

Poetry Beyond the Page: A Case for Spoken Word Poetry in Florida's Secondary Classrooms

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**Abstract**

Florida's B.E.S.T. Standards, Florida's most recent K-12 educational standards to promote literacy, lack the rising art of Spoken Word Poetry. However, Florida's Department of Education should integrate Spoken Word into Florida's Secondary curriculum. Spoken Word Poetry, by its definition, holds researched benefits that align with the B.E.S.T. Standard's poetry recommendations and literacy-centered goals. In light of such benefits, Florida's Department of Education should consider various Spoken Word poets and poems to include in Florida's Secondary Curriculum, as well as explore the resources and integration methods included in this thesis for both teachers and students.

### Poetry Beyond the Page

My first taste of Spoken Word Poetry was in 2017 when my Rhetoric teacher told us we would be writing a Spoken Word poem and I thought, “what is Spoken Word Poetry?” We had dug into poetry such as *The Odyssey*, William Wordsworth’s work, and even Simon and Garfunkel’s “Sound of Silence,” but never had I heard of Spoken Word Poetry. Once I performed my first piece, however, and my school asked me to keep performing for the guests who visited my little private school, I realized the beauty a poem could bring when brought to life in the form of speech. That first poem of mine, “Daily Purpose,” is now a piece I carry in my heart to share at a moment’s notice. “Hey,” it says. “Life is more than mundane bad days.”

As time passed, and I went to college, I kept writing. On a three-hour car ride between Pennsylvania and Virginia, my pencil flew across a page, and I submitted the result to an on-campus open mic night. The evening came, and I stood behind a microphone, voice quavering. I greeted the crowd in my soft, light voice. Then, my poetry shot out like a cannon. Confidence overtook me; I could say anything, and it didn’t matter what people thought. I had never expressed my mind that way before. I felt an empowerment of my voice that made me believe for the first time in my life that one day I could speak my mind anytime, anywhere. And when a Spoken Word Poetry club sprang up on my campus, COVID-19 could not stop us from meeting up virtually, empowering one another’s stories and visions for a better world, and building a sense of community strong enough for love and confrontation.

Now, as that club’s president, I am all the more passionate about sharing my vision of a strong community centered around strong craftsmanship. I have watched Spoken Word Poetry challenge perspectives, forge inseparable bonds between young adults, and empower people to

share their stories for mutual growth. The following research is a study with a radical vision: what if Spoken Word Poetry became mainstream in public education for Florida, my home state? What if Florida teachers enabled boys and girls to share their hope for America; to realize that they, too, can speak with confidence, encourage others, and write words worthy of presidential inaugurations and super bowls? What if Spoken Word Poetry swept up Florida school communities, bridging teacher-student connections and changing lives for the better? What if such a vision is possible for every school in Florida, regardless of funding, racial makeup, or even language barriers? This is the potential of Spoken Word Poetry.

### **What is Spoken Word Poetry?**

Spoken Word Poetry is a literary form consisting of verse, rhyme, and meter in an oral form which is written to be performed. According to Denise Newfield and Raphael D'Abdon, oral poetry creates a variety of "meaning-making combinations" which "question[n] the dominance of the written word" by virtue of its oral form (Multimodal Genre, 521). In other words, Spoken Word Poetry creates meaning both visually and orally, in which a performer's vocal inflections, pace of speech, body language, pitch, and even dress all work together to establish meaning through a performed poem. A Spoken Word Poem, then, is not simply a written poem that is memorized and performed. Rather, Spoken Word Poetry is crafted primarily with the meaning-making conventions of speech and performance in mind.

Spoken Word Poetry can fall under two overarching categories, both mentioned by Luka Lesson during a published interview with Daniel Xerri: Performance Poetry and Slam Poetry (Xerri, 20). The former, Performance Poetry, is poetry written to be performed in front of a camera or live audience, the visual aspects and audial aspects of performance considered in the

writing process as contributing to the making of meaning in a poem. Such poetry is unique, in that it can accommodate one or more performers.

Slam Poetry is similar to Performance Poetry in type but different in its context: Slam Poetry is more competitive, as live audiences judge the aesthetic, performance, and message of both stand-alone pieces, group pieces, or poetry battles between two or more poets. Slam poetry is popular among youth, and, as Korina Joscon mentions in her article “Poetry in a New Race Era,” occurs in large events such as the Annual Brave New Voices (BNV) International Youth Poetry Slam Festival of Los Angeles, California (New Race Era, 154). While Slam Poetry plays an important role in various parts of America, this article will focus on Performance Poetry and its researched benefits in the classroom. I will refer to Performance Poetry, however, as Spoken Word Poetry for two reasons: Firstly, in some contexts, the terms “Spoken Word Poetry” and “Performance Poetry” are interchangeable (Poetry does educate 20). Secondly, according to Newfield and D’Abdon, “*Spoken Word Poetry* is an umbrella term that captures...a wide variety of performance-oriented poetic style (black arts movement, jazz poetry, modernist poetry...” (521), so the overarching term “Spoken Word Poetry” puts into consideration the many genres and forms of Spoken Word Poetry which could be considered for inclusion in Florida’s curriculum.

### **Performance Poetry, Meaning-Making, and a Drama Class**

Imagine, for a moment, a drama teacher named Mr. Anderson. Before Mr. Anderson, etched into the fabric of past curriculum, are the great plays of educational history: *Death of A Salesman*, *The Crucible*, *Peter Pan*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* - all of these and more are prime options for his classroom. He makes his selections, weeding through monologues until he finds the ones he best understands, and eagerly awaits the arrival of his class. As the high school

students pour into the empty room, placing their backpacks against the wall, Mr. Anderson calls out for their attention and welcomes them to class. Then, for the first lesson, Mr. Anderson asks them to pull the chairs off their stacks and set up the space like a traditional classroom.

Somewhat confused, they oblige. As they settle into the makeshift rows of desks, Mr. Anderson cracks open a copy of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, reads a section, and delivers an incredible lecture on figurative language and hypothetical meaning. Then, the class leaves. Certainly, Mr. Anderson has done his work well!

But as the school year goes on, Mr. Anderson never moves the chairs and tables. The students never perform. In fact, the students hardly read aloud. Instead, they spend the next two semesters with their backs hunched over textbooks. They read, they recite, and they discuss the meanings of monologue and dialogues. They see no plays, nor act as performers. And as the vocabulary of drama washes over them, hardly to be recalled again, those students leave Mr. Anderson's class with any passion for drama extinguished. *Well, no wonder! A seasoned drama teacher might say. They never performed! They never heard the anguish of Romeo and Juliet; never flew with Wendy Darling!* And that teacher would be right! Drama, as an art form, is written to be performed. Part of a play's meaning lies in its presentation and performance. Would a drama teacher only *read* Shakespeare? Reading the script alone can be valuable, but most drama teachers would agree that a play truly comes alive when its written aspects are recognized *alongside* its aspects of performance: its audio, visual, even tactile, and sensory aspects.

