



WRITING THE SELF: POETRY, YOUTH IDENTITY, AND CRITICAL POETIC INQUIRY

Camea Davis
Ball State University
closborn@bsu.edu

Camea Davis is currently an advanced doctoral candidate at Ball State University in the Educational Studies Department where she majors in Critical Educational Policy Studies and minors in Educational Technology and Curriculum. Her research interests include culturally responsive teaching, youth spoken word communities, and youth civic engagement.

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to describe the slam poetry classroom space and its meaningfulness as a tool for the construction of the perceived and embodied identities of urban American middle school students. The aim of this article is to explain how critical poetic inquiry can participate in the activist tradition of amplifying the voices of the oppressed when exploring the slam poetry classroom space and co-creating its meaning with student-participants. This research questioned: How does the slam poetry space enable middle school students to break through social barriers? How does the slam poetry space engage middle school students in the process of identity construction? Themes that emerged from this study include that slam poetry class provided a place to negotiate prescribed identities and the slam poetry class was a location for youth to create ideal self-narratives. This research contributes a pedagogy that empowers teachers and students to engage in collaborative agency and change-making through dialogue via slam poetry and critical poetic inquiry. The organizing structure of this article uses poems authored by the researcher and subtitles to introduce each section.

Keywords: slam poetry, identity development, arts-based research, poetic inquiry

*We share open wounds
 Sew sores with ears
 Unlikely friendships grow
 Crusted skin
 Heals
 Where verse meets adolescence*

Middle school, the black hole of life, a place brimming with possibilities for great success or epic failure conceived in the adolescent heart, is one significant location to examine identity development as a political project in which poetry serves as a tool of social justice and liberation. The tension between what it means to explore or possess an identity is at the crux of a political dilemma of the personal and the perceived self (Alcoff, 2006). Identity is both embodied privately as well as apparent to others in visible ways, although the two may not always agree; thus Alcoff (2006) argued that identity is the site of a political and metaphysical conundrum to which the individual is tasked to respond. Private and visible identities are a primary concern for all people, but especially middle school aged adolescents of color. They are embarking on self-definition independent of their families, but characterized by political implications in the real world. Adolescents are prescribed politicized identities based on their visible characteristics, causing them to wrestle with being objects of society's prescribed categories of identity, while also working to construct their own unique identities.

Space, the physical location and social expectations of behaviors and identities in that location, contribute to prescription of identities. Thompson, Russell, and Simmons (2013) presented space as emergent and produced by lives, relations, and actions; space is a sociocultural and political location. In the context of education and schooling, space can serve to liberate or dehumanize based on the structures, pedagogy, and expectations imposed on students (Freire, 1972). Liberating structures invite students to be critically thinking agents that co-construct knowledge and decode oppressive forces with each other and educators. Liberationist education amplifies the students' complex intersectionality of identities and assists them in constructing the self. Few students in American schools today, under neoliberal mandates for standardized accountability measures, experience liberationist pedagogies or have space allotted to contemplate self-construction (Nichols & Berliner, 2014; Pyle, 2005; Stearns, 2002; Townsend, 2000). Neoliberalism in American public education is evidenced by the

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privatization of public goods and services under the pretense of an open market economy. In this system, black and brown youth are asked to compete under American meritocracy that dismisses the racist and classist structures of the “free” market which intentionally disenfranchise these youths from competing equitably (Giroux & Giroux, 2004). For example, federal and state standardized test mandates award and punish schools through school closures or increased funding based on student test scores without accommodating for failing school structures, the socio-political contexts, or implicit bias on test measures that may affect students’ opportunities to learn (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In this context, curricula are narrowed, teachers are deskilled, and pedagogy prizes efficiency. In my own practice as a middle school teacher, I experienced the exhaustion and pain of asking my students to disengage with their real lives to master superficial standardized content, which was often irrelevant to their lived experiences.

On the contrary, my same students became engaged, empathetic, and open to other students’ complex identities in the context of a creative writing slam poetry classroom space. The physical location was the same, room D200 in an American, Midwestern, urban middle school, but the social expectations shifted when the bell rang for slam poetry class to being. I noticed a distinct difference between the relationships in my traditional language arts classes and my slam poetry class. The space shifted to allow room for innovative peer relationships, political dialogue, and joy in the classroom that did not occur in any other classes. Through collaboration a new and unique community of adolescent student-artists was created (Eisner, 2000; Goodwin, 2000).

