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“How Do I Teach With Hope?": Enacting Poetry Reading and Writing as a Form Of Critical Hope In Classroom Spaces

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Abstract: In this article, we explore how the reading and writing of poetry can be a form of critical hope within secondary English teacher education courses, and across our experiences as English teachers. We begin by discussing a particular moment from our secondary English teacher education course, where one of our teacher interns prompted us to respond thoughtfully about the ways we have enacted critical hope by asking, “How do I teach with hope?” From this moment, we share five vignettes of how as former teachers and current teacher educators, we each read and taught with poetry and the ways these moments evoked possibilities for how we might trace the contours of critical hope through a deeper engagement of the relational and poetic within teaching.

Keywords: critical hope; poetry; poetic resonance; relationality; teacher education



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Introduction¹

We recall an instructor meeting in a small conference room on an August Thursday afternoon. We came together, coffee in hand, to plan the class, *Reflection and Inquiry in Secondary English Teaching Practices*, and we voiced the felt distance between ourselves as teacher educators and our former secondary classroom spaces. Within this sensed moment, we carried the residues of past teaching experiences — the ways we all loved and missed and learned from and with youth. We each recalled how the reading, writing, and teaching of poetry evoked possibilities for how we might trace the contours of critical hope through a deeper engagement of the relational and poetic within teaching. We continued to reflect on these relational, poetic, and critical moments in our learning and teaching with preservice English teachers.

We noted how teaching and learning as a form of critical hope necessitated that we build upon youths'

and communities' already present strengths. This idea was manifest across each other's dispositions and through the demanding nature of a teaching internship year. It became particularly salient one Friday in October, when we invited a guest presenter who shared ideas for critical literacies and language pedagogies in ELA classrooms. Brayden² was a teaching intern grappling with how he might teach in ways that humanize his students in a schooling system that too often promotes the opposite (Paris & Winn, 2013). He sighed, moved to speak, then offered a question to the class: "How do I teach with hope?"

In this reflection we recall and complicate our own experiences as teacher educators in this particular course and as former high school English teachers who attempted ways of engaging critical hope through reading, listening to, and writing poetry. We remain cautious of perspectives of critical hope as prescriptive pedagogy. Yet through and with these experiences, we wondered how poetry might render the relational more visible through the

¹ We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that

correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

² All names used in this essay article are pseudonyms.

engagement of critical hope in English teacher education and secondary ELA classrooms. We consider how critical hope may involve centering joys and desires of youth and their communities.

We now share five vignettes that open possibilities for ways in which educators may extend meanings of the interplay of poetic resonance and relationality. We see these moves as underscoring how we each read and taught with poetry as forms of critical hope.

Teacher Educators: Alecia, Mary, Renee, and Vaughn

Five minutes from now we will end the first class. We will have shared the readings for next Friday, and reminders of assignments to complete across the week. We will have asked the students and teacher interns, who, as soon as September, will lead their own English classrooms, to put away their books and pens.

Laptops click shut across the room, along with someone's hurried, whispered ending to the story about her third period to her tablemate. We dim the lights, and Mary recalls noticing the sunlight through the branches of that oak tree, directly across a hall and outside our classroom, landing nearby Kylie's well-read copy of *Into the Wild*, the book that last year, her undergraduate senior year, she used to write a unit comprised of lesson plans she hoped to teach with students one day.

Everyone, now, is seated, and still.

Alecia moves to the front of the room with a paper pulled from her notebook. We are quiet, and there. Alecia begins reading a poem she wrote for the class:

I never want to disparage belief, I never
want you to see classrooms as only
walls, barricaded and bounded
in the rhetoric of what someone else
asserted as knowledge.

See, I am still defining all that is
and could be. You taught me that.
You taught me the shape of meaning,
what I mean is that you should be
fearless. And continue.³

We read this poem with beginning teachers who together had attended as peers, colleagues, and friends the two secondary English methods classes we had instructed across the previous Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 semesters.

Now, as teacher interns, each had spent their first weeks of this Fall 2018 semester learning with mentor teachers, in middle or high school English classes in school districts close by a college town, or further away, 75 miles southeast, in a large city where more than 50,000 youth attend its public schools. On Fridays, teacher interns returned to this university classroom on the familiar campus from which they had just graduated in May. Poetry reading became a tradition: We ended our class here. Sitting with a poem, consumed by the moment it elicited, so that our last words were or would become:

you might think was nothing, a random bit
caught in a web coming loose from the
window frame, in wind.⁴

or

As if an enlarged clip could be a piece of
sculpture

³ Beymer, A. (2018). Excerpted from "In the attempt." Poem in preparation.