Poetry, unfortunately, is in this very state in many classrooms today. Just as the drama example above limits plays to their scripts, disregarding their auidial and performative aspects, so is poetry limited to its written forms in many classrooms today. According to Newfield and

D'Abdon, "the present conceptions of poetry in formal education are narrow and restricted" (Multimodal Genre, 511). Such a restriction lies in the impression of poetry as contained to the intricacies of written words, limiting not only the form of poetry to writing, but the taste preference of poetry to those intellectuals in pursuit of deep, complex meaning in written literature. When poetry is kept to the written word alone, it functions like a "monomodal" genre; in other words, like a genre that has only one form (511). This is like the class described above that only read plays. However, poetry is truly "multimodal," having a variety of forms that reach far beyond the written word, including the forms stated above: Performance Poetry and Slam Poetry. And if Spoken Word Poetry can introduce the multimodal nature of the genre of poetry, why not consider supplementing classic poetry teaching with Spoken Word Poetry, so that poetry is presented in classrooms in its multiple forms?

### **Florida's B.E.S.T. Standards: Its Poetry Selection, Standards, and Opportunities**

Florida's Governor, DeSantis, tasked Commissioner Corcoran to create a set of educational standards for English Language Arts (ELA) in Florida (DOE 5). In January of 2019, the Commissioner released a set of standards called Florida's Benchmarks for Excellent Student Thinking (B.E.S.T.) (Department of Education (DOE), 1, 5). The B.E.S.T. Standards place four requirements on the teaching of poetry between ninth and twelfth grade (DOE 14). To meet these standards, Florida's Department of Education recommends the poets and poems compiled in Table 1 for Secondary students, stating that "[these are] not intended to be exhaustive but to serve as a foundation for educators when selecting additional rich and meaningful texts" (151). In examining these recommendations, Table 1 also includes in parenthesis for each poem or poet the form of poetry that author used, the race or origin of the poet, and whether the poet is male or



female (unless the poet is listed as female, that poet is male). Additionally, the asterisk next to the poet “Lawrence Ferlinghetti” indicates that he lived and published works past the year 1975. (DOE 104-42, poetryfoundation.org). Even though Florida released the B.E.S.T. Standards two years ago, they only standardized the work of one poet who published poetry within the last fifty years (poetry foundation.org) Also, each recommendation is confined to the written word - no form of Spoken Word Poetry is present. While the recommendations listed are not exhaustive, the lack of contemporary poetry and limitation in form of poetry is worth noting, since Florida teachers will likely rely heavily on these recommendations as they build curricula for their students.

The four main requirements in the B.E.S.T. standards for teaching poetry in high school should be considered alongside Table 1: “Analyze the characters, structures, and themes of epic poetry,” “Analyze how authors create multiple layers of meaning and/or ambiguity in a poem,” “Analyze ways in which poetry reflects the themes and issues of its time period,” and “Evaluate works of major poets in their historical context” (DOE 14). The first standard, set up for ninth graders, is sufficient in that it prepares students to understand the way poets conveyed meaning through epic poetry, especially in the structure of the poems. However, epic poetry comes not from cultures of the written word, but cultures of oral poetry. Johnathan L. Ready, in his study titled “The textualization of Homeric Epics by Means of Dictation,” hypothesizes the idea, among other theories, that epic poetry reached the modern era when poets allowed scribes to transcribe their words (1-2). While the means of epic poetry coming to the written word is debated, what is understood by Homerists – those who study Homer’s epic poetry – is that epic poems were the product of “an active oral tradition,” meaning that epic poems were intended, in

Table 1: List of Poetry in Florida's B.E.S.T. Standards, by Grade and Type:

9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>
<i>Beowulf</i> (Epic)	“Constantly Risking Absurdity” by Lawrence Ferlinghetti (Written, British)*	“Nature” by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Written, New England)	The poetry of Robert Burns (Written, Scottish)
<i>The Aeneid</i> (Epic)	“Not Waving but Drowning” by Stevie Smith (Written, American, Female)	“O Captain, My Captain” by Walt Whitman (Written, American)	The Poetry of Countee Cullen (Written, Black)
<i>The Epic of Gilgamesh</i> (Epic)	“Ozymandias” by Percy Brysshe Shelley (Written, British)	“The Chimney Sweepers” and poems from <i>Songs of Innocence</i> and <i>Songs of Experience</i> by William Blake (Anthology, English)	The Poetry of Emily Dickinson (Written, American, Female)
<i>The Illiad</i> (Epic)	“Thanatopsis” by William Cullen Bryant (Written, American)	“We Wear the Mask” by Paul Dunbar (Written, American, Black)	The Poetry of John Donne (Written, British)
<i>The Odyssey</i> (Epic)	“The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats (Written, Anglo-Saxon)	<i>Are Women People?</i> by Alice Miller (Anthology, New Zealand, Female)	The Poetry of Robert Frost (Written, American)
	<i>Prometheus Unbound</i> by Percy Brysshe Shelley (Drama, British)	<i>Book of Psalms</i> by various (Anthology, Jewish)	The Poetry of Langston Hughes (Written, American, Black)
		<i>Canterbury Tales</i> (Prologue and Selected Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer (Anthology, English)	The Poetry of Percy Bysse Shelley (Written, British)
		<i>Dante's Inferno</i> by Dante Alighieri (Book, Italian)	The Poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay (Written, American, Female)
			The Poetry of Phillis Wheatley (Witten, Black, Female)

their conception, to be spoken aloud (1). Ruth Scodel, in her book *Listening to Homer: Tradition, Narrative, and Audience*, defines epic poetry as a medium of performance, describing such poems as “composition-in-performance” (3). Rather than memorizing a written poem, oral poetic tradition involved a performer who “recombine[d]” the core narrative elements of an epic tale into a form suitable to the audience of the poem (1, 3). Epic poetry is traditionally crafted and perfected through performance, rather than crafted in writing and delivered through performance. A classroom that allowed its students to re-tell pieces of epic poetry such as the *Illiad* and *Odyssey* would be one step closer to considering characters, structure, and themes as they were portrayed in traditional epic poetry. The written forms of poems held in classrooms today reflect the oral tradition and should be taught with such oral tradition in mind. Florida teachers in the ninth grade have an ideal opportunity, as they meet their poetry standard, to introduce and discuss the performance side of epic poetry.

The second standard for tenth graders asks students to analyze the meaning and ambiguity authors create in their poetry. Using texts with complex meanings, this standard builds on the previous 4<sup>th</sup>-grade standard, in which students “[d]escribe the impact of various poetic forms on meaning and style,” and the 7<sup>th</sup>-grade standard, in which students “Analyze the impact of various poetic forms on meaning and style” (DOE 14). Among all the B.E.S.T. Standards, poetry is the only genre that receives the task of sorting out its “ambiguity,” as if ambiguity is one of the main features of the poetry genre alone. In her article “Rediscovering the Joy of Poetry,” Katherine Keil quotes poet Muriel Rukeyser, who said Americans “have been taught to fear poetry, to have a distaste for it and to resist it” (95). Why is this the case? The perception of poetry promoted by curriculum is one of an emotion-based, meaning-rich art form. Keeping to

the written poetry of the classic poets, teachers tend to present poetry as if each line requires a rigorous safari of meaning among an aesthetic jungle of words and nuisances. The general impression of poetry becomes a form of literature that is artfully ambiguous - in other words, students believe that “good” and/or “classic” poetry is written poetry that lacks direct, understandable meaning. As Newfield and D’Abdon put it, poetry is often considered by students “too difficult, elitist, or remote from the concerns of everyday life[.]” (Newfield and D’Abdon 511). One cannot deny the complexity of poetry in many cases. However, if students are presented with increasingly ambiguous poems as they progress through secondary school and are taught as if such poetry is at their grade level, then they could associate the artistic value of a poem with its ability to layer meaning in a complex manner and/or create ambiguity.