Additionally, as the slam poetry classroom teacher and an experienced spoken word poet in this space, the classroom provided an opportunity for me to reflect on my own pedagogy and student-teacher relationships through poetry. I come to this research study having been deeply involved in training, teaching, and cultivating spoken word communities across the United States. I bring the assumption that spoken word is a valuable tool of self-expression, positive identity development, and emotional release for performers and audiences alike.

Critical Poetic Inquiry

The purpose of this research is to describe the slam poetry classroom space and its meaningfulness as a tool of connectivity and political contemplation of identities for middle school students. This study was conceived as a critical poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2015), and sought to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized students as a counter-narrative to rhetoric that suggests they are disengaged, unaware, and unwilling to learn. Leavy (2010) notes that “researchers committed to accessing subjugated voices might be especially inclined toward [poetic inquiry]” (p. 84). Likewise, Prendergast (2015) argues that

critical poetic inquiry “invites the researcher to engage as an active witness standing beside participants in their search for justice, recognition, healing, and a better life” (p. 683). Thus, critical poetic inquiry was well-suited for this study because it allowed me to participate in the justice-seeking act of using poetry to explore, capture, and present adolescent identity construction.

The research questions that guided this study were: How does the slam poetry space enable middle school students to break through social barriers? How does the slam poetry space engage middle school students in the process of identity construction?

The search for identity and a place to belong among pre-constructed meanings is especially significant to middle school students who are beginning their social development and constructing their personal identities (Brown, Knowles, & Beane, 2007). Students of all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and sexual orientations bring their socially constructed identities and the values from their own diverse home communities into the classroom. In this study, the slam poetry class space created by the students and myself functioned as a community of collective constructed meanings. A critical theory framework suggests that since the current structures of society (in this case urban American classrooms) are socially constructed, they can also be socially re-constructed and challenged (Broido & Manning, 2002). Critical inquiry seeks to investigate who is marginalized in the predominant constructions of reality and in what ways injustices are sustained by socially constructed norms (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This theoretical perspective and specific paradigm allowed me to explore how middle school students used the slam poetry classroom space to challenge or confirm the identity stereotypes and social groupings traditionally assigned to them.

The significance of this research illuminates a pedagogy that can liberate students in traditional American public, K-12, school spaces. These spaces are often characterized by standardized curricula that position the teacher as the source of knowledge, and students as repositories for knowledge in which students may passively progress through years of schooling. On the contrary, this research provides a counter-narrative of practices that can liberate students to access their own agency, curiosity, and stores of cultural knowledge to make learning a student-centered, higher order thinking experience co-constructed with teachers. Most importantly, this research models how teacher-researchers might use writing as a tool to explore the emotional aspects of identity development among students through the powerful, emotional expression of poetic language (Prendergast & Belliveau, 2012).

This study presents tools and possibilities to reimagine student-teacher and peer-peer relationships in middle schools that promote just and humanizing identity development that prepares youth to be political agents and citizens in the present moment (Boyte, 2008). Youth and schooling exists in a politicized context to which students, especially youth of

color, must be prepared to respond to the social, historical systems that contextualize their day to day lives, or else they become automatized, passive pupils incapable of active participation in political processes of full citizenship. In a critical theorist framework, passivity is not educative but instead demeaning to the learner. Students should be led to become active agents participating in critique, creation, and analysis of their worlds to discover ways to expand equity for themselves and others. This is justice-centered education. This research relies on a spoken word poetry pedagogy, characterized by the dialogic relationships created through slam poetry, to produce a justice-centered educative space that grants students access to a humanizing, and thus liberatory learning space (Fisher, 2003, 2005; Jocson, 2006; Stovall, 2006).

What is Slam Poetry?

