Tell the Story, Speak the Truth: Creating a Third Space Through Spoken Word Poetry

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Spoken word poetry allows youth to be creative, develop critical literacy skills, and speak up about issues relevant to their lives.

Poetry is a political act because it involves telling the truth.
(June Jordan; Quiroz-Martinez, 1998, para. 4)

Spoken word poetry has become an increasingly popular form of creative expression, particularly among marginalized youth (Biggs-El, 2012; Ciardiello, 2010; Fisher, 2015; Jocson, 2005; Williams, 2015). The genre combines the written conventions of poetry with performance, and poets use their voices, movements, and gestures to enhance meaning (Dymoke, 2017; Gregory, 2013). Spoken word has become popular as poetry slams around the world offer a stage where youth voices have a place to be heard.

Spoken word allows students to manipulate language without the restrictions of grammar or structure. In recent years, studies conducted in schools in the United States and England used spoken word poetry to support culturally sustaining pedagogy in secondary English classrooms (e.g., Biggs-El, 2012; Ciardiello, 2010; Dymoke, 2017; Fisher, 2015; Flint & Laman, 2012; Jocson, 2005; Scarbrough & Allen, 2014; Smith, 2010; Williams, 2015; Wiseman, 2011). Despite growing international scholarship in this area, there has been no prior Australian research examining spoken word poetry in school contexts. Moreover, the demands of the country's assessment-driven curriculum often leave little space for young people to express their identities and craft their stories. By exploring the intersection of spoken word poetry and culturally sustaining pedagogy, we uncovered how students can cultivate their critical literacy skills and talk back (hooks, 1986) to the world around them.

In this study, we focused on the Real Talk program, a six-week spoken word poetry workshop organized by the Bankstown Poetry Slam and conducted by mentor poets throughout Western Sydney, with a focus on schools with a significant number of students from lower socioeconomic and non-English-speaking backgrounds. Underpinned by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning and Freire's (1972) critical pedagogy, we explored how the program created a third space for literacy development by using both critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies to link students' out-of-school literacy practices and lived experiences with their in-school literacy development. Within the third space (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999), dominant languages and literacy practices are not privileged, which allows for students' broad range of sociocultural resources to be used as literacy tools.

In this qualitative study, we asked two questions:

1. How can the creation of a third space in spoken word poetry workshops use a culturally sustaining pedagogy to allow the voices of marginalized students to be heard?

2. How can spoken word poetry enhance the critical literacy skills of students in diverse schools?

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Spoken Word Poetry and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Spoken word poetry workshops with marginalized youth are often facilitated through culturally sustaining pedagogy (Fisher, 2015). Culturally sustaining pedagogy perpetuates linguistic, literate, and cultural (Paris, 2012) diversity through using the sociocultural resources, such as additional languages and evolving cultural identities, that students bring to the classroom (Jocson, 2005; Paris, 2012). Jocson (2005) suggested that spoken word builds on the strengths of every student, and Biggs-El (2012) asserted that spoken word celebrates human difference. Moreover, Paris (2012) argued that nurturing multilingualism and multiculturalism is imperative in our globalized world as they become inextricably linked to access and power.

Through the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy, spoken word offers a platform for students to interrogate relevant societal and cultural issues (Fisher, 2015). Moreover, Padgett and Curwood (2016) found that youth's poetic literacy thrives by having an authentic audience and receiving meaningful feedback. However, Winn (2015) indicated that many teachers familiar with culturally sustaining pedagogy fail to enact these practices within their classroom because of a disconnect from their students' actual lived experiences. Spoken word mitigates this by asking students to base their writing on personal experiences (Jocson, 2005). Critical pedagogy, in this sense, fosters the variety of languages, cultures, and beliefs that students bring to the classroom rather than gentrifying students through the traditional cultural and historical processes that schooling imposes (Freire, 1972; Paris, 2012).

