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# Getting to What Is: Poetry as a Genre of Access for Multilingual Learners

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# Getting to What Is: Poetry as a Genre of Access for Multilingual Learners

## **Cover Page Footnote**

All authors were equal contributors to this piece.

## Getting to What Is: Poetry as a Genre of Access for Multilingual Learners

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*Little by little parts of my body disappear*

*Before you know it I'll be casper*

*How will anyone know im here?...*

(Anita, study participant, age 15, poem *No Title #1*, punctuation and capitalization as written)

In this excerpt from *No Title #1*, Anita<sup>1</sup> asks: “How will anyone know im here?” Anita is only one of the increasing number of U.S. students who learn English as an additional language and are best served when teachers engage with students across language differences. Anita, like all the other students in this study, was labeled as “failing” in the reading and writing subtests of her state’s major standardized exam, despite the potency of her poetic message excerpted above. Her poem, explicated further in the findings section of this piece, captures an experience shared by many students in this study: feeling voiceless, unacknowledged, and devalued within traditional structures of schooling. Anita’s sense of powerlessness is conveyed through the disappearance of her physical body as she expresses desire for belonging and acceptance in her classroom and her community. As Anita shows us, and as we will argue in this article, the poetic form can be a powerful medium for making the invisible visible, positioning students as efficacious users of language and surfacing aspects of their identity and agency.

Although poetry offers students access to school-based discourses while enabling them to critically examine and reshape these discourses through the lens of their lived realities (Clark & Seider, 2017), such lived experiences are rarely recognized through traditional frameworks for analyzing student writing, especially

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

in K-12 classrooms. Given that more than 4.8 million public school students are learning English as an additional language (National Center for Education Statistics, April 2018), frameworks that identify what these multilingual learners (MLs) *can do* are imperative in order to acknowledge the depth and power of their linguistic repertoires.

In our own teaching, research, and work in teacher education, we find teachers and students hungry for actionable frameworks, which capture the linguistic gifts and dexterity of MLs' writing. Too often, frameworks and assessments are normed on monolingual English speaking populations, then simply "adapted" for MLs (García & Kleifgen, 2010). Instead, we sought to derive a framework grounded in the writing of MLs themselves. In order to achieve this, we analyzed the poetry writing of 15 ninth grade MLs, asking: *How does poetry—read as a specific, situated discourse—reveal linguistic and cultural competence among MLs in an urban, high school classroom?* Tools of discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) revealed a systematic approach for evaluating writing that attended to the breadth of students' language resources and the potentialities in their language use. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to argue for broadening the lenses practitioners use to evaluate students as writers, and in particular the writing of MLs, by offering a discourse analysis-informed framework to support strengths-based appraisals of students' writing.

### **Theoretical Framework: Poetry as a Genre of Access**

The past two decades have witnessed a growing recognition of the positive impact of youth poetry, particularly spoken word poetry, on students' literate identities, self-confidence, and potential for challenging social and political structures (e.g. Weinstein & West, 2012). Research suggests that participating in classroom communities through poetry can leave lasting, identity-affirming impressions on students (Manning, 2016; Muhammad & Gonzalez, 2016). The study of spoken word poetry in school contexts (e.g. Fisher, 2005) has revealed the wide range of complex literacy activities that young people are deeply engaged with outside of the classroom and through which they assert authorship and autonomy. Winn (2013) situates poetry writing within her vision of restorative English Education: a pedagogy of possibilities that relies on literature and writing as tools to seek justice and "radical healing" by creating space for students to be the tellers of their own stories. Similarly, Jocson (2011) argues that the poetry of urban youth "encourages conversations that make explicit the asymmetrical relations of power based on various markers of difference" (p. 155), and notes that poetry as a discursive practice also offers entrée into other literacies (2008). Thus, poetry as a genre of access is a generative pedagogy for MLs, as it is a unique discourse that reflects the varied language practices and experiences they bring to the classroom,

while providing opportunities to voice experience and communicate across a range of socially-valued discursive practices.

Grounded in this long history of poetry as a vehicle for student-centered, critical pedagogy (Perrillo, 2015), we identify poetry as a *genre of access*. We define *genre* as a style of writing marked by particular elements such as tone, diction, form, and function (Brisk, 2015). *Access* is conceptualized as multidirectional: allowing students access to language learning and academic content; allowing teachers access into the lived realities of their students; and allowing reciprocal access to powerful critical literacies necessary for engaging in civic life and society (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Poetry represents a complex and demanding discourse. However, unlike other genres, poetry is uniquely unapologetic, authentic, and visceral, and although some forms of poetry adhere to rules of form and poetic language, poetry pushes the boundaries of what is considered “standard” written English, allowing figurative space for personal meaning making. Poetry liberates, “becom[ing] a place for bilingual students and their teachers to explore a wide range of linguistic and cultural competencies” (Cahnmann, 2006, p. 343), challenging teachers to “learn the art of the multiple languages” that multilingual students speak. Poetry is also adaptive, as it provides “short texts to teach a variety of language arts skills” required in the CCSS (Hahn & Wong, 2015, p. 1). In this way, poetry, as a genre, provides both teacher and student access to voice, culture, context, hurts, anger, conflict, dreams, and desires.

Theorizing poetry as a genre of access shares Lucas and Villegas’ (2011) aim of “helping [MLs] to become confidently bilingual and bicultural, rather than silent or alienated” (p. 58). Poetry becomes a safe textual space for all students to experiment with language, enjoy and learn from breaking language norms, develop unique voices that might otherwise be marginalized, and ascribe meaning to critical experiences in their own lives. However, while poetry is a powerful expressive medium for students to make sense of and represent their life experiences, writing modern poetry is often a confessional act (Rosenthal, 1991), as it requires students to exhibit vulnerable emotions like anger, sadness, embarrassment, and fear. The extent to which students experience poetry as safe and affirming depends on how the teacher facilitates safety in the writing, sharing, and evaluating of poetry. Therefore, without a supportive classroom community and a trusting relationship with a linguistically responsive teacher who values and respects each student, poetry writing may actually foreclose opportunities for cultural exchange and language development. It is this relational aspect that we hope to address through our theorizing of poetry as a genre of access. Our use of the term “access” is thus dually understood: teachers’ access to knowledge about students’ lived experience, and MLs’ access to curriculum content and skills in meaningful ways that affirm linguistic diversity as a resource.

Our work also draws from Hanauer's (2010) research on *poetic identity in a second language*, which refined Ivanič's (1997) notion of the discursive self of the writer to clearly define "the poetic self...as a reflective and linguistically negotiated interpretation of autobiographical information and experiences" (2010, p. 59). Hanauer (2010) offered three categories for exploring poetic identity: analysis of context of the writing, content analysis, and stylistic analysis of literary and linguistic choices, noting that, "these three categories of analysis are closely integrated within the poem itself and cannot be easily disentangled" (p. 64). Later research (Hanauer, 2015) confirmed the significant presence of discernible voice in the poetry of second language learners, noting that "the addition of creative writing genres may allow enhanced ownership of language, the development of a personal style of imagistic and sensory writing and provide the rare experience of actually having a personal, recognizable voice in a second language" (p. 84).

Our study recognizes the richness of poetry as a pedagogy that enables MLs to express agency and identity while offering practitioners a more intentional framework for reading, interpreting, and evaluating poetic discourse. Furthermore, this framework asserts that it is the responsibility of K-12 practitioners to understand the complex and varied ways MLs use language so that they may gain access to the experiences that shape the lives of their students. It is only when educators are deliberate in this endeavor that they are genuine collaborators in a collective struggle to fully engage students in critical literacies and to educate for social justice (Stovall, 2006).