Now, it is important to note that written poetry has the great advantage of being open to analysis because of its form - in other words, one can sit down and analyze a written poem, word for word and line for line, but one cannot analyze, in the same critical way, a poem that he or she has heard once. In this sense, written poetry has the capacity in its form to portray intricate meaning which requires analysis. However, when students study poetry in its written form and view poetry as a genre marked by its complexities waiting to be analyzed, students could think that simple poems are for children and hard poems are for grown adults. Such a mindset, shared implicitly through curriculum, could - and does - dissuade students from a passion for poetry. Thus, Katherine Keil quotes Janice Willms’ idea from *The Western Journal of Medicine* that many students think, ““Whatever has poetry to do with me? ...I find it inaccessible, I do not understand it”” (Rediscovering the Joy qtd. 95). Students who are asked to struggle through ambiguous poetry are less inclined to be connected to texts, and because of this, are less likely to

pursue meeting the poetry standards. However, in Daniel Xerri's summary of his interview with Luka Lesson, he states that poetry education should consider "broadening the curriculum's conception of poetry by enabling young people to watch and perform spoken word poetry..." (Xerri 19). Spoken Word Poetry takes advantage of its oral form to produce poems with meaning-making attainable to the ear, rather than attainable through the analysis of the written word. Since performance poems will be heard and not read, the poet performing must craft poetry that is artistically intricate and yet understandable to a listening, rather than a reading, audience. Written poetry is accessible because its form - being written on paper - allows students to perform in-depth analysis to find meaning if an in-depth analysis is required to find meaning. But Spoken Word Poetry is accessible in a different form. The audial form of Spoken Word does not provide an opportunity for in-depth textual analysis but presents meaning to be understood through critical listening, a form of analysis conducted solely through hearing. Since a student of Spoken Word performance cannot analyze the word choice of a performance by reading, all analysis and meaning are done through listening, a medium designed for a more direct - hearing-based - sharing of meaning. Thus, Spoken Word Poetry is "accessible" in that it can share meaning accessible through listening alone, unlike much of the written poetry standardized in Florida classrooms today.

If included at the tenth-grade level, Spoken Word Poetry can give students confidence in their ability to dissect meaning. "If I can understand this performance poetry," they might think, "then I can try to tackle harder poems, like those written ones!" Because Spoken Word Poetry portrays meaning in an "accessible" manner, students can build a foundation and impression of poetry as an art form which artistically shares meaning, rather than one that artistically *and* (for

the most part) ambiguously portrays meaning. Such a foundation could be used to scaffold student analysis of written poetry. For example, students could study the way a Spoken Word poem creates meaning attainable to the ear, practice their own ability to hear meaning portrayed through figurative language tools, and become better prepared for the complexities of poems written with high levels of ambiguity. While, of course, not every written poem is characterized by high levels of ambiguity, the form of Spoken Word can aid students in their ability to understand the meaning in language they hear, a skill which is useful as students seek to dissect meaning in written language.

The next standard, for eleventh-grade students, requires that students. “Analyze ways in which poetry reflects the themes and issues of its time period” (DOE 14). According to the poetry recommendations in Table 1 and biographies of each poet from [poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org), all but one poet published their works before 1975 ([poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org)). In the spirit of integration, building connections between separate but related subjects, this standard creates a unique opportunity for teachers to present history and its themes alongside poetry. Such an opportunity should not be wasted. In an age fraught with social media, students are passionate about discussing current events. Spoken Word Poetry creates a prime space for such discussions to occur. For example, Button Poetry posted a video in 2016 titled “Lost Voices,” a poem in which poets Darius Simpson and Scout Bostley discuss both feminism and racism. They state, in discussing feminism, “Never will I turn away an ally, but when a man speaks on my behalf, that only proves my point. Movements are driven by passion, not by asserting you’re self-dominant by a world that already puts you there. You speak to know pain you only fathom because we told you it was there” (“Lost Voices”). Simpson and Bostley’s Spoken Word poem, as it reaches this

part of its conclusion, reflects issues which are prevalent in contemporary conversation, such as microaggressions and sexism. Teachers could allow students to hear such poems and promote engagement in the same conversations about history which students already participate in on social media, especially as technology makes such conversations more and more common. Such usage of poetry is not unique or limited to Spoken Word Poetry. In fact, one of the B.E.S.T. standard's listed anthologies, *Are Women People?* by Anne Miller, also discusses feminism. Mary Chapman, in her *Oxford Journal* article "'Are Women People?': Alice Duer Miller's Poetry and Politics," comments on Alice Miller's discussion of feminism in the poem, "Recollections of Anti-suffrage Speeches Heard in Early Childhood (with apologies to Wordsworth)":

There was a time when platform, stage, and hall  
Speeches, at least in public view,  
Did me appall  
They were to me taboo,  
Not women's sphere at all.  
It is not now as once it was; I roam  
Where'er I may  
By night or day  
To preach to Man that Woman's place is home. (Chapman 61)

Just like the Spoken Word poem "Lost Voices" discusses contemporary issues, so does Miller's poem reflect the sentiments of women in the anti-suffrage movement, especially in the idea that "Woman's place is home" (qtd. "AWP" sec. 3:1). Students who study this poem are engaging with feminist and anti-feminist ideas and theories through their analysis. Both poems, Miller's poem and "Lost Voices," allow students to "Analyze the ways in which poetry reflects the themes and issues of this time period" (DOE 14). However, Spoken Word Poetry has the advantage of promoting the discussion of real-time issues with which the students are familiar. If

teachers included Spoken Word Poems into their curriculum, they could show students how poetry can 1), address contemporary issues and themes by presenting Spoken Word poems that discuss current world issues and theme and then 2), show how, in turn, written poetry from other times in history also addresses issues and themes contemporary to its time period. Spoken Word poems, alongside written poems, could encourage students to see and analyze poetry as an art form that has contributed to historical, political, and social conversations.

The final Secondary poetry standard for twelfth graders asks that students “evaluate works of major poets in their historical context” (DOE 14). Such a standard, which covers poets such as Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, and Langston Hughes (see Table 1), is vital to a student’s understanding of the poets common in mainstream education. Students who are not familiar with such prominent poets could struggle as they take standardized tests for higher-level education, such as the SAT and the GRE, which require knowledge of such poets. While removing such poets from the Florida curriculum would not be fitting to prepare students within the common poetic education of America, supplementing such poets and works with modern Spoken Word Artists allows students to better engage with subject area content. Tara Seale, in her article for *The English Journal* titled “Why Teach Poetry,” asserts that “Historically, the poet has provided a prominent and passionate voice, but if poetry is minimized in the classroom, students may never understand the influence of its inspirational voice” (12). As discussed previously, poetry is minimized when it is studied monomodally (only studied in written form), categorized in students’ minds for its ambiguity (as poetry is commonly perceived and taught), and disregarded for its benefits (such as its engagement with contemporary issues and themes). But poetry is also minimized when its rising poets within contemporary history are not studied. For example,



Amanda Gorman, National Youth Poet Laureate of 2017, read her Inaugural poem “The Hill We Climb” for the 2021 Inauguration. Her piece captures the struggle and unity prominent in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (poets.org). Just as students could study individual Spoken Word Poems to better analyze the themes and issues of history in written poems, so could students study major contemporary poets such as Amanda Gorman. For example, students could watch a Spoken Word Artist, such as Amanda Gorman, discuss a local civic issue, then draw comparisons between that artist’s dialogue with historical context and the dialogue between Emily Dickinson’s poetry and her historical context. Luka Lesson presents a similar idea in his interview, when he says of Shakespeare, “[He] was doing then what spoken word and rap do now, fully owning his language and using it in whatever way he felt it...” (Xerri, qtd. 19). Spoken Word Poetry and the works of major poets demonstrate the relatable aspects of poetry which are often lost in the minds of students who only study written poetry. If students can study and learn to relate to their contemporary major poets, then they will be more open to relating to famous historical poets who are likewise discussing major elements of their historical contexts.