Street corner poets

Coffee shop prophets

Shakespearean rappers

Mechanics who fix poems

As vehicles to voice

A place for us all

To speak

Slam poetry as used in this study refers to spoken word poetry, the oral performance of poetry written by marginalized youth to challenge the political and social forces that oppress them through policies, practices, and silencing (Gregory, 2008). Spoken word poetry as an art form uses the vernaculars, cultural icons, and experiences of the marginalized to provide a counter-narrative to Eurocentric portrayals of these communities in mainstream media and pop culture. Spoken word poets and audiences participate in a form of collective resistance that refuses to accept normative narratives, calls out injustice, and reimagines equity and justice for these communities (Bruce & Davis, 2000; Fisher, 2003; Gregory, 2008; Stovall, 2006). Spoken word poetry participates in the resistant tradition of Civil Rights activists and hip-hop activists that spoke truth to power and liberated both the individual speaker, and the collective of other activists striving towards similar goals (Brown, 2011; Bruce & Davis, 2000). The spoken word poem in 2017 is likened to the Negro spiritual, marching song, or protest anthem of past activists' praxis.

Spoken word poetry for youth exploded as an art form with the creation of national slam organizations such as Youth Speaks Inc. and the creation of the largest international youth spoken word poetry competition, Brave New Voices, in 1998 (Weinstein & West,

2012). When spoken word is presented as a competitive event where points are awarded to performances and a winner is selected, the event is called a poetry slam, and the performances are titled slam poems. In 2010, Russell Simmons amplified the visibility of youth-spoken word poetry with the creation of the hit TV series on HBO titled *Brave New Voices* (Weinstein & West, 2012; Weiss & Herndon, 2001). These spaces amplified youth voice to an international platform and empowered more young people than ever to tell their stories through spoken word poetry at poetry slam events. This art was nationally recognized as a cultural phenomenon for youth and in academic scholarship.

Spoken word spaces, like the slam poetry class in this study, have been found to be liberatory learning spaces in school and in out-of-school contexts. Fisher (2005) found that classes that focus on spoken word through hip-hop pedagogy improve students' traditional and critical literacy skills, as well as developed their confidence through public performance. Similarly, Jocson (2006) argues that spoken word programs are tools to develop youth identity and voice. Moreover, Hill (2009) found that spoken word use in classrooms allows youth to challenge and affirm society's prescribed identities, which confirms Alcoff's (2006) argument that prescribed identities have power and presence in spaces. This research expands on the current scholarship by prioritizing student written poetry as data, and employing critical poetic inquiry to explore the emotional and aesthetic nature of adolescences' experience of the slam poetry classroom space.

Participant Descriptions

He sounds laughter like cannons

She strikes spite like thunder

Both emotional and curious

Young and brave

Brown and beautiful

Two teens writing their way through the mud of adolescence

Gave me poems and allowed me to learn their hearts

During the fall of 2015, homogenous sampling was used to invite students enrolled in an American, Midwestern middle school slam poetry elective course to participate in this research study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Selection criteria for participation included completion of two semesters of slam poetry class, being between the ages 13-15, legal guardian consent, and student assent. Participants demonstrated that they placed a significant value on the slam poetry classroom space by selecting to use their only optional course offering to take the course for two consecutive semesters. Two students completed the assent and consent protocol and were eligible to participate in the study. The participants

included one African American male student and one African American female student, assigned the pseudonyms Andrew and Brittany, respectively. Both Andrew and Brittany participated in slam poetry performances during school and outside of school. Neither Brittany nor Andrew had ever participated in slam poetry prior to enrolling in the class. I also did not have any prior relationship with Brittany or Andrew before their enrollment in my slam poetry class.

Research Design

“Curricula THE TEST Rejects”

*The orange of her brilliance corrected as error
 The artistry of his anger doodled across pages
 The eloquence of the emotions she carves into poetry
 His ability to build people with words like an architect
 The mastery of crafting friendships from truths shared
 The stuff their smiles are made of
 ...Their humanity*

This critical poetic inquiry research design was conceived in a constructionist paradigm in which two poems from both participants were collected as data. Participant poems functioned as data for this study because storytelling through slam poetry is a political activity in which students access their own agency to create themselves in ways they want to be perceived (Rudd, 2012). Both participants had complete autonomy on the final submission of their expressive works. The act of writing allowed them to become authors of their own narratives and therefore constructors of their own identities that challenge and affirm different aspects of their social identities (Brown, 2011).