Critical Literacy and Creativity in the Third Space

Spoken word poetry can readily be taught through culturally sustaining pedagogy to build students' critical literacy skills. Critical literacy involves the analysis of the world by interrogating the power structures present in texts that oppress certain voices (Flint & Laman, 2012). This requires students to analyze texts in ways that examine the intersections of race, class, and gender that can influence a text's creation and perception (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012). Freire (1972) conceptualized literacy as an interchange between the word and the world around us. By questioning the meaning of language, students become active citizens who evaluate existing social and power structures (Fiore, 2015; Fisher, 2015). Critical literacy skills are essential for

21st-century learners, with texts being produced exponentially and students accessing these on a mass scale (Flint & Laman, 2012). Additionally, critical literacy skills are integral to the New South Wales English K–10 Syllabus, which expects students to "develop their critical and imaginative faculties" (New South Wales Education Standards Authority, 2012, p. 10) in their study of English.

In cultivating students' critical literacy, spoken word fosters analytical and interpretive skills. In a case study of spoken word, Smith (2010) discovered an intersection between students believing they can produce knowledge and believing they can effectively critique texts. Kovalik and Curwood (2019) found that youth can use poetry as a way to explore the human condition, and Jocson (2005) indicated that poetry serves as a vehicle for creative expression without the constraints of grammar and structure. Accordingly, spoken word engages students who are typically disengaged in the English classroom (Gregory, 2013; Jocson, 2005). In Flint and Laman's (2012) study with 57% EAL/D (English as an additional language or dialect) students, spoken word linked their everyday experiences to broader societal issues. Moreover, Fiore (2015) suggested that spoken word as a critical literacy tool "facilitate[s] unprecedented social change" (p. 814) by allowing students to question the conditions of their lives.

Gutiérrez et al. (1999) attributed this to the third space, where alternative and competing discourses are recognized. The third space is a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) that acknowledges students' sociocultural experiences and connects this with their school practices (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). Notably, the third space is often achieved through the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). In this study, we sought to explore how spoken word workshops could cultivate a third space by providing a safe atmosphere for students' voices to be heard, allowing for expression in ways that traditional English classes may not permit.

Our Study

Research Contexts and Participants

Designed as a multiple-case embedded study (Yin, 2008) and informed by sociocultural theory, we investigated the impact of the workshops across three school sites. An initiative of the Bankstown Poetry Slam, the largest poetry slam in Australia, the six-week program was facilitated by experienced spoken word poets, who acted as mentors, and primarily attended by students in years 9 and 10. In this annual initiative, students' writing is developed in weekly workshops by exploring relevant

topics such as identity, racism, and gender. In the final week, students perform their poetry at a competitive in-school heat. The heat winners then compete in a finale at a well-known theater in Sydney.

Fourteen socioeconomically and linguistically diverse public high schools across Western Sydney were chosen by Bankstown Poetry Slam to participate in the program in 2018. Three of these schools—Jacaranda High School, Westview High School, and Acacia High School (all names of schools and research participants are pseudonyms)—were selected as representative case studies. On average, 49.6% of students identified as having an additional language other than English, and all schools were identified as low socioeconomic by the federal government (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2018). Across all three research sites, a total of 74 students participated in the workshops, and 39 of these students took part in the study, as well as three English teachers and seven mentor poets.

Data Collection

In this qualitative multicase study, we collected primary data from multiple sources—interviews, focus groups, observational field notes, and artifacts—and triangulated the data to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. English teachers from all three sites were individually interviewed to gain an understanding of their perspectives on the effectiveness of the program. Each 30-minute semistructured interview was audio recorded and later transcribed. Interviews were conducted at the beginning and conclusion of the program to consider the changing nature of teachers' perspectives on the program's ability to build critical literacy skills.

