

Summer 2022

## A Finding Place: Social Justice Poetry Toward Empathy in the Secondary English Language Arts Classroom

Patricia Vicino

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vicino, P.(2022). *A Finding Place: Social Justice Poetry Toward Empathy in the Secondary English Language Arts Classroom*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/6949>

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

A FINDING PLACE: SOCIAL JUSTICE POETRY TOWARD EMPATHY IN THE  
SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

by

Patricia Vicino

Bachelor of Arts  
College of Mount Saint Vincent, 1996

Master of Arts  
Manhattanville College, 2000

---

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctorate in Education in

Curriculum and Instruction

School of Education

University of South Carolina

2022

Accepted by:

James Kirylo, Major Professor

Linda Silvernail, Committee Member

Suha Tamim, Committee Member

Kenneth Vogler, Committee Member

Tracey L. Weldon, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

© Copyright by Patricia Vicino, 2022  
All Rights Reserved.

## DEDICATION

To my mother, Dr. Carol Masterson Vicino, for showing me that it was possible, and to my father, Joseph Vicino, for helping to make it so. I am the person and educator I've become because of your love and guidance, and my gratitude is endless.

Mom, thank you for setting an amazing example, raising me to value education, juggling work, school, and family, and still being a wonderful mother and a beautiful person. We are now both "Dr. Vicino."

Dad, thank for your steadfast support, generosity, and dedication to your family. You never held us back and raised me to be strong and independent. I have some averages for us to do!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. James Kirylo, my dissertation chair, for his patient and steadfast guidance and encouragement during this process. I am grateful to Linda Silvernail, Suha Tamim, and Kenneth Vogler for serving on my dissertation committee. I also want to thank my student participants for trusting me to present poetry within a social justice framework. A sincere thank you to my friend Ronda Concannon for serving as the editor of this document and constantly reminding me to take it “one day at a time.” Finally, eternal love to Murphy for being my unofficial assistant during this process.

## ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of a combined reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry on the empathy levels of secondary level English Language Arts students in my classroom. This action research study occurred over a six-week period during a Fall 2021 English elective course with six student participants in a high school within South Carolina. Research was conducted via a mixed methods approach that analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data from prestudy and poststudy Likert scales along with surveys, interviews, observation notes, and artifacts. The data revealed that student empathy levels were elevated after the study unit despite initial student antipathy towards poetry. The powerful and accessible focus of social justice poems along with a primarily reader-response-based approach likely served as a catalyst for this change. Offering students timely and relevant poetry while favoring a student-centered analysis model allows them to consider and relate to perspectives outside of their everyday lived experience and subsequently grow in their understanding of the “other,” which in this study resulted in increased levels of empathetic thinking.

## PREFACE

“When people say that poetry is a luxury, or an opinion, or for the middle classes, or that it should not be read at school because it is irrelevant, or any of the strange and stupid things that are said about poetry and its place in our lives, I suspect that the people doing the saying have had things pretty easy. A tough life needs a tough language—and that is what poetry is. That is what literature offers - a language powerful enough to say how it is...Through the agency of the poem that is powerful enough to clarifying feelings into facts, I am no longer dumb, not speechless, not lost. Language is a finding place, not a hiding place.”

- Jeanette Winterson

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Abstract .....	v
Preface .....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Review of Literature .....	15
Chapter 3: Action Research Methodology .....	45
Chapter 4: Findings from the Data Analysis .....	63
Chapter 5: Discussion, Implication, and Recommendations .....	82
References .....	96
Appendix A: Reader-Response Poem Questions .....	110
Appendix B: Close Reading Poem Analysis Template .....	111
Appendix C: Student Poem Drafting Questions .....	113
Appendix D: Original Student Poems .....	114
Appendix E: Wakelet Poem Prompt Responses .....	117
Appendix F: “Home” Visual Metaphor Responses .....	119
Appendix G: Visual Poem Project Examples .....	12



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Poetry is an area of the English Language Arts curriculum in which teachers and students grapple with one of the most intense forms of human expression. Former United States poet laureate Rita Dove fittingly called poetry “language at its most distilled and most powerful” (Dove, 1992, as cited in Streitfeld, 1993), and current laureate Joy Harjo assigns it a crucial role in society with a concentrated field of meaning through lines that “can hold a whole lifetime” (Harjo, 2018, as cited in D’Isa, 2020). Despite the multiple challenges of the genre, many teachers view the reading and discussion of poetry as very important, mostly due to the opportunities it offers in exposing students to the possibilities of language, the collective nature of human emotion, and the shared wisdom of human experience.

Yet the struggle to understand, effectively teach, and make poetry engaging for students is an uphill battle that many teachers wearily face or reluctantly defer from, especially in high school, by which time student attitudes toward poetry are decidedly less than enthusiastic. A study by Hennessey and McNamara (2011) found that a mere 6.5% of students found poetry to be an important part of their English studies while 84% never read and 89% never wrote poetry outside of class. This lack of engagement is often blamed on the steadily increasing teaching to the test phenomenon so prevalent in today’s schools, which leaves a dearth of time for covering creative content or allowing

students to analyze poetry on a more meaningful level (Cushing, 2018; Sigvardsson 2020; Xerri, 2013).

Others see negative student attitudes toward poetry as stemming from rigid former English teachers' interpretations of what a poem means, which left little to no room for subjective, individual, or disparate student reactions. An instructor's possible lack of experience with teaching poetry that grows more complex from elementary to middle and secondary school is yet another factor considered to cause lukewarm student reactions to poetry; many educators also feel less than confident about teaching it, so students struggle to decode language and meanings they may not yet have the framework to completely understand. Lack of in-service training opportunities on the teaching of poetry and an increasing focus on teaching toward exam preparation that leaves less time for its enjoyment are also impediments to the genre (Akewo, 2013; Creely, 2019).

Despite these hindrances, poetry is unquestionably a literary form that provides some of the most gripping, devastating -- and enlightening -- counter-perspectives on such topics as racism, injustice, violence, cruelty, and genocide. Chavis (2013) maintains that the genre is particularly useful in encouraging younger readers to recognize and value diversity, as different poetic speakers with perspectives outside of normal reality lend opportunities for students to enter and explore alternate perspectives while increasing comprehension of unfamiliar struggles and triumphs. This in turn establishes connections while illuminating complexity and fostering empathy.

This perspective calls attention to the educational value of poetry and its possibilities in eliciting genuine and meaningful student responses while potentially developing increased empathetic thinking, which is decreasing as societal levels of

narcissism increase (Campbell & Twenge, 2013; Campbell et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2015). Empathy, defined as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present,” may be a crucial mindset for coping with and combating negative societal issues (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Multiple studies show increases in narcissism and a shift toward extrinsic and individualistic values, such as money and image, at the expense of intrinsic and collective concerns, such as community and affiliation, which has led to a decrease in empathy, a reduced emphasis on emotional intelligence, and greater overall social isolation (Campbell & Twenge, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem of Practice**

As a teacher who loves her subject area while being deeply concerned about the state of society along with morality, integrity, and character education, the necessary query becomes how to best approach the issue that has been highlighted as “the single most interesting and difficult question in education: Can we teach students to care?” (Barrow, 1975, p. 162). Furthermore, can students be guided past a mere emotional reaction to another into a more meaningful sharing of an individual’s emotional experience? Most specifically, can this be done through a reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry?

The challenge of developing and shaping students’ moral and social conscience regarding race, gender, religion, and sexuality during the confusion and turbulence of the teenage years is an enormous yet essential undertaking. Multiple studies show the benefits of incorporating character education into elementary, middle, and secondary school curriculum (Jeynes, 2019). As an educator, I believe that I have a critical

responsibility not only to address societal issues and inequities but also to reach beyond proscribed content and utilize my subject area to inform and empower my students. Social justice poetry allows me to address these issues while incorporating diverse perspectives into my teaching in a genuine effort to foster empathy and more empathetic thinking.

Over my last few years of teaching high school, I have witnessed many English students struggling with close reading, a strategy focused on “thoughtful, critical analysis of a text that focuses on significant details or patterns in order to develop a deep, precise understanding of the text’s form, craft, meanings, etc.” (Burke, n.d., p. 3). Uncovering layers of meaning for deeper textual comprehension is achieved through deliberate reading and rereading that is centered on word meaning, sentence order, development of ideas, and key supporting details (Boyles, 2012).

Many students grapple with close reading because of its thorough approach, which requires concentration and effort. This became evident during a junior class’s analysis of *The Crucible* last year. When given one printed page of the play’s text to annotate with observations, visualizations, questions, connections, clarifications, and evaluations, most students struggled to complete a handful of entries, even after a review of the concept and strategies, a completed page of model annotations, and individualized assistance. Overall, they were very uncomfortable with traveling past literary devices and factual analysis to go more deeply into the text toward a greater synthesis of overall content and meaning.

My students also struggle with poetry comprehension, which they often feel is inaccessible to them. Many seem to view poems as complex text speak that contains

hidden messages and convoluted meanings. An example of this occurred during the Early American literature unit with the same junior class when we covered “Captivity,” an evocative poem by Louis Erdrich that is one of my favorite pieces. Although the poem was written from a fictional perspective, its narrative was based on the real-life experience of Mary Rowlandson, a Puritan woman who chronicled her captivity among Native Americans in her famous narrative. Although we had read and analyzed excerpts from her story the previous day, students had great difficulty deciphering what was occurring in the poem despite their familiarity with the overall story. The poem’s rich imagery, contemplative perspective, and redolent language combined to overwhelm their tepid efforts to understand it.

Since poetry offers such concentrated and intense language and images, students must be taught to utilize certain techniques that will assist in the “unlocking” of meaning. An approach that combines reader-response and close reading methods to give students both cognitive (efferent) and effective (aesthetic) entrance points to a poem provides multiple ways for students to access poetic content and dive further underneath the surface toward more abstract reasoning (Rosenblatt, 1986). Social justice poetry, a subgenre of poetry focused on eliciting a moral vision within the reader while combating social injustices and inspiring democratic visions of a fair and just society, is well-suited to engage students and elicit empathy because it “speaks to the heart as well as the head, calling for empathy as well as rights” (Ciardiello, 2010, p. 464).

Therefore, the identified Problem of Practice for this study is framed in a secondary English Language Arts class that would benefit from enhanced critical poetry reading skills and an increase in empathy. Through a fusion of reader-response and close

reading, I will use social justice poetry and supporting curriculum to lead my students into more meaningful literary analysis along with enhanced empathetic thinking skills. As Christensen and Watson (2015) say, “Part of education for the ‘real world’ must teach empathy, must call attention to policies and actions that harm society’s most vulnerable” (p. iii).

### **Research Question**

What impact will a combined reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry have on the empathy levels of secondary English Language Arts students?

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect that a reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry has on the empathetic thinking of my secondary ELA students. The reader-response approach is delineated as critical theory that focuses on the reader’s reaction to and interaction with a particular literary work more centrally than the work itself, and the close reading method is defined as “the sustained, concentrated reading of a text’s linguistic features and rhetorical operations centered around a technically informed, fine-grained analysis...in connection with some broader question of interest” (Smith, 2016, p. 56).

While at first these two approaches may seem contradictory, they mirror Rosenblatt’s aesthetic and efferent components for both affective and cognitive learner outcomes (1986). Therefore, conjunctively using these two methods of poetic analysis is more likely to yield both academic gain within critical English Language Arts skills and personal growth in the form of enhanced empathy. Moreover, for the purposes of this

study, social justice poetry is defined as poems about injustice, identity, and human rights that expands our insight into the struggles of others by exposing aspects of experience. And finally, empathy is defined as the ability to share someone else's feelings by personally relating to that individual's situation or experience.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Regarding the teaching of poetry on the secondary level, Sigvardsson (2017) points out that there is only one dominating theoretical trend: reader-response theory, which highlights the individual reader's personal contribution to the interpretation of a poem. Reader-response theory additionally holds that the role of the reader and his or her reaction is essential to a text, more so than the content of the text itself, in interpreting textual meaning. Rosenblatt further "theorized the poem as the result of a transactional event, a process of exchange between the text and the reader. This transaction is what enables the unique personal response: the evocation of the poem in the reader's mind" (Sigvardsson, 2017, p. 589).

Rosenblatt's (1998) transactional theory of reading and writing further explores the idea that a work of literature exists only in interaction that is individual and unique, as opposed to a "static" reader eliciting a pre-determined textual meaning. Transactional theory subscribes to reading as a progressive event during which the reader AND the text "condition" each other to evoking meaning (p. 889-890). These transform reading and analyzing text into a dynamic activity that allows each reader to bring his or her individual ideas, beliefs, and experiences into the linguistic process. This also accommodates different interpretations of text and meaning as each reader construes it on a unique basis.

Rosenblatt's main goal was to provide a different theory for teaching literature by making personal response the basis for a progression toward balanced, self-critical, and knowledgeable interpretation. Emphasizing this aesthetical transaction between a reader and text can bring students closer to the main purpose of literature: broadening students' comprehension of the world through experiences with works significant to the human experience. Literature therefore allows the "reader to learn how to enter through the printed page into the whole culture" (Connell, 2000, p. 32).

Poetry provides shorter and more accessible entrance points into human experience. As Rosenblatt (1995) describes, "A poem...remains merely ink spots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The poem exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text" (p. 25). Barrs (2016) concluded that the dynamic and personal nature of inner language as expressed by the moods, sounds, meaning, and allusions of words is best explored through poetry. The poet's private inner speech is transferred into language and symbols for others, and this shift seamlessly allows entrance into the inner speech of others while also unfolding in the reader's mind. Barrs (2016) further claims that poetry is the most deliberate way to structure webs of meaning and that the paradox of simultaneously "being the most conscious and artful way of using language, yet that which is most responsive to the subterranean and condensed meanings of inner speech...makes it a uniquely powerful medium" (p. 244).

Stickling et al. (2011) found that poetry provides an "authentic text" that highlights phonemic awareness and language development skills within a shorter mode for students to analyze content and vocabulary more deeply and fluently, concluding that the prioritization of poetry as a "natural and consistent part of the classroom routine"



leads to an increase in comprehension skills and overall literacy” (p. 32). Simicek (2019) concludes that the poetic mode provides engagement with precise language and how it is used within the “communicative act” of the work, which provides perspective-sharing much more powerfully than other types of literature. Poetry in particular allows the reader to forge connections and construct individual significance, which provides an imaginative experience where “we do not discover a meaning: we engage in discovering” (p. 5).

Creely (2019) views poetry as strongly connecting to the shared humanity of life within a complex and evolving world and as a mode that can powerfully act within the emotional realm of the reader. Schneider (2014) additionally sees the counter-narratives offered by poetry as a way of voicing and celebrating the marginalized and forgotten. Considering the perspective of the ‘other’ is often the main purpose of a poem and moves an individual closer to not just empathetic thinking but also the goal of social justice: “full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs...democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming” (Adams & Bell, 2016, p. 3).

Social justice poetry is all these things; it seeks to open the mind of the reader to new possibilities, realities, and experiences so that an individual considers this perspective and seeks to measure it against his or her own. Broadly viewed as poems about injustice, unfairness, and human rights, it can cultivate civic responsibility while developing and refining literacy skills within the ELA curriculum and acting as a humanizing agent that elicits student empathy by nature (Ciardiello, 2010). Roebuck

(2015) elaborates that “Students’ awareness of their own identities connects them to other groups by emphasizing the shared aspects of the human experience, whether within the classroom, the neighborhood, or society in general, situating them within communities” (p. 4).

Some of the other benefits of poetry instruction in secondary school include critical reading improvement, analytical proficiency enhancement, refined writing skills, metacognitive thinking, self-reflection, experimentation with language, enrichment of creativity, and intellectual challenge. Poetry can also “breathe life into the voices of those who usually don’t find ways into classrooms and textbooks,” and in the process “prepare students to meet the real world with a sense of humanity” (Christensen & Watson, 2016, p. iii). Finally, poetry additionally gives students exposure to disparate voices that builds consideration of alternate and unfamiliar experiences, which is essential for building empathy (Eva-Wood, 2008, 2004; Kinloch, 2005; Nichols et al., 2018).

### **Methodology**

Action research is the perfect vessel to explore a Problem of Practice within education because, like education itself, it is “more dynamic, fluid, and -- at times -- messier than the linear description of the process,” which completely embodies the act of teaching as well (Efron & Ravid, 2015, p. 8). A mixed methods action research methodological design will be utilized during this study to examine the impact that a reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry has on the empathy levels of secondary English students.

At the beginning of the six-week unit, students will take an empathy survey to gauge their empathy levels and a poetry affinity Likert survey, which will both provide preliminary quantitative data. Throughout the unit, the six included poems will each be introduced and covered with relevant print and media content for context, as each title relates to events of social injustice, such as racial injustice, the refugee crisis, and genocide. Students will be guided through close reading and reader-response analysis of each poem along with relevant related and supporting content during each individual title, and poem writing activities will occur at two different stages of the unit. Classroom discussion, student interviews, written responses, and a final creative visual poem project will provide qualitative data during the study. During the final week of the unit, the empathy survey and poetry affinity Likert scale will be readministered to evaluate changes and provide comparative quantitative data.

### **Positionality**

The focus of my study is personally relevant. Social justice is an important concept to me as a 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher facing the issues and challenges within the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. I strongly feel that one of my essential tasks as an educator is to develop a level of social consciousness within my students so they are more knowledgeable and responsible individuals and citizens within our increasingly global world. At a time when individualism is rampant and narcissism is rising, giving students the tools to see beyond themselves into the perspectives of the disenfranchised is essential for the development of empathy and empathetic thinking. This in turn is necessary to combat stereotypes, resist me vs. them thinking, and ensure collective hope amid an increasingly uncertain future.

Poetry is essential to this process because I am passionate about its capacity to transcend the ordinary and provide fresh and powerful ways of seeing what we've become desensitized to amid the furious pace of daily life. My 18 years of classroom experience have shown me that students engage more fully with shorter pieces and expect material that is relevant to and connected with their perspectives. Social justice poetry aligns with my commitment to a social justice framework while providing accessible entrance points to alternate perspectives, providing material that is dynamic and contemporary, and promoting student empathy.

Writer Jeanette Winterson (2012) states that poetry is "a language powerful enough to say how it is...Through the agency of the poem that is powerful enough to clarifying feelings into facts, I am no longer dumb, not speechless, not lost. Language is a finding place, not a hiding place" (pp. 39-40). This affirmation of poetry's power to provide wisdom, express essential truths about the human experience, and direct readers into a more profound state of enriched understanding is a driving concept within my English Language Arts classroom and provided the impetus for my research study.

As the secondary English Language Arts educator conducting the study, I am an insider. After teaching for 11 years at the same high school, in August 2020 I started employment within a different school district. This relatively new high school environment seems conducive to my academic and dissertation-related goals. However, students may not be as familiar and comfortable with me as a new teacher within my high school, so this is something to consider regarding the level of trust and willingness required to take risks regarding the reader-response and close reading of poems that will gauge and hopefully build student empathy. The "border crossing" articulated by Herr

and Anderson (2015) may not come as easily in a new school, but “even the notions of insider and outsider are multilayered and fluid and can shift at various times during a research study” (p. 37).

### **Definition of Terms**

**Action research:** Systematic inquiry conducted by teachers or others with a vested interest in teaching and learning or the environment in which it takes place to gather information about a particular school operates, how they teach, and/or how their students learn (Mertler, 2017).

**Aesthetic:** Reading purpose that concerns “the sensuous, the affective, the emotive, the qualitative” – i.e., admitting a broader field of awareness that allows both a cognitive and affective text response (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1068).

**Close Reading:** Critical analysis of a text favoring sustained, methodical textual analyses with multiple and deliberate readings that focuses on significant details or patterns to develop a deep understanding of form, craft, and meaning (Hinchman & Moore, 2013).

**Efferent:** Reading purpose that concerns “the cognitive, the referential, the factual, the analytic, the logical, the quantitative aspects of meaning,” – i.e., extracting information, analyzing structural form, or logical argument (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1068).

**Empathy:** “The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present” (Merriam-Webster).

**Progressivism:** Within education, the belief that the interest of the learner is central along with authentic educational experience and democratic ideals (Ellis, 2013).

**Reader-Response:** Literary theory that considers the reader's response to the text as vital to its interpretation and therefore the reader actively constructs meaning and cannot be omitted from the reading process (Tyson, 2006).

**Social Justice Poetry** (also known as protest poetry or poetry of witness): Poems about injustice, unfairness, and human rights that use powerful figurative language to address and combat social injustices while inspiring a fair and just society for all (Ciardiello, 2010).

**Transactional Theory:** The idea that the literary work is an event or experience directly shaped by the reader's past experiences and present personality; the reader engages in a dynamic and personal activity when reading text and any valid interpretation of literature must contain a personal analysis that recognizes the reader as a unique part of the process. The transaction between reader and text is a complex one that must consider genre, reader activities, text function(s), interpretation, and implication(s) for evaluation, criticism, and analysis (Rosenblatt, 1994).

