As he introduced their new unit, Mr. Coppola directed his seventh-grade students’ attention to a statement he had composed with a colleague and written on the whiteboard earlier that morning: “Poetry reveals a lived life through a colored lens.” His students had just finished watching the documentary Louder than a Bomb (Siskel & Jacobs, 2011), which chronicles the experiences of high-school spoken-word poets in Chicago—the city that he and his students call home. The students’ reactions to this video had been overwhelmingly emotional, with a few crying openly as they listened to young poets use voice, rhythm, and rhyme to chronicle their experiences in the city. Mr. Coppola continued, stating, “... each [poet’s] perspective is colored by [his or her] lived experience ... but some people don’t give you credit for your lived experiences. How is your life colored through your experience? How can poetry be a mechanism to share and explore those details?”

With these words, Mr. Coppola began a nine-week engagement with culture and poetry. Through reading, writing, and performing poems ranging from sonnets to spoken word, Mr. Coppola’s students examined, celebrated, and even critiqued their cultural affiliations. However, this is not a story of students celebrating static notions of their cultural heritages. This is not a story of poetry written about cultural heroes and holidays, though they did figure into students’ writing in ways that were both playful and subversive. Rather, this is a story of students’ exploration of a wide range of cultural affiliations through poetry. We believe that Mr. Coppola’s unit resonates with a theoretical framework for teaching and learning known as “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (Paris, 2012). This approach, which empowers teachers to foster and support students’ cultural knowledge, also encourages them to engage with language and culture “... in both the traditional and evolving ways they are lived and used by contemporary young people” (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

In this article, we document Mr. Coppola’s poetry unit, which applied the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy to the literacy classroom. Through this examination, we aim to contribute to a broad field of equity-oriented literacy pedagogies—approaches to teaching and learning that value and support the cultural, linguistic, and literate resources of all students. The following research questions guide our presentation of the data and data analysis:

1. How did Mr. Coppola’s seventh-grade students use poetry to explore and express the fluid and hybrid natures of their cultural affiliations?

2. What teaching moves did Mr. Coppola make to support cultural pluralism across his poetry unit?

By sharing the stories of three students—Isaac, Jess, and Alex [all student and school names are pseudonyms]—we shed light on the diverse ways that they explored their own cultures and began to better understand the lived experiences of their peers through poetry. We conclude with recommendations for teachers interested in taking up the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy in English language arts instruction.
Culturally sustaining pedagogy builds on existing asset-based approaches to teaching and learning, such as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In fact, Paris (2012) positions the approach as an extension of culturally relevant pedagogy for teachers in the 21st century. In Ladson-Billings’s (1995) original framing of culturally relevant pedagogy, she encouraged teachers to make schooling more reflective of students’ home and heritage cultural practices. Additionally, she urged them to foreground three key tenets: “academic success,” “cultural competence,” and “sociopolitical consciousness” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). By integrating these tenets into their instruction, many teachers of culturally relevant pedagogy have encouraged students to engage in rigorous academic activities, to think deeply about their own and others’ cultural backgrounds, and to examine their communities through a critical lens. Ladson-Billings (2014) has acknowledged, however, that her theory has been misappropriated in reductive ways over the years, reflecting that, “The idea that adding some books about people of color, having a classroom Kwanzaa celebration, or posting ‘diverse’ images makes one ‘culturally relevant’ seems to be what the pedagogy has been reduced to” (p. 82).

In response, Paris (2012) proposed culturally sustaining pedagogy, which aims to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 93). This shift in terminology, Paris (2012) argues, moves the focus of schooling beyond relevance to students’ cultures and toward sustenance of their cultural, linguistic, and literate practices. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, which Ladson-Billings (2014) terms “culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0” (p. 74), emphasizes her original tenet of “sociopolitical consciousness,” encouraging teachers and students to approach the work of education through a critical lens. This approach, then, extends culturally relevant pedagogy by moving beyond acknowledgment of students’ cultures and toward a more pluralistic and critical approach to schooling.

Paris and Alim (2014) suggest that two tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy include a “… focus on the plural and evolving nature of youth identity and cultural practices” and a “… commitment to embracing youth culture’s counterhegemonic potential” (p. 85). This article foregrounds their first tenet, documenting how cultural plurality is fostered in a poetry unit in an urban middle school literacy classroom.
linguistic practices are sure to become more fluid and hybrid than ever before.

