IGNITING POETIC POTENTIAL
in Traditionally Underserved Gifted Adolescents

By Kristina Doubet

When I dream, I dream good:
Mamas and daddies aren't fighting in the hood.
Everyone is living life under the sun,
Everyone's communicating—becoming one
If the world calmed down, the hurt wouldn't fester,
We wouldn't feel like we'd explode or always try to test ya.
No, I want a cool world—like sugary ice cream
Let's come together and grant my dream.

—*Jamal, 7th Grade*

Let's face it. Adolescents like Jamal who live life on "the edge"—who struggle to find bits and pieces of the safety and acceptance that many of us take for granted—are not likely to be energized by the prospect of filling in the blanks of a formulaic Cinquain poem. What may ignite their investment, however, is Wordsworth's notion that poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion." Powerful emotion literally reigns supreme in the adolescent mind and body as it is filtered through an overactive amygdala—the emotional center of the brain—and circulated via an overabundant supply of hormones.

Deep down inside my heart,
Rage stands, bitter and tart.
It knows just how to communicate,
How to clobber my every difference
To make me ache.
It knows just how to make me change,
How to keep me always in its range.
To trap me in a fiery cage
There's just no escaping
This burning Rage.

—*Kira, 7th Grade*

Such physiological and emotional states, combined with the pressures that accompany unstable family lives, insufficient incomes, and/or racial tensions, make it imperative for educators to respond to—rather than to ignore—the volatile nature of at-risk youngsters' lives. Poetry can be both an outlet and a source of pride for such students, but it must be *real* poetry, authentic poetry— poetry that oozes from the rhythms of their lives and poetry that voices the resounding ambivalence of their feelings about themselves and their world.

I am a powder keg
My anger builds until someone makes it explode.
I am an eraser–
Eliminating all the bad thoughts from my mind.
I am an ant–
Everyone looks down on me.
I am nothing–
No one can see me.
But I am something–
Brilliant and intelligent.
Who am I?
Powder keg, eraser, ant, nothing, and something.
I am
Me.

—*April, 7th Grade*

THE SETTING

One Virginia city middle school took note of the discrepancies among the *large* number of low-socio-economic status (SES) and minority students the school served and the *small* number of such students represented in "advanced" track classes— classes that employed a high-quality curriculum and catered to those recognized as gifted according to its formal identification system. The school acknowledged that, as Lisa Delpit (1995) explains, "Children who may be gifted in real-life settings are often at a loss when asked to exhib-

it knowledge solely through decontexualized paper-and-pencil exercises" (p. 173). In order to address these discrepancies, the school created a "Talent Development" program targeting minority and low-SES students who had earlier demonstrated academic promise but who were now in danger of failing middle school. These students were invited to participate in the talent development program with the understanding that they would be held to high expectations (i.e., the honors curriculum) but would be given ample support to help them achieve (skills reinforcement, after school tutoring, and work sessions).

These students, however, required more than these concrete forms of support to be successful; they also required emotional and social scaffolding. African-American students tend to "hold dual beliefs about achievement, believing in the American Dream and the work ethic, while simultaneously holding pessimistic beliefs about the efficacy of hard work and effort" (Ford, 1993, p.79). The "counter-narrative" once present in the Black culture—that African American children *are* gifted, that children of Color *are* contributors, that education can truly help you to "*Be Somebody*"—is fading in the cacophony of societal messages that contradict that song (Perry, 2003).

It is therefore imperative for classroom teachers to trumpet this song in such a way that Black students can see that the heart and effort they put into their schooling *will* be recognized and *is* worth the exertion they expend. African-American children must be both told and shown—repeatedly—that intelligence is dynamic and that effort can and will result in growth and productivity (Steele, 2003). Furthermore, it is imperative that Black students see themselves reflected in the curriculum as well as in instructional tools and materials. Adolescents in general crave this relevance and identification (Bowers, 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000); educators need to work even more diligently to find these reflections for children of Color because they are not so readily available or celebrated by society.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

This poetry unit was designed to let students experience the power of language as a means of communicating their unique perspectives, affecting change, and creating beauty (in both the conventional and unconventional sense). While not explicitly stated in lesson plans, the underlying current throughout the unit was "Look what words can do! Look what these people's words could do! Look what *my* words can do!" Students studied the work of poets and song writers from diverse cultures and time periods. Poems were selected so that students of all races had the chance to see their own faces reflected in the faces of the poets studied.