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Poetry is one of the most challenging yet rewarding areas of the curriculum that can richly reward students with exposure to complex language, critical engagement, and enlightened creativity. It can also lead them toward a growing awareness of social justice issues and foster the development of empathy at a time when the notion of empathy may be decreasing. Close reading and reader-response methods can provide students with both efferent and aesthetic approaches to poetry that aid student understanding of the tangible elements of poetry, such as imagery and sound devices, and more abstract concepts like tone and theme.

#### **Statement of the Problem of Practice**

The identified Problem of Practice for this study is framed in a secondary English Language Arts class that will seek enhanced critical poetry reading skills in relation to empathy. Through a fusion of reader-response and close reading methods, I will use social justice poetry and unique supporting curriculum to lead my students into an exploration of literary analysis along with enhanced empathetic thinking skills.

#### **Research Question**

What impact will a combined reader-response and close-reading approach to social justice poetry have on the empathy levels of secondary English Language Arts students?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study to examine the impact a close response approach to social justice poetry will have on the empathy levels of my secondary English Language Arts students.

For the purposes of this study, the reader-response approach is defined as a framework of response focusing on the reader's reaction to and interaction with a particular literary work more centrally than the work itself, and close reading methods are defined as critical analysis of a text that focuses on significant details to develop a profound understanding of textual form, craft, and meaning. Additionally, for the purposes of this study, social justice poetry is defined as poems about injustice and human rights, while empathy is defined as the ability to share someone else's feelings by sympathetically relating to that person's situation or experience.

This chapter will address literature relating to methods and strategies utilized in close reading and reader-response approaches to the teaching of poetry. Central to this exploration of reader response is Rosenblatt's transactional theory. Her popularity as a proponent of Dewey's progressive ideals against the formality of the New Critics comprises the historic perspective (Connell, 1996; Dewey, 1934; Faust, 2000; Faust and Dressman, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1995). Social justice poetry within the ELA curriculum as a means of promoting moral cognitive education and studies into adolescent empathy are also relevant to the design and outcome of this study, respectively.

### **Literature Review Methodology**

Multiple strategies were employed to search the literature. I purchased the Rosenblatt books most aligned with her reader-response and transactional theories. The



University of South Carolina library databases were electronically searched for peer reviewed journal titles using the keywords poetry, English, secondary, reader response, close reading, transactional, Rosenblatt, social justice, moral cognitive education, and empathy. The internal citations and works cited lists of relevant articles were perused for additional sources. Google Scholar was also utilized when a search of the university library databases proved unsuccessful.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This action research study is grounded in the progressivism of Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005), an adherent of John Dewey whose reader-response and transactional theories have shaped the teaching and learning of literature for the better part of the last century. Progressivism holds the interest of the learner as a central tenet along with authentic educational experience and democratic ideals (Ellis, 2013). Rosenblatt's preoccupation with the reader within reader-response theory and the importance placed on the reader as an equal factor along with the text within her transactional theory both reflect progressivism's learner-centered and democratic focus (Connell, 2000).

Progressivism, often used to denote the point of contrast between "new" curriculum and "old" ideas, holds the interest of the learner as a central tenet (Ellis, 2013). Initially inspired by European Romantic thinkers of the 1700s, the movement forged its own unique path in America and gained popularity in the late 1800s, hitting its full stride during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the contributions of John Dewey, the most influential American educational scholar even in modern times (Vaughn & Nunez, 2020). Dewey's idea that school experience should reflect real life became a central idea of progressivism and a unique American addition to the movement, along with a focus on

democracy, community involvement, project learning, and integrated units of study (Ellis, 2013).

Rosenblatt was directly and repeatedly influenced by Dewey throughout her long career as a teacher, writer, and educational theorist. Many of her most well-known ideas can be traced either directly or indirectly back to Dewey; even the impetus for the title of her defining theory, the transactional theory of reader-response, comes from Dewey's accounts of interaction and transaction in his major works (Connell, 2008). Rosenblatt's reader response theory focuses on an organic, experience-based theory of reading that evolved from Dewey's desire for an educational theory based upon human practice and the organic nature of experience (Connell, 2008). Furthermore, the transactional relationship between knower and known detailed by Dewey in his writings serves as one of the main reference points for Rosenblatt's envisioning of the relationship between reader and text (Connell, 2008).

Consistent with Dewey's views, Rosenblatt also rejects a dualistic viewpoint of reader and text, described as knower and known by Dewey, and her transactional view that "knowing emerged from a more dynamic process...which considers...making meaning...a significant experience" parallels Dewey's views (Connell, 2008, p. 107). Other central parallels between Dewey and Rosenblatt include the essential importance of experience (action-oriented vs. reading-oriented, respectively), language and communication as fluid and generative, a formalized view of knowledge, a strong focus on active learning, and an ongoing emphasis on democratic values (Connell, 2008).

Close reading reflects another dominant 20<sup>th</sup>-century theoretical trend: the New Criticism of I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren. Its scrupulous and

exclusive attention to the text at first seems at odds with Rosenblatt's reader-response framework (Rejan, 2017). However, these pedagogies evolved within the same timeframe of the twentieth century; Rosenblatt's seminal *Literature as Exploration* was first published in 1938, the same year that Brooks's and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* appeared. *Literature as Exploration* is now in its fifth printing, most recently in 1995, and was followed by Rosenblatt's *The Reader, the Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literature* initially in 1978 and then again in 1994.

### **Reader-Response**

After the Romantic preoccupation with the author and New Critic centrality with the text, the focus on the reader at the heart of reader-response criticism has been a trend of prominence since the latter half of the twentieth century (Rosenblatt, 2003). Reader-response theory, a reflection of the cognitive-constructivist and Progressive education movements, was developed by Louise Rosenblatt along with Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser as a disparate critical response to the traditionalist approach of New Criticism, which dominated literary theory for much of the early twentieth century (Woodruff & Griffin, 2017). Unlike New Criticism, which focused on the text as a self-contained entity that largely excluded the reader and context, reader-response "created space for a range of...interpretations, and recognized response as shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which reading takes place" (Park, 2012, p. 192).

Reader-response theory therefore offered a drastic contrast to former critical standpoints because it recognized the reader as an essential part of the reading process. At its most basic level, the reader response approach focuses on the interplay between a reader and his or her response to a literary piece (Woodruff & Griffin, 2017). It has

become one of the most influential literary theories within middle and secondary English education; at its best it can make literature more relevant and important while shifting the power dynamic in the classroom, yet at its worst it can also lead to an overly simplistic and individualistic interpretation that lacks critical depth and literary merit (Park, 2012). To avoid this, response and rigor must both be addressed, and the reader, the text, and the context considered in equal measure (Appleman, 2015). The reader should also be prepared for the increased demands of the personal insight and imagination called into the response process, as reader-response “theorizes the reader as active and situated, bringing to the text a wealth of experiences, knowledge, and beliefs” (Park, 2012, p. 192).

While a seemingly straightforward critical stance, reader-response proponents support a broad range of ideas toward the role of the three. Beach (1993) first organized these reader-text-context responses into five primary theoretical perspectives that reflect historical development within the field: textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural. This individual to collective order considers the focus of early reader-response theorists of the 1920s-1930s on the reader’s knowledge and experience, the later interest in applying psychoanalytical and cognitive perspectives to response during the 1960s-1970s, and the rise of poststructuralist, feminist, and cultural perspectives as embedded in response during the 1980s and 1990s (Beach, 1993).

Regardless of the primary focus or interest, reader-response remains a popular teaching method within the modern ELA classroom. Sigvardsson’s (2017) literature review on research from the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland, Australia, and the United States showed that reader-response theory is the dominant approach of scholarly articles regarding the teaching of secondary level poetry. A wide variety of studies, including the

inquiry of Dias (2002), Duke (1990), Eva-Wood (2008), Faust and Dressman (2009), Harker (1994), Harkin (2005), Lockett (2010), Naylor (2013), Pike (2000a, 2000b, 2000c), Wilson (2021), and Woodruff and Griffin (2017) show that Rosenblatt's work on literary reading as developed throughout the twentieth century is still influential well into the twenty-first and continues to refine research theory and argument in many ways.

### **Transactional Theory**

Among all of Louise Rosenblatt's innumerable contributions to the field of literary theory and criticism, she is perhaps best known for her transactional theory. Rosenblatt's term transaction was derived from John Dewey's transactional formulation terminology and research (which was also applied to psychology and linguistics) and represents only one of the many ways that Rosenblatt was influenced by Dewey's progressivism and educational ideals (Connell, 1999). An early reader-response critic who remained active within the field for the duration of her life, she not only influenced literary theorists but also teachers of reading and literature. The popularity of reader-based critical theories over the last five decades is largely attributed to Rosenblatt's work (Connell, 2005).

Rosenblatt's overarching goal was to provide a different theory for teaching literature by making personal response the basis for "a progression toward balanced, self-critical, and knowledgeable interpretation" (Connell, 2000, p. 29). Her transactional theory maintains that the poem, or literary work, is an event or experience that is directly shaped by the reader's experience and present personality and that pedagogical theory and practice fail to recognize that the reader engages in a dynamic and personal activity when reading text. A valid interpretation of literature must contain a personal analysis that recognizes the reader as a unique part of the process (Rosenblatt, 1994). However,

the transactional view should not be misunderstood as focusing too narrowly on the mind of the reader at the expense of the text and a critical view of it; rather than a simple exchange between two parts or parties, the transaction between reader and text is a complex one that must consider genre, reader activities, text function(s), interpretation, and implication(s) for evaluation, criticism, and analysis (Rosenblatt, 1994).

A major component of the transactional theory is the way the reader approaches the text and the different potential responses elicited by these disparate stances. The non-aesthetic, or efferent, stance focuses on information, logic, action, concepts, and ideas that remain afterward, while the aesthetic stance is concerned with the associations, attitudes, feelings, and ideas that occur during the reading event (Rosenblatt, 1994). The distinction between efferent and aesthetic readings comes from what the reader does, the position he or she adopts, and the activities he or she carries out in connection to the text.

This transaction furthermore encompasses the concept of a continuum of different possible readings of the same text by the same reader at different times and places on the efferent and aesthetic spectrum, and no one single correct meaning for a text. Poetry, especially, provided shorter and more accessible entrance points into human experience. Rosenblatt (1994) viewed poetry as existing in a dormant state until the reader transformed its words, images, and symbols into meaning, professing that “the poem exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text” (p. 25). She therefore supported multiple correct readings of a poem as each reader’s past experiences and perspectives contribute to individual interpretation (Sigvardsson, 2020).

Rosenblatt continually maintained, despite this difference between her and other reader-response proponents, that emphasis on the reader’s role does not minimize the

importance of the text. Rather, she believed that personal responses to literature were necessary to enable a transaction between the reader and the text that resulted in literary sensibility and understanding (Rosenblatt, 1994). She did, however, favor the aesthetic stance within the ELA classroom, believing that the literary experience was more complex, nuanced, and intense because of certain stylistic elements that invited an aesthetic response and that emphasizing this aesthetical transaction between a reader and text brought students closer to the main purpose of literature: broadening students' comprehension of the world through experiences with humanly significant works (Rosenblatt, 1994).

However, in true democratic fashion, she warned against dualisms, maintaining that most readings were a blend of efferent and aesthetic stances, with shifting possible along the continuum as the reader proceeded (Galda & Liang, 2003). Rosenblatt later extended her labeling of the efferent, or non-aesthetic reading, to the term public, and the aesthetic reading to the term private, maintaining that "both aspects of meaning are always present in our transactions with the world" (Rosenblatt, 1994). Her concept of this shifting stance along with her transactional paradigm differentiates her theory from both traditional and New Criticism approaches and other reader-response theories.

Rosenblatt later distanced herself from the label reader-response, and what she felt had become its overly personal focus, to emphasize the transactional approach's equally important reader-plus-text elements of the reading experience. She felt that each reader drew from an individual reserve of life and linguistic experience and that "the work is constituted during the actual transaction between the equally essential reader and text" (Rosenblatt, 2003, p. 70). She later labeled this stance Reader-Plus-Text-Oriented

to emphasize the text and the self's "spiral reciprocal relationship in which each conditions the other" as opposed to the reader-response label too frequently and simply being interpreted as a critical approach with personal response as its end result (Rosenblatt, 2003, p. 70).

Therefore, while Rosenblatt focus on what readers brought to their experience of the literature being read legitimized a range of personal responses, she remained more text-oriented than many believed. Honoring students' engagement with the text did not and should not come at the expense of the text itself, as true reader-response emphasizes "a need for readers to acknowledge the literary text as a coparticipant in the literary transaction" (Soter et al., 2010, p. 213). This frequent misinterpretation of Rosenblatt's framework as "a critical approach with a personal response as its end product" fails to adequately represent the rich and varied synergy that she envisioned when both reader and text operate within the necessary synthesis (Rosenblatt, 2003, p. 70).

### **Close Reading**

Close reading is critical analysis of a text that focuses on significant details or patterns to develop a deep understanding of textual form, craft, and meaning. The term is associated with literary practices favoring sustained, methodical textual analyses with multiple and deliberate readings to arrive at a thorough understanding of the text along with its features and effects (Hinchman and Moore, 2013). Close reading is most associated with the New Critics of 1920s and 1930s, most notably I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren, whose critical essays modeled close reading analysis techniques geared toward analyzing first how notable texts were constructed and then how they produced important effects through patterns of language or the use of certain



literary techniques (Smith, 2016). This emphasis on the text is all-encompassing and does not consider the reader and historical or cultural factors; the text is self-contained, and meaning is interpreted strictly within its confines (Hinchman and Moore, 2013).

Close reading is centered around the analysis of literary texts with meticulous interpretation of linguistic features. It has been referred to as “the primary methodology of literary studies” since every critical literary movement or shift of the twentieth century included reading individual texts closely (Smith, 2016). Yet as reader-response methodologies gained influence and support, close reading has waned in popularity within the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as prior to being endorsed as a principal strategy within the Common Core State Standards, it received little notice in adolescent literacy professional or research literature and was ignored by high-profile literacy research syntheses (Hinchman and Moore, 2013).

The phrase close reading can elicit a negative response because its initial application demanded “a rigorous objective method for extracting the correct meaning of a text” at the expense of the reader and the context (Hinchman & Moore, 2013, p. 443). This rather rigid description has since been modified to accommodate subsequent literary theory that focuses on varying purposes and methods of text interpretation. Some critics view the practice as antithetical to Rosenblatt’s transactional theory; others see close reading as a technique that can help transform the meaning of a text in accordance with each reader’s unique experience while bringing an enriching depth and dimension to literary analysis (Hinchman & Moore, 2013).

Used correctly and not exhaustively, close reading is a technique that complements Rosenblatt’s transactional theory in the secondary ELA classroom. The

Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, has linked the close reading of complex text for both struggling and advanced readers with significant gains in reading proficiency and college and career readiness (“Reading complex texts,” 2011). In an evaluation of PARCC’s clarification of using close reading successfully in the secondary English classroom, Boyles (2012) advises the use of short texts, aiming for independence, teaching students to ask the questions, and focusing on observation and analysis, which can be viewed as close reading methods to achieve balance between Rosenblatt’s efferent and aesthetic stances for maximum student benefit.

Additionally, close reading texts should offer rich vocabulary, ideas, and information and lead to reading, examination, and discussion that can take place on different levels of taxonomical thinking. Vocabulary, syntax, text structures, and text features are all important elements that contribute to text complexity; teachers can differentiate how texts are approached depending on the ability levels and needs of their students (Burke, n.d.). Multiple readings are a hallmark of close reading; the first read focuses on key ideas and details, the second read on craft and structure, and the third on integration of knowledge and ideas. The Scaffolding Model, along with the Gradual Release of Responsibility (based on Vygotsky’s theory) can work effectively when the end goal is to get students reading complex texts independently (Boyles, 2013).

### **Reader Response and Close Reading**

A closer look at both Rosenblatt’s Progressivist-informed and Brooks’s New Criticism-infused ideas shows that initially they were not as opposed as many modern theorists have come to believe (Rejan, 2017). Some critics view these terms as a disparate and unreconcilable pairing, with close reading’s textual focus a product of the

New Criticism theory of I.A. Richards and reader-response's concern with the reader a Progressive construct of the Dewey-inspired Louise Rosenblatt. Recent research, however, allows for a more synergistic middle ground, as the reader should not dominate the text or be dominated by it (Rosenblatt, 1994).

Therefore, this fusion offers the best of both approaches in that it elicits a personal, meaningful student response to text – what Rosenblatt would term an aesthetic response – while also focusing on the presence and importance of text features and devices and analyzing their overall effect – or the efferent response (Rosenblatt, 1994). This offers what Smith et al. (2014) termed “a pedagogical compromise” between reader-response and New Critical methodology (p. 35) and the 21<sup>st</sup> century enlightened educator's attempt to reconcile “the great tragedy in the misunderstood legacies of Rosenblatt and the New Critics...the failure to see the substantial common ground between two camps unnecessarily defined in opposition to one another” (Rejan, 2017, p. 37).

Rejan (2017) furthers the idea that Rosenblatt's transactional theory and the close reading endorsed by the New Critics is not as oppositional as most believe, instead conceptually and chronologically being shaped by the parallel influences of I. A. Richards and John Dewey. The relatively rigid stance of the close reading New Critics and the more user-friendly position of Rosenblatt's reader-response proponents is also not absolute: New Critic Cleanth Brooks felt that reader-response was “certainly worth studying” and that “a poem is fluid, dynamic, a transaction between poet and reader;” likewise, Rosenblatt was an advocate of close reading in that close conveyed both

intimate connection, careful examination, and a disciplined rereading process (Rejan, 2017, p. 23).

Research now supports the view of reading as a constructive process during which the reader's active involvement creates meaning from a text, in effect combining the energies of the writer with those of the reader. The meaning that results from this collaboration of close textual analysis and unique reader knowledge and experience results in fusion which "allows a reader to infuse meaning with the text as the text guides and constrains that meaning" (Galda and Liang, 2003, p. 269). As Rejan (2017) states, "the best New Critical tradition does consider the experience of reading" (p. 36).

Therefore, close reading and reader-response theories and methods are not at cross purposes and this approach to literature in the secondary English classroom will benefit student understanding of works such as poetry. Rejan (2017) further clarifies this in his focus on the greater parallels between the New Critics and Rosenblatt amid surface disparities; with Brooks viewing reading as an experience and process, a *transaction* even, "he articulates a version of some of the Deweyan concepts that inspired Rosenblatt's theories... and despite their differences, [the two] were both determined to engage students in an experienced understanding of literature" (p. 29).

Both close reading and reader-response approaches have been and continue to be considered best practices by many curriculum experts and literature teachers, especially on the secondary level, and the viewpoint that they are complementary to one another rather than nonreciprocal can strengthen student literary analysis (Dressman & Rao, 2020). A combination of these two techniques considers a range of factors, most prominently the words and language of the text and a reader's intuitive response along

with reading context, historical context, author's intent, rhetorical awareness, and intertextuality. Dressman and Rao (2020) refer to this as the difference between the story *in* the text vs. the story *of* the text, the former concerning the text's meaning and the latter regarding the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the backstory.

### **Benefits of Teaching Poetry**

Over the last several decades, many writers, teachers, and theorists have expressed ideas about the value of both reading and teaching poetry, particularly as it relates to raising awareness and combatting injustice. Internationally renowned American-Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz (1983) characterizes our age as a “‘nightmare’ that cannot end well,” and describes poetry as one of the most powerful ways to “reconstruct reality...To ‘compose from fragments a world perfect at last’” (p. 47). Calling further importance to the genre, Blake (1992) expresses that “One of the great moral issues of our time is the place of poetry in our culture” (p. 16). Stout (1999) maintains that poetry can draw students from self-absorption into a burgeoning curiosity and awareness of the greater world around them, further elaborating that creative works can lead audiences to increased critical awareness and morality while promulgating a more enlightened engagement with humanity.

Benton (1999) asserts that teachers overwhelmingly “sense that engagement with poetry is of the highest value in encouraging students to think analytically [while] unraveling the complexities of...charged language” (p. 525). Through two major modern studies of poetry, attitudes toward poetry, and methods of teaching it, Benton (2000) further maintains that poetry plays an essential role in cultural language, creates, and reinforces social identity, and serves to contextualize individual identity within common

human experience. Additionally, Berman (1999) believes that poetry sets direction and stimulates perception while simultaneously countering injustice through inviting change that enriches communities.

Aside from its critical thinking value, poetry is unquestionably a literary form that provides some of the most direct and poignant counter-perspectives on social justice topics such as racial injustice, historical and modern violence, war, and genocide. Schneider (2014) argues that as most narratives come from the perpetrator perspective, it is “therefore imperative as teachers that we provide a counter-narrative of the victim,” and that offering such alternate perspectives “equates to teaching social justice” (p. 24-25).

These perspectives all call attention to the potential educational value of poetry and its possibilities in eliciting meaningful and critical student responses while developing increased critical thinking, representing the marginalized, and fostering a social conscience (Simicek & Ellis, 2017; Simicek & Rumbold, 2016). Compared to prose, a poem provides a shorter and more accessible entry point into human experience, one that can be discussed, analyzed, and explored in a much shorter timeframe than a novel, play, or short story. Some of the other benefits of poetry instruction in secondary school include critical reading improvement, analytical proficiency enhancement, refined writing skills, metacognitive thinking, self-reflection, experimentation with language, enrichment of creativity, and intellectual challenge (Simicek & Rumbold, 2016). Finally, poetry gives students exposure to disparate voices that builds consideration of alternate experiences, which is essential for building empathy.