In addition, a focus on poetry deliberately challenges the current policy environment. The CCSS and current accountability measures privilege nonfiction and formulaic writing, limiting time for more creative forms of writing, especially poetry (Kane, et al., 2016). Linguistically and culturally narrow constructions of writing proficiency on standardized writing assessments constrain MLs' demonstration of rich literacy skills in their multiple languages and also handicap teachers' ability to design authentic learning experiences that build on MLs' lived experiences (e.g. Brimi, 2012; Brindley & Schneider, 2002). Furthermore, the narrowing of curriculum associated with high-stakes testing and reform increases teacher-centered instruction (Au, 2012). This actively works against teachers' best efforts to deliver critical literacy instruction and develop "ideological clarity" (Bartolomé, 2004) with respect to the political dimensions of language, literacy, and culture implicit in their work (Macedo, 2003). In a policy context rife with five-paragraph essays, creating space in the curriculum for poetry writing is both subversive and educationally essential.

## Methods

### Study Context

This framework emerged as part of ongoing research about pre-service teachers' cultural competence in developing writers' cultural identity (Friedman & Herrmann, 2014). The larger study utilized an online mentoring platform, through which ninth-grade students submitted writing to pre-service, secondary English education students who served as online writing mentors, with the goal of helping pre-service teachers develop cultural competence while affirming learners' cultural identities. Throughout the entire academic year, students submitted at least two drafts of autobiographies, memoirs, conflict-dialogue journals, expository analyses of selected literature, and different types of poetry. Grounded in a Writer's Workshop approach (e.g. Atwell, 1998), the classroom teacher instructed pre-service teachers to provide feedback that focused on clarifying meaning and context on the first draft and conventions on the second draft.

Upon examining pre-service teacher feedback on students' poems, we noticed that, much like their feedback on student writing in other genres, their responses to student poetry missed opportunities to probe aspects of students' lived experiences reflected in the poems and often provided inadequate or inaccurate responses about students' language use. This trend occurred most often in responding to the writing of MLs. Other research with this cohort of teacher candidates found that, although mentors' coursework stressed the importance of posing authentic questions to support students' autonomy as writers and their interpretive skills, much of mentors' feedback still focused on writing mechanics and improving students' technical proficiency as users of language (Pedersen, 2018). We found similar patterns in their responses to students' poetry.

Often mentors' feedback emphasized grammar, spelling, and other writing conventions rather than the deeper meanings behind students' poems. Sometimes their feedback overpowered students' poetic voices, as when mentors dismissed students' usage of figurative language as "cliché" or rewrote students' poems for them to make them more technically proficient. Although they attempted to use question-posing feedback strategies emphasized in their coursework to support students' autonomy as writers, many of their questions dealt with mechanics and were, in reality, not framed as optional for students to address. Mentors' skills-based assumptions around what it meant to write correctly (Ivanič, 1997) left teacher candidates unable to see the creative potential in students' word choice and kept them at a distance from students lived experiences as communicated through their poems. In their feedback to students, many mentors directly indicated that they found evaluating poetry difficult because it was "so subjective."

Given that one of the goals of the project was to help teachers develop competencies around cultural and linguistic diversity, we saw these feedback trends

as problematic. Thus, we sought to develop a practitioner framework for responding to poetry among MLs derived from the writing of MLs themselves. Rather than imposing the norms and understandings of poetry as practiced with monolingual English-speaking students, we employed a grounded approach, developing this framework based on poetry as written by MLs.

### Participants and Data Sources

Student writing samples were drawn from ninth grade students at a large urban high school in the Northeastern U.S. who had scored “failing” or “needs improvement” in the English Language Arts Reading and Writing Subtests of the state exam. Labeled “transitional” (requiring academic support to matriculate in ninth grade), these students required additional literacy instruction. (See Table 1 for demographics of poets.) In the event under study, writers were asked to compose a poem on any topic and in any poetic form after reading a variety of poetic forms during a poetry unit and after listening to a poetry reading by a local author. Thus, original works of poetry from 15, urban, ninth grade, multilingual learners provided the primary data source. We provide two poems in full within the findings section, excerpts from all poems in Table 2, and the full versions of all of the poems in an Appendix section.

**Table 1.** Participants’ Demographics: Poet, Poem Title, Country of Birth Home Language, and Gender.

| Name   | Title of Poem                       | Country of Birth   | Home Language  | Gender |
|--------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------|
| Eileen | <i>Rib</i>                          | Brazil             | Portuguese     | F      |
| Selen  | <i>My Her</i>                       | Pakistan           | Urdu           | F      |
| Louisa | <i>Falling Apart</i>                | Cape Verde         | Portuguese     | F      |
| Jenny  | <i>The Man That Left</i>            | United States      | Vietnamese     | F      |
| James  | <i>Who Is She Waiting For?</i>      | Haiti              | Haitian-Creole | M      |
| Anita  | <i>No Title #1 (Little by ...)</i>  | Brazil             | Spanish        | F      |
| Sandra | <i>Moving On</i>                    | Dominican Republic | Spanish        | F      |
| Astrid | <i>No Title # 2 (Sad...ashamed)</i> | Brazil             | Portuguese     | F      |



|          |                                      |  |                |   |
|----------|--------------------------------------|--|----------------|---|
| Javier   | <i>Bolsillos</i>                     | Colombia                               | Spanish        | M |
| Clarissa | <i>Broken Family</i>                 | Puerto Rico                            | Spanish        | F |
| Darren   | <i>My Brain Fell Out</i>             | China                                  | Cantonese      | M |
| Esther   | <i>No Title #3<br/>(Superman...)</i> | United States                          | Haitian-Creole | F |
| Vanessa  | <i>Body Parts</i>                    | Dominican<br>Republic                  | Spanish        | F |
| Anna     | <i>Invisible</i>                     | Slovakia                               | Slovak/English | F |
| Maria    | <i>Alone</i>                         | United States<br>(raised in<br>Brazil) | Portuguese     | F |

### Data Analysis

Our analysis was embedded in a phenomenological analysis approach (Broomé, 2011; Giorgi, 2009). Each researcher read each poem in its entirety, then deconstructed each poem into specific, analyzable “meaning units” for further analysis (Broomé, 2011, p. 12). Subsequently, each meaning unit within the poem and each poem in its entirety were analyzed individually using Gee’s (2014) discourse analysis tools—specifically, situated meaning, significance building, connections building, and identities building. Below, we offer a rationale for employing these four tools and explain major themes that emerged, enabling the construction of our practitioner framework for analyzing language output of MLs.

**Situated meaning.** As poetry is a highly figurative genre allowing a range of textual interpretation, the situated meaning tool acknowledges that a text carries broad “meaning potential” (Gee, 2014, p. 157), a range of meanings a particular word or phrase may assume. Situated meaning allows the reader to conceptualize words and phrases with a broad range of potential meaning, including non-traditional meanings, which writers may intentionally assign. This is particularly important in reading the work of MLs, whose rhetorical styles and intended meanings are often misunderstood within largely monolingual educational spaces. Thus, the reader must examine the meaning of a discourse within the context of the writer’s individual, unique range of language tools, rather than from an un-situated perspective that certain syntactic or grammatical forms are “correct” or “incorrect” as vehicles to express meaning.

**Significance building.** The significance building tool explores the ways in which writers build or diminish significance through language. As an expressive

genre, poetry requires the writer to make topical, grammatical, and other linguistic choices to highlight particular aspects of emotion or lived experience. Grounded in short utterances and economy of language, poetry requires writers to make difficult but meaningful choices about including topics and words, paring down a topic, image, or idea to bare bones. The significance building tool allows the reader to ask how language is being used to create or diminish significance, placing emphasis on certain ideas and excluding others by asking how writers use words and grammar to imbue certain factors with relevance and importance.

