slam poetry tends to fall under a certain range of styles. There are very few nonnegotiable rules in most slams: no props or costumes, no music, it has to be less than 3 minutes, and it has to be original work. Many slam competitions like Louder Than a Bomb echo these rules in their rulebooks. The “range” that I consider when discussing slam poetry is that most slam poems tend to be informal, personal narratives. The speaker walks the audience through an experience they had in their life. Slam poetry is free verse, so the poet is free to choose when to engage in rhyme or not.

Most poems are also known to have a distinct passionate tone that Somers-Willet (2012) describes because “protestive and passionate pieces are frequent at a slam, and many poets treat the slam stage as a political soapbox” (p. 52). When given three minutes to share your perspective on any topic imaginable, most poems tend to be about larger issues connected to identity, politics, injustice, and many other topics that are on the poet’s mind as they intersect within their own lived experiences.

Taking influence from hip-hop, some poems feature a hip-hop rhythm that creates a pulsing beat to the narrative without music. It is difficult to describe this typically fast rhythm over text, but it is a common feature worth mentioning due to the feeling that it evokes—a feeling of restlessness, power, and also a feeling of identity for those that have either grown up listening to hip-hop/rap or currently listen to the genres. For those that don’t listen to hip-hop or rap, slam poets that engage in this expression are difficult to follow at times. During those moments, I am reminded of the fact that sometimes just listening to the way a poem feels is
much more important than what is being said, however strange that may sound. As mentioned earlier, the audience experiences the feeling the author has captured in such moments.

If there is anything to take away from the descriptions above, it is that slam poetry is centralized around the experiences, individual and collective, and voice of the performer.

**Introduction to Social and Emotional Learning**

I was largely unaware of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) before beginning research as a reflective process from my internship experience. Although this paper won’t go too deep into SEL or its current research, this is some of the research I discovered while looking at SEL’s impact.

When discussing SEL, CASEL or the collaborative for academic, social, and emotional learning is bound to come up in conversation. Since its creation in 1994, CASEL has been a leader for SEL in the US. They are now one of the largest groups that researches SEL, creates tools using their research, and provides SEL guidance to states.

In 2016, CASEL launched its Collaborating States Initiative or CSI, which is CASEL’s mission of working with states to help their SEL development by providing research and connections. As of 2019, CASEL now works directly with 30 states, “collectively representing more than 11,850 school districts, 67,000 schools, 2 million teachers and 35 million students…” (CASEL, State Scan). Washington State, the site of my internship, falls under one of the 30 states that directly uses CASEL’s information and guidance.

Since CASEL has such a far-reaching influence in SEL, it is important to share their definition of SEL (which many states such as Washington copy with few changes): “Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and
manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL). According to CASEL, SEL instruction doesn’t occur in just the classroom although integrating SEL into academics is important. SEL should be pervasive throughout the school system and culture, and it should also reach out to family/community members for involvement.

Before continuing, I will also mention that although I agree with many of SEL’s current research and the thought that has gone into creating standards/guidelines for states, readers may notice the frequent use of the word “managing” in terms of emotions in many SEL guidelines such as CASEL’s mentioned above. The use of the word “managing” denotes a need for control over our emotions, or that expressive emotions such as anger or grief need to be “managed” (students are told to “calm down” or leave the classroom so as not to disturb the other students) rather than supporting these emotions as natural and welcome expressions. “Identifying,” or being able to acknowledge where the anger or sadness originates from, gives more power to the students as they reflect on not only what they are feeling but why. It is not intended to diminish their feelings or ask them to simply “stop feeling” what they experience, but it can be a starting point to validating and respecting their experiences. Reflecting on the differences between managing and identifying emotions, I will use identifying in my own reflections and writing although I will maintain the word managing and it relates to an organization’s work.

A common misconception in SEL is imagining the teaching of key socio-emotional skills such as setting positive goals or showing empathy occurring solely in elementary school where children develop their personal and social skills. An unnecessary bias in teaching SEL to elementary age kids is pervasive throughout the nation. As of 2018, only 18 states reported P-12
guidelines for SEL. The majority that did not include middle school or high school only shared
guidelines for pre-school or early elementary.

