Censoring Freedom: Community-Based Professional Development and the Politics of Profanity

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The lack of strong literacy skills and practices among students is perhaps the clearest indicator that the education system continues to leave millions of children behind. To advance the reading, writing, and speaking skills of middle and high school students, this study examines a professional development model that brought trained community-based poets into the classroom to conduct weekly writing workshops. Over the course of two years, poet-mentor educators worked alongside 30 English Language Arts and Special Education teachers, reaching over 800 students. When the literacy program entered its second year, issues of propriety and language usages unveiled deep rifts between who students were as individuals and who educators wanted them to be as learners. The literature on multiple literacies and cultural relevancy helped frame the professional development within a larger movement to bring student voices and experiences into the curriculum (e.g., Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Mahiri, 1998a, 1998b), but even this scholarship does not address the contentious interplay between student self-expression, conformity, and academic achievement. So what happens when students' poetry embodies inner-city street vernacular and volatile subject matter that offends teachers? To address this concern, my research analyzes how to use spoken word poetry as a form of critical literacy development and empowerment within the confines of school.

Many urban school districts, like the one in this study, are in crisis, and despite various reform efforts, the failure rate of students, disproportionately low-income students of color, continues to rise (Anyon, 2005; Hursh, 2007; Kozol, 1994; Lipman, 2011; Orfield, 2006). The lack of strong literacy skills and practices among high school students is an indicator that the education system continues to leave millions of children behind. Researchers and practitioners agree that children, en masse, need better reading and writing skills as well as opportunities to use literacy practices in school and community contexts (Chappell & Faltis, 2013; Christensen, 2000; 2009; Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000; Heath, 1983). Yet, there is less agreement about how to do it.

As one solution, Noguera (2001) argues that to learn how to influence student attitudes and enhance their academic abilities, educators must first understand the cultural forms and stances that young people produce within what is commonly referred to as youth culture. Noguera, as do others (e.g., Dimitriadis, 2001; Ferguson, 2001; Hill, 2009), emphasizes the need to develop

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youth-centered pedagogies that place students at the center; this approach is not simply about connecting students to the canon, but about shifting the core of instruction from teacher to student. To develop a praxis of student-centered instruction, my research examines a spoken word literacy partnership that tried to make critical pedagogy a reality inside a high-poverty low-performing urban school district.

To advance the reading, writing, and speaking skills of middle and high school students, I designed a professional development model that brought trained community-based poets into the classroom to conduct weekly writing workshops that would engage and excite students to share their experiences and speak their truth. Over the course of two years (2010–2012), the poet-mentor educators (PMEs) were paired with 30 English Language Arts and Special Education teachers, reaching over 800 students. In addition to the weekly writing workshops inside the classroom, teachers and poet-mentor educators worked together to plan lessons and participated in monthly literacy seminars and three-day summer institutes.

In the first year of the project, every teacher working with a poet-mentor reported an increase in student engagement, and the majority of teachers stated that students completed class assignments more frequently (Watson, 2011a). Field notes consistently noted an explosion of youth expression in the treatment classes, documenting key indicators such as the number of students writing and sharing their work out loud. In some classes, however, it seemed that the creative writing process was starting to silence a few teachers. Teachers were not necessarily participating in the activities; rather, they remained observers of a classroom space erupting with student voice. When the PME left, teachers were not using the critical literacy tools on their own or with their other students. Something remained amiss.

Farmer and his colleagues (2005) suggest that "just as the best teaching empowers students, the best professional development empowers teachers" (p. 60). The poetry program was clearly engaging young people, but how could it simultaneously improve teacher quality? When the program entered its second year, I suggested that the teachers try to participate as active members of the writing process. As a result, teachers sat alongside their students in participatory literacy circles (Fisher, 2007, 2009) and everyone got to know each other in a more authentic and intimate way. The resulting honesty, however, was sometimes harsh, painful, and maybe even too revealing. Issues of propriety and language usage started to unveil deep rifts about who students were as individuals and who educators wanted them to be as learners.

During monthly literacy seminars with the participating teachers and poet-mentors, pedagogical tensions began to surface. The literature on multiple literacies and cultural relevancy helped me frame the professional development within a larger movement to bring student voices and experiences into the curriculum (e.g., Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Mahiri, 1998a, 1998b). Yet, even this scholarship did not address the contentious interplay between profanity, spoken word poetry, and power with which teachers and PMEs were grappling. Building upon the gap in the literature alongside the qualitative data I collected over the course of two years, my article addresses the following research questions:

1. What struggles do educators encounter when trying to create student-centered classrooms?
2. How do pedagogical conflicts around language use—what is and is not allowed—shape our understanding of multiple literacies inside educational spaces?
3. How can spoken word poetry be used as a tool to empower both students and teachers in the learning process?

MULTIPLE LITERACIES, CULTURAL RELEVANCY,
AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Given that schools are becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse, advocates of culturally responsive teaching argue that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the frame of reference of students, learning becomes more personally meaningful, students have greater interest and engage in school-based practices more readily, and achievement levels increase (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1995; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). "As a result," explains Gay (2002), "the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters" (p. 106). The National Council of Teachers of English (2007) concurs: "When students are not recognized for bringing valuable, multiple-literacy practices to school, they can become resistant to school-based literacy" (p. 3). Teachers who utilize a multiple-literacy approach to academic instruction engender an atmosphere of participation that allows students to tap into the language resources and cultural knowledge of their home communities.

To engage in meaningful learning, therefore, it is important to employ culturally responsive strategies that tap into students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). But this form of instruction can be quite challenging in an urban classroom where students are from various ethnic backgrounds and speak various languages and dialects. When choosing what literature to bring into class, for instance, some teachers try to create a melting pot of texts—almost like a checklist—that simply showcases each group (Watson, 2011b). While this approach to multicultural education is partially supported by research (e.g., Banks, 1995), it does not challenge or amplify the meaning of literacy. Neither does it explicitly address issues of power, privilege, and purpose. Underlying beliefs about what counts as literacy shape definitions, practical classroom lessons and, ultimately, pedagogy.

An autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1997, 2001, 2008) is one in which literacy is seen as a universal technical skill that is the same everywhere. Based upon this paradigm, literacy becomes impersonal and static; in other words, dead. This unresponsive form of standardization divorces skill from the particular social context and interactions of everyday life. Applying this autonomous model of literacy to the classroom, the teacher becomes a manager of discourse (even in a classroom with a "diverse" curriculum that features writers of color) and the keeper/evaluator of knowledge while students are obedient workers tested on how well they regurgitate information (Apple, 2004; Bakhtin, 1981). Hence, there is one way to write a "correct" essay, one way to decipher text, and, when a teacher asks the class a question, there is one correct answer. Enright and her colleagues (2012) analyzed this pedagogy in a recent study of two high school English Language Arts classes. They examined how students were socialized into the norms of academic literacy when they read and wrote poetry based upon Emily Dickinson's "Hope is the Thing with Feathers" in preparation for a high-stakes exam. This study and others (e.g., Ginwright, 2004) demonstrate that even well-intentioned multicultural educators can subscribe to instructional practices that actually deter from critical thinking. Since most teachers want to create (rather than negate) spaces for students to achieve, it is important to consider a form of literacy instruction that is multifaceted, locally constructed, and ever-changing.

An ideological model of literacy views literacy as a social practice, situated in the local co-construction of knowledge among members of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Street, 2008; Wenger, 1998). In the field of multiple literacies, Enright (2006) and others (e.g.,

Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000) explain that alternative forms of meaning-making can add value to academic English and vice versa. As a practical example, Williams (2006) examined the use of a bilingual pedagogy to empower African Americans to learn Standard English. She found that this multiple literacies instructional approach helped students acquire traditional language skills without sacrificing their identities and native lexicon. In another study, Villegas and Lucas (2002) highlight the ways a teacher successfully introduced the concept of rhythm in poetry to African American and Latino students in an urban middle school by drawing upon the students' familiarity with rhythm in rap music. The teacher began the lesson by playing a selection of rap music and then guided the students through a similar analysis of rhythm in a poem by Robert Frost. In exploring the analogy between the two poetic forms, the authors found that the teacher was able to transform the subject matter into an educational experience relevant to students. The same case could be made about asking students to write about their favorite video game or sport. Essentially, if all forms of knowing are valid, the rubric of proficiency shifts; the measures of success change form. An asset-based approach to language development disrupts the master narrative because each person's worldview, experiences, and perspectives are utilized as equal forms of text. These ideals, however, are complicated by the realities of inequity, especially when considering issues of propriety in educational spaces.

Within the inner-city classroom environment, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2005) designed lessons that utilized popular media and hip hop culture as literary text. Critics quickly pointed out that this nontraditional literature base (i.e., Tupac's poems and raps) dealt with issues of sex, drugs, violence, and profanity and, therefore, could not be used at school. The authors challenged:

> Core curriculum Shakespearian texts are replete with elements of graphic violence, debauchery, sex, and suicide. Core novels such as Maya Angelou's, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and J. D. Salinger's, *The Catcher in the Rye*, have multiple uses of profane language. There is no shortage of established core texts that raise the same taboo subjects that are the nexus of the argument for excluding popular texts. (pp. 303–304)

Clearly, the issue is not profanity, but who is using it. Objections to certain language usages are culturally-based and culturally-biased. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell state, "this fact is certainly not missed on the urban students of color" and usually furthers "feelings of exclusion" (p. 304).

Various scholars have found that the way literacy is constructed, defined, and recognized reflects deeper ideological systems of knowing. "Appropriate" language use is not a neutral concept. In an ethnography of communication, Spears (1998) examined language use as a matter of sociocultural interpretation. He finds that, since any utterance can be literal, figurative, or ironic (for example), "obscenity, in the final analysis, is in the ears of the hearer" (p. 241). The ways in which language can be deemed "correct" is based, in part, on power and dominance. bell hooks (1994) adds to this analysis: Standard English, far from being a neutral tool of communication, "has the potential to disempower those of us who are just learning to speak, who are just learning to claim language as a place where we make ourselves subject" (p. 168). Upon further reflection, hooks states, "it is not the English language that hurt me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize" (p. 168). In learning the "oppressor's language," Macedo (2000) agrees, "We are often forced to experience subordination and conformity" (p. 23). These scholars describe a complex duplicity of expression, reminiscent of DuBois' (1903) concept of double consciousness. In other words, if the English language signifies oppression, how can it be used as a

liberatory tool? Lorde (1984) challenges that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 110). To the extent that this is true, how can English teachers support low-income youth and students of color to use language in academic contexts in a way that fosters agency, honors their identity, and propels them to succeed? This question has, at times, paralyzed my own pedagogy.

A short personal vignette will help clarify my own uncertainties about how to effectively teach English. Years ago a student asked me point blank: "Why do I got to speak the cracker's language to live in the cracker's world?" Silence. More silence. It was clear to everyone in the room that I did not have an answer. As a young white woman desperately trying to demystify the writing process and get teenagers to code-switch, I was missing a key component. I neither spoke nor understood my students' language(s); I was the foreigner; I was the minority; I was the stranger. And yet I had the audacity to try to use my position of authority to convince, threaten, and prod them into reading and writing to achieve in "our" world. Deeper issues of conformity ("the cracker's language") were left unaddressed—primarily because their sharp critique intimidated me. I started to feel lost and ill-prepared to teach. There were not enough incentives in the world to get the majority of my students to want to be like me—a grammatically correct, college-educated, square. To hone my effectiveness, I had to acclimate myself to a new form of literacy that embraced urban students. Youth spoken word performance poetry was a natural fit because it is an unabashed truth-telling, soul-stirring, multilingual outlet (Fisher, 2007, 2009; Weiss & Herndon, 2001).

Over the last decade, research on hip-hop education and spoken word poetry has burgeoned (Dyson, 2001; Fisher, 2007, 2009; Hill, 2009; Jocson, 2009, 2010; Stovall, 2006; Watson, 2004). In major cities across the United States, poetry-writing workshops have become available inside schools and have become increasingly embedded in English Language Arts curricula. Jocson (2008) discusses teen poetry spaces as "symbolic sanctuaries" (p. 2), places where young people can proudly and freely proclaim who they are. Yet in a social justice poetry contest ("Pens on the Prize") facilitated by Jocson and her colleagues (2006), students were asked to "submit your best poem and express the depth of your emotion *without profanity*" (my emphasis). Even adults who advocate for youth voice often seek to arbitrate, grade, and manage it. This connects directly to Spears' (1998) analysis of profanity as a socially constructed concept.