**Poetry as a Form of Culturally Sustaining Literacy Instruction**

A growing community of scholars is examining how culturally sustaining pedagogy might be enacted in schools (e.g., McCarty & Lee, 2014). We contribute to this conversation by examining culturally sustaining pedagogy enacted in a literacy classroom. We see poetry as a useful entry point to culturally sustaining literacy pedagogy because of the way the genre invites readers and writers to bring their backgrounds, perspectives, and languages to the tasks of interpretation and composition (Fiore, 2015). In addition, because of its linguistic and structural flexibility, poetry encourages alternative ways of communicating and offers students the opportunity to share stories in their own voices. Ultimately, reading and writing poetry privileges alternative interpretations and perspectives, which may be informed by students’ cultural affiliations. For example, Mr. Coppola’s students wrote and discussed poems that explored their affiliations with a wide range of cultural groups—from formal religious cultures to local and informal youth cultures. In this unit, culture was intentionally positioned as fluid and hybrid, resonating with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Within the genre of poetry, we focus on spoken word, which was a highlighted expressive form in our focal classroom. Spaces for youth spoken-word poetry have grown in number and visibility since the 1990s (Weinstein & West, 2012). Many of these spaces have existed outside of traditional schools (Biggs-El, 2012; Fisher, 2005), but teachers have increasingly brought spoken-word poetry into the classroom. Fisher (2005) positions spoken-word poetry as a cultural practice rather than a teaching strategy or tool, meaning that it is an oral art tradition with roots in African American culture in the United States (e.g., the Harlem Renaissance; blues; spiritual and hip hop music; and the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement). By welcoming a poetic form with roots in nondominant communities and elevating it alongside canonical texts, Mr. Coppola’s poetry unit supported alternative ways of communicating and promoted cultural pluralism—hallmarks of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

**Methodology and Methods**

**Context, Participants, and Curriculum**

Mr. Coppola, a 7th-grade English teacher and Ph.D. candidate in Education, is a White male and 12-year teaching veteran. City Center School (CCS) is located in a gentrifying neighborhood of Chicago. According to Illinois Board of Education records, the school population identifies as Black (44.3%), White (27.3%), Asian (11.0%), Hispanic (10.1%), American Indian (0.3%), two or more races (5.2%), and Pacific Islander (1.8%), with 36.2% of its students eligible for free/reduced lunch. We spent time with Mr. Coppola’s gifted class of 29 students, whose ethnic and racial breakdown reflected the diversity of CCS’s population.

> Because of its linguistic and structural flexibility, poetry encourages alternative ways of communicating and offers students the opportunity to share stories in their own voices.

Mr. Coppola designed a poetry unit that emphasized reading, composition, and performance. Using the documentary *Louder than a Bomb (LTAB)* (Siskel & Jacobs, 2011) as an anchor text, his students examined the featured youth poets’ compositions through close reading, annotation, and discussion. Additionally, his students completed reading and writing modules (adapted from Coval, n.d.) organized around the exploration of culture and/or identity.

The first module, titled “A Place Called Home,” began with an analysis of *LTAB* poet Adam Gottlieb’s “Maxwell Street,” a spoken-word poem that examines a changing Chicago neighborhood located near CCS. In this module, the students also analyzed the canonical poem “Chicago” by
Carl Sandburg (1916/2007, pp. 3–4) to approach the concept of “home” from a historical perspective. Writing workshops associated with the module encouraged students to write about aspects of their own homes, incorporating rich description and poetic devices.

The second module, titled “Poem as Portrait,” drew on *LTAB* poet Nova Venerable’s “Cody,” a composition about her brother’s struggle with Fragile X Syndrome. The students also read canonical poems that painted portraits of people or things, including “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams (1923/1970, p. 78) and several odes written by Pablo Neruda. Students composed their own portrait poems about important people or things in their lives.

As the unit went on, Mr. Coppola created a classroom blog for students to share their poems and provide feedback. Students continued exploring poetic forms (e.g., sonnet, tanka, ghazal) across a number of languages and cultures as they moved toward the unit’s consequential task: the composition and performance of a spoken-word piece reflecting aspects of the students’ identities and/or cultures. Several open-ended sessions were provided for students to draft their spoken-word poems and/or receive feedback. Students took up these spaces for composing in a variety of ways. For example, Isaac worked on his poem independently in iterative cycles, while Jess chose to participate in a writing conference with Mr. Coppola and incorporate his feedback. Alex shared her poem with peers as well as her parents, and drew on their suggestions in her revisions. These spaces for engagement in the writing process were intentionally unstructured by Mr. Coppola to empower students to navigate their own processes as writers.