Focus groups were used as a method of inquiry with 39 students and separate sessions with the seven mentor poets. Focus groups allowed for an understanding of the complexities experienced within each school environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The 10 student focus group sessions ran for 30 minutes each and were conducted at the beginning and conclusion of the program, to compare perspectives as they developed. Similarly, two mentor poet focus groups ran for 60 minutes at both the beginning and conclusion of the program, giving the opportunity for poets to reflect on the progress in the workshops. Open-ended questions that asked about the writing experience and the workshop environment allowed for new lines of inquiry and an exploration in discussion.

We used member checks and cross-referencing for both the interviews and focus groups to ensure the credibility of the study. We took observational field notes during all six workshops at each of the sites and recorded students' and mentor poets' interactions, reactions, and emotions. In addition, we used artifacts to analyze the development of critical literacy skills throughout the program; these artifacts were teaching materials created by Real Talk and student poetry samples created and revised during the workshops.

Data Analysis

To understand how the third space was created using a culturally sustaining pedagogy and how this impacted students' critical literacy skills, we analyzed the multiple sources of qualitative data through a sociocultural theoretical lens. During first-cycle coding, observational notes, artifacts, and interview and focus group transcripts were all coded line by line. Descriptive codes, such as "hearing the experiences of others" and "writing personal opinions," were used to highlight meaningful sections of the data. In vivo codes, such as "it didn't have to be really flowy," were used because they were essential for an accurate understanding of student voices.

The second cycle of coding involved focused coding methods, which categorized the data into more salient themes (Saldaña, 2012). We reduced to four significant codes that synthesized the descriptive and in vivo codes into overarching themes. The codes "connecting with culture" and "new learning environment" allowed for an analysis of the workshops' use of culturally sustaining pedagogy in the third space. Meanwhile, the codes "understanding the world" and "developing voice" examined the improvement of critical literacy skills. Finally, we synthesized the themes that emerged from all data sources in a process of methodological triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) that was achieved by cross-checking the most frequently coded items across each data set to confirm the key findings.

Creating Space and Finding Voice Through Spoken Word

We offer two key findings that highlight the way Real Talk workshops engaged students in spoken word poetry. First, the creation of a third space through the workshops used a culturally sustaining pedagogy to empower youth who may be otherwise marginalized, such as by their sexual orientation or cultural background.

The third space was primarily created by teachers and mentors showing a level of vulnerability that helped students take risks in their writing. In addition, the empowerment realized through the celebration of their unique voices and experiences allowed students to develop and sustain critically literate identities beyond the workshops. Their newfound critical literacy skills allowed students to meaningfully use language to interrogate the relation between texts and the world through the exploration of relevant world issues, such as racism, religion, and politics.

"I Will Scream So Loud That My Language Will Thunder": Establishing the Third Space Through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

The creation of a third space was essential when asking students to compose authentic poetry that examines issues closely linked to their identities and lived experiences. In typical English classrooms, the high-stakes nature of writing affects the authenticity of student work (Scarbrough & Allen, 2014). By drawing on a culturally sustaining pedagogy that celebrates student diversity, the creation of the third space inside classrooms provided many students, regardless of their background or ability, with a safe space to take risks while manipulating language (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). The Real Talk mentor poets created a new learning environment that acted as a third space as teachers stepped back and joined their students in the writing process. This meant that students could showcase multilingual talents and share authentic lived experiences outside of the confines of traditional assessments, which allowed marginalized students to feel included while deepening their peers' understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity.

The relatable leadership of a mentor poet is integral to the creation of the third space inside existing classrooms. In this study, mentor poets used the workshop structure to transform the traditional classroom into the third space (Fisher, 2015; Gutiérrez et al., 1999). During focus groups, Ivy, a 23-year-old queer mentor poet, mentioned that she "was vulnerable first" by sharing her own poetry to make students feel comfortable in the space. By showing vulnerability, Ivy suggested that students felt more confident in performing their poetry. The second-cycle coding of "new learning environment" in the observational notes revealed that two other mentor poets used this strategy to build trust within the third space of the poetry workshop, helping

students feel safe. During focus groups, students from Acacia High mentioned that when the poets performed poetry that deals with their diverse identities, students felt "inspired to share" these aspects of their identity in their own poetry.