Florida’s B.E.S.T. standards and poetry recommendations, as examined, leave opportunities for Spoken Word Poetry to support student learning. Rather than removing the written poetry and poets necessary for student success in mainstream ELA education, Florida’s B.E.S.T. Standards should consider supplementing their teaching with Spoken Word Poetry. Through such poems, Florida teachers could include more contemporary poetry, explore oral forms of meaning-making, increase student passion in finding meaning in complex texts, better understand how a poem connects to the themes and issues of its period, and increase student engagement with the historical contexts of major poets and their works.

### **The Aims of Florida's B.E.S.T. Standards**

Commissioner Corcoran, by the executive order of Florida's Governor DeSantis, created the B.E.S.T Standards to meet a variety of educational goals for the State of Florida. Within the high school poetry standards alone, Spoken Word Poetry has the potential to enhance student learning in both poetic textual analysis and the evaluation of famous poets. The list below is a condensed form of the overarching aims instilled in the introduction to Florida's B.E.S.T.

Standards:

*Aim 1:* Instill respect for literary works using complex, rich, meaningful texts

*Aim 2:* Educate the hearts of children with an education that is enlightening, noble, and good

*Aim 3:* Make Florida the most literate state through a focus on fluency

*Aim 4:* Prepare students for jobs and civic participation (DOE 5-9)

Meaningful texts, the hearts of children, literacy, and fluency, and civic preparation mark the overarching desires of Florida's new standards. Spoken Word Poetry has the potential, in its multimodal and communal nature, to meet not only the poetic portions of Florida's standards but also the overarching aims which define the whole of Florida's B.E.S.T. Standards.

#### **Spoken Word Poetry and Aim 1: Instill Respect for Literary Works using Complex, Rich, Meaningful texts**

As discussed previously, many students lack an appreciation for poetry in that they feel poetry is "unaccessible [*sic*]" (Rediscovering the Joy, qtd. 95) and "elitist" (Newfield and D'Abdon, 511). However, Spoken Word Poetry, in its form, content, and conventions for meaning-making, opens a door for students to respect poetry as a genre and, in turn, respect other

complex, rich, and meaningful poetic texts such as those already included in Florida's B.E.S.T. Standards.

Poetry, whether written or spoken, seeks to widen a reader's perspective of the world by placing language into verse, rhyme, and meter in a way that is or can be memorable, complicated, and aesthetically pleasing. One could say that snow is beautiful, and another could agree. But if Robert Frost wrote,

The way a crow  
Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a Hemlock tree

Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some part  
Of a day I had rued. (Dust of Snow, poetryfoundation.org)

then another would be inclined not only to see Frost's meaning - snow is beautiful - but to see also that snow has changed Frost's attitude from pessimism to optimism. The beauty of snow, through poetry, went from being a simple statement of opinion to being the catalyst for change in a human heart. Now the reader could consider, "how else can beauty in nature positively affect its observers?" Even in just eight lines, poetry can direct the widening of perspective. Michael Edwards elaborates on this ability of poetry in his essay "Believing in Poetry," in which he discusses poetry from a spiritual perspective and explores its engagement with reality through language. He makes the claim that poetry brings meaning to a world which "remains silent" (10). In other words, poetry uses its words to interact with the world, bringing in fresh perspectives rather than drawing out a single perspective from the world. Poetry, however, can also re-create a reader's perspective on poetry. Edwards remarks, "From reading not simply my own poetry but

that of a wide diversity of poets, from different periods and from various countries, it seems that one universal effect of poetry is this modification of reality...to believe in poetry is to value its ability at once to close with the real and to re-create it" (Believing 12). Poetry, then, can do multiple things: discuss the world; present a perspective on that silent world, thus widening a reader's perspective on elements of the world; and even change - "re-create" - a reader's perspective on the world.

Spoken Word Poetry's oral form also produces rich, meaningful texts in which poets seek to "re-create" perspectives. In written poetry, readers can analyze word usage and rhyme scheme, dissecting the complexities of words as they are set on a page. Spoken Word Poetry, however, does not allow for the same type of analysis possible through the written word. Jacques Derrida, in his essay *Dissemination*, examines the difference between the written and spoken word as one about memory. The written word seeks to capture the essence of spoken words since humans are incapable of remembering all that they hear. Written poetry, by its form, provides the opportunity for deep analysis in not requiring memory. A student of a poem could sit down and analyze a written poem by dissecting visual language. Spoken words, however, can only undergo analysis as long as they can be remembered (Derrida 1608-12). The audience of a spoken poem is unable to sit down and analyze word choice by the conventions of written poetry. Rather, an audience must analyze the meaning of a poem in three predominant ways: 1), by what they hear during the performance, 2), by what they see in the poet's body language during the performance, and 3), by what they recall from a performance after a performance. These ways are not all-inclusive, but they characterize an extension of the normal practice of analysis in classrooms today, which is heavily based on digesting the written word.

The richness of Spoken Word texts lies in both the “re-creative” tendencies of poetry as an art form and the expansion of analytic concepts that Spoken Word Poetry brings to poetry as a genre. Such expansion means poets practicing Spoken Word Poetry must consider how the conventions of orality and visual performance both enhance and limit the poems they want to create, so that the audience can analyze – or perhaps, experience – their poem in a way that exhibits the author’s intended meaning. In Newfield and D’Abdon’s study, Spoken Word and written poetry are on “a continuum where boundaries [of meaning-making] are blurred and overlaps occur” (Multimodal 522). Such an overlap, in which meaning can be portrayed both audibly and visually in written words, marks Spoken Word Poetry as rich and meaningful under less commonly studied forms of meaning-making and analysis. Walter Ong, the author of *Orality and Literacy*, conducted a historical study in the early 1900s which demonstrates the predominance of orality’s meaning-making in language. While social conventions emphasize the authority of written language, Ong’s study points out the prominence of sound and speech in language for centuries, as a result of which he claims that oral culture can exist without writing, but “writing can never dispense with orality” (xiii-8). Despite the modern emphasis on the authority of the written word, oral tradition thrived for centuries before words were transcribed onto tablets of stone. In fact, Ong references Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric*, in which the ancient rhetorician recalls that the purpose of writing was to enhance orality (9). The move in modern classrooms to focus on written words over spoken words misses the original intention of the written word to enhance the rich meaning of spoken words. The form of Spoken Word Poetry can both re-create perspectives through its content and provide a rich ground of study for the analysis of audial and visual meaning-making.