Taken together, these distinct definitions of literacy (autonomous and ideological) alongside empirical studies of English classrooms frame how I examine student writing and forms of self-expression inside school. Significantly, the hypocrisy of what is deemed suitable comes to the fore in my quest to better understand the nexus between English, Language, and Art. My methods of data collection and analysis set the stage for my findings wherein I argue for a liberatory model of literacy inside urban classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

Research Context

Data were collected from the *Closing the Achievement Gap Write Now* literacy intervention[1] that took place in a diverse urban district in northern California. The school district in this study serves over 22,000 linguistically and ethnically diverse students; students and their families speak over 42 languages. Located in a high poverty area where 82% of the population is socio-economically disadvantaged, nearly all students are eligible for free or reduced-fee meals. In 2008, over 70% of

middle and high school students were not scoring proficient in English Language Arts and only 63% of 10th grade students passed the CAHSEE.[2] In 2009, the CAHSEE passage rate dropped to 61%. In response to this crisis, Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS), a spoken word literary arts program directed out of the UC Davis School of Education CRESS Center, was brought into the district to conduct intensive writing workshops in classes where the majority of students were struggling academically. As previously mentioned, this aspect of the SAYS program pairs a poet-mentor educator with a classroom teacher to implement culturally relevant literacy activities on a weekly basis for an entire school year.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

To address my research questions about how to use spoken word poetry as a form of self-expression and empowerment within the confines of school, I employed an ethnographic case-study methodology. Data collected over the course of two years (2010–2012) involved students, teachers, and poet-mentor educators in the SAYS treatment classrooms. Specifically, I relied upon participant observation (Glesne, 1999; Maxwell, 1996), anonymous pre/post surveys to all participants, interviews, journal reflections, and various writing samples. Classroom data included audio recordings of students and teacher performances, field notes of classroom observations, copies of curricular materials and student work, and photographs of classroom artifacts (e.g., teacher's boardwork). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, students, and poet-mentor educators in which I invited participants to grapple with issues of censorship in student writing and performance pieces. All interviews took between 30–60 minutes; they were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, the SAYS student and teacher anthology of poetry (nearly 1,000 pages) was coded to better understand how participants were sharing their stories. During this stage of analysis, I gave particular attention to poems that might be considered "obscene" or "profane."

   Throughout the process of data analysis, I constructed matrices to link concepts emerging from the data to ideas in the literature and to my research questions (Maykurt & Morehouse, 1994; Seidman, 1991). Utilizing various ethnographic tools, I examined the data using both open and theoretical codes as a way of constructing further questions and building themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To maximize the validity of my findings, multiple data sources were cross-referenced for consistency so that areas of contention could be highlighted. By triangulating information sources, it was assumed (though not assured) that aberrations would be noticed and elucidated. To further substantiate my results, I conducted member checks (Maxwell, 1996) by having participants review interview transcripts so that they would have the opportunity to clarify or expand on any issues raised. I also solicited feedback regularly from skilled researchers not intimately connected to the data. I shared transcripts, memos, and matrices with these colleagues to identify discrepant information and to strengthen my coding strategies and analytic tools. Such alternative interpretations were necessary to strengthen the findings as well as try my conclusions. Altogether, I sought to layer my data to deepen my analysis.

Bringing the Community into the Classroom

When I first started working at UC Davis, I wanted to develop an applied research program that fused together evidence-based best practices (Watson, 2012) and the specific context of local

needs. UC Davis is surrounded by urban, rural, and suburban neighborhoods, and in each of these settings, the achievement gaps and dropout rates are visible and discouraging. As a response, in Fall 2008, I established a consortium to understand and promote social justice youth development and youth voice in Sacramento, California. The original group of stakeholders represented a cross-section of teachers, district administrators, city leaders, community organizers, and program officers. Each person seemed genuinely drawn to the partnership because of his or her commitment to improve the way young people are engaged and educated. Recognizing that literacy is a gateway to academic success in all content areas, we decided to partner with Youth Speaks, Inc. to bring a nationally recognized poetry model to the region.

In January 2009, I held the first meeting of SAYS at the Sierra Health Foundation. Based on word of mouth, five students came. A UC Davis college student and spoken word artist led a writing workshop and facilitated an open mic that got the students reading their poems out loud. At the end of the evening, I challenged each student to "put five on it" and return to the subsequent meeting with five of their peers. One month later, 58 young people filled the space. Within a few months, close to a hundred people were attending each of our workshops; we were also starting to receive calls to bring our literary arts work into the schools. To meet this demand, I wanted to find a way to bring the community into the classroom.

Blending together a grassroots community and youth organizing model (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Skinner, Garreton, & Schultz, 2011; Taines, 2012; Watson, 2012), SAYS trains poet-mentor educators (PMEs) from the neighborhood to work alongside classroom teachers. The PMEs are all people of color ranging in age from 18 to 46. They represent a unique mix of community activists, hip hop MCs, and spoken word artists. The majority of them grew up in the Sacramento region and attended schools in the area (some even dropped out of the very schools in which they now work). Each cohort of mentors partakes in a six-week training program in three core areas: critical pedagogy, curriculum development, and literary arts. SAYS then places these nontraditional educators inside classrooms in which they act as literacy coaches and engagement specialists.

In these spaces, the SAYS pedagogy has three key components:

1. Learning how to authentically reach students is a precursor to successful teaching.
2. Knowing who students are and where they come from allows us to create meaningful and thought-provoking curricula.
3. Reading, writing, and speaking are the foundations of academic achievement, critical thinking, and social justice within and beyond the walls of school.

These three pillars shape the SAYS writing process, but the following guidelines help create a family-like atmosphere.

SAYS Guidelines
    1 Mic
    Loud-N-Proud
    Step Up . . . Step Back
    Freedom of Speech . . . With Propriety
    Create Community . . . No Snitchin
    Standard is Yourself: Be You and Do You
    Respect . . . Self, Others, and the Space
    Patience, Perseverance, Participation, and Above All: *Love*

On the first day of a classroom residency, the poet-mentor shares the above guidelines. It is important to note that students and the teacher have an opportunity to change any of the guidelines to better meet the needs of the group. In one instance, a poet-mentor was teaching in an affluent suburb and the students changed "no snitchin" to "please do not gossip." The SAYS rules are not fixed, but they are rarely changed. Young people are often thrilled that SAYS uses some of their slang to describe what is (not) expected. The guidelines provide a kind of cultural clue that the space is youth-centered. Further explanation of the guidelines is included in Appendix A.

Since this article gives particular attention to issues of decorum, it is worthwhile to share the SAYS understanding of freedom of speech. Because of the nature of the writing workshops ("write as freely as possible in your SAYS journal") alongside the appropriateness of school, students consistently ask, "Can we cuss?" A poet-mentor responds to her students: "Speak your truth, but remember, someone is always listening. Be conscious of what you say and how you say it. Even the grimiest rappers have radio versions these days so recognize that there is a time and a place for everything." In addition, the mentor provides a definition of propriety as "the state or quality of conforming to conventionally accepted standards of behavior or morals." This word, propriety, is powerful because it situates normalcy within a communal classroom setting. The students' accepted standard of language use might be juxtaposed to the teacher or institution. The goal of discussing propriety is not to find a clear-cut answer about what is or is not appropriate, but instead to provide students with an understanding of the context and choices we all make as authors of our work. With these norms in place, let us enter a SAYS classroom.

