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“Poetry is on its way back up”: a spoken word performer’s contribution to young people’s engagement with poetry

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ABSTRACT

The presence of spoken word poets at school can prove to be engaging for young people, especially if used to complement the work conducted by enthusiastic teachers of poetry. By means of an evaluation of a spoken word residency at an Australian high school, this article discusses some of the opportunities and challenges associated with the attempt to engage young people with the genre. The case study’s research data was collected by means of observation of the residency and semi-structured interviews with the poet leading it and the teacher who organized it. In the article it is argued that while students are encouraged to develop their conceptions of poetry and perceive it as engaging, it is important to democratize participation in spoken word activities and enhance teachers’ own engagement.

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Introduction

Ever since being associated with the civil rights movement in the 1960s, the emergence of hip-hop in the 1970s, and the first National Poetry Slam in 1990 in San Francisco, spoken word poetry seems to have become increasingly popular in the U.S.A. and in many other contexts around the world. The term *spoken word poetry* is a catchall that incorporates different kinds of recited poetry, including slam poetry in which poets perform their work and are judged by an audience, and performance poetry which refers “to a type of contemporary poetry composed either for or during performance before an audience” (Hirsch, 2014, p. 453). Due to the fact that “Spoken word poetry fosters a ‘culture of listening’ and valuing words” (Fisher, 2005, p. 128), its potential in young people’s education is immense (Xerri, 2018). However, despite being described as having become a mainstream art, spoken word poetry has not yet filtered into the majority of educational contexts worldwide. This seems to be due to the assessment-driven culture that dominates poetry education (Dymoke, 2001, 2012; Xerri, 2016b). This case study of a spoken word residency by the poet Luka Lesson at a high school in Australia (Xerri, 2016c) helps to

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shed light on the opportunities and challenges associated with the attempt to engage young people with the genre in school settings.

Spoken word poetry in education

In many contexts around the world, poetry plays a vital role in young people's education, which at times means that it is closely associated with assessment. The weight given to assessment in poetry education is likely to scupper young people's engagement with poetic texts and might lead to a reductive pedagogy that focuses on canonical poems which are analyzed exclusively for meaning (Benton, 1999, 2000; Dymoke, 2002; O'Neill, 2006; Xerri, 2013, 2016b). Nonetheless, even when teaching poetry for examinations, it is still imperative "to use as many active approaches as you can" (Dymoke, 2009, p. 94). This entails being "conversant with the many imaginative, active strategies that can be called upon to bring poems to life for children" (Kelly & Collins, 2009, p. 29). Active approaches to the teaching of poetry encourage students to engage with poems in a variety of ways so that they are not just perceived as printed texts but appreciated for their multimodality (Xerri, 2012). Burdan (2004:, p. 27) believes that "It is important for students to recognize that poetry lives both on the page and in the ear, to see and hear the play of language." According to Snapper (2009:, p. 2), "Teachers know that, if poetry is to have an impact in the classroom, it must be to some extent demystified, and the links between the oral origins of poetry and the modern popular and literary traditions made clear." Spoken word poetry is most probably one of the best ways of attaining this goal; however, some curricula still fail to enshrine its value (Curwood & Bull, 2023). In the UK, initiatives like Poetry by Heart, the Poetry Archive and Poetry Live! celebrate the performative nature of poetry and thus encourage students not to perceive the genre solely as something to be read for examination purposes.

Speaking about the UK educational context, Gordon (2004) complains that the curriculum's definition of poetry as a printed mode may foster a pedagogy that does not acknowledge poetry's ability to produce meaning in a range of ways. Poetry ends up being "taught as a set of rules and procedures, with a terminology that relates to measurement of lines and stanzas, identification of elements and forms. Poems become riddles to which only the English teacher has the answer" (Sullivan, 2005, pp. 30–31). Stovall (2006) maintains that in spite of the popularity of spoken word poetry, opportunities for young people to be creative at school are gradually being eradicated due to the notion that the performing arts are not essential components of the curriculum. This is detrimental to young people's engagement with poetry, especially since "Performing a poem is one of the most enjoyable ways of finding out how it tastes, how it works, how it hangs together, how rhythm, word music, the patterning of language and sound all combine to express feelings and meanings" (Barrs & Styles, 2013, p. 193). According to Certo (2013:, p. 115), "Poetry matters, for it is a form of performance that can potentially exhilarate children and develop their confidence, all the while having their literal and metaphorical voices being heard." The insignificance accorded to spoken word poetry in certain curricula goes counter to the idea that poetry education should place young people's voices at its center (Almond, 2021; Kahn et al., 2022).