**Connections building.** At its most fundamental level, writing is about connecting the author and audience. According to Erikson (1993), as adolescents enter into young adulthood, they must negotiate the conflict of intimacy versus isolation, forming or not forming connections with others. Viewing adolescent poetry through the lens of the connections building tool reveals how writers use words and grammar to connect ideas to other ideas, other individuals, and themselves. The connections building tool also establishes power dynamics of the writer as agent *acting upon* or agent *acted on* in their writing.

**Identities building.** The identities building tool is useful because it asks “what socially recognizable identity or identities the writer is trying to enact or to get others to recognize,” (Gee, 2014, p. 116), how the writer’s language positions others, or how language is used to construct identity through and for others? Identity formation is a critical consideration given the developmental trajectory of adolescent writers (Kroger, 2000); it is through language and narrative that adolescents can form and share identity, as “writing is thinking... a kind of self-making or forming. To write is to measure the depth of things, as well as to come to a sense of one’s own depth” (Van Manen, 1989, p. 238). As such, this tool illuminates how adolescents use the medium of poetry to construct identities for themselves and others.

### **Analytical Approach.**

We normed our protocol for using these tools on three participant writing samples. When satisfactory inter-rater agreement was reached, we independently analyzed the remaining samples. We then looked across cases for meaning and patterns, and ultimately engaged in a collaborative process of theme building (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), comparing our findings until we reached consensus about how poetry was functioning as a genre of access for these students. The lens of the original discourse analysis tools brought into focus nine particular features across the body of student work, which we grouped into three thematic categories presented below (See Figure 1). Although these categories are not fixed and occur in overlapping and mutually-informing ways, we provide excerpted examples for

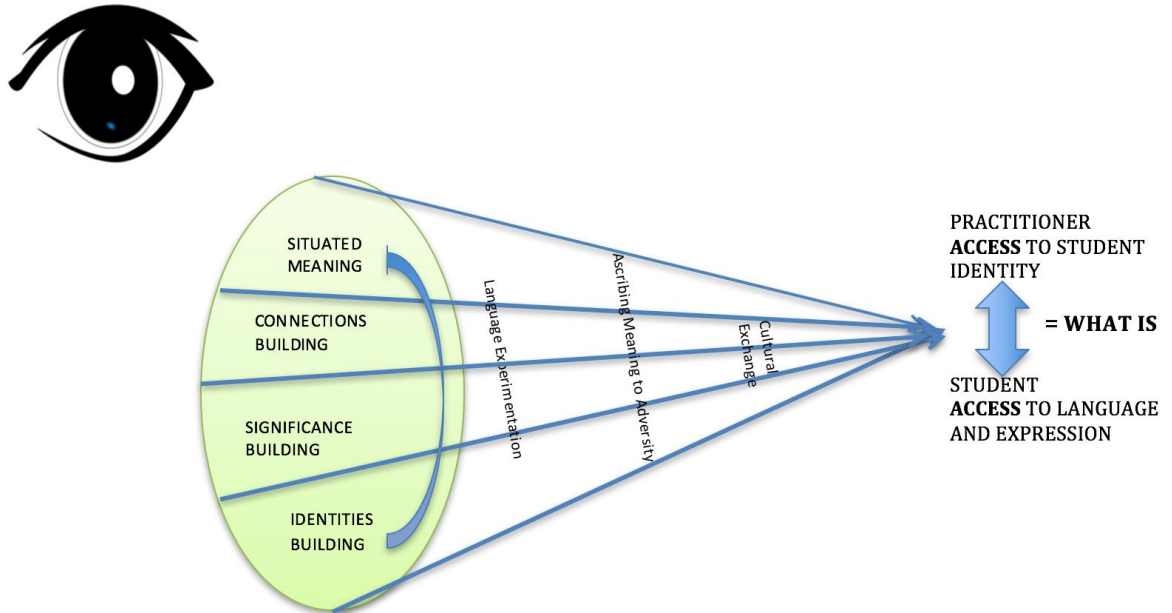
each of the nine features to provide specific illustrations of how each theme was constructed (see Table 2).

### **Getting to What Is: A Framework for Analyzing Discourse with Multilingual Learners**

In the findings below, we illustrate the ways using the four tools as a “practitioner lens” provided greater access not only to how MLs demonstrate linguistic competence, but also to how they experiment with language to ascribe meaning to adversity and to engage in cultural exchange. This framework, depicted in Figure 1, invites readers into authentic discourse with student writers, challenging practitioners to expand their own situated understandings of language and the potential meaning of student work. Rather than deficit-oriented language ideologies (McBee Orzulak, 2015) that focus on *What is not* present in student writing, the framework enables practitioners to better identify both the linguistic and experiential realities of MLs as resources to enhance classroom instruction. This opens up possibilities to focus on *What is* present in the student writing. We characterize *What is not* as approaches that focus on lexical and grammatical “correctness” to define what constitutes a demonstration of linguistic competence—an emphasis on standardized form over content, creativity, or metalinguistic awareness. Additionally, *What is not* circumscribes student identities to fit a monolingual, monocultural framework of what constitutes academic success and legitimate forms of expression. In contrast, a framework that views the work of MLs as a specific, situated discourse—in this case, situated meaning, connection, significance, and identities built through poetry—more readily allows practitioners a window into *What is*. Below, we outline how our framework served as a lens to highlight the unique and impactful way that this group of MLs demonstrated linguistic competence through language experimentation in order to engage in cultural exchange and ascribe meaning to adversity.

**Figure 1.** Getting to *What is*: A Practitioner Framework for Analyzing the Language Output of Multilingual Learners

**PRACTITIONER LENS**



**Findings and Analyses**

Our analysis revealed cross-case incidence of nine features that contributed to three thematic categories: (1) language experimentation; (2) ascribing meaning to adversity; and (3) cultural exchange. Each thematic category subsumed three features or subcategories (see Table 2). The discourse analysis tools worked in combination to generate a nuanced understanding of the writer as adolescent and the writer as poet, getting to *What is*. In what follows, we first explain each of these categories and their corresponding features in detail, with representative excerpts from students’ poems. In the next section, we share an analysis of poems by Javier and Anita to illustrate how the writers exemplified these categories. Finally, we contrast this analysis with feedback given to these focal students by teacher mentors within a discussion of the possible affordances of approaching student writing through our framework. Throughout this paper, excerpts from student poems are presented “sic,” as written, to maintain the authenticity of students’ contributions. What readers may interpret as misspellings or missing accents/punctuation are original to the students’ work.

