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CLASSROOM

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Abstract

In this study, teachers and twelfth grade students were surveyed regarding poetry instruction. Teachers were asked about their attitudes regarding poetry instruction and about their poetry teaching practices. The twelfth grade students were asked about their perceptions of poetry instruction during their high school careers and about their perceptions of poetry in general. The study found that there are mixed reviews about the quality of poetry instruction, but overall, teachers and students acknowledged a need for more poetry instruction in the high school classroom.

Chapter One: Introduction

Teaching Poetry

Ahem..I clear my throat
Class, today let's begin with a poem
Collective groans ring out
But
Yes, but across the room there is a grin
There is hope
At least one student is excited
I begin to read

"You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise."

Ahh..the mighty Maya Angelou never disappoints
Now there are five students
With ears bending towards my words

"Does my sassiness upset you?" – I say with pizzaz
"Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room."

Now, now I've got 'em
15 listening closely
Sometimes my sassiness does upset them

"Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise."

At attention
I've almost caught them all
I continue with great satisfaction
"Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?"

"Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard

'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard."
Here we go
We are all together now
Even the boy on his cell phone has paused
Snapchat cannot compare with these smooth
Soulful words

I keep on reading
Letting the words fill the room
"Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?"

Woah...wait a minute
Their faces filled with surprise
Can our teacher say those words?

You bet she can
It's a poem
AND THOSE WORDS MATTER

"Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide."

"Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise."

The room is silent
But far from empty
Angelou's words float
Land in each ear
And swim to their hearts

A hand shoots up
“Can you read it again?”
No, but you can
Any volunteers?
35 hands rise
Still, they rise

The Story Behind the Study

I logged into a popular social media site to find a post from a fellow teacher. The post read, “April is coming, so it’s time to plan my poetry unit. Any suggestions?”

At first I was excited. April is National Poetry Month and I do love poetry. I immediately started to type a response and then realized that I didn’t have much to say. How could that be? I’m an English teacher, shouldn’t I have suggestions? Then it dawned on me that I don’t really teach much poetry and have no go-to lessons to share. I suddenly felt disheartened and ashamed. I closed my laptop and went straight to my bookshelf.

Out of curiosity, I surveyed my seventh hour senior English class. “Hey guys,” I said, “show of hands, do you feel like you have had adequate exposure to poetry during high school?” They all look around at each other, heads tilted a bit, and one student raised her hand. “Great!” I thought. Then the student explained that she was not raising her hand because she thought she fully understood everything about poetry, but to ask a question. “I kind of remember doing slam poetry at the end of sophomore year, did we do more than that?”

My heart sank into my stomach. All she could remember from her high school poetry instruction was a mini-unit in her sophomore English class. I, a lover of poetry, had made little impact on this student over the last year in the realm of poetry instruction. Somehow my zeal for poetic verse had not reached my students. When I say

I'm a lover of poetry, I mean that it is my favorite mode of writing. I enjoy composing poetry (though I rarely share it) and I read at least one poem each day. I am subscriber to "American Life in Poetry" and read their weekly column, as well as receive the poem of the day. I am often moved by the poem and forward it onto a friend or family member that I know could use it. Perhaps I should be more impromptu with my class and share the poem with them. I know, however, that each school day is planned to the minute and I hesitate to disrupt that plan with a poem I read in an email, but perhaps I should.

Our class conversation continued for the next ten minutes and then the bell rang. My students ran off to their next class carrying little worry about their exposure to poetry. I, however, sat down at my desk and began to ponder what went wrong. Yes, I was exposing my students to poetry here and there, but it wasn't making a lasting impression. In fact, we spent three weeks reading and discussing *Beowulf*, but my aforementioned student didn't even remember that. Though, to be fair, many students seem to forget that *Beowulf* is a poem and not short story. This got me wondering what was going on in my high school regarding poetry instruction. What weren't we doing? Why weren't we spending more time with poetry? Was it just me? Do we, as English teachers, actually have a fear of poetry? What happened to my preconceived notions about what teaching poetry would be like?

All of these questions lead me to research poetry instruction from the teacher and student perspective. I had an overwhelming feeling that poetry was increasingly cast aside for other modes of writing. If poetry is a fixture in my life, but it only seems to slowly seep from my personal life into my classroom.

My Own Insecurities

One reason I think I stray away from poetry instruction is due to my lack of confidence, and that insecurity stems from the fact that I myself have had very little poetry instruction. As a Language Arts Education major I was not required to take one poetry course. Most of my literature courses focused on novels and short stories. Though it wasn't required, I did take one poetry class in the English department. I took a Romantic Poetry class my senior year of undergrad. The class was overwhelming to me. I had spent very little time reading English Romantic poetry and was then suddenly immersed in it. The biggest issue with the poetry class was not that it was rather difficult and only focused on a subset of poetry, but that it didn't teach me how to teach poetry. Sure, I could model what my professor did, but there is no way that a poetry lecture would fly in a high school classroom. It was barely suitable for an upper level English major. Buchanan (2016) suggests in his article that this is a problem. He notes that the professors in the English department aren't there to teach English education majors how to teach, but to teach the literature. He wonders how future secondary educators are supposed to learn *how* to teach the material when a majority of the classes English education majors take are actually in the English department and not the education department. Buchanan questions, "What if, then, literature instructors in university classrooms are not teaching literature as future secondary teachers are taught to teach it? What if my students, teacher candidates, are encountering models of teaching in literature classes that undermine what they are learning in methods courses" (p.79)? Buchanan's question hits home, because if the only teaching of poetry

instruction I encountered was from a pedagogically less than sound professor, my own methods of teaching poetry are limited.

Now, my courses in the education department did a better job of teaching me how to teach, but perhaps not as explicitly as they could have. There was never a “teaching poetry” course, but there was “teaching literature” and “teaching composition.” Both of these courses dabbled in poetry instruction, both how to analyze and write, but never an in-depth methodology. A typical semester course is sixteen weeks and only one of those weeks was reserved explicitly for poetry instruction. When discussing how to use poetry in the classroom it was almost exclusively as a supplemental activity. By supplemental I mean it was used as bell work, an anticipation guide, or to reinforce a thematic unit. I don’t recall poetry ever being its own entity, simply studying a poem to study a poem, or better yet reading a poem to simply read and enjoy. I think we, as English teachers, often forget that literature’s real purpose is to be consumed, not analyzed.

Of course, there was an exemption. The Creativity in Composition course did give me a firm foundation for my own poetry writing. I spent four intensive weeks writing poetry inspired by painting, and painting canvases inspired by poetry. I thoroughly enjoyed the class, but there was little practical application. I wish I could justify slinging paint around in my classroom, but I’m sure that would not fly the week before the AP exam. The Creativity in Composition course did help me feel more confident in my abilities to write poetry, and for that reason it was a good course.

Am I Alone? A Long Standing Problem

The answer is no. Teachers have been battling with poetry instruction for quite some time. Logan (1960) posed many of the same questions I have about poetry. Logan asked many of the same questions I have and delves into many of the same problems I have encountered. Logan “realized that [his] own love for good poetry was not enough” to encourage students to read and appreciate poetry (p.266). In an effort to find answers on how to better teach poetry, Logan went to a colleague. The colleague suggested to start with student-written poetry. Freier, the colleague, said that “the secret is that the work is approached in such a way that no one performs under a feeling of dread or compulsion” (p.267). I do wonder how he makes that happen. Logan concludes by asserting that we “never let up on [our] campaign to sell [our] students and convince them of the importance and fascination of both reading and writing poetry” (p.268). This final charge by Logan is easier said than done, but an encouraging note, nonetheless.

Although Logan’s article ended on the sunny side, the struggle to bring poetry into the classroom continued into the 1970s. Burroughs’ experience has been my experience when it comes to trying to teach poetry. Burroughs (1977) writes that his student “hated teachers dissecting a poem through forty-five minutes of discussion and then requiring a three-page paper on the carcass” (p.48). This scenario sounds rather familiar. I have never required a student to write a three-page paper over the “carcass” of a poem, but I have been responsible for the dissecting of the poem, the flaying of the carcass. Burroughs notes that some students play along and solve the puzzle of meaning just to please the teacher (p.49). After attempting to teach two young men a poem, Burroughs concludes that students have been “induced to hate” poetry (p.50).

Burroughs even admits to “not knowing what to do about it” (p.51). But Burroughs’ real suggestion on how to teach poetry comes down to listening. We, as teachers, must listen to the students. We can’t just fill their brains with interpretations; we must allow student interpretations to be valid.

Despite Burroughs’ attempt to help English teachers teach poetry, the battle progressed into the 1980’s. Don Mainprize (1982) gets rather snarky when writing about his approach to “ouchless poetry.” Mainprize begins his advice by suggesting that, “if you don’t like poetry, team teach, invite a guest poet, or let the custodian handle it” (p.31). I have to admit that Mainprize’s suggestion is hilarious and I know a few teachers who would welcome the custodian. Mainprize senses student hatred of poetry and recommends that teachers “never announce a poetry unit ahead of time” because it reduces “student groaning time, a common activity guaranteed to stifle interest and creativity” (p.31). You must pause for laughter here; I sure did. Despite Mainprize’s quick wit, his plethora of suggesting on teaching “ouchless poetry” does ease an English teacher’s worries about the pressure to have students write great poetry. The goal is simply for them to write and read poetry, not for it to be anything grand, though I am sure it could be.

Sadly it appeared that no teachers read Mainprize’s article and poetry continued to be an evasive topic in the 1990’s English classroom. In his attempt to make sense of the issue, Michael Fleming (1992) noted that poetry “can feel... remote and abstract, its meaning more dense and elliptical” (p.31) Fleming takes it a step further in suggesting that “it is even more likely to be viewed as something difficult and strange if it appears in the classroom only at very infrequent intervals” (p.31). I see this in the faces of my

students when I do introduce a poem. Bringing a poem into class can be like throwing a curveball. Students aren't sure what to do with it. Sometimes they don't even swing. They stand there in a silent awe. Students would much rather me bring in a nonfiction article than a poem that they are going to have to try and analyze. Poems require a depth of thought that a nonfiction piece doesn't usually require. Essays and op-ed columns get to the point. They tell you what to think and why. A poem doesn't do that. A poem begs to be read over and over. It's more work to read a poem.

Fast forward ten years and English teachers are in the exact same spot. John Noell Moore (2002) struggled to teach poetry to his students because “neither [his] English major nor [his] methods course had trained [him] very well to teach poetry to high school students” (p.44). Not only did Moore struggle with teaching poetry to high schoolers, but his high schoolers struggled with why they needed poetry. Moore recalls one student “burst[ing] into tears” and sobbing, “why are you making us do this?” when Moore asked them to recite poetry in his Advanced Placement course (p.45). Luckily, Moore went on to find strategies for teaching poetry that were effective, but it was a matter of trial and error. Poetry instruction takes practice, especially when you don't feel as prepared to teach it.

From 2002 to the present, poetry appears to be the mode of literacy that evades students and teachers alike. Even the most advanced students seem to struggle with poetry. This struggle has reared its ugly head on AP Literature and Composition exam. For the last eleven out of fifteen years, the poetry analysis question has been the lowest scoring of the three essays on the exam (College Board, 2017). In 2014 and 2010 the poetry analysis question outscored the prose analysis questions as it was especially

hard, but still scored lower than the open prompt. The open prompt requires students to discuss a specific theme in literature with a novel of their choice. 2004 and 2005 were exceptions as the poetry analysis question scored the highest those two years. It is telling that you have to go back twelve years to find poetry as the highest scoring essay. Most telling is that this last year, 2016, was the lowest scoring poetry analysis question, tying with 2012. In 2016 and 2012 the poetry questions scored a mere 3.98, just under the “inadequate” score of 4 out of 9 on the AP scoring rubric. The chief reader from 2016, Warren J. Carson noted that “poetry analysis proves to be quite difficult for student writers” and “students often demonstrate lack of skill with poetry analysis.”

Table 1 AP Literature and Composition Free Response Averages

	Poetry Analysis Q	Prose Analysis Q	Open Response Q
2016	3.98	4.34	4.33
2015	4.06	4.16	4.42
2014	4.16	4.10	4.54
2013	4.21	4.39	4.61
2012	3.98	4.42	4.79
2011	4.28	4.65	4.58
2010	4.33	4.14	4.49
2009	4.37	4.46	4.82
2008	4.44	3.93	4.80
2007	4.57	4.45	4.84
2006	4.27	4.59	4.50
2005	4.67	4.32	4.43
2004	4.59	4.31	4.4
2003	4.64	4.83	4.43
2002	4.4	4.8	4.7

Though poetry analysis scores low on the AP exam, that is simply one view and use of poetry. Poetry cannot be limited to what students can write about it on a standardized test. And perhaps a testing approach to poetry is one of the reason I struggle with poetry instruction. There is this pressure to make sure students can analyze poetry on a test, and always “know” what it means. I don’t imagine that any poet ever wrote a poem in hopes that it would appear on a standardized test for students to analyze. Perhaps, we should take note of what poets want us to do with poetry and then allow our students to do the same. Let’s take Billy Collins’ (1988) advice in his poem “Introduction to Poetry”.