These instructional moves reflected the multifaceted ways Mr. Coppola conceptualized culture in his classroom, which he defined on the first day of the unit as “...not only ethnicity, but your interests, affiliations, things that make you feel like you belong.” Mr. Coppola utilized varied texts to provoke discussion about history and place, family and personal identity, and language. The composition and performance of students’ final spoken-word pieces afforded them the opportunity to speak for themselves about their cultures in ways that went beyond their ethnicity or appearance.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

We (Emily, Andrea, and Rebecca) observed Mr. Coppola’s classroom across nine weeks, for a total of 27 one- to two-hour sessions. Most of our observation time was spent silently writing fieldnotes, audio-recording lessons, and collecting artifacts that included student writing, worksheets, and rubrics. However, we were invited to share appreciative feedback on student work, either verbally or on the class blog. Rebecca also attended an out-of-school *LTAB* poetry performance with Mr. Coppola and some of the students. We interviewed Mr. Coppola before, during, and after the unit. In his first semi-structured interview, we asked Mr. Coppola about his beliefs and practices as a literacy teacher (e.g., “How do you teach and talk about Standard English versus home languages and dialects?”). In later semi-structured interviews, we discussed his students’ experiences of the unit and his reflections on their learning (e.g., “What have been some ‘ah-ha’ moments for students in this unit?”).

At the end of the unit, all 29 students in the classroom participated in a survey created jointly by the four authors, which included questions about their experiences exploring culture and receiving feedback on writing. In addition, we interviewed 16 students to learn more about their writing processes and to hear their reflections on reading and writing poetry in the unit. We chose students for interviews who a) we hoped to probe further regarding their engagements with cultures; b) were nominated by peers in the end-of-unit survey as being inspirational or surprising; and/or c) had availability in their schedules. We utilized a semi-structured protocol and conducted the interviews one-on-one, usually with the researcher who had been present on the day that student had performed his or her spoken-word poem. All interviews were transcribed.

Throughout the data collection process, we met regularly to write and discuss analytic memos focused on the construction of themes about Mr. Coppola’s pedagogical practices that seemed...
Findings

In this section, we illustrate ways that Mr. Coppola’s students engaged with fluid and hybrid notions of culture by looking closely at the experiences of Isaac, Jess, and Alex across the poetry unit. These students explored their affiliations with cultural groups by engaging in linguistic play, invoking an insider perspective, and leveraging elements of youth literate culture.

Isaac: Exploring Ethnic and Religious Culture through Linguistic Play

In 7th grade, Isaac had found that Judaism was becoming an increasingly important part of his life. He was preparing for his Bar Mitzvah, a Jewish coming-of-age ritual. He had also recently attended a Jewish summer camp and occasionally missed school to observe Jewish holidays. Even his choice of the pseudonym “Isaac,” a biblical name, reflected his deep engagement with his religion. However, despite Judaism’s importance in his life outside of school, Isaac rarely felt comfortable discussing his religion with his peers at CCS. In fact, Isaac was keenly aware of his status as a religious minority, stating in an interview, “I think a lot of people, like in my class, do not know anything about Judaism.”

Throughout the course of the unit, however, Isaac recognized that he could use poetry to explore Judaism and teach his peers about its importance in his life. Most strikingly, in several of his poems, Isaac explored Jewish culture as he played with linguistic structures, translation, and transliteration across English, Hebrew, and Yiddish. At the beginning of the unit, this linguistic play was subtle and rarely addressed explicitly; as the unit went on, however, he intentionally and explicitly integrated multiple languages in his poems.

We chose to share the stories of Isaac, Jess, and Alex because their work over the course of the unit exemplified various ways that the class explored issues of culture through poetry, and because of their potential to extend our understandings of how culturally sustaining pedagogy might be enacted in literacy classrooms. Isaac, a White male, started the unit feeling reserved about his Jewish faith, but through poetry found a voice to share and teach about his ethnic and religious culture. Jess, a female student of Indian heritage, used poetry as a means to engage critically as an insider in her local culture. Alex, an African American female student, used spoken word to share her literate expertise and find her place within the classroom community. Prior to the publication of this article, Mr. Coppola met with Isaac, Jess, and Alex to conduct member checks and ensure that their expressions of identity and culture were accurately represented in our writing.
replacing them with alternative letters. When asked about why he removed vowels from the piece, Isaac told his peers, “Just like it’s hard to get up . . . without the stairs, it’s hard to read without vowels.” However, Isaac’s removal of vowels resonates with the way Hebrew is often written—without diacritical vowel markings. In this example, then, his linguistic play was subtle and only apparent to cultural insiders.