**Table 2.** Thematic Category, Sub-categories, and Examples from Poems

| Thematic Category              | Sub-category             | Examples from Poems  |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Language Experimentation       | Rhetorical Flexibility   | “tears my heart with joy” ( <i>My Her</i> )<br>“Making her loose my faith on me.” ( <i>Falling Apart</i> )<br>“Without any balance on myself” ( <i>Rib</i> )   |
|                                | Lexical Flexibility      | “with a smile on every song” ( <i>Moving On</i> )<br>“seeking at the horizon” ( <i>Who Is She Waiting For?</i> )<br>“Blind like a 150-mile mph runaway truck in the midnight hours” ( <i>Invisible</i> )   |
|                                | Translanguaging          | “Bolsillos...espanol....latino...marron” ( <i>Bolsillos</i> )  |
| Ascribing Meaning To Adversity | Figurative Space         | “Blood dripped like tears of a hungry vampire” ( <i>Rib</i> )<br>“When there is sorrow it rains and when it rains the chains rust./ The rusted chains become weak, they begin to fall apart” ( <i>Broken Family</i> )<br>“I hoped my body would find it (brain) /Before it got squashed like /A oversized bug” ( <i>My Brain Fell Out</i> )            |
|                                | Expressions of Adversity | “And found my ribcage/On my bed” ( <i>Rib</i> )<br>“So I went to put my socks on/And my thumbs fell off.” ( <i>Body Parts</i> )<br>“She was my hero, / And will always be.” ( <i>My Her</i> )  |
|                                | Enabling Language        | “Made my dark and sorrow tears flow down my pink cheeks.” ( <i>The Man That Left</i> )<br>“the woman who sings unfamiliar gospels / And scrubs toilets for a living” ( <i>Invisible</i> )<br>“He changes like cars in traffic lanes, / And transforms into / A star. ( <i>No Title #3</i> )  |
| Cultural Exchange              | Third Space              | “Asking forgiveness for my sins / Crying with my heart down.” ( <i>Who Is She Waiting For?</i> )<br>“I can see the king of death, dancing over my head / I am going to die” ( <i>Falling Apart</i> )<br>“In her memory she mainly remembered how neglective her/ Mother’s hands came to be year after year /Going on about her life.” ( <i>Alone</i> ) |
|                                | Cultural Exclusion       | “Is it me against the world? /Or the world against me?” ( <i>No Title #2</i> )<br>“Before you know it I’ll be casper” ( <i>No Title #1</i> )<br>“We have / To move on, because / You and me is just / Very wrong.” ( <i>Moving On</i> )  |
|                                | Rewriting Identities     | “The thought of the man that left me and my mom / Made my dark and sorrow tears flow down my pink cheeks/ Now the hope and sadness is dead” ( <i>The Man That Left</i> )<br>“I yell to tell my classmates that im here” ( <i>No Title #1</i> )   |

### Language Experimentation

**Rhetorical flexibility.** Poetry is a rhetorically flexible genre where aberrant structure and syntax are not only permitted, but encouraged, allowing a broader use of linguistic tools. Structures that may have been “corrected” as “errors” in other

genres (e.g. unconventional spelling, punctuation, tense, and preposition use; confusions of homonyms; syntactic inversion) provide safe space for conversation, learning, negotiating meaning, teacher-student dialogue, and language-risk-taking behaviors. For example, in Selen's *My Her*, "tears my heart with joy" works as "to separate" or to "create tears."

**Lexical flexibility.** As poetry is a genre of figurative language, the act of finding the right word is as characteristic of poetry as it is to MLs' everyday experiences of navigating multiple languages and cultures, which we define as lexical flexibility. As recent research demonstrates that the cognitive correlates of bilingualism include increased metalinguistic awareness (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010; Jiménez, et al., 2015), we argue that this feature puts MLs and lifelong English speakers on more equal footing, having to search for words while learning new structures and language conventions through poetry. For example, in Eileen's *Rib*, "angel haired arteries/were zigzagging/through the bones" and "I use a pair/ Of two flesh scissors/ and open my chest" create appropriate visceral imagery while drawing on lexical flexibility.

**Translanguaging.** By engaging in translanguaging (García & Wei, 2013) writers draw on their full linguistic repertoires in their writing. This was exemplified through Javier's use of Spanish vocabulary, such as "marron" and "bolsillos." This intentional use of a broad range of linguistic resources creates "a whole greater than the sum of its parts" of the two component languages (Hopewell, 2011, p. 616) serving to affirm and capitalize upon students' existing language resources and contributing to the distinctive voice of the piece. Readers should note that these multilingual writers often break convention in their use of an additional language (e.g. "marron" for *marrón*) in the same way they do with English. This suggests that the potential for lexical and rhetorical flexibility captured in poetry writing can support language experimentation and literacy development across students' various languages and reflects how the genre of poetry transcends linguistic and cultural divides.

Thus, within the broader category of language experimentation, poets appropriate these forms to situate meaning, as these devices generate broad "meaning potential," or a range of possible interpretations of the students' work (Gee, 2014, p. 157). Simple forms of poetry such as free verse "can give students a framework for expressing ideas that are meaningful to them, without the constraints of grammatical accuracy" (Finch, 2003, p. 4). This is not to say that poetry is not bounded by rules of form, but probing inverted phrases or seemingly "incorrect" words and homonyms in MLs' poetry is essential to discern more accurately the writer's purpose and meaning.

### Ascribing Meaning to Adversity

**Figurative space.** Poetry, an emotive genre, encourages students to use figurative language to express feelings, apprehensions, and experiences. Thus, poetry creates a space for openness where students can play with symbolic language to represent the reality they know and perceive. In some instances, figurative space permits allusions to popular culture, such as vampire metaphors (reminiscent of a teen novel popular at the time of the study) like “Blood dripped / Like tears of a / Hungry vampire / Searching for food” (Eileen’s *Rib*).

**Adversity expressions.** For this research, adversity events are grounded in an ecological perspective (Weaver, 1996) and include such issues as abandonment, death of a critical caregiver, racism, and exposure to micro-aggressions, among many other examples. Consistent with Manning’s (2016) conceptualization of poetry as a space for students’ “rewriting struggles as strength” (p. 288), our findings demonstrated that poetic devices allow writers to highlight lived experiences—such as childhood memories, abandonment, peer pressure, and difficult experiences with shame—as embodied adversity, contrasted with consistent undercurrents of hope. Describing her experience in *Broken Family* Clarissa writes, “When there is sorrow it rains and when it rains the chains rust. / The rusted chains become weak, they begin to fall apart.” In *My Her* Eileen describes her deceased grandmother, who had been her primary caregiver: “She is like my baby blue blanket, / When I was a little girl. / The blanket that absorbs the cold / During winter”.

**Enabling language.** Notably, incidents of students’ ascribing meaning to adversity frequently overlap with expressions of creativity through breaking language norms. Thus, poetry acts as a linguistically-accessible genre offering linguistic flexibility that allows learners to ascribe meaning to personal adversity more readily. Esther discusses her father’s two identities: “A man as cold as a dead person’s corpse” and “a star” in *No Title #2* while Clarissa despairs her father’s abandonment, “The thought of the man that left me and my mom / Made my dark and sorrow tears flow down my pink cheeks” (*The Man That Left*).

In poetry, all forms of language are fair game, as this genre permits space to play with symbolism and other literary devices and express experiences of adversity, struggles, and conflicts in masked or blatant language. This enables writers to situate experiences, ascribe significance to these experiences, and create metaphorical “wholes” that connect ideas and people, personas that give students agency in authoring both their identities and experiences.

### Cultural Exchange

**Third space.** As poetry encourages students to draw on lived experiences, the data reveal mobilization of literacy as a third space (Moje et al., 2004), opening the door for students to bring lived experience into the classroom by means of literacy practices as well as traditions, beliefs, values, and conflicts. Louisa, for example, brings to her writing a personal experience of guilt about lying to her mother: “Realizing the grave sin that I did. / Remembering the lie I told my mother,” Louisa writes, “Then all of a sudden my head falls off /...Asking forgiveness for my sins / Crying with my heart down” (*Falling Apart*).

**Cultural exclusion.** Many of the students in the sample engaged in dialogue with a perceived dominant, monolingual “American” culture, demonstrating this through statements tied to a sense of being misread (literally and figuratively), misunderstood, misjudged, and ignored. Poetry permits an authentic and emotional dialogue about marginalization as writers describe feelings of anonymity and insignificance. As Anita laments, “Before you know it I’ll be casper” and “Through their eyes I can see their fear / Afraid that I might hurt them” (*No Title #1*).

**Rewriting identities.** Poems offer a venue for students to rewrite stereotypes of youth, particularly youth as viewed by a misperceiving and uninformed “mainstream” culture that differentiates youth in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and language. Poets challenge readers’ existing *What is not* interpretation, authentically articulating *What is*: “Did I do something wrong? /... I try and try / I fight and try to beat it/ No eyes on me /No attention given to me” (Astrid, *No Title #2*) resounds a pleading “Look at me—see who I really am—I matter!”