Showing engagement and vulnerability from the teachers can also help create the third space. Iman, a 22-year-old Muslim mentor poet, stated that she encouraged "teachers [to] participate." The coding of "new learning environment" shown in the following examples revealed that this created the third space by prompting teachers to authentically interact with their students (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). Angela, a teacher from Jacaranda High, noted how this impacted classroom dynamics by engendering "better relationships between students and teachers. The kids saw us taking risks...they could make mistakes as well." Arihi, a Samoan EAL/D student in Angela's class, confirmed that this created "a different learning environment" where students' knowledge was valued alongside their teachers'.

By privileging student knowledge, the altered learning environment formed through the third space engaged students with different personalities and literacy skills. During interviews, teachers noted that the students who thrived in the workshops were not ones they expected to engage in writing and performance. Teachers noted that many of these students were typically shy and introverted. Thuy, a Vietnamese Australian EAL/D student in year 10 at Jacaranda, admitted that she felt "intimidated" to perform at first but, at the conclusion of the workshops, realized that "it gives you the environment where you can talk." By establishing a space where student voices are privileged, Real Talk effectively engaged diverse students with varying personalities and literacy abilities.

The third space established by Real Talk empowered students by celebrating their multiliteracies and multilingual identities. The workshops used a culturally sustaining pedagogy through acknowledging and valuing students' richly diverse sociocultural resources (Paris, 2012). Daniela, who teaches at Acacia, noted that many of her students have "developing literacy skills in English but are quite sophisticated in their first language." Within the third space that uses culturally sustaining pedagogy, "no single language or register is privileged" (Gutiérrez et al., 1999, p. 293). Despite only seeking refuge in Australia a couple of years ago, two of Daniela's Iraqi and Syrian EAL/D students, Zara and Amarni, "eloquently conveyed their message." This meant that the workshops used "culturally and linguistically inclusive strategies...[such as] encouraging the use of first language" (New South Wales Department of

Education & Communities, 2014, p. 11), as suggested in the curriculum for teachers in New South Wales.

In the third space, students used their multilingual skills to share their lived experiences. For example, the code "connecting with culture" showed that Jaimini, an Indian Australian EAL/D student from Jacaranda, drew on her literacy skills in both Gujarati and English in her poem, "Culture." This poem experiments with hybrid language practices and contrasting accents in "Hu Gujarati chu...I am Gujarati" to interrogate Jaimini's experience of racialized stereotyping: "Some Gujaratis are terrorists...but that doesn't count for everyone." In this poem, Jaimini used pausing in her accumulation of clichés to "critically evaluate[d] the ways bias, stereotypes, perspectives...are constructed" (New South Wales Education Standards Authority, 2012, p. 155), thereby achieving key outcomes of the New South Wales English syllabus. Jaimini's, Zara's, and Armani's multilingual skills offered them valuable opportunities for access and power (Paris, 2012). Moreover, additional language practices can "support learning in English" (New South Wales Department of Education & Communities, 2014, p. 28). Unfortunately, in most English classrooms, the incorporation of Jaimini's additional language would be limited. However, the third space that used culturally sustaining pedagogy in the workshops encouraged Jaimini to celebrate her multilingual identity and share her lived experiences with an authentic audience.

Although culturally sustaining pedagogy was readily used during the workshops, the participating teachers had minimal or no prior experiences when using this approach in their classrooms. As Winn (2015) suggested, culturally sustaining pedagogy can be difficult to enact in the classroom. During initial interviews, Angela from Jacaranda High admitted to her unfamiliarity with the pedagogy, and Vanessa from Westview High stated that it is "challenging" with a class of 30 diverse students. Our analysis of curricular materials revealed that the workshops used culturally sustaining pedagogy by allowing students to influence the writing and workshop content based on their own diverse experiences. This type of student-centered pedagogy meant that students' learning had significant individual meaning, leading them to purposefully craft their language to express personal experiences (Gregory, 2013; Paris, 2012).