This unit was a departure from the typical middle school poetry unit that typically features:

• an emphasis on poetic devices
• the creation of formulaic poetry

Poetic devices were indeed both defined and applied, but only as students noticed them in other poets' work and sought to use them in their own writing. A careful selection of poems containing a vast array of devices and techniques lent itself to this approach. Outlining such target terms in the unit goals can help teachers create a "roadmap" that will assist them with poem selection.

In an effort to help students discover their own writer's voice, "formulas" were not generally used in this unit. Allowing for multiple means and modes of expression is a vital component of curriculum for culturally diverse students; it allows teachers to discover and recognize the different ways in which talent manifests itself in various cultures (Borland, 2004). A reliance on poetic formulas not only robs the student poet of an authentic experience, but can also highlight student weaknesses while hiding creative strengths. This must be avoided, for as Delpit puts it (1995, p. 173), "not knowing students' strengths can lead to our 'teaching down' to children"—especially those who don't fit the traditional learning mold. To avoid this trap, this unit featured poetry itself as the inspiration for students' creations. The poems selected centered on the driving concepts of the year (language; power; conflict; perspective); this conceptual focus allowed the teacher and students to:

- study poets from *diverse cultures* and time periods who address related issues
- use these *issues* as the *foundation* for the *creation of poetry* (rather than using a formula or poetic devices as the foundation)
- avoid the assumption of deficits in skill or understanding and, instead, use formative assessment to use scaffolding (e.g., line starters or other templates) on an as-needed basis.

All three of these principles brought students closer to behaving as poets—as the disciplinarians of the field. Poets do not begin writing with an outline that's been handed to them by someone else; neither do they begin with an end goal of learning and using certain terminology and become inspired by this! Rather, as Wordsworth suggests, strong emotion serves as the ultimate muse of poets, and poetic devices function as their tools of the trade—not the trade itself. By focusing on poets/songwriters, poems/songs and concepts that students could relate to, this unit helped them tap into their own strong emotion and to find their own unique, authentic poetic voices.

WHAT IS POETIC?

Adolescents, regardless of their backgrounds, work best when they find meaning and relevance in their work; unfortunately, the *at-risk* middle school students in this study had little opportunity to discover such connections. Prior to beginning the talent development program, their learning experiences could best be described as "remediation, remediation, remediation" combined with content that seemed remote and disconnected from their lives. Unfortunately, instruction for at risk students "...usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural differences..." Such a focus creates a tendency to "assume deficits in students rather than to locate and to teach to strengths" (Delpit, 1995, p. 172). These students had certainly experienced this kind of rote instruction.

As seventh-grade Louie put it, "I used to read poetry and I was in Boresville. I hated it, so I was *very* unhappy to know we were going to be writing it!"

Therefore, it was vital that students entered the poetry unit with some sense of how poetry was relevant to what they cared about. Music offered the perfect avenue for such connection, so the first lesson featured students bringing in song lyrics (edited for school-appropriateness) that they believed were particularly powerful. Students wrote letters to classmates defending their lyric choices and shared these letters with each other before contributing to a class list of "Powerful Lyric Criteria."