## Poetry Instruction

The question now becomes how does a secondary English instructor most effectively use reader-response and close reading methods to develop critical curriculum skills while promulgating empathy through social justice poetry? Pike (2000) coined the phrase ‘responsive teaching’ to denote a synthesis approach based upon Rosenblatt’s reader response methodology in which initial emphasis is placed on the text as ‘stimulus.’ In ‘responsive teaching,’ the reader’s response is discussed as a starting point that is then followed by instruction on form and cultural context for fuller reader understanding and appreciation (Pike, 2000). Importantly, once a positive personal response has been established, student enthusiasm is not reduced but increased by further teaching. This methodology is consistent with reader response theory and importantly allows the student to experience an aesthetic reaction to the poem while also fostering academic and curricular goals (Pike, 2000).

An additional later critique by Pike (2003) details further classroom strategy utilizing Rosenblatt’s pedagogy. His reading framework combines Rosenblatt’s transactional theory with individuality in reading models that espouse matches between readers and texts that maximize cognition and motivation. He describes six types of poem readers: Associative, Investigative, Speculative, Affective, Cognitive, and Passive, and his theory that certain texts and readers must reflect compatibility for a poem to be evoked reflects Rosenblatt’s transactional framework. Both envision reader and text changing in the process, but Pike (2003) additionally envisions “not simply a model of transaction or exchange but a model of amplification and growth” (p. 69).

Pike's reader-response and transactional-infused methods for teaching poetry in the secondary classroom show that synthesis between theoretical framework, empirical method, literary mode, and classroom practice is challenging yet attainable. The teaching of poetry, already a complex and dubious undertaking, becomes more than just task or practice under its inspiring and informed guidelines. Best practices emerge to guide the process of utilizing social justice poetry's power to call the reader toward an enlightened consciousness through response and transaction so that an enhanced empathetic response may be elicited.

Creely (2019) focuses on the fundamental differences between poetry and other forms of writing, including brevity and economy of words, extensive form and structure variations, use of complex imagery, highly personal expression, and transcendent nature. To combat the decline in teaching poetry, its lack of classroom and curricular presence, widespread teacher reticence based on poetry's complexity and obscurity, and poor student reception to and engagement with poetry as denoted by Benton (2000), Dymoke (2012, 2001), Farber (2015), Sigvardsson (2020), and Xerri (2013), he advocates a four-part approach to effective poetry teaching: modeling, which emphasizes the instructor's active engagement with teaching and writing poetry, integrating, which focuses on incorporating poetry into "diverse learning contexts and meaning spaces," recentering, which involves the shifting of poetry into spaces more meaningful to students, and challenging, which entails overcoming obstacles and rigidities that separate poetry from experience (p. 122). The end goal is making poetry oriented and relevant to the world of students.



Farber (2015) believes that the way poetry is traditionally taught has greatly contributed to its decline, and the only way to reverse this trend is to adapt teaching methods that embrace a more flexible didactic framework. Many students have been intentionally or unintentionally taught that the only way to enjoy a poem is to decode a hidden and cryptic message that can only be unlocked through the instructor's wisdom, a belief that negates any individual interpretation and enjoyment within the genre. Farber (2015) believes that failing to honor the identity of poetry comes from teaching students that every poem has a singular concrete message to nail down, and the main purpose in reading it is to dissect that message.

This singular mindset often leads to an approach in which students “confront something that fascinates because it seems permanently in flight, and yet we’ve been taught to put it in a cage” (Farber, 2015, p. 228). Autonomy is crucial along with giving as much room as possible for individual student choice. The realization that the experience of a poem differs from one individual to another is one of the genre's greatest strengths, and accepting, and even celebrating, this elusiveness as an inexorable part of poetry is essential to avoid the “fortune cookie” and “Rorschach test” approach to the genre (Farber, 2015).

Sigvardsson (2020) denoted four main themes essential to successful poetry instruction within the secondary English classroom: the teacher's personal interest in and engagement with poetic material, open discussion regarding the conception of poetry as intimidating and difficult while stressing that it does not belong to an educated elite and that there is more than one valid interpretation, establishing a safe and secure classroom environment built on the trust necessary vulnerability, and scaffolding student interpretations while being open to and incorporating their viewpoints. In addition to these

findings, selecting poems that interested and engaged students was a vitally important strategy of teaching poetry successfully (Sigvardsson, 2020).

### **Moral-Cognitive Education**

English Language Arts provides an ideal opportunity to approach morality as copious positive and negative examples exist within literature. Although the place of moral-cognitive education within the school curriculum is currently being challenged, many influential theorists recognized the importance of an emotional component within pedagogical frameworks. As early as 1933, John Dewey envisioned a focus on the emotional and intellectual as essential for whole-person education (Storey, 2019). Vygotsky furthered this view through recognizing the benefits of literature not only for moral education, but also to provide readers with necessary exploration and interpretation of life experience. Rosenblatt also emphasized literature's potential for understanding the self and others, widening cultural horizons, clarifying values, and illuminating the world (Storey, 2019).

The power of social justice poetry to explore injustice, promote human dignity, and cultivate civic responsibility while reinforcing curricular and character-building skills highlights the importance of moral education in our modern age (Stout, 1999). Logical-mathematical intelligence is arguably the primary method of thinking in Western civilization, and its long-held dominance has led to collective thinking that revolves around absolutes and a scientific method-based intellectual approach (Blake, 1992). These "absolutes" can dominate schools and come at the expense of morality and character building, leading to a moral examination of the place of poetry in our culture (Blake, 1992). To an arguably large extent, modern society seems to de-value poetry and

the creative arts in the face of rationality, science, and technology, which has possibly led to a decrease in empathy, a reduced emphasis on emotional intelligence, and greater overall social isolation (Blake, 1992).

Mirroring Farber's (2015) more recent analysis, Blake (1992) purports that poems are often viewed as "secret messages, technical constructs...linguistic puzzles to be solved" by an elite and studied few, with pupils forced to unearth meaning through ration and logic while disregarding emotion and morality, which creates a rigid and unforgiving framework that disregards poetry's fluid and dynamic core.

Stout (1999) advocates a moral-cognitive approach to learning to combat this educational divide and argues that poetry can provide this bridge. Moral awareness should govern critical intellect, as the former more fully discerns sympathetically and imaginatively reconstructing differing paradigms of thinking, which can be viewed as a hallmark of empathy. Stout (1999) further argues that strictly assigning cognitive growth to school and affective development to home results in a "human being who is an integral composite of qualities...shaped into something less than fully human in the process" (p. 23). Therefore, moral-cognitive education articulates that learning has two purposes: the development of critical skills and the human capacity for caring.

Other researchers detailed the importance of cognition and emotion working in tandem; Clark and Jensen (1992) advocated a turning toward the social side of the social sciences--toward questions of morality and care, while educational theorists such as Broudy (1972), Bruner (1986), and Noddings (1992) questioned modern attempts to separate "ways of knowing" from "ways of caring," or what Stout (1999) called "schooling for instruction" vs. "schooling for life" (p. 24). Belenky et al. (1986) applied

this concept further with "connected knowing" that supports a correlation between thinking and feeling for the educator and student, which in turn provides a framework for allowing moral awareness to govern critical intellect (Stout, 1999).

Phillips (2003) broadened the moral-cognitive spectrum even more by maintaining that learning to care and extending this outward creates an enhanced sense of justice and community. Finally, Pantic (2015) discussed the 21<sup>st</sup> century emphasis on teachers as 'agents of change' within frameworks of social justice through engaging in a moral vision "seeking to address exclusion and...disadvantage," which directly links to the goals and effects of social justice poetry (p. 764).

### **Social Justice Poetry**

Social justice poetry, broadly viewed as poems about injustice, identity, unfairness, and human rights, can more specifically be viewed as "using the power of figurative language to combat social injustices and inspires democratic visions of a fair and just society" (Ciardiello, 2010, p. 464). It is often correlated with political poetry, protest poetry, and poetry of witness, with these terms sometimes interchangeably utilized. Social justice poetry can have several functions, including protesting unjust living conditions, respecting and promoting human dignity, representing the oppressed and marginalized, voicing the dispossessed, examining issues of fairness, and exposing various forms of discrimination, violence, and oppression (Damico, 2005).

The modern concept of social justice has existed since the nineteenth century, but notions of it as a principal concept within English education is a late twentieth and early twenty-first-century development (Alsup & Miller, 2014). Social justice education can currently be defined as the integration of "aspects of democratic education, critical

pedagogy, critical multicultural education, and culturally responsive education, along with elements of social, cognitive, and systems theory in an attempt to effect holistic educational and societal transformation” (Dover, 2013, p. 6). English teachers are often personally and professionally associated with social justice education as practitioners of a subject focused on critical approaches to language, literature, and literacy (Alsup & Miller, 2014). While the phrase has recently become controversial in the wake of the uproar over Critical Race Theory, Alsup and Miller (2014) envision social justice not as a political label or party affiliation but as a way of approaching public education that “ensures that it will be as open and equitable as possible to all children, regardless of their identities, biologies, or experience” (p. 199).

The emergence of social justice poetry as a subgenre within the poetic framework corresponds with this recent focus. Within the classroom, Ciardiello (2010) makes a strong case for the use of social justice poetry to additionally cultivate civic responsibility while developing and refining literacy skills within the ELA curriculum and act as a humanizing agent that elicits student empathy by nature. Damico (2005) focused on social justice poetry as a catalyst for critical classroom conversations about socially complex topics. Students at elementary and middle school levels positively responded to social justice poetry on a variety of topics in the English Language Arts classroom, while it remains to be seen if high school students share a similar response. Both studies found that social justice poetry can be taught in a variety of ways in the classroom – formally, aesthetically, critically, socially, etc. – to reinforce curricular and standards-based skills while also offering civic training and character building (Ciardiello, 2010; Damico, 2005).

Espada (2000) further lays theoretical groundwork for social justice poetry by claiming that “progressive social change must be imagined first, and that vision must find its most eloquent possible expression to move from vision to reality” (p. 9). Stovall (2006) believes that social justice poetry reinforces culturally relevant pedagogy, as the poetry educator is a crucial factor in the ongoing project of social justice in education: “Teaching social justice through poetry is a liberatory, conscious-raising, politicized process that challenges young people to develop understandings of their world and begin to engage the world as agents of change” (p. 63). Furthering this process, Stout (2014) views social justice poetry as a way of providing powerful counter-narratives to students that equip them to push back against the Dominant Discourse, or the language of those in power, accessible only to history’s victors, by claiming that “Poetry gives us an out, or a way to avoid this kind of Discourse by giving voice to those ‘others’” (p. 25).

While the previous studies and experiences with social justice poetry focused on the benefits of the genre and broader applications within the classroom, a study by Malo-Juvera and Spears-Bunton (2015) chronicled their experiences and successes with a social justice poetry unit that used Leslea Newman’s *October Mourning* as its anchor text. This novel in verse contains sixty-eight fictitious monologue poems surrounding the kidnapping, beating, and death of Matthew Shepard, a gay 21-year-old college student whose murder made national headlines in 1998. This qualitative study with 112 high school students from four Advanced Placement Language and Literature classes at an urban south Florida high school included such topics as race, LGBTQ, rape, and suicide in a descriptive case study that utilized content analysis to evaluate the way students used poetry to engage with social justice topics.

Students were asked to analyze previously written texts and produce new ones in order to interrogate existing disparities in power. Nineteen student-composed poetry projects consisting of 248 poems were then independently analyzed by the two authors of the study using open coding to develop categories and themes. Study results showed that students mastered many elements of the poetic form while engaging in an interdisciplinary approach to social justice issues and poems that they themselves enthusiastically discussed and wrote about. Malo-Juvera's and Spears-Bunton's (2015) work reflects the power of social justice poetry while proving success with engaging students at the highest levels of taxonomy-driven learning.

Sanchez (2007) also used poetry to instigate critical thought and discussion about social justice topics such as privilege, discrimination, and stigma in a qualitative study that utilized thick description and action inquiry from a participatory paradigm with 13 students in the middle/high school age group between 13 and 17 years old. Six of the students were female, and seven of the students were male. There was a wide range of socioeconomic status reported among the ethnically and culturally diverse sample. Data was collected and analyzed throughout the course of the study and coded for common themes.

The data from responses to study assignments revealed that students began to identify and name social justice issues, themes, and concepts by analyzing both poems and music. Students experienced a wide range of emotions and feelings about social justice, especially regarding how they should act and what they should do about it. Empathy was another emotional reaction some students had to the music and songs. Opening a safe forum for discussion about difficult and painful topics while using

alternative texts to study social phenomena helped to create a classroom space for social justice inquiry.

## **Empathy**

If reader-response and close reading comprise the framework and social justice poetry is the vehicle, then increased empathy is the desired effect. The definition of empathy varies from dictionary to dictionary and study to study, but at its most basic empathy can be understood as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Davis (1983) defined it “reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another.” The term is modeled from the German word *Einfühlung* (from *ein* "in" + *Fühlung* "feeling," traces further back to the Greek word *empathēia*, translated as “passion, state of emotion” from *en*, or in, and *pathos*, or feeling. and descends from the Proto-Indo-European root – *kwent(h)*, meaning to suffer (Bouton, 2016).

The more empathy is studied, the greater the evidence that it is a multidimensional construct (Davis, 1983). There are affective, behavioral, cognitive, and compassionate approaches, social, moral, philosophical, and cultural points of view, and the similar, commonly interchanged, or confused terms sympathy, perspective taking, and compassion (Bouton, 2016). For example, effective empathy refers to an individual’s ability to perceive and share another’s emotional states and feelings, behavioral empathy is an automatic emotional response to environmental stimulus, cognitive empathy is the ability to understand how another person is feeling, or how one’s behavior might influence another individual’s feelings, and compassionate empathy is an understanding of one’s situational feelings combined with a desire to resolve the problem(s) causing



them, a more sophisticated level of empathy that develops with age (Ilgunaite et al., 2017).

Ilgunaite et al.'s (2017) study focused on full text, English language studies published in academic journals between 2000 and 2015. Among 252 eligible studies, the 28-item, Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983) that measures Perspective Taking (PT), Fantasy (FS), Empathic Concern (EC), and Personal Distress (PD) was utilized the most, in 43, or 17% of studies (Ilgunaite et al., 2017). The 60-item Empathy Quotient (EQ; Baron–Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004) that measures three different factors – cognitive empathy, emotional reactivity, and social skills – was the third most utilized measurement tool, in 25 out of 252 studies (Ilgunaite et al., 2017). These studies show that while there is no one definitive way to measure an abstract quality like empathy, there are at least a variety of different tools to yield baseline data for study and analysis.

Overgaauw's (2017) study detailed the development and validation of a new tool, The Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (EmQue-CA), a self-report questionnaire which focuses on affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and intention to comfort. 1250 children and adolescents (10–15-year-olds) completed the newly developed Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (EmQue-CA) that consisted of 21 items with three scales: (1) *affective empathy*, measuring the extent to which one feels for the emotion of another person, (2) *cognitive empathy*, measuring the extent to which one understands why another person is in distress, and (3) *intention to comfort*, measuring the extent to which one is also inclined to actually help or support a person in need (Overgaauw, 2017). The study found that higher empathy was related to

more attention to others' emotions, higher friendship quality, less focus on own affective state, and lower levels of bullying behavior (Overgaauw, 2017).

These study results showed that the EmQue-CA is a reliable and valid instrument to measure empathy in typically developing children and adolescents aged 10 and older (Overgaauw, 2017). Aimed to assess empathy more thoroughly and provide a scale that measures both affective and cognitive empathy, it presented a significant contribution to the literature on empathy, especially with its addition of a scale assessing intention to comfort, offering another method to assess and measure empathy in a field of study with limited options (Overgaauw, 2017). However, only seven students in the study were from North America or had North American parents, which represents an extremely small sample size and reflects the growing need for additional studies with American populations to shed light on an understudied area, especially due to the United States's status as one of the most narcissistic nations in the world (Campbell et al., 2010).

Regardless of the empathy definition, type, or selected measurement tool, educational theorists agree that it is a crucial mindset toward combating the increasing narcissism among younger generations. Campbell and Twenge (2013) have studied individual narcissism trends and documented larger than normal increases in personal vanity, materialism, entitlement, and fame-seeking behavior along with television shows and song lyrics that reflect American cultural narcissistic tendencies. Likewise, Twenge et al.'s (2008) cross-temporal meta-analysis reflected a generational increase in narcissism by assessing the lifetime prevalence of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) in a nationally representative sample of American college students between 1979 and 2006; the results showed that younger Americans in the 20s were 30% more likely than

those over age 60 to have experienced NPD, the most serious form of individual narcissism, in their lifetimes.

Additionally, Konrath et al.'s (2011) cross temporal meta-analysis measured the dispositional empathy of American college students between 1979-2009 and found sharp decreases in Empathetic Concern and Perspective Taking, two of the four most prototypically empathic subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). In a discussion of the results, the study authors noted the dynamic relationship between culture and personality and how societal change affects both, before noting narcissism's negative correlation with empathy, an increase in violence and bullying, changing parenting and family practices, increasing expectations of success, and most comprehensively, changes in media and technology, with excessive personal technology and social media use negatively affecting empathy in multiple ways (Konrath et al., 2011).

The use of different empathy measurement tools within different studies highlights the difficulty of quantifying what seems to be at least a partially abstract quality that "is notoriously difficult to evaluate because it happens within the minds of students" (Bouton, 2016, p. 21). Despite this, most research studies used a form of scale measurement while others used observation or written response to procure an external measurement from an internal pattern of thinking (Bouton, 2016). While of questionable efficacy, no other more effective method of empathy testing has been identified, and the last 30 years have yielded limited empirical studies regarding if it can be taught and how this is best accomplished. Study authors who believe that empathy can be taught still caution that the lack of definition consensus, scale validity and reliability issues, and lack

of methodology clarity and consistency pose challenges for the field of empathy research and curriculum development (Bouton, 2016).

Despite these challenges and the presence of a new empathy measurement scale intended for adolescents, I intend to use Davis's (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), the most established and popular tool used within previous empathy studies, to establish a baseline measure of empathy in students at the beginning of a six-week social justice poetry unit that will explore racism, the refugee/immigration crisis, and terrorism. The IRI will be re-administered at the conclusion of the unit to provide further comparative quantitative data as part of a mixed methods research study considering the effect of social justice poetry on empathy in the secondary English classroom.

## CHAPTER 3

### ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The identified Problem of Practice for this study is a secondary English Language Arts class that would benefit from enhanced critical poetry reading skills and an increase in empathetic consciousness. Using action research methods, I will blend reader-response and close reading techniques throughout a unit on social justice poetry and supporting curriculum to lead my students into more meaningful literary analysis along with enhanced empathetic thinking skills. Investigating this “wondering” within my classroom will allow me to share multidisciplinary content with my students that both strengthens their ELA skills and addresses character education while I become a more nuanced and reflective practitioner.

#### **Research Question**

How will reader-response and close reading approaches to social justice poetry impact on the empathy levels of secondary English Language Arts students?

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect that a reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry has on the empathetic thinking of my secondary ELA students. A reader-response approach to literature places emphasis on the reader’s reaction to and interaction with a particular literary work as or more centrally than the work itself, while close reading methods stress critical text analysis centered on significant details or patterns within the work to develop an in-depth grasp on textual form and meanings (Burke, n.d.). Using these two approaches mirror Rosenblatt’s

aesthetic and efferent components for both affective and cognitive learner outcomes. Therefore, conjunctively using these two methods of poetic analysis will more likely yield both academic gain within critical English Language Arts skills and personal growth in the form of enhanced empathy. For the purposes of this study, social justice poetry is defined as poems about injustice, identity, and human rights, while empathy is defined as the ability to share someone else's feelings by personally relating to that individual's situation or experience.

### **Action Research Design**

Action research is the perfect vessel to explore a Problem of Practice within the field of education because, like education itself, it is "more dynamic, fluid, and -- at times -- messier than the linear description of the process," which completely describes the act of teaching as well (Efron and Ravid, 2015, p. 8). It focuses on the investigator while emergent in design, participant-focused, insider-based, and analyzed through multiple forms of data. This design is most appropriate for teacher-researchers who conduct investigations with their own students to improve an area of practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Setting and Time Frame of the Study**

The high school where this action research study took place is in the rural outskirts of a large city within a southern state. According to the school district's website, the high school has just over 2,300 students in grades nine through twelve. Male and female students are closely balanced at 51% female to 49% male. The ethnic distribution is mostly white (65%), with African Americans comprising 25% of students, Hispanics making up 4%, Bi-racial students at 4%, and Asian students composing 1%. 31% of students are

eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, which is well below the state average (65%), and 30% of students are classified as low income. Regarding academics, the schoolwide graduation rate is 91%, with an 82% and 64% passage rate, respectively, on Reading/Language Arts and Mathematics test scores (as defined as at or above or at proficiency on South Carolina state tests). 45% of students participate in AP classes.