As a classroom teacher and researcher, I used the slam poetry class space to co-construct this study along with Brittany and Andrew (Leavy, 2009; Norris, 2013; Percer, 2002). This collaboration is consistent with the critical inquiry paradigm in which I, as the researcher, sought to create equitable power relationships and construct knowledge along with research participants (Broido & Manning, 2002). Employing a liberationist pedagogy, I embodied roles as both a student and a teacher; the students lead the class with their prior knowledge about the political nature of their lives and identities.

This study was conducted in November and December 2015 in the middle school slam poetry class. The class was comprised of 25 seventh and eighth grade students that met daily for 48 minutes. I designed this study by employing weekly cycles. During the first week, I collected one sample of writing from both participants. The writing assignments were

a part of the predetermined slam poetry lesson cycle. I spent week two analyzing the data from week one. Then I used my analysis to inform my data collection during week three which included one additional writing sample from each participant. I again analyzed all data during week four and began a comprehensive poetic inquiry of the complete data set.

Participant confidentiality was protected by using pseudonyms in all data collected, and in the secure storage of consent forms. Because the slam poetry class invited students to write personal truths about themselves, it was essential that their identities remain confidential to cause no harm to students socially, academically, or personally.

Goodness and Trustworthiness

As the teacher and creator of the specific class curriculum, norms, and expectations, I had a relationship with Brittany and Andrew that placed me in a position of authority. They viewed me as an expert regarding the craft of slam poetry but I negotiated this power dynamic by acknowledging that the students were experts on their own feelings and lived experiences. As such we could co-create a space for honest self-expression untainted by the student-teacher power dynamic.

Another way I addressed this power dynamic was by allowing all students in the class to write without censorship in their journals. Students were not required to share their uncensored truths. This allowed for Brittany and Andrew to maintain autonomy in creating their literary identities during the course (Fisher, 2005; Hill, 2009; Jocson, 2006). To increase the collaborative culture of the slam poetry class, I also invited students to facilitate, offer instructional ideas, and engage in critical dialogue about society and their lived experiences. I intentionally planned a variety of student choice into the curriculum to achieve a liberationist pedagogy that empowered all students to be agents of their own learning in the classroom and beyond (Freire, 1972). As a result, students had more agency and power in this middle school course than in most other classes they experienced.

As a poet-researcher, I worked to craft aesthetically accurate works of poetry and credible interpretations of the data. My attention to aesthetic detail included focus on concreteness, voice, emotion, ambiguity, and credible interpretations increased the trustworthiness of my findings as a qualitative researcher within the arts-based research paradigm (Leavy, 2010; Prendergast & Belliveau, 2012). Furthermore, my choice to write from my own perspective using poetic inquiry increased my authenticity which is a criterion of quality specific to both poetic inquiry in research and slam poetry (Leavy, 2010; Somers-Willet, 2005).

The Data

Participant authored poems were the raw data for this study. Below are excerpts from the participants' poems as examples of the raw data. After coding and analyzing this data, I wrote two interpretive participant-voiced research poems. These poems are printed below to demonstrate the products of the critical poetic inquiry.

Excerpts from Raw Data

How I Feel by Brittany

I am angry
 I feel like the fire
 that's in my blue and straight veins
 with a warm sweet cover wrapped around me
 I am so angry

I am sad because my favorite person passed away
 but I am so, so happy because I know that she is in a
 better place
 I am proud of her but lonely without her
 She is where the air is warm and cool with the clouds

The Father that Wasn't There Excerpt by Andrew

A father ...
 A father is all I wanted
 A father that will take me places
 Buy me stuff
 Show me how to be a man

I knew who he was
 I knew where he lived
 But he was like a ghost
 He didn't do anything for me
 15 birthdays and Christmases
 Getting nothing from him

It's like a dad is a fiction character in my life
 I don't even call him daddy
 Just some guy that made a kind beast

Research Poems

Room D200

Notebooks set carpet ablaze
 Ignited by her gasoline tears
 Extinguished by his lonely
 Pens turn paper to ash
 That we, together, will sweep up and frame

Later, desktops blossom possibilities
 Under florescent lights bursting with sunrays
 Erasers lose venom and grow fur
 Together we continue...

