

Mary Pipher's "I Am From" in Art Application & Poetic Expression for Identity Exploration

Ilian Hernandez Juarez

Introduction

... all children are artists, the problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.

—Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)

The primary focus of this inquiry is the individual child—in this instance children between the ages of 8 and 19. Among the eight passions of inquiry outlined by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) in *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn through Practitioner Inquiry* the first is that of "helping an individual child." Creating curricula that benefits the unique qualities of the individual child is where we should begin when designing and implementing culturally responsive curricula like the art-based lesson plan presented here.

Students from all over the world, from various ethnic and racial communities, make up the student population of the schools in the United States. Each one of them brings to the classroom several unique characteristics: (1) a new perspective, (2) a different set of beliefs, customs, and values, (3) a special place, whether home or where they have lived, (4) different experiences or interests, (5) different learning abilities and talents, and (6) their favorite subject areas.

According to Tonya Huber (2002), it is crucial for teachers to understand "the lives of the students [since] it is part of the knowledge base necessary to develop culturally responsible teaching [to achieve] multicultural education" (p. 29). The necessity of understanding different cultures is a crucial element in curriculum design and implementation.

Teachers must welcome students with "constructive platforms for developing the

confidence and life skills needed to [help] acclimate [the] [student] both in and out of school" by promoting cultural awareness, appreciation, and sensitivity in the classroom (Wellman & Bey, 2015, p. 36)

This raises two important questions for inquiry: How can an educator incorporate all of these factors in the curriculum? How is it possible to implement multicultural experiences to enrich each individual student while serving a whole classroom of students at the same time?

Creative Writing and Art

Authentic teaching involves creative curricula that focus on the engagement of students. Creative writing and art are both empowering tools that meet the commonality of self-expression. Both are processes "in which students can find ways of expressing their perception of culture" through artistic representations or words, and which help students identify the influence of culture on their formation of personal identity (Kiratli & Eristi, 2011, p. 139).

In chapter two of the book *Writing to Change the World*, entitled "Know Thyself," Mary Pipher states that the first step in her goal to "experiment with identity" is to write a poem with every line starting with the phrase "I am from." As Pipher stresses, the primary focus of writing an "I Am From" poem is to explore the soul deeply and "trace a trail from the present to deepen into your past [pivotal events [that] shaped core values," including (1) influential friends and/or family members, (2) challenges, sacrifices, and memories from home, in school, or from special places, (3) particular foods, cultural customs, and holidays, and (4) quotes and sayings, all with the purpose of understanding where you come from (p. 35).

Views similar to Pipher's are held by visual artists such as Faith Ringgold (African American artist) who paints and expresses stories from her culture in mixed

media fabric quilts, Shirin Neshat (Iranian artist) who photographs and films contrasts between Islam and the West incorporating characteristics of femininity and masculinity, and Diego Rivera (Mexican artist), a muralist who painted his political views, Mexican customs, and history. Just like these artists, past and present, there are many more artists who come from different cultural backgrounds yet share a powerful commonality, and a powerful expression that takes the form of a visual "I Am From" poem.

Therefore, engaging in art-making can help students gain critical thinking skills, experience in meaning making, and develop dispositions toward learning. Creating and evaluating visual art has the power to help students:

... develop [a] creative relationship to art and heritage and understand their world. It has the power to be meaningful in a way that allows them to learn about their own culture, customs, and beliefs, since art consists of symbols that communicate ideas and represent elements and experiences as well as feelings. (Sova & Kemperl, 2012, p. 76)

Aspects of individuality and similarity are always present in each individual and are reflections of culture that can be expressed in creative written or artistic representation.

... [c]ultural changes play an important role in reflecting a particular culture. Although cultures have their roots in the past, they undergo considerable changes over the course of time. Artistic representation is similar to culture in this respect. In other words, artistic representation of individuals also changes and improves depending on cultural changes. (Kiratli & Eristi, 2012, p.144)

These cultural changes are reflected in the continuously shifting world in which we live, reminding us that:

... [c]ultural expression is essential to the development of creative skills, which can

Ilian Hernandez Juarez recently graduated with a Master of Arts degree in education from Texas A&M International University, Laredo, Texas.

be transferred to a variety of professional contexts. A solid understanding of one's own culture and a sense of identity can be the basis for an open attitude towards and respect for diversity of cultural expression. (Sova & Kemperl, 2012, p. 76)

For additional definitions of art education as an application to promote self-identity, cultural exploration, expression, awareness, and appreciation see Figure 1. Following are Mary Pipher's inspira-

tional poem, a lesson plan and related activities, and a template for students to use, all geared to help the individual child develop critical awareness, critical thinking, and identity definition.