By creating a learning environment that promotes inclusion, the third space of the workshops acted as a safe atmosphere for LGBTIQ+ students to share their experiences and gave their peers a greater understanding of sexual and gender diversity. In focus groups, the mentor poets shared that four LGBTIQ+ students used their poetry to publicly come out to their peers during the workshops. This is significant, as many LGBTIQ+ students "locate themselves as outsiders" because the texts studied in English "publicly silence certain sexualities" (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005, p. 203); in contrast, poetry can be conceptualized as a counternarrative (Curwood & Gibbons, 2009) that respects young people's identities and encourages them to push back against oppressive paradigms. Ivy, a queer mentor poet, stated that "having a space...where kids were comfortable talking about that...was so overwhelming for me. That's not a thing I had." In Westview student Leo's poem, "Rainbow Hair," he discusses the unfortunate abuse that he experienced ("tears rained down on my hands as I ran them through my rainbow hair"), emphasized through the deliberate pause in "all... / 'cos I loved a man." Subsequent interviews with Leo and his peers aligned with observations of students' reactions to reveal that "Rainbow Hair" allowed both Leo and his audience to understand the beauty, diversity, and intimacy of human experience.

The role of the diverse mentor poets in the third space was significant in allowing students to celebrate difference. Coding of "new learning environment" in focus group transcripts revealed that mentor poet Iman created a safe space by telling her students, "We don't judge other people no matter what...if you think it's problematic... we talk about it." Gutiérrez et al. (1999) suggested that these points of tension transform classroom discourse. This evolutionary discourse gave students a greater understanding of LGBTIQ+ experiences by listening to and discussing their peers' poetry. Angela, from Jacaranda, stated that a poem written by her student Jamie, who does not like to be identified by gender, made the other students "more supportive and understanding." Jamie's poem, "They Told Me," explores their experience of gender expectations: "They told me I could be anything / but my brother got the books / and I got tiaras."

The third space gave Jamie a platform that celebrated their experiences, and their peers gained a greater understanding of gender. The experiences of Jamie and Leo significantly reflect the ethos of the third space where dominant paradigms are without privilege and students are free to express themselves (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). In this sense, the fostering of a third space that uses culturally sustaining pedagogy achieves one of the fundamental goals of Australian education outlined in the Melbourne Declaration: to "provide all students with...schooling that is free from discrimination" (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 8).

"Every Poem Shared an Important Message": Developing Critical Literacy Skills

Through creating a third space and embedding a culturally sustaining pedagogy that recognizes the diversity of literacies and identities, spoken word poetry workshops can significantly enhance students' critical literacy skills. These skills require students to interrogate the world around them through an analysis of texts that examines the embedded power relations that privilege some voices over others (Fisher, 2015; Flint & Laman, 2012). Real Talk fosters this through their unique curriculum designed collaboratively by the diverse mentor poets and Bankstown Poetry Slam. The curriculum empowers students to interrogate world issues and cultivates critical literacy by examining and creating poetry that covers topics such as politics, climate change, refugees, mental health, gender, and race.

To understand these topics, students analyzed poetry by diverse authors, such as poet Luka Lesson and writer Bhanu Kapil, and used these as mentor texts to create poetry using a combination of language modes and performance techniques to represent issues relevant to their lives. Focus groups revealed that this increase in critical literacy helped students "realize the reality of the world." In interviews, teachers unanimously indicated that this was achieved by giving students a deeper understanding of the power that language holds in representing world issues.

The development of critical literacy begins with providing students with an accessible platform to use their voice when exploring issues relevant to their lives through the use of freewriting strategies, including stream of consciousness (Elbow, 1973). In this activity, students continually write everything that comes to mind (e.g., ideas, words, phrases) until the timer stops. Over the course of the workshops in this study, the timer gradually increased in length to allow students to fully develop their ideas. Although students were reluctant at first, observations coded with "developing voice" showed that the continual use of this task proved valuable in allowing students to develop their own voice and recognize the power of their ideas. Chloe, a queer student from Jacaranda, commented that it helped her "harness those ideas."