This research study was implemented in a mixed-level elective class during the second quarter of the fall semester to give students a chance to acclimate to the class and one another. Poetry in general and social justice poetry in particular can be challenging and unsettling, so I wanted to ensure that students felt familiar with each other and class dynamics before sensitive topics without easy solutions were explored and discussed. Analyzing these social justice issues in-depth sometimes brings out negative attitudes in participants, and discomfort needs to be worked through, which is more difficult with the current hyper-focus on avoiding whatever is deemed to be “controversial” material. We are undoubtedly living through tumultuous times filled with societal division, hostility, and isolation; however, I believe that the intensity and creativity of social justice poetry can serve as a medium to bridge these gaps while teaching young adults the value of voice, social responsibility, and empathy.

### **Participants**

The participants for this mixed methods action research study regarding a reader response and close reading approach to social justice poetry and if it increases student empathetic thinking were comprised of tenth through twelfth grade high school students in an advanced elective class. I collected data on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the third block period that occurs between 1:06 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. For the purposes of this study, six

students were selected as subjects for both observation and data collection. These students were chosen based on the grade level they represented as well as their race and gender to ensure a representative class sample. The student-participants included three females and three males. Three of the participants were African American and three were Caucasian. To protect the identity of the student-participants, pseudonyms were utilized throughout the study. The six student-participants are described as follows:

**Phoebe**, a 12<sup>th</sup> grader, who is mostly quiet and introverted during class.

**Mark**, a 12<sup>th</sup> grader who generally articulates his opinion.

**Eva**, an 11<sup>th</sup> grader who is a pleasant and generally hard-working student.

**Scott**, an 11<sup>th</sup> grader who is somewhat impatient and critical regarding class content.

**Nicole**, a 10<sup>th</sup> grader who likes poetry but is somewhat reserved in class.

**Ryan**, a 10<sup>th</sup> grader who appears less than motivated with his analysis and assignments.

### **Research Methods**

This qualitative mixed-methods research study was guided by the principles of action research, which is comprised of recurring cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Repeatedly conducting these cycles at various stages of the study allows for continuous refining and reflecting within both active and passive phases of analysis. A mixed-methods design using concurrent methods was utilized during this study to examine the impact that a reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry has on the empathy levels of secondary English students.

This design allowed me to collect different but complementary data to develop and evaluate a multi-faceted picture of the student-participants. It also provided a comparison and contrast of quantitative statistics and qualitative findings to validate or



expand the former with the latter (Mertler, 2017). Using narrative data only would not provide as thorough an examination of the impact of reader-response and close reading methods nor allow as complete a measure of student empathy levels.

A concurrent procedure was used for the simultaneous collection of information and data. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were implemented with equal weight during this six-week one-phase design in order to combine the strength of both data sets. The two data sets were merged and interpreted at the conclusion of the study period to answer the research question (Mertler, 2017) most fully and effectively.

### **Data Collection Methods**

#### **Quantitative Data**

Quantitative data was collected from a baseline empathy scale survey score at the beginning and end of the study. The Davis (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index, or IRI, is an established data tool and the assessment most utilized in multi-field empathy studies (Ilguinaite et al., 2016). Pre-study and post-study score results were measured and charted for visual data that highlighted changes in student empathy levels. A pre-unit and post-unit Poetry Affinity Likert Scale survey from Patel and Laud (2015) was also administered, which permitted me to discover if students progressed in their knowledge of and proclivity for poetry over the course of the study. These measures will further allow me to quantitatively evaluate if the dual reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry increased the empathy levels of my secondary students.

#### **Qualitative Data**

Qualitative data was collected throughout the six-week study in multiple forms. As the teacher-researcher, I maintained an observation journal for the duration of the study to

record field notes in the form of student comments and opinions. I also formally and informally interviewed the six student-participants at the inception, during, and conclusion of the study to ascertain attitudes and ideas about poetic content, close reading strategies, reader-response approaches, and empathy. Finally, assignment and artifact results were added to the data in the form of student poems written during the unit and a creative visual poem project at its conclusion. These qualitative measures yielded a fuller picture of how and why empathy levels along with enjoyment and knowledge of poetry increased or stayed the same during this dual methods approach based on social justice poetry.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Throughout the study, various types of data were collected from both the teacher and the student participants. The different instruments ensured that a varied complement of material was evaluated to create a full picture of students' responses:

#### **Pre/Post Empathy Scale Assessment**

Davis's (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) empathy scale provided initial and final student empathy level figures for the purpose of comparison. This provided a baseline empathy level assessment prior to student-participant exposure to, participation in, and analysis of the social justice poetry unit and then a concluding figure at the end of the unit to show if growth in empathy levels was achieved through a dual reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry.

#### **Poetry Affinity Likert Scale Survey**

The questions from Patel and Laud's (2015) poetry attitudes survey were given to students at the beginning and end of the study and asked multiple questions pertaining to their views on poetry. Choices encompassed strongly agree to strongly disagree on a

continuum. Questions were clear and concise with appropriate choices while avoiding bias or presumptions. Data was used to judge the current knowledge and comfort levels students had with poetry as well as the depth and type of their previous exposure to it.

### **Pre/Post Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were administered at both the start and end of the research study to provide an enhanced understanding of participants' ideas and experiences and to "complement and substantiate" observation data (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 98). The same open-ended questions were asked of each interviewee, but follow-up, alternate queries were also posed depending on the responses, which provides the best truly qualitative data as it allows consistent topic investigation with participants but also grants the flexibility for natural conversation that yields deeper insight (Mertler, 2017).

### **Observation Field Notes**

A journal of narrative data was carefully kept for the duration of the research study. This was a valuable tool to increase insight into classroom interactions while also illuminating constraints and monitoring subjectivity, which enhances the ethical considerations of the research study (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Notes on student responses and behavior help to provide a more complete picture of each participant and the teacher-researcher's reactions as the study continued.

### **Assignments/Artifacts**

Student work is an important type of data instrument that allows teacher researchers to "construct a layered and contextual understanding of their topics" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 123). During each week of the study, the teacher researcher collected and evaluated student responses to assignment materials for each social justice poem in the

six-week unit for greater insight into perspectives as the unit progressed. In addition to these assignments, special projects in the form of two original poems written by student-participants, a creative visual metaphor, and a final visual poem response on a poem of choice served as important artifacts to ascertain the effectiveness of the instruction as well as evolving student perceptions into social justice issues.

## **Procedure**

### **Week One**

During the first week of the unit, the six student-participants took the Davis (1983) IRI baseline empathy scale measurement along with Patel and Laud's (2015) basic poetry attitudes Likert survey to judge their knowledge of and enthusiasm for poetry before coverage of specific social justice poems. These students were also interviewed using a semi-structured format. The teacher-researcher briefly shared the unit outline, close-reading and reader response background, terminology, and strategies along with poetry analysis terms and review during direct classroom instruction.

To galvanize student thinking about poetry as a response to social justice issues, students viewed the documentary *Louder Than a Bomb* in class, which chronicles the journey of four Chicago-area high schools to compete in the largest teen poetry slam competition in the United States. While slam poetry is not the style or focus of the poetic expression within this research study, the featured students in the documentary thoughtfully write and passionately perform poems that respond to a variety of social issues while demonstrating an enthusiasm for poetry that is contagious. Student-participants answered pre- and post-viewing questions about the documentary prior to discussing their reactions to it in class.

Student-participants were also told that through direct instruction (historical context, in-class analysis, and paired activities) and individual reflection (additional close reading, prompt responses, poem writing), the unit poems would be analyzed using reader response and close reading techniques to facilitate comprehension along with critical and creative thinking about each piece. Supplementary materials (documentaries, video clips, interviews, news articles, media) further enhanced each poem and the themes and issues within it.

## **Week Two**

The second week of the unit focused on the theme of racial injustice and included two poems centered around this issue: “Unrest in Baton Rouge,” by Tracey K. Smith and “When Puffy says, and we won’ t stop, ‘cause we can’ t stop.” by Rasheed Copeland (see Appendix A for unit poems). “Unrest in Baton Rouge” is an example of an ekphrastic poem, one written in response to an image or work of art. It is based on freelance photographer Jonathan Bachman’s award-winning photograph of a calm and unarmed female protestor being arrested in Louisiana during the peaceful 2016 protest of Alton Sterling’s death at the hands of law enforcement. As this was the first poem of the unit, I wanted to give students some extra “scaffolding” for reading and analysis while illustrating poetry’s “crossover” to mainstream media. The poem is also short, direct, and imagery-laden, all criteria to consider when asking students to test the waters with poetry.

The second poem selected to explore racial injustice was Rasheed Copeland’s “When Puffy says, and we won’t stop, ‘cause we can’t stop.” This oddly titled yet powerful poem addresses generational violence caused by racial poverty while offering an understated approach to the topic. The title is a reference to a line within the hit song “I’ll Be Missing

You,” itself a remix of The Police’s iconic song “Every Breath You Take.” Once again, I capitalized on the opportunity to demonstrate poetry’s crossover to modern music with two incredibly successful songs and correlation to song lyrics, which students are much more familiar and comfortable with that poetry.

“Unrest in Baton Rouge” was introduced, read, and analyzed on Monday and Tuesday, while “When Puffy says, and we won’ t stop, ‘cause we can’ t stop.” by Rasheed Copeland was covered on Wednesday and Thursday. After the initial reading of each poem, which was first introduced via a teacher reading and then audio of an online reading, students were asked how the poem made them feel and what it made them think of (reader-response) prior to a more structured and in-depth analysis of the piece (close reading).

On Monday, after “Unrest in Baton Rouge” was read out loud, listened to, and discussed via a reader-response approach (see Appendix A), students viewed some additional examples of ekphrastic poetry and started an online search for a racial injustice news photograph that mirrored the image described within in the poem. On Tuesday, the SMARTTS (Sound, Meaning, Active Reading, Tone, Theme, Singulars – see Appendix B) poem template was introduced to students as an example of a close reading tool prior to the class filling it in together to model the process for future assignments. Students were then given additional time in class to find an evocative and powerful news image that reflected racial injustice.

On Wednesday, after Rasheed Copeland’s “When Puffy says, and we won’t stop, ‘cause we can’t stop.” was read, listened to, and discussed, the class spoke on how musicians create modern adaptations of famous songs, as this poem takes its title from a

line in P. Diddy's song "I'll Be Missing You," which itself is based on The Police's hit song "I'll Be Watching You." The videos for both songs were watched and listened to so students could listen to similarities and discover where the title line for Copeland's poem came from. On Thursday, students completed a "Poem to Title" Wakelet (a digital curation platform that lets teachers and students organize a mix of content for easy access posting) response that asked them to elaborate on the poem title's dual positive and negative connotations and how it connected to the poem's content. Responses were discussed among student pairs and then as a whole class to share impressions and evocative interpretations.

On Friday, the final day of focusing on racial injustice, students were asked to finalize their selection of an old or modern news photograph that memorably captured racial injustice. They were then led through a series of pre-writing questions based on their image (see Appendix C) before drafting an ekphrastic poem to accompany their selected picture. Interestingly, some students chose images from the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and others selected more recent images from the nation-wide protests over the killing of George Floyd in 2020. Poems were then typed, handed in the following week, and evaluated for correspondence to the original image and the presence of a more in-depth viewpoint related in some way to the photograph (see Appendix D).

### **Week Three**

During the third week of the social justice poetry unit, the theme of the refugee crisis and immigration was introduced through the poems "Things We Carry on the Sea" by Wang Ping and "Home" by Warsan Shire, two very different poems that center on the experience of international refugees facing challenging conditions. "Things We Carry on the Sea" is a

list poem selected to counterbalance the fierceness of “Home” and its more direct tone and approach. Ping’s poem draws its quiet intensity through the repetition of certain words and phrases as it drifts along, a stark contrast to Shire’s unflinching diatribe that grabs readers with the opening line “No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of shark” to highlight the uncertainty and terror of the refugee experience. This allowed students to consider disparate approaches to the same social justice topic. Shire’s “Home” also allowed the continuation of a focus on music and poetry’s crossover to pop culture, as Shire’s words inspired Beyonce and resulted in a successful collaboration between the two artists.

Once again, the first immigration/refugee crisis poem was introduced, read, listened to, and discussed on Monday while the second was covered on Wednesday. Students were again given the chance to first respond to each poem via reader-response questions prior to a more in-depth close reading of each piece. In between these two poems, on Tuesday students viewed the documentary *Brave Girl Rising*, which chronicles the life of a Somali teenager living in one of the largest African refugee camps, and then analyzed data and statistics on the worldwide refugee crisis. They also completed a Wakelet posting response on tone and theme in “Things We Carry on the Sea” (see Appendix E). On Thursday, they explored poet Warsan Shire’s connections to pop megastar Beyonce and then began to formulate a written and visual metaphor that paralleled Shire’s powerful opening line “No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.”

On Friday, students typed, designed, and presented their individual metaphors based on “Home” (see Appendix F). They were then once again led through a series of reader-response-based questions based on “Things We Carry on the Sea” to gather material for the drafting of a 15–20 line poem that repeatedly used “I am,” “I hold,” and/or “I carry” as a



line starter (like Ping’s poem), either from their own perspective or the perspective of a refugee. Students then had time to reflect on their thoughts and refine their answers. Additional drafting time was then given so students could figure out an approach to their poem and begin organizing and writing it. Their poems were submitted the following week and evaluated on adherence to the original poem’s beginning line structure format along with the presentation a more unique and individual perspective (see Poem 2 section of Appendix D).

#### **Week Four**

The fourth week of the unit focused on terrorism as a social justice issue, and two disparate poems centered on it: “Window Seat” by Molly McGinness and “Alabanza” by Martin Espada. “Window Seat” was selected for its indirect approach to terrorism and evocative imagery, while “Alabanza,” which means “praise” in Spanish, is a stunning 9/11 poem dedicated to the 43 kitchen workers employed at Windows on the World, a restaurant on the 106th and 107th floors of the World Trade Center’s north tower, who perished when it fell.

Continuing the pattern of previous weeks, the poems were respectively introduced and analyzed on Monday and Wednesday of the week, and students were first asked how they responded personally to each poem prior to a more intense close reading analysis of each piece. On Tuesday, students completed a close-read analysis of “Window Seat” based on questions within the CommonLit website platform. On Thursday, students watched audio of Espada’s emotional and musical reading of “Alabanza,” discussed the concept of allusions before researching those found in Espada’s poem, and created active reading statements for the poem. In lieu of a written poem focused on the week’s theme,

students were asked to begin contemplating options for a final visual poem project based on a poem of their choice within the unit.

### **Week Five**

During the fifth week of the unit, the class reviewed social justice themes and the poems representing them by analyzing similarities and differences using a Venn Diagram for each themed set, an activity that relied on close-reading techniques, and a dialectical journal assignment on one poem they chose to analyze more closely, which relied on reader-response techniques. Student-participants were given time in class for the poem comparison and contrast and the more in-depth dialectical journal assignment. The final unit project, a visual interpretation of a poem of their choice (see Appendix G), was also discussed and concept and drafting time was given in class so the instructor could conference with each student regarding his or her ideas.

### **Week Six**

During the sixth and final week of the study, the Davis (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) was once again administered along with Patel and Laud's (2015) poetry affinity Likert scale survey to gauge student empathy levels and changed responses regarding poetry. The six student-participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format for closing commentary both in a group and then individually. Final visual poem projects were drafted and perfected before their final submission, and a Microsoft Forms survey was administered to collect and record poem preferences and which activities were favored by each student.

The visual poem project that closed out the unit required students to select a poem that they enjoyed or responded to and create by hand a graphic representation of it that

incorporated images, symbols, and colors. The assignment was designed to reinforce the concepts that each student interprets poems uniquely and visualizes and renders these interpretations differently along with the idea that poetry is a medium which lends itself very easily to visual and other artistic interpretations. After drafting time both in and out of class, students submitted their final assignment on the last day of the unit. These projects were assessed based on their accurate representation of ideas, concepts, lines, objects, and/or symbols from the selected poem along with the panel layout and use of color for a more striking effect.

Throughout the unit, I collected and reflected on field notes every Tuesday and Thursday while students were engaged in poem extension activities. This provided an ongoing source of student reaction to both close reading and reader response teaching methods as well as each individual social justice poem that was covered. It also allowed me to observe and record comments made during interactions with other student-participants and those made during general class discussions of the pieces.

To further enhance the study, student-participants were given two separate opportunities to write their own poems. The first came early in the unit and entailed students choosing a retro or modern photograph to write a poem in the style of Tracy K. Smith's "Unrest in Baton Rouge," the first poem and first racial injustice representative in the unit. As previously discussed, "Unrest in Baton Rouge" is an example of an ekphrastic poem, one that is written in response to a work of art. After selecting an image that appealed to them, students were asked to draft a 12–15-line piece that reflected a specific aspect or perspective of the photograph. The assignment was designed to allow students to become more familiar with drafting a short poem (six two-line stanzas) while relying on

source material in the form of their selected photograph to scaffold the difficulty level of this first attempt at writing poetry.

The second poem writing activity came following “Things We Carry on the Sea,” the third poem in the unit and the first of two immigration/refugee crisis pieces. The poem repeats the phrase “We carry” thirteen times as it details the tangible and intangible items that refugees take with them as they flee their homelands and attempt to find safe space to exist. In response, student-participants were asked to write a 15–20-line poem from their own perspective or the perspective of a refugee. This writing activity further connected them to the power of their own voices if they chose to write from their own perspective or allowed them to assume a persona involved in a situation completely unknown to them if they chose to write from a refugee’s standpoint. The assignment represented a deliberate attempt to bring students more individually and fully into the poetry unit and social justice issues while giving them a familiar topic on which to write.

One of the goals of the research study was an increase in the baseline empathy scale measurements of students at the conclusion of the six-week unit and its varied activities. Previous studies have noted that empathy is a difficult variable to measure, or that empathetic growth may need to take place over a longer period (Gerdes et al., 2011; Junker & Jacquemin, 2017). Other goals include increased engagement with and appreciation for poetry in general and social justice poetry in particular, improved content, comprehension, close reading, and reader response skills, enhanced creative writing abilities, and a broader overall awareness of national and international human rights issues.

## **Data Analysis**

This study used a mixed methods approach to research. Statistical analysis was used to analyze the quantitative data, first from the Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) empathy measurement scale scores and then from the Likert scale poetry affinity survey. While quantitative results contain very little concrete description, but according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “a world of variables and static states” (p. 238), in this study the quantitative findings were extremely useful to ascertain and contrast if change has occurred in student empathy levels and attitudes regarding a mixed reader response and close reading approach to social justice poetry.

Following the administration of the pre-treatment survey, study participants responded to open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview. Their responses were then coded using emergent coding (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The qualitative data analysis process was inductive to support the building of concepts and theories. This process involved an extensive amount of organizing, coding, and arranging data within certain themes so that patterns, categories, similarities, or differences were observed and noted. Once this organizational process was complete, the researcher once again reviewed the data to note responses and results. As this is a qualitative study within English Language Arts, student response measured through these methods were valuable in ascertaining a more precise and nuanced answer to the research question. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note, understanding of a phenomenon is the main rationale for a qualitative research study, and it must be followed with well-developed standards and established authenticity.

Semi-structured participant interviews during the unit and post-unit interviews and surveys were also emergently coded, as were participant artifacts. In addition to interviews

and surveys, observation notes were regularly taken during the duration of the treatment and a field journal was maintained to note discussion and behavior of study participants during reader-response and close reading analysis of the unit's poems and at other stages of the study.

### **Plan for Reflecting with Participants on Data**

At the end of the study, I discussed the unit in general with the student participants, including overall responses to the unit's social justice poems, and proclivity for reader-response or close reading analysis techniques. This provided further information on the student-participant preferences while providing both teacher and students further opportunity for reflection, which Mertler (2014) denotes as necessary for professional development and growth. This discussion gave study participants the chance to share opinions and experiences not conveyed within the Likert survey or semi-structured interviews and provided a sense of closure for the overall unit.

### **Devising an Action Plan**

Based on the results of this research study, I developed a PowerPoint-based action plan that included major conclusions from the unit regarding students and social justice poetry, its effect on empathy, and how teachers may utilize a reader response approach to poetry that favors student-centered interpretation with teacher flexibility regarding reaction and response. This plan will be presented during a future department meeting and emailed to department members for further use. I also intend to offer a district-wide professional development session on the results of my study along with instruction on how teachers can implement social justice poetry and a reader-response framework into their content and lessons.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS FROM THE DATA ANALYSIS

#### **Introduction**

This study examined the impact of a combined reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry had on the empathy levels of secondary students in an elective English class. A small group of six tenth through twelfth students participated in this six-week study with the teacher as the researcher. The problem of practice for this study focused on an elective English Language Arts class that would benefit from enhanced critical poetry reading skills and an increase in empathy. Reader-response and close reading strategies were used with social justice poetry and related curriculum to lead my students to more meaningful literary analysis along with enhanced empathetic thinking skills.

The primary treatment method for this study was reader-response and close reading, and the vehicle was social justice poetry, a subgenre of poetry that focuses on the problems faced by marginalized groups and perspectives on these issues. At every stage of the study, I aimed to address the problem of practice and build student empathy levels while enhancing their poetry analysis skills and enjoyment of the genre.

