

Dreams of Possibilities: Linking Poetry to Our Lives

Ruth McKoy Lowery

Dreams

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

—Langston Hughes*

As an interim middle school teacher in a large urban school district, I was assigned to teach a dropout prevention language arts sixth grade class. The students were predominantly minority immigrants performing below grade level. Many were not excited at the prospect of doing “too much reading” and wanted to bargain about the types of books they could read, the main concern being the thickness of the books chosen. In an effort to engage them in the beauty of language, I integrated poetry in the language arts lessons. At first reluctant; their interests piqued when I emphasized the concise nature of poetic forms. Wow! They would not have to read long pages, they could read “poetry” and that was reading. They were exultant.

I began with a demonstration of how meaningful poems could be in our lives. First, I introduced them to Langston Hughes’ poem, “Dreams.” Before reading the poem, I asked the students about their dreams for life after middle and high school. We talked about what they hoped to do after graduation. What careers would they like to have? I then asked them to think about their dreams as I recited the poem. After reciting the poem, I asked them to respond to their feelings about the poem. We then shared in a classroom discussion. The students’ responses focused mainly on the jobs they would like to have after graduation. Most of the jobs were those that would make them rich so they could buy and do anything they wanted for the rest of their lives.

Using their personal connections to the poem, we created a “dream wall”. We placed Hughes’ poem in the middle of a bulletin board and then using 3x5 index cards and yarn, we created individual links to the poem. The students wrote their dreams for the future on the 3x5 cards. They were free to revisit the wall and update their dreams. For many, this was a meaningful exercise. They frequently referred to the “dream wall” as a memorable experience. I dared them to dream and to think beyond those dreams to making them possibilities for the future.

More recently, as a teacher educator, in my children’s and adolescent literature classes I continue to incorporate the poems of Langston Hughes in hopes of preparing pre-service teachers to teach diverse students. My dream is that they will go out and create effective educational environments that foster dreams of possibilities for all students they will teach, including those students considered at risk of school failure. In the remainder of this article I share pre-service teachers’ reflections to “Dreams” in one literature class. First, I begin with an overview of poetry in children’s lives. I then describe the setting and present how the pre-service teachers reflected on their dreams after listening to the poem.

Poetry in Children’s Lives

Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown define poetry as “the expression of ideas and feelings through a rhythmical composition of imaginative and beautiful words selected for their sonorous effects” (38). Poetry has the power to illuminate ordinary experiences in extraordinary ways (Hade and Murphy, 346). Readers of poetry quickly come to realize the picturesque ways in which they can express themselves while using a scarcity of words. They learn to recognize and value the beauty in words. Perfect (728) determines that poetry validates the human experience thus it helps us to understand ourselves.

Poetry is all around us and inside us. Teachers can orient their students to the beauty that lies within by providing them with a wide variety of poetic forms. Tompkins posits, “As students experiment with poetry, they learn that poetic language is vivid and powerful but concise, and they learn that poems can be arranged in different ways on a page” (50). Teachers can use the poetry to help their students create new experiences. They can empower their students to move beyond simply liking poetry to thinking more deeply about the poem’s meaning. As students read or hear poetry recited, they learn to reflect on poetry. This reflective process creates more meaningful personal experiences for them.

Although poetry has the power to generate wonderful experiences in its readers, historically it has been the most neglected genre utilized in schools’ curricula. Some teachers do not share poetry in their classrooms because they too had negative experiences in their early exposure to the genre. When I ask preservice teachers to reflect on poetry from their elementary to high school experiences, their responses are often prefaced by groans. Many vividly describe how they had

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to dissect or memorize different poems. Often, they remember the poems but not the poets' names. They have no positive connection with the beautiful words.

Strickland and Strickland (205) found that teachers today are increasingly more knowledgeable about literature and are willing to expose students to a plethora of literary experiences. These teachers are more willing to engage their students in poetry. Teachers are finding that students tend to develop a love for poetry when they are immersed in reading and listening to poems as pleasurable engagements. Sloan (53) admonishes that in order to create poetry lovers, teachers need to give students what they want. Consistently exposing students to an array of good poetry helps them to develop a sense for poetic forms and soon they are able to identify different types of poems on their own. They are able to create lasting connections with poetry.

Pre-service Teachers' Reflections on "Dreams"

The children's literature course focuses heavily on the different literary genres. The pre-service teachers are encouraged to read widely in all genres throughout the semester. My goal is to help them learn to read critically, analyze, and interpret literature from a wide variety of genres, topics, and themes. When we study poetry, I often encourage them to create poems from their own experiences using some of the forms we discuss in class. Often, to begin the poetic experience, I share with them from the Langston Hughes' collection of poems (4). Recreating the experience with my middle school students, I share the "Dreams" poem with the pre-service teachers.

I begin by placing a copy of the poem on an overhead. I ask the pre-service teachers to listen as I recite the poem. I recite the poem once as they follow along with the copy on the overhead. Then, I ask them to close their eyes and think about anything that came to their minds while I again recited the poem. After the second recital, the pre-service teachers write their responses in their class journals. We then discuss their individual responses as a whole group and I share my experience of reading the same poem to middle school at-risk students.

The pre-service teachers' responses to the poem were diverse. Seventeen focused on their dreams for the future, eight focused on the children they hoped to teach, one reflected on her parents' admonition to her as a child, and one focused on her young son's future. I did not ask them to respond in a particular way to the poem before I told them about the middle school students because I wanted them to think freely about their responses. However, from their responses, it was evident that most of the class focused on their personal dreams and hopes for the future.