Often, beginning writing can be daunting because of the high-stakes nature of written work (Scarbrough & Allen, 2014). However, this activity allowed for a range of learners to begin writing, as it was all about privately putting pen to paper, regardless of coherence. Meranee, a Thai refugee student from Westview, suggested that this activity helped build her confidence: "In class, I feel like it's really hard, but in here, it's just what's inside your head." Another Samoan EAL/D student, Arihi, stated that this activity and writing spoken word in general allows students to "passionately...[write] about society...in your personal, creative way." This mirrors the findings in Jocson's (2005) study, where students recognized the power they held in their own writing. By acknowledging students' ideas, Real Talk gave students agency over their own writing, allowing for critical literacy skills to emerge. In an increasingly high-stakes assessment era, this is a powerful outcome for students, as agency in writing may be overlooked in the English curriculum.

Critical literacy skills of analyzing and interpreting the relation between texts and the world were fostered throughout Real Talk through provocative poetry prompts that encouraged students to meaningfully use performance poetry devices. Similar to Smith's (2010) study, throughout Real Talk, students felt more confident with analyzing texts after experiencing the creation of their own. Both artifacts and observational notes taken over the course of the workshops that were coded extensively with "developing voice" revealed that many students acquired skills of deep analysis and used this in their own writing.

Angela, from Jacaranda, recalled students recognizing imagery in Rudy Francisco's spoken word poem "Adrenaline Rush" and emulating this imagery in their writing. She mentioned students considering poets' performances and "the influence...on meaning." The intensive accumulation of imagery heightened by Rudy's tone and pace in his performance served as a mentor text for Isaiah, a year 10 student of color, in his poem, "Earthquake": "When my mum is checked by 10 officers at the airport or followed by security in a shopping mall...no matter the slight scale, it causes damage." In this sense, Isaiah's poem "respond[s] imaginatively and critically to the verbal and visual imagery" (New South Wales Education Standards Authority, 2012, p. 22) of Rudy Francisco and uses a combination of metaphor and anaphora with pacing and gesture to convey meaning. Additionally, Isaiah's poem shows critical literacy skills by questioning the race-determined inequities that he experiences daily.

Vanessa, a teacher from Westview, noticed similar development in her students' writing as they began using "unique nonclichéd similes and metaphors" toward the end of the workshops. Similarly, Daniela, from Acacia, shared that students "having to use [literary techniques]" in their poetry helped them "understand it" more than they did in class. Thuy, a Vietnamese Australian EAL/D student from Jacaranda, also experienced this and

claimed, "You're using [literary techniques] to say what you think about the world." The Real Talk program offered students a third space to creatively manipulate literary form and develop their analytical skills through the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which subsequently strengthened their critical literacy.

The critical literacy developed in the program had a lasting impact on many of the students' literate identities, as they continued to improve these skills beyond Real Talk. During follow-up focus groups, not all students thought that they would continue writing spoken word after the program. However, many students suggested that they wanted to continue engaging with the genre by attending local poetry slams. Angela, from Jacaranda, attended a community-based slam after the program concluded to watch her student Jaimini perform. After this performance, Jaimini and Miracle performed their multilingual piece "Culture," which incorporates English, Gujarati, and Māori, at Bankstown Poetry Slam's Grand Finale, held at the Sydney International Convention Centre in front of 4,000 people, and won the People's Choice Award. The initial focus groups revealed that Jaimini was apprehensive about spoken word prior to the program. Despite this, Jaimini and Miracle's continued engagement with community-based spoken word is evidence of their ongoing development of critically literate identities and their commitment to sharing their stories with a wide audience.