STUDENT LIST OF POWERFUL LYRIC CRITERIA
- It really explains how the speaker feels
- Voice – you know the speaker's personality
- Shows the speaker's style (the way s/he says things)
- Communicates emotions through both *words* and *rhythm*

Words:
- uses details so that you can picture it or feel it
- tells about past experiences/memories
- uses unusual comparisons
- uses strong words – "Cadillac Words"

Mood: is *pleasing* or *disturbing*

Rhythm:
- accentuates words to create rhythm
- moves in "steady waves"
- a "flow" pulls you through the song

FIGURE 1

Unwittingly, students had successfully created the rubric by which their poems would be evaluated—both by one another and by their teacher. Although this announcement was initially greeted with groans of, "Man! Why were we so hard on ourselves?" students were generally accepting of the new grading system; they reasoned it would, in essence, encourage them to emulate the artists they admired.

FIRE-STARTER POEMS

Because student textbooks were devoid of poems from cultures and backgrounds other than the majority, a trip to the bookstore was necessary to locate poems written by poets whose faces and backgrounds reflected those of the students. "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes was first on the docket, but students were not given the entire poem; rather, they were introduced to certain key words from the poem—out of context—and asked to write a free-association phrase that contained the word. Students were instructed to attempt to make the lines fit together, thematically—but this was not a requirement.

Students were presented with the following "fire-starter words from "A Dream Deferred," one at a time, in the following order: *dream; fester; sugar; heavy;* and *explode.* A discussion ensued about the meaning of "fester," the most common response to which was "Eeewww!" (a sure sign of a "Cadillac word," they agreed). Students were then given time to rearrange their lines of poetry, to add and subtract words as necessary, to rewrite, and eventually to share their creations with the class. There were many enthusiastic "takers" to the latter invitation, among them Jamal, whose poem began this article. The pride he showed in his creation was a groundbreaking experience for this young man who normally avoided writing at all costs.

When asked if they wanted to see where their "fire starter" words had come from, students responded with a resounding "yes!" There was instant investment in Langston Hughes' work, and students eagerly dissected his meaning, mused about his word choice, and compared his themes to that of their own poems. When offered the chance to complete another fire-starter poem, students enthusiastically accepted, but some asked if they could see all the words ahead of time.

The next class period, students were given a choice to take a list of fire-starter words from James Berry's poem, "What Do We Do with a

Variation?" and head to the back of the room to begin writing; or they could stay at the front of the room to hear the words one at a time, maintaining the element of surprise. Both groups of students dug eagerly into the following words from Berry's poem: *difference, clobber, rage, communicate,* and *down.* Students completed their poems in the same manner they had with Hughes' words, this time exercising a bit more freedom in how they arranged their lines. Kira's poem, "Rage"—displayed above—illustrates this increasing level of sophistication and fluidity.

After sharing their own creations, students settled into a Socratic Seminar on Berry's poem, discussing his hypotheses about how people treat those different from the rest of the crowd—a significant theme for middle schoolers, to say the least. Students expressed and defended their varying opinions about the most fitting analogy Berry offered (e.g., "Do we stand and discuss its oddity? Do we move around it in rage and enlist the rage of others?"). In this focused and at times, heated discussion, students supported their arguments with both evidence from the poem and examples from their lives. Afterward, they were congratulated for the manner in which they had conducted themselves, the authentic, expert-like ideas they had discussed, and the depths to which they had reached in supporting their arguments.