During the six-week study and data collection, student participants responded to the pre- and post-Davis (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) survey to measure empathy levels at the beginning of the poetry unit and again at the end. A pre-and post-unit Likert survey on poetry affinity from Patel and Laud (2015) was also administered. Semi-structured pre-and -post-unit interviews occurred before and after student-participants

analyzed six poems organized around three social justice themes and completed reinforcement activities for each. Students also reflected on the poems via Microsoft Teams class page discussion threads, Wakelet postings, and longer written responses. They also participated in two poetry writing activities geared toward increasing their awareness of social justice issues and empowering their voices while embracing disparate perspectives. Finally, students prepared an illustrated version of a poem of their choice as the final creative closing activity of the unit.

### **Research Question**

What impact will a combined reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry have on the empathy levels of secondary English Language Arts students?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect(s) that a dual reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry had on the empathy levels of secondary English students within the classroom.

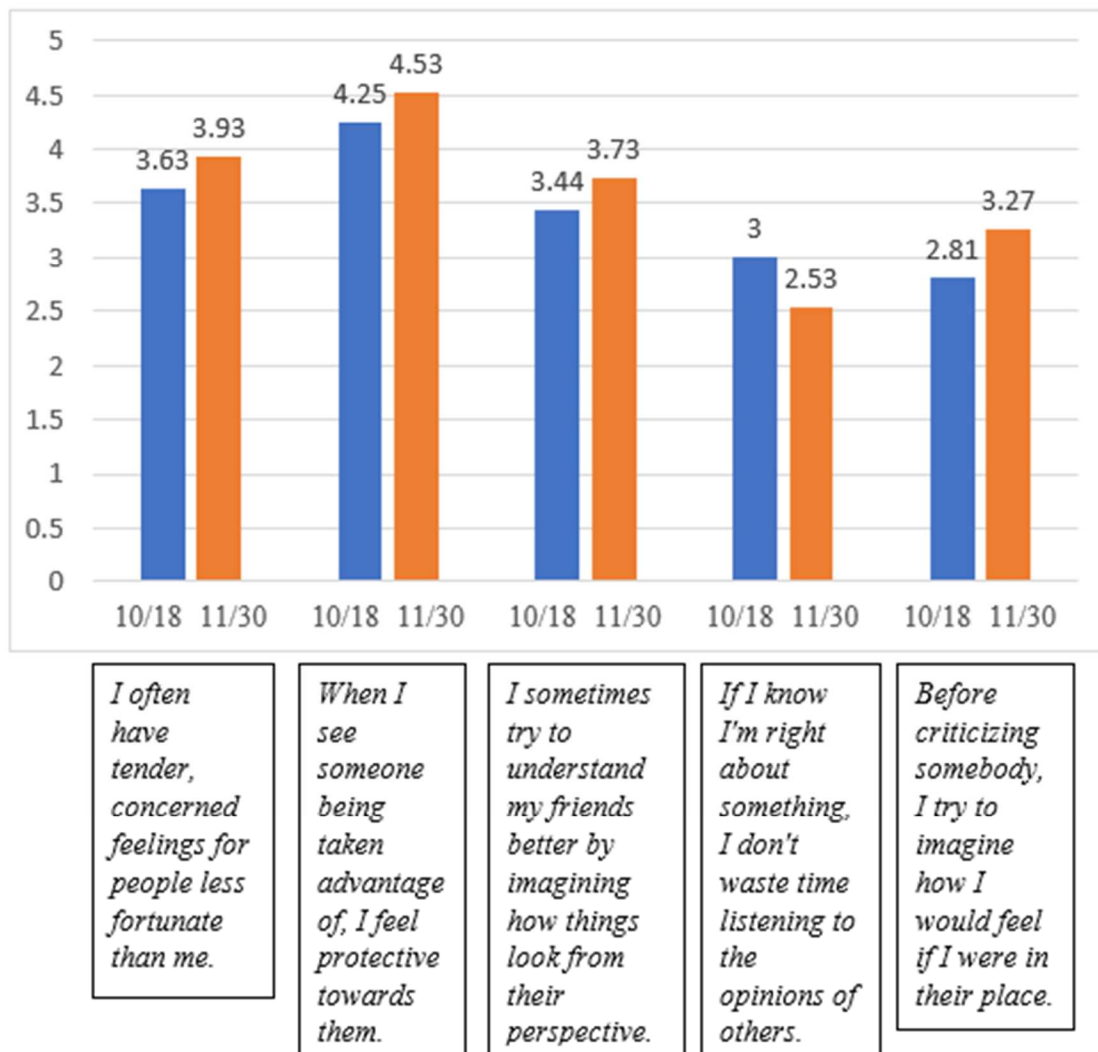
### **Findings of the Study and Interpretation of the Results**

During the six-week research period, I utilized a mixed methods framework for collecting data using a variety of quantitative and qualitative measures: a pre- and post-empathy level survey, pre- and post-Likert surveys, pre- and post-interviews, teacher-researcher observations, and student-participant artifacts which included original poems, a visual metaphor, and a visual representation of one chosen poem at the end of the unit.



## Quantitative Results

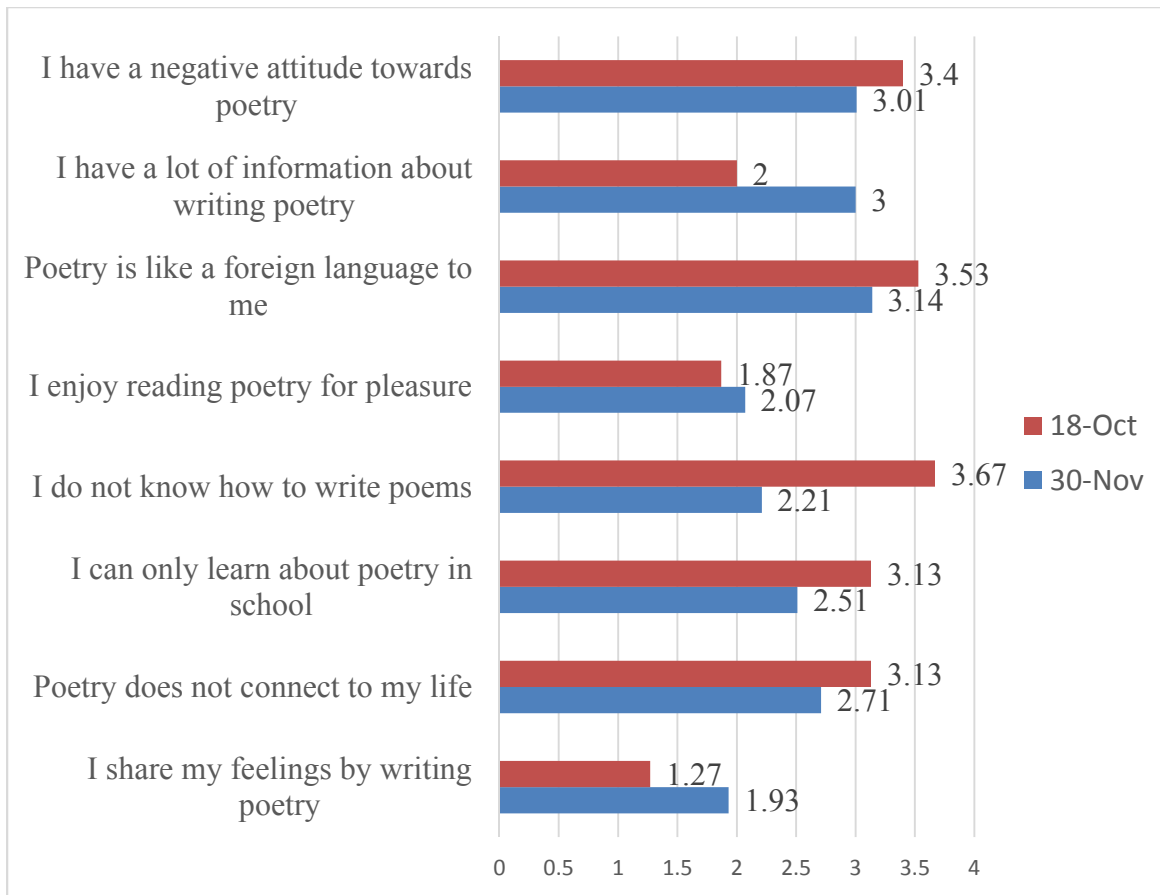
Using the results of the Davis IRI survey, I recorded and then compared the differential in the student-participants' pre-unit and post-unit responses to certain questions relating to their empathy levels. The average response of all six students was then organized into a chart showing any differences in their responses to certain questions from before and after the treatment and the differential between them. The pre-study and post-study results are shown below.



**Figure 4.1 Davis (1983) IRI Pre-Study and Post-Study Empathy Scale Score Results**

The data revealed that the empathy levels of student-participants appeared to increase after the treatment. Having concern for others in less fortuitous situations, feeling protective towards individuals being treated unfairly, examining situations from another's perspective, listening to what others have to offer, and placing oneself in someone else's shoes are hallmarks of empathy and empathetic concern. It is therefore reasonable to conclude based on the quantitative data that the social justice poems in this study increased student empathy by allowing them views into disparate perspectives and exposed them to difficult situations experienced and endured by others who don't usually enter their viewpoint.

Patel and Laud's (2015) poetry affinity Likert survey based on administered pre- and post-unit, the second quantitative measurement tool, showed growth toward more positive perspectives on poetry, including the writing and understanding of it. Once again, I examined the six student-participants' responses to certain questions from the measurement tool and then averaged these responses before recording the difference between them. The figure below shows the data results from before and after the treatment along with the differential between responses.



**Figure 4.2 Patel and Laud's (2015) Poetry Affinity Likert Survey Pre-Study and Post-Study Responses**

The data reveals that student-participants showed heightened interest in both the reading and writing of poetry, with an increased number reading poetry for non-academic reasons and understanding what they read more clearly. The results also show that student-participants felt more of a personal connection to poetry and a greater confidence to write within the genre using newly gained information and skills. Student-participants additionally felt that they learned a great deal during the unit that enhanced their poetry writing skills.

## **Qualitative Results**

Regarding qualitative data, I recorded observations during classwork regarding the discussion, interaction, and behavior of the student-participants as each poem was experienced and analyzed. I also analyzed data in the form of semi-structured student-participant interviews conducted both in-person and via Microsoft Forms queries. Following the data collection period, I engaged in multiple reviews of the data and coded it to identify patterns within student-participant responses. During data review and analysis, six words emerged most frequently from student-participant responses: social justice/injustice, voice/voices, empathy/empathize, open mind, change, and story.

The data revealed that students felt challenged by poetry but connected with the social justice poems more significantly than other poetry they have previously studied. They also felt that these poems gave an appropriate voice to victims of racial injustice, refugees and immigrants, and victims of terrorism. Individual review of student-participant comments showed that the poems were a potent tool in shifting perspectives and more fully considering the unfortunate situations that others endure throughout the world. Student-participants were more likely to respond evocatively and in greater depth about the poems and their connections to them, and the quantitative data reflected an excellent understanding of the poem's literary elements.

As a result of the examination of both the quantitative and qualitative data, four major themes emerged:

### **Theme One: Initial Student Antipathy Toward Poetry**

Data collection and coding of the pre-unit Poetry Affinity Likert survey reflected a clear dislike of poetry from the pre-survey statements, "I enjoy reading poetry for

pleasure,” “Poetry is like a foreign language to me,” “Poetry does not connect to my life,” and “I share my feelings by writing poetry.” The level of agreement or disagreement with these statements, corroborated during pre-interview discussions and responses, revealed that student-participants did not count poetry among things they enjoyed reading or learning about and did not consider it something worthwhile to read, analyze, or write. They also saw a disconnect between the form, subject matter, and personal life connections.

Most high school students approach poetry with resistance and antipathy due to prior experience with teacher-led interpretive absolutes and frustration over a lack of understanding of the material. Three out of the six student-participants responded that they “strongly disagreed” with the Likert survey statement “I enjoy reading poetry for pleasure,” while two of the six “disagreed” and only one responded, “neither agree nor disagree.” Likewise, three out of six chose “strongly agree” or “agree” to the survey statement “I have a negative attitude towards poetry,” while two of the six chose “neither agree nor disagree” and only one chose “disagree.” Even those with a less negative response to poetry expressed their misgivings; Nicole replied that “I like poetry, but it’s a lot of work.”

During student-participant interviews at the beginning of the unit, this negativity continued. Ryan admitted that he had already “looked into” poetry in the past and “didn’t care for most of it.” Phoebe said her past experiences with poetry were negative because the only poems read during school were “long and boring ones with different meanings that we had to point out and write about.” Nicole did not like being told that her interpretation of a poem was incorrect and commented further that “teachers drill one

single meaning of the poem into your head, and that's it," which expressed the limitations of her prior experience with poetry and frustration over narrow, didactic approaches to the genre. Mark even memorably referred to poetry as "the math of English," meaning that he found it as cryptic and unapproachable as algebraic equations.

However, by the study's end, these same participants expressed improved attitudes toward poetry. The Likert survey reflected an increase in responses to the statement, "I enjoy reading poetry for pleasure" (1.87 vs. 2.07) and a decrease in responses to the statement, "I have a negative attitude toward poetry" (3.40 vs. 3.01). Likewise, there was a decrease in agreement to the statement, "Poetry does not connect to my life" (3.13 vs. 2.57) and an increase in agreement with the statement, "I share my feelings by writing poetry" (1.21 vs. 1.93). There was also a notable decrease in agreement with the statement, "I do not know how to write poems," (3.67 vs. 2.21) and "I have a lot of information about writing poems" (3.0 vs. 4.0), which reflects the enjoyment that several study participants said they experienced with writing and not analyzing poetry.

The student-participants comments during the post-interview reflected these trends. Mark commented that he felt that he was exposed to something new and that he liked this poetry unit "more than other courses I've had so far." Ryan said that his favorite part of the unit was "reading and listening to the poems," and that the poems and assignments were "well-constructed and necessary." Phoebe replied that the unit "was very eventful" and that she learned "many new things that helped me identify different types of poems." Nicole reaffirmed that she usually did not like poetry "because of how teachers made us view [the poems], but "I loved the poetry in this class, and it was my favorite unit." Scott added that,

“I feel like the poetry unit and poetry as a whole just gives me a new way of thinking. I didn't fully enjoy all of the poems, but they definitely broadened my horizons. Finally, Eva reflected that “Every poem has something to teach us about ourselves if we look closely enough.”

## **Interpretation**

Student commentary and pre-study Likert survey results reflected a strong initial dislike for and understanding of the genre of poetry. This appeared to stem from being force-fed singular interpretations of poems that did not resonate with them and were taught as a required part of the curriculum. However, by the end of the unit, students admitted that while poetry was still difficult and usually required heavy thinking, they enjoyed at least some of the poems studied and more fully understood concepts about writing poetry, conclusions reflected in both the students' comments and the post-study Likert survey.

One major factor that drove this notable change in response was that from the beginning of the unit, I made a concerted effort to express and adhere to the principle that single, instructor-driven interpretations of the poems would not be a part of the treatment and that multiple student-centered interpretations and responses would be not just acceptable but also preferable. Over many years of experience teaching poetry, this single condition by far yields the best scenario for analysis and interpretation of poetry as it gives students the freedom to respond authentically, encourages a sense of agency regarding the validity of their responses, and allows the instructor to also learn and grow from disparate yet fascinating student perspectives on poems.

The study participants responded to this approach. Nicole replied, “I liked how we could interpret the poems as we saw them and decipher the messages behind each.”

Eva enjoyed “the no wrong answers approach” and said that she “thoroughly enjoyed each poem.” Ryan commented that he “liked the way poetry is told versus stories” and that even the poems he didn’t totally enjoy “broadened my horizons.” Scott memorably commented that “Before I hated poetry. During I disliked poetry. After I kind of started to like poetry.” His comment importantly points out that poetry can be a literary form that provides delayed gratification; students may initially struggle through sustained focus and work to understand certain poems, and only after that effort can they truly begin to grasp the larger connections and deeper elucidation that this practice unlocks. Teachers, therefore, may have to be patient when facing initial student resistance to poetry and trust in the final outcomes while guiding their students through the material towards the synthesis of connections and critical thinking that poetry analysis inevitably sharpens.

### **Theme Two: Reader Response Over Close Reading**

Within this study it was apparent that student-participants responded more positively to a reader-response approach to poetry than a close-reading approach as they preferred flexible, open-ended interpretation and the freedom to individually respond as opposed to a precise, device-driven deep analysis of poems. While both reader-response and close-reading strategies were utilized during the instruction of this unit, the primary mode of response following the reading and analysis of each poem was an individual, emotion-based one in which the emphasis was on how the poem made the student-participant *feel* and what individual connections were elicited from it. Two of the student-participants interview responses directly recognized this: Mark stated that “Poems are a way for many to express their strong emotions, which are so powerful that



they could not be accurately described by prose alone,” and Ryan offered, “While poetry can be difficult to understand, the medium allows many to communicate feelings and emotions that the logical systems of prose cannot do justice.”

Emphasizing a reader-response approach to poetry seemed to put students more at ease as there is no “incorrect” interpretation to a poem, but rather an individual personal response that varies by student and factors into consideration. Mark related “I felt like I had been exposed to something new that I had never thought about.” Ryan said that he enjoyed reading the unit’s poems but “analyzing them was less enjoyable.” Phoebe stated that she “never before really liked reading poetry in school because of having to take apart each and every word” which was “really difficult.” Finally, Scott replied that he’s “not a fan of analyzing writing” because “I hate nitpicking things out of the poetry to get a meaning that might not even be the real meaning.”

## **Interpretation**

In addition to the study participants loathing singular, teacher-centered interpretations of classic poems, one can also conclude from this study that the more concrete absolutes of a close-reading approach to poems, which is driven by poetic devices and textual features that students may or may not be able to identify, seems to at least be partially responsible for students’ initial dread of poetry in the first place. While close-reading remains a valid skills-based approach to poetic interpretation, it should possibly be used more sparingly or as a second-line approach to poetry and justified as such due to the end results of this study along with Romantic poet William Wordsworth’s tenant that poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions,” which therefore necessitates a more individualistic feelings-based approach more prominently than a rational and logical textual

one. As Zapruder (2017) aptly summarizes, “When we release ourselves from the need to boil the poem down to a single meaning or theme, the mind can move in an...associative way...simultaneously attentive to the outside world, but also thinking, processing” (p. 80).

Modern research increasingly notes that focusing exclusively on the formal and structural elements of a piece of writing disconnects reader and text and further denies the reader her place as an active constructor of meaning while ignoring that context is an essential element within literary analysis (Brewer, 2019; Carillo, 2016; Beers and Probst, 2013; Puig, 2013). The increasing tendency to view close reading with caution and utilize it as one of many strategies among a broad context of techniques echoes Freire & Macedo’s (1987) earlier caveat that close reading “divorces reading the word from reading the world” (p. 22). Beers and Probst (2013) even more closely reflect the experiences of the student-participants in this study with their belief that “the most rigorous reading is to find what those words on that page mean in our own lives” (p. 42).

The reader-response first approach to the poems within this unit was one of the aspects that student-participants seemed to enjoy most. Nicole expressed “I liked how we could interpret the poems as we saw them.” Ryan commented “I’m not a fan of analyzing writing, but the poems and assignments were well-constructed and necessary.” Mark noted more of a connection to the poems in the unit when he stated, “Before the unit I felt good about poetry, I enjoyed reading it and writing it, but while in the unit I felt closer to it.” Finally, Eva noted that “the poems brought up strong emotions and feelings.” All of these responses highlight the importance of reader-response as the primary approach to poetry that serves as a springboard to a more formal and rigorous close reading approach that should be secondary in focus.

### **Theme Three: Affinity for Social Justice Poetry**

The results of this study additionally show that students view social justice poetry as an interesting, powerful, and worthy approach to a variety of contemporary issues.

After learning early in the unit what constitutes social justice poetry and then focusing on two different poems representing three contemporary social justice issues, racial injustice, immigration/refugee crisis, and terrorism, student-participants not only favorably responded to the genre but also expressed enthusiasm about writing poems in this style as well. This shift was reflected especially within changing responses to two statements in the pre-and post-unit poetry affinity Likert scale survey: 1) I do not know how to write poems (3.67 vs. 2.21), and 2) Poetry does not connect to my life (3.13 vs. 2.57).

Phoebe conveyed that “social justice poetry can increase your understanding of different relevant subjects” and that “reading a poem that presents a clear understanding of a social justice situation is best for students who don’t like poetry because of how easy it is to learn about the topic.” Mark responded that “social justice poetry can positively enhance anyone’s understanding of different subjects through their diversity” and their relevance “makes students try harder to analyze them.” Eva offered that social justice poetry “gives an entirely different experience than ‘ordinary’ poetry by taking something raw and real and makes it into something incredible.”