Isaac’s language play became more intentional and focused on teaching about Judaism as the unit went on. In fact, when he performed his spoken-word poem, Isaac integrated Hebrew, Yiddish, and English through translation and transliteration. As he performed, his linguistic play also became embodied; he clothed himself in attire for prayer and supported his peers’ understanding of Hebrew words with props and demonstrations.

On the day of his spoken-word performance, Isaac stepped up to the front of the classroom and placed a striped kippah, or Jewish skullcap, on his head. He unfolded his poem, titled “Judaism and ME!!” and began to read (see Fig. 1).

In his poem, Isaac incorporated transliterated Hebrew and Yiddish words (footnote numbers apply to the poem). For example, he wrote:

Every week I practice
Practice Torah
Haftarah5
Davening6

It’s a lot of work.

His references to “Torah” and “Haftarah” are transliterated versions of תורה and הפטרה, Hebrew words that connote two religious texts he would read at his bar mitzvah. He also incorporated the word “davening,” a hybrid, or “Yinglish” word that meshes Yiddish vocabulary with English structures (daven, which means “pray” in Yiddish, is blended with -ing, an inflected ending in English). Recognizing that his peers might not understand these words, Isaac added explanatory footnotes to his poem, which also played with languages themselves. For example, in his fifth footnote, Isaac wrote:

In this short footnote, Isaac integrated Hebrew writing in three different ways. First, he wrote “Haftarah” and הפטרה beside it, providing Hebrew characters alongside a transliterated word. Second, he translated an English word into its Hebrew form, writing "נביאים," which is transliterated as nevi'im, the Hebrew word for “prophets.” Third, Isaac wrote that the selection from the prophets is read on שבת morning.” In this instance, Isaac integrated the Hebrew word for “Sabbath” without providing a transliteration or translation. As he performed, Isaac addressed several of these untranslated words with embodied demonstrations and the use of props. For example, as he said the Hebrew word matzah, Isaac pulled a piece of unleavened bread typical of the Passover holiday out of his backpack and took a bite, continuing to read with crumbs in his mouth. Through these written footnotes and embodied demonstrations, he taught his peers about Jewish cultural traditions rooted in Hebrew words.

Isaac ended his poetry performance by stating, “This is my Jewish life, an improvisational piece of spoken-word poetry.” Isaac’s closing, in which he proudly acknowledges his “Jewish life” in language and dress, stands in contrast to the hesitancy he described at the beginning of the unit. In fact, in an interview following the unit, he stated, “I think now I feel a lot more comfortable talking about Judaism. Or now . . . I know more about my class, and I trust them more. I think they trust me more.”

It is important to note that in this unit, Isaac was encouraged to craft poetry that reflected the way that, as a member of Jewish ethnic and religious culture, he shifts fluidly between three languages, occasionally hybridizing them, as well. This act of linguistic hybridity afforded Isaac the opportunity to engage with his cultures in authentic—and even playful—ways.

Jess: Critiquing Local Culture by Invoking an Insider Perspective

Jess, an Indian student, regularly sought out opportunities to educate her peers about her ethnic cultural heritage. Throughout this unit, however, Jess engaged with and critiqued her local culture by invoking her position as an insider in the city of
Figure 1. Isaac’s spoken-word poem

Some of you
As my friends
Or at least
Not my enemies
Will notice that on
Some days the sun comes up and I am not
At school.
The more observant
or perhaps the
More friendly to me
May know
That on that day
It is a holy day.
I cannot be at school
Because I am at shul
davening and
Laughing
Eating special
Not always delicious foods.
Like on pesach.
Matzah is like eating
really really old stale bread
That was actually made in under 18 minutes.
We eat it anyway
And try not to gag
Sunday
Hebrew School
Early morning teachers
And students.
Who are not alive until
Noon
Discussing the intricacies
Of torah and mishna
And of people being covered in sheep.
They know I know
Their secret
But they trust me anyway.
We all eventually must have one
A bar mitzvah or a bat mitzvah
Which I’m sure you all know means
Son or daughter of the commandments
In a weird Aramaic and

The tiny words are for girls. I thought that I should put boys in large text because I am one. Hebrew is a gender specific language.

Aramaic is an archaic form of Hebrew that was the common language around 2000 years ago in ancient Israel. Aramaic was the language most people spoke, which is why many Jewish things are Aramaic such as the Kaddishites.