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

One of the most important aspects of this study is that it should be immediately applicable to teachers currently in the classroom. Therefore, I decided that the literature review should consist of books and articles written by practicing English teachers. For this review I spent most of my time consulting the *English Journal* published by the National Council of Teachers of English. *English Journal* gives timely and practical advice to teachers deep in the trenches of the classroom. I also frequently consulted the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, published by the International Literacy Association. The aim of the journal is to provide researched, best practices in order to improve literacy among all language learners. On a few occasions, however, I strayed from those journals in order to bring in a few studies done in the United Kingdom regarding poetry curriculum.

I wanted to stay current (last 5-10 years) in the review, but a few articles published in the 1960s proved to be timeless. The older articles only reinforce that teaching poetry effectively has eluded teachers for quite some time. It is both alarming and comforting to know that teachers seem to have always struggled with poetry instruction. It is important to note that the literature covering poetry instruction is rather extensive, even in the last ten years, so I limited the review to three-six articles per section. I chose articles and books that seemed to encapsulate the sentiment of the majority of the articles not included.

This review is broken up into three parts: *Why Teach Poetry*, *The Conundrum of Poetry Instruction*, and *Revitalizing Poetry Instruction*. I chose these three sections because they cover the heart of my research question and the purpose of my research.

Why Teach Poetry covers the value of poetry instruction in the language arts classroom because I think that sometimes it is easy to forget that poetry is important and should not become an afterthought when planning curriculum. *The Conundrum of Poetry Instruction* highlights that there is in fact a lack of poetry instruction in many language arts classrooms or that teachers of English struggle to teach poetry for various reasons. Though this idea was briefly highlighted in the introduction, I wanted to add a more in-depth look at some of those sources. *Revitalizing Poetry Instruction* discusses the attempt being made by educators to increase poetry instruction. This is the very heart of my study, as I want to increase poetry instruction in my classroom and help my colleagues to do the same in order to better serve all of the students at my school.

Why Teach Poetry: The Value of Poetry in the ELA Classroom

The value of poetry is at the heart of my question. If we truly valued poetry, wouldn't we teach it? That question gets a little muddy. I would think it would be safe to assume that most English teachers see the value of poetry, but perhaps we don't see it as the most valuable. During my five years of teaching, I have always valued poetry, but I haven't always taught poetry. In fact, I haven't taught a poem in my AP Language and Composition course this year. I feel ashamed to say so, but it's not on the test and we have to cover what *is* on the test. Time seems limited.

Seale (2015) makes the argument that poetry *should* be taught in the AP Language classroom regardless of whether or not it is on the exam. Seal urges teacher to see 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" (p.12). This inspirational voice is what language is all about. I

spend the entire school year teaching my AP students the art of rhetoric and persuasion. What is more persuasive and emotionally charged than a poem? Poetry is a form of rhetoric. Do Shakespeare's sonnets not woo the heart?

It is this passion that Seale is so concerned with. She asks of us, "do we seek proficiency or elicit passion?" (p.12). She goes on to argue that we want to elicit passion, that is why we teach. Seale fears, much like I do, that poetry is decreasing in our classrooms and therefore students are failing to see its importance (p.12). And Seale knows that teachers see the power and value of poetry, and that is what is ironic about us not teaching it. She does note that she is not trying to argue that English classrooms are "poetry-less," but the reality is that the poet's voice lacks emphasis" (p.13). It is this emphasis that I would argue needs to be brought back into the classroom.

Seal goes on her article to discuss various ways in which she has incorporated poetry into her AP Language and Composition class, as well as how other teachers have done the same. She notes the usefulness of poetry to teach writing, grammar, and argument. But her one goal is for "students to hear the passionate words of poets and value those voices as important in the human experience" (p.14). That is what English Language Arts is all about, the expression of the human experience.

Sadly, the English classroom is increasingly becoming about the "real-world" and somehow poetry is not considered one of these "real-world" texts. In my experience, there has been an emphasis to teach standards of reading and writing that will be expected in the "real-world." It is safe to assume by "real-world" they mean "work-world." And I suppose that many people do not read and write poetry at their jobs, but doesn't that mean it isn't valuable?

Simmons (2014) writes that poetry is not just important to teach, but that it is “important for the teaching of writing and reading.” Simmons discusses the common clichés of poetry and that it is for the “antisocial and effete.” But Simmons rejects this notion. Though Simmons does acknowledge that poetry has become an afterthought, a supplement, not something to be studied on its own.” I see this often in my own practice, as well as the practice of my colleagues. I often bring in a poem to “go along” with a novel, or an essay we have been reading. Rarely are we reading a poem merely to read a poem. But Simmons argues that poetry has ample functions in the classroom. It can be used for students who need to learn to be concise, it can be a good starter for analysis with ELL students, and it teaches grammar; the rules and how to break those rules for the purpose of style (Simmons, 2014). Simmons sees countless reasons why poetry should fill our classrooms, but he is also leery of using it merely as a tool. He argues that our students should see literature as “mystifying” and require “return visits” and that “poetry serves this purpose perfectly.” Simmons is right in his assumption that we, as teachers, feel compelled to make sure students can perform basic functions of literacy and get more caught up in writing essays and reading for understanding, rather than reading to be challenged and baffled at the complexity of words and the human condition.

Simmons is hardly the first person to suggest that poetry is valuable and needs to be revitalized in our classrooms. As far back, and even farther, as the 1960’s teachers of English have been noting the lack of poetry instruction and arguing for more. Dunning (1966), a professor of literature and education, argued that “we have failed, by and large, to convince our students to be readers of poetry” (p.158). In his article, Dunning

provides four reasons why we should teach poetry. These reasons go beyond the personal. First, Dunning believes we should teach poetry because it allows students to bring “complete works of art into focus,” allowing teachers “the chance to persuade students into consideration of every word” (p.158). Only a poem allows you to do this without dying because “a short poem will allow its parts to be added up into a total literary experience within the class period” (p.158). And Dunning is right; we can experience an entire poem in short settings. For the time-crunched teacher, poetry should be our strongest ally.

Secondly, Dunning notes that “poetry tends to be richer, linguistically, than any other genre” (158). For this very reason Dunning believes that poems are our strongest tools for “building broader vocabularies” and “developing sentence structure” (p.158). This argument alone should be reason enough to bring poetry into the classroom. The heart of most of our standards lie in building broader vocabularies and developing sentence structure.

The third reason Dunning gives for why we should teach poetry may be the most thought provoking. Dunning suggests that poetry “is an exotic form” that “students will not identify with immediately” like they do when reading stories and plays (p.159). According to Dunning, “poems keep a lens of linguistic uniqueness between reader and experience” and this allows students to read poems objectively because it “gives students enough distance from reality” (p.159). This idea that students can read a poem objectively is nice because we after all think of poetry as an emotional ride, and it is, but a student doesn’t have to find their personal connection in the poem in order to make sense of it.

Lastly, Dunning gives as his fourth reason for teaching poetry the idea that successful poetry instruction gives students “high-caliber ammunition for their battles against conformity and faddism” and that “we may owe poetry to those students who want to fight the good fight” (p.159). Nearly fifty years later, we still live in an age when we often feel that a good fight is what is needed, and I can think of no better reason to teach poetry.

Though Dunning gives us ample reason to teach poetry, he does acknowledge the struggle that many teachers will face. He understands that such teaching could take forever, that students may be indifferent, that it is in fact a difficult thing to teach, perhaps even “impossible” at times (p.161). Dunning warns us that “all efforts toward ‘coverage’ will fail” (p.161). This means that we can’t just teach poetry in order to check it off of our list of things to be covered, it is more than just a literary term to be introduced and quizzed over. Instead, he suggests that “if you’ll choose a poem with a particular class in mind and get ready to go as far with that poem as student response and interest allow you to go, some learning will occur” (p.161). It is this promise that Dunning ends his article on: learning will occur and that poetry “is the one course that decorates the fabric of the humanities; poetry is one of its brightest threads” (p.161). The humanity of poetry is why we teach poetry. It is more than just curriculum, it is the human soul.

But it isn’t just the connection to the humanities that makes poetry important to the language arts classroom. Poetry, quite simply is a useful tool. Van Wyhe (2006) discovered “poetry to be magic” (p.16). Originally, Van Wyhe, a National Board certified teacher, teacher of junior high and high school language arts, and now a district

curriculum specialist, also found poetry to be “a genre best left alone” and “one [she] should not teach” (p.15). She cites, like most of us, bad experiences when trying to understand poetry, and just a general lack of confidence with the genre. Fortunately, something changed. After a series of lectures and workshops on the power of poetry and some guidance from Herbert Kohl, Nancie Atwell, and Dixie Goswami, Van Wyhe was ready to bring poetry to her class.

After the initial “trepidation” by her students, Van Wyhe notes that, “the results were stunning, and nothing has been the same” (p.16). From this experience of finding the power of poetry, Van Wyhe now sees why poetry is so valuable in the classroom with lots to offer. Poetry is magical because it offers eight different functions in the classroom. Poetry offers (1) “brevity,” (2) “variety,” (3) “a myriad of companion pieces,” (4) “a powerful tool for teaching word choice,” (5) “opportunities to investigate issues of speaker and audience,” (6) “invitations to support assertions based on text,” (7) “models...helping them to tailor their writing styles,” and (8) “a genre for documenting their lives, one poetic snapshot at a time” (p.16) This is a rather impressive list of all the things a poem can do and poetry is certainly not limited to these eight suggestions by Van Wyhe. Some, myself included, would go as far as to say that you could pretty much teach every literacy skill with poetry. Poems really do pack a punch.

But why poetry when it appears to be one of the least appreciated forms of literature amongst high schoolers? Goba (1967) urges that we teach poetry because it *is* hard. He grapples with the same question that many current English teachers grapple with. “Why read poetry in high school (when students don’t really give a damn)”

(p.278)? Goba argues though that we teach poetry because it “is simply one of the things one must learn how to read” (p.278). And we may ask why. Why do students need to learn to read poetry? Goba answers his own question. We read poetry “because poetry is tough to read. It is an intensified and concentrated form of what all writing is” (p.278). Following this logic, we teach the reading of poetry because if students can read and understand a poem, then they can read and understand anything. All other writing is watered down in comparison to poetry. To Goba, the skill of reading poetry is difficult because “one is never sure, particularly with poetry, and yet one must surely analyze” (p.279). And, “that’s why reading poetry is tough for the student AND the teacher” (p.279). But Goba doesn’t want teachers to give up just because it is hard for both the student and the teacher, because “teach[ing] students how to read” is our one job, so we must do that job (p.280). If teaching students to read is our one job, and if poetry reading is the most difficult reading, then when should be teaching poetry if only because it is our one duty to students.

But can poetry instruction expand beyond the typical standards of the language arts classroom? You bet it can! In her article on metacognition, Eva-Wood (2008) argues that, “poetry, as a bridge to self-understanding, can complement and build on the self-knowledge inherent in metacognitive practices” (p.564). For this very reason, poetry should be highly valued in the English classroom and across the secondary curriculum. Teaching students how to think deeply and critically is the goal of most secondary courses. Therefore, “poetry reading might be considered a particularly relevant comprehension activity for prompting more deliberate and meaningful engagement with both cognitive and affective responses” (p.565).

The Conundrum of Poetry Instruction

Sadly, teaching poetry is hard and because of that, teachers seem to be shying away from it. There are various reasons of course, and not all English teachers are avoiding the teaching of poetry. A study done of middle school teachers and pupils in the United Kingdom highlights “teachers’ lack of confidence in encouraging classroom work on poetry” (Wade & Sidaway 1990, p.75). It is important to note that this study was conducted at the University of Birmingham and published in 1990. Though this study isn’t directly in line with my study, as it looks at middle school teachers, it still highlights the major issue: a crisis in poetry instruction. The study begins by highlighting previous findings on poetry instruction, noting most importantly that “poetry is an area of the curriculum where teachers feel most uncertain of their knowledge; most uncomfortable about their methods and most guilty about both” (p.76). The study surveyed 40 middle school teachers and concluded that “all staff responding claimed to enjoy poetry and said they included poetry in their teaching” (p.78). I found this interesting since “70% of the respondents listed their problems and difficulties; of these most frequently mentioned were lack of confidence and lack of knowledge” (p.78). So, even though teachers may enjoy poetry, and do in fact teach it, they feel a lack of confidence with the genre is holding them back.