The rest of the student-participants agreed. Scott replied that the poems covered “many different real-world problems by shining a light on those topics.” Nicole elaborated that she liked reading poems on social justice “as it’s a topic that might make people uncomfortable or one that they don’t usually think about.” She also offered that she thought the class would be reading “less interesting poems” and that “social justice poetry was easier

to understand, analyze, and find meaning within” while being “much more interesting.” Ryan concurred, stating that “the social justice poems were easier to understand and work with and can also enhance your consciousness of problems going on in the world, which is very positive because this may lead students to join or create groups to help solve these issues.”

### **Interpretation**

The student-participants comments made it clear that gains in more positive attitudes towards poetry and a willingness to write their own pieces were largely due to the selected sub-genre of social justice poetry. Through this vehicle, students can continue learning about contemporary world issues they may have encountered in other classes, which may lend a helpful sense of familiarity to the material. Conversely, some students enjoy the edginess of topics possibly considered controversial and previously avoided. Sanchez (2007) notes that while social justice education should be an ongoing part of curriculum and instruction, it is often neglected. Students within her action research study were also initially reluctant to engage in dialogue about societal issues, but progressing through a social justice unit that focused on poetry and music allowed them to react and respond in a variety of ways that encompassed guilt, anger, powerlessness, and empathy while reflecting increased enthusiasm. As within the teacher-researcher’s study, the end results included increased awareness and response to modern problems that many students never seriously considered.

An added benefit of social justice education beyond being a hallmark of a diverse and democratic society that empowers rather than restricts is that it also fosters a classroom environment more responsive to and inclusive of different student perspectives and needs

(Sanchez 2007). This viewpoint is obvious within the comments of the student-participants. Phoebe replied that social justice poetry “gives a voice to certain individuals when they unable to physically speak. Whether it is about racism, refugees, or even terrorism, poets can describe the events in a way that makes us more aware of what is around us and what other people are going through in their lives.” Nicole responded that social justice poetry “allows the reader think that they are there, witnessing the story unfold itself in front of them.” Mark conveyed that “These poems all are ways to human beings to both relieve the pains brought on by injustice, and a way to express their feelings on the situations so that others may understand.”

Eva additionally expressed that “social justice poetry is powerful, and many people use this power to speak about things that others are afraid of.” Ryan added that “What can be learnt from these poems is to not judge anyone because of how they were portrayed by someone else, or how the media portrays them as. You never know what they are fighting for, what they are running away from, or what they have experienced. Finally, Scott offered, “Although poetry is often criticized for being boring or confusing, it can change society if given time and patience.” While every student did not enjoy each poem, these perspectives reflect contemplation, growth, and an increasing awareness and understanding of alternate viewpoints that many teenagers do not have.

#### **Theme Four: An Increase in Student Empathy**

Based on the differences in the results between the pre- and post-unit Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index survey, along with post-unit student-participant interview comments, social justice poetry can be used to increase the empathy levels of secondary English students. The post-unit Davis IRI reflected increases in such statements as “I

often have tender, concerned feelings for those less fortunate than me” (3.63 vs. 3.93), “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel protective of them” (4.25 vs. 4.53), “I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both” (3.69 vs. 3.93), and “Before criticizing someone, I try to imagine how I would feel in their place” (2.81 vs. 3. 27). The ability to imagine oneself within the experience of another is central to the concept of empathy and empathetic thinking.

Student participant post-interview comments even more clearly reflected this change. Phoebe replied that “The social justice poetry unit has taught me to feel empathy for those who have come a long way in life, and the poems made me more empathetic because they gave me more definition of events that unraveled.” Scott commented that “The poems did make me more empathetic because it showed me how to better see someone else's perspective on life and the world.” Ryan echoed this by responding that “social justice poetry can enhance skills for understanding different subjects by opening up the reader's mind to be more empathetic in a positive way.” Eva added that the unit “taught me a lot about perspective,” while Nicole said that “social justice issues could bring students to be more empathetic towards different subjects.” Finally, Mark encouragingly offered that “The poems covered in class might make students more empathetic by showing them the conflicts people are experiencing outside of the conscious world they live in. I feel the poems covered did make me more empathetic in general because I will view people's stories and lives with more humility and open-mindedness.”

### **Interpretation**

These responses all clearly show a transformation that occurred over the course of the unit and reflect that student-participants traveled beyond a strong and typical dislike of

the genre and its hyper-focus on conventions to deeply thinking about outside perspectives and unfamiliar experiences. Each student moved beyond a narrow conception of poetry as something tedious and difficult to understand toward embracing and responding to a much more open-minded vision of global societal issues and those who endure them. Casale et al. (2018) found that fostering empathetic classrooms not only yielded immediate improvements in student motivation and self-esteem but also encouraged long-term critical, compassionate, and reflective thinking skills along with enhanced tolerance. Teachers who provide a classroom environment encouraging collaborative discourse create multiple and ongoing opportunities for perspective shifts, and “empathy driven curricula nurture opportunities for deeper learning experiences” (p. 5).

Furthermore, the post-unit Likert scale comments of the student-participants reflect that not only did the social justice poetry unit make them more empathetic, but also that they somewhat surprisingly started to enjoy expressing these perspectives and emotions in original verse of their own. This was expressed through the differences in the pre-and post-unit statements, “I share my feelings by writing poetry” (1.27 vs. 1.93), “I write poetry during my free time” (1.13 vs. 1.43), and “I have a lot of information about writing poetry” (2.0 vs. 3.0). Student-participants were much more likely to write and enjoy writing their own verse by the conclusion of the unit, and their original poems clearly expressed empathetic viewpoints (see Appendix D).

Post-unit interview comments corroborated this phenomenon. Eva stated that “Writing the poems were my favorite assignments.” Scott shared that “although it was sometimes difficult to analyze the poem and understand what the poet was trying to say, it was enjoyable to write my own poetry.” Nicole said that “Poetry writing was my favorite

because it gave me a chance to be creative and express my feelings.” Mark replied that “writing the poems comes making your own pathway of ideas and controlling what things mean.” Phoebe suggested that “giving more chances to write poems would make the unit better because I, along with other students, enjoyed writing them.” Ryan expressed that his favorite part of the unit was “Writing my own poetry, because I know what each line means. No matter how farfetched the metaphor might be, I wrote it, so I remember what it means to me.”

Many of the resultant poems from the first poetry writing assignment conveyed increasing awareness of and enhanced empathy for those dealing with systemic injustice and intolerance. Eva invoked strong imagery by writing about the “world falling through the dark cracks of injustice,” while Phoebe’s poem implored “I want to be heard, instead you want to argue / Listen to me / Why can’t you look at me?” Scott focused on the power of protestors coming together with his simile “we, as a nation, are stronger than tungsten,” while Ryan succinctly emphasized poetry as a means of witness by stating “People getting injured, hurt, and killed. / I see it all happen, yet no one’s fulfilled.”

The second poetry writing assignment reflected a growing confidence in their voices and a willingness to express disparate perspectives. Student-participants wrote about both tangible and intangible objects through such powerful statements as “I am archiving blindness so I may see,” “I am a silver hairpin, the only thing my grandmother left,” “I carry pictures of my family in every pocket of my memory,” and “I carry mistakes and new lessons seared into my brain.” Interestingly, they did not indicate their preference for and enjoyment of the poetry writing assignments until after the study ended; if they had, I would have found a way to incorporate an additional poem writing assignment into the unit.



## **Conclusion**

Poetry is a challenging but worthwhile genre within the English classroom, and social justice poetry is an important and evocative vehicle that allows students to push past the initial reluctance and dread of the form that many of them express. A highly subjective approach to poetry analysis favoring reader-response gives students the freedom to express their unique individual reactions to different pieces and creates a classroom environment conducive to deeper and more meaningful reflection. Close reading can also complement poetic analysis and is utilized most effectively as a secondary strategy for students to focus more directly on the poem's form and function.

Social justice poetry also exposes students to a variety of contemporary issues and is preferred over classic and traditional poems. Students seemed more willing to discuss and write about social justice issues as this allows them to add their perspectives to timely and relevant problems. In addition to enhancing student poem writing skills, social justice poetry leads students to consider disparate viewpoints and experiences that broadens their worldview. It can also lead to increased empathy levels within high school students at a time when perspective taking seems to be decreasing amid our highly individualistic culture.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By the time students reach high school, it appears their interest in poetry is practically non-existent particularly when it comes to deciphering cryptic classical poems that don't seem to have any connections to their everyday lives. Students are also used to a one-response approach to the genre that favors the instructor's all-encompassing knowledge of a poem's obscure meaning. Social justice poetry is different; it invites the reader to respond in multiple ways to a catalog of societal wrongs that demand energy, attention, and a shifting of perspective to consider relevant issues. It is therefore an ideal tool for infusing genre knowledge while also honing critical thinking skills and enhancing empathetic perspective.

Empathy, which can broadly be defined as experiencing the inferred feelings of others, plays a pivotal role in our society but is declining as levels of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, or NPD, rise (Campbell & Twenge, 2013; Campbell et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2015; Twenge et al., 2012). It is now crucially important to explore the educational possibilities of social justice poetry and its value in eliciting meaningful student responses developing increased empathetic thinking. As a mode representing marginalized groups in sensitive and nuanced ways, social justice poetry is visionary in its work of "making way for new worlds and words" (Faulkner, 2017, p. 89).

This mixed methods action research study centered around the combined impact of a reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry in terms of empathy levels of secondary students in an elective English class. Six tenth through

twelfth grade students participated in this six-week study with the class teacher as the researcher. The problem of practice for this study focused on an elective English Language Arts class that would benefit from enhanced critical poetry reading skills and an increase in empathy. Reader-response and close reading strategies were utilized with social justice poetry and related curriculum to lead students toward more profound literary analysis and enhanced empathetic thinking skills.

The primary treatment method for this study was reader-response and close reading, and the vehicle was social justice poetry, a subgenre of poetry that focuses on the problems faced by marginalized groups throughout history and different perspectives on these issues. At every stage of the study, the problem of practice was addressed in an attempt to build student empathy levels while enhancing their poetry analysis skills and enjoyment of the genre. The six-week study utilized both quantitative and qualitative measures

Quantitative data was provided from the student participants' responses to the Davis (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) survey to measure empathy levels at the beginning of the study and again at the end. Patel and Laud's (2015) pre-and post-unit Likert survey on poetry affinity was also administered. Qualitative data was provided through semi-structured pre-and -post-unit interviews administered before and after student analysis of six poems organized around three social justice issues: racial injustice, refugee crisis/immigration, and terrorism. Student reflection, class discussion, written responses, two poem writing activities, and a creative project provided additional qualitative data for analysis.

### **Research Question**

What impact will a combined reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry have on the empathy levels of secondary English Language Arts students?

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect that a dual reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry had on the empathy levels of my secondary ELA students. The reader-response approach is defined as critical theory that focuses on the reader's reaction to and interaction with a particular literary work more centrally than the work itself, and close reading methods are defined as deep critical analysis of a text that focuses on significant details or patterns identified through multiple readings and text features to develop a precise understanding of the text's form, craft, and meaning (Burke, n.d.).

These two approaches may appear contradictory at first but in fact mirror Louise Rosenblatt's aesthetic and efferent components for both affective and cognitive learner outcomes (1986). Conjunctively using these two methods of text analysis is more likely to yield both academic gain within critical English Language Arts skills and personal growth in the form of enhanced empathy. For the purposes of this study, social justice poetry is defined as poems that focus on the marginalized while challenging oppression and injustice and empathy is defined as the ability to share someone else's feelings by personally relating to that individual's situation or experience.

## **Overview of the Study**

At the conclusion of the study that used a combined reader-response and close reading approach to social justice poetry in an attempt to increase student empathy and enjoyment of the genre, quantitative and qualitative results reflect gains in both areas. The Davis (1983) IRI empathy scale survey results showed increases in overall empathetic tendencies while Patel and Laud's (2015) poetry affinity Likert survey results reflected an enhanced enjoyment and understanding of reading and writing poetry. These quantitative results were corroborated through pre- and post-study student interviews, field notes, student artifacts, and assignments responses. After careful review, analysis and coding of study data resulted in the emergence of four major themes: initial student antipathy over poetry, student preference for the reader-response approach over close reading techniques, an affinity for social justice poetry, and an increase in student empathy.

## **Implications of the Study**

Current literature is limited on using social justice poetry as a catalyst for empathetic thinking. Other related studies have largely used qualitative documentation, but measuring, or attempting to measure, empathetic thinking with quantitative measures is an understudied area. Previous studies on literature and empathy have largely focused on the relationship between literary fiction and empathy, with varying results (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Djikic et al., 2013; Junker & Jaquemin, 2017; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Junker and Jacquemin's more recent 2017 study additionally did not find an increase in student empathy within their study focusing on college students writing about literary texts, a result they termed "confounding."

The genre of poetry may be crucial to this empathetic transformation. Poetry is an area of language arts curriculum that has also been understudied within the context of empathy, but its highly emotional framework, visceral impact, and generally shorter form seems conducive to eliciting empathy. According to Xerri and Agius (2015), poetry is a more compact vehicle for students to increase self-awareness through emotions, mental images, and language, form comparisons, and view themselves and others within a safe space. Faulkner (2020) purports that poetry presents the human experience “in a more approachable, powerful, emotionally poignant, and accurate form” than prose allows (p. xi). The promising results of this study show that social justice poetry is a strong catalyst for empathetic response in secondary English students; additional future research is needed to further elucidate the exact relationship between the two.

### **Focus on Evocative Curriculum Choices with Long-Range Benefits**

The four themes that emerged from the study prompted a great deal of reflection. Social justice poetry is a powerful yet under-utilized tool for awareness and change when used mindfully in the classroom. Yet today’s classroom environments lean heavily toward standardized testing, and teachers are seemingly steered away from mindfulness and toward rigid, proscribed notions of curriculum while being discouraged from taking risks (Shelton & Brooks, 2019; Sigvardsson, 2020). Before the study began, for many months I deliberated over which social justice poems to include within this study unit. Some of my initial choices seemed riskier since societal tensions have increased regarding such educational issues as Critical Race Theory, mandated curriculum, and book banning. I was also cautioned by school administration that my selections should not make students feel “uncomfortable” in any way.

However, many social justice poems are predicated on discomfort as an entrance point to controversial events and practices, and this tension is sometimes necessary to raise awareness and galvanize response. The maturity levels and ages of study audience, teenagers within a public school educational system, caused extra consideration over poem choices to ensure that selections were powerful yet palatable enough to maintain a comfortable and conducive learning environment. As Alsup and Miller (2014) point out, “...a social justice orientation to teaching and learning is complex, requires the activation of multiple subjectivities, and may take time to develop (p. 205).

A chance conversation with one of the study participants six months after its conclusion underscored the notion of that complexity along with the importance of perseverance. Scott confessed that although he had gone into the poetry unit with “a less than positive attitude,” he came out of it with “a new perspective on life” and the idea that he should write poetry the way he wants to and not “in a specific style that is set by other poets and writers.” He also stated that the unit had provided an enhanced understanding of poetry, a greater sense of empathy, and the desire to write poetry into the future.

Therefore, patience and keeping the long-term goal in mind is crucial, especially with poetry. The experiences and results of this study point out that most secondary students will initially resist poetry based on their previous curricular experiences with it and their association of the word poetry with descriptors like cryptic and confusing. It may take a while before students relax into the reader-response-driven mode, and the approach I frequently reminded the class: we don’t have to have all the answers, but we will certainly ask the questions.

This approach worked well for the student-participants. Eva responded that this “has been the best experience I’ve had with poetry units” and that she “thoroughly enjoyed each poem.” Nicole “liked how we could interpret the poems as we saw them” and confessed that she “usually did not like poetry because of how teachers would make us view them, but I loved poetry in this class, and it was my favorite unit.” Ryan replied that “Before the unit I felt good about poetry, I enjoyed reading it and writing it, but while in the unit I felt closer to it,” later expressing “the poems and assignments you chose were well-constructed and necessary.” When during the end of unit class discussion, I revealed my struggle to choose the right poems, Phoebe mirrored Ryan’s statement and validated all my efforts by simply stating “you chose well.”

### **Focus on Providing Creative Curricular Opportunities**

One area of the study unit that possibly reflected not as strong of a choice was students writing poetry. Their views on drafting and composing poems were a pleasant surprise, and had I anticipated this, I would have built more poem-writing opportunities into the curriculum. Scott replied that it was “enjoyable” to write his own poetry as he dislikes “having to take other people’s perspectives and analyze this and that,” but “with writing the poems comes making your own pathway of ideas and controlling what things mean.” Nicole mirrored this sentiment by also expressing that she dislikes overanalyzing poetry, but “writing the poems was my favorite because it gave me a chance to be creative.”

While it’s the highest level on the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy, creativity is sometimes a daunting prospect in the classroom because as the least taught and least assessed area, it is the most difficult skill for students to master (Sweet et al., 2016). The current focus on testing and state assessment scores along with pressure to produce strong



results often drive creative opportunities straight out of curriculum. For the past several decades, many tests have focused on literal comprehension at the expense of artistic and cultural aspects of literature and there is little to no attempt to measure the more complex domains of analysis, interpretation, and evaluation (Purves, 1990). More recent studies (Santoro, 2018, 2011; Shelton & Brooks, 2019) have found that educators who sought to be creative and inspire students in non-traditional ways found themselves in direct conflict with administration and federal testing requirements.

However, as a higher-order skill, it promotes “deep learning,” leads students to higher levels of content synthesis and confidence, and prepares students for the challenges of advanced thinking. While creativity requires patience and just the right amount of guidance to push students forward without overwhelming them, enthusiastic student responses to writing poetry highlight the genre’s potentially transformational use within the ELA classroom. As Rosenblatt (2005) herself observed, “A poem is not a ready-made object to which a reader is passively exposed. A poem is a happening, an event, in which the listener or reader draws on images and feelings and ideas stirred up by the words of the text; out of these is shaped lived-through experience” (p. 96).

### **Focus on Expanding a Social Justice Framework**

Student feedback greatly confirmed the chances I took with creating a social justice poetry unit in the first place and guiding six initially less-than-enthusiastic student participants through important yet intense subject matter concerning issues that today’s teachers are told to handle with kid gloves. Yet social justice and the poetry that represents it is currently more important than ever before. “In the face of racism, hatred, brutality, murder, and violence, we must reaffirm our values and commitment...as educators. Social

justice is not just a term we say, it is a call-to-action. Now is the time to live it through our advocacy and actions” (Bordnick, 2020, para. 2).

As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) envision it, social justice relates to universal principles of fairness and equity along with respect for basic human rights. Critical social justice that examines varied perspectives on fairness and equality to promote diversity and the educational activism necessary to achieve it is a challenge yet necessity for the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom teacher. Social justice poetry is an essential component of this proactive framework within the secondary English classroom. The enthusiastic comments of the student participants reveal both the possibilities and effectiveness of this medium in bringing students to a more complex and complete world view. Ryan believes that it teaches that “everyone has a point of view that needs to be respected,” while Eva feels that “these poems are written with the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities.” Scott feels that these poems “were easier to understand and work with” while simultaneously allowing him to “view people's stories and lives with more humility and open-mindedness.”

The results of this study pose exciting possibilities for advancing the study of poetry within secondary ELA classrooms while also positively impacting student empathy levels. Poetry empowers students, creates a space for responsive witnessing, enhances writing skills, builds self-awareness, and develops social consciousness (Baxley & Sealy-Ruiz, 2021). Empathy is considered an essential component of moral development, and adolescents with higher levels exhibit more altruistic and prosocial behavior. Adolescents with lower levels of empathy exhibit more aggressive tendencies, and this deficit has been

linked with antisocial behavior, bullying, sexual offense, and violent crime (Sesso et al., 2021).

Therefore, enhancing literary analysis skills through social justice poetry and developing increased levels of empathy among adolescent secondary students is beneficial on every examined level, from inwardly focused individual student academic achievement and moral development to outwardly directed societal and community enhanced frameworks. The only drawback to consider is taking the risk of possibly making students uncomfortable along the process, which many would argue is sometimes a necessary step in learning and developing. The current conservative trend in education will limit some teachers from taking this step, but many others will consider it the modern educator's responsibility in guiding students toward a successful and conscientious future.

### **Action Plan**

The study results support the idea that approaching poetry patiently while favoring a reader-response focus along with the social justice sub-genre can increase levels of student empathy both inside and outside of the classroom. Using this information, I developed a three-step action plan comprised of (a) adhering to a social justice framework by expanding the study unit and related curriculum, (b) teaching the unit while continuing study into the social justice poetry/empathy connection, and (c) sharing the unit and results with current English department colleagues and offering training on the effective teaching of social justice poetry.

## **Adhering to a social justice framework by expanding the study unit and related curriculum**

I will first work on increasing the study unit from six poems to eight poems by adding genocide as the fourth social justice issue to accompany the current focus on racial injustice, refugee crisis/immigration, and terrorism. According to the Early Warning Project, an initiative of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum that uses quantitative and qualitative research data and methods to pinpoint countries where the risk for genocide is elevated, mass atrocities are ongoing and persist in our current world despite a body of law to prevent and punish them (Kikoler, 2021). Therefore, while many people still view the Holocaust as the foremost example of genocide, it is unfortunately as timely a topic as the other social justice issues within the unit and will be a necessary and valuable addition to it.