Imagery and personification had been key elements of figurative language featured in the "fire starter" poems; the discussion of these techniques flowed naturally from an examination of the language used by the poets, as well as by their seventh-grade emulators. This was important because the state standards dictated that students be able to recognize and analyze poets' use of such figurative language. Even more important, however, were students' authentic experiences with these literary techniques: they recognized, understood, and especially *used* figurative language to explain and discuss important ideas about the world and themselves.
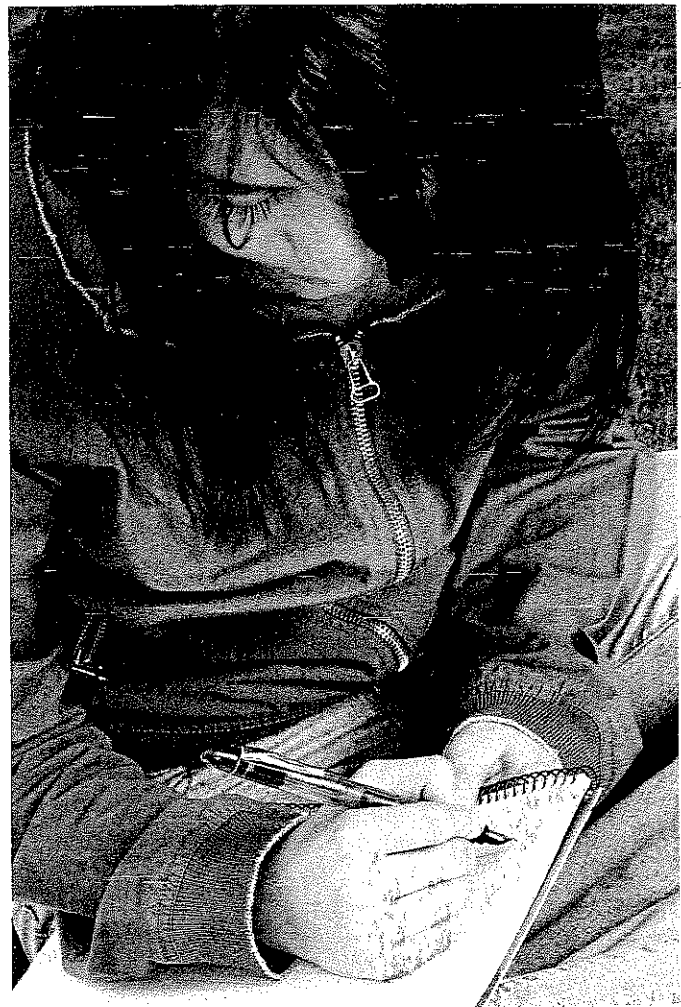
"ME METAPHOR" POEMS

Such was true for the next poetry assignment, "Me Metaphor" poems. Students used the keystone of figurative language, the metaphor, to describe the essence of who they were. In preparation for the lesson, students completed the following exit card:

EXIT CARD

Name: Period:

1. What is a "metaphor"?

2. Give at least two examples.

3. Explain why songwriters and poets use metaphors.

FIGURE 2

Answers to these formative assessment questions revealed which students grasped the definition and purpose of metaphors and were ready to exercise their understanding and which students required further instruction before they would be able to develop their own metaphorical descriptions.

The lesson began with the full-class journal prompt: *Describe yourself in such a way that, after reading your description, someone who had never met you would feel as if they had known you their entire lives.* Such a multi-faceted prompt encouraged students to be thorough and specific in their descriptions, to reflect on their unique characteristics, and to describe them in vivid detail. This journal entry set the stage for the next poetry assignment titled "Me Metaphor" poems. A small group of students who on the previous day's exit card demonstrated an advanced understanding of the purpose and use of metaphors were instructed to

use their self-descriptions as fodder for the following assignment listed on a task card:

"ME METAPHOR" POEM ASSIGNMENT 1

Choose something to compare yourself to. It can be something in nature, a machine of sorts, a song, a force, an animal, a color. The only thing it *can't* be is another person. Strive to continue your analogy for at least 4 stanzas and to capture all aspects of your personality. Line lengths in stanzas can vary.

FIGURE 3

The remainder of the class received a mini-lesson on similes and metaphors that featured examples from the poems studied in the previous lesson and those from students' own work to explain the purpose and use of such analogies. Students shared select descriptions of themselves from their free-writes and the group worked together to generate metaphors that would appropriately capture these descriptions. At the completion of this explanation, the mini-lesson group was given the following assignment along with the option to either begin work immediately or to remain with the teacher for further practice and explanation:

"ME METAPHOR" POEM ASSIGNMENT 2

Write a poem describing all aspects of your personality using a series of metaphors and similes. Strive for about 5-7 couplets. See pages 314-315 in your text for the definition of "couplet" and be prepared to explain it to your classmates.