Unfortunately, research shows us that high schoolers are also deeply in need of SEL
instruction despite what the majority of states may think. A research group called Civic
conducted a report for CASEL (2018), surveying the SEL needs for high school students and
their perspective of school. In one survey result (Appendix A), Civic determined the percentage
of students who described multiple categories such as stress, disruptions, and confidence as a
hindrance to their education. 22% of students named “Feeling stressed” as something that makes
it a lot harder for them to learn and 39% named it as something that makes it somewhat harder
for them to learn. The rest of the categories don’t reflect much better, with 17% of youth from
the survey marking “Things in my life outside school” also making it harder to learn (DePaoli,

This survey and surveys like this are difficult to read. The consensus is clear, many of our
high schoolers are stressed, many are worried about outside factors in their life, and many
struggle with self-confidence among many other things. Any educator may think of individual
students as they reflect on the severe need for SEL in our schools.

Washington State’s Response to SEL

When considering my internship experience teaching in Western Washington, I was
curious to understand what has been going on at the state level in terms of SEL.

Like many states, Washington state only focused on early elementary SEL, publishing it’s
guidelines for this early age group in 2012. OSPI, Washington Office of Superintendent of Public
Instruction, noticed a lack of SEL and ordered a workgroup in 2015 to develop new benchmarks
for SEL that included all grades. These standards were pushed out in 2016 and weren't formally adopted until January 1, 2020. Between 2016 and 2020, the SEL group from OSPI has created an implementation guide for districts, and a professional module.

In this implementation guide, the six standards are divided by personal skills (self-awareness, self-management, and self-efficacy) and social skills (social-awareness, social management, social engagement). These standards may sound similar to CASEL’s definition for SEL, largely because it is inspired by their research. When looking through the implementation guide, the workgroup specifically discusses their alignment with equity, culturally responsive practices, universal design, and trauma-informed practices. Other papers have discussed whether or not Washington state and others have written, but I did appreciate this alignment as the conversation is being pushed further towards these standards.

However, I am a very practical person. While I do appreciate what institutions are discussing and developing, I am more concerned with what is actually going on in classrooms around my state, Washington, specifically. In a statewide survey administered by Education Northwest to determine what districts in Washington state are actually doing, the results were dismal to say the least (Appendix B and C). As of January 2019, only 35% of districts reported using OSPI’s standards. Even less (11%) reported using OSPI’s professional module for SEL. More districts are using outside resources (38%) and the amount of programs is staggering. According to the same report, 89 different programs are being used across the state, with the most common being “PBIS, Second Step, CharacterStrong, and RULER” (Petrokubi et al., 2019, p. 10). Without a common program or accountability from the state to use their resources, many districts have continued to shop around for SEL programs that may not even be effective.
The second chart (Appendix C) makes it look better. After all, 65% of districts are doing SEL instruction and 60% have curriculum for SEL (Petrokubi et al., 2019, p. 33). However, this doesn’t tell us much at all. How much of this instruction is only in elementary grades? What do they really consider SEL activities? Is hosting a school dance considered supporting social engagement? How frequent are students given support? When researching my questions, there weren’t easy answers to any of them.

When considering why more districts aren’t implementing SEL, the results from the question “What additional information, supports, or resources does your district need to successfully implement SEL?” (Appendix D) were interesting. Additional funding (63%), time to build SEL knowledge (55%), and more instruction on how to integrate SEL into academics (42%) were the keys (Petrokubi et al., 2019, p. 36). SEL certainly isn’t cheap for large outside programs, it takes time and thoughtful research, and teachers have a billion things to teach already so how do they meaningfully integrate SEL into everything else that is on their plate?

This question set this project into motion as I reflected on my internship and what happened. I believe the lessons I learned while teaching slam poetry start a conversation with other educators that find themselves in similar scenarios.

**Internship Experience**

Woodring College of Education, the teacher preparation program I attended, has its students complete two quarters of part-time individual work at a school, called a practicum, before a full-time internship quarter. What follows is my informal, personal narrative of the past year:
It was April of 2019, I don’t remember the exact date, but I was given an interview coordinated from my school with, who would later become, my practicum teacher Shannon Casey. I remember being nervous before I even left my house, doubting my ability to lead a class of students someday and feeling generally unconfident.

I vividly remember the first time I walked into the high school. It was recently remodeled, as in the old building was entirely demolished and a new building was finished four months prior. It truly felt like walking into a community college, especially when considering how close it was to a large university—only half a mile away. There were gorgeous glass walls, a modern style throughout, and couches placed in the hallway for students to work. As I walked down one of the large halls to find the classroom for my interview, many students were in the hallway working on projects and I saw no adult patrolling the hall for misbehavior.

Eventually I found Shannon’s room and she asked me a few questions. I don’t even remember any of them, I was that nervous. Afterwards, she showed me around the school and I remember a part of me knowing that I would soon consider Sehome High School a second home.