The form of Spoken Word Poetry provides an opportunity: students can learn to respect poetry in all its forms, written or spoken, through Spoken Word Poetry because spoken poetry expresses meaning in a form which can re-create perspectives, is “attainable” by hearing, and opens the door for students to experience poetry beyond the page. Jonna Perrillo, in her essay titled “The Popularization of High School Poetry Instruction, 1920-1940,” discusses the work of Hughes Mearns towards improving poetry education in classrooms. Mearns’ pedagogy, as she describes it, involved both advocating for creative forms of teaching poetry in the classroom and inviting his students to hear the works of poets such as Robert Frost and Edna St. Vincent Millay (115). Mearns’ examples are of written poems read aloud. Rather than simply read and discuss such poems on-page, Mearns chooses to enhance her poetry teaching by giving students the audial aspects of written language from which they can better understand and analyze a written poem. Perrillo further states that Mearns wanted to “develop children’s abilities to appreciate and enjoy texts” through poetry by discussing poetry as a “medium of experience” (Perrillo 113). In reading written poetry, students experienced written poetry in two ways: reading and hearing. But Mearns creates further experiences for his students by allowing students to both create and experience each other’s poetry. And, according to Perrillo, Mearns’s approach “popularize[d] and elevate[d] poetry instruction in schools (Perrillo 116). Mearns opened the door for her students to view all types of poetry as the expression of human experience, even as the students themselves experience the art form. Mearns taught poetry in multiple forms to deepen his pupil’s appreciation of texts.

Now, there is a notable distinction between written poetry read aloud and Spoken Word Poetry. Written poetry read aloud has the advantage of the audial aspects of language to help

portray meaning. Consider the following sentence: “I didn’t say I took her shoe.” In this sentence, the implied meaning of the phrase changes if you emphasize a different word each time you read the sentence. “I didn’t *say* I took her shoe” has a different implication from “I didn’t say I *took* her shoe.” The way a word is stated, the auidial inflection, affects the meaning of a word. When a teacher such as Mearns chooses to read a written poem out loud, the way he or she reads a poem can aid students in how they understand the meaning of the written poem. But Spoken Word Poetry, as defined previously, is crafted primarily with the meaning-making conventions of sound and performance in mind. As the poet writes, the questions that the poet asks will differ from the questions a poet writing a written poem will ask. The poet of a written poem asks questions like, “How will this poem be read? How will this poem be seen?” whereas the poet of a Spoken Word poem asks questions like, “How will this poem be heard? How will this poem be spoken? How can I convey meaning through body language as I perform this poem?” These questions drive the methods of meaning-making in each type of poem; they make distinct the forms of each type of poem. It follows, then, that a written poem, which was not created with the auidial aspects of meaning-making in mind, even if read aloud, does not represent auidial forms of meaning-making in the same way as a Spoken Word poem, whose lines are designed to be performed and heard. Mearns, aware of this distinction, used both types of poetry hearing - reading written poems and encouraging the creation and sharing of Spoken Word poems - to deepen student appreciation of poetry in its many forms.

Newfield and D-A’bdon also discuss how Spoken Word Poetry, by its auidial form, has can enhance the experience of English Language learners. In their study, they found that English Language Learners could benefit greatly from hearing poetry rather than only analyzing written

poetry (Multimodal Genre 522). Hearing poetry, for English Language learners as well as other students, is an alternative and, in some cases, more accessible form by which ELL students can understand poetry. If Florida students were enabled to hear and write Spoken Word Poetry in the classrooms, they would see poetry as a rich, meaningful re-creation of perspectives and develop a deeper respect for poetry as a literary form. Spoken Word Poetry creates an experience of poetry that enhances student perception and respect of poetry as an art form that is both meaningful in analyzing its written pieces while also accessible and experiential in analyzing its means of performative experience. Spoken Word Poetry re-creates perspectives on what it means to make meaning outside of the written word. If taught side-by-side with written poetry, Spoken Word Poetry could enhance Florida's curriculum to teach meaning-making in a way that's accessible to ELL students and prepares them to respect the rich meanings in written poetry.

**Spoken Word Poetry and Aim 2: Educate the Hearts of Children with Education that is Enlightening, Noble, and Good**

Teachers, among standards and schedules, tests, and requirements, fundamentally want one thing: to get to the heart of the children they teach in a positively transformative way. Curricula plays a large role in the hearts of students, in the sense that what children are taught, explicitly and implicitly, will form their view of the world for years to come. Spoken Word Poetry, in its ability to re-create perspectives and promote a better understanding of self and others, can also enhance curricula to make it even more enlightening, noble, and good.

Spoken Word poetry, as a poetry form and creative expression, can teach students about themselves and others. Robert J. Sternberg wrote an essay on Creative Giftedness in which he critiqued the common notions of creativity held on account of creative giftedness tests. He



discusses creativity as having three types of defiance: Defying the Crowd, Defying Oneself and Defying the *Zeigeist* [sic] - “common cultural presuppositions” (Creative Giftedness 160-61). In Defying the Crowd, students write and act in creative ways which may please some and not please others (160). In Defying the *Zeigeist*, students step outside normal creative bounds to change what is considered “normal” to culture (161-62). In Defying Oneself, however, students use their creativity to stretch their beliefs and perspectives, using their abilities to learn about and even change themselves, just as they learn about and change others through the other two forms of defiance (160-61). While the term “defiance” typically has a negative connotation, Sternberg’s theory speaks into the ability for creativity to promote what is enlightening, noble, and good. For it is enlightening to take in new perspectives, noble to change oneself for the better, and good to promote change in others through the arts. Spoken Word Poetry, in its style, has already promoted such qualities in classroom environments. Logan Manning, a former teacher at New Beginnings High School, conducted a study on the poetry students at his school a few years after they all graduated. In his article, “Rewriting Struggles as Strength: Young Adults’ Reflections on the Significance of their High School Poetry Community,” he describes New Beginnings as a high school full of students who had “dropped out of traditional high schools” (Manning 290-91). Many of the students, as a result, had faced much trauma (289). In his interview of students, Manning discovered that, even years after students had graduated, their experiences in learning Spoken Word and written poetry stuck with them. Jaleeyah, for example, had dropped out of multiple schools before coming to New Beginnings (294) and as “a survivor of abuse...she used poetry class as a space to work through life challenges” (297). Writing and receiving student feedback for her poetry, she realized, helped her not only relay her struggles to a trustworthy

community of students but also discuss her struggles less directly, providing her with more closure (298-99). Another student, Ruby, was also a survivor of multiple kinds of abuse (294). Ruby not only grew stronger from the poetry community's feedback, but she also extended the welcoming, constructive environment to her brother (303-04). Ruby even applied her ability to share her story in poetry to a personal essay contest and ended up winning a scholarship (304). For Ruby, a poetry class using both written and Spoken Word Poetry allowed her to grow in self-confidence, reach out to others, and succeed academically with the skills she learned in articulating her experiences. The third student Manning focused on was Lachelle, a woman who grew up in foster care (294). She described the poetry group as one which “promoted growth,” built a community in which the students “had each other,” and transformed her mindset so that she “[saw] herself as a survivor, not a hostage, of her upbringing” (299). For each of these students, Spoken Word Poetry created an environment in which students were enlightened about their peers' experiences, explored the noble acts of encouraging feedback and sharing community, and promoted the good of others by sharing their own stories and supporting others who shared their stories.