But the study is not limited to merely the views of teachers, as it brings in student perceptions as well. The study asked students about their voluntary reading habits, specifically what mode of writing students preferred out of stories, nonfiction, poetry, magazines, newspapers, and comics. Poetry was never the lowest preference, but it was second to last (Wade & Sidaway, p.80). Students ages 9-10 only read poetry

more than non-fiction and students ages 11-12 only read newspapers less than poetry (Wade & Sidaway, p.80). Both groups preferred stories to any other type of reading (Wade & Sidaway, p.80). However, the study also noted “clearly attitudes to poetry are part of broader attitudes to reading” (p.80). Perhaps it is not just a crisis in poetry, but in reading.

According to a study by the National Endowment for the Arts (2004), reading trends are steadily dropping. The survey of 17, 000 adults specifically looked at reading for leisure. Only 46.7% of the U.S. adult population reported that they had read a novel, short story, poem, or a play in the last 12 months (Bradshaw, p.ix). Along with an across the board decline in reading, reading is rapidly declining amongst young people. Reading rates have dropped 28% amongst people ages 18-24 over the last twenty years (Bradshaw, p.xi). Poetry reading is the second least read type of literature, with only 12.1% of those surveyed saying they had read poetry in the last 12 months. Plays were the least common type of literature read at 3.6% (Bradshaw, p. 4). It is clear that there is an overall decline in reading, but why does poetry suffer more than other types of literature?

Wade’s and Sidaway’s study didn’t stop at reading patterns, but also looked at poetry instruction. “Some 71% of 9-to-10-year olds and 69% of 11-to12-year olds said they did not experience lessons which included poetry from all of their teachers” and that “less than one-third of the sample had had poetry consistently offered them and remembered it” (Wade & Sidaway, p.81). But interestingly, students seemed to want to read and write more poetry than their teachers thought. Wade and Sidaway (1990) suggest that there is “an untapped reservoir of interest and motivation which could be

exploited profitably” (p.81). What if this same inconsistency exists between students and teachers in all schools? If students were more interested in poetry than teachers perceived, then it is only a matter of teaching more poetry.

The study concludes that “whereas teachers revealed concern for poetry aligned to lack of confidence, pupils showed receptiveness and interest regardless of particular approaches or even neglect by their schools” (p.83). This is good news for poetry instruction, though the study also found that “insufficient [was] time given to poetry” and that “the gap between attitudes and actual practice is shown to be a chasm” (p.83). I fear that this may currently be the case in my school, as well as schools across America. What if teachers shy away from poetry because they feel students aren’t receptive, but they really are? This is one issue I hope to question in order to identify a solution.

Nearly ten years later Benton (2000) sought to identify problems in the poetry curriculum. His study is a comparison of survey data collected from teachers in 1982 and 1998. Benton was looking to identify changes in poetry teaching and what forces were impacting that poetry instruction. What Benton found was that it wasn’t so much the teaching of reading and writing poetry that teachers were struggling with but the effects of a standardized curriculum and standardized tests such as the SAT (p.81). Once again, this study was done in the United Kingdom, but closely represents what I have seen in my own classroom and school. The UK had developed a national curriculum that dictated what English teachers had to cover in class. The national curriculum did, of course, cover poetry, but it was prescriptive. The 1995 National Curriculum included “naming of specific authors and heavy stress on the pre-20th century canon” (p.83). With this sort of prescription, it is clear why “over 50% of

teachers surveyed agreed with the proposition that ‘The English curriculum is too crowded for me to be able to teach as much poetry as I would like in my classes,’ and 55% of teachers in the survey felt that the prescriptive nature of the National Curriculum prevented them from teaching some poems they would like to teach” (p.84). This is a cautionary tale on the effects of mandated standards. Standards and curriculum designs are fine as long as they have teacher input and keep from being prescriptive.

Fortunately, the curriculum guidelines are not heavily monitored in their implementation. Benton (2000) notes that “some 40% of teachers felt it had not had any significant effect on their practice” (p.85). This is data I can believe. As state standards have changed in Oklahoma three times in my five years of teaching, I have made very little changes to my instruction based on those standards. That being said, it means that is not the fault of the standards that poetry instruction is missing from my practice. So, perhaps it is something else.

Benton’s (2000) suggestion is that it is less the curriculum and more the standardized exams (p.86). Benton found that teachers “were extremely critical of the effects of SATs” (p.86). In fact, “58% saw the effects of SATs as negative” in relation to poetry teaching (p.86). This is something that also concerns me. There are so many things I must cover for standardized tests that poetry often gets left behind because it is nonexistent on the exams. Of the teachers who viewed the effects of the SATs on poetry teaching negatively “the most pressing concern was that time which they had formerly given to poetry was now preempted by other aspects of the English curriculum” (p.86). What is interesting though from the study is that “the concern is

not with *how* one teaches poetry but with the students' more limited experience of poetry" (p.86). This is interesting because I would guess that poetry wasn't being taught as often because teachers were concerned with how to best teach poetry, but time constraints are of the highest concern to these teachers in the study.

The study does note that there have been gains in the teaching of poetry but that a national curriculum and standardized tests such as the SATs "lead to teaching to the test", a falling off in enjoyment of poetry, a closing down of some thing that teachers previously valued and a loss of the creative to the analytical" (p.92). I fear these are the same effects we see in the U.S.

Maranto (2015) echoes these sentiments in his article published fifteen years later and in America. Maranto, chair in Leadership at the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, asks, "why don't schools teach poetry" (p.165)? His concerns rise from his firm belief that poetry offers students many things. According to Maranto, poetry "can encompass science," "express faith," and "reflect history" (p.167-168). Of course, Maranto admits that "public schools actually still do teach poetry, but far less of it than in the past" (p.169). His supporting data? Maranto makes most of his accusations based on the use of Common Core State Standards. He notes that a friend of his recently had his book on teaching poetry cancelled and the publisher blamed CCSS (p.170). Not only was his friend duped by the CCSS, but also his children. Maranto says that the local public school "cut poetry and upped technical reading in literature classes to make them more factual than fictional, citing the CCSS" (p. 170). This is a fad I saw sweep across the state of Oklahoma during my student teaching and first few years as a teacher. There was this pressure to tie nonfiction into

the curriculum as much as possible, which meant eliminating smaller works like short stories and poems. In fact, I now spend more time working with nonfiction pieces in my classroom than I do poetry. It is true that Common Core State Standards favor nonfiction over fiction, but that is across the curriculum, not just in English. Of course science, history, and math classes should be based in nonfiction, leave the fiction and poetry to the English teachers. Though it would be easy to just blame CCSS for a lack of poetry in our schools, it can be seen that teachers were struggling with poetry long before Common Core State Standards (Logan, 1960; Burroughs, 1977; Mainprize, 1982; Moore, 2002; College Board, 2017).

Apart from curriculum, standards, and testing, there are other factors for why poetry may be lacking in the English classroom. Hughes and Dymoke (2011) sought to identify preservice teachers' preconceptions about poetry and poetry teaching and then transform those preconceptions. Hughes and Dymoke identified seven different preconceptions: (1) "poetry is boring and students resist poetry" (2) "poetry is for the elite" (3) "poetry is inaccessible" (4) "poetry is frill" (5) "student poetry is too difficult to evaluate" (6) "analysis is at the heart of understanding poetry" and (7) "poetry is a solitary art" (p.49-54). Working with 56 teacher candidates in two preservice English methods courses, Hughes and Dymoke were able to tackle these preconceptions head on through wikispaces (p.46). From their findings, Hughes and Dymoke (2011) believe that "teacher beliefs and attitudes strongly affect student learning, and if teachers believe their students will not enjoy poetry, or if they themselves are anxious about poetry, it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy" (p.54). For this very reason, it is crucial that English teacher candidates leave school with a confidence in all the subject

matter they may teach. Of course, this is a daunting task, but one that can be conquered. It will be interesting to note from survey data why teachers don't teach poetry as often, if in fact it is being neglected. Will teachers cite standards and testing, or their own negative preconception to poetry?

Revitalizing Poetry Instruction: Best Practices for Strengthening Poetry

Instruction

Much has been written on revitalizing the teaching of poetry in the language arts classroom, but before you can adjust the curriculum you have to identify what the real problem is. I hope to identify that problem through this study, but Keil (2005) has one suggestion. She believes that the lack of poetry in our classrooms stems from a lack of joy associated with poetry. And it makes sense. How many English teachers do you know that became teachers because they simply love books? I know I did. When people ask why I teach, I always answer the same way. I teach because I love teenagers (I'm crazy, I know) and because I love books. I could write a Dr. Seuss book about all the places and spaces where I could read a book. I could read on a train. I could read in the rain. I could read while leaning on a cane... But what kind of books do I read? I read stories not volumes of poetry. If novels disappeared, I am not sure I would be a teacher. So why is that not the case with poetry?

Keil (2005) claims that "students and teachers have grown alienated from and frightened of poetry" (p.97). And this fear has lead many of us to "avoid poetry entirely or teach it without enjoying it or modeling love of it" (p.97). In fact, Keil comes to the conclusion that she "was helping to create and maintain the malaise in the small, rural, university town that is home to [her] ninth grade students" (p.97). With this conclusion,

Keil set out to find a way to rediscover the joy of poetry. She was bound and determined to find a way to bring poetry to her students that often felt defeated by poetry before they had even tried to understand. Keil's goal was to help students "reconnect to those early days when poetry was not tiresome and threatening but carefree and fun" (p.98).

With that mission, Keil took her ninth graders back to childhood by letting students frolic outside as they played with jacks, hula-hoops, colored chalk, and bubbles. She needed to let them play. She encouraged students to take this playtime and apply it to poetry; to play with language. By letting students loose and free to create, they were more willing to engage with poetry. Keil included types of poetry writing like simile poems and found poetry. She found that "bringing students to poetry through writing lets them experience the success and satisfaction of writing poetry and helps them gain confidence as they listen to and understand the poems of their peers" (p.99). By allowing her students to first find joy in poetry from their own writing, they were better able to connect with the language. It was no longer about trying to solve the puzzle that poetry had been made out to be. "Once students have been hooked, they are more willing to look at other poems, contemporary and classical, as having value" (Keil, 2005, p.99). It is the value that students must see first. Students will never enjoy or "get" poetry if they do not see the value in it. And that is true for all literature.

Poetry does not have to be an elusive creature that evades the masses. That is not its purpose. Poetry can "rescue volatile teenagers grappling with life issues" (Keil, 2005, p.100). It is how students find voice and meaning. It is Keil's firm belief that poetry must be approached personally, before analytically. She writes that "using

student poetry as studied text will add more validation to student voices and student poetry can also be a rich source to tap when ready to address poetic elements” (p.100)

We, as teachers, have to remember that poetry does not and should not be about figuring out what the lines mean, but simply wrestling with the language. What better way to wrestle with language than poetry? And wrestling gets personal. Keil’s final claim is that “poetry is about interacting intimately with language. As students manipulate words to express their feelings, they are apprentice artisans growing in skills and ideas that will help them become masters (p.101). And isn’t mastery our goal? Not just masters of poetry, but masters of language. Poetry writing skills “will spill over into other writing genres and into reading abilities” (Keil, 2005, p.101). So, amongst all the testing and state mandates, students need to play with language. They need to find joy, and the rest will fall into place. Teachers too need to find joy in poetry because we “do not have to be a great master of poetry, just-like [our] students-an apprentice artisan who takes great joy in the dance” (Keil, 2005, p.101).

But finding the joy in poetry is perhaps a little easier said than done. When students have deep-rooted anxieties and negative assumptions about poetry, it can be very difficult to play with language the way Keil would like us to. Apol and Macaluso (2016) offer teachers one approach to combat student anxiety in relation to poetry. The two educators came up with a process for poetry reading and writing that would ask “the writer to step back and remain silent, thus removing the author’s interpretive control over the work” (p.31). Apol and Macaluso (2016) identify two common assumptions that they have seen in their classrooms. The first is that students often believe that poetry is not for them, but because of its “rigid set of rules” that it must

only be for experts (Ap.32). The second assumption is that “poetry is intensely personal. Therefore, a poem can mean whatever the reader and/or writer wills it to mean” (p.33). These two assumptions seem fairly accurate, as I hear many of my students make the same comments.

To combat these assumptions, Apol and Macaluso set five clear guidelines for their Author-Out Workshop. The Author-Out workshop is a poetry-writing workshop. This approach allows for a rich experience with the writing process. The first guideline in this writing workshop is that “the writer reads the poem aloud without any additional explanation” (p.34). This guideline ensures that when a student read his/her poetry to peers, they can’t add any additional commentary, allowing readers a chance to understand the poem on their own.

The second guideline requires “the writer listen to the negotiation of readers’ interpretations” (p.34). This is interesting because the writer is forced to listen to how their writing is being interpreted and where their intentions don’t match up with readers’ understanding. “Listening to readers interpret a poem without directing or correcting allows a writer to witness how readers make meaning and undermines the notion that a writer’s intent is the sole determiner of the meaning of the poem” (p.34). I like this idea because it teaches students about reading and writing processes. It allows students a chance to see the effects of their language choices and identify any points of tension.