COMMUNITY-BASED LITERACY: THE NEXUS OF ENGLISH, LANGUAGE, AND ART

In the weekly SAYS classes, students and teachers are guided through writing workshops that delve into personal experiences as the basis for a literary exercise. At the start of each class, students engage in a "mental push-up" activity. Often, the poet-mentor educator (PME) reads through the student journals and chooses a particular piece of writing to feature. The entire class then writes down the student's quote and responds to it. This activity promotes individual students while encouraging community building within the class. To unearth students' passions, personalities, and perceptions, mentors do activities such as, "I am not who you think I am" in which students respond through writing (to view a sample SAYS lesson, see Appendix B & C).

SAYS classes are also political in nature. After a recent shooting in the neighborhood by a school resource officer, students were asked to use research ("back it up") alongside personal testimony and communal history to answer the following question: Do the police in your neighborhood serve and protect? Prompts such as this excite students to learn. Writing, however, is only part of the program. At SAYS, students write for the page and the stage. As a spoken word program, the popular SAYS mantra is, "If you got something to Say? SAY*Something!*" The program encourages students to write from the heart, edit with the mind, and perform from the soul.

Evidence obtained from the SAYS approach to literacy development demonstrates significant improvements, including an increase in student attendance, task completion, self-expression, and classroom engagement. Teachers also report improvements in student writing and use of complicated language and concepts (Watson, 2011a, 2011b). In the best-case scenario, the above

indicators help shift the culture of classroom practice from a teacher-centered autonomous model of literacy to a student-centered ideological model of literacy. In these spaces,

> poetry and spoken word are being used to effectively change the curriculum so that the students are learning more about themselves. . . . As a result of learning more about themselves and having the freedom to fully explore and express themselves, they begin to feel more validated in the classroom. This validation leads to improved engagement in the curriculum. (PME interview, 2011)

Prior to SAYS, many students stated that they "had never had the opportunity to be heard" (middle school survey, 2011). The SAYS residency "provided an environment of freedom of expression that was, heretofore, untapped" (teacher survey, 2011). SAYS "creates a platform for the youth," explains one of the PMEs, "and their voice to be heard."

Student Empowerment

At the onset, many teachers believed their students just did not like to write (or could not write). "*These* students," a continuation school teacher contended, "don't even know their name belongs in the right hand corner of a piece of paper" (teacher interview, 2010). By-and-large, low expectations were rampant. As a response, the SAYS poet-mentor educators entered the classroom space armed with a purpose: to engage and excite students to write. Unfortunately, this intention created an unexpected tension because some teachers did not find the students' narratives of poverty, anger, and injustice academically acceptable. So what happens if the narrative being expressed makes a teacher uncomfortable? Consider the following excerpt written by a continuation school student. She described where she is from:

> I'm from where
> Bitch suck my dick
> Put it in ya mamas face
> Bustin a full clip
> Is our literature

This particular student forcefully depicts an urban literacy that shapes her existence. She situates profanity, violence, and abuse as a form of lived text. Various scholars and educators commit to culturally relevant literacy practices (e.g., Gay, 2000); however, this student expands this framework to include her inner-city environment. Another student uses the word "shit" throughout her piece to emphasize and critique the ways her people have been treated in this country and within the educational system. She recited,

> A teacher once told me that we would never be shit, because the color of our skin and the accent of our tongue was statistically forming our future, but her shit talking was very hypocritical like she wasn't even using her degree right like she wasn't even teaching us shit like she wasn't doing shit but talking shit but I was doing shit by standing up here, like I don't even have my degree yet but I teach audiences in less than four minutes . . . slavery is at its highest peak, the chains never left they just replaced them with puppet strings and hand cuffs. We keep doing exactly what they want us to do, hatred among each other that's exactly how they want us to be, separated, killing our own race, then incarcerated, the next step is brown on brown retaliation, really another word for incarceration. They used to kill anyone with a brown or black complexion they don't even have to move a finger now;

we do them the favor, killing ourselves. Who told you? Who told you, you had to die young, kill the young, because as far as I'm concerned there isn't anything cute about dying young, dying young that aint no gangster shit, Dr. King, Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez died fighting for our rights now that's some gangster shit and sometimes we get so inspired to do some real dumb shit like you are government owned once you're cocaine stoned crystal zoned jail cell thrown . . . We've been controlled by men we never see and they're relaxing in ten bedroom mansions with maids at their personal feet, these muthafuckers are very well protected but we go out and speak and we get arrested, that's another government investment, because they told us that we would never amount to shit, so now we tell each other that we really aint shit, when in reality we have always been way more. But ignorance is what racism has sculpted. Why do you think that when we get stereo-typed, we just laugh about it and we don't even get insulted anymore?

This young woman's poem challenges and reconfigures the hypocrisies of society, drawing metaphors with reconfigured words (like the repetitive use of the word "shit").

In response to intense vulgar writing, a teacher asserts that profanity should not be used by anyone in the classroom. Although "it might be 'their culture' within their small and very limited world . . . my hope is my students will want to expand their world and learn to survive and thrive beyond [their neighborhood]. . . . They need to be taught how the rest of the world behaves" (teacher reflection, 2012). Instead of honoring the students' home languages and cultures, this teacher draws a rather limiting parallel between language and behavior. Instead of looking at her student's lexicon as a doorway into their world(s), she judges them. Apparently her goal is for students to use proper English as a pathway out of the hood, instead of viewing literacy as a tool to transform their present.

In another instance, a high school student discussed the interplay of poverty and hustlin' that shaped his identity.

> The life I live I grew up poor
> A family of sixteen often short on the green
> So a lot of thing we couldn't afford
> We did what we have to do to get by
> Share the same clothes man it's no lie
> . . . They call it ghetto but I call it home
> This the place where the best of the poor roam
> It's like a bless and a curse but I still thank the Lord
> . . . Stress at its best and so much more
> I live a hard life
> The struggle can't be cure
> On the block I hustle pop clips yet my love is pure
> The bottom of every bottom I been there before
> . . . Young cats running wild like they aint got nothing to lose
> I made history in these streets I aint got nothing to prove
> The hood I love I got no intention to move and
> The past year I been blessed with two
> My baby mama and my only girl
> The system is fucked up got a nigga feeling lost
> . . . I've been broke all my life
> Trying to make a change
> . . . I was born not to make it but I adapt the pain

Still so much more to come
. . . Tomorrow's not a promise
Sleep is the cousin of death
So every breath I take I adore
(H)ustle (M)oney (O)ver a (N)igga's (G)ame
That's what I stand for.