As the new year rolled around in September, I returned to the early weeks of the new class and witnessed the relationships and rapport forming. We had three AP Language & Composition classes, one Animal Studies class (an elective that Shannon taught), and two English 201 classes. Perhaps it was the age of the sophomores in English 201, a seemingly perfect point where they began to mature past their freshmen year and also still retain some of the energy and fun. I think it was also the year before some of the unfortunate tracking that happens in school took effect. All freshmen took English 101 and all sophomores took English 201, but after that the AP ready kids went to AP Lang and the rest picked up electives for credit.
So the sophomore classes were a mix of all these social groups. During this fall practicum, I mostly shadowed Shannon and focused on developing my rapport with these students. I loved going to Sehome during this fall period. Not to say every day was easy, there were hard days for sure, but they gave me a new purpose every day.

January of this year, 2020, was my last quarter in the Woodring program, the 18 credit internship complete, of course, with a grueling EdTPA. Since I was one of the few student teachers to be at the school for such a long time beforehand, I was able to jump in almost immediately. I started co-teaching lessons, leading lessons on my own, grading papers, giving advice to students on how to improve, and slowly building my teacher presence. At the end of January, Shannon and I met for coffee to plan out what February would look like.

Before this meeting, I was starting to develop a curiosity with slam poetry. I’m not sure which Youtube tunnel took me to the slam poetry side of the internet, but I was entranced by the power and passion of slam poetry. I never really considered myself interested in poetry before despite teaching English, but the personal narratives and passionate dialogue caught my attention and made my heart beat faster. I still can’t watch my favorite slam poems and not get excited after watching them (I highly recommend listening to Elizabeth Acevedo’s “Afro-latina” for starters).

So, when I stepped into that coffee shop meeting, I knew where my heart was at the time: slam poetry. I had no experience writing slam poetry and absolutely no experience teaching slam poetry, but something told me to do it. I pitched the idea, nervous and ready to show some of the resources I found online from other teachers that actually have taught slam poetry. My mentor teacher was onboard and let me have full control over the entire five weeks that followed.
When I first introduced the slam poetry unit, I wasn’t great at setting guidelines or expectations for the level of respect and vulnerability that slam poetry calls for. That is something I’ve definitely reflected on looking back, but fortunately I had such a great group of young adults that supported one another. From the start, I made it clear that this unit was about them and their voice. This is part of the original message I gave them: “I want you to show me what your voice says when given the opportunity. If you often stay silent, or compromise for others often, I want you to say ‘This is my voice.’ If you’re loud and feel like no one is listening, I want you to say ‘This is what I’ve been trying to say.’” My promise to them was to give them the platform, give them the mic and a stage so to speak, to say whatever they needed to say.

Before I go into the two students I reflected on individually, here’s a brief overview of what the sophomore class engaged in. Some of the pieces we watched were the documentary I mentioned earlier, Louder Than a Bomb, which follows several Chicago teens from different perspectives performing at the same competition (Siskel, J. & Jacobs, G, 2012). After we watched the documentary we discussed what slam poetry meant to each person the documentary followed and the poems they shared. We also watched many other slam poets and discussed them, including a popular song, but they all centered around a discussion about identity and what identity meant to the speaker.

One poem we watched and then discussed was Elizabeth Acevedo’s “Afro-Latina.” She’s most known for her book The Poet X, but this poem is my favorite poem of hers because she breaks down her experience growing up Afro-latina and embracing where she comes from. Again, I encourage you to hear her own words and experience her poem yourself.
Personally, being biracial with a Mexican last name and white skin has made me connect to this poem discussing living between two intersecting identities. I don’t think many teachers are open about reflections on race or identity and purposefully bring it into the classroom, so I shared why I connected to this poem with my students. A few didn’t even know I was Mexican, or that Ramirez was a Mexican name. By sharing that part of myself and discussing what it feels like to belong to two different identities, I started to set the emotional groundwork for my students to also open up about their experiences with identity. In my mind, it was not fair to expect a sort of emotional identity labour without engaging in my own work as well alongside them and sharing my thoughts and feelings.

Altogether, the class completed three poems. One was about a person that was important to them (Appendix E), and the second was a definition poem (Appendix F) where they redefined and reclaimed a word that society had used to label them. For each poem, I shared my own and, honestly, allowed myself to be emotional as I performed. When sharing about my father’s PTSD and my own difficult journey reclaiming my voice after being called quiet my entire life, students started to understand myself better beyond the simple definition of “teacher.” The definition poem in particular allowed me to connect with the other introverts in the room, and many students that were called extroverts admitted in their poems that they hate the label too and felt the pressure to always be bubbly or fun. Both of my personal poems are included in the appendix as well as the accompanying worksheets that I created (Appendix E and F).