The third guideline asks the “readers [to] listen and comment on how the poem works” (p.35). When students follow this guideline in the workshop, it allows the readers to listen actively as they mark up the poem for how the poem works. The

readers mark the poem with “things they notice, appreciate, or wonder” (p.35). This keeps the readers engaged with “how the poem works” and less on the actual content of a poem and the vulnerability of the writer.

The fourth guideline requires that “readers use ‘I statements’ and speak to other readers about the poem” (p.35). When the readers are “unpacking” the poem and analyzing it, they are required to make statements that begin with “I”. It reminds the other readers, and especially the writer, that “this is one person’s personal understanding, an individual making sense of the work based on the cues provided and his or her own particular experiences, perspectives, imaginings” (p.35). This way of responding also adds a sense of ownership of the comments being made. Each reader will understand a poem in a slightly different light, and this pushes the readers to acknowledge what they bring to the poem when they read it. This reader-response perspective is helpful when reading any type of writing; allowing students to go beyond an efferent reading to an aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1995).

The fifth, and final guideline requires that “readers refrain from addressing the writer” (p.35). Apol and Macaluso want their students to only discuss the poem amongst the other readers, and not talk directly to the writer. Their wish here is for students to experience what it is like in the real world. We rarely discuss a poem with the writer in the room to help guide and explain. So, the readers talk amongst themselves as the writer listens. No comments are directed to the writer. “The reader guidelines allow the writer to listen in on how a poem is understood” without changing the meaning or influencing the discussion (p.35).

Apol and Macaluso have found that this method breaks students assumptions about poetry being too difficult and too personal to share with classmates. They feel that the guidelines “shift the attention from the person to the poem, making revision and analysis both possible and desirable” (p.36). This approach to poetry writing beefs up anything I have ever done in my classroom. It legitimizes the writing of a poem. It becomes an intensive writing workshop and less of “write about your feelings” exercise. The Author-Out approach to poetry writing workshops adds a rigor to students reading and writing of poetry.

While Apol and Macaluso renew the poetry writing experience, Barton (2002) aims to update the entire poetry unit. Now, the poetry unit is something I struggle with a little bit. Why should poetry be separated out into one, solo unit? Should poetry not be incorporated throughout the curriculum? This is one question I am very interested in. We don't teach a “novel unit”, so why would we teach a poetry unit? Barton (2002) was prompted to renew his poetry unit when he realized that his “poetry unit had drifted pretty far from what [he] believed poetry to be about and was becoming more and more about forms and exercises” (p.56). What or who was to blame for this drifting? Barton argues that it was teachers like him “who over a period of time, lost their true purpose and smothered the fire that was poetry with a blanket of academic structure” (p.56). It is this academic structure “that concerns itself primarily with the end result, the measurable product as opposed to the messy, sometimes indefinable process” (p.56). We know that it is in the process where the real learning happens. It is not in the end product. Same goes for this thesis. The learning that I have engaged in while writing and rewriting IRB proposals, surveys, abstracts, and all the emails in between is far

greater than the final product that will be tucked away in a library somewhere to collect dust. It is the process that will live inside me and affect my students and colleagues.

In his quest to renew the poetry unit, Barton came across the idea that poets fall in love with words and wordplay long before they actually start writing poems. Barton set out to help his students become lovers of words. He now starts his poetry units by asking his students, “What’s your favorite word” (p.57). From that single question his students ran, perhaps even flew. He had his students engage in wordplay. They had to write about their favorite word. Why they liked it. They could write anything, and they did. The thing is, that is all he did. Barton exclaims that he’s “given up trying to teach poetry writing and [has] started trying to make poets because that’s where it starts” (p.57). We have to throw out whatever doesn’t work, and perhaps starting with the same 2Pac song and showing students that rappers are poets, isn’t the way to get students hooked on poetry. Of course, teaching form is not to be eliminated. Barton does note that once students get the hang of wordplay with poetry that they “begin demanding form” and “seek ways to sharpen and expand what they want to say, and that leads them naturally to structure” (p.58). Ultimately, poetry teaching comes down to letting students play with language naturally, not to force forms and structures onto them. Students need room to breath when they write, and we need to let go a little. This open approach will also take the pressure off of teachers who sometimes feel a little inadequate teaching poetry. Barton’s approach allows students and teachers to learn and grow together. The teacher guides and the student explores.

Of course there are countless recommendations for how to approach poetry instruction, and how to upgrade from the “read this poem and write about it” structure

that we have limited ourselves with. The *English Journal* alone offers enough suggestions for teachers who wish to shake things up, and the *English Journal* is only one source. But it is clear that poetry does matter, teachers have real anxieties about teaching poetry, and there are sources to help ease those anxieties.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Poetry instruction is undoubtedly important to the language arts curriculum (Dunning, 1966), but are teachers putting enough emphasis on poetry and are students getting what they need? I know that in my classroom, poetry has taken a backseat to other genres of writing, but why? Perhaps I am not as confident in teaching poetry, perhaps even, that it isn't as important on standardized tests as other texts and I have let those tests dictate my classroom. Some answers can be found through a survey of the teachers and students at my school. Once these questions are answered, perhaps we can move forward with how we can better incorporate and teach poetry in the high school classroom.

This is an auto ethnographic study into my own poetry instruction, colleagues' poetry instruction, and the perceptions of our students. Along with my own dialogue and perceptions of teaching poetry, I decided to include survey data from both teachers and students in my school with the hopes that I could identify some problems in order to begin solving those issues. The ultimate goal of this study is to find ways to increase poetry instruction as well as the quality of poetry instruction in the high school classroom.

Description of the Classroom & School

The school in which I work is located in a suburb of a major metropolitan city. There is a large research university within a few miles of the school. It is important to note this because many of the Language Arts teachers at the school have close ties with the university. Many of the teachers either graduated from the university or are current students working on advanced degrees.

I have spent my entire teaching career at this school. I completed my student teaching at the school in the fall of 2012 and was hired that following spring semester. I am now reaching the end of my fifth year at the school. In fact, the seniors surveyed were my first group of freshman and now are my most recent graduating seniors. Many of the seniors in my English I class are now in my English IV class.

Administration of Survey

I gave the survey to seniors through their English IV classes. The survey was given on the same day as the course evaluation, after final exams have been taken. Students knew that their completion or answers on the survey had no impact on their final grade. Because of this, it is hard to know how seriously each student took the survey. A standard script was used in the administration of the survey. See appendix A. The teacher survey was given via email correspondence. See appendix B.

Teacher Survey

I knew that my poetry instruction was lacking, but I was wondering if that was the case throughout the department. First, I asked teachers to respond on a scale of 1-5 to a series of statements. In their responses, 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. The statements asked teachers to reflect on their poetry teaching practices as well as their understanding of poetry. See appendix B for the full survey.

Statement One: I feel confident in my ability to teach poetry.

As a teacher, I often avoid teaching things that are out of my comfort zone. I could see why teachers may not feel confident in their ability to teach poetry because of my own hesitation. There was not an emphasis on poetry in my high school classes, I took one poetry course in college (which was not required), and never took a course on

teaching poetry during my undergraduate or graduate studies. On that line of thinking, I also wanted to be able to compare a teacher's confidence in teaching poetry to not only their own abilities to work with poetry (statements two and three), but also to how often they teach poetry and how adequately those teachers cover poetry in their classrooms (statements twelve and thirteen).

Statement Two: I feel confident in my own ability to read and analyze poetry.

I want to use this statement to compare confidence with enjoyment (question five). Though there are various reasons to enjoy reading poetry, part of it might be because one feels confident in their ability to read and analyze that poetry. I am not sure I would enjoy reading poetry if I thought I didn't understand what was happening in a poem. Following this same logic, I would imagine that teachers, who are confident in their ability to read and analyze poetry, feel confident teaching it as well. I spent all four years of my undergrad analyzing novels, and now I feel quite confident in my ability to not only read and analyze, but also in my ability to teach students how to read and think critically of the novels I put in front of them.

Statement Three: I feel confident in my own ability to write poetry.

Along the same lines as statement one, statement two and three asked teachers to reflect on their own abilities with poetry. I wanted to separate read and analyze from write, because those tasks are very different. I love reading novels, but writing novels is a completely different task that I do not enjoy. We often do two things with poetry. Analysis of poetry requires close reading and insight and is often considered the more academic activity, while writing poetry is more of a creative process. I would argue that while writing poetry is a creative process, it is also very analytical. But it is because of

the creativity that poetry can difficult to assess and grade. It is hard to grade creativity, as it is very subjective, and perhaps that means we don't engage in that creative process because we feel it cannot be assigned a grade, and therefore it has little value in a classroom strapped down by standards and multiple-choice tests.

On another note, I feel confident in my ability to analyze poetry, but not write poetry. It's always been easier for me to think and write about other's poetry than to write my own. I suppose because that was the skill I usually practice. All of my college English courses centered around analyzing poetry, not writing poetry. Because of this, I rarely ask my students to write poetry. Why would I ask them to do something that I don't feel confident in? Perhaps this lack of confidence is at the core of why poetry falls to the wayside in my classroom.

Statement Four: I teach poetry outside of the typical poetry unit.

Part of my own frustration with poetry curriculum stems from "poetry units." A poetry unit is lovely as it lays the foundation for all other poetry instruction, but it also limits poetry. I have found that when I teach a poetry unit, I am trying to find the best of the best poems (who is to say what is best?) and the unit becomes very technical and less creative. And often, what I may think is great, falls limply into the laps of students. It could be that the poetry that moves me, isn't the poetry that moves students. Perhaps it is the age difference, but I suspect it has more to do with my high level of interest in the written word and general teenage apathy. Of course, students can't be blamed for this. It is my job as the teacher to break through that apathy.

Statement Five: I enjoy reading poetry.

I think it is safe to say that we, as teachers, often focus on the things we enjoy doing. For instance, I enjoy having discussions about issues, therefore a lot of my classroom instruction is discussion based. If a teacher didn't enjoy reading poetry, I would imagine that his/her classroom wasn't full of poetry instruction. In my practice, students can sense when I am having fun, and they usually have fun as a result. I can only imagine how torturous a poetry lesson would be if neither the teacher nor the student was having any fun.

Statement Six: I enjoy writing poetry.

I asked this statement and the previous to see if there was a correlation between teachers who enjoyed reading and writing poetry, to teachers that feel they teach poetry well in class. I would imagine that teachers who enjoy reading and writing poetry would also enjoy teaching it.

Statement Seven: I wish I used poetry more often in my classroom.

This is a rather direct statement. I simply want to know if my colleagues also wish they used poetry more in their classrooms.

Statement Eight: My students seem reluctant to engage in poetry lessons.

I often stray from poetry lessons because my students don't seem to engage in poetry the way they do with non-fiction articles, novels, or even short stories. A classroom can get uncomfortable when students aren't engaged and if students are reluctant to engage (for whatever reason) I would be tempted and have been tempted to lessen the amount of poetry I put before them.

Statement Nine: I enjoy teaching poetry.

Put quite simply, I teach what I enjoy. If teachers enjoy teaching poetry, one would think that they would teach it more often. On that same train of logic, perhaps the more a teacher enjoys a topic or form; the more enthusiastic their students may be to consume that topic or form.

Statement Ten: I integrate poetry into all curriculum units.

This is an important statement because I want to know whether or not teachers integrate poetry into multiple units, or if they stick to a self-contained poetry unit. I would never limit non-fiction articles to one unit, so why would I limit poetry that way? I do think, however, that many teachers, myself included, get to April (National Poetry Month) and decide to teach a mini unit on poetry and then leave it at that. Poetry instruction should go far beyond self-contained units if we want students to feel more confident in their abilities to read and write poetry.

Statement Eleven: I think poetry is valuable in the English Language Arts Classroom.

This statement is crucial. If a teacher believes that poetry is only “fluff” they are less likely to use poetry. Sometimes it is hard for me to justify teaching a poem in class when I could be helping my seniors write scholarship essays and resumes. I have felt pressure to make sure that I am teaching “real-world” English. Meaning that everything I teach has a direct correlation to the world my students will enter. Though, of course, the argument can be made that nothing is more real world than a poem that reaches far into the depths of our souls.

Statement Twelve: I teach poetry on a regular basis.

This question relates to question four and ten in that it is asking teachers whether or not poetry is taught often, in conjunction with other forms of literature, or if it is isolated to a stand alone unit.

Statement Thirteen: I feel I adequately cover poetry in my classroom curriculum.

This question is related to questions four, seven, ten and twelve. Even if a teacher only teaches poetry in an isolated unit, they may feel that they adequately cover poetry curriculum. If teachers only teach poetry in an isolated unit, I would like to know if they feel it is adequate or not.

Free Response Questions

After responding to the thirteen statements on poetry instruction, I asked teachers to respond to four short answer questions. These four questions ask about similar issues from the scale questions, but I left these questions open-ended so that teachers felt the freedom to say things that could not be conveyed on a scale of 1-5. Questions one and three focus on actual instruction as it regards to poetry curriculum. I wanted to see if a variety of lessons and poems were being taught.