Inspirational Poem

"I Am From"

By Mary Pipher

from *Writing to Change the World* (2006)

I am from Avis and Frank, Agnes and Fred, Glessie May and Mark.
 From the Ozark Mountains and the high plains of Eastern Colorado,
 From mountain snowmelt and lazy southern creeks filled with water moccasins.
 I am from oatmeal eaters, gizzard eaters, haggis and raccoon eaters.
 I'm from craziness, darkness, sensuality, and humor.
 From intense do-gooders struggling through ranch winters in the 1920s.
 I'm from "If you can't say anything nice about someone don't say anything" and "Pretty is as pretty does" and "Shit-mucklety brown" and "Damn it all to hell."
 I'm from no-dancing-or-drinking Methodists, but cards were okay except on Sunday,
 and from tent-meeting Holy Rollers,
 From farmers, soldiers, bootleggers, and teachers.
 I'm from Schwinn girl's bike, 1950 Mercury two-door, and West Side Story.
 I'm from coyotes, baby field mice, chlorinous swimming pools,
 Milky Way and harvest moon over Nebraska cornfields.
 I'm from muddy Platte and Republican,
 From cottonwood and mulberry, tumbleweed and switchgrass
 From Willa Cather, Walt Whitman, and Janis Joplin,
 My own sweet dance unfolding against a cast of women in aprons and barefoot men in overalls.

Figure 1

Definitions of Art Education as an Application to Promote Self-Identity, Cultural Exploration, Expression, Awareness, and Appreciation

Authors	Definitions	Personal Notes
Kiratli, D. & Eristi, S. D. (2012)	Students have the potential to independently interpret and express their own artistic representations by reflecting on their culture and to gain cultural awareness in their values and identity as well as the changes lived from past to present.	Implementation activities that focus on student independence to create an "I Am From" poem inspired by Mary Pipher, reflecting on their life and cultural background can raise awareness of their identity.
Sova, R. B. & Kemperl, M. (2012)	Curriculum must include cultural awareness since it is defined as "appreciation of the importance of the creative expression of ideas, experiences, and emotions."	Cultural expression is essential to the development of critical thinking, creative skills, appreciation, awareness, and understanding, which can be transferred to future professional contexts.
Wellman, S. & Bey, S.	The arts can provide refugee students, in fact all students, with "constructive platforms for developing confidence and life skills."	Both the teacher and the student become aware, experience, and embrace culture together.

Lesson Plan

Teacher: Ilian Hernandez

Subject: Art and Writing

Outcomes: Students will learn about the author Mary Pipher and her poem entitled “I Am From.” Students will think critically and reflect to write a self-identity poem inspired by “I Am From.” Students will learn the meaning behind a fingerprint and its relation to identity by engaging in a short discussion and explanation. Students will also create design of their poem in the form of a fingerprint to reflect their uniqueness by using mixed media paper, stickers, markers, colored pencils, and calligraphy pens.

Assessment: Individual and unique creation of creative poetry and artwork.

§117.302. Art, Level I (One Credit), Adopted 2013. (2C) Creative expression. The student communicates ideas through original artwork using a variety of media with appropriate skills. The student expresses thoughts and ideas creatively while challenging the imagination, fostering reflective thinking, and developing disciplined effort and progressive problem-solving skills. The student is expected to: (D) create original artwork to communicate thoughts, feelings, ideas, or impressions.

§110.31. English Language Arts and Reading, English I (13) Writing/Writing Process. Students use elements of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) to compose text. (A) plan a first draft by selecting the correct genre for conveying the intended meaning to multiple audiences, determining appropriate topics through a range of strategies (e.g., discussion, background reading, personal interests, interviews), and developing a thesis or controlling idea; (B) write a poem using a variety of poetic techniques (e.g., structural elements, figurative language) and a variety of poetic forms (e.g., sonnets, ballads); and (14) Writing/Literary Texts. Students write literary texts to express their ideas and feelings about real or imagined people, events, and ideas.

Materials: “I Am From” poem by Mary Pipher, “I Am From” poem template in both English and Spanish language, mixed media paper, pencils, markers, calligraphy ink pen, gel pens, colored pencils, and inkpad.