Several texts will also inform and enhance my curricular expansion efforts. *Poetic Inquiry as Social Justice and Political Response* (2020), edited by Sandra L. Faulkner and Abigail Cloud, discusses the use of poetry in both critical qualitative research and classroom practice to supplement my action research framework. Linda Christensen's *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word* (2017) offers teaching models, essays, and student writing to inform and inspire the socially conscience educator in a variety of ways. Finally, Christensen's *Rhythm and Resistance: Teaching Poetry for Social Justice* (2015), focuses specifically on the genre of poetry to enhance the creation of new content to supplement the original unit.

### **Teaching the unit while continuing study into the social justice poetry and empathy connection**

I plan to teach the social justice poetry unit again during the upcoming school year in the same elective course that it was first part of. This will give me an opportunity to ascertain the effectiveness of content within the newly added social justice topic (genocide) while continuing to gather data regarding social justice poetry's impact on secondary English student empathy levels. Repeating the unit with a different group of students using the same quantitative and qualitative measures will allow me to further identify patterns and correlations that may further elucidate the relationship between empathy and this powerful form of poetry.

### **Sharing the unit and offering training on the effective teaching of social justice poetry**

During the upcoming school year, I plan to share the results of my study with English Department colleagues and offer to lead professional development sessions on the effective teaching of social justice poetry within core and elective classes. Several of my colleagues have expressed reticence in the past about teaching poetry, ranking it as their least preferred genre behind fiction, nonfiction, and drama in an earlier department survey I administered. Some even directly noted the aversion students have toward poetry and shared that it doesn't seem understandable even to the teacher. Others noted that teaching poetry makes them nervous due to less experience within the genre, and that it can be difficult even as the teacher to interpret the poet's intended meaning.

Furthermore, on a scale of one to five, with one being the least difficult and five being the most difficult, most teachers assigned a four to the statement, "Teaching poetry

to students is difficult,” noting that the challenges of teaching literal vs. figurative language and the lack of student experience regarding interpretation and relating to the poem. Most chose a three in responding to the statement, “I am comfortable teaching poetry within my ELA classroom,” noting heavy prep work and a lack of relating to the poem themselves. These survey results indicate that English teachers would benefit from professional development sessions based around a successful poetry unit that offered methods and strategies for demystifying the genre and engaging students.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

In following the principles of action research study, my student-participant sample size was small, which makes large-scale generalizations difficult. I therefore feel it is imperative to continue gathering data on the effect of social justice poetry on student empathy levels to ascertain if the positive results of this study will be replicated among other classes of students. One suggestion for future research is to teach the unit within core classes over a semester to see if the results remain the same within larger and more diverse groups of students.

In addition, the participants in this study were selected from an Honors-level elective course that focused on different genres of English literature. While not all class members displayed a strong work ethic, most were at least receptive to lessons, activities, and class requirements while expressing their ideas and opinions in a conducive manner. Future research could focus on the effects social justice poetry has on the empathy levels of non-Honors level students who are generally not as motivated within the classroom and less receptive to different genres of literature along with related activities.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this mixed-methods action research study show that social justice poetry is indeed a finding place, one in which students can activate their energy of conscience to read, respond, learn, develop, and grow in personal ways both academically and morally for their own self-benefit and the good of the classroom, community, and society at large. Along this journey, my students all found a moral voice that responded with empathy, compassion, and consideration for those who walk outside of their own experience on previously unfamiliar roads covering vastly different terrains, and this passage left them personally and collectively enhanced and transformed into better young adults, students, and citizens. My hope is that they continue to find this empathy as they travel through this perilous world because the future of the journey depends upon it.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, M., & Bell, L.A. (2016). *Teaching for diversity and social justice*. Routledge.
- Alsup, J., & Miller, S.I. (2014). Reclaiming English education: rooting social justice in dispositions. *English Education*, 46(3), 195–215.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24570902>
- Akewo, D. I. (2013). A critical look at the teacher factor in senior secondary school students' poetic appreciation skills development. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3(2), 222-232.
- Appleman, D. (2015). The lens of reader response: The promise and peril of response-based pedagogy. In *Critical Encounters in Secondary English: Teaching literary theory to adolescents* (pp. 29-51). Teachers College Press.
- Bal, P. M., & Veltkamp, M. (2013). How does fiction reading influence empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation. *PLOS ONE* 8(1):e55341. DOI:10.1371/journal.pone.0055341
- Barrs, M. (2016). Vygotsky's 'thought and word.' *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 23(3), 241-256.
- Baxley, G., & Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2021). In the Black radical tradition: Poetry as a praxis for healing and resistance in education. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 55(3), 311-321.



- Beach, R. (1993). *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader Response Theories*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Beers, K., & Probst, R.E. (2013). *Notice and note: Strategies for close reading*. Heinemann.
- Benton, P. (1999). Unweaving the rainbow: poetry teaching in the secondary school I. *Oxford Review of Education*, 25(4), 521-531.  
<http://doi.org/10.1080/030549899103964>
- Benton, P. (2000). The conveyor belt curriculum? Poetry teaching in the secondary school: Part II. *Oxford Review of Education*, 26(1), 81-93.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/030549800103872>
- Berman, L. M. (1999). Teacher as poet. *Theory Into Practice*, 38(1), 18-23.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849909543826>
- Blake, R.W. (1992). Poets on poetry: The morality of poetry. *The English Journal*, 81(1), 16. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.2307/818330>
- Bordnick, P. S. (2020). "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Tulane University School of Social Work. <https://tssw.tulane.edu/news/injustice-anywhere-threat-justice-everywhere>
- Bouton, B. (2016). Empathy research and teacher preparation: Benefits and obstacles *Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators*, 25(2)2,16-25.
- Boyles, N. (2012). Closing in on close reading. *Educational Leadership*, 70(4), 36-41.  
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec12/vol70/num04/Closing-in-on-Close-Reading.aspx>

- Brewer, M. (2019). The closer the better? The perils of an exclusive focus on close reading. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 62(6), 635–642.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.938>
- Burke, B. (n.d.). A close look at close reading.  
[https://nieonline.com/tbtimes/downloads/CCSS\\_reading.pdf](https://nieonline.com/tbtimes/downloads/CCSS_reading.pdf)
- Campbell, W. K., and Twenge, J. M. (2013). “Narcissism unleashed.” *Association of Psychological Science*.  
<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/narcissism-unleashed>
- Campbell, W.K., Miller, J.D., and Buffardi, L.E. (2010). The United States and the “culture of narcissism.” *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1(3) 222-229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550610366878>
- Carillo, E. (2016). Reimagining the role of the reader in the Common Core State Standards. *English Journal*, 105(3), 29–35.
- Casale, C., Thomas, C., and Simmons, T. (2018). Developing empathetic learners. *Journal of Thought*. 52(3-4): 3-18.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/90026734>
- Chavis, G. (2013). Looking out and looking in: Journeys to self-awareness and empathy through creative juxtapositions. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 26(3), 159-167.
- Christensen, L., and Watson, D. (2015). *Rhythm and resistance: Teaching poetry for social justice*. Rethinking Schools.
- Ciardiello, A. (2010). "Talking walls": Presenting a case for social justice poetry in literacy education. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(6), 464-473.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25615836?seq=1>

- Connell, J. (1996). Assessing the influence of Dewey's epistemology on Rosenblatt's reader response theory. *Educational Theory*, 46(4), 395–413.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.1996.00395.x>
- Connell, J. (2000). Aesthetic experiences in the school curriculum: Assessing the value of Rosenblatt's transactional theory. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 34(1), 27-35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3333652>
- Connell, J. (2005). Continue to explore: In memory of Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005). *Education and Culture*, 21(2), 63–79.
- Connell, J. (2008). The emergence of pragmatic philosophy's influence on literary theory: Making meaning with texts from a transactional perspective. *Educational Theory*, 58(1), 103–122. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2007.00278.x>
- Creely, E. (2019). 'Poetry is dying': Creating a (re)new(ed) pedagogical vision for teaching poetry. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 42(2), 116-127.
- Cushing, I. (2018). 'Suddenly, I am part of the poem': texts as worlds, reader-response, and grammar in teaching poetry. *English in Education*, 52:1, 7-19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04250494.2018.1414398>
- Damico, J.S. (2005). Evoking hearts and heads: Exploring issues of social justice through poetry. *Language Arts*, 83(2), 137–146.
- Davis, M. H. (1980). A multidimensional approach to individual differences in empathy. *JSAS Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology*, 10, 85.
- Davis, M. H. (1983). Measuring individual differences in empathy: Evidence for a multidimensional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44(1), 113-126.

- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as Experience*. Berkeley University Press.
- Djicic, M., K. Oatley, & M. C. Moldoveanu. (2013). "Reading other minds: Effects of literature on empathy." *Scientific Study of Literature*, 3(1): 28–47.
- D’Issa, C. (2020, 13 October). Joy Harjo on the power of poetry, and on building a comprehensive canon of indigenous poems. *Chicago Review of Books*.  
<https://chireviewofbooks.com/2020/10/13/joy-harjo-on-the-power-of-poetry/>
- Dover, J. (2013). Teaching for social justice: From conceptual frameworks to classroom practices. *Multicultural Perspectives*. 15(1): 3-11.
- Dressman, M. and Rao, D. (2020). On savvy reading. *English in Education*, 54(2), 161-173.
- Dymoke, S. (2012) Poetry is an unfamiliar text: Locating poetry in secondary english classrooms in New Zealand and England during a period of curriculum change. *Changing English*, 19:4, 395-410, DOI: 10.1080/1358684X.2012.736741
- Dymoke, S. (2001). Taking poetry off its pedestal: The place of poetry writing in an assessment-driven curriculum. *English in Education*, 35(3), 32-41.
- Efron, S. E., & Ravid, R. (2013). *Action research in education: A practical guide*. Guilford.
- Ellis, A.K. (2013). *Exemplars of curriculum theory*. Routledge Press.
- Espada, M. (2000). "Foreword." In Espada, M. (Ed.), *Poetry like bread* (pp. 9-14). Curbstone Press.
- Eva-Wood, A.L. (2004). How think-and-feel-aloud instruction influences poetry readers. *Discourse Processes*, 38:2, 173-192, DOI: 10.1207/s15326950dp3802\_2

- Eva-Wood, A.L. (2008). Does feeling come first? How poetry can help readers broaden their understanding of metacognition. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 51(7), 564-576. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40012382>
- Farber, J. (2015). On not betraying poetry. *Pedagogy*, 15(2), 213-232.
- Faulkner, S. L. (2020). "Foreword." In Faulkner, S.L. and Cloud, A. (Eds.), *Poetic inquiry as social justice and political response* (pp. xi-xv). Vernon Press.
- Faust, M. (2000). Reconstructing familiar metaphors: "John Dewey and Louise Rosenblatt on literary art as experience." *Research in the Teaching of English*, 35(1), 9-34.
- Faust, M., & Dressman, M. (2009). The other tradition: Populist perspectives on teaching poetry, as published in "English Journal", 1912-2005. *English Education*, 41(2), 114-134.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Routledge Press.
- Galda, L., and Liang, L.A. (2003). Theory and research into practice: Literature as experience or looking for facts: Stance in the classroom. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38(2), 268-275. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4151786>
- Gerdes, Lietz, C. A., & Segal, E. A. (2011). Measuring empathy in the 21st century: development of an empathy index rooted in social cognitive neuroscience and social justice. *Social Work Research*, 35(2), 83-93.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/35.2.83>
- Harkin, P. (2005). The reception of reader-response theory. *College Composition and Communication*, 56(3), 410-425.

- Hennessey, J. & McNamara, P.M. (2011). Packaging poetry? Pupils' perspectives of their learning experience within the post-primary poetry classroom. *English in Education*, 45(3), 206-223.
- Herr, K., & Anderson, G. L. (2015). *The action research dissertation* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Hinchman, K.A., and Moore, D.W. (2013). Close reading: A cautionary interpretation. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. 56(6), 441-450.
- Ilgunaite, G., Giromini, L., & Di Girolamo, M. (2017). Measuring empathy: A literature review of available tools. *Applied Psychology Bulletin*, 280(65), 2–28
- Jeynes, W.H. (2019). A meta-analysis on the relationship between character education and student achievement and behavioral outcomes. *Education and Urban Society*. 2019;51(1):33-71. doi:10.1177/0013124517747681
- Junker, C., & Jacquemin, S. (2017). How does literature affect empathy in students? *College Teaching*, 65(2), 79-87.
- Kidd, D. C., & E. Castano. (2013). Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind. *Science*, 342 (6156): 377–80.
- Kikoler, N. (2021, 29 November). “Countries at risk for mass killing 2021–22: Early warning project statistical risk assessment results.” *Early Warning Project*.  
<https://earlywarningproject.usmmm.org/reports/countries-at-risk-for-mass-killing-2021-22-early-warning-project-statistical-risk-assessment-results>
- Kinloch, V. (2005). Poetry, literacy, and creativity: Fostering effective learning strategies in an urban classroom. *English Education*, 37(2), 96-114.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40173175>
- Konrath, S. H., O’Brien, E. H., & Hsing, C. (2011). Changes in dispositional empathy in

- American college students over time: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15(2), 180–198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868310377395>
- Koopman, E. M., & Hakemulder, F. (2015). “Effects of literature on empathy and self-reflection: A theoretical-empirical framework. *Journal of Literary Theory*. 9(1): 79-111
- Lockett, M. (2010). Close reading: A synergistic approach to the (post) modern divide, *Changing English*, 17:4, 399-409, DOI: 10.1080/1358684X.2010.528874
- Malo-Juvera, V., and Spears-Bunton, L. (2015). A qualitative analysis of high school students’ engagement with poetry and social justice. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*. 11(2).  
[http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Article-1\\_Malo-Juvera.pdf](http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Article-1_Malo-Juvera.pdf)
- Merriam, S.B., & Tisdale, E.J. (2015). Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Wiley.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Empathy. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*.  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>
- Mertler, C.A. (2017). *Action research: improving schools and empowering educators* (5<sup>th</sup> ed). Sage.
- Miller, J. D., Maples, J. L., Buffardi, L., Cai, H., Gentile, B., Kisbu-Sakarya, Y., Kwan, V. S. Y., LoPilato, A., Pendry, L. F., Sedikides, C., Siedor, L., & Campbell, W. K. (2015). Narcissism and United States’ culture: The view from home and around the world. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109(6), 1068–1089. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039543>
- Milosz, C. (1983). *The Witness of Poetry*. Harvard University Press.

- Nichols, W., Rasinski, T. V., Rupley, W. H., Kellogg, R. A., & Paige, D. D. (2018). Why poetry for reading instruction? Because it works. *The Reading Teacher*, 72(3), 389–396. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1734>
- Overgaauw, R. (2017). Assessing empathy across childhood and adolescence: Validation of the empathy questionnaire for children and adolescents (EmQue-CA). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 870–870. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00870>
- Pantić, N. (2015). A model for study of teacher agency for social justice. *Teachers and Teaching, Theory, and Practice*, 21(6), 759–778. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044332>
- Park, J. (2012). Re-imaging reader-response in middle and secondary schools: Early adolescent girls' critical and communal reader responses to the young adult novel *Speak*. *Children's Literature in Education*, 43(3), 191–212. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-012-9164-5>
- Patel, P., & Laud, L. E. (2015). Poetry feedback that feeds forward. *Middle School Journal*, 46(4), 24–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2015.1146197>
- Phillips, L.C. (2003). Nurturing empathy. *Art Education*, 56(4), 45–50. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/3194063>
- Pike, M. (2000). Keen readers: adolescents and pre-twentieth century poetry. *Educational Review*, 52(1), 13–28. <https://doi-org.pallas2.tcl.sc.edu/10.1080/00131910097379>
- Pike, M. (2003). From personal to social transaction: A model of aesthetic reading in the classroom. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 37(2), 61–72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3527455>



- Puig, E.A. (2013). Text-dependent questioning: Stop the insanity! *Florida English Journal: Literature in the 21st-century classroom*. Florida Council of Teachers of English.
- Purves, A.C. (1990). "Can literature be rescued from reading?" In E.J. Farrell & J.R. Squire (Eds.), *Transactions with Literature: A Fifty-Year Perspective* (pp. 79-93). National Council of Teachers of English.
- "Reading complex texts." Partnership for assessment of readiness for college and careers. (2011). *PARCC model content frameworks: English language arts/literacy grades 3-11*.  
[www.parcconline.org/sites/parcc/files/PARCCMCFELALiteracyAugust2012\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.parcconline.org/sites/parcc/files/PARCCMCFELALiteracyAugust2012_FINAL.pdf)
- Rejan, A. (2017). Reconciling Rosenblatt and the new critics: The quest for an "experienced understanding" of literature. *English Education*, 50(1), 10–41.
- Roebuck, C. (2015). *Impact and import of poetry in high school pedagogy: A study of practice and student learning*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1985). Transaction vs. interaction: A terminological rescue operation. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 19, 96-107.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1986). The aesthetic transaction. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 20(4), 122–128. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3332615>
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1988). Readers, texts, authors. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 34(4), 885-921.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1993). The transactional theory: Against dualisms. *College English*, 55(4), 377-386. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/378648>

- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1994). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1995). *Literature as exploration* (5th ed). Modern Language Association.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (2003). Literary theory. In Flood, J. & Lapp, D. (Eds), *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). 67-73. Erlbaum Associates.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (2005). *Making meaning with texts: Selected essays*. Heinemann.
- Sánchez. (2007). Music and poetry as social justice texts in the secondary classroom. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 35(4), 646–666.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2007.10473354>
- Santoro, D. A. (2018). Is it burnout? Or demoralization? *Educational Leadership*, 75, 10-15.
- Santoro, D. A. (2011). Good teaching in difficult times: Demoralization in the pursuit of good work. *American Journal of Education*, 118(1), 1-23.
- Schneider, S. (2014). Teaching the unthinkable: counter-narratives, pedagogy, and genocide. *Theory in Action*, 7(1), 23-45. DOI: 10.3798/tia.1937-0237.14002
- Sesso, G., Brancati, G. E., Fantozzi, P., Inguaggiato, E., Milone, A., & Masi, G. (2021). Measures of empathy in children and adolescents: A systematic review of questionnaires. *World journal of psychiatry*, 11(10), 876–896.  
<https://doi.org/10.5498/wjp.v11.i10.876>
- Sensoy, O., and DiAngelo, R. (2017). *Is everyone really equal?: An introduction to key concepts in social justice education* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.

- Shelton, S.A., and Brooks, T. (2019). “We need to get these scores up”: A narrative examination of the challenges of teaching literature in the age of standardized testing. *Journal of Language & Literacy Education*, 15(2), 1–17.
- Sigvardsson, A. (2017). Teaching poetry reading in secondary education: Findings from a systematic literature review. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 61(5), 584–599. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2016.1172503>
- Sigvardsson, A. (2020) Don’t fear poetry! Secondary teachers’ key strategies for engaging pupils with poetic texts. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 64:6, 953-966, DOI: 10.1080/00313831.2019.1650823
- Simicek, K. (2019). New directions in the philosophy of poetry. *Philosophy Compass*, 14(6). DOI: 10.1111/phc3.12593
- Simecek, K., & Ellis, V. (2017). The uses of poetry: Renewing an educational understanding of a language art. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 51(1), 98–114. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.51.1.0098>
- Simecek, K., and Rumbold, R. (2016). The uses of poetry. *Changing English*, 23(4), 309–313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2016.1230300>
- Smith, B. H. (2016). What was "close reading?": A century of Method in literary studies. *Minnesota Review*: 87, 57-75.
- Smith, M. W., Appleman, D., & Wilhelm, J. D. (2014). *Uncommon core*. Corwin.
- Soter, A. O., Wilkinson, I. A. G., Connors, S. P., Murphy, P. K., & Shen, V. F.-Y. (2010). Deconstructing “aesthetic response” in small-group discussions about literature: A possible solution to the “aesthetic response” dilemma. *English Education*, 42(2), 204–225. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40607962>

- Stickling, S., Prasun, M., & Olsen, C. (2011). Poetry: What's the sense in teaching it? *Illinois Reading Council Journal*, 39(3), 31-40.
- Storey, M. (2019). Engaging minds and hearts: Social and emotional learning in English Language Arts. *Language and Literacy*, 21(1), 122–139.  
<https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29355>
- Stout, C. (1999). The art of empathy: teaching students to care. *Art Education*, 52(2), 21-34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3193759>
- Stovall, D. (2006). Urban poetics: Poetry, social justice and critical pedagogy in education. *The Urban Review*, 38(1), 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-006-0027-5>
- Streitfeld, D. (1993, May 19). “Laureate for a new age.” *Washington Post*.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/05/19/laureate-for-a-new-age/66ef2e1f-5bee-4025-aed9-18285afa2702/>
- Sweet, C., Blythe, H., & Carpenter, R. (2016). Why the revised bloom's taxonomy is essential to creative teaching. *The National Teaching & Learning Forum*, 26(1), 7–9. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ntlf.30095>
- Twenge, J.M., Campbell, W. K., & Freeman, E. C. (2012). Generational differences in young adults' life goals, concern for others, and civic orientation, 1966-2009. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(5), 1045–1062.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027408>
- Twenge, J.M., Konrath, S., Foster, J. D., Keith Campbell, W., & Bushman, B. J. (2008). Egos inflating over time: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the narcissistic

- personality inventory. *Journal of Personality*, 76(4), 875–902.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00507.x>
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical theory today: a user-friendly guide*. Routledge.
- Vaughn, K.P., & Nunez, I. (2020). Curriculum scholars reflect on the curriculum field. *The Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies*. 14(1), 1-16.  
<https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/jaaacs/article/view/192204/189830>
- Wilson, A. (2021) The reader, the text, the poem: The influence and challenge of Louise Rosenblatt, *Education* 3-13, 49:1, 79-95, DOI:10.1080/03004279.2020.1824704
- Winterson, J. (2012). *Why Be happy when you can be normal?* Grove.
- Woodruff, A.H., & Griffin, R.A. (2017). Reader response in secondary settings: Increasing comprehension through meaningful interactions with literary texts. *Texas Journal of Literacy Education*, 5(2), 108-116.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1162670.pdf>
- Xerri, D. (2013) Colluding in the ‘torture’ of poetry: Shared beliefs and assessment, *English in Education*, 47:2, 134-146.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/17548845.2013.11912485>
- Xerri, D., & Agius, S.X. (2015). Galvanizing empathy through poetry. *The English Journal*, 104(4), 71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484325>
- Zapruder, M. (2017). *Why poetry*. Harper Collins.