1. What is your favorite poetry lesson/activity to teach?
2. Tell me why you like or dislike teaching poetry.
3. What is your favorite poem to teach? Why?
4. Do you wish you used poetry on a more regular basis in classroom lessons?

Why?

Student Survey of Seniors in High School

Many of the same questions were repeated in the student survey. I wanted to see student perceptions of the poetry instruction they had received during their four years of

high school. I also wanted to be able to compare student responses to the responses of their teachers. The student survey questions asked students about their perceptions of their confidence in working with poetry, their enjoyment of poetry, and the poetry instruction they received in high school. I asked students to respond on a scale of 1-5 to a series of statements, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. See appendix C for the complete survey.

Statement One: I feel confident in my ability to read and understand poetry.

With this statement I was looking to see how many students felt strongly in their ability to work with poetry. I also wanted to be able to compare this response to teacher responses from statement thirteen in the teacher survey.

Statement Two: I feel confident in my ability to write poetry.

I asked this question because I wanted to see if there was a difference in student perceptions of ability to read and understand poetry (statement one) compared to write poetry. While writing poetry is an analytical task, it is also highly creative. While students may feel confident in their analytical skills, they may feel less confident when it comes to creativity.

Statement Three: My high school teachers spent quality time teaching poetry.

This statement must be taken with a grain of salt. This response will be highly biased. What is quality time to one student may not be to another. Likewise, quality time in a student's mind might not be quality time according to the teacher. I just wanted a general feel for student perception of time spent on poetry.

Statement Four: I enjoy reading and writing poetry.

I felt it necessary to ask about enjoyment of poetry because that can change perceptions of ability and their responses to other questions. A student who enjoys reading and writing poetry might wish there had been more poetry instruction in class (statement five), while a student who dislikes reading and writing poetry wishes there was less.

Statement Five: I wish there had been more poetry in my high school English classes.

This statement is a follow-up question to statement four. I was curious to see if students wished to have more or less poetry instruction. Perhaps even a student wishes there had been more poetry in his/her English class and because of that does not feel confident in his/her ability to read and analyze poetry (statement two).

Statement Six: Poetry was a regular component in my high school English classes.

This statement directly addresses poetry curriculum and how often students were exposed to poetry in relation to their general language arts curriculum.

Statement Seven: It is important to learn about poetry in high school.

This statement dives into student beliefs in regard to the validity of poetry instruction. Do students find it useful or just another box to check during their four years of high school survey courses.

Statement Eight: My high school English teachers liked teaching poetry.

I wanted to include this statement because I was interested to see if students perceived teacher enthusiasm with the subject. Perhaps the students could sense apprehension from the teacher or assumed the teacher loved teaching poetry because it was a regular topic in class.

Free Response Questions

I asked three free response questions in the student survey. I wanted to see specific reasons as to why or why not students enjoyed poetry. I also asked students to identify their favorite poetry lesson or activity. I asked this question because I wanted to know what activities resonated with students regardless of whether or not they liked poetry. I ended the survey with a very open ended question that asked students to discuss how they felt about their overall exposure to poetry in high school. Answers to these questions will hopefully help clarify any thoughts or questions unanswered in the general Likert scale survey.

1. What was your favorite poetry lesson/activity in high school?
2. Tell me why you like or dislike poetry.
3. How do you feel about your overall exposure to poetry in high school.

Study Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations and restrictions of this study. This study was done with two hundred students in a suburban school in the Midwest. If this study had been conducted with two thousand students, versus the mere two hundred, survey data could have been wildly different. The same goes for the teacher population surveyed. This survey only collected data from one English department from a school in a thriving university town. If the survey had been conducted in a city further away from a continuing learning institution or deep in an urban metropolis, the results could have been drastically different. There is no way to tell if the results would have been better or worse. The survey also asked senior students at the end of the spring semester their thoughts on poetry instruction. The timing of the survey could have also played a role in responses. Responses could be overly positive as students are feeling giddy and looking

back on fondly on their high school career, though results could be overly negative for the same reasons. The same could be said about teacher responses. Despite this study's limitations, it still explores teachers' and students' attitudes and perceptions toward poetry in the English Language Arts classroom.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis

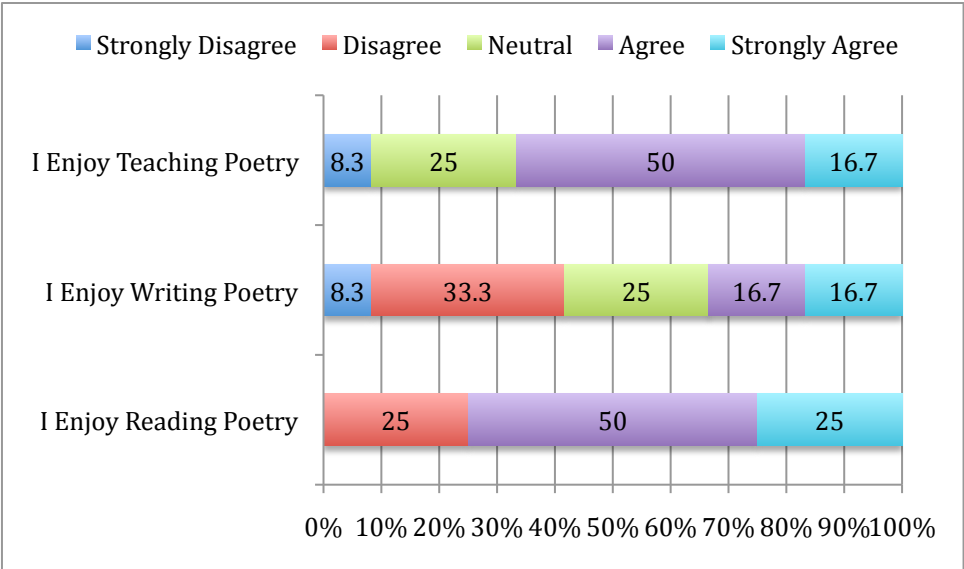
Once the surveys were administered, the data was analyzed to find any correlations, patterns, and most importantly insight into the nature of poetry instruction at my high school. Part of the analysis is through the lens of my research questions as well as information collected in my literature review. Does the research out there on poetry ring true in my classroom and school? Are there areas where my instruction and school instruction can improve? And based on the data, what strategies would best help my colleagues and me improve our poetry instruction? I was only hoping to find clarity about issues relating to poetry instruction as a means to move forward in building a strong poetry curriculum at my high school. These surveys served as a diagnostic test to determine what is and isn't working with teachers and students in hopes of creating a robust poetry curriculum in my school.

Teacher Survey Results

When I began to analyze the survey results from the teacher survey, I grouped the survey questions into five categories: enjoyment related to poetry, confidence engaging with poetry, value of poetry, poetry teaching practices, and student perceptions of poetry. Looking at survey results through these groups allowed me to draw conclusions about general perceptions of poetry and how those perceptions are related to the classroom. Teachers were asked to respond to statements on a Likert scale of 1 to 5. 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree.

Teacher Enjoyment Related to Poetry

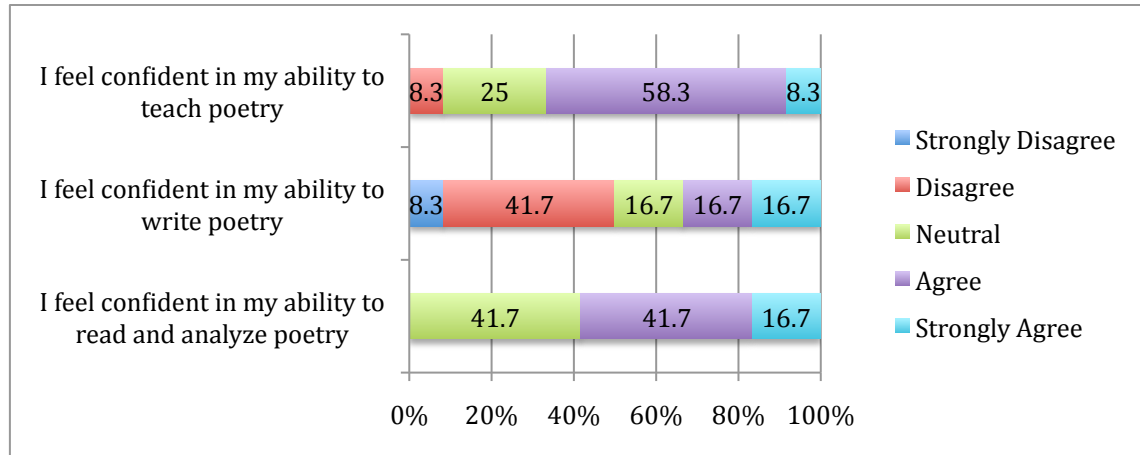
Figure 1: Teacher Enjoyment Related to Poetry



Questions that involved enjoyment where: I enjoy reading poetry, I enjoy writing poetry and, I enjoy teaching poetry. Of the teachers who responded, 75% of teachers enjoy reading poetry, while only a little over 30% of teachers enjoy writing poetry. I find this interesting, but not surprising, as writing poetry can be much more personal and I would assume that English teachers might do more reading than writing in general. That is an entirely different problem and a study for another day. Despite the lack of enjoyment when it comes to writing poetry, a majority of teachers claimed to enjoy teaching poetry. 66.7% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed to the statement about enjoying teaching poetry, with only 8.3% saying they strongly disagreed. 25% of teachers felt neutral about teaching poetry, which notes a lack of passion for the subject. Adding this 25% to the 8% who strongly dislike teaching poetry, means that a little over 30% of the teachers struggle with enjoying the teaching of poetry.

Confidence Engaging with Poetry

Figure 2” Teacher Confidence Engaging with Poetry



After looking at whether or not teachers enjoyed poetry, I wanted to know about their confidence in actually teaching poetry. Do the teachers who say they enjoy teaching poetry also feel confident in their teaching? And on the flip side, do teachers who dislike teaching poetry also lack confidence and perhaps that is why they dislike it? I asked the teachers three questions in regards to their confidence in engaging with poetry: I feel confident in my own ability to read and analyze poetry, I feel confident in my own ability to write poetry, and I feel confident in my ability to teach poetry. These questions also correlate to the enjoyment questions, as they are parallel questions.

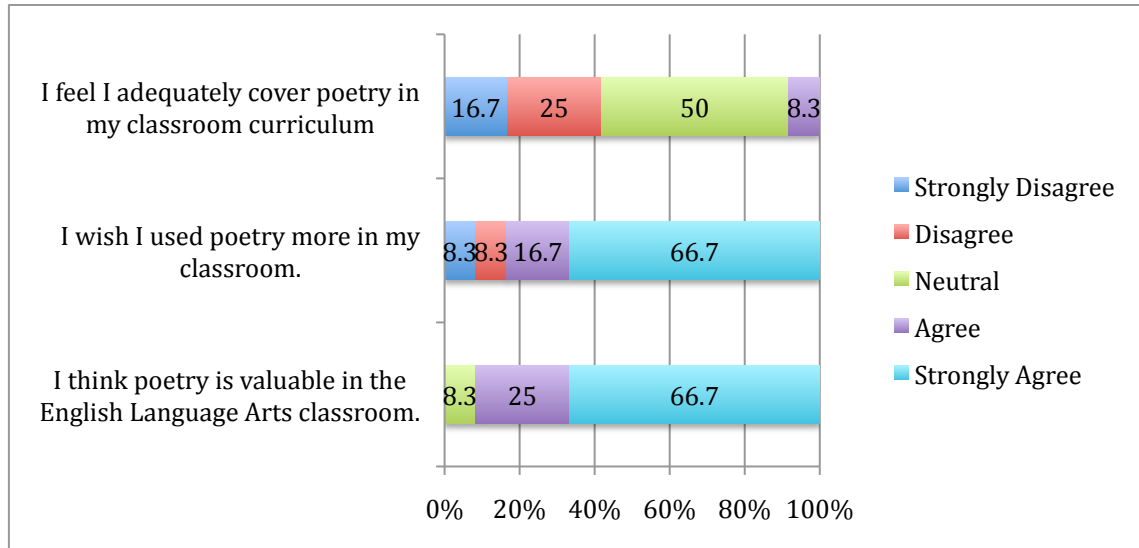
Not surprisingly, teachers' enjoyment of writing poetry almost perfectly mirrors their confidence in writing poetry with 50% of teachers reporting that they do not feel confident in their ability to write poetry. This makes sense as most people don't enjoy something they aren't good at. So, if a teacher enjoys writing poetry, they feel confident in their ability to write poetry. In turn, this means that 50% of teachers are asking students to write poetry when they themselves don't feel confident, or they are not asking students to write poetry at all. This is concerning. I would imagine that a math

teacher isn't asking students to solve problems they themselves feel uncomfortable solving, so why should English teachers ask students to do something we don't feel confident doing ourselves? Perhaps if more teachers felt confident in their abilities to write poetry, they would have their students write poetry more often.