Personal Reflections. The 17 pre-service teachers shared a common bond in describing their personal dreams in that they looked at their own experiences. However, their reflections were closely related to the poem as they shared their hopes for the future. One pre-service teacher shared, "Dreams are the substance of who we are. They give us purpose and direction and without them we would have nothing to look forward to." Another wrote, "This poem just strikes me as true. Without something to live for, we die; if only inside." Still another shared, "[This is] a beautiful poem that is full of hope for the future. Without dreams what is life worth. Dreams are our hope for a better future."

Several pre-service teachers focused on the sadness they would feel if they did not have dreams. One wrote, "I have more dreams in my head & in my heart than I can count. I think I would be sad if I didn't have my dreams. Whenever things aren't working out, or I feel frustrated where I am, I can always escape to the thoughts of my dreams." Another shared, "I feel sad, for life without dreams seems pointless, dreams are the only hope we have for happiness." Finally, one pre-service teacher wrote, "It is incredibly sad to forget your true, pure ambitions—your dreams. Life tries to take them from you—reality gets in the way. Somehow, the truly heroic people hold fast to their dreams."

Reflections as Future Teachers. The eight pre-service teachers who focused on their future as teachers, wanted to help their students realize the importance of their dreams. One pre-service teacher shared, "I think this is a great poem to show children how plain life would be without them having dreams. Having dreams add variety and excitement to people's lives." Another wrote, "Many times younger children only think of dreams as being what they have at night while sleeping. This poem would give another, important perspective. And it would also get them thinking of their own dreams."

The pre-service teachers felt that sharing the poem with their students could help them to see that dreams are good. They wanted to empower them to think beyond their present situations to claiming a future of possibilities. One pre-service teacher shared her hope for her future students, "The picture that [Hughes] paints for the reader (to describe the absence of dreams) is very vivid. I think that this poem is very motivational. Those students who seem not to have ambition or visions for themselves could be influenced by this poem." Another wrote, "Dreams are the core of life. They permeate through every soul...Don't ever let your dreams melt into tiny snowflakes. Keep your dreams alive."

Creating a Classroom of Dreamers

After the pre-service teachers wrote their responses to the poem in their journals and I shared my experience of reading the same poem to at-risk middle school students, we began to envision their future classrooms. I communicated the importance of being prepared to teach all students. I placed strong emphasis on the at-risk students they may ultimately meet, interjecting some of the stark research findings on the at-risk and diverse student body they will encounter in their teaching careers.

Slavin (5) determines that at-risk children are students who are at risk, on the basis of several risk factors and are unlikely to graduate from high school. The risk factors include low achievement, retention in grade, behavior problems, poor attendance, low socioeconomic status, and attendance at schools with large numbers of poor students. The changing demographics in immigrant populations across the United States indicate that by the year 2020 the student population will comprise over 45% minority students (Banks, 5).

It is important, then, to prepare pre-service teachers to meet the needs of this rapidly changing student body. Teachers who are not prepared for cultural diversity may experience difficulty as they try to administer the needs of these children. Teacher educators are being asked to prepare teachers who are more culturally aware and perceptive of the children they will teach.

For many students, school is the main social space where they will come in contact with others, often others who are different from them. Their teachers are important factors in their lives, frequently being the only person to offer them a glimmer of hope for the future. It is important that teachers acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for understanding how to effectively reach these children.

Moving Beyond Dreams to Possibilities

In order to move the pre-service teachers to the level where they are prepared to meet the needs of their students, I encourage them to first look at their personal experiences. Using Langston Hughes' poem provides a non-threatening exercise where they can tap into their personal dreams and hopes for the future. They begin to see that they are now in college because of their dreams as young children. Along the way, their parents, teachers, and others interested in their lives encouraged them to make realities of their dreams. The experience is meaningful because they are looking at themselves.

As the pre-service teachers make these self-discoveries, they then move to another level where they can then look critically at the lives of children they will teach. Some of their students will have the same opportunities they had but others will not. Some students do not have parents who dream a future of possibilities for them. They simply live through the kindergarten to twelfth grade experience. Many do not even make it to the twelfth grade, often dropping out of school before the tenth grade. The pre-service teachers then begin to picture the influence they will undoubtedly have on these children. What if they dared them to dream? What if they showed them that there was a larger world beyond their lived realities? How can they make a difference in their students' lives? These are some of the issues they begin to ponder. They grapple with these questions from the simple incorporation of an eight-line poem, "Dreams." Pre-service teachers come to realize that their children also have dreams and that these dreams can become possibilities if someone takes the time to foster hope in their lives. They learn that by reflecting on their personal lives they can encourage their students to "Hold fast to dreams."

Conclusion

Using poetry to help students think about their future can have powerful effects on their thinking processes. As students "take the poems to heart" and try to link them to their lived experiences they come to understand that they can create meaningful expressions without long texts. For many students, their dreams are simply dreams until teachers or other well-meaning adults challenge them to move beyond dreams to reality.

Many pre-service teachers will have their first true experience with cultural diversity when they step into their own classrooms. It is important, then, that teacher educators help them to prepare for this experience. Using poetry can indeed be a useful experience in helping pre-service teachers reflect on themselves and then move beyond those self-reflections to understanding the greater worldview they can provide their students. For many students considered at risk of school failure, a teacher's assurance that their dreams can become possibilities can make a difference. One pre-service teacher, Caitie Porteus Galligane, summed it up beautifully in her reflection on Hughes' poem, "Dreams":

"Dreams"

My dream is my guide,
My determination, my pathway,
Without my dream, I have no point,
Nothing to do, no where to go,
My dream is my life, my goal.

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