Even amidst the struggles to survive and thrive, this student loves the ghetto that raised him, and he does not want to leave. This attitude is in stark contrast to the English teacher quoted above who sees it as her job to get urban students to escape their community. Another interesting component of this piece is the use of the n-word, especially because the student is Hmong. The vernacular of the street is often the means of communication that feels the most genuine and real to these students. But how successful can students be if they do not have the tools to write and speak properly?

Providing students with the space to write freely while denying them the tools to code-switch and utilize multiple literacies further stagnates academic achievement. However, some students are not just reluctant, but adamant, that they do not want to conform. I watched a group of high school students argue with a poet-mentor that using Standard English when writing or speaking is simply being "fake." The PME asked her class rhetorically, "Would you cuss inside the courtroom? No! You would talk in *they* language, you would be proper. So don't get up in here and act like you can't code-switch!" Ironically, the PME relied on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Morgan, 2001; Rickford, 1999; Smitherman, 2000) to convince her students to expand their vocabulary and lexicon (Carter, 2008; Delpit, 1995). "This is not about judging you," she pleaded, "it's about giving you what you need to survive and thrive in this world." I saw students begin to nod in agreement. With a short directive from the PME, every single student in the class started writing.

Many of the teachers we work with, however, do not speak their students' languages nor do they live in their neighborhoods, so fostering a genuine connection can be challenging. For these educators, partnering with a community member can significantly increase student participation. In the words of one teacher,

> with a PME here, they can see that I can switch and meet the students where they are. But if it was me doing it on my own, it's not going to work. I have been teaching at a continuation school for seven years—I know it doesn't work. I need that PME youthful urban person that speaks the language and can translate between my generation and my upbringing and the student's experience. The PME is the glue that holds the learning together.

Since code-switching worked in her class with a poet, this teacher decided to try a similar activity with one of her other classes that is majority African American.

Without any context, she simply wrote the following assignment on the board for seniors to complete. "Rewrite this sentence correctly: 'I done did good on the test.'" I was disappointed, but not surprised, that every student in the room refused to do their work ("this is bullshit" was the response I continued to hear). The class acquiesced to get an "F" for the day. I suspect that the students found the assignment to be elementary on the one hand and disrespectful to their families on the other. Providing students with opportunities to code-switch sentences is an important activity, but it can be viewed as disrespectful when the assignment has an underlying message that one form of English is right while the languages within their homes, in this case

AAVE, is wrong. This adapted lesson did not embody the cultural relevancy we sought to impart to teachers. Although it brought students' lexicon into the classroom, it further alienated them and shut down aspects of the learning process. The SAYS pedagogy intentionally finds ways to open people up.

The heart of English Language Art is literary expression—getting students to read the word, the world, and even read themselves in a new way. When given topics of interest, emotion, and controversy, many students erupt with veracity and vocabularic creativity. But within these stories, there is also a lot of pain. A student shared,

> It was summer in the month of June when I first saw death and I was at the age of 7. It was my best friend, he was like a older brother to me. He always taught me how to fight back and don't show my weakness. Until that night when there was a drive-by right in front of my house. When everything was done I looked outside and saw him trying to walk it off but keep falling. I was terrified but at the same time I was mad. I was at the age of 8 now. Another brother of mine was taken away. I will always remember wat he told me. I don't know why but all I can think about is surviving. He would alway bitch at me and hit me tell me to go home. He always tell me this life is not gonna get you anywhere. He told everyone he's gonna quit and then he got taken away. I didn't know wat to think.

This student, like many youth in the SAYS program, reminds us to look underneath their hardcore exteriors and tough fronts (Dance, 2002). This teenager is often considered "bad" and labeled emotionally disturbed by school personnel. A teacher commented that it seems he is incapable of focusing and paying attention in class. Yet a poet-mentor notes that this same student writes with intensity when asked about youth violence. Underneath his thug persona is a grieving child. He even discusses the ways one of his brothers forcefully tried to get him to leave the streets alone and not follow in his footsteps. Writing such as this can provide teachers with tremendous insight into their students, which I contend, can and should guide curriculum. Educators can even connect these issues to universal themes in other genres, but for this to occur, space has to be created in which honest expression is encouraged and allowed.

As students start to use writing as an outlet to speak their truth, teachers will begin to really hear them authentically—in their own words and on their own terms. Unlike the poetry unit described earlier (Enright, Torres-Torretti, & Carreón, 2012), writing is not a series of structured decontextualized tasks, but an art of courage, vulnerability, and communication. A student revealed:

> It's the pain behind her smile
> And the smile that hides the pain
> A lost girl in a cold world
> Her tears are invisible in the rain
> She runs and runs
> But couldn't find an open door
> She wants to cry it to the world
> But instead she cries to her book!
> . . . Yeah, never in life would she ever thought to speak her life on the mic,
> So if it wasn't for SAYS,
> The only door open would be suicide.
> So thanks SAYS for letting me speak my pain
> Y'all eyes was the only one who saw my tears that were once invisible in the rain.

Giving students the freedom to write honestly and creatively saves lives. These examples of student writing demonstrate that when death, depression, and various forms of oppression loom so heavily in this world, writing and performing is not simply an act of expression, it is an outlet for healing. Literacy in this milieu is liberating.

Empowering young people to participate in a liberatory model of literacy within school affects achievement. In the next excerpt, taken from an interview, a student described why she shut down and disengaged from school, but was able to come back to life through spoken word.

> My brother Lamont was killed. He was found behind a garbage can and he was stabbed 9 times. . . . It really changed me, I guess, according to other people like my family. They said my attitude is different. And I started fucking up in school and shit. He was only 16 when he died. . . . But last school year, I got on the stage and performed for the first time. Ever [since] it changed my life because I realized my poetry and raps is one thing I cannot fuck up in. And I can say anything I want. And when I'm on stage, I can be myself. And I can say things through my poetry that I just can't say out loud without it.

Performance poetry is a unique platform that allowed this student to find an outlet for her despair and anger. She also described it as a place she can be herself and be successful. As a result, this particular young person started coming to school regularly and went from failing English to getting an "A." But this is not simply about a grade point average, it is about using English classrooms as an oasis to practice freedom, create spaces that heal, and engage youth in their education (Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1994). At SAYS, I translate this scholarship to mean youth voices for social change. In the tradition of literary resistance, a new generation of young people, mentors, and even some of their teachers are literally and figuratively taking the mic and disrupting the hegemonic narrative rampant in today's schools and society at large (Apple, 2004).