FIGURE 4

This assignment stresses the same understanding, knowledge, and skills as does the first "Me Metaphor" assignment, but it does so in a more structured, supported manner. The first assignment required students to continue a single analogy—one that communicates different aspects of their personalities—throughout the course of an entire poem. This called for a more complex utilization of metaphor than did comparing different aspects of one's self to several different things (assignment 2). Thus, all students were supported and challenged at the proper level.

I am Love—
I am cherished.
I am looked for often,
But seldom found...

I am Love—
sometimes sweet,
But always with the potential
To bite you in the back...

I am Love—
Oh-so-precious,
But you'd better believe you can see
The ugly side of me...

I am Love—
A big heart full of joy,
A calm, quiet day with
a big storm brewing,
A bird soaring higher and higher
Into that dangerous sky.

—*Jasmyn*

Yet, when it came time to share poems, all students—no matter which version of the assignment they had completed—shared poems which communicated equal depth of feeling and an equal feeling of respectfulness. April's poem, featured earlier in the article, illustrates products derived from the second assignment, while Jasmyn's poem, to the left, represents those completed in response to the more complex version of the assignment, the extended metaphor (or conceit).

Students from both instructional groups were very invested in this assignment. After all, it was about adolescents' favorite subject—themselves! More importantly, the assignment asked students to stretch their descriptive powers even as they celebrated their uniqueness and to produce work of which they could be proud. Students like Louie were beginning to understand that poetry was not as disconnected from their lives as they had imagined.

MODEL POETRY

The rest of the unit called for students to study the works of poets both famous and obscure and to emulate their work in subject and/or in form. They read poems from *Hailstones and Halibut Bones* (O'Neill, 1961) and wrote their own color poems, oozing with both imagery and emotion. They read Georgia Ella Lyon's reminiscent "Where I'm From," and composed remembrances of their own childhood, artfully integrating the symbols and images associated with them. They examined and discussed poems describing all kinds of conflicts, from Alice Walker's admonition about self image in "Without Commercials" to Sylvia Plath's bitter reflections in "The Rival." Many of these poems were examined and shared in "jigsaw" fashion with students examining poems they had either chosen (interest) or been assigned (readiness), explicating them in small groups, and sharing their findings with the class. In each case, the poems featured devices or themes that had served as the inspiration for students' own creations.

Although poems like Louie's were startling in their seemingly dark and brooding nature, they actually served as outlets for these young students who were experiencing so much at such a young age:

I came into that color poem with a lot of anger, but by the time I was done writing I realized I had gotten all my feelings out. I felt ten times better because I wasn't holding all my emotions in any

more. I was writing from my heart. I also felt like I had finally done something well, and I felt like jumping inside! — Louie.

As this unit progressed, students fell more and more in love with using "Cadillac words" in their descriptions, with capturing their feelings in unusual comparisons, and especially with using language to create mystery. Much of this excitement and love grew out of the spontaneous discussions arising from what students themselves brought to the explication and creation of poetry.

Black is hatred building in my mind,
Blocking all I see, making me go blind
Not able to sleep, just lying in my bed
With all of this blackness going through
    my head
The black is building up—I can't make it stop
Black builds up like a heavy tear, just waiting
    to drop
So many tears, so many years....
Black is the tear now running down my cheek,
Tears so wet, so cold, having chills for a week
Black is the small spot in the back of my brain
A small spot that lingers, driving me insane

—*Louie*

The most important "teaching" lessons learned from the implementation of this unit were to:

- keep one's finger to the pulse of what kids were thinking, feeling, and struggling with in terms of writing and in terms of life
- *be quiet!* Let the students do the talking and the discovering! It's amazing what happens when students who have previously been restricted by the boundaries of a "one-size-fits-all" educational system have the chance to break out and "showcase their brilliance" (Perry, 2003).

I love what we've been able to accomplish! You really pushed us beyond what we thought was our limit. I never knew that I could write, but with my imagination and your encouragement, I did it...! I'm going to keep on writing, and I'll be sending you more poems! —Kira ■

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