Just until the bell rings.

How to Create Self

First, Windex the windows of your soul clean enough to pick insecurity from your teeth
 Next, sharpen self-awareness to a dagger like point
 Then, taste enough adjectives to decipher which ones to buy a leash for
 Remember to make lots of messes
 Mix the confusion with pride
 The hate with self-love
 Keep at it
 Hang more mirrors to make sure
 Finally, climb out
 Dance
 Then, get more Windex

I approached meaning making in this research study by employing a/r/tography as an approach to my research data (Irwin, Kind, & Springgay, 2005). "A/r/t is a metaphor for artist–researcher–teacher. In a/r/tography these three roles are integrated creating a third space" (Pinar, 2004, p. 9 as cited in Leavy, 2009). As the artist, researcher, and teacher conducting a study in my own slam poetry classroom, I made sense of this space for myself and my readers through engaging in the creative writing process (Leggo, 2005). I invited my students to write poetry to express themselves, develop a sense of community within the

classroom, resist passivity, and critique the prescribed politics of their lived experiences. My students grew as agents of knowledge working with me to create a learning space worth existing fully in. Because I hoped to capture meaningfulness of the slam poetry classroom space it was best to process my own understandings through poetic inquiry and engagement with the creative writing process that enables this space to exist (Leggo, 2005). Further, through *a/r/tography*, I responded with all versions of myself and the multiple lenses through which I see, sense, and experience. Leavy (2009) argues that it is the responsibility of the arts-based researcher “to sculpt engaged, holistic, passionate research practices that bridge and not divide both the artist-self and researcher-self with the researcher and audience and researcher and teacher” (p. 2). In this research, I respond to this call as an artist, researcher, and teacher.

Creating these poems involved a recursive process of engaging with the raw data. To begin, I read, re-read, and coded each participant-written poem for any mention of mental, emotional, or physical space and any aspect of personal identity. Then, I reanalyzed the raw data and coded for any suggestion of perceived or imposed identities or use of the classroom space. Next, I explored the data by writing analytic memos of what was present beyond topics of space or identity. From these analytic cycles, I created a comprehensive list of NVivo codes that I used to identify themes aligned to the research questions. After identifying salient themes in the data evidenced by repetition and similarities in the data, I then returned to the raw data and searched it for poetic devices. The search for the poetic is an intuitive, analytic process in which the poet-researcher searches the data for metaphor, imagery, aesthetic appeal, and ambiguity (Prendergast, 2015). Deriving imagery and metaphors from the raw data invokes participant voice in the analysis while also rendering the poet-researcher as present in the creation of research poetry. In this way, the poet-researcher is made an active witness to participants’ in their search for justice (Prendergast, 2015). During the writing of the research poems, I re-read the raw data multiple times because, as Weinstein and West (2012) note, “self-making” through poetry is a continuous process. Additionally, Leavy (2009) states trustworthiness is added to arts-based research data using analysis cycles during which a researcher cyclically revisits the data throughout the analysis. This critical poetic inquiry captured the affective quality of space and adolescence identity development, thus this specific methodology is fitting for this topic because the poem amplifies the abstract quality of space, and allows for the ambiguity necessary to explore shifting adolescent identities.

Furthermore, writing poetry as a research process facilitated a collaborative meaning-making between Brittany, Andrew, and myself. Poetic inquiry facilitates a dialogue between researcher and participants on an embodied, communicative level that serves constructionists’ research and liberationists’ pedagogy, as it concerns researching in educative spaces. Hurren (1998) argues that poetry as a way of knowing helps researchers understand personal truths through embodied language. Additionally, through poetry I

challenge the power dynamic within the researcher-participant and student-teacher relationships (Leavy, 2010).

Findings

The slam poetry class is a space where a wide range of emotions can be named and expressed.