Teaching Procedure:

1. Motivation: Teacher motivates students by announcing its time to turn “on” to creativity mode.
2. Purpose: Today we will reflect about personal identity by asking the question: Who am I? Where do I come from? We will embark on the journey of exploring self-identity.
3. Instructional Steps:
 - I. Teacher will introduce motivation and purpose.
 - II. Teacher will introduce and explain the poem “I Am From” and author Mary Pipher as well as the content of the poem and will make a connection to the purpose of the lesson and activity.
 - III. Teacher will start a short discussion regarding the meaning behind fingerprints in connection with identity.
 - IV. Teacher will explain to students the creation of own I Am From poem: students can follow English or Spanish example template or individually brainstorm different ideas that can be incorporated into their poem.
 - V. Teacher will monitor students while they work, guide, help in corrections and assist them in any need.
 - VI. Teacher will explain finger print drawing for Poem, students will print own fingerprints in a separate post-it paper, and see an example to create own fingerprint poem.
 - VII. Teacher will provide materials, monitor, guide, and provide feedback to students.
 - VIII. Teacher will encourage respect at all times and engage students in an oral presentation of their I Am From poem.

Identity Exploration Method

Eighteen students from ages 8 to 19 at Bethany House/*La Luz de Esperanza* were exposed and learned about Mary Pipher’s “I Am From” poem with the purpose of inviting them to think critically and creatively on exploring their identity and culture in the creation of their own written poetic work. Students were also assisted by a sample template inspired by the content of the original “I Am From.” The sample was simplified to an appropriate age level and translated into both English and Spanish as an optional guide to create their poem. The sample sheet also asked the students to reflect on special places, quotes, memories, smells, objects, experiences, acts of pride, and dreams for the future to remember and cherish past influential and special memories.

Students also learned about the meaning behind fingerprints and how these are used as a form of identity since everyone has a unique pattern of swirls in their fingertips. The objective of learning about fingerprints lead to the application of unique artistic representation and expression of each individual student, since they portrayed their written “I Am From” poem in the form of a fingerprint using typography and illustrative elements of their choice. For protection of privacy, students did not include names or specific information that could reveal their identity.

Experiences, expressions, and observations were collected as a form of data collection and reflection.

Sample Template for Students

“I Am From” *sample template (English language; same template also provided in Spanish)*

“I Am From” by Mary Pipher is a written journey in search of past, present and future identity and individual culture. Writing your own “I Am From” poem will help you remember past memories!

As you write your poem, start with I am from and then include references and descriptions about:

- ◆ A specific or memorable place, details about that place.
- ◆ Favorite weather
- ◆ Your personality, describe how you are.
- ◆ Memories, a special birthday or occasion.
- ◆ Special foods, meals, desserts, traditional foods, or candy.
- ◆ Song lyrics, songs that family members sing.
- ◆ Smells or tastes.
- ◆ Stories, poem verses, quotes.
- ◆ Words, sayings, or phrases repeated often with your friends or family.
- ◆ Household items or toys.
- ◆ Something someone said to you that made you feel special.
- ◆ Traditions and customs with family and friends.
- ◆ Favorite color.
- ◆ Favorite hobbies, sports, school subjects.
- ◆ Dreams, feelings, values, experiences.
- ◆ Hopes of who you want to be like in your future.
- ◆ Pets.

“I Am From” *sample questions:*

- I am from _____ (nationality, country, city)
- I am from _____ (Describe home, a special place or room)
- I am from _____ (Memory, special moment or occasion)
- I am from _____ (Describe personality)
- I am from _____ (Holiday or tradition with family and friends)
- I am from _____ and _____ and _____ (Foods)
- I am from _____ and _____ and _____ (Favorite toy or hobbies and color)
- From _____ (Things you enjoy doing)
- From _____ (Favorite smell, flowers, plant, weather)
- I am from _____ and _____ (Family quotes or sayings)
- I am from _____ (Experiences)
- I am from _____ and _____ and _____ (Favorite sports, subjects, characters)
- From _____ (Something that makes you laugh)
- I am from _____ (Lyrics to a song or inspirational quote)
- From _____ (Feelings) and _____ (Something you are proud of)
- I am from _____ (Talent or something unique about yourself)
- I am from _____ (pets) from _____ (Things you like)
- I am from _____ (Story, books, quotes)
- I am from _____ (Something that someone said to you that made you feel special)
- From _____ (A dream, something you want to accomplish)
- And _____ (Hopes for the future, who you want to be when you become older)