## APPENDIX A

### READER-RESPONSE POEM QUESTIONS

After we read the poem in class, and you read it again to yourself, answer the following questions.

Poem Title:

Author:

1. What specific words and/or images come to mind right after reading this poem?

*Specific words and/or images that come to mind are...*

2. How does this poem specifically make you feel, and why? Give specific examples.

*The poem makes me feel.... because....*

3. Does this poem connect to anything else you've read, seen, or heard, and what/how/why?

*This poem connects to...because...*

4. What is your favorite line, phrase, or image from the poem, and why?

*My favorite line/phrase/image from the poem is.... because....*

5. What new idea(s) or thought(s) does this poem give to you?

*The new idea(s) or thought(s) that the poem gives to me is/are...*

6. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being the least and 10 being the most, what would you rate this poem as, and why?

*I would rate this poem a...because*

## APPENDIX B

### CLOSE READING POEM ANALYSIS TEMPLATE

BASICS	SOUND
<p>Author:</p> <p>Year Composed:</p> <p>Poem Type:</p> <p>Stanzas:</p> <p>Lines in Stanzas:</p> <p>Vocabulary:</p> <p>Notable Information:</p>	<p>ALLITERATION:</p> <p>CONSONANCE:</p> <p>ASSONANCE:</p> <p>ONOMATOPOEIA:</p> <p>RHYME:      Direct      Off      Internal      End</p>
MEANING	
<p>How does the title relate to the poem?</p> <p>Who “tells” the poem?</p> <p>What point of view is used?</p> <p>Who is the speaker addressing?</p> <p>What is the setting?</p> <p>Are the line lengths short or long?</p> <p>Does each line coincide with the end of a thought or does one line just continue into the next (enjambment)?</p> <p>What do you notice about the way the poem is punctuated?</p> <p>Are there shifts in poem?</p>	<p>Stanza rhyme scheme:</p> <p>Repetition (anaphora):</p> <p>Hyperbole:</p> <p>Similes:</p> <p>Metaphors:</p> <p>Personification:</p> <p>Symbolism:</p> <p>Motifs:</p> <p>Theme:</p>

ACTIVE READING			
Visualizations/Imagery:	Connections:	Questions	Evaluations:
TONE			
What is the emotional feeling of the poem?	Is the tone positive or negative, and why?	How does the speaker feel about himself, others, the subject?	
THEME			
Paraphrase each line of the poem:		What statement about life is the poet making, or what is his/her overall message?	



## APPENDIX C

### STUDENT POEM RESPONSE QUESTIONS

#### **Racial Injustice Image:**

Study the image you chose carefully. Then note the following -

1. Describe THREE specific things you observe.
2. Is your image color or B&W? What colors or shades appear?
3. What contrasts exist in the image between colors, dark/light, subject/others?
4. What is the placement of notable figures or objects in the image?
5. What is the tone and mood of your image, and why?
6. What title of your own would you give this image, and why?
7. Does your image contain symbols, or symbolic interpretation(s)?
8. What are THREE direct verbs to describe what is happening in your image?

Now look over your answers and begin drafting your 12-line (six 2-line stanzas) poem. Draft first and then incorporate poetic devices such as simile, metaphor, imagery, symbolism, etc.

#### **I Am/I Hold/I Carry:**

Carefully reflect on the following and then answer as specifically as possible -

1. Who or what are you?
2. What would you say that you hold?
3. If life was a suitcase, what are you carrying in yours?
4. What are 3-4 of your favorite things?
5. What is a good memory, and what specifically makes it good?
6. What is a bad memory, and what specifically makes it bad?
7. What is a significant place to you, and what gives it that designation?
8. Who is a significant person to you, and what is one of their features?
9. What is a significant object to you, and what gives it significance?
10. What is your favorite color, and what are three synonyms for it on [www.thesaurus.com](http://www.thesaurus.com)
11. What is your favorite season, and what are 3 things you like about it?
12. What is your favorite animal, and what is one adjective that describes it?
13. What subject do you most prefer, and why?
14. What is one specific future goal you have?
15. What is your favorite kind of weather?
16. What is one object that describes you?
17. What is your family's ethnic roots?
18. What is a significant event to you, and why?

APPENDIX D

ORIGINAL STUDENT POEMS

Poem 1 – Racial Injustice Image Poem

*Construction Obstruction*

She sits in protest  
In the construction yard.

The police standing around her,  
One smiling for the picture.

She wears a fancy dress,  
Placing her poster on the ground

So she does not dirty the dress.  
The calmness in her face and posture,

Like a statue on Easter Island,  
Puts the police at unease,

Not knowing what to do.  
The dump truck waits patiently, silently supporting the cause.



## The Attraction of Opposition

As the world falls through the dark cracks of Injustice,  
two men stand, opposites, in a laughing agreement.

Peace shakes hands with violence in a dangerous dark dance  
Love is a double-edged sword; she is ready to strike.

The air is light and joyous, grinning from ear to ear  
It listens to the two men meeting on the Capitol Hill.

Love a harsh reality, a deep wound, it coils itself up like a snake ready to strike,  
when the time is right it takes a venomous bite.

If only they knew, this first meeting would be the last  
The smiles on their faces would drop to know love can't complete the task.

Each man stood in Opposition with the other, love tying them together.  
In the end they were both betrayed, three years later they met in the grave.



Poem 2 – I Am/I Hold/I Carry Poem

***Without A Sound***

I am a stage constantly putting on a performance for nobody to see  
I am a leader desperately trying to find someone to lead  
I am a writer but it's too dark to read the page  
I am a bird flying outside a window with little grace  
I am a silver hairpin, the only thing my grandmother left  
I am my father's laugh that loses joy with every breath  
I am an argument that my mother tries to forget and push down  
I am a girl that sometimes wishes to disappear without a sound

And yet I carry the joy of early morning hikes  
I carry the freshness of mountain air  
I carry the smiles of a road trip  
I carry the comfort of home

I am a stage, but I no longer put on a performance for nobody to see  
I am a leader, but I have found people to lead  
I am a writer, but I finally turned on a light to read the page  
I am a bird outside a window who has managed to finally find some grace  
I am a silver hairpin, but I've realized I am not the only thing my grandmother left  
I am my father's laugh but now it inflates with more joy with every breath  
I am an argument that my mother tries to forgive instead of forgetting and pushing down

**I am no longer a girl who wishes to disappear without a sound**

**The Daughter**

I am a daughter, friend, sister, student, optimist  
I carry the Bindi my mom places between my brows to protect me from harm  
I am the sunset, painting the colors of who I want to be across the earth with every step  
I hold onto my mother's old books, my track medals, old birthday cards and fond memories  
I am the morning sun, always ready to begin again, to start a new.  
I carry my running shoes always seeking the next adventure and the next mountain to conquer  
I hold the hand of my brother as he walks to third grade in a new state  
I am a wildflower, free, unique, hard to find, difficult to forget, delicate yet resilient.  
I am the daughter of generations of women before me and a change for those who come after.  
I am not caged, meek and small, voiceless, or lost.  
I am not trapped inside the box others make for me and try to fit me into.

## APPENDIX E

### POEM PROMPT WAKELET RESPONSE

#### **"Things We Carry On the Sea" Wakelet Response**

**Please reread the "Things We Carry On the Sea" poem, name/identify three specific adjectives to describe its TONE (the author's attitude toward the subject see attached list), and then describe its MOOD (how the poem makes you feel and why)?**

Tired, Tragic, Persevering. The poem makes me feel like a bystander, uninvolved but still witnessing something tragic.

The adjectives i used to describe the authors tone are lost, hope, and remember. This poem makes me feel sad as I think that's the author's goal. It makes me feel sad because of its descriptions as well as the ending.

Adjectives :

"mushroom clouds"

"old homes"

"rising from industrial wastes"

The tone of the authors attitude towards the subject seems pensive/dreary.

The mood of the poem makes me sad because she talks about how much that they, (we) carry and how they don't stop until they are finally out of the situation that they are trying to get out of. As they are desperate to escape their "old homes."

Three adjectives that I would use to describe the tone "The Things We Carry on The Sea" are lost, grief-stricken, commemorative. Personally, I felt very sad about the pain Ping and her people have experienced and continue to experience.

Three adjectives to describe the poem are anxious, gloomy, and tense. The mood of the poem is exhausting and tiring. These people in the poem are almost just being pushed around by people and they have to carry on like it's normal.

The adjectives that stood out the most to me were fickle, strewn, and curious. Most of these have more negative associations with them and it makes the situation seem bleak or miserable. The author clearly feels as if this is a travesty. I see hope throughout this poem rising. The tone I would say creates a sympathetic attitude and creates a mood that makes people who were not born in these situations feel lucky.

The three adjectives I chose were, mushroom clouds, old homes, and forced upon us. I think that they all reveal the struggle the author is implementing into the poem. I feel like the poem is exhausting because of its repetitive obstacles. The amount of death and sadness that is in each line of the poem is worrisome and makes me feel bad for the people that went through this.

The tone of the poem "Things We Carry on the Sea", written by Wang Ping, in my opinion, could be described as pensive, wistful, and somewhat vindictive because of the huge load they carry from their home and what they had left behind. The mood of the poem is inspiring but also could be pensive in a way because it gets the reader thinking of immigrants and people traveling from their homes under harsh conditions, and it gives a sense of sorrow.

The tone of the poem is outspoken, gloomy, and reflective. The mood was sad or gloomy and it put me at unrest because I feel like what she's describing in the poem needs to change.

For the tone I'd say apprehensive, candid, and depressed. For the mood it's tired and desperate. It seems tiring from having to move from one place to another and desperate to find a place that they can stay for a long period of time.

Wang Ping makes the tone poem emotional, grave, and optimistic. The poem makes me feel empathic, the poem goes more into detail about how much these people go through when leaving their home and moving to a new place. Although the condition may be better in the new place it is still disheartening.


The tone is ambiguous, ambivalent, and complicated. The mood is complex, baffled, and elegiac.

Wang Ping's Things We Carry on the Sea is introspective, wistful, and forlorn. It makes me feel interested in the other cultures in the poem, but also guilty about not having to think about the problems the people on the boat would have to deal with.

The author is weary, complacent, and used to moving around, but she makes sure to keep her culture. The poem makes me feel lost, maybe like how the author felt when she was moving to her new land.



### Things We Carry on the Sea by Wang Ping - Poems | poets.org

 Poets

Things We Carry on the Sea - We carry tears in our eyes: good-bye father,  
good-bye mother

## APPENDIX F

### “HOME” VISUAL METAPHOR RESPONSES



**NO ONE LEAVES HOME  
... UNLESS HOME IS ...  
THE **STING** OF A **BEE****

**NO ONE LEAVES HOME  
UNLESS HOME IS THE  
*FLAME* OF THE *MATCH***





**NO ONE  
LEAVES  
HOME  
UNLESS  
HOME IS  
A HUNGRY  
GRAVE**



|



***NO ONE LEAVES HOME***



***UNLESS HOME IS THE***

***VENOM OF A SNAKE***





# NO ONE LEAVES HOME UNLESS HOME IS THE CLAW OF A LION

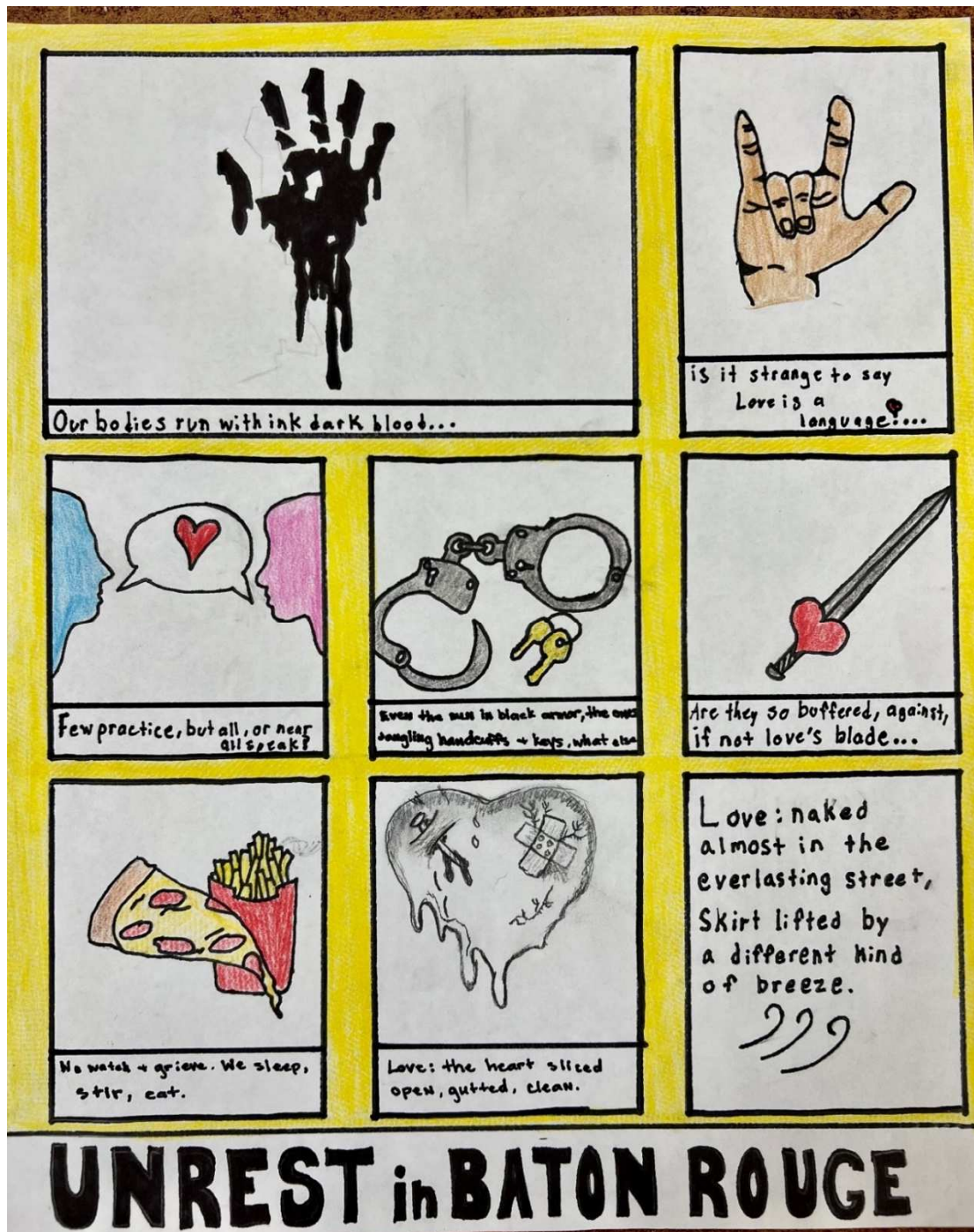


No one leaves Home  
Unless Home  
Is an explosion in a **minefield**.



# APPENDIX G

## POEM PROJECT VISUAL EXAMPLES





# "Things We Carry on the Sea"



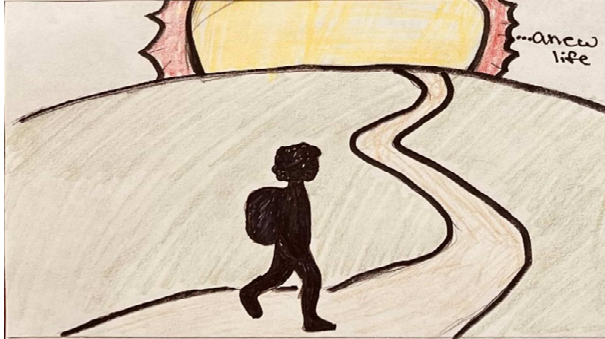
We carry tears in our eyes, goodbye father, goodbye mother... We carry scars from proxy wars of greed.



incinerated in mushroom clouds



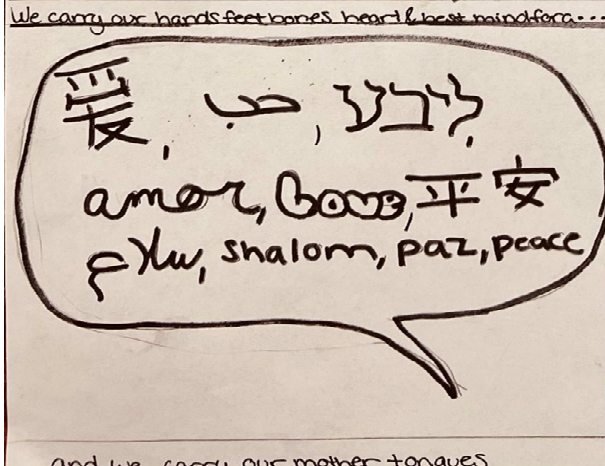
We carry islands sinking under the sea.



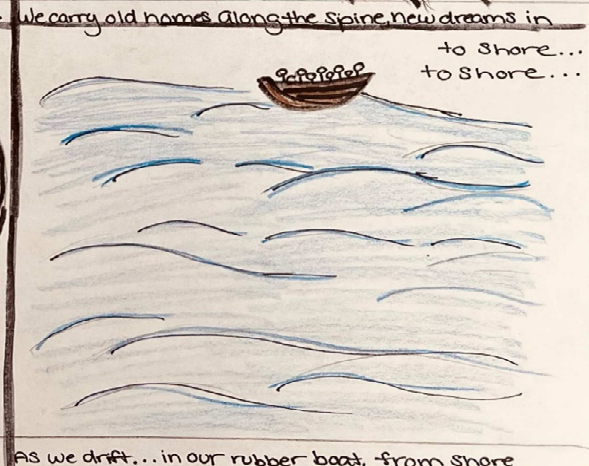
We carry our hands, feet, bones, heart & best minds for a...



We carry old homes along the spine, new dreams in to shore... to shore...



and we carry our mother tongues



As we drift... in our rubber boat, from shore



# Albanza Catholic Step



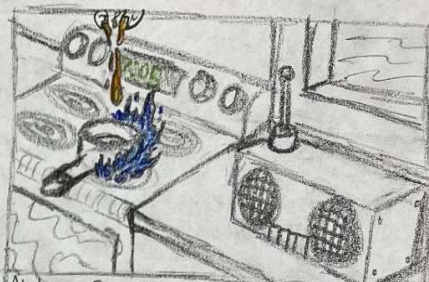
Albanza. Praise the cook with the shaven head, and a tattoo on his shoulder that said LOVE, a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo.

Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, a candle glimmering white to ward off the dark saint of the sea. Robert Clemente, his plane that flared into the ocean loaded with cans for Nicaragua for all the months chewing the ash of earthquakes.



Praise Manhattan from a hundred and seven flights up, like Atlantis jumped through the great windows of an ancient aquarium. Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen could squint and almost see their world, hear the Chant of Nations:

ECUADOR,  
MEXICO,  
REPUBLICA DOMINICA,  
HAITI, YEMEN, GHANA, BANGLADESH.



Albanza. Praise the kitchen in the morning, where the gas burned blue on every stove and exhaust fans fired their diamondlike floppers, hands cracked eggs with quick thumbs or sliced open cabbages to build an altar of cans.

To pile sacks of rice and beans for a family floating away on some Caribbean island, plagued by rats.



After the thunder wilder than thunder, after the booming like storm of glass from the great windows, after the radio stopped singing like a tree full of terrified frogs after night burst the door of day and flooded the kitchen, torn like the stoves glowed in darkness, like the lighthouse in Fajardo, like a cook's soul.



Soul I say, even if the dead cannot tell us about the bristles of God's beard, because God has no face. Soul I say, to name the smoke-beings hung in constellations, across the night sky of this city and cities to come.



Teach me to dance, we have no music here.

I will teach you. Music is all we have.

Two constellations of smoke rose and drifted to each other, mingling in icy air, and one said with African tongue: Teach me to dance, we have no music here. And the other said with Spanish tongue: I will teach you. Music is all we have.