The slam poetry space was found to be one where feelings are expressed and named without social ostracization, shame, or guilt, which is normative in middle school social spaces. In Brittany's poem, she wrote about an array of emotional states including anger, sadness, grief, pride, loneliness, and happiness. Similarly, Andrew used this space to explore his emotions of fear, pain, memories of joy, and a grief instigated by fatherlessness. He also reflected on existing in other spaces where he felt unsafe and faced difficult realities. The research poem "Room D200" captured the range of emotions participants mentioned, using imagery related to classroom objects used for writing that create natural disasters symbolic of strong human emotions such as fire representing anger. I adapted the fire imagery from Brittany's poem and included tears and loneliness in the research poem to mimic the feelings she and Andrew expressed in their own poems. Later, "Room D200" shifts toward more welcoming images such as sunrays and fur to indicate how the sharing and exploration of negative emotions produces a positive classroom community in which participants felt safe. "Room D200" ends with a proclamation that employing the plural pronoun we to capture that the slam poetry class community continues while also building in ambiguity to invite the reader into the narrative.

The slam poetry classroom space is a location for creation of ideal-self narratives.

Andrew's poems suggested that as a writer in the slam poetry class he could create his own mental space of peace that protected him from the harsh conditions of other locations where he existed. This is facilitated by the physical classroom space being one in which using imagination and memory were permitted to create ideal self-narratives. Likewise, Brittany described memories of being happy with a lost loved one in one poem, and described a reality where heteronormativity did not hinder diversity of sexual orientation in another. Thus, these youths used the slam poetry space to create portraits of themselves as safe and accepted, portraits they could live out in the physical classroom space. Additionally, Brittany crafted a dynamic identity in which she experienced and expressed multiple emotions not solely characterized by anger, the easiest emotion to publicly express. In the research poem "Room D200" this imaginative ability of the slam poetry classroom spaces to allow for crafting ideal self-narratives is mirrored in the imaginative repurposing of classroom writing tools as weapons or tools for gardening and growth.

The slam poetry class as a place of rebellion in which adolescents can challenge oppressors.

Participants' poems demonstrated that the slam poetry classroom space was a location for adolescence rebellion against societal expectations and prescribed identities. For example, Brittany wrote extensively about how homophobia is wrong. She wrote with declarative statements as if to call out oppressors of the LGBTQ+ community and correct them. In a related but different manner, Andrew confronted his absentee father in one of his poems as a rebellion against respecting one's parents. Both participants used this space to critique ills in their own lives and broader society. Also, noteworthy, is that Andrew identified himself as a kind beast. This oxymoronic metaphor calls out societies' perception of his African American male identity as violent or aggressive, while also appropriating the term and rebranding himself a *kind* beast. The poem is an act of personal rebellion yet conflicting confirmation. This tension is captured in "Room D200" by using both destructive and growth oriented images to suggest from this type of creative rebellion new, endless possibilities are made available to youth.

Adolescents participate in a recursive process of identity development characterized by reflection, naming, creation of self, and expression of the created self.

The interpretive analytic process of critical poetic inquiry revealed that participant poems and the slam poetry classroom are operating on a developmental plane that aids adolescents in identity construction. Through the writing and speaking tasks of spoken word, participants reflected on their identities and lived experiences. Brittany reflected on gender and sexual orientation. Andrew reflected on fatherlessness and his urban community. Next, through the writing process they named how they saw themselves, and how they felt society saw them. Brittany saw herself as angry and Andrew saw himself as a kind beast. Then, participants used the slam poetry class space and writing activity to create themselves by affirming or re-imagining the self. Lastly, through the speaking and performance act they could express the ideal self and as a result exist in their created identities more fully in the slam poetry classroom space. The research poem titled, "How to Create Self" uses time-bound, process-oriented transitions and a second person point of view to instruct how these participants used this space to construct identity. The voice invoked in this poem attempts universality of this finding by broadening it to be relevant to any context not just the classroom while at the same time using metaphor to capture what I found participants doing in the raw data. For example, Andrew identified his own insecurity as a boy attempting to develop into a man without a father, and Brittany identified sexual orientation as a point of insecurity. The poem also symbolizes the personal yet abstract work of creating a self through imagery related to glass and mirrors and a mixing of emotions, which cannot be tangibly combined.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore how the slam poetry classroom space enables middle school students to break through social barriers in the process of identity construction. Additionally, this research explored the usefulness of the slam poetry classroom space to adolescents, and the analytic process of critical poetic inquiry to teacher-researchers. The findings of this research, based on a critical poetic analysis of two middle school students' personal poetry as data and the construction of research poetry as an analytic tool, affirm Alcoff's (2006) argument that human identity is a political process derived from both the individual and society's prescription on the individual. Participants in this study challenged society's prescription of their identities through the slam poetry classroom space. This specific space allowed participants the mental, emotional, and physical space to reflect on and challenge identities assigned to them.