For the final poem, the students could choose between either revising and workshopping one of the first two poems, or they could create another poem on whatever subject they wanted
for our anticipated performance day at the end of the unit. Some students appreciated this freedom to explore new topics, and other students liked working on a more structured format.

In terms of performance, I spent many days considering not having a performance. After all, I remembered having anxiety speaking in front of my classmates. However, since slam poetry is performative in nature, I decided it was worth spending two days sharing and celebrating our poems together as a class. The students that opted out of the performance for any reason were able to video tape their performance and send it directly to me so they could still participate in sharing their work aloud, an option several students were thankful for. When considering what this unit accomplished, exactly, in terms of SEL, it’s easiest to tell the story through the lens of two students: Alex and Anna.

**Alex’s Story**

The first assignment in the year was supposed to be fun. It was a short creative writing piece, just a paragraph or two, where students could invite anyone from any time period, fictional or nonfictional, and host a brunch. Some students spent a lot of time describing what food they were eating and others talked about their favorite basketball players and musicians.

This student, who we’ll call Alex, was always quiet, but when I went around to pick up the brunch assignment he tentatively asked how many points it was worth. I wasn’t surprised. From my own experience, grade anxiety is common in students especially when they have high expectations placed on them either by family members or their own self. When I went to grade that night, I noticed that Alex’s paper was wonderful: beautiful descriptions, thoughtful guests, but it wasn’t complete. The paper suddenly switched to his personal voice explaining how he rewrote the entire story the night prior because he hated the first, how this story wasn’t good
either, and how he knew it wouldn’t get an A. Well, I gave him an A and a note about my thoughts on grades. Still, a note wasn’t going to change this deep-rooted fear of failure.

It was hard to build a rapport with Alex because he was so quiet, despite my own quietness when I was his age giving me some personal insight. When we started writing in the slam poetry unit, I remember him having a blank page. He had completed the brainstorm page perfectly, but was stuck on actually creating a poem. He wanted each line to be perfect, but perfect was hard with a form he had never encountered before. I reminded Alex that I was still new to slam poetry as well (remember, I had never written a slam poem either) and that my poems weren’t perfect by any means. That wasn’t the point, after all, to share what you thought. Eventually after giving this advice, Alex went on to write some of the most thoughtful poetry in the class. Not perfect either, but personal thoughts on what music and art meant to him (he played viola in the school’s orchestra) that he had never shared before.

On the final performing day in our small classroom, his voice was still quiet even with the microphone. However, as Alex finished each page of verse, he tossed the paper he was finished reading into the air. When he was done, he collected the pieces up and neatly placed them back on his desk. I still think about that decision to throw the pieces of paper in the air. When I asked why, he just shrugged, but there was this glimmer of pride in the smile he shared. Tossing the pieces of paper was him saying something more about his personal progress during this unit.

About two months later, I sent a survey to the class reflecting on what they learned in the unit, either about themselves or others. He sent me this: “Afterwards, I wouldn't have felt any different if it weren't for some of the praise I received, which was unexpected. I still partially
have the mindset that carried over from elementary school which made me think everyone knew something I didn't, and never vice versa. I revert back to that every so often” and “I purposefully left out enough sensory details to get less than a 100% to see if you really were using the rubric. I had heard both of you say that the grading would be more intuitive, and I wanted to test that.”

Both of these comments struck me in that his fear of others knowing something he didn’t stemmed back to elementary school (a time we consider most SEL skills to have developed) and still affected him now in high school, and I also love how he tested my grading scale (was it really down to the point or more holistic?). The act of testing whether or not I strictly followed my own grading scale (I devoted points specifically to sensory details in the rubric) was powerful in that it showed how his poem went beyond the strict confines of a percentage or that grading was not a punitive measurement. I’m reminded of the Louder Than a Bomb quote again in that the points of the assignment are not the point, the point is the poetry. His first comment also made me realize just how much the power of community and praise stayed with him as he thought about this unit two months gone.

I tell Alex’s story because it captures two things. First, Alex didn’t suddenly become louder and a risk-taker unafraid of the bully that grades were to him. Of course not. No unit can reverse years of internalized self-doubt. I’m still working on that in myself. However, this unit did have an impact on Alex that was noticeable to both myself and him reflecting two months later.