During our season to showcase student work, we intentionally try to elevate a narrative often left out of education. SAYS prides itself on being able to reach and teach young people seen by many as rough, tough, and misled. At these events, students consistently report that they feel "free" and the experience is "inspiring," "mind-blowing," "educational," "empowering," and "amazing." Yet some teachers' perceptions and experiences are diametrically different—describing the youth-centered setting as "unruly," "ignorant," and "out of control." When a girl used profanity at a poetry slam ("ain't no censorship on my feelings so quite frankly I don't give 2 fucks"), a couple of adults wanted her microphone turned off immediately. I kept the mic on; it was the cause for future debate. I continued to prod, how do we silence students in a place we espouse, at least for a moment, belongs to them? At subsequent literacy seminars, we tried to tackle this question.

Growing Pains

Debates over language use caused some real friction within the group of teachers and PMEs. These controversial conversations also allowed us to go deeper with one another as we wrestled to understand the purpose of school and our role as educators. By fixating on a cuss word sometimes we are remiss to address a teenager's call for help, explained one of the teachers. "But it's just wrong" argued another. A 19-year-old African American PME from the same neighborhood as his students became increasingly frustrated with the critique of language use. He asserted,

> To the adults that are concerned about students' use of explicit language, they are trying to avoid a problem rather than deal with it. The problem is not the profanity. The problem is the source. The source is not the youth. We did not make this world, we were born into it just like every other poet, student, teacher, human being. And in many ways, it's a fucked up world! This is the environment that raised us so what kind of adult criticizes our attempt to release, reshape, and create our own identity? SAYS students cussing is not as profane as an officer pepper-spraying their own college students trying to stand up for their rights, or as profane as a child being murdered by a grown man—Zimmerman—or as profane as the slaughter of Oscar Grant, JFK, MLK, X, Tupac, Diallo . . .! Is cussing a big deal when our students are starving? Where are the priorities? One of the schools I work at with SAYS looks just like a prison. Is cussing more profane than that?

The SAYS mentor used the definition of profane (blasphemous, disrespectful) to redefine its meaning in the lives of his students. The environment, as scholars depict, is constantly in flux, shaping and remaking communication systems and ways of knowing (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000). The perils of the inner-city are profane; according to this PME, literacy just puts words to the pain.

For other teachers, however, it was not the issue of swearing that unnerved them. As students became increasingly vocal and proud of their heritage, as well as critical of systems of oppression, a number of teachers asked the young people to stop sharing their work out loud. Writing for the page was not necessarily viewed as a threat, but as soon as students' social critiques were magnified upon a stage, a few white teachers were offended. One teacher expressed her discontent:

> I am tired of white bashing spoken word poetry. . . . It is funny how white bashing poetry is allowed but if I was to bash people of color, I would be considered a racist. How is it that people who bash whites are NOT also racist? . . . I am given the same educational rights and opportunities, but I am to blame if people of color don't make it in this world and thrive? . . . Not all poetry has to be screamed into a microphone. If you want to learn about yourself, write it down and move forward. The written word can have just as strong of an affect on people.

Even though this teacher was adamant that her students' writing was disrespecting white people, after analyzing the poetry from her class, not one student even mentioned whiteness. Many students, instead, used spoken word performance poetry as an outlet to proclaim a sense of ethnic pride. Nevertheless, this teacher was quite upset about the topics being espoused in the students' poetry. She vacillated about whether to drop out of the program. She continued to participate because of the relationship she had forged with her poet-mentor. By the end of the second year, she wrote her PME a note: "Thank you for being my friend and opening the world up to me. I appreciate your love and advice."

Teacher Empowerment

For professional development to be successful, teachers must not feel judged or chastised for their beliefs or pedagogy. The best tools for empowering students (e.g., listening, loving, empathizing, challenging) are also the best tools for empowering teachers. Unfortunately, some white teachers felt attacked by the SAYS pedagogy. Initially, teachers of color comprised 53% of participants, but by the end of the second year, teachers of color represented 80%. (For a snapshot of the demographics, see Appendix D.) Over the course of the intervention, a number of teachers

dropped out of the program. While there were teachers of color who left the program, it was because they were moved to a different school. In the exit survey, they reported this as their only reason for having to disassociate from the literacy partnership.

White teachers left for other reasons, however. At one literacy seminar, we began to disaggregate school data based upon race, seeking to understand the context for the achievement gap. Within the group of teachers and poet-mentor educators, wounds began to surface. Historical injustices, present-day inequities, and issues of police brutality created severe divisions. An outspoken white English teacher felt that the "discussion of 'the man' and his continued attack on children of color and of poverty" divided the group and had a political tenor that dissipated the central theme of our collaboration: literacy. She explained, "I share the sentiment of several others that it felt very uncomfortable to be a white person in that room … Even though I rarely see myself as a white person anymore, in that room I felt it stronger than ever before" (personal communication, October, 2011). Inevitably, these sentiments prompted her to remove herself from the program. In response to this decision, a veteran African American teacher shook her head in shame. She asked rhetorically, "Why is empowering black and brown young people to write and speak their truth so darn political?" Within the English Department, teachers who had worked side-by-side for decades started to question one another's motives for teaching children of color.

To address these volatile dynamics that continued to surface, I intentionally asked an older white female professor with decades of teaching experience to lead the summer institute. My hope was that this renowned social justice educator, Linda Christensen (2000, 2009), would be able to demonstrate that any person, irrespective of skin color or background, can effectively address race, class, and oppression inside their classrooms. She explains her philosophy: "Bringing student issues into the room does not mean giving up teaching the core ideas and skills of the class; it means using the energy of their connections to drive us through the content" (2000, p. 5). Christensen provided the group with important tools to honor students' home languages while developing them as writers. Her work provided a critical bridge between teachers with opposing politics; the group started to come together.

Significantly, another shift started to take place. At a subsequent PME staff meeting, one of the mentors expressed vehemently, "We need a pedagogy of love for the teachers. We already have it for the students. But we also need it for the teachers!" The mentors took this insight seriously and planned to improve their relationships with the teachers by forging genuine connections—unlikely friendships started to emerge among disparate individuals. As a result, participating teachers began to make the SAYS program their own.

For example, teachers started spitting (reciting their spoken word poetry) alongside their students. A middle school teacher performed:

> I came from back-breaking field work and canned tomatoes. . . . High school tried to break my spirit. But, I kept my head up like I didn't hear it. Higher education let me reach my potential. Associates, bachelors, masters, credential. Now I am the game changer. Letting students know they are in danger. No one gets to put limits on our minds … My purpose in life was decided before I even knew. In the classroom, kids are the puzzle pieces and I am the glue.