The ongoing development of critically literate identities allowed some students to interrogate world issues relevant to their lives long after the conclusion of Real Talk. During the workshops, Samara, a year 10 Muslim student from Westview, wrote "Australia" as a critique of Australia's treatment of refugees. The poem was crafted in the third workshop and is evidence of Samara's emerging critical literacy skills, as she cleverly condemns the treatment of refugees through the use of symbolism, rhyme, and a satirical inclusion of parts of the national anthem: "We hold the key / Let us rejoice. For we are young and free." Six months later, in front of a crowd of approximately 175 people at the monthly Bankstown Poetry Slam, Samara performed "Solitude's Love Letter" in response to the devastating Christchurch attacks. This poem is evidence of her extensive and continued development of critical literacy skills, as she creates more refined uses of imagery, allusion, and personification to defend being Muslim. Moreover, her ability to recognize power structures that exist in text is evident in her repetition of "the truth is Islam is not like any other faith," which parodies an Australian senator's response to the Christchurch attacks. Samara's skillful exploration of her faith is evidence of how culturally sustaining pedagogy in the third space significantly enhanced her critical literacy skills. These skills gave her the power and agency to ask profound questions about herself and the world around her, which shows how spoken word can be a critical pedagogical tool.

Looking Back and Moving Forward

Culturally sustaining pedagogy can be used to teach spoken word poetry, which allows for the celebration of diversity in literacies and the engagement of typically marginalized students. By confronting relevant societal issues, writing in this genre strengthens students' critical literacy while working as an empowering pedagogy (Flint & Laman, 2012; Jocson, 2005). The first of its kind in Australia, this study offers teachers insight into how to effectively use culturally sustaining pedagogy in their classrooms to strengthen students' critical literacy skills. Students purposefully engaged with the opportunity to write freely about their personal experiences, allowing them to gain confidence and a sense of agency over both their speaking and writing skills. Furthermore, throughout the workshops, students experienced immediate and constant feedback from peers, their teacher, and their mentor.

Although this study offers ample evidence for the success of incorporating spoken word poetry into schools, there are limitations. Due to this study's position in Western Sydney, the data sample is not representative across all of Australia. This is a limitation because it restricts the transferability of the study to a wider range of contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Furthermore, because this is a supplementary program, it is not part of the English curriculum. Future research can consider how spoken word poetry can effectively be incorporated into the curriculum to create a third space or support multimodal assessment. With the Melbourne Declaration outlining that Australian schools need to promote "active and informed citizens" (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 9) who contribute to a "socially cohesive society that respects and appreciates cultural, social and religious diversity" (p. 7), the need for practical applications of culturally sustaining pedagogy that honor and extend students' sociocultural resources while developing critical literacy is imminent (Paris, 2012). In this study, we asked English educators to consider spoken word poetry as an effective strategy to achieve this goal. Spoken word is an empowering tool that connects students' academic literacy practices with their lived experiences and that encourages them to talk back.

TAKE ACTION!

1. Find spoken word poetry online that will pique your students' interest. There are plenty of examples on YouTube, such as Sarah Kay and Aja Monet.

2. Find a local slam and inquire about student workshops or invite a poet to perform in your class.

3. Write and perform your own poem for your students.

4. Get your students writing and performing:
   - Start with a simple exercise such as the stream of consciousness. Give students a blank page and ask them to write whatever comes to their mind for a set time limit. Remind students that their pen cannot leave the page.
   - Once your students are comfortable writing, use a poetry prompt. For example, in an "I Am" poem, students start every line of the poem with "I am" and list aspects of their identity. This can be changed to "I was" or "I will be" if students want to be more creative.
   - Organize your own school-based slam to allow students to share their voices and experiences.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

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- Button Poetry's YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5DH3eN81b0RGJ7Xj3fsjVg

- Sarah Temporal's spoken word poetry resources for teachers: https://sarahtemporal.com/teachers/

- "Spoken Word Poetry Guide for Teachers—Resources for Writers", a TED Conferences lesson by Caroline Gerard: https://ed.ted.com/on/wHNZ7jqX