Anna’s Story

The first time I met Anna, she was sitting in her chosen spot at the front of the class with an iced caramel macchiato. I remember introducing myself by pointing out her drink and how it
was my favorite as well. She looked at me and my clothes before nodding and explaining how it’s the only thing she orders because she knows what she wants, even during the cold fall. Before I could answer back, she continued on to tell me how I wouldn’t like her, that no teachers liked her. I was astonished, to say the least, to hear a student say something like that with such determination—as if she were accepting a prophecy that wouldn’t change. When I asked why, she said (paraphrasing, of course): “I say what’s on my mind and teachers don’t like that. I’m going to share it whether you like it or not. I don’t lie but I tell the truth even if it hurts others.” I honestly wasn’t expecting that on my first day, so I took a moment before saying that I already liked her because I appreciate honesty and someone who “is real.” She shrugged and said “Good” before turning and resuming her previous conversation with a friend.

I hadn’t lied in that interaction—she had this spunky, authentic energy that I loved. If any student was going to tell me my lesson was terrible and how to improve, it would be her. Anna had such a high energy level at the start of the year, bouncing into class brimming with things to talk about. At times, she was a distraction to others at her table, but she was a welcome voice in the otherwise quiet morning classroom.

It was about the beginning of December when she became less energetic and less happy overall. She stopped turning in assignments at times, although we knew her parents (both professors at the nearby university) strongly encouraged her education. She stopped drinking iced caramel macchiatos, even though she used to never start her morning without one. Some days, Anna simply laid her head down on the table and told us she was tired.

As someone that also experienced depression and anxiety in high school, I empathized with Anna’s experience although I knew I would never be able to fully understand how she felt.
When I asked my mentor teacher about Anna’s deteriorating mental health, she assured me that counselors were helping her. Still, I was concerned and tried to build rapport with Anna by welcoming her in the morning and chatting about non-English topics like music or T.V. shows.

During the slam poetry unit, the definition poem struck something within Anna. Her word was “empath.” I honestly had never heard the word before, so I knelt down by her (as to create some sense of privacy) and asked with genuine curiosity about what it meant for her. Others at the table noticeably looked at us as they wondered the same thing. She explained how she felt others’ emotions—sadness, anger, happiness, love—like empathy, but so strongly that it was like she was experiencing it. She used an example of crying after she saw her little brother crying recently. She went on to talk about how it was the cause of her depression.

Again, it is moments like these that make me realize that despite being an educator that creates space for such conversations, it was still difficult to find the right words to respond. I do remember thanking her for sharing and that I was glad to learn about being an empath from her, that her poem was beautiful for sharing what it felt like. She smiled, and it was the first time I thought she really took my words to heart. As I moved away from the table, the other students were both amazed and respectful about Anna’s inner wisdom with comments like “How did you know you were one?” and “That really sucks.” In a way, the poetry unit was already doing so much more than I expected in the third week by allowing connections and new learning from student-student interactions.

Anna liked to talk a lot, and her final poem reflected that—five full pages of verse long when I had only asked for two. She asked for special permission to go over the time limit even after staying longer to ask how to cut it down; something told me she needed to say everything
so I allowed it. Although nervous, she shared each page detailing exactly what depression was like for her. In reflection, she wrote “I felt like sharing a poem about depression would help everyone understand what it feel [sic] like and how its not just being sad.”

Anna’s story helped me realize something crucial in terms of teaching SEL skills to high schoolers. Some, like Alex, haven’t taken the time to reflect and think about their emotions. The slam poetry unit was great for those students to take the time to consider what they were feeling and what they wanted to share. Students like Anna, however, were keenly aware of what they felt. Anna self-identified herself as an empath and someone with depression. She very much knew who she was down to the core. Slam poetry, for her, was a way to help others understand her experience and share what she had never told many outside her circle.

**Other Students**

While typing Alex and Anna’s story, I recognized the fact that I have only deeply represented the experiences of two students out of 57 from both English 201 classes. I have taken several more quotes from students (Appendix G) to provide a fuller picture of the other students in both classes. Although Alex and Anna are extraordinary in how they responded to the unit, many of the students simply didn’t write about such personal topics. There is a particular uncomfortable feeling in sharing deep thoughts and emotions with peers given the fact that there aren’t many times in high school when students are given the opportunity to share their thoughts on non-academic subjects.