The specific space of the slam poetry classroom is significant because it provides a counter-narrative of socio-cultural location in which both teachers and students can critically analyze society, space, and power dynamics prevalent in traditional school settings. Spoken word as an art and educative tool in schools has been proven to add an element of social acceptance of negotiated identities that can be conceived as humanizing, and thus politically liberating, because it allows youth to self-select or reject prescribed societal norms (Fisher, 2005; Hill, 2009; Jocson, 2006).

The slam poetry class is, according to the themes that emerged from this research, a place to experience a range of emotions, rebel against society norms, create ideal self-narratives, and participate in a recursive identity construction process. These findings are in alignment with the prevailing literature on slam poetry and identity construction indicating that youth use the slam poetry classroom space to think through and challenge their socially constructed identities (Fisher, 2005; Hill, 2009; Jocson, 2006; Rudd 2012; Somers-Willett, 2005; Weinstein & West, 2012). It is proven that through the slam poetry classroom space youth are empowered to access their agency in ways that challenge normative school power dynamics that are mimicked in society, and through critical reflection they develop the skills to effect personal and collective change. Through collaborative classroom norms and pedagogic practices, students can recognize their own ideal personal narratives and create them alongside other students in ways that disrupt oppressive and/or stereotypical identity prescriptions. The co-construction of self and the classroom space allows these students to transcend identity barriers assigned to them more easily. Noteworthy is that Brown (2011) suggests that identity construction for youth is not finished at the completion of a poem, but that poems, like identity, are constantly being reshaped, and as such are never fully complete (Brown, 2011; Brown, Knowles, & Beane, 2007). This study confirms this finding by

identifying a recursive process of identity development that the slam poetry class allows youth to access to continue to reflect, name, create, and live out identities during development.

This study contributes to the existing body of scholarship by analyzing the usefulness of slam poetry classroom space through a critical poetic inquiry that explored student written poems as the primary data source. This methodology is particularly well suited for this project because it attempts to capture the emotion and experience of the student-participant creative analytic process of crafting poetry (Prendergast, 2015). Furthermore, this methodology also achieves the liberationist aim of amplifying the participant experience and repositioning the researcher as witness to the participants' struggle for justice.

In this research, participants and I together created a space that permitted black and brown youth to experience a range of emotions unapologetically. In the context of American urban schools that can often penalize the same youth through punitive standardized test policies, militant zero tolerance discipline policies, and push them into a society that often responds with racialized police brutality and other systems that threaten their opportunities to equitably live and learn, exploring a range of human emotion in a classroom becomes a radical action. In this slam poetry classroom space, Andrew, an African American male participant weighing about 250 pounds and standing six feet tall, could express his pain and sorrow and not be chastised or required to be strong. Brittany could grieve for her favorite person and advocate for same sex love without fear of judgement. This finding aligns well with previous research on spoken word communities as socializing units that maintain nonjudgmental attitudes toward peers (Fisher, 2005; Jocson, 2006).

A contribution to the literature is that this study uses the form of poetry to explore the topic of a slam poetry classroom space thus offering readers an aesthetic experience into the slam poetry classroom space. At the same time, this work models the process through which teachers, youth workers, and poets in other contexts might explore the politics of identity through the dialogic of writing and analyzing poetry. In the collaborative space, this process fosters meaning making is expanded to include all persons in the research and learning enterprise because the poem mimics universality that allows all persons to enter (Faulkner, 2009). In closing, poetic inquiry as an arts-based research methodology offers interdisciplinary usefulness as an analytic tool that captures and responds to justice oriented research agendas for equity in education and beyond.

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