1 בר מצוה
2 The tiny words are for girls. I thought that I should put boys in large text because I am one. Hebrew is a gender specific language.
3 בכメール
4 Aramaic is an archaic form of Hebrew that was the common language around 2000 years ago in ancient Israel. Aramaic was the language most people spoke, which is why many Jewish things are Aramaic such as the Kaddishites.

Aramaic is an archaic form of Hebrew that was the common language around 2000 years ago in ancient Israel. Aramaic was the language most people spoke, which is why many Jewish things are Aramaic such as the Kaddishites.

5 Haftarah is a selection from the prophets read on Sabbath morning
6 Praying
7 Words of Torah to be spoken at my Bar Mitzvah, basically a speech
Chicago. Both in and out of school, Jess engaged with her local community and worked for positive change. She lobbied for gun safety, helped with food and toy drives, and packed backpacks with supplies for Chicago’s homeless population. Jess’s volunteerism and social activism deepened her community involvement and seemed to inform the critical perspective she took in her poetry. We witnessed this critical perspective in many ways throughout the unit; for example, she spoke as a Chicagoan during class discussions about poetry and even crafted her final spoken-word poem around Chicago’s history.

Jess’s status as a cultural insider in Chicago informed her analysis of poetry. For example, during the class’s discussion of the LTab poem “Maxwell Street,” Jess explained why she privileged an insider perspective in writing, saying, “I mean, someone from Maine could write about Chicago, but it’s going to come out sounding like this is a war zone.” In this instance, Jess used the term “war zone” to refer to Chicago’s violent representation in the media. However, she felt that an insider perspective allowed writers to create more complex and realistic portraits of the city.

Jess also used her insider perspective to connect Chicago’s past, present, and future as she critiqued the city and described her aspirations to improve it. While reading and discussing Sandburg’s “Chicago” (1916/2007, pp. 2–3), a poem from the turn of the twentieth century that initially positions the city as “wicked,” Jess integrated her knowledge of Chicago’s recent history into her interpretation. She argued, “Chicago has a history of getting what we want through protesting. In the 1968 Democratic Convention, we got our word out there protesting. . . . Somehow the violence has helped Chicago grow to be, I guess, a better city.” Here, Jess positioned herself as an insider by using first-person pronouns, such as “we” and “our,” even though she was not alive in 1968. She also recognized the complex nature of her city, commenting, “Yes, protesting might not be the best thing, but Chicago has a way of making protesting work to get these ideas out.” In this statement, Jess made space for multiple narratives about Chicago, acknowledging tensions in a dynamic city.

Jess’s historical knowledge of Chicago and identity as a cultural insider also served as content for writing poetry. In her spoken-word poem, she wove together past and present political issues to critique aspects of her city; specifically, she compared the 1968 Democratic Convention to the 2016 protest in Chicago over US presidential candidate Donald Trump’s visit to a local university campus. When describing how she chose this topic, Jess referenced a Chicago Tribune article she had read, saying:

[I] started finding that I was taking a side. . . . of a lot of these protesters. . . . I just really felt that when the Trump rally [happened], when everything happened with the protest in March, I just felt that I had to write [about] it.

Jess incorporated her knowledge of Chicago into a poem that linked the two historical events and looked toward the future (see Fig. 2).

The introductory stanzas of Jess’s poem draw connections among Chicago’s past, present, and future. She used poetry to critique her city’s history, taking on an agentive role as she asked, “So why can’t I be the one to cause change?” Jess’s engagement with this unit reflected the fluid nature of her cultural affiliations across time and place. As an insider in Chicago culture, she drew upon the city’s past, present, and future dexterously as she composed. She recognized that the city—like her own cultural affiliations—was not static, but changed constantly over time. Rather than merely acknowledging or celebrating her city, this unit allowed Jess to meaningfully employ her insider status as a Chicagoan to critique local culture.

Alex: Leveraging the Practices of Youth Literate Culture

Alex, an African American female and a newly enrolled student at CCS, drew on her experiences as a member of youth literate culture to find her place in the classroom community. Alex actively identified as a writer and engaged with a culture of teens that use writing for self-expression. For example, she wrote short horror stories, critiqued fan fiction, and had recently discovered spoken-word poetry after watching LTab on her own. At her previous
Figure 2. Jess’s spoken-word poem

1968

I know, I know, that growth is possible
That the world can change, and grow to be something new
That with the right leaders, and with the right people speaking out, anything can happen.
I want to be one of those people.