Topics such as depression, a loss of a parent, or drug abuse in their family (all topics that students performed) may be fine for some students to share but others certainly did not want to share their inner thoughts. One student in this second category wrote about his favorite dog.
Although he didn’t write a particularly emotional piece, he reflected on how he was able to listen to others share their own pieces. There was absolutely no requirement to share a personal piece as I knew some would never feel comfortable sharing personal stories. However, their reflections provided enough proof for me that there was enough power in letting every student know that they had an opportunity to share if they needed to.

**Conclusion: Thoughts on Slam Poetry, SEL, and Identity**

In the past month, a professor gave me excellent advice when facing larger areas of concern with students, advice I will use to frame my concluding thoughts. He described two areas: an area we don’t control and an area we do control. As educators in public school systems, we do not control our students’ home lives, their past experiences, their disposition towards our subject, what may have happened that day or week or year, or any major life events (such as divorce, relocation, or homelessness). Some of these are beyond our immediate control, such as systemic problems within schools (the school-to-prison pipeline, lack of diversity in our staff, lack of access). In terms of this paper’s argument, we have no control over the SEL program our school is using—if our school is using one. These are issues that we can and should be actively working to change, but they are not quick or individual movements a teacher can enact on their own.

Despite this gloomy reflection, there is hope in the area we do control. We do control our curriculum, lessons, and the environment we create in our classrooms. Although some schools provide less freedom for educators to change set curriculum, or require that they adhere to a specific textbook, there nonetheless remains room for implementing supplemental activities that can integrate SEL skills and sustain students’ identities into the classroom.
I take the phrase sustaining student identities from Django Paris and Alim’s book, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies*, which continues the important work from Ladson-Billings’ (1995) article on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. In an interview, Paris said:

Culturally sustaining pedagogy exists wherever education sustains the lifeways of communities who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling. As such, CSP explicitly calls for schooling to be a site for sustaining—rather than eradicating—the cultural ways of being of communities of color. (Ferlazzo, 2017)

On reflecting the role educators have in sustaining our students’ identities, I thought about Acevedo’s poem “Afro-Latina,” which I mentioned earlier. It wasn’t until weeks after teaching the unit that I realized that Acevedo was the first woman of color that the students had analyzed the entire year. Not only that, she was the first person of color since November, when we started our *Lord of the Flies* unit. Although 73% of our students were white, our curriculum had not included the experiences of 27% of the classes (OSPI, 2019), which required reflection on my sphere of influence as an educator to sustain the lives of my students. However, as Paris and Alim stress, it is not enough to simply throw in “diverse” authors into our classroom. Sustaining means creating a thoughtful, intentional discussion around race, identity, language, (dis)ability, gender, and other topics that values the identities of our students.

Such discussions may be seen as easier to incorporate into a humanities classroom. Teaching slam poetry, for example, taught me the power of integrating SEL and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy into the English classroom by listening to and sharing others’ stories. However, my story isn’t just for English teachers, although the specific case of slam poetry functions as an English unit. SEL and identity work can happen in any discipline. When
discussing this topic with a future math educator, we considered the story problems in math
textbooks that regularly centered on white experiences, as well as the diverse lineage of
mathematicians that students are largely unaware of as possible starting points for change so as
to integrate identity into the math classroom. In terms of SEL, math educators can also explicitly
teach problem-solving skills and approaches that are applicable beyond academics.

SEL can and should be meaningfully integrated into academics. I didn’t even know what
SEL was while teaching the slam poetry unit, but it engaged in teaching students how to identify
their thoughts and emotions through the poems we created, as well as allowing them to encounter
and empathize with the experiences of those that were different from themselves during our
workshop and presentation days.

However, I am also quick to notice what many will notice in my argument: this kind of
work takes time, which all teachers are short on. It does take time, as it should take time to
thoughtfully reevaluate and rewrite new units that sustain our students and teach them SEL
skills. Time that, unfortunately, will never be compensated and may never be acknowledged.

Still, it would serve a great injustice to our students, especially in the light of new
statistics (Depaoli et al., 2018) that reveal high levels of stress and lack of self-confidence in high
school students, to not create units that address these factors. Units such as the slam poetry unit
discussed in this paper can help to create avenues for students to express their stress as well as
increase their self-confidence by promoting their voice.