⁴ Perillo, L. (2018). Say this. *Poetry*.

(And it could).⁵

As teacher educators, we attempted to put language to what unfolded, recognizing the varied perspectives present in the space, in the brief time where, together, we listened to the poetry. The poetic readings in some ways had been a teaching whim, a desire to invite poetry and poetic dispositions into teaching practice, an engaging with poems by reading and being with the poem as it came to us, as the words and pauses on the page (Beymer & Jarvie, 2020; Certo, Apol, Wibbens, & Hawkins, 2012). At first, performing the roles we do, as teacher educators, we chose the poems. As the semester continued, as we dimmed the lights, interns who would become teachers packed away their belongings; a reinvention to recognize our practice of poetry reading prompted a changing of routines.

The choosing of the poems and even the poems we decided not to read became its own quest as we moved further into the semester, and students sought out and read poems of their own, offering something that felt the way they felt in this moment while on their teaching path. We all awed at the resonance the poems held, at the nods and threaded overlap of our experiences. It seemed we each found a way into the poems, and through that recognition a way, an opening of possibilities toward how we might understand each other. It became apparent and important to us that the choosing of the poem meant and said just as much as any other pedagogical decision we made; we showed ourselves through the poem we selected, poetic readings layering and resounding in and beyond our classroom.

“a reinvention to recognize our practice of poetry reading prompted a changing of routines.”

Alecia

I recall a moment of poetic resonance when students in a racially and linguistically diverse high school in High Point, North Carolina, were moved to share

We recall now we never formally talked about the poems, but we, with teacher interns, would say to each other outside class, “this line really got me” or “that one line is how I feel right now” —“yeahs” resounding in these moments of felt truths. We lived teaching, in this way, with Bingham (2011), who discusses two ideas we need to hold on to in education: the relational, and the poetic. In teaching with Duncan-Andrade’s (2009) considerations of critical hope, we extend new possibilities of Bingham’s focus on the relational and the poetic as vital and necessary response to Brayden’s question. We propose, through our encounters with poetry in our classroom, that it is the intertwining of the poetic, the communal and the moves toward critical hope that is the work we need to explore.

their poems with the wider school community. A week or so before, they had asked me if they could perform their poems outside the classroom. Now, the students and I, a White woman teacher, walked towards the crowded lunchroom. Marjorie, a young White woman, walked by me. She had been revising a poem for months; stories of herself and women across the world that she had threaded together about what it means to be a feminist today. Justin, a young Black man, walked beside us. He had written a love poem to a girl that became part love story, part moving on. Sam, almost in sprint mode, ran ahead of us; he had written a poem imagining what it might be like to be a soldier in a war, intertwining his personal life of being a young Black man and the war he fought everyday against anti-Blackness.

⁵ Sexton, A. (2001). *The Gold Key. Transformations*

When we walked into the two-roomed lunch area, the students already eating lunch didn't know it was a day that would belong to poetry. Marjorie stood at the side of the lunchroom; over the semester, she had been honing her voice, and now, it began to carry. She began performing her poem, and students crowded around her. Some students hunched near the floor, others crouched on tables. Swift resonances of snaps, nods and ah-has filtered throughout the room. The principal, the teachers on lunch duty, and I watched from the sides of the cafeteria. This, just the beginning, as these three youth, after this, took their poetry out into the world, onto a local radio show, to national poetry competitions, and to community organized events, believing in their stories and their poetic power. This particular moment, and the poetry writing and reading sessions that occurred afterward, reminds me of the spaces teacher educators and secondary English teachers offer to share stories, how poems became a platform for youth to resonate across the lunch area believing someone else somewhere felt that line, or this line and in doing so enacted an intertwining of critical hope and relationality. We are consumed by the moment of giving over, and how youth walked the hallways after whispering or calling out to the poems, "that one, it got me" and they moved past lockers, sweeping into classrooms, traveling with those poetic resonances.

I am drawn here to the ways an envisioning and offering of poetic resonances across designated schooling spaces and into communities is a carrying and creation of critical hope given from the youth I got to know and learn with. In this way, teachers and teacher educators may invite moments of critical hope into their learning and teaching through intending with their students, to trace the ideas and dreams that might seem unconventional and may move outside the confines of a classroom space. This willingness to move with youth

engenders the intertwining of relationality and poetic resonance towards critical hope.

