



Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms. Maisha T. Fisher. New York: Teachers College Press, 2007. 128 pp.

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One of the most difficult tasks of teachers today is the empowerment of minority, low-income, and otherwise disenfranchised students to take control of their education and their futures. Inside this slim volume, *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms*, the reader gains insight into the Power Writers, a unique program that has achieved success in this mission. Hidden behind a seemingly ordinary title, a powerful ethnographic account of an out-of-school literacy program for high school students emerges.

Located in an area of severe poverty in the Bronx of New York City, the Power Writers meet before and after school and on weekends to read, write, and share their life stories through poetry. A virtual United Nations of students, this group of young people, from such diverse ethnic groups as African American, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Colombian, Salvadoran, West Indian, White, and every possible combination, comes together for the opportunity of accessing written and spoken words while speaking their own truth. While celebrating the voices of these students, the account gives the reader a glimpse into the teaching and learning process by which these young people bring the chaos of their lived experiences into the discipline of written and spoken rhythm.

However, the power of the Power Writers is much more than a few students and dedicated adults coming together to write and analyze poetry. At the heart of the power writing experience is the desire for "a sense of being connected and respected, of being somebody who should be taken seriously (p. x)." Here, young people, living in drug-ridden streets where death takes too many young lives, learn to respect themselves, to respect others, and to connect with each other and the world outside the boundaries of their neighborhood through their words. They learn to value their own culture and the culture of others. They learn the value of using different forms of language in different settings.

Joe, the Power Writer teacher, links music to the students' writing and by employing musical metaphors, he challenges and tests each of the writers. He tells his students, "You have to sing your piece (p. 2)," for singing makes the words flow into the ears of the audience. Student writing is often compared to the blues and the purpose of blues singers, for, just as the blues tell of suffering, student writing sheds light upon their complicated life stories. Through their words and the consequent development of literacy, the students gain the power to take charge of their lives and their futures.

"Read and feed" serves as the core of each writing session. Not only does each student



"read" his/her work, the other students "feed" the reader with their detailed feedback. Active listening is more than expected; it is required. Feeding has to be more than simple compliments. It must be specific, critical, and informed. Through this process, new vocabulary words are introduced, new styles of writing are defined, and students are coached on public speaking and critical thinking. In the course of this constant challenge of reader and listener, students learn to analyze their own writing process. They exercise critical discourse not only during read and feed sessions, but they also learn to implement that same strategy in their lives outside the Power Writing class.

Roland, another of the adult leaders of the group, described the Power Writers in this way:

...these kids are rebels...because what they have all done is rebel against the little slot, the little block in the pyramid that society has chosen for them. And they have chosen to rebel in the deepest, most profound way with their power, with their literacy.... (p.12).

While the book is most obviously directed to English/Language Arts teachers, it also serves as a valuable resource for teachers of all grades and subject areas who are searching for ways to connect with the diverse students in today's elementary, middle and high schools. Maisha Fisher concludes her study with these words: Young people are yearning to be chosen and to be claimed. Teachers must recognize this yearning and help young people develop the tools to transform this yearning into words and actions that chart the future they desire and deserve (p. 100).

For those teachers interested in helping students develop their own identity and the agency to take control of their futures, this book must be read. The reader quickly recognizes the intimate relationship between language and culture, language and identity, language and agency, thinking and emotion, literacy and context, and literacy and agency. Common assumptions about teaching minority children in impoverished conditions are challenged as the Power Writers share their deepest thoughts and private dreams of a better future.

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