In another instance, a special education teacher explained that as she opened up about herself on the page and stage, her students began to do the same. She wrote, "Students were encouraged listening to a teacher perform spoken word for them. My students reported how excited and privileged they were to be my students and represent while I was on stage performing."

The literacy seminars also came more alive with sheer enthusiasm. "Last year everyone was just telling me about SAYS," explained one of the teachers, "but now I really feel like it's a part of me." Another teacher shared,

> When I go to the SAYS meetings it recharges my battery and it puts me in a room with people that have shared ideals . . . The program for me has been really good because it's been that light in my life . . . because I get to go to the meetings and we get to do writing and we get to dialogue and we get to show that we have this collective conscious about what we're trying to get done. And that to me has really [been] inspiring and made my job a lot easier.

This teacher also became a more confident writer and speaker. She continued:

> Because of SAYS I've really learned to love my poetry . . . and in turn loving myself a lot more, and that's why I love this program so much! Cause I feel like when you love yourself and the kids see it and you own what you write and you share this with your kids, then they see it . . . then they start doing it for themselves, too. (teacher interview, 2012)

Clearly, when educators and students work together to excavate literacy among one another, learning becomes more vulnerable, honest, and democratic; in other words, teaching becomes a job of joy and justice (Christensen, 2009).

A retired educator had an epiphany after one of the poetry events. For years he tried to mold young people—believing adamantly that there is one right way to write and perform. But on this particular night, the students' words quieted his paradigm long enough that he started to hear them, even though the language was aggressive, heartfelt, and at times hurtful. He became a student of their wisdom, instead of holding tight to his authority as their teacher. He shared,

> One of the many beautiful things I learned last night was that being an elder doesn't mean giving the youth a blue print on how to do it. We are not their navigation systems placed in their lives to give them step-by-step instructions to their truth. They'll figure their own path out the way we're figuring out ours . . . In truth, what they really need from us is support. They need us to share our wisdom without trying to force them to use it. They need us to occasionally pick them up when they start to feel like they can't go any further. They need us to quietly tell them they can achieve their dreams when the whole world is telling them to turn back and run into the cave of fear with the rest of the sheep. They need us to acknowledge their ascension to the thrones that are rightfully theirs and to step aside when the time is right. Most of all, they need us to stop hating on them for not being us and to love them for who they are.

The revelation that this older teacher had signifies an important shift. Issues of decorum are the symptom of a gap between who students are and who we want them to become. It can be a hard lesson to accept. Young people's destinies do not belong to us—in fact, the future belongs to them.

CONCLUSION

If the young are not initiated into the village, they will burn it down just to feel its warmth. —African Proverb

Many scholars and practitioners espouse that they want students to be literate, analytical, and empowered with a sense of agency to overcome adversity (e.g., Ginwright, Noguera, &

Cammarota, 2006), yet we rarely achieve this model inside the confines of school. Why? Institutional barriers and ineffective policies, personal idiosyncrasies and prejudices, and the overwhelming social-emotional needs of students come together and often collide inside classrooms. Moreover, implicit and explicit judgments within curricula can further alienate students from their own education. The results are all too familiar: disengagement, discipline problems, and a devastating drop-out crisis. As a solution, listening to who students *really* are as a basis for learning is not simply a first step, but rather the journey.

At times, listening to students' complaints can make us feel uncomfortable, especially if they give rise to our own insecurities. As one teacher advocated, write it down, but do not speak it. Silence is more comfortable when the language spoken is not your own. English is not a neutral tool of communication in multicultural settings; rather, it is a gatekeeper by which assimilation and conformity are measured. Unfortunately, this tension becomes magnified when educators enter urban environments without any real understanding of the complexity of students' lives and languages outside of school.

To better understand situated literacies and culturally responsive teaching, my research explored a community-based professional development model. As poet-mentor educators led students through writing workshops, issues of language use and student expression brought to the fore ideological tensions about power, privilege, and propriety in schools and society. For instance, to chastise students for using the n-word in their own writing, but then force them to dissect Mark Twain or William Faulkner is hypocritical. But contradictions like this are not new or surprising. In actuality, they demarcate the American landscape: independence that condones slavery, democracy that serves capitalism, and meritocracy that maintains inequity.

Since all languages (and people) are still not valued equally, my research illuminates the inconsistencies and judgments that occur inside schools when the message just doesn't sound right. According to my findings, classroom decorum is a culturally-based assumption. When advocating for cultural relevancy, then, educators need to come to terms with what that really means. If teachers invite students' literacies into the classroom, it is unfair to punish or condemn students for the kinds of funds of knowledge they bring into the academic setting. In fact, when the disconnect between the community and the classroom is vast, the teacher's role as bridge-builder, code-switcher, and translator becomes all that more critical. But this bridge, code, and translation cannot simply flow in one direction wherein students are mandated to switch from their local lexicon and language styles to Standard English. While this might work for a few kids, simply requiring students to learn how to formulate a thesis statement remains amiss if students are cutting class, dropping out, or being shot. Because of the climate of the inner-city, education must take on new meanings. English Language Arts classrooms, in particular, are fertile ground for a transformative praxis that embodies the needs and worldview(s) of the students under our guidance and, yes, in our care.

In the final analysis, the goal of this article was to complicate the ways we think about culturally responsive English classrooms. I suggest that teachers remain open to the truths students speak while offering them the tools to understand their audience and, furthermore, to code-switch when they deem it necessary and useful. As teachers grapple with educational diversity, my findings underscore the need for an inclusive approach. On the one extreme, educators who penalize students for speaking their truths or censor what is deemed adequate knowledge, subsequently serve the dominant social order. Many of these educators help perpetuate, not close, the achievement gap. On the other extreme, educators who simply ignore and excuse student

mistakes and rationalize ignorance in an effort to be "down," likewise further disenfranchise students. Youth cannot get a job that involves basic literacy if they cannot comprehend and analyze what they read. Allowing underachievement to exist is as morally reprehensible to the profession as its opposite because doing so sustains and even widens the gap. Significantly, both examples perpetuate oppression.

To combat the failures in education, SAYS emphasizes the relational aspect of teaching; the art of human connection and the science of translating knowledge and understanding to the next generation. Spoken word poetry serves as an important doorway into the lives of students and teachers, and it makes the classroom experience more humane. When this type of critical pedagogy is applied to inner-city English classrooms, the mechanics of reading and writing take on a different purpose. English acquisition and mastery are not just the rungs on the ladder of assimilation that help students climb out of their circumstance and simply go to college. That type of brain-drain helps to further disenfranchise, collapse, gentrify, and dismantle urban areas. Instead of educating students to *escape* their hood, critical pedagogy reinforces communities because it is rooted in the cultural practices, needs, and realities of the local area. This relates directly to language acquisition.