Mary

I walked my ninth-grade students through a map of my childhood in a lesson introducing our poetry unit. This cartography became a space of possibility and inquiry, a mapping of ourselves as an act of critical hope through poetry (Butler, 2018). This mapping activity was itself a form of poetic expression, a fostering of critical hope through the act of seeing how students' stories and their spaces matter. A theorizing and rendering of critical hope involve a poetic prioritization of lived experiences, of noticing how students historicize the particularities of their own stories (Adichie, 2009), and how those memories hold poetic resonance. Moreover, this poetic activity allowed for the co-construction of knowledge by beginning with what students already know. I pointed toward the arrows on my own badly drawn map: here, laughter at my bike fall; there, fear where I held my seizing brother's head in my lap; there, joy at the swing set where my husband proposed.

I looked around our ELA classroom, a carpeted room with banging heaters on the first floor of a small Detroit school, and asked students to map a place of meaning. In considering how spaces make meaning for us, I think now of how these geographic locations may be themselves sites of inquiry for students. The class, like the wider student population of the school, consisted mainly of students of Color with White teachers like myself. Students began their own poetic charts of place and space, of hope, joy, and learning: a boy's neighbor who he initially thought was "strange" who then saved his little sister from running into a busy street; the look on a grandfather's face at his grandchild's first trip to their family's home in Mexico; the sidewalk that had witnessed the chalk dust and

jump rope beats of two sisters; the curb where two friends shared spicy hot Cheetos and debated who was better: Steph or LeBron; the oil-stained driveway where a child and his mother worked on their family cars.

Students used these maps to begin first lines of poems and revisited them throughout the year to build more poems. Some students chose to organize their images together as a collective map of their city, Detroit, on our classroom wall; this new map offered a hopeful and storied view of a community that is too often seen in deficit. Their map represented critical hope, a collective curating through youths' already storied selves in poetry.

Renee

As a Black woman educator, I think back to teaching in a predominantly Black high school. As the only ELA teacher at a school with a purposefully small student enrollment, I saw poetry as a form of critical hope. Poetry, as contextualized through critical hope, centered the joys and vulnerabilities in students' lived experiences, while decentering Eurocentric ways of knowing. As critical hope encouraged emerging poets toward rendering their authentic selves, educators and students in response affirmed each poet. I began ninth-grade English with a poetry unit, paralleling the course curriculum with the expectancy of the new school year. I designed the unit to culminate with a performance of their poems as a place to invite community. Poetry became a platform for students to share what they bring with them. This curricular move coincided with the excitement overheard in returning students' lunchroom chatter, as they anticipated getting to know the incoming ninth graders. Across the weeks,

“Poetry, as contextualized through critical hope, centered the joys and vulnerabilities in students' lived experiences, while decentering Eurocentric ways of knowing.”

days, and moments building up to their presentation, ninth graders came to me expressing apprehension.

“Ms. Wilmot, I'm gonna be sick during your class.”

“Ms. Wilmot, I'm not coming to school.”

These feelings of nervousness were due to the possibility of students having their whole selves on display for peers and teachers to reject or uplift. A scary and beautiful proposition for students, to share of themselves with the school community and feel supported. The poetry performance became a rite of passage through which ninth graders

introduced themselves to the school: peers across grade levels, and teachers came to know poets through the renderings of vulnerability, joy, and hope in their poems. During those moments — poetry performances in the school auditorium — peers became friends and teachers welcomed poets into community.

Vaughn

I wrote with youth with whom I taught and learned in the third-floor classroom at City Public, the performing-and-visual arts high school housed in the L-shaped building originally constructed in 1957, across a city block and under the expressway, the 11th busiest thoroughfare in the US. I taught with my lived experiences as a Black man, and encouraged students to bring forth interests and experiences in their lives. This modeling of writing as a possibility toward critical hope invited a sharing of narratives.

I greeted students — all youth of color — at the classroom door. They retrieved composition

notebooks from shelves beneath the windowsill, then moved into something familiar: We started each class journaling in conversation with a prompt I had written on the board. Individual and collective response urged forward a recalling and sharing of lived experiences as a rendering of critical hope. This day, the prompt was: “I remember the day when”

About 10 minutes passed, and I next asked students to compose list poems by selecting and writing out words, phrases, or sentences from their journal writing, and beginning each line with “I remember.” I then shared my own list poem:

I remember driving to Grandmom and Grandpop’s house.