By means of spoken word poetry activities at school, students can be encouraged "to share their stories and develop their voices" (Williams, 2015, p. 82). In fact, poets brought

in to run such activities might use things like slam poetry as a means of opposing the curriculum's limitations, especially since they "are often keenly aware of how unpalatable the restrictiveness of the school curriculum is to many teachers and students" (Gregory, 2008, p. 74). Despite poetry being a multimodal medium, some curricula still seem to associate it with print and this is a form of disservice to students' engagement with poetry. For instance, Gordon (2009; p. 173) believes that "a curricular gap in attention to aural dimensions, though overt in the early years and tacitly assumed in the upper levels of attainment, is untenable with regard to the way pupils can and do understand poetry as sound". This gap is due to the curriculum's narrow conception of poetry, which is imposed on students in the course of their assessment-driven education. Young people can "respond sensitively to poetry, though in ways not easily acknowledged by this established discourse of poetry in schools" (Gordon, 2010, p. 40). Providing young people with the opportunity to experience spoken word poetry at school would probably help to boost their engagement since it enriches their conceptions of poetry and transforms them from passive recipients into active producers of the genre. Spoken word poetry activities at school can help students to develop their confidence and ability as writers and performers of poetry (Chepp, 2022).

Purpose and method

This study sought to evaluate a spoken word residency led by the poet Luka Lesson at a high school in Australia. The research question being addressed was: What does a poet's spoken word residency at a high school consist of? The case study involved the observation of the events taking place during the residency, including the interaction between the poet and the students. For this purpose, field notes consisting of an extensive description of what was observed at all stages of the residency – from the point of arrival at the school onwards – were taken. These field notes helped with the subsequent creation of a detailed narrative account of the residency. Immediately after the residency, the teacher who organized the event and the poet who led it participated in a one-to-one semi-structured interview. The purpose for these interviews was to form a better understanding of the residency's purpose and events from the perspective of two key stakeholders. The next three sections describe the study's participants and the context for the residency. These are followed by sections focusing on the residency itself.

The poet

On a research trip to Australia, I had the opportunity to visit Red Room Poetry, a non-profit organization based in Sydney devoted to the promotion of poetry. One of its programs, Poetic Learning, consists of poets taking up a residency at schools and in this way cultivating young people's creativity:

Nurturing creative practice through critical and imaginative investigation, our *learning programs* connect practicing poets with students and teachers to unlock poetic ways of seeing, writing and responding. We are committed to publishing these outcomes and providing a platform for young poets to share their work with wider audiences. (The Red Room Company, 2016, p. 14)

One of the poets employed by Red Room Poetry at the time of my visit was spoken word and hip-hop artist Luka Lesson, this being the stage name for Luke Haralampou. Lesson has been active in the spoken word poetry scene since 2009 and currently works as a full-time poet, frequently collaborating with musicians and visual artists. In 2011, he won the Australian Poetry Slam final and the fame that ensued as a result of this has allowed him to tour the world performing his poetry, particularly in the U.S.A., Asia, South Africa, and Oceania. Besides being a spoken word performer, Lesson (as cited in Saeed, 2015) sees it as his job to engage young people with poetry:

I get employed to make poetry be something more than dusty books and old irrelevant quotes by dead authors. Schools teach poetry but kids generally aren't that keen, so my job is to help facilitate writing and the performance of students' own work, some of which are as young as 13 years old. It is actually much easier than people think. Young people of all backgrounds are yearning to be heard, and stamp their authority and name on this era.

Not all teachers and schools make poetry seem "irrelevant", but even in those cases where poetry education is successful spoken word performers can help to further enhance students' engagement. Keen to see how Lesson engages young people with spoken word poetry, I welcomed Red Room Poetry's invitation to observe a brief residency at a high school in the southwest of Sydney. Immediately after the residency, I conducted a 45-minute interview with Lesson about his views on spoken word poetry in education. I also interviewed Judith, the teacher of English who had helped organize the residency.

The students

The residency consisted of a spoken word performance and two workshops with Year 7 students aged approximately 12–13-years-old. The school was partially selective in that it combined selective and comprehensive streams. In New South Wales, selective streams in government schools are made up of students who achieve more than a particular score on the Selective High Schools Test, which identifies high achievers in reading, writing, mathematics and general ability. Students who fail to achieve such a score or who do not sit for the test can self-select, in which case an internal committee determines whether their application to be part of the selective stream is successful or not. Despite the fact that all the students in a particular year group at a partially selective school are expected to follow the same curriculum, the selective stream is meant to be more advanced in level. Self-selective students run the risk of being relegated to the comprehensive stream if they fail to show evidence of academic achievement, or, in Judith's words, "If they start mucking around." Students forming part of a selective stream are expected to be more academically talented than those in a comprehensive stream and if they do not meet expectations they lose their place in the selective class. At the school where the residency took place around 10% of the school population consisted of selective classes.