The same correlation could not be found when it came to reading poetry. None of the teachers scored their confidence in their ability to read and analyze poetry below a 3, while 25% of them did say they didn't enjoy reading poetry. I would say that this is good news. Even if a teacher does not enjoy reading poetry, they still feel fairly confident in their ability to read and analyze a poem. Though it should be noted that nearly 42% of the teachers do feel neutral in their ability to read and analyze a poem. I would argue that even though no teachers responded negatively to this question, it is still concerning that 42% of teachers would acknowledge some difficulty in reading and analyzing a poem. Despite this fact, nearly 67% of the teachers felt confident in their ability to teach poetry, with 25% feeling neutral, and only 8.3% feeling a lack of confidence. This is a good sign that poetry instruction might not be in as bad of shape as I had hypothesized. Though this survey is limited to the teachers at one school, in one town.

Value of Poetry

Figure 3: Teacher Value of Poetry



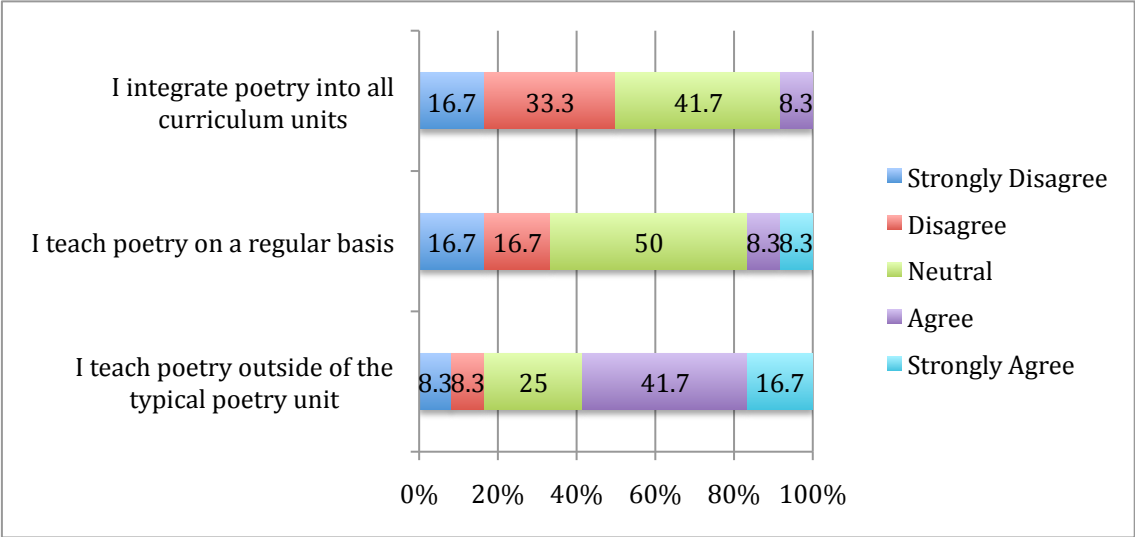
Regardless of teachers' enjoyment and confidence with poetry, the value they place on poetry instruction has a direct impact on the classroom. In order to assess whether or not teachers value poetry in the curriculum I asked teachers to respond to three different statements: I think poetry is valuable in the English Language Arts classroom, I feel I adequately cover poetry in my classroom curriculum, and I wish I used poetry more often in my classroom. Ideally, if a teacher places a high value on poetry in the classroom, then they would adequately cover poetry and wish to use it more often, but that is the ideal. You could argue that a teacher could highly value poetry and because of that feel that they never teach poetry as much as they should or that a teacher values poetry, but because of other values, poetry falls to the side. Along the same lines as adequately covering poetry in the classroom is the desire to use poetry more often.

Despite a teacher's enjoyment of reading or writing poetry, over 90% of teachers believe that poetry is valuable in the English classroom, with only 8% feeling

neutral. As suspected, the majority of teachers don't believe they adequately cover poetry in their classrooms even though they value poetry. In correlation, a majority of teachers do wish they used poetry more. 66.7% of teachers said they valued poetry in the classroom and 66.7% said they wished they used poetry more often.

Poetry Teaching Practices

Figure 4: Poetry Teaching Practices

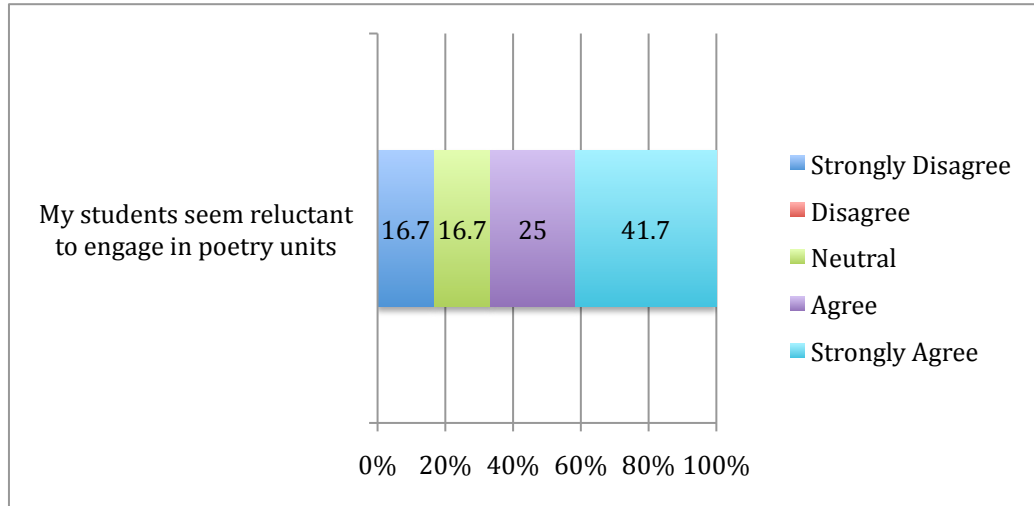


When asked about actual teaching practices, teachers were asked to respond to the following questions: I teach poetry outside of the typical “poetry unit”, I teach poetry on a regular basis, and I integrate poetry into all curriculum units. Only 8.3% of teachers said they teach poetry in all curriculum units, with the largest percent of teachers responding neutrally on the scale. Following this trend, teachers responded almost the same in regards to teaching poetry on a regular basis, with only slight gains in the strongly agree column. In relation, most teachers do not isolate poetry to a single unit. Roughly 83% of teachers responded with a 3 or above on the question, suggesting that while teachers don't teach poetry on a regular basis, they do teach it outside of the

typical poetry unit. This is good news. As we know that poetry can and should be infused throughout the English curriculum (Simmons, 2014).

Teacher Perceptions of Student Engagement

Figure 5: Teacher Perceptions of Student Engagement



The final Likert scale question asked teachers about their students' engagement with poetry. Teachers were asked to respond to the statement: my students seem reluctant to engage in poetry lessons. In correlation with most literature, teachers responded overwhelmingly that their students seem reluctant when it comes to poetry. Almost 67% of teachers responded with a 4 or 5 on this question, with 25% of teachers remaining neutral. Though, interestingly, 16.7% of teachers strongly disagreed with this statement. This gives hope that all is not lost and that given the right approach, students *can* be excited to work with poetry.

Free Response Questions

The free response questions allowed me to get a better glimpse into teachers' feelings and practices in regards to poetry instruction. The first free response question asked teachers why they liked or disliked teaching poetry. Most teachers acknowledged

both their likes and dislikes. There were varying reasons as to why teachers like teaching poetry, but there were two common responses. The first was that poetry can often be relatable and personal. Some responses included:

“I get to share in a very personal experience with the students. I get to understand their perspective better, especially since poetry is a condensed version/ expression of an author’s thoughts and ideas.”

“I like teaching poetry that is relates to students.”

“I like watching kids deal with poetry on their own terms.”

Some teachers even remarked that one reason they liked teaching poetry was because it was hard. They noted the importance of students stretching their brains by reading and analyzing poetry.

“I like letting students see that they have the power to get meanings from poems even though it’s harder.”

“It’s rewarding for them to see things that I haven’t discussed.”

“Students need to learn to stay with things even when they don’t immediately tell you what they mean.”

Despite giving reasons for why they liked teaching poetry, most teachers gave at least one reason as to why they disliked teaching poetry. The most common response was a concern about student willingness to engage and negative preconceptions about poetry. There was an overwhelming sense that even if a teacher was excited to teach poetry, the students had the power to stifle that excitement. Below are several responses.

“I dislike teaching poetry because once students hear that term they automatically seize with anxiety or disgust.”

“It is one of the more challenging things I teach due to student’s’ resistance. They have such a stigma against poetry that you definitely have to combat that.”

“Because students are reluctant to read poetry, it is often tricky to get them engaged.”

Though most of the survey focused on perceptions of teaching poetry, the two free response questions asked teachers about the content of their poetry curriculum. The first question asked teachers what their favorite poetry lesson is to teach, and the second asked what their favorite poem to teach is. These two questions focused on positive interactions with students and teaching poetry.

Of the responses to the first question, many teachers discussed lessons that required creativity and writing poetry with a personal connection. Teachers clearly value lessons that allow students to feel a personal connection to their writing and lessons that allow students to be creative. Interestingly, many teachers talked about the slam poetry unit that the sophomore English classes do every year. This unit comes at the end of the school year, right after state testing, when students need a chance to let loose and recover from rigorous test prep.

“Students seemed to enjoy the slam poetry unit because it allowed them to be more creative.”

“Slam poetry because my students feel empowered to express themselves and compose their own poems, rather than having to analyze someone else’s poem.”

“I do blackout poetry with some of poems at the beginning of the year. They liked the opportunity to be creative.”

“With my sophomores, we do a unit on slam poetry. We talk about their preconceptions of poetry at the beginning of the unit. This unit really seems to demystify poetry for them and allows them to appreciate an otherwise hated genre. It also allows them to gain confidence in their ability to write poetry.”

Other teachers discussed the importance of poetry analysis and the strategies they use to help students better understand poetry. These responses focused on techniques that allow students to engage with poetry in a new, and perhaps more friendly way. Teachers seems to be hyper aware of student preconceptions about poetry and try to find ways to make poetry more accessible to students. Some common responses were:

“I like to have students read poems three times out loud. First time we clarify words we don’t know, second time start to get at literal meaning, third time we start to notice device and effect. I tell them the only difference between me and them is that I’ve read the poems more times.”

“Students share/explicate poetry that they enjoy or have discovered.”

“(TPDASTT) with “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou”

The other content question asked teachers what their favorite poem to teach is. I asked this question to get a glimpse into what poems are being taught in my school and to note any trends in poetry selection. Though it can be valuable to read and study the same poem throughout the years. What happens if students are being asked to read and analyze the same poem year after year? Luckily, not one teacher responded with the same poem. In fact, each teacher mentioned different poets. A common reasoning for the use of certain poems was the poems accessibility and capacity for multiple interpretations.

“Tarantula Wasp ----I love this poem. I don’t have many poems that get me excited about poetry, but this is one. My students had lots of interpretations I didn’t expect. Some were outlandish, but I loved seeing them work with it.”

“I really enjoy teaching “My Papa’s Waltz”. Students have such varying perceptions about the poem and it allows for those interpretations to be validated.”

“ “A Dream Deferred” by Langston Hughes. My sophomores really struggle with what the theme is of the poem, but as we work through it I can see the theme “click” and they are so proud of themselves for giving it chance. They love the poem once they’ve figured it out.”

The final question of the survey asked teachers if they wished they used poetry more often in classroom lessons and why. Unfortunately two teachers indicated that they did not wish they used poetry more often, and upon investigation into those teachers other survey results, it is because they feel they already adequately cover poetry and don’t feel a need to increase their poetry instruction. However, these two teachers appear to

be outliers, as the rest of the teachers indicated that they do wish they used poetry more often. 25% of the teachers did acknowledge they wished they used poetry more, but their answer was more complicated than just wishing they used it more. Their answers seem to indicate that they wished they used it more, but there is some clear hesitation in their responses.

“I know I should, but overall poetry is not what I want to read. That being said, it’s my goal to do a better job with poetry this year. They need the exposure to poetry and I need to better serve the vertical team.”

“I do, but there are many things I wish I had more time to teach and honestly poetry is low on the list.”

On the reverse side, some teachers appeared very enthusiastic about bring more poetry into the classroom. They recognize the need to increase poetry instruction.

“I do wish that I used poetry more often. I think that it would help kids understand the way language works in all types of writing, not just poetry. Since I teach rhetorical analysis, I think that it is important that kids realize that the techniques of poetry/song writing/ etc. are applicable in all writing.”

“Yes, I want students to know that poetry is fun and a wonderful mode to communicate. I feel as though it possesses a negative connotation only because students are mostly exposed to very difficult pieces. They don’t get to enjoy a wide variety of poetry due to curriculum and time demands.”