In this way, poetry writing offers a space for MLs to situate themselves in conversation with the reader, a conversation from which they are often excluded due to misread cues, deficit thinking, and cultural differences. Poetry showcases students’ growing identities as writers, thinkers, and navigators in an exclusionary context, offering a literacy framework that instantiates their connections to words, ideas, meaning, peers, and the *other*, poignantly illustrating identity, purpose, and value as writers and humans.

### Close Read of *Bolsillos* and *No Title #1*

Below, we present a chart that identifies sub-categories and a full analysis of two selected pieces: “Bolsillos” and “No Title #1” to exemplify our framework in action. Recalling that these writers, Javier and Anita, were deemed “failing” by the state’s comprehensive academic proficiency exam, we demonstrate how our framework more readily highlights the writers’ rich and dynamic linguistic competencies. Within this particular set of poems, the framework helped to reveal



nuanced and complex expressions of language experimentation, ascribing meaning to adversity, and cultural exchange (see Figure 1). Importantly, our analysis is not meant to suggest a definitive interpretation of the “true” nature of the poems, which can be known only to the author and should be left open to interpretations by a range of readers. Rather, we seek to illustrate the multilayered cultural and linguistic complexities that can be revealed when student work is treated as intentional and authorial and how a discourse analytic framework can facilitate such analysis. For clarity, we include alphanumeric references (i.e. Theme 1, 1a, etc.) to reference specific sections of Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

**Bolsillos  
by Javier**

You See me a Young latino boy  
 Marron in da face espanol in the tone  
 You think I carry the leaves  
 In my pocket that, when lit  
 Can burn my future away  
 Puff by puff  
 But instead  
 I carry the pencil  
 I will use to draw my dreams  
 The keys I will use to open doors  
 You think I carry the shank  
 That will slice my life  
 But  
 I carry the rosary  
 Which I use to pray  
 For my mother, my friends and mentors  
 In my pocket I carry Hope.

**Table 3.** *Bolsillos*: Illustrative Examples and Analysis

| Thematic Category               | Sub-category                   | Examples from <i>Bolsillos</i>   |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| (1)<br>Language Experimentation | (1a)<br>Rhetorical Flexibility | “You” and “See,”<br>lower case “I” in latino; upper case “Y” in Young; lower case “m” in me<br>“Marron in da face espanol in the tone”     |
|                                 | (1b)<br>Lexical Flexibility    | Consistent use of “I-You” form to note relationship between the poet and the reader<br>“Marron (sic) in da face espanol (sic) in the tone” |

|   |                                     |  |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|
|   |                                     | repetition of “You think” and “You See,” and “But” or “But” and “But instead” as stand-alone lines<br>“Leaves” instead of “weed”   |
|   | (1c)<br>Translanguaging             | “Bolsillos,” “Marron,” “español” and “latino”  |
| (2)<br>Ascribing<br>Meaning<br>To Adversity | (2a)<br>Figurative<br>Space         | Plays with and extends symbolic language to play with the reader’s prejudice and misperception:<br>“Bolsillos” instead of “Pockets”; “leaves” instead of less poetic weed) that “can burn...puff by puff”; “pencil...to draw dreams”; “shank that will slice my life”; “keys...to open doors”; and “rosary” used to pray and symbol<br>“Hope”  |
|   | (2b)<br>Expressions of<br>Adversity | Establishes racial and ethnic adversity of prejudice writer has experienced:<br>“You vs. me”; “You see” and “You think” vs. <i>What is</i> Misperception vs. truth<br>References to drugs (leaves) and prison (shank)  |
|   | (2c)<br>Enabling<br>Language        | Phrasing, use of pronouns and commands, and symbolism via poetry permits an “in da face” exposition and deconstruction of perceived prejudice.   |
| (3)<br>Cultural<br>Exchange                 | (3a)<br>Third<br>Space              | Space for poet to be authentic about who he is and honest about what he thinks you think he is:<br>“You See” and “You think” followed by “But”<br>“Leaves”: part of his adolescent (and our adult) world but he is not a participant; “Shank”: associations with violence, but he is not a participant; “Rosary”: part of the Catholic world and the world of payer and hope, of which he is a participant |
|   | (3b)<br>Cultural<br>Exclusion       | Identifies stereotypes used to characterize youth, urban, race, language ability, and ethnicity that are racist, ageist, and classist to portray exclusion experiences   |
|   | (3c)<br>Rewriting<br>Identities     | Challenges reader’s and society’s prejudices and assumptions to get to <i>What is</i> to assure that “What is done” is just, right, and good   |

Born in Colombia and fluent in Spanish, Javier exemplifies language experimentation (Theme 1), first through translanguaging (1c). His title, *Bolsillos* (which translates to *Pockets* in English), challenges the reader’s beliefs and assumptions about what is hidden in his pockets—misperceived identity, essentially, *What is not*—and rewrites his identity to explain what truly lies inside: *What is*. Integrating rhetorical and lexical flexibility (1a and 1b), Javier plays with punctuation, suggesting significance by capitalizing “You” and “See.” He situates the *reader as other* and their *appraisal as subjective*. The lower case “m” in “me”

and “I” in “latino” relay a sense of diminishment, while “Young” and “boy” emphasize the role youth plays in his exclusion.

“Marron in da face espanol in the tone” continues language experimentation. *Marron* could have several meanings: *Marrón* in Spanish and *marron* in French mean brown; *marron* is a Spanish chestnut noted for its rich, vanilla flavor; in France it is a large European chestnut used in cooking but historically means runaway; and in Italian *marone* is a racial pejorative. All meanings, intentional or not, work in this poem. “Marron in da face” suggests “brown” skinned; yet, runaway can suggest that he has left his country of origin, and used pejoratively, *marone* is how he perceives the *other* “See[s]” him.

Javier further exemplifies his ability to incorporate a variety of linguistic discourses with the use of “da” in the place of “the,” a characteristic of African American Vernacular English. “[I]n da face” can mean blatantly showing someone up, which elaborates the *What is not—What is* theme. Poetry permits him to be “in da face” of and to challenge the readers’ assumptions and beliefs. “[E]spanol in the tone” connects to the poet’s identity and continues to break norms of conventional Spanish spelling, (“espanol” for *español*). Being “marron” speaks for one or many: African American, Malay, Portuguese, Spanish or another race or ethnicity, but he clarifies that he is “espanol,” Spanish “in tone,” another word that refers to shade of color, the strength, pitch, quality or source of the sound of one’s voice, or the attitude with which a writer treats his subject.

Ascribing meaning to adversity (Theme 2), Javier builds connections through figurative space (2a), adversity expressions (2b), and enabling language (2c), which afford him agency in confronting this adversity. “*You think I carry the leaves/In my pocket that, when lit/Can burn my future away*” creates a figurative space (2a) where Javier can draw on symbolic language to personify prejudice through his interlocutor. Expressing this adversity (2b) Javier generalizes his audience to “You” and attributes to them again the misperception that he is other than what he truly is. Based on what “You think” he carries in his *bolsillos*--“leaves” that are for smoking marijuana or tobacco—a substance that can literally or figuratively “burn [his] future away...Puff by puff.” He then counters “Puff by puff” through enabling language (2c), exercising his ability to contradict (literally *speak against*) these expectations. He parries with another “But instead” noting again what truly lies in his pockets—a “pencil” he uses “to draw [his] dreams” through drawing or writing perhaps, or listing the subjects, books, and goals that lead to fulfilling his dreams. In his pockets are “The keys [he] will use to open doors”—symbolic keys that will perhaps unlock the assumptions, biases, and adversities he encounters.