As a novice teacher beginning my career, I do not have a clear solution that some may be
hoping for. Despite this, I offer my own testimony and my own thoughts on how I saw slam
poetry, SEL, and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy intersect as a site for opportunity. I ask fellow
educators in public schools to join me in this reflexive, powerful journey: use your area of control to give our students a mic, give them a stage to share their voice, and sustain who they are.
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https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=124&v=tofJeQe87pM&feature=emb_title


https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=53&v=nXwN3eQOFI0&feature=emb_title
Appendix

Appendix A

Taken from:


Appendix B

Taken from:


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question: What resources is your district using to support SEL? (All districts)</th>
<th>OSPI's recommended SEL standards and benchmarks</th>
<th>OSPI's online SEL professional development modules</th>
<th>PESB's SEL micro-credential pilot</th>
<th>Resources from outside of Washington (e.g., CASEL)</th>
<th>Local resources (e.g., School's Out Washington, tribes, other districts, YDEKC)</th>
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<td>Yes, we are doing this</td>
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<td>11%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<td>No, but I want to learn more about this</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No, we are not doing this</td>
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<td>39%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<td>I'm not sure</td>
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<td>16%</td>
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Appendix C

Taken from:

Appendix D

Taken from:


<table>
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<th>Question: How are you assessing/monitoring progress on SEL? Please select all that apply.</th>
<th>All Districts</th>
<th>Small</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Large</th>
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<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educator/staff survey</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent survey</td>
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<td>35%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<td>Student assessments</td>
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<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom observations</td>
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<td>Student focus groups</td>
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<td>30%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>42%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>16</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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Appendix E

Person Poem — Poetic Devices Writing Practice

1) Write a list of four people that are significant people in your life:
   - My mom
   - My dad
   - My tata
   - My partner

2) Chose one of the people to write about and circle their name.

3) Complete the sentence to repeat in the poem:
   [My person] is **strong**.

4) Write a list of descriptive adjectives that describe this person based on:
   - Sight
   - Smell
   - Feeling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sight</th>
<th>Smell</th>
<th>Feeling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short, black hair</td>
<td>Freshly ground coffee</td>
<td>A place like home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A duffle bag with clothes</td>
<td>Mowed lawns</td>
<td>A terrible pun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A cup of coffee</td>
<td>Ceviche</td>
<td>Bittersweetness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An empty, well-worn chair</td>
<td>Carne asada</td>
<td>Potholes on a road</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5) Choosing two of the words above, create a metaphor that describes this person:

Metaphor 1: **He is the empty, well worn chair left with the impression of the person who sat in it.**

Metaphor 2: **His coffee was always black. Only a little bit of hazelnut, no sugar. Bittersweet. My heart was his coffee when he eventually came back.**

6) Create at least twenty lines of poetry using:
   - At least five (5) of the descriptive adjectives you brainstormed
   - Both of the metaphors you created in step 5.
   - At least two instances of repetition using the line in step 3.
Person Poem

My dad is strong.
4 am wake-up calls
to send him off to sea.
I was seven. So was
the number of times I
said goodbye not knowing
what it means.
The same green duffle bag.
Uniform, photos of us,
some snacks we packed for you.
“My dad is strong” younger me said,
because he missed all of mom’s
home cooking: carne asada
and ceviche. Also
Birthdays. Concerts.
My first solo in band.
He missed every award
I tried for because of him.
My dad is strong…
I told myself when he came back.
You see, he came back empty.

He was the same kind of empty
of a well-worn chair left
with the impression of the
person who sat in it.
His coffee was always black.
Some hazelnut, no sugar. Bittersweet.
My heart was his coffee
when he eventually came back.
I love my dad,
and all of his terrible dad-jokes and puns.
He reminds me of home and
the smell of a mowed lawn in spring.
I love him, despite
how strong he tries to be.
It took him twenty years to get him
all the help he needs.
Because he wanted
his little girl to say a
“My dad is strong.”
But sometimes,
there’s strength in admitting
you aren’t.
Person Poem Reflection

1) Circle or highlight all of the descriptive adjectives in your poem.

2) Why did you choose those words? How did they enhance your poem?

I chose words that meant a lot to me growing up. I vividly remember that green duffle bag, his favorite chair, his favorite foods, and how he likes his coffee. They not only paint a picture of how I grew up to those that don’t know me or my past, but they also create the emotions of warmth and happiness next to the harder theme.

3) Draw a box around each metaphor you used in your poem.

4) What did your metaphors compare? What kind of meaning did they create?

I compared my dad to the impression of a well-worn chair. This means after returning from service he became an impression of the person he was before leaving. I also compared my heart to the way he prepared his coffee. I described his coffee as bittersweet before to demonstrate how bittersweet it was when he came back.

5) How did you complete the line: “[My person] is ______________”? What does this line mean to you? What does it emphasize?