In New York City, Spoken Word Poetry is also impacting students towards what is enlightening, noble, and good. Maria T. Fisher conducted close studies on two extra-curricular poetry groups, one of them being the “Power Writers” led by Joe, a high school English and music teacher (Coffee House 115). Among his “Power Writers,” the environment of shared experiences and feedback through Spoken Word Poetry has encouraged students to mentor one another (120), “not be afraid to say what [they] see and feel” (121), move their “voices and experiences out of obscurity” to foster “awareness among each other” (122), and practice active

listening (128). The essence of Spoken Word Poetry is the raw, community-based sharing of experiences. With this essence, teachers are already pointing students to what is good: trustworthy communities, groups of craft and support, speaking one's mind artistically and truthfully, and encouraging others to do the same. Even better, such communities are changing the hearts of students so that, as Manning's study presents, students become life-long examples of the ability for poetic voice to bring healing. In light of its success in other schools, Florida teachers should consider the ability of Spoken Word Poetry to promote what is enlightening, noble, and good and find ways to implement such poetry into their curriculum.

### **Spoken Word Poetry and Aim 3: Make Florida the Most Literate State Through a Focus on Fluency**

Florida's B.E.S.T. Standards emphasize increasing Florida's literacy through fluency (DOE 5-6). Underlying each literacy standard is Florida's belief in the value of broadening the current view of literacy so that it "promotes knowledge-building across varied domains and subjects, making the integration of content and collaboration among teachers much easier to achieve" (6). Fluency, according to Florida's new standards, is predominantly taught between Kindergarten and fifth grade, but the curriculum plan also includes a set of standards for Sixth through Twelfth graders titled "6-12 Foundational Reading Intervention Standards" (145-46). These Intervention Standards particularly help what Florida regards as "Learner Profile 2b," which describes those "Students without a strong background in literacy in any language [who] may need support beyond ESOL strategies and could have an unidentified learning disability" (211). Common to both Florida's B.E.S.T. Standards and scholarship on Spoken Word Poetry use in classroom settings is an emphasis on literacy; Spoken Word Poetry can reenforce literacy

for every profile of learner while creating a strong opportunity for Profile 2b learners to increase their literacy.

Hughes Mearns, nearly one hundred years ago, aimed to increase the literacy of students through performed poetry (Popularization 111). Within the past thirty years, Joe set up his “Power Writers” as a “Participatory Literacy Community” (Fisher 117). And today, as Florida seeks to become the most literate state, the deep connection between Spoken Word Poetry and literacy in recent scholarship presents a strong encouragement for its use in Florida’s mainstream curriculum.

Spoken Word poetry, as an oral form of poetry, allows students to practice their fluency through reading aloud and/or performing poetry. On the *Multidimensional Fluency Scale*, a chart used in the B.E.S.T. Standards, a student is fluent when he/she “Reads with good expression and enthusiasm;” “Generally reads with good phrasing, mostly in clause and sentence units, with adequate attention to expression;” “Generally reads smoothly with some breaks...;” and “Consistently reads at conversational pace; appropriate rate through reading” (DOE 210). Also, on the *NAEP Fluency Scale*, a student is fluent at level 4 (the highest level) if he or she

Reads primarily in larger, meaningful phrase groups. Although some regression, repetitions, and deviations from text may be present, these do not appear to detract from the overall structure of the story. Preservation of the author’s syntax is consistent. Some or most of the story is read with expressive interpretation. (210)

Spoken Word poetry involves audial and visual conventions of meaning-making, as stated previously. The oral meaning-making process of Spoken Word Poetry opens a door for English Language learners to increase their literacy more easily in the classroom setting. Newfield and

D'Abdon highlight this concept in their multimodal view of Spoken Word Poetry. "The multiple semiotic forms," they realize, "create a stimulating context for the linguistic meaning with which EAL [English as an additional language] learners may be struggling" (Multimodal 523). Because Spoken Word Poetry conveys much of its meaning through audial means, those learning English can realize word meaning with the way a word is said in a poem and not simply how a word is read off a page (522). This distinction is crucial - as previously discussed, audial forms of meaning-making are portrayed differently when comparing a written poem read aloud to a performed Spoken Word poem. Spoken Word Poetry, unlike written poems read aloud, functions on meaning-making which is "attainable" to the ear when heard once and then functions, even within its artistic form, more like conversational language than written poetry read aloud. EAL learners who hear Spoken Word Poetry are hearing a form of poetry that is more closely connected to conversational English than the typical written poem, which is most often written to encourage in-depth analysis of the written word. Because of its connections to conversational language, Spoken Word Poetry provides, as Newfield and D'Abdon put it, a "stimulating context" for EALs (522).

Additionally, any student reading a poem can practice reading with good expression and enthusiasm, and a student performing a poem can practice phrasing and expression, speaking at a rate to accommodate the poem's meaning. Both practices are integral to the Spoken Word Poetry environment and coincide with the fluency scales listed above. Alfredo Bautissa, among others, conducted an extended study on students in Singapore concerning creative curriculum integration. In his study, he writes that the teachers integrated creativity into their classrooms to "help students develop a broader perspective towards the arts, enabling them to acquire more

sophisticated levels of appreciation, analysis and expression” (Curriculum integration, 625). As Spoken Word Poetry involves aural and visual aspects of meaning-making, encourages an atmosphere of language performance, and creates a community of expression, Students receive, through Spoken Word Poetry, frequent practice in the reading skills listed on the fluency scale. The form of Spoken Word Poetry itself provides a differentiated means by which all students - even EALs - can become more literate; thus, using Spoken Word Poetry in the classroom allows students to regularly practice their fluency skills.

#### **Spoken Word Poetry and Aim 4: Prepare Students for Jobs and Civic Participation**

Maria Fisher, as she studied the nature of two Participatory Literacy Communities, described the communities as being rooted in “three theoretical frameworks for literacy: literacy as critical...literacy as a social practice...as learned through social participation...and literacy as Democratic Engagement” (118). This third aspect of literacy, Democratic Engagement, takes on a special light in Spoken Word Poetry, for Spoken Word Poetry invites students into civic engagement through the trustworthy communities and the discourses created through poetry. Across the Atlantic Ocean, Peter Bearder followed the lead of the poet Peter Kahn in Chicago to become a full-time Spoken Word Educator for Secondary Students in London (Liberating 233). Bearder was a “radical political poet” in London before he became a “full time poet teacher in a Roman Catholic secondary school” (233). The title of “political poet” itself is telling in the ability of poetry to encourage civic engagement. In Bearder’s experience, not only did Spoken Word Poetry draw his students together into learning communities, but such poetry also drove students to participate in political activity in London (234). In 2014, for example, four London poets from Bearder’s programs opened the “War on Want” conference. As a result, the War on

Want is now seeking to create an engagement program with schools that involve Spoken Word Poetry (235-36). Bearder also leads students in creating political poems to address civic issues in Parliament, and one of his students became a youth councillor for her town. In Bearder's words, "This shows a clear link between an artistic community that discusses and articulates political issues, and tangible action in the form of representational politics" (235). Through Spoken Word Poetry, which, as previously discussed, promotes the telling of individual stories in an accessible manner, students are encouraged to share their views on society and engage in critical and constructive conversations about civic issues.