Through cultural exchange (Theme 3), Javier reemphasizes the cultural exclusion (3b) he has experienced in order to set up a juxtaposition by which to

rewrite his identity (3c). He returns to “You think,” as he builds significance by attributing stereotypic characteristics to false identities he suspects the reader possesses. Repeating language, he responds to the cultural exclusion he knows from experience. A “shank” that “will slice [his] life” and lead to his violent demise is *not* in his pocket. “But” rather he carries “the rosary,” a string of beads used in Roman Catholic prayer, with each bead symbolizing virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity. “But” reorients the reader to *What is* and not what “You think.” He carries “the rosary” with which he “Pray[s] for [his] mother, [his] friends, and mentors” — people who have meaning in his life, a life full of meaning and intentionality and purpose, a life full of “Hope” with a capital “H” signifying strength, optimism, confidence, and success. In his *bolsillos* he carries “Hope.” In navigating this cultural exchange, Javier creates a third space (3a): an arena in which he is the author of a complex identity, traversing multiple cultures and sets of expectations.

**No Title #1**  
**by Anita**

Little by little parts of my body disappear  
 Before you know it I'll be casper  
 How will anyone know im here?  
 I yell to let my classmates know my presence is here.  
 Through their eyes I can see their fear  
 Afraid that I might hurt them  
 I try yelling to them  
 Telling them im harmless

**Table 4.** *No Title #1*: Illustrative Examples and Analysis

| Thematic Category                  | Sub-category                      | Examples from <i>No Title #1</i>   |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| (1)<br>Language<br>Experimentation | (1a)<br>Rhetorical<br>Flexibility | Lower case i in im—contraction is absent<br>Lower case c in casper<br>No punctuation except for one “?”  |
|                                    | (1b)<br>Lexical<br>Flexibility    | “I yell to let my classmates know my presence is here”<br>uses end rhyme “disappear,” “here,” and “fear”<br>repeats “here” and repeats “them”<br>Internal rhyme: “yelling” and “telling” |
|                                    | (1c)<br>Translanguaging           | No examples are found in this poem.  |

|   |                                     |  |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| (2)<br>Ascribing<br>Meaning<br>To Adversity | (2a)<br>Figurative<br>Space         | Plays with and extends symbolic language of disappearing physically and socially: “Little by little parts of my body disappear”; “Before you know it I’ll be casper”<br>Uses other senses to make her “presence” known”<br>“yell,” “yelling,” “tell” and “telling” |
|   | (2b)<br>Expressions of<br>Adversity | Establishes social and emotional adversity of prejudice writer has experienced:<br>“Through their eyes I can see their fear”<br>“...I’ll be casper”<br>“im here”<br>“afraid I might hurt them.”<br>“Telling them im harmless”                                      |
|   | (2c)<br>Enabling<br>Language        | Phrasing, use of “im” repetition of reaching out by “telling and yelling, reference to a popular culture ghost, and extended symbol of social, emotional, and physical disappearance via poetry permits Anita to discuss the serious marginalization she feels.    |
| (3)<br>Cultural<br>Exchange                 | (3a)<br>Third<br>Space              | Space for Anita to tell her readers how she feels, how she thinks others see or do not see her, do not hear her, and how she is being excluded. In many ways, her poetry is a cry for help.  |
|   | (3b)<br>Cultural<br>Exclusion       | Repeats phrases that characterize exclusion and omission, disenfranchisement, and finally elimination:<br>“I’ll be casper,” “im here,” and “im harmless”   |
|   | (3c)<br>Rewriting<br>Identities     | Anita wants the reader to know that she is very cognizant, very present, and very aware of her place in this classroom and in this society.  |

Although born in Brazil, where Portuguese is the dominant language, Anita’s home language is Spanish. While she does not draw on her translingual resources in this poem, she nonetheless exemplifies language experimentation (Theme 1) through rhetorical flexibility (1a) and lexical flexibility (1b). She does this primarily by means of punctuation that suggests a growing feeling of isolation. She repeats “im” with a lowercase “i” with the absence of the apostrophe. Contrasting with her more conventional usage of “I” and “I’ll” further reinforces the poignant and personal reduction of “I am” to “im.” Repeated urgings of “im here,” and the absence of end punctuation except a “?”, a single plea, “How will anyone know im here?,” further intensifies the insinuation of isolation and diminishment.

Anita extends this diminishment as she intertwines ascribing meaning to adversity (Theme 2) with her attempts to initiate cultural exchange within the community of her classmates (Theme 3). She writes, “Before you know it I’ll be

casper” (with a lower case “c”). Casper is a use of figurative space (2a) to reference an animated character that emerged first from a 1930s children’s book *The Friendly Ghost* and has appeared in numerous film iterations as recently as 2012. He is supposedly “friendly” and apparent to those around him, unlike Anita’s casper who attempts to enact enabling language (2c) by “yelling” and “telling” her classmates and readers that she is harmless and not to be feared. Thus, Anita’s feelings of cultural exclusion (3b) become palpable. Her expressions of adversity (2b) reference disappearing body parts. Her ignored “presence,” with denoted through “casper.” Her urgings that she is not to be feared move beyond symbolism to blatant declaration: I am here! I will not harm you! Hear me! See me!

The third space (3a) created in her writing is an invitation for “anyone” who is willing to listen to her. Further interrogation might reveal that her language, her immigrant status, and her differences contribute to her feelings of cultural exclusion and separation and others’ seemingly intentional or perhaps unintentional marginalization and exclusion from the classroom community. That she does not title her poem strongly intimates that there is no need to title work when no one even notices that the writer exists. More importantly, however, is that this space permits her an arena to articulate - and thus an opportunity to rewrite - her identity (3c) and to be recognized as a voice that desires, demands, and deserves access, understanding, and response.

### **Discussion: Mentor Feedback**

The linguistic richness and cultural significance of Javier’s and Anita’s writing, when read through our framework, stands at odds with the feedback provided by the teacher candidates acting as students’ online writing mentors. One of Anita’s mentors, Molly, struggled to respond to the content of Anita’s poem, focusing instead on the technical aspects of Anita’s language use: “My only suggestion would be to maybe think of a different word for the end of either line 3 or line 4. You used ‘here’ twice. Maybe ‘near’ could work for one of them?” Likewise, Samantha, Anita’s other mentor, failed to see her reference to Casper as a reflection of her cultural insight or her developing skills with the literary device of extended metaphor. In her feedback to Anita, she said, “I think that you should change the word ‘casper’ to a different word. Try thinking of a word that more people can imagine... like ‘ghost.’” While Javier’s mentor, Allan, praised his poem, it was on vague terms: “Your poem contains very good imagery and has a good flow to it.” Reflecting a lack of linguistic awareness, he continued, “My Spanish is really bad so I was wondering if you could tell me what bolsillos is in english?” Only Elliot, Javier’s other mentor, was able to articulate the full weight of Javier’s poem as a reflection of his racial identity:

I like how you chose to tackle such a tough issue in the prejudices that many people have. It is certainly difficult to talk and write about, but you have done this beautifully. What really works is the contrast that you create between what many people expect of you because of your race... The way you use “you” in the poem to address those who think this way about you is very effective. It jumps off of the page at the reader and really makes the reader think... it makes them think about whether or not they have ever held these same prejudices. Any poem that makes the reader question himself is doing its job.

Here, Elliot’s feedback captures the power of poetry as a medium for accessing students’ lived experiences and as a tool for challenging readers’ personal biases. It also contrasts with the feedback of other mentors, suggesting the need for our framework as an analytical tool to help teachers surface the deeper meanings behind students’ poetry.

In addition to enabling readers to understand the content of students’ writing, applying this framework provides opportunities for the student and teacher to move from viewing language use as arbitrary and accidental to understanding it as purposeful and intentional. As Ryan, one of our mentor participants, explained to his mentee,

The beautiful thing about poetry is that it can be whatever you want it to... One of the most important things I know about poetry is that, because it’s so short, every word and symbol you write needs to be there for a reason. Look at a poem as a challenge to say as much as you can in as little space as you can. Remember you’re saying a lot more than just those eight lines.