Lesson's performance and workshops were open only to the Year 7 selective classes. The only exception the teachers made when choosing students for the workshops was Lisa and this was because she was considered "a lover of poetry". This seemed to illustrate the idea that teachers are powerful gatekeepers to poetry (Xerri, 2013). Individual students did not seem to have a choice as to whether they wanted to attend the workshops or not but it was up to their teachers to make the choice for them. The fact that the

teachers at this school had intentionally decided to limit Lesson's workshops to students whom they felt deserved to benefit from exposure to poetry highlights the entrenchment of the belief that poetry is an elitist genre with which only the best students can engage (Xerri, 2016a). According to Hanratty (2011, p. 424), "the educational and imaginative benefits resulting from that engagement cannot be underestimated and they can undoubtedly transcend the merely academic benefits which can be measured by examination results". If young people's contact with poetry happens largely through their school experiences, it is clear that teachers play a crucial role in either helping as many students as possible to discover enjoyment of poetry or else reserving such a discovery for the select few.

The teachers and the school

Once at the school we were met by Judith, a passionate teacher of English who was responsible for liaising with Red Room Poetry in order to bring Lesson over to the school. Her own attendance at a poetry slam festival had sparked her enthusiasm for spoken word poetry and she wanted her students to have the opportunity of being exposed to this art form. In the interview Lesson confirmed that this was very common:

Once people go to a slam or a good event or they see a good poet, they're fans for life. A lot of the people who attend such events are teachers or are involved in education in some way; they can see the value in that.

The only support Judith received from her colleagues consisted of them giving up class time so that their students could attend the performance and workshops. This seemed like a fairly typical situation: the opportunity for students to meet contemporary poets relies almost exclusively on their teachers' interest in poetry. As unfair as this may sound, it also underscores the significance of teacher agency and the impact enthusiastic educators have on students' engagement with poetry (Cremin, 2010). According to Lesson, "If it weren't for the passion of those teachers, spoken word wouldn't be in schools because it's not on the curriculum." He expressed his belief that it should be on the curriculum "because as soon as young people have this experience they are motivated to do spoken word poetry or engage in it". Unless teachers were sufficiently keen on poetry to convince their superiors to provide them with the necessary support to get involved in the Poetic Learning program, the benefits of this would never reach students. In fact, one of the teachers supervising the students during the workshops informed me that in his two and a half years at the school it was always novelists who got invited and never poets. He agreed with Judith's proposal because he felt it was "a good opportunity for the students to see something different".

A school's participation in Poetic Learning relies on the funding provided by philanthropic foundations and government grants as well as through collaboration with universities and other entities. Essentially, this means that interested government schools pay nothing themselves. In the case of private schools, there are usually adequate funds available for teachers to regularly organize poet residencies, sometimes two at a time. This seems to indicate that in addition to the luck of having an enterprising teacher, students' access to poetry also depends on how socially privileged they are. It further underscores the need for spoken word poetry to form an intrinsic part of all

students' education through the right kind of support being provided to all English teachers and schools.

Lesson's performance and workshops were to take place in the school library. The building was octagon-shaped and light streamed through the skylights forming a smaller octagon in the ceiling, which was held by four Y-shaped beams painted light blue. It felt like being inside a flying saucer. On opposite walls hung two big banners, one saying FICTION, the other NON-FICTION. When I asked Judith where the poetry section was located she seemed perplexed and asked the librarian to point me in the right direction. The poetry section consisted of three and a half shelves beneath a window and a smaller banner saying, "This is a positive thinking area." I wondered whether this was merely coincidental. The shelves were knee-high and one had to squat or crouch in order to browse the selection of poetry volumes available. The shelves were packed tightly with books, perhaps indicating that not many of them were on loan. A quick scan of the titles showed that the poetry available was largely canonical. There were very few contemporary poets and almost no multicultural poetry. The fact that the Poetic Learning program involves the participation of Indigenous and culturally diverse poets is reassuring since it exposes students to a kind of poetry that they might not necessarily encounter at school. In the process, their conception of what counts as poetry is broadened (Fleming & Stevens, 2015).