I remember riding in the backseat along busy Route 130; pressing against the window to see college crew teams dressed in maroon noiselessly slipping narrow boats down the Schuylkill River. We know we’re close.

There is Mom’s old high school.

I remember turning left, then right on Passaic, another left on Elder Avenue, such a fitting name.

I remember Grandpop pulling those striped-colored lawn chairs from the basement, and we sat under the canopy of that great tree in the backyard, and played croquet, game after game, knocking red, yellow, and green balls through narrow wickets.

I remember, later, Grandpop yells, “Time to eat,” and we sprinted up the back-porch steps, into the kitchen; a family nourished by Philly soul.

I wonder now, with preservice teachers, how writing and sharing in the English classroom as varied

renderings of critical hope may purposefully extend into the familiar routines of writing our lives beyond school.

Teaching with Hope through Poetry

We, the four authors, continue to revisit Brayden’s question, “How do we teach with hope?” Our vignettes show teaching with poetry as a form of Duncan-Andrade’s (2009) theorizing of critical hope. Critical hope surfaced through the reading of poetry at the end of our secondary English education course; a teacher offering space for students to call upon topics and moments of importance in their own lives when writing and sharing poetry with the wider school community (Alecia); a teacher creating pedagogical spaces to reject popularized deficit views of students’ communities (Mary); students rendering joy and vulnerability in their poetry (Renee); and a teacher sharing his lived experiences as he wrote with youth (Vaughn). We see these poetic moments as opportunities to bring forth each of our four experiences so that they could serve as the basis for the ways we enacted pedagogical modes of community and visions of critical hope together as instructors in this teacher education course.

Brayden’s question, urgent and unanticipated, prompted his colleagues — nascent teachers — to look at one another around the semicircle of long tables and chairs, nodding in agreement. We kept and keep coming back to, Brayden’s question. Our students ask it over and again in a myriad of ways. With our teacher interns we tussled as instructors with what it may mean to deconstruct systems of oppression while simultaneously encouraging, with our students, an emboldening of what may be meant by the hope they bring to our classrooms. We asked one another, as teacher educators who were and continue to consider ourselves in some ways secondary English teachers, how, we must also, in

this educational moment, continue on and invite hope.

We invited our students, the very next time we met, to read and engage in conversation with Duncan-Andrade's (2009) theorizing of critical hope. We spent time with the notion of Socratic hope, in how Duncan-Andrade compels teachers and youth "to painfully examine our lives and our actions within an unjust society and to share the sensibility that pain may pave the path to justice" (p. 187-188). In returning to how we shared poems at the end of each class, we find that this poetry reading required a kind of introspection; a sitting with instead of a turning away.

Sharing poetry at the end of class became an associative endeavor, situated as an intertwining of pieces of ourselves and our teacher interns and the many ways we were making sense of this world. As Duncan-Andrade (2009) asserts, material hope asks teachers to consider ways our students can grow when given the resources to make their own decisions inside and outside the class. Poetry was a place to find our expression of the complicated and ineffable moments of being human. If anything, we didn't want to forget the humanity of teaching. At the root we wanted to give our teacher-interns ways to invite their humanity and their students' humanity into the classroom.

We hadn't recognized all the ways poetry had

permeated our felt experiences and teaching dispositions at the time, in those moments, on those Fridays, but we began to see how thinking with poetry or thinking through poetry became an act of languaging our experiences (Bingham, 2011). We recall one Friday toward the middle of the semester, we began class with a T. S. Eliot (1921) passage in which he noted the ways poets "steal" in order to

create "a whole of feeling which is unique," and "utterly different" (p. 114). When a teacher intern read this passage aloud, we asked the class to consider what it might mean to substitute "teacher" for "poet." Where might the "whole of feeling which is unique" come into play with teaching and learning with critical hope? How might this consideration of poetry through the lens of critical hope and community move toward a more humanizing dispositional stance? We see this moment as possibly inviting a shift where we began to think of ourselves as hopeful, "whole feeling," as curators, as "poets" in our work.

In this moment and the many after, the poetic dispositions manifested into the relational work that is teaching through the reading of the poems, through the fragments of resonance we gathered from each other's poems. And so the last day of class of the first semester, we did what we had always done, and ended on a poem: "Tell me to stop reaching/and I'll show you a skyline of darkened/trees — not one turned to the ground."⁶

⁶ Beymer, A. (2018). This distance. Poem in preparation.

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