Rather than assuming that the student’s unconventional word choice is an error (which it may well be), the reader/teacher should ask or least wonder about the choice, doing so in a way that encourages the student to think about language, purpose, meaning, and wordplay. As Goodrich (2015) notes, an “error” or “failure” is actually a gift, as the lessons learned from it can have great worth. Furthermore, as participants’ greatest risk-taking in language experimentation overlapped with their most probing articulations of adversity, inquiry into “errors” may also give rise to conversations about adversity illustrated in students’ poetry, creating more access for the teacher by offering glimpses into the poets’ lives, ambitions, struggles, dreams, contexts, and cultures.

Perhaps most notably, reading Javier’s or Anita’s poems through our framework contradicts their label as “failing” by a state’s interpretation of linguistic and academic competence. While we recognize that our interpretations of these poems are speculative, we offer these readings as alternatives to skills-based approaches to writing response (Ivanič, 1997) favored by both students’ mentors and the state assessments which positioned these students as “failing.” Such a focus

on technical writing skills forecloses teachers' opportunities to connect with students as intentional, agentive authors. Instead, our framework seeks to open up interpretive possibilities – asking *What if?* as a way to more clearly access *What is*. It affords students the same legitimate authorship and competency in making choices about language use that we might accord to published writers, positioning them with power and voice. When applied to poetry, this framework enables readers to acknowledge more justly and creatively the linguistic resources students such as Javier and Anita bring to the classroom. It could be seen as a first step, prior to dialogue with students about their writing, to understand more concretely their intentionality and to communicate how their language choices might be perceived by readers. Such a framework leads practitioners – both pre-service and veterans - to *What is* by providing a foundation for writing assessment that encourages rich pedagogical opportunities, allowing all students to learn and thrive.

### **Implications**

The current policy climate all but mandates that teachers cultivate forms of discourse which are easily measured (e.g. Brimi, 2012; Brindley & Schneider, 2002), forms that generally do not prioritize students' lived realities or identities (Liou, Marsh, & Antrop-González, 2017). Creative writing in general, and poetry particularly, offer a rich alternative to the formulaic structure of standardized writing prompts (Jocson, 2008). As Patel (2016) has argued, literacy and learning offer possibilities for transgressive resistance—the always-fugitive dynamic of a dialectical relationship with power structures working to quash this resistance. However, MLs are too often compelled toward remedial, linguistically-assimilative pedagogies that do not allow them to fully engage in the critical literacies necessary for these transformative practices (Bacon, 2017). In light of these realities, this framework is deliberately transgressive. Instead of mitigating the influence of individual students' language forms and cultures, our framework treats language and culture as dynamic and inseparable from writerly voice and agency. Building from prior work on critical literacies, our framework maintains that language is communicative rather than technical, and power laden rather than a mechanical (Macedo, 2003). Such framing subverts a hierarchy of language instruction assuming that a threshold of technical competence must be mastered before students can effectively express themselves.

For teachers, poetry can reveal the many identities of the writer, offering entrée for practitioners to better know and care for the whole student. We therefore build upon of previous poetic frameworks, such as Hanauer's (2010) emphasis on context, content analysis, and stylistic analysis, to reaffirm the discursive relationships between reader and writer, teacher and student. Our framework recognizes that the meaning-making process depends on the lenses, experiences,



and interpretive skills practitioners bring to the text. The point remains, as Javier reminds us, that there is more than what appears at first glance. This framework does not provide easy answers, as it is generative only in as much as it enables teacher and student to co-construct meaning from experiences rendered in the poetic form. Mentor Catherine expressed this idea powerfully in her feedback on her mentee's poem:

So, we don't know each other. And I don't even know your name, or what kind of student you are. Which, of course, means that to critique your creative writing is a challenge. Because the act of writing is so personal, it takes a fairly intimate relationship to judge it well. I hope my comments have helped; but as always, if they don't, forget 'em. I'm just here to make you think about, expand, and even justify your work.

In applying this framework, we suspect—and to a great extent, hope—that it will complicate practitioners' understandings of their students and their own identities as educators. It is only through dissonance that we learn and progress.

This study also has direct implications for teacher educators working to support linguistically aware teacher candidates. Our framework offers new teachers a point of reference from which they may come to see language diversity as an asset, even as cultural capital (Yosso, 2005), rather than focusing attention on correcting language "errors." This focus enables more linguistically responsive instruction, ideological clarity, cultural competence, and care for the entire person, laying the foundation for a critical, additive approach for multilingual education (Nieto, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999, 2005). This framework has the potential to provide teachers needed insight into their students' strengths and talents as writers and may challenge teachers' preconceived notions about their students' capacities in a variety of literacies (Stovall, 2006).

These implications must be considered in light of our study's limitations. The small sample size bounds generalizability to a particular instructional context. Additional data sources, such as student and teacher interviews or observations of poetry lessons, would illuminate the value of poetry instruction within the culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. Without these perspectives, some meaning gleaned from students' writing remains speculative. As our initial study was not designed to investigate how teachers responded to this framework, we are currently engaged in additional research to determine the utility of this framework in writing teacher education. Other future studies might investigate the possibility of teaching students this framework directly to guide them in their own writing, or using it to confer with students about their writing. We also wonder about the value of this framework beyond teaching poetry, and call for further exploration of how application of discourse analysis could lend to the creation of pedagogical tools for building students' language skills across genres and disciplines. We see great

potential here for such tools to illuminate students' writing as identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011), challenging traditional definitions of literacy and creating spaces for multiple literacies that reflect the full range of students' linguistic, cultural, and experiential assets.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, we illustrated how the use of our practitioner framework made visible MLs' literary deftness and ability to engage with and through the written word. We also highlighted the potential for poetry writing to offer teachers critical insight into MLs' strengths and talents. These are qualities that may challenge preconceived notions about a student's capacity to become proficient in a variety of literacies. Poetry emerged as a pedagogy enabling writers to teach the teacher, allowing practitioners to identify and clarify personal beliefs about literacy, culture, achievement, race, and class in order to mobilize transformative practices toward academic opportunity for all students. By opening the doors of language through poetry and providing the creative space to engage and interact, teachers and students may work together to bridge cultural and linguistic divides, negotiate academic discourses, and forge authentic connections. Affirming students' unique identities and relationships to and with language fosters belongingness, self-efficacy, and engagement across the curriculum. It is by starting with *What is* and valuing the cultural and linguistic dimensions that make our students who they are that we may enable their access to all facets of school and life.

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**Editor's Note:** The authors are equal collaborators on this project and deserve co-authorial recognition.

**Appendix: Full Student Poems**

(Excluding poems already fully included in manuscript body)

*Note: All poems are included "sic," as written***Rib****By Eileen**

I woke up this morning  
 And found my ribcage  
 On my bed.  
 The sore,  
 Blue pale veins  
 And angel haired arteries  
 Were zigzagging  
 Through the  
 Bones  
 How am I going  
 To school today  
 Without any  
 Balance on myself?  
 I asked myself.  
 I had to do  
 Something about this crazy  
 Situation.  
 I used a pair  
 Of two flesh scissors  
 And open my chest.  
 Blood dripped  
 Like tears of a  
 Hungry vampire  
 Searching for food.

**My Her****By Selen**

She is like my baby blue blanket,  
 When I was a little girl.  
 The blanket that absorbs the cold  
 During winter.  
 When ever I'm cold,  
 She makes hot cocoa to keep me warm.  
 Always holding me like a pen on a paper,  
 And putting on funny faces when I'm sad.  
 Just a click of her heels against  
 The floor  
 Tears my heart with joy.  
 She shares tears when I feel ill,  
 And prays for me to regain  
 My strenght.  
 When I got a huge cut

On my knee,  
 She ran like  
 A spinning wheel to get the first aid box.  
 Always pick me up when I fall,  
 With her gigantic hands.  
 She was my hero,  
 And will always be.