As students are prepared through Spoken Word Poetry to participate in society, the educational benefits of Spoken Word Poetry could increase the likelihood of students entering higher education or the job market. Pepka Boyadjieva and Petya Ilieva-Trichkova conducted a study of Bulgaria schools in 2019. Their goal, through quantitative research, was to determine the effects of differentiated educational programs on a Bulgarian student's likelihood to go to college or get into "significant employment" (which they define as "an employment of minimum 6 months duration and minimum 20 hours per week") (Horizontal 37-38). Education programs were divided by the type of school in which they were taught, with six varieties of schools by whether a school was Selective or Non-selective, and then whether a school was Vocational, Profiled, Partially Profiled, or Non-Profiled (37). The empirical data they collected revealed a few things about differentiated education: not only does education affect the way students will think about their future and the decisions they make, but education even has the potential to lead students towards higher education despite their social background - i.e., despite whether their parents completed higher education or a high paying job (38, 45-46). This notable difference

occurs because the sense of identity instilled by a school has a highly probable correlation with whether a student will continue towards higher education (46-47).

Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova made this credible assumption when they found, in their data, that students in Non-Selective schools with X grades were still less likely to pursue higher education than students in Selective schools with the same grades. This occurs, they realized, because Selective schools instilled a greater sense of identity in their students (46-47). It follows, then, that identity formation is based not predominantly on a student's grades, but on how a school environment affects a student's identity formation.

Spoken Word poetry creates an environment that helps students with identity formation. Spoken Word Poetry accomplishes identity formation by giving students an outlet to share their personal experiences in a way that is validated by their school community. Emily Jane Style, in her article "Curriculum as Encounter: Selves and Shelves," discusses the "life-texts" that students bring into the classroom (67). Style's pedagogy seeks to draw on the life experience of students, balancing what students already know with the curriculum she brings before students (67-68). Through a style of poetry teaching which validates the student's "own methods of meaning-making" (67), students are encouraged to both listen and speak and this, Style declares, "could further inform both their individual and collective learning (70). With Spoken Word Poetry in the picture, students are enabled to explore their own identities as well as the identities of others. And as a student's stories, writing, and feedback are welcomed, crafted, and praised within a community of peers and poets, students find themselves more stable in their own identities and better prepared to look to the future with optimism and vision. Students with vision



are more likely to become students with better lives, better character, and better preparation for participation in the job field as well as the civic arena.

Spoken Word Poetry holds unique qualities, such as its conversational form and its focus on individual voice, that help students address issues of their past, find their identities in supportive communities of the present, and grow in preparation for higher education and civic engagement in the future. Spoken Word Poetry creates communities of students who pursue the good of helping one another, sharing their experiences in positive and artistic ways. Spoken Word Poetry also provides means by which students can increase their literacy in their command of the English language as well as their knowledge of literary works commonly studied in a high school scholarship. And Spoken Word Poetry can prepare students for their futures by encouraging civic participation, empowering their voices to discuss issues in society, and giving them the confidence to discover themselves and see themselves as capable individuals.

Many seasoned teachers, upon seeing these possible benefits, would be eager to explore the idea of integrating Spoken Word Poetry. What teacher doesn't want their classroom to excel? However, as with any new subject material or concept, teachers need time, resources, and training to successfully integrate Spoken Word Poetry in these classrooms. What can be done?

### **Integration Against Limitations**

Teachers work long hours for the sake of their students. In 2003, the National Center for Education Statistics conducted two different Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASSs). According to SASS studies, the regular full-time private school worked an average of 52.5 hours a week on "school-related activities" (NCES, private school) while the regular full-time public-school teacher in a school funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs worked for an average of 52.7 hours a

week (SASS) (NCES, public school). The same two studies found that an average of 28.75 hours of a teacher's workweek is spent delivering classroom instruction to students, meaning that public and private school teachers (who, together, work an average of 52.6 hours a week) spend an average of about 24 hours preparing to teach students outside of the classroom. Most teachers, even before seeing such statistics, know that teachers are constantly busy providing the best teaching experience possible for their students. In light of such busyness, the idea of integrating yet another type of instruction into the classroom, especially one which could require additional study and practice on the teacher's part, can be daunting. How, then, can teachers integrate Spoken Word Poetry into their poetry instruction against such time limitations?

Spoken Word poetry can combine with the teachings of both global and digital literacy. Sylvia Vardell, in her article "Exploring the Global Landscape through Digital Poetry," discusses the mobility of poetry across subjects. "A poem," she writes, "can provide a stepping stone in developing critical global literacies" (Exploring 100). She suggests exploring the internet for global poetry, instilling that into a curriculum to discuss global perspectives. Pinterest boards, Favoritepoem.org, Gutenberg.org, and other websites all provide performance and read poetry at the touch of a button to be used in a curriculum (100-01). Additionally, many Spoken Word poets post their poetry on Youtube, and most pieces are under five minutes long, so finding a Spoken Word piece to include in that curriculum is not as difficult as it may first appear to be. By searching a topic or theme with the phrase "Spoken Word," teachers can find videos from phone-recorded classroom sessions to official videos posted by Spoken Word artists. Button Poetry is a channel of Spoken Word Poetry, and many performers on that page are of the high school age (Button Poetry).

Now, it should be noted: while it would be ideal to eventually include Spoken Word Poetry in classrooms, Spoken Word communities can start outside of the classroom and be initiated by a teacher. This is one means by which teachers eager to use Spoken Word Poetry can give themselves more time to learn about the art form and see how students interact with Spoken Word in an extracurricular setting. Maria Fisher's study of the "Power Writers," discussed above, is a great example of an extracurricular Spoken Word Poetry club (Coffee House 117-18). Some students in Florida schools may already be interested in Spoken Word Poetry, or quickly become engaged with Spoken Word Poetry if informed about the art form, so teachers can tap into the artistic, leadership-minded students in their classes and encourage them to start a Spoken Word community. Believe it or not, a teacher does not have to be a poet to start such a community! When I was in high school, my Rhetoric teacher showed us a video of Spoken Word Poetry and asked us to write a poem like that. As someone inclined to creativity, I was eager to take such an opportunity, even though my teacher never called herself a poet. While having a poetry-minded teacher can be of enormous benefit to a Spoken Word community, students who are given the open space to start a poetry club by their teacher's introduction to Spoken Word Poetry, may look into the art form on their own and go start such a club. Despite the perceived limitations of time, the benefits of a digital age and form of poetry as a contemporary and digital can overcome such limitations.

### **Integration and Inexperience with New Subject Material**

Some teachers might be concerned about Spoken Word Poetry because of their views on written poetry - not every teacher loves poetry! Those teachers have passions in other parts of English Language Arts, and that allows teachers to help students find their individual passions

within English. However, regardless of one's view on poetry, and regardless of whether a teacher wants to use written or spoken poetry in their curriculum, poetry is a fundamental part of Florida's new standards. How, then, can we encourage teachers who do not prefer poetry or feel less qualified by their passions for other parts of English to teach poetry in a new way?

Teachers of poetry could have students do this task: "Re-write this poem as if you would say it." Such a task is inspired by Catherine Louise Kennedy's article "Sappho Through Mimesis, a Pedagogical Approach to Teaching Poetry." Kennedy presents a strategy for teaching the poetry of Sappho, an ancient poet whose works have re-surfaced in multiple modern instances by allusion (Sappho 26-27). Kennedy recommends taking Sappho's poem "Fragment 105a," which is as follows:

Like the sweet-apple that's gleaming red on the  
topmost bough  
Right at the very end, that the apple pickers forgot,  
Or rather didn't forget, but just were unable to  
reach. (27)

Kennedy asks students about the poem's surface meaning. Then, she asks students to re-write the poem in their own words, portraying the meaning they find as they study the poem in their own words, using their own voice (27-28). Lastly, the poems can be read aloud and discussed. This exercise is like writing a paraphrase with verse, rhyme, and meter, and can allow the teacher to work alongside students and try writing their own form of poetry.