I aspire to learn, and change, and lead
I’d love to be a hero, like Perseus and Hercules
I long to complete my labors that include influencing people to grow, and laying the foundation of a new world.

Because unless people are willing to do something,
This world will stay the same
And history will repeat itself
1968 will come again.

We live in an endless cycle, that repeats,
Repeats,
Repeats,
It goes on, on, and on
And while people say that anybody can change the world,
And while I want to believe I can make a difference
A cycle like this is hard to break

But a cycle like this has been broken before
King did it, Anthony did it,
Hamilton, Washington,
I could even say Abbie Hoffman did
So why can’t I be the one to cause change?

August 1968, Chicago Illinois
A time, almost half a century ago
That seems to be repeating itself today

March, 2016, Chicago Illinois
A time, not so long ago
That can be a learning experience, if we just could see that.

Change really only needs a few things
The ability to see what’s wrong,
The drive to speak up about the problem,
And the determination to not give up, when things get hard.

So, if people are willing to let change happen,
Maybe 1968 will not repeat.

Let me paint a picture for you
August, 1968, Chicago Illinois
People stood up for what they believed in
They stood tall and proud, the way that they should
Protesting against the terrifying way the country was run
Going against war, and fighting for peace

March, 2016, Chicago Illinois
People standing up for what they believe in
They stand tall and proud, the way that they should
Protesting against the terrifying way the country may, someday, be run
They were going against war, and fighting for peace.

And both times, the police, the people who are supposed to be, the just law enforcement, the ones keeping us safe
They attacked brutally, causing damage to people’s bodies and spirits
The new 1984, the world is going insane
Those who should protect those who can’t protect themselves, aren’t doing that, in fact they are hurting others.

Attacking people, of all races, genders, sexualities, and professions
As if just because Chicago is so diverse
It’s okay, because half the people don’t seem to matter

March, 2016, Chicago Illinois
A time when people got together to fight against a potential leader of this country
That doesn’t understand that the discrimination against any one person or group
Is not acceptable

March, 2016, Chicago Illinois
A time when it was shown that after 48 long years, there was little change
That society is hot molten lava, that is refusing to move, and takes years to change.

March, 2016, Chicago Illinois
A time when society learned that there is still so much room to grow, and that we can’t stop now
That we left a puzzle half finished, and we need to see the final picture soon.

I know, I know, that growth is possible
That the world can change, and grow to be something new
That with the right leaders, and with the right people speaking out, anything can happen.
I want to be one of those people.

I aspire to learn, and change, and lead
I’d love to be a hero, like Perseus and Hercules
I long to complete my labors that include influencing people to grow, and laying the foundation of a new world.

Because unless people are willing to do something,
This world will stay the same
And history will repeat itself
1968 will come again.

We live in an endless cycle, that repeats,
Repeats,
Repeats,
It goes on, on, and on
And while people say that anybody can change the world,
And while I want to believe I can make a difference
A cycle like this is hard to break

But a cycle like this has been broken before
King did it, Anthony did it,
Hamilton, Washington,
I could even say Abbie Hoffman did
So why can’t I be the one to cause change?

August 1968, Chicago Illinois
A time, almost half a century ago
That seems to be repeating itself today

March, 2016, Chicago Illinois
A time, not so long ago
That can be a learning experience, if we just could see that.

Change really only needs a few things
The ability to see what’s wrong,
The drive to speak up about the problem,
And the determination to not give up, when things get hard.

So, if people are willing to let change happen,
Maybe 1968 will not repeat.
school, she had also won a poetry slam for a collaborative composition about suicide. While Alex initially described herself as an “outcast” at CCS, throughout the unit she leveraged her writerly identity and skills as a spoken-word poet as a form of social and cultural capital within the classroom, representing herself to her peers in new ways.

Alex most clearly shared her affiliations with youth literate culture as she delivered her spoken-word poem, titled “Stuck” (see Fig. 3).

Her poem described her late aunt’s battle with lung cancer and Alex’s emotional response as she processed her grief. One stanza read:

Four years they say you knocked at death’s door
That dark beast that turned your lungs black as ash
That dark beast that left a trach hanging from your neck
That dark beast that had you suffering—crying for God to take you now
That dark beast that took away my Gabrielle A.