I said “My dad is strong.” To me, I thought about how this line has changed throughout my life as I’ve grown up and know more about PTSD than I did when I was seven. It started as a declaration, a definite statement that he is strong. But then I changed it to emphasise that strength isn’t just surviving or taking all the emotions. It also means getting the help you need.
**Brainstorming Page (use if helpful or if you’re stuck, skip if not)**

What are some words that define you? Words that friends, family, or other people have said?

Smart  Quiet  Kind  Emotional

Circle one of the words and think about it. How do you fit that word? How do you not?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am this word because…</th>
<th>I don’t fit this word because…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am quiet when I’m in an unfamiliar place.</td>
<td>I can be loud when I like the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I don’t like who I’m sitting by.</td>
<td>I talk a lot when I’m with my friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I’m anxious or feel like my opinion isn’t good.</td>
<td>I tend to lead group projects because my team members usually don’t.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I’m thinking about something before speaking up.</td>
<td>I speak up against things that are wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I am trying to relax.</td>
<td>Sometimes I want to have fun.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you like being labeled with this word? If yes, why? If not, what would you prefer to be called?

I both do and don’t like being called quiet. I like how meditative it makes me sound, although I feel like I’m not a very meditative person. I do like being known as someone who would rather stop and think things through instead of always saying before thinking. That being said, I hate how it instantly labels me as someone who doesn’t have a voice to speak up. I do like to speak up when I need to. Calling me quiet makes me feel smaller sometimes.
“I am Quiet” by Ms. Ramirez

I am quiet.
This has been chosen by many people:
friends, family, classmates, strangers.
I would rather be called thoughtful,
meditative, an avid reader, or even
something about how I can talk for hours
about something I love.
Still, I am quiet. I admit that.
Sometimes I don’t speak unless
spoken to. Sometimes I wait…
hear the whole story, listen… listen.
I want to listen, and then speak,
but others speak before me.
And so I am quiet.
Quiet not by choice.
Quiet because others have
decided I look better
mouth closed.

Despite this, I embrace my quietness.
There is tranquility in the
silence I possess, a certain amount of
selflessness in wanting to be a
great listener over
a great talker.
A server rather than
a taker.
I don’t need the spotlight.
My role is to put the spotlight
on others.
And now, when someone says,
“You’re quiet, aren’t you?” or
“You’re such a great listener!”
I feel the complexity of those
statements made about me.
I do.
But I also embrace the word
because of what I can offer through it:
Advice, Hope, Love, Understanding.
And maybe I can teach my students
in the loud, crazy world
we live in.
The silent strength “quiet” can possess.

What word did you choose and why?
I chose the word “quiet” because I’ve heard that said about me so many times throughout my life. It is a label that I both love and hate about myself.

How would you describe your own voice/style? Think about word choice, tone, how fast/slow you speak, what words you emphasize?
I tend to speak slowly and emphasize many words when I’m talking. My favorite part is pausing to let the audience rest on a certain word or phrase before continuing. My word choice is informal and can be colloquial at times. I like writing serious or critical poems on hard subjects. I should try to push myself and write a funny poem sometime.
Appendix G

[Student quotes (grammatical/spelling errors included) from the survey I administered two months after teaching the slam poetry unit.]

- “I really enjoyed this unit. I had never heard about slam poetry until now, but I had a really fun time writing slam poetry. I think it's also a good way to get your emotions out and de-stress.”

- “I learnt about new ways to express myself, and I learnt how powerful poetry can really be.”

- “my favorite day was when we got to have time to write and kind of work with our peers it was nice to see what others were doing and their opinion on others poems.”

- “I think the past works hard to shape who we are in the future. Hearing about your person poem, and the one about your dad showed a lot more of who you are in rhyme schemes and metaphors than most essays could.”

- “It helped express things that were hard to say”

- “I learned that i can do much more than i think i am capable of. This unit pushed me to share a side of myself that i normally wouldn't share with my classmates.”

- “It was a little uncomfortable being super vulnerable since I'm a pretty lighthearted person, but it was good.”

- “I think I defined things about myself that I already knew. Writing the poems often helped me lay out difficult thoughts so I could process them better.”

- “I felt like it gave me new ideas and inspirations that i will never forget and i liked the whole unit”
- “I felt like throwing up, then I felt relieved”

- “Your personal poems got the class to write more deep and meaningful poems which if you didn't show us those we would write average poems.”

- “I think this was a opportunity for everyone to learn who everyone truly is in the class.”

- “I felt like sharing a poem about depression would help everyone understand what it feel like and how its not just being sad.”