Liberatory literacy does not silence nor does it turn off the microphone. Rather, it cuts open reality in a process that is vulnerable and revealing for artist and audience, teacher and student. Embodying what Fisher (2007, 2009) describes as participatory literacy circles, the SAYS classroom spaces become sanctuaries of student and teacher empowerment—revealing, intimidating, and emancipatory. I can hear Audre Lorde (1984) echoing about the possibilities of poetry as a transformative tool for ourselves, our students, and our schools. In closing, she urges:

> Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. . . . We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before. (p. 36)

NOTES

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2. California High School Exit Exam (or CAHSEE) is a requirement for high school graduation in the state of California.

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APPENDIX A: SAYS GUIDELINES

SAYS Guidelines
1 Mic
Loud-N-Proud
Step Up . . . Step Back
Freedom of Speech . . . With Propriety
Create Community . . . No Snitchin
Standard is Yourself: Be You and Do You
Respect . . . Self, Others, and the Space
Patience, Perseverance, Participation, and Above All: *Love*

Below is verbatim how I describe the SAYS Guidelines.

1 Mic: Nas popularized this sentiment, but we use it every time up in here. If one person is speaking, we listen. It's that simple.

Loud-N-Proud: When you do speak, own your words and speak so that we can really hear you. Raise the roof with the power of your voice.

Step Up . . . **Step Back:** If you like to run your mouth like I do, make space for someone else to speak by keeping your mouth shut once in awhile. But if you are shy, we genuinely want to create a space for your voice to be heard. So take a risk and share what you're thinking. Sharing is caring and a closed mouth can't get fed.

Freedom of Speech . . . **With Propriety:** Speak your truth, but remember someone is always listening. Be conscious of what you say and how you say it. Even the grimiest rappers have radio versions these days so recognize that there is a time and a place for everything.

Create Community . . . **No Snitchin:** Whatever is said in this room, stays in this room . . . No playin.

Standard is Yourself: Be You and Do You: Raise the bar for yourself and challenge yourself to do more and be more. And if that fails, let your haters be your motivators.

Respect . . . **Self, Others, and the Space:** Aretha like to sing it, and we are going to try and live it: R-E-S-P-E-C-T/Find out what it means to me/R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

Patience, Perseverance, Participation, and Above All: *Love:* Changing the way we teach and learn is hard work and we need to have patience for one another and for this process. But no matter the hurdles, our perseverance and our participation is our collective power. We will make this road by walking, but please remember that this journey is fortified with love, hope, and a commitment to see you grow. I love you. You might not know it now, but you can see it in my eyes. Real talk: I love you!

Okay, are there any questions, comments, concerns or criticisms? I know y'all want to change at least one of these guidelines. They belong to you, let's talk about it . . .

APPENDIX B: SAYS WRITING ASSIGNMENT SAMPLES

Acceptance Workshop Summary

12 steps to getting to know a deeper part of our selves and each other

Step 1: Put "Acceptance" on the board and ask the students: What comes to mind when you think about Acceptance? [Probes: What does it take to be accepted? What does it take for you accept someone? What does it take to be accepted at school? In your family? Your neighborhood?] Write all responses on the board.

After the board is full, explain that the students created a collective definition of acceptance and a word pallet. Read out loud all of their responses that are on the board.

Step 2: Tell students to pick six responses from the board that resonate with them and write them down on their pieces of paper.

Step 3: Ask them to circle the three that appeal to them the most

Step 4: Ask them to cross those three out

Step 5: Tell participants the challenge is to use the three remaining words/lines in the upcoming free-write exercise.

Step 6: Explain the rules of the free-write [A hand in motion stays in motion—keep writing! Don't think too hard; if your mind wanders, it's okay! Write down your thoughts in real time! For example, if your leg starts to itch, don't itch your leg, write about your leg itching. Ask them if they are ready to begin.]

Step 7: Have participants finish the following sentence and ask them to keep writing using the three words/phrases from Step 5: "I am not who you think I am . . ." Have students write continuously for 3–5 minutes, then call for pencils to be put down.

Step 8: Have students draw a line on their paper to prepare for the next prompt. [Say: Pencils in the air.]

Step 9: Say to students: Write down three specific moments that have made you into the person you are today. What was the year, season, what made this experience so significant? Take us there. Write.

Step 10: Have students draw a line on their paper to prepare for the next prompt. [Say: Pencils in the air.]

Step 11: Say to students: Write down three questions in which the answer is you. Be sure to write the question and your full name for each. For example, Question: Whose mom would sing angels into the room when she put her baby girl to sleep each night? Answer: Vajra Mujiba Watson

Step 12: Go over the SAYS Guidelines and ask participants to share what they wrote. Anyone sharing must read what they wrote verbatim (no paraphrasing) and they must read all three sections all the way through.

I AM FROM Workshop Summary

"I AM FROM" is a poetry exercise created by Linda Christensen that can be done with little advance preparation. Using the stem "I am from" for each stanza, we ask participants to describe familiar items found around their homes, sights, sounds, and smells from their neighborhoods, names of foods and dishes enjoyed at special family gatherings, familiar family sayings, and names of relatives or other important people who are a link to their past, present, and future.

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE SAYS FEEDBACK FORM

Students, the teacher, and the poet-mentor educator (PME) fill out the following form and provide one another with positive feedback. This is a sample of the way we help one another revise our work.

SAYS SPOKEN WORD SESSION: If you got something to SAY? SAYSomething!
1. Name of Speaker:

2. Title of Piece:

3. My favorite lines/ideas:

4. I want to know more about:

5. To make this piece even stronger, I suggest that you . . .

6. Did this piece relate to anything in your own life? If so, what?

7. How did this piece make you feel?

8. On a scale of 1–10, I would give this piece a (circle your rating):

WACK-1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10-WOW!

APPENDIX D
Snapshot of Demographics

Teachers	13 African-American, 11 white, 4 Asian, and 2 Latina; 24 females and 6 males. The participating teachers had a range of teaching experience: 37% reported teaching between 1 and 4 years and 15% reported teaching for 5 to 10 years. Almost half of the teachers reported having more than ten years of experience.
Poet-Mentor Educators	7 African-American males, 4 African-American females, 2 multi-racial females, 1 bi-racial male, and 1 Filipino male, ranging in age from 18 to 46.
Course Breakdown	9 middle school classes, 16 high school classes, and 5 ELA classes at the continuation schools. Of these classes, 18 are traditional ELA courses and 12 are special education/support courses.