Figure 3. Alex’s spoken-word poem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stuck</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Given to me in the year of 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You were my mother, my sister and my best friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Auntie G.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the day I was born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To November of 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You were my everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You listened to my hopes and dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The look of content on your face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you listened to the way teachers made my confidence sway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing myself talk about you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes me go back to the days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you waited for me after school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never keeping your cool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking through the house whispering, “Well back in my day . . .”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You were the brick house that couldn’t be moved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The life of the party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That no one could follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My love for you overflowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Until your grave sunk six feet low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With a headstone that stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.I.P. Gabrielle A. G.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body burned to ashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To never be scattered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cried in the night so no one would see me crack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like little kids break fortune cookies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never thought that I would see the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That Gabrielle A. would leave me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That day reality struck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like a lightning bolt striking a truck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was stuck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a place that I didn’t want to be anymore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuck in a place that seemed like hell without your smile</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stuck in a place for the damned</td>
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<td>Stuck in a place without you . . .</td>
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Here, Alex incorporated literary devices such as repetition, simile, and imagery—hallmarks of the poetic form. What was most striking, however, was the way that Alex commanded the performative traditions associated with spoken-word poetry. She artfully altered her inflection and added micropauses (short, unvoiced pauses for breath) to reflect a distinctly poetic style of speaking (see Fig. 4). In fact, many of her peers remarked that Alex’s performance was as emotionally powerful as those of the LTAB youth poets. Her artistry and expressive delivery of highly evocative subject matter embodied the spirit of the spoken-word poets captured in the documentary.

Alex’s facility with language and expertise in this poetic form became mechanisms for her to gain a stronger foothold within her peer community. At the conclusion of her spoken-word performance, multiple students in the classroom wept openly, prompting Mr. Coppola to call for a break. On the class blog, the students later expressed to Alex how her poem resonated with their own experiences and shared stories of grief and loss. When asked about her performance in an interview, Alex noticed the way that her role in the classroom seemed to have shifted. She said, “So once I opened [my eyes] and saw everyone crying, I was like, ‘Wait a minute . . . what’s happening?’ And that’s what really triggered, ‘This is real now!’”

Because he privileged nondominant literate forms like spoken word in this unit, Mr. Coppola opened up a space for Alex to draw upon the writing skills she had developed as a member of youth literate culture (Fisher, 2005) in the classroom. In fact, we argue that Alex’s skill and expertise as a poet helped her to claim a more central and significant role within the classroom community. As an outsider to the classroom culture, Alex had typically kept to the periphery of classroom activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, as she recognized the opportunity that the poetry unit presented to hybridize her private, writerly affiliations with the academic demands of the discipline, she engaged more fully. Winn (2016) argues that performance gives youth opportunities to (re)present themselves, transcending single storylines that school has boxed them into. Alex transcended the narrative of the

**Figure 4.** Alex performs her spoken-word poem, a tribute to her late aunt.
fluid and hybrid ways: 1) encourage linguistic play and hybridity; 2) help students position themselves as experts/insiders; and 3) privilege alternative forms of cultural capital in the genres students read, compose, and perform.

**Encourage Linguistic Play and Hybridity**

Mr. Coppola’s encouragement of language play allowed Isaac to explore cultural hybridity in structural, semantic, and embodied ways throughout the poetry unit. For example, rather than asking Isaac to change his poems that used alternative language structures (e.g., “Sq Mwch Drptnds Ppsn”), Mr. Coppola spoke to Isaac about the meaning behind his choices as a writer. He recognized that by playing with language in his writing, Isaac had engaged in rigorous linguistic work, making language choices that supported the meaning of his piece.

One takeaway for teachers might be to offer students “agency in their language choices” (see Dyson, 2006, p. 36). For example, teachers might notice and talk with students about their use of unconventional or seemingly “incorrect” language structures in their writing rather than rushing to correct them. This might also mean emphasizing student intentions over grammatical correctness when evaluating writing. Teachers might also hold up examples of linguistic play and nondominant language usage as models for writing (see Table 1). By showing students how published authors use agency in their language choices to help their readers better understand the cultural traditions embedded in their words—and/or by modeling such writing themselves—teachers can encourage their students to play and experiment with these practices in their own writing and language use.

**Help Students Position Themselves as Cultural Insiders**

Mr. Coppola intentionally leveraged his students’ wide-ranging cultural expertise to help them expand beyond singular considerations of ethnic heritage. For example, during class discussions of canonical texts like Sandburg’s (1916/2007, pp. 3–4) “Chicago,” Mr. Coppola encouraged Jess to draw on her activist background and historical understandings of her
Table 1. Mentor texts that showcase hybridity and/or nondominant language in poetry or prose

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community’s past, present, and future and to use these understandings to examine and critique local culture.