Building off this example, teachers could try another method to encourage the creation of Spoken Word Poetry. Teachers could put a prompt on the board, such as "Is chivalry dead?" and ask students to answer the question in a few sentences. Once the class is finished, the teacher can

then ask students to re-create their answer as a Spoken Word poem, meaning their goal is to put their answer into a Spoken Word format. This could look something like this:

Answer: I don't think chivalry is dead. Some men are still kind and open doors for me. I think some girls practice chivalry too, honestly. It just looks different. We should expect and encourage chivalry where it seems dead.

Re-creation: Chivalry isn't dead. / It's not dead in the men who hold doors for me / it's still alive in some women, honestly / Chivalry isn't dead, it's just different. / We should revive it by discussing it different.

In this example, a prose answer to a question is transformed into Spoken Word Poetry by 1) including some forms of rhyme and rhythm, 2) breaking up sentences into lines, and 3) considering how lines can be phrased and minimum word changes could be made to re-create the answer into Spoken Word Poetry. Similar to the Sappho poem, in which students ask themselves, "what do I think this poem means, and how can I write my own perceived meaning poetically," this exercise asks students to make their own words and meaning into poetry, showing both the connections between Spoken Word Poetry and conversational language and encouraging the ability for students to create Spoken Word Poetry from their own words. Trying either of these exercises with a class is similar in many ways to the literacy communities presented by Fisher - poetry is discussed, written, and spoken to promote further discussion about individual opinions and meaning-making (Coffee House 117). So even if a teacher is new to Spoken Word Poetry, or if a teacher is not extremely comfortable writing poetry, such an exercise stretched a teacher's thinking to consider, "could I be more comfortable teaching poetry in a new way? Can I see poetry differently and, in so doing, better be able to teach poetry to my students?" Such reflection is a core part of an educator's growth and should be considered against any hesitations about any subject material, not just Spoken Word Poetry.

### **Possibilities for Further Integration**

With various issues addressed, Florida teachers should know the many resources by which they can explore the culture and benefits of Spoken Word Poetry. Firstly, Florida teachers can attend virtual open mic events through Instagram and Facebook. An “open mic” is an event in which local poets can sign up and perform their homemade poems. Because many open mic nights happen virtually, an educator can grab a cup of tea, sit down in their living room, and watch poetry performed live at the touch of a button. Virtual open mic nights lose some of the benefits of live performance but retain all the advantages of convenience and time since a teacher could watch one brief poem and then step away from the live stream if need be. In addition, Florida teachers could watch open mics that happen live worldwide, so that they can see how different subcultures in the United States affect meaning-making in Spoken Word Poetry.

Florida teachers can also look at community calendars and events to find live open mic nights, many of which could be happening close to their schools. Live open mic nights are a unique experience. Many Spoken Word poets play off the energy of their live audience as they perform, matching the pace of their performance (pausing and speeding up their poem) based on the reactions from a crowd. Florida teachers can learn much about how a poet moves on stage to create meaning in a live open mic setting. They can also interact with other Spoken Word Poetry consumers and have enlightening discussions about Spoken Word Poetry. Such discussions are a simple, engaging way to get connected with the community through artists and learn more about Spoken Word Poetry.

In addition, hundreds of YouTube channels champion Spoken Word Poetry. Button Poetry, for example, features award-winning slam poetry from experienced artists. Slam Poetry,

as touched on briefly at the beginning of this essay, is performance poetry crafted specifically for a performance contest setting, so careful attention is paid to a performer's form, diction, and poetic content. Just as a teacher would run to Shakespeare or Wordsworth to teach the greatness of written poetry, so can a teacher turn to award-winning Spoken Word Poets and learn from their expertise.

Just as Mearns, in Perillo's study, had students listen to famous written poems read aloud, Florida teachers can introduce new forms of aural meaning-making to their students by giving students poem audios. Poetryoutloud.org is one site that provides audio readings of written poems. The site also has videos of performance poetry, so a student can watch and re-watch a performance poem to dissect how a poet makes meaning through their diction, body language, volume, and even their clothing. Digital resources such as poetryoutloud.org are a key means by which teachers can introduce Spoken Word Poetry into their classrooms.

And finally, while the task may seem daunting to a teacher who doesn't normally write Spoken Word Poetry, Florida teachers can try writing their own Spoken Word Poetry to connect with subject material. Many Spoken Word Poems flow smoothly like a conversation, using alliteration and free verse, so a teacher could be shocked at how statements they say daily can be altered to fit the Spoken Word Style. Spoken Word Poetry, teachers might find, is simpler to create than they initially realized. Such exploration can become exciting, and an excited teacher makes for a classroom of encouraged and inspired learners.

### **Conclusion**

Florida's B.E.S.T. Standards seek to make Florida "the most literate state in the nation" (DOE 5). Their new standards have provided a solid foundation to meet such a goal, in addition

to preparing for students who need support in their literacy learning. As the standards themselves say, however, their suggestions for poetry are not “exhaustive” and leave room for what teachers find best for their classrooms (DOE 151).

Spoken Word Poetry has well-documented potential to provide an enhanced poetry education in Florida classrooms. As a performative art form, Spoken Word Poetry functions paradoxically, extending the current classroom conception of poetry to its traditional oral roots to provide fresh perspectives of poetry for students and teachers alike. It possesses educational qualities such as an extended conception of analysis, an alternative form of meaning-making worth examination, and an ability to engage with the culture that makes it suitable to support the learning standards for poetry set for Florida’s High School B.E.S.T. Standards. Spoken Word Poetry also possesses benefits beyond the poetry standards, supporting the overarching aims of Florida’s new Standards. Spoken Word Poetry can create new perspectives on literary forms of sharing experience, giving students deeper respect for literature as a genre. It encourages learning communities of honesty and kindness, teaching children how to pursue, socially and in writing, what is enlightening, noble, and good. In its performative and social aspects, Spoken Word Poetry has, according to research, increased literacy in all types of students, especially English language learners, and has provided an outlet for students to find their voices, see themselves as capable of excelling beyond their comfort zone, and participate with their voices in society. With the internet capabilities of integrating Spoken Word Poetry and the communal aspects of the art form, Florida teachers can find a variety of resources with which to integrate Spoken Word Poetry into their classrooms, despite any hesitations or limitations in resources.



Spoken Word poetry has the capabilities to help Florida teachers meet every educational goal set out in Florida's B.E.S.T. standards. If integrated into Florida's curriculum, Spoken Word Poetry could, over time, radically change the way Florida views poetry education in the classroom and produce a generation of students like Amanda Gorman - eloquent, intelligent, and filled with a passion to share words that can uplift an entire nation. The State of Florida wants literate students. Florida wants their children to grow up more confident in their voices and their ability to make positive change in a country that, while blessed in many ways, still needs change at the level of the way neighbor sees neighbor and the way media portrays people. In the spirit of meeting such an attainable and noble goal, I strongly suggest that the Florida Department of Education, Commissioner Corcoran, and Governor DeSantis consider the benefits Spoken Word Poetry could bring if integrated into the B.E.S.T. Standards.

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