**Falling Apart**  
**By Louisa**

I woke up in the morning,  
 Glancing myself at the mirror  
 Jumping behind with a horror look  
 Nothing to say, nothing to do,  
 Just kept staring in the mirror  
 For I found myself old.  
 White hair, rough skin, all crippled  
 Making me useless for ever.  
 Trying to search my youthfulness  
 Running here and there, thinking of death  
 I can see the king of death, dancing over my head  
 Making me realize that, "I am going to die"  
 I knew it was a punishment for my former sins.  
 Trying to escape from death  
 My body starts giving up,  
 My own legs fall apart as if they are deserting me  
 My crippled body do not have the strenght  
 To pull me, I sit on my waist  
 Watching the football game that was played  
 By my own legs, I stop my legs  
 Telling them to take me to a safe place  
 Away from the fear of death.  
 Not far away my hands fall apart  
 My hands and my legs trying to search a  
 Place to hide.  
 As they found a place to hide  
 My eye balls fell down  
 Making me blind  
 Frightened and afraid, I feel something on my hand  
 Realizing it was a fancy pencil  
 That I stole from my best friend,  
 Making her sad forever.  
 Realizing the grave sin that I did,  
 Remembering the lie I told to my mother  
 Making her loose my faith on me.  
 Trying to fix my eyess  
 Who were playing, in total darkness.  
 Then all of a sudden my head falls of  
 Leaving me with an old, rotten body  
 Seeing God and death on the two ends,  
 Asking forgiveness for my sins  
 Crying with my heart down.

Suddenly I feel someone pushing me frantically  
Not seeing anyone  
Finding that it was morning  
And late for school.  
For it was only a dream  
But, like a real life experience of death.

**The Man That Left**  
**By Jenny**

I remembered how I first held it  
How I held it to my nose just to smell the sweet scent of it  
It's once red color has faded to brown  
His hugs used to bring me hope  
The hope of him returning  
The scent of his cologne has brought me happy memories of the past  
The day I woke up with the rose was a nightmare  
It was attached to a note that he left me  
Each day the petals began to fall off  
The thought of the man that left me and my mom  
Made my dark and sorrow tears flow down my pink cheeks  
Now the hope and happiness is dead

**Who Is She Waiting For?**  
**By James**

Everyday, when the sun is about to rise  
I would see her through the window  
Of my bedroom in a ball gown  
Hands crossed, all dressed up  
Standing in the doorway  
Seeking at the horizon  
She stood there, in her blank front yard  
Wearing a frown in her face  
As if waiting for someone  
And I've always wondered:  
Who is she waiting for?

**Moving On**  
**By Sandra**

When I try to forget  
When I try to let go  
Your always there  
Stopping me from saying no.

When I try to move on  
When I try to go far  
Your always there  
Saying "I need you" so and on.



You know that we have  
To forget, and we have  
To let go. We have  
To move on, because  
You and me is just  
Very wrong.

I'll never forget you because  
What I feel for you is strong.  
I might be mistaken and won't  
Realize it until dawn.

I'll always remember you  
With a smile on every song.  
You know that I love you  
So I'll see you later on.

**No Title #2**  
**By Astrid**

Sad, ashamed, shocked and embraced  
No where to go, no where to stay  
Where do I go?  
Where do I stay/No one cares  
No one is here with me  
Why?  
Did I do something wrong?  
Did I?  
Is it just me against the world?  
Or the world against me?  
Was it meant to be like this?  
I think and think?  
I try and try  
I fight it and try to beat it  
No eyes on me  
No attention given to me  
Is it me against the world?  
Or the world against me?

**Broken Family**  
**By Clarissa**

Chains. Strength, force, safety  
Each link holding on to each other tightly  
Unity  
Without one link the next link has nothing to grasp to for strength and force  
Without a link there exists no chain  
The more links there are the more strength the chain has  
A powerful chain obtains more uses  
When there is sorrow it rains and when it rains the chains rust.  
The rusted chains become weak, they begin to fall apart  
They begin to become useless, something with no value, no existence.

**My Brain Fell Out****By Darren**

As I was walking,  
 It landed in the middle of  
 The hot sunbaked sidewalk,  
 Feet landed everywhere around my brain,  
 A guy in sneakers only narrowly missed  
 And than a woman wearing boots saw it  
 And walked around it just in time,  
 I hoped my body would find it  
 Before it got squashed like  
 A oversized bug,  
 My brain panicked and started twitching  
 And willed my body to hurry,  
 When my body spotted my brain  
 And moved right over my brain,  
 It tripped

**No Title #3****By Esther**

Superman that's what he is.  
 A man who is 5 feet and some change,  
 But seems as tall as the peek of Mount Everest on a clear day.  
 Brave  
 A branch fragile from the touch of a premature baby,  
 Shaking like a 100 year old mans body  
 Wouldn't stop him from jumping on it.  
 He says "I have everything I need,  
 A wife, two beautiful daughters and I know how to play basketball."  
 He is simple.  
 The purity in water,  
 The answer to the math problem  
 2+2 after learning it all your life.  
 Two identities  
 A side everyone sees  
 A man as cold as a dead person's corpses  
 Stuck in the ground  
 Below ice cold snow.  
 But then...  
 He changes like cars in traffic lanes,  
 And transforms into  
 A star.

**Body Parts****By Vanessa**

I went to put my earring on  
 And I couldn't find my ear.

So I checked the other one  
 And it wasn't there.  
 I didn't want to go crazy,  
 So I went to put my socks on  
 And my thumbs fell off.  
 I went to wash the blood off  
 And there was no water.  
 I yelled to my mom, I needed some help  
 But then my jaw locked shut.  
 She tried to get to help  
 Landing on her waist because her legs weren't there.  
 I start to sweat and I jump up with the sound of my  
 Alarm clock  
 So I put my earrings on  
 And I put my socks on  
 And go brush my teeth  
 And there is my mom with my breakfast ready  
 Standing on her long, strong legs.

**Invisible**  
**By Anna**

Vividness of neon green.  
 Blind like a 150-mile mph runaway truck in the midnight hours.  
 Even the cleverest can fall to the joker's scheme.  
 Without a formal education, some may see her as easy prey.  
 Only to find that she is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

In line stands a woman who dedicates her time to her family.  
 Sacrificing her desires for the want of her children.  
 Constantly losing the battle between give and take.

For those who don't know her, see gray peeking out from darkness,  
 And then, through a peephole comes the woman who sings unfamiliar gospels  
 And scrubs toilets for a living.  
 Beyond the green and gray, she's a hard working, under appreciated person.

**Alone**  
**By Maria**

She pulls up in her white car.  
 Then enters the cfee house,  
 Like she does every night.  
 When she walks in she spots a lot  
 Of people, sitting together.

They see her expressions and her appearance  
 They see an overwhelmed and independent woman,  
 Since she has a tool belt and oil stains on her clothes.

On her way out of the restroom  
 She pulls out her silver watch and notices the two

T/W

Minutes she has left to kill, before getting ready to go  
To work and having to deal with that demanding boss  
Of hers.

As she sits at the table alone waiting for her everyday  
Drink to arrive, her coffee. She then looks up and see's the  
Map, the map she see's eveyday that also reminds her of  
The 35 mile drives to go and see her family.

Then observing a woman at the coffe house  
Surrounded by four hyper kids, reminded her of the way  
Her mom used to point and yell whenever her and her  
Siblings got loud and disruptive .

In her memory she mainly remembered how neglective her  
Mother's hands came to be year after year  
Going on about her life.  
All alone.

Suddenly her coffee appears in her hands  
She pays the waiter  
And before getting up to leave  
She takes a deep breath,looks around once more  
And walks out.

Her two minutes were up  
Too bad it felt like two second.