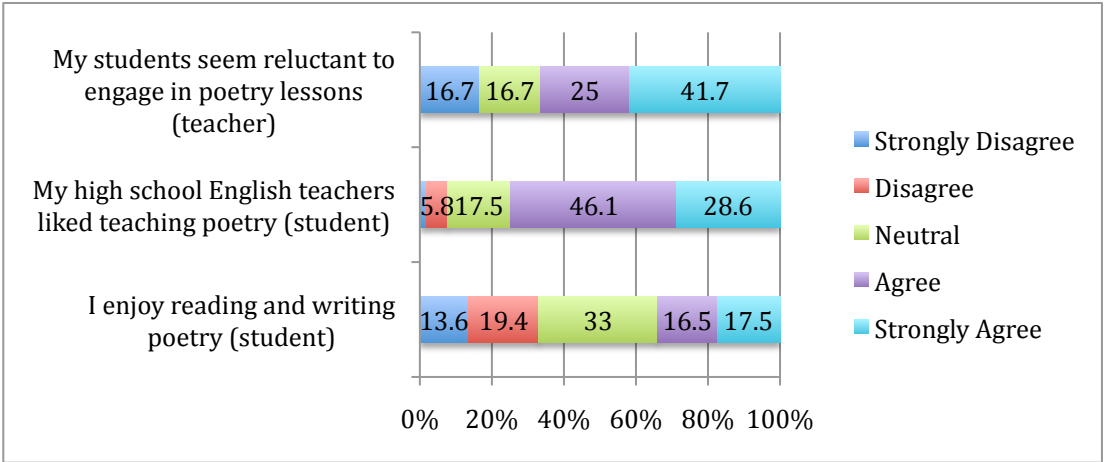
These responses are promising. All is not lost in poetry instruction in my high school, there just needs to be a revival amongst teachers

Student Survey Results

The student survey consists of responses from 206 graduating seniors. For the purpose of analysis, I divided the questions and responses into three major groups: enjoyment of poetry, confidence with poetry, and poetry instruction.

Student Enjoyment of Poetry

Figure 6: Student Enjoyment of Poetry



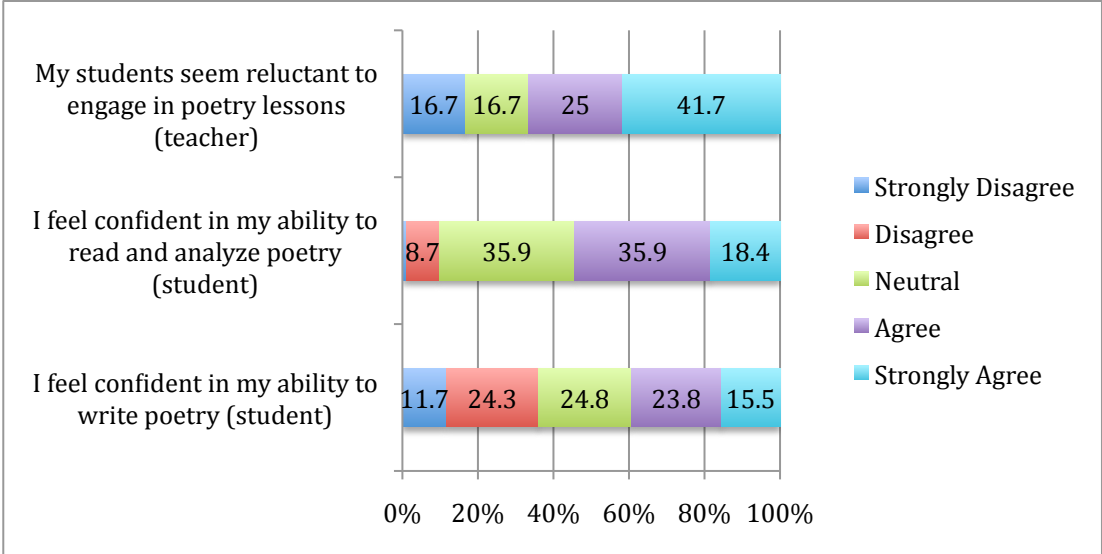
I first looked at enjoyment as it relates to poetry. I asked students if they enjoyed reading and writing poetry and whether or not they thought their teachers enjoyed poetry. These two questions have direct parallels to the teacher survey. If teachers perceive that their students are reluctant to engage in poetry instruction, but students actually tend to enjoy poetry, there is a clear disconnect. According to the survey data, that exact disconnect can be seen. Only 33% of students said that they disliked reading and writing poetry. Now, 68% neither disagreed nor agreed with the statement, but remained neutral. But, students who enjoy poetry or feel neutral about poetry make up 67% of the students. This is exciting news. If only 33% of a classroom disliked poetry, perhaps more teachers would feel more confident bringing poetry to students more often. There does seem to be a disconnect in students enjoyment of poetry and what teachers perceive. 67% of teachers said that their students were reluctant to engage in poetry lessons, but their enjoyment levels would suggest otherwise. Of course, with 33% of students feeling neutrally about poetry, teachers may perceive this neutrality as reluctance. There is also the idea that teacher and student conceptions of what poetry

instruction looks like vary greatly. It could be that the poetry we often want to teach and discuss is not the poetry students want to engage with. Just like there are avid readers who still won't read the class assigned novel. This is where bringing in student choice could strengthen poetry curriculum.

It is not just student enjoyment that matters, but also teacher enjoyment. I can remember high school classes where it was clear that the teacher disliked what they were teaching and therefore student engagement was low and the learning was painful. If students perceive that their teachers dislike poetry, it could be hard for them to get on board. Luckily, a sweeping majority of students believe that their teachers enjoyed teaching poetry. Nearly 75% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their teachers enjoyed teaching poetry. Less than 8% of students thought their teachers disliked teaching poetry. Students seem highly attuned to their teachers, as 8.3% teachers say they disliked teaching poetry and a little less than 8% of students noted that their teachers disliked teaching poetry. The implications being that students know when teachers aren't on board with a topic and may form their attitudes around the teacher's attitude.

Student Confidence with Poetry

Figure 7: Student Confidence with Poetry

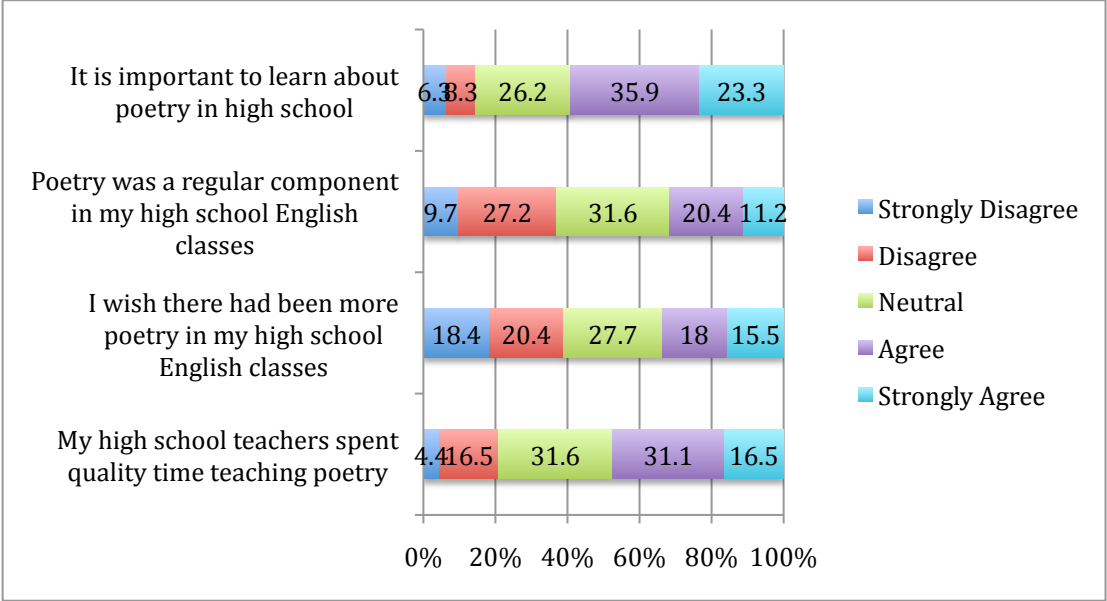


When looking at student confidence with poetry, I asked students to respond to two statements: I feel confident in my ability to read and understand poetry and I feel confident in my ability to write poetry. Unlike with the enjoyment question, I wanted to separate writing from reading because reading poetry and writing poetry are two very different things when it comes to performing. With the enjoyment question, I simply wanted to gauge overall enjoyment with poetry. I was pleasantly surprised by the overall response. More than a majority of students, 90%, scored the reading question as a 3 or higher, with 54% percent of students rating their confidence at a 4 or 5. There is, however, a clear distinction between reading and writing. Students feel less confident in their ability to write poetry, with more students scaling this question at a 1 or 2. Though students feel less confident in their writing abilities, 64% still scaled their writing abilities as a 3 or higher, with 39% scaling their confidence at a 4 or 5. Students appear much more confident in their poetry abilities than I hypothesized. This is also

interesting since many teachers reported that their students seemed reluctant to engage with poetry, despite the fact that students feel confident in their poetry abilities.

Poetry Instruction

Figure 8: Student Views of Poetry Instruction



To get a better look at what students perceive in the classroom, I asked students to respond to the following four statements: my high school teachers spent quality time teaching poetry, I wish there had been more poetry in my high school English classes, poetry was a regular component in my high school English classes, and it is important to learn about poetry in high school.

I would like to address the last question first. Students’ value of poetry can greatly affect their answers to the other three questions. 59% of high school seniors said they agreed or strongly agreed that it is important to learn about poetry, 26% remained neutral, while only 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This reinforces the findings of Wade and Sidaway (1990) that there is “an untapped reservoir of interest and

motivation which could be exploited profitably” (p.81). Students find value in poetry, so why not tap into that value?

Following this question, it is important to look at student perceptions of actual poetry instruction in their classes. If students feel that poetry is important, do they feel they received enough poetry instruction? Less than half of students (47%) believed their teachers spent quality time on poetry instruction (selecting at 4 or 5) with only 31.5% of students reporting that poetry was a regular component in their English classes. The most common response of these two questions was a 3, with 31.6% of students remaining neutral to both statements. The implications being that we as teachers could certainly do a better job of bringing poetry into the classroom.

Despite the responses to importance, amount of time, and regularity of poetry instruction, only 33.5% of students wish there had been more poetry in their high school English classes. Now, 27.7% remained neutral on this statement, but I think that says a lot. Regardless of the high value students place on poetry, they don't necessarily want more of it. This data, however, should be taken with a grain of salt. Do graduating seniors want more of any type of curriculum? No, they want to be done. We don't always want more of what we know is good for us. I know I should exercise and I know I don't do it enough, but that doesn't mean that I want to run more. This data correlates nicely with student enjoyment of poetry. As stated early, only 34% of students responded that they enjoyed reading and writing poetry. So, even if students see value, that doesn't mean they enjoy it. The thing with poetry instruction is that we should also be fostering a passion for reading and writing. Students should want to read and write poetry more often if we, teachers, are doing our job well.

Free Response Questions

The free response questions of the student survey reveal a lot about the poetry practices in the school and across the department. The responses also reveal interesting trends amongst the students. The first free response question asked students what their favorite poetry lesson or activity was in high school. With just a quick glance it became clear what the favorite activity was. 26% of students reported the same activity: slam poetry. Writing slam poems is part of the sophomore curriculum in our high school and continues to be one of the favorites. The slam poetry unit comes right after state testing when students and teachers can focus on curriculum that might not be found on the state exams. Combined with the students who explicitly mentioned slam poetry, 93 or 45% of students mentioned writing poetry. Students who extrapolated on why writing, most noted the ability to be personal and creative.

“Slam poetry was amazing. It was cool to put your own creative voice on an issue that’s important to you.”

“Any time we were allowed to write poetry was fun.”

“This semester in my creative writing class, we had poets come twice and we got to write our own poetry and they helped us to edit it. I submitted one of the poems I wrote that day to the issue of Soupstone, and it was in the running to win an award.”

“I liked any activity where we were actually writing poetry.”

“Slam poetry, because it gave me the opportunity to express myself and my own story.”

These responses highlight students’ love of writing poetry and their appreciation of having a chance to be creative and tell their stories. Some students also named specific teachers who emphasized poetry writing and their enjoyment in that class. Contrary to writing poetry, only 30% mentioned reading poetry as a favorite activity. 9 students

specifically wrote about reading Beowulf. This is not a surprising response as it is part of the senior curriculum and a fresh memory for students. When students explained why they enjoyed reading poems, most mentioned being able to find new or previously unseen meanings, becoming aware of the power of language.

“Discovering unexpected meanings behind poems.”