The residency

The students were marched into the center of the room and asked to sit in a large group on the floor. They warmly welcomed Lesson and seemed somewhat in awe of him. However, this soon changed once they realized how down-to-earth he was. Observing him connect with these young people made me think that part of what makes one a good spoken word poet is the ability to be outgoing and expressive. He was dressed in a style similar to that of hip-hop artistes, with his hair covered by a black beanie. This item of clothing was incidentally also worn by Lisa, a student who left quite an impression on Lesson for her own poetic skills. At a number of points during the day various students asked to pose for photos with Lesson or for his autograph. In the lunch break a group of five students interviewed him in order to write an article for the school magazine.

The students seemed to feel as if they were in the presence of a celebrity and it was obvious that they had been looking forward to meeting him. This could probably be explained by all the hype that the teachers had built up in the weeks prior to Lesson's visit. In fact, upon arrival we were even told that the local press might drop by. In introducing Lesson, Judith mentioned that the students had been shown his YouTube video of "Please Resist Me" in class and that they had enjoyed it. When I subsequently asked her whether the students had known who Lesson was she told me that they had not heard of him before watching the video. Nonetheless, what the teachers had done by showing the students the video was highlight the fact that poetry was not merely an academic subject but was actually very popular on the kind of social media that young people use when looking for music to listen to. The video has had more than 164,000 views and this seems to suggest how spoken word poetry has become a YouTube phenomenon. Many contemporary poets are promoting their work via social media to reach a much broader audience than previously possible. Spoken word poets like Lesson probably

appreciate the potential of such digital platforms. Just as many young people discover indie musicians that they like by means of YouTube and help to make them famous before they are signed up by a record label, poets can build up a following online prior to being given official recognition by festival organizers and publishers.

Spoken word performance

Lesson started by performing a number of his poems. He made a pact with the students that after every poem they were to ask him at least one question about poetry. The student who asked the best question at the end of the performance would win a copy of his book *The Future Ancients*. The students were keen to ask more than one question and an analysis of their questions indicates that they were highly engaged with the performance. These are some of the questions that the students asked throughout Lesson's performance:

1. When you're writing poetry, how do you think of what you're going to write?
2. How did you come to perform poetry?
3. Is it hard to remember words when you're performing poetry?
4. Does your poetry relate to personal stories and beliefs?
5. Have you ever forgotten a poem when on stage?
6. How do you deal with nervousness when you're on stage?
7. Do you speak poetry when you're dreaming?
8. What kind of emotions do you feel when you're speaking poetry?
9. You said that the pen is mightier than the sword. Do you think our generation would do that, take up the pen rather than the sword?
10. You said that you didn't like poetry when you were at school. Why did you change your mind?
11. How do you not lose your breath when speaking poetry?
12. How often do you get a mental block when writing?
13. How many poems have you written in total?
14. Who inspired you?
15. How did you come up with all the words for "A to Z"?

The questions are varied and demonstrate that the students gave a great deal of thought to the genre of poetry that Lesson was exposing them to. They were interested in both the poetic process and the product, as well as in what it meant to be a poet. Having the opportunity of meeting a spoken word poet, they were keen to learn about how he composed, memorized and performed his poetry. In answering some of the above questions, Lesson made references to his personal life and interests. He encouraged the students to see poetry as a valid means of self-expression not just as a subject that was only meant to be studied at school.

At one point, Lesson invited the students to raise their hand in reply to three successive questions he asked them. The majority of them indicated that they considered poetry boring, but nearly all of them raised their hand when asked whether they liked hip-hop. Half the students raised their hand when asked if they came from a non-English speaking household. Lesson explained to the students that poetry was not a stuffy

subject removed from their every day lives. He told them that “Shakespeare was doing the hip-hop of his generation.” Lesson mentioned that because of his Greek origins he was bullied at school. He sought to show them that, just like music, poetry can be an empowering medium by means of which people can celebrate their identity (Curwood & Jones, 2022).

At the end of the performance, Lesson awarded his poetry volume to Lisa for asking the question, “Did you write the poem ‘Please Resist Me’ because you were racist or because you were teased?” Her question enabled him to discuss with the students how racism is a complex phenomenon involving people of all skin colors despising one another, with those who are subjected to racism countering this by sometimes being racist themselves. Lesson praised Lisa for a poem she had written about bullying but which she felt too shy to perform in front of the other students. For him Lisa was using poetry as a form of therapy. When interviewed he remarked, “I’ve seen that the students who have been close to a negative edge or suffering a lot in their lives might not have made poetry their career but it became a catalyst for change.” A positive attitude towards poetry, like that demonstrated by Lisa, would probably become more common amongst students if it were to feature as a desired outcome of poetry education in addition to the knowledge they are expected to master for examination purposes.