To apply this practice in the literacy classroom, teachers might consider asking older students about their roles as “insiders” and younger students about their roles as “experts” across a variety of cultural and linguistic contexts (e.g., asking students about what hobbies, interests, and language forms they are experts in, passionate about, or engaged with). Recognizing the fluid nature of these affiliations, teachers should acknowledge that students’ insider statuses may shift throughout the course of a school year as students develop new interests, friendships, or engagements inside or outside of school. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) and other subsequent researchers have named multiple strategies to learn about and incorporate students’ funds of knowledge into the school curriculum (e.g., interest surveys, linguistic autobiographies, community ethnographies). Teachers might also intentionally choose texts that provoke exploration of these cultures, identities, and languages, and support students to write about these interests. Finally, teachers can encourage students to take a critical lens to these cultural explorations.

**Privilege Alternative Forms of Cultural Capital**

When Mr. Coppola designed the spoken-word assignment, he encouraged students to draw on the performative practices of spoken-word poets like those in the *LTAB* documentary. Unlike some other genres in the literacy curriculum (e.g., five-paragraph essay writing), spoken-word poetry has roots in nondominant communities and has flourished outside of schools (Biggs-El, 2012; Fisher, 2005). By privileging forms of cultural and linguistic capital that are not typically valued in school’s “official” curriculum (Dyson, 2006), Mr. Coppola opened up space for Alex to shine in her new community.

Elementary teachers can create spaces like these in the “official” school curriculum where students might fluidly draw upon or hybridize alternative forms of cultural and linguistic capital from their “unofficial” literate worlds. For example, Dyson (1999) showcases how she spent a year learning about the popular culture interests of first graders (including learning about sports, video games, music, and television) in order to better understand their composing practices. Teachers can similarly spend time exploring students’ heritage and popular literate and linguistic practices in order to embed those ways of knowing and/or communicating more fully into the curriculum.

**Conclusion**

Mr. Coppola opened his poetry unit by stating, “Poetry reveals a lived life through a colored lens.” Throughout the course of the unit, his students examined their lives through multiple lenses that were shifting and often multicolored. In fact, by engaging with culturally sustaining pedagogy, Mr. Coppola helped his students explore hybrid and fluid notions of culture and encouraged them to see through the cultural lenses of their peers. In this era of narrowed literacy curricula and increased educational standardization (Dyson, 2006), we recognize the pressures teachers feel to help students develop
proficiency in the traditions and expectations of dominant culture’s literacy practices. However, we argue that a culturally sustaining approach to literacy instruction—and poetry, in particular—offers teachers the opportunity to support, as Paris (2012) puts it, “cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 94). The stories of Isaac, Jess, and Alex show us the power of poetry rooted in students’ cultural affiliations, and the way that it can help us see the world, ourselves, and each other through multiple lenses.

References


INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

In Crossing Boundaries through Bilingual, Spoken-Word Poetry, students write and perform bilingual poetry, exploring the theme of “crossing boundaries.” Boundaries can be those that divide countries, race, class, cultures, or even our own mental boundaries and prejudices. In order to scaffold the integration of different languages, three mini workshops with individual models are provided. The unit culminates in a poetry slam at school or in the community. As optional extensions, students may also publish an anthology of their poetry and choose to support a local nonprofit in a service-learning component.


In her poem “Nikki-Rosa,” Nikki Giovanni describes specific moments from her childhood. The images she recalls are more than biographical details; they are evidence to support her premise that growing up black doesn’t always mean growing up in hardship. Adapted from Carol Jago’s Nikki Giovanni in the Classroom, Childhood Remembrances: Life and Art Intersect in Nikki Giovanni’s “Nikki-Rosa” invites students to explore what Jago calls the place “where life and art intersect” by carefully reading and discussing Giovanni’s poem. They explore their own childhood memories using an interactive tool and then write about these memories, using Giovanni’s poem as a model.


When students make real-world connections between themselves and their community, they can participate in authentic communication activities based on issues that matter to them personally. In Connecting Past and Present: A Local Research Project, students research a decade in their school’s history, with small groups researching specific topics. Within each group, students take on specific roles, such as archivist, manager, techie, or researcher. Students become active archivists, gathering photos, artifacts, interviews, and stories for a museum exhibit that highlights one decade in their school’s history. The final project can be shared and displayed in your classroom, in the school auditorium, or in the library.

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