“Reading today’s songs and pulling it apart, reading between the lines.”

“Examining word play and extended metaphors.”

However, not all students answered the question positively. 17% of students provided some sort of negative response to this question. Answers varied from general dislike of poetry to a lack of any memorable poetry lesson. Though these responses are less than ideal, they are expected. Not all students enjoy school and English can be rather cumbersome to a student who generally dislikes reading and writing. If a math teacher had asked me what my favorite math activity was in high school, I would be hard pressed to answer that question positively.

Directly connected to the idea that some students simply dislike poetry, I asked students why they either liked or disliked poetry. Responses varied from a deep passion for poetics to a downright loathsome disregard for anything resembling a poem. When examining the reasons for students’ dislike of poetry, difficulty was the most common.

“Most poetry that we read is difficult to understand so I do not always understand what is going on in the poem and I become bored.”

“The language in poetry is beautiful and I wish I enjoyed it more. I just don’t always feel confident that I understand it, which makes me not want to read it because I feel incompetent and stupid. Obviously there are some that are way easier to comprehend than others but in general, I don’t enjoy what I don’t understand.”

“I don’t like poetry because it’s hard to understand.”

Along with students struggling to understand poetry, many voiced concerns over the selection of poetry they have been introduced to. The words “old” and “boring” were quite often used to describe this dislike.

“Shakespeare has been dead for awhile. Let’s move on and find someone new.”

“I hate reading poetry because most of the poetry we have to read is old and hard to understand.”

“Some poetry isn’t that bad but all of the poems we’ve read in school are difficult and not straightforward.”

Luckily, 46% of students had something positive to say about why they like poetry.

Two common themes emerged from their responses. For the most part students commented on the multiple levels of meaning in a poem or poetry’s relatability when it came to expressing emotions. Despite the difficulty in finding deeper meaning, some students enjoy identifying the less obvious in a poem.

“Poetry can express hidden meanings and express feelings people can’t.”

“I like that I can see a bit more into the initial understanding that typically blinds people.”

“It makes people think beyond the blunt meaning of words.”

When it comes to the emotional connection and relatability that students mentioned, most of their responses involved the writing of poetry, though the reading of poetry was not completely excluded. The implication being that perhaps the best way to working with poetry is through student writing, and not analysis of poems found in dusty anthologies. This is also the suggestion that Logan (1960) made, when his colleague said to always start with student writing (p.267).

“Poetry is great because you can express your feelings through an artful composition of words.”

“I like poetry because everyone can do it. The reason I enjoy it is because you can be as goofy or as serious as you want. It gives you a way to escape and write down your feelings.”

“I like poetry because it gives anyone a voice. Poetry is not as rigid as a research paper and it also allows for more personal connection. Once one understands poetry, it’s a fun way to express yourself and read about others expressions.”

The final question of the student survey asked students to comment on their overall exposure to poetry during high school. I originally divided the responses into positive and negative statements, though it became clear that a neutral category was also needed. The positive and negative responses were almost even, with 44% of students responding negatively and 43% of students responding positively. 13% of students remained neutral, as their responses were neither clearly positive nor negative. So neutral responses included statements like, “I feel indifferent about poetry instruction” and multiple students replied with simple, one-word responses like “ehh,” “eh?,” and “meh.”

Unlike the students who fell in the neutral category, students who identified a positive exposure to poetry in high school were a bit more descriptive in their responses. Many students noted the importance of working with poetry and found the time spent on poetry was quality.

“I feel that it was an eye-opening experience to the world and perspectives of others”

“I feel like we had great exposure to poetry throughout high school, focusing on one main type of poetry each year and then brushing over the smaller elements each year.”

“I was exposed to many different types of poetry from Odysseus to Poe. I feel I’ve seen a very broad spectrum of writing that has made me a more well spoken and cultured individual.”

As I suspected, however, many students, almost half, felt their exposure to poetry was less than stellar. Most negative responses mentioned a lack of time spent on poetry, student and teacher attitudes, and just a general absence in the curriculum.

“I’ve hardly had any exposure to poetry the past 4 years in high school. I had maybe one assignment each year that involved poetry.”

“Lackluster, only year that anything was done was sophomore year which lasted maybe 2 weeks.

“It was short-lived, and shallow.”

“It was a section every year that our teachers moved over really quickly. We didn’t really do much of it because the kids had such a hard time with it and the teachers it seemed like dreaded teaching it.”

While these responses are not surprising, they are heartbreaking. I am glad that 43% of students feel positively about their high school experience with poetry, but the fact that 44% of students feel as if they have been robbed of a proper poetry education saddens me. What is striking though is the contrast between students who had a positive poetry experience and those that had a negative experience. It appears that students’ exposure to poetry relies heavily on the teacher, and depending on which teacher the student had their experiences changes. Theoretically a student could have had a poetry enthusiast all four years and feel they received a superb poetry education, while another student could have had four teachers that found teaching poetry difficult and therefore there was little to no exposure to poetry. More must be done to help give all of our students a well-rounded education.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Next Steps

My questions are all answered
But there is more to be done
We can't just stop here
There's a battle to be won

Poetry is not dying
It has just fallen asleep
But it's time to be woken
For its secret I can't keep

We can help each other
Bring the poetry alive
Every child and student
Deserves a chance to take a dive

The point of this study was to identify common perceptions of teachers and students concerning poetry instruction and to compare those perceptions not only to each other but to what research has shown as well as what we know is good teaching practice. This data will allow teachers to remedy any identifiable problems. There are three standout issues with current poetry instruction: 1) teachers lack confidence in their ability to write poetry so are either not teaching writing or asking students to write poetry despite the fact that they themselves are apprehensive about writing; 2) teachers perceive that students are reluctant to engage with poetry, though for the most part students say otherwise; and 3) students appear to have very mixed reviews on the amount of poetry instruction they are receiving.

So, what can we, as English teachers, do to improve poetry instruction in order to give our students the best possible experience with poetry? I would like to suggest two actions that could lead to stronger poetry instruction; creating PLCs for teachers already in the classroom and improving college curriculum for preservice teachers.

The main goals of the PLCs will be to identify good strategies for teaching poetry and opportunities for teachers to practice their own poetry craft. This will not only help strengthen teachers' confidence with poetry, but will give them strategies for bringing poetry to students in order to maximize learning. Student engagement is at the core of poetry instruction. Students must feel a connection, and for lack of a better word, students should be having *fun* with poetry. There is no need for poetry to be a stuffy, inaccessible mode of writing.

One of my favorite suggestions for teaching poetry comes from William Wrigg and he suggests just that, have fun. Wrigg (1991) comments "teachers of English at all grade levels are often plagued with gnawing consciences over the paucity of time devoted to poetry in their classes." This "paucity" does continue to plague my classroom and Wrigg wants to give teachers at least one strategy to increase poetry instruction. Wrigg jumps right to the heart of the matter and suggests that teaching poetry is quite difficult because "despite the best of intentions many teachers are handicapped by a lack of that certain dramatic flair needed to inspire a genuine appreciation of poetry. And nothing is quite so boring or detrimental to the enjoyment of poetry as a poor reading of it." And Wrigg is right. More so than any other literary genre, except plays, poetry is meant to be performed. Poetry is a song without music. So what happens when we, the teachers, can't perform? The poem, or song, falls flat. Wrigg's strategy then to combat the fact that "there is really nothing intrinsic in the nature of poetry to explain its repugnance to many students" is to bring the poem to life with a record of the poem being performed. Wrigg admits that "the idea of using records as an aid in teaching poetry is far from an original one," but that we just need to

remember to do it, and do it right. I often forget that playing audio of a poem is an option when I feel uncertain about my own abilities to perform the poem. But even Wrigg acknowledges that “achieving a genuine appreciation of poetry is never easy even when the most effective methods are at one’s command.” By allowing myself to be open to new suggestions from new or experienced teachers, I allow myself to grow as a teacher. Growth is the goal of PLCs, and with PLCs teachers can expand their poetry curriculum and find ways to bridge the gap.

My other suggestion is to help teachers before they even step into the classroom. Lauren Apol and Kati Macaluso (2016) from Michigan State University created a course for preservice teachers called “Reading, Writing and Teaching Poetry” in order to “nurture students’ poetic passion and proficiency” (p.31). Apol and Macaluso hope to assuage preservice teachers’ fear and anxiety of teaching poetry by “providing positive experiences and helping [their] students gain confidence in themselves as readers and writers of poems, [they] hope [their students] will become teachers who pass on to their own students an engaged passion for poetry” (p.32). Though my study did not focus on preservice teachers or why teachers may be hesitant to teach poetry, there is still a clear sense that teachers don’t always know how to approach poetry, mainly due to student engagement. We could help incoming teachers avoid this problem with courses similar to Apol’s and Macaluso’s. Courses that not only taught best practice approaches to teaching poetry, but also the value of poetry would help instill a greater appreciation for why it is so important that we bring poetry to our students. Our students deserve poetry because, as one student said, “Poetry is a very human thing.”

Surprising Results

To conclude, I would like to point out that my study resulted in some rather surprising results. I was expecting more students to dislike poetry and for teachers to show a bigger resistance to teaching poetry. Most of my research from my literature review showed that teachers struggle to teach poetry and are reluctant to give it the time of day it deserves in the classroom. I would like to suggest that perhaps students and teacher were feeling overly positive about poetry instruction the day they took the survey. Though I trust the teachers and students, I am not sure their answers reflect what I have observed in my building. I rarely hear teachers talk about teaching poetry and my students never ask to read or write more poetry. I do feel, however, that there are rock star teachers in my building and that their instruction may be superior to teachers elsewhere. I would be curious though to actually break down the curriculum maps of the school's teachers and see how often poetry is actually taught.

I say all of this because despite my own acknowledgement that I should use poetry more often, especially in my AP Language course, I still don't. When push comes to shove, poetry is not on the AP test that my students will take and it always takes a backseat to other modes of writing and reading. I *know* my students need and deserve quality poetry instruction, but how do I make sure that happens?

Moving Forward

In order to make this study relevant to the actual poetry instruction in my building, I plan to debrief my colleagues on the results of the study and suggest poetry practices that could enhance our poetry instruction. Continuing this discourse will allow us to help each other form a stronger curriculum for our students. My hopes are for a

vertically aligned poetry curriculum that covers different forms and genres of poetry. As a department we have mapped out writing and reading skills as they apply to longer works of literature, so why not include a vertical alignment of poetry curriculum as well?

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Appendix A: Student Survey Administration Script

Kaysi Sheehan: *Dear students, thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey.*

Please remember that your answers are anonymous and you will not be penalized in anyway. I ask that you answer truthfully about your experiences with poetry during your time as a student at this school. Once you have turned in your signed consent form, you may type in the link provided to begin the survey. Thank you again for your participation. The results of this study will be used to improve poetry instruction for future students.

Appendix B: Teacher Survey Administration Script

Teacher survey was administered via email correspondence.

Kaysi Sheehan: *Dear teachers, thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey.*

Please remember that your answers are anonymous. I ask that you answer truthfully

about your experiences with poetry and your instructional practices. Once you have

turned in your signed consent form, you may click on the link provided to begin the

survey. Thank you again for your participation. The results of this study will be used to

improve poetry instruction for future students.

Appendix C: Teacher Poetry Survey

On a scale of 1 to 5: (1= strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree) please answer the following questions.

I feel confident in my ability to teach poetry.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel confident in my own ability to read and analyze poetry.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel confident in my own ability to write poetry.	1	2	3	4	5
I teach poetry outside of the typical “poetry unit”.	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy reading poetry.	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy writing poetry.	1	2	3	4	5
I wish I used poetry more often in my classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
My students seem reluctant to engage in poetry lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy teaching poetry.	1	2	3	4	5
I integrate poetry into all curriculum units.	1	2	3	4	5
I think poetry is valuable in the English Language Arts classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
I teach poetry on a regular basis.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel I adequately cover poetry in my classroom curriculum	1	2	3	4	5

Free-Response

1. What is your favorite poetry lesson/activity to teach?
2. Tell me why you like or dislike teaching poetry.
3. What is your favorite poem to teach? Why?
4. Do you wish you used poetry on a more regular basis in classroom lessons?

Why?

Appendix D: Student Poetry Survey

On a scale of 1 to 5: (1= strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree) please answer the following questions.

I feel confident in my ability to read and understand poetry.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel confident in my ability to write poetry.	1	2	3	4	5
My high school teachers spent quality time teaching poetry.	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy reading and writing poetry.	1	2	3	4	5
I wish there had been more poetry in my high school English classes.	1	2	3	4	5
Poetry was a regular component in my high school English classes.	1	2	3	4	5
It is important to learn about poetry in high school.	1	2	3	4	5
My high school English teachers liked teaching poetry.	1	2	3	4	5

Free-Response

1. What was your favorite poetry lesson/activity in high school?
2. Tell me why you like or dislike poetry.
3. How do you feel about your overall exposure to poetry in high school?