After Lesson’s performance, Judith informed me that the students were not usually so engaged with poetry and that she was amazed at all the questions they had asked. In her opinion, the fact that the students had already watched Lesson performing “Please Resist Me” on YouTube helped to heighten their sense of engagement because they realized that poetry could be a vibrant medium. She felt pleased that the performance had helped to challenge the academic associations the students made with poetry. In the interview Lesson affirmed that young people tended to respond better to spoken word poetry than to page poetry: “it’s always the embodiment of the poem, it’s always the passion that I bring in presenting the poem that initially grabs their attention and makes them understand what it is I’m getting at”. He claimed that “poetry hit rock bottom but is now on its way back up. I think the entry point for that journey back up is spoken word or performance poetry or slam poetry.” At the same time he rejected the idea that

there’s a page versus stage poetry thing. I’m in love with all forms of it but what I want is for a generation of young people to know that they can just sound like themselves and express themselves in a way that’s contemporary for them.

Lesson’s views underscore the fact that the use of spoken word poetry is a means of acknowledging poetry’s multimodality and of subverting the limited conceptions of poetry that might exist in certain curricula. This is vital given its “potential not only to celebrate form and meaning, but also to instantiate a kind of knowledge whose educational value should be given equal status with the analytical understanding of poems that currently drives the examination system” (Pullinger & Whitley, 2013, p. 172). Poetry’s potential for performance seems to demand creative spaces and opportunities that encourage students to transcend the close reading of printed poems, which is traditionally the way in which they are asked to engage with poetry at school. At the same, spoken word poetry can be made more accessible to students if teachers are provided with the necessary support to celebrate this form in the classroom throughout the year, rather than relying exclusively on one-off visits by professional poets.

The workshops

The spoken word performance was followed by two workshops. The first one involved 35 students coming from two selective classes while the second one was made up of 28 students coming from a self-selective class. I was informed that Red Room Poetry prefers working with groups of 20 students at a time; however, some schools tend to pack in as many students as possible in a group. They probably do this in order to give a larger number of students the opportunity to participate without realizing that the quality of the experience might risk being diluted as a result of having a bigger group.

The effects of having a big group of students in each workshop were at times visible as some students tended not to be on task. This put a strain on Lesson's voice, something that worried him as he had a busy schedule of school visits and gigs in various places over the coming weeks. However, in the interview he admitted that he was not too concerned about unruly behavior:

I've never really had a negative situation with a student disliking something to that end. There might be a grumpy kid or two but usually even the kids that are super angry and upset about something, they're also sometimes the best poets because they've got a poem in them. That frustration is exactly what I had at school. I was always talking a lot or hating class or being bored. Sometimes they're the best poets.

The situation of having to deal with two large groups was not helped by the fact that the teachers of English meant to be supervising the students were somewhat disengaged from what was taking place in the workshops. They did not join in Lesson's activities and sat apart from the students. For most of the time they were busy playing with their mobile phones, occasionally rebuking the students when a few of them got too rambunctious. In the interview Lesson explained,

whenever I've been in a class where I've helped students to write something and the teacher has written as well and has shared what they've written and it might be something vulnerable or personal, the respect between teacher and students becomes so equal and solid.

It was somewhat ironic that sessions meant to engage students with poetry ran the risk of being undermined by the teachers' own lack of engagement. Students are receptive to such behavior and it is useless for teachers to expect them to communicate passion for poetry unless they themselves act as role models (Cremin, 2010).

Lesson's flexible approach to the structure of the workshops indicated that they were not following an outline drawn up by Red Room Poetry. Instead, they seemed to be based on his experience of facilitating workshops that are meant to expose students to spoken word poetry and counter their preconception that poetry has to be anchored to the page. When interviewed he affirmed that teachers "should forget about the word 'poetry' or what form it takes and instead help students to fall in love with words in as many ways as that can be done." He reckoned that "if young people are taught to be poets or to express themselves freely and perform their work, even if they don't become poets later on in life, poetry does help human beings become more whole."

The two workshops started with two guided writing activities. These consisted of the students writing a haiku and a five-line stem poem. The latter activity involved the generation of a metaphor by the completion of a line. For example, in the first workshop the students were asked to complete the line "Poetry is ..." This was completed as "my maths

teacher writing on the board” and “my maths teacher trying to explain Pythagoras’s theorem”. This seems to highlight the idea that some young people conceive of poetry as being abstruse (Fleming & Stevens, 2015).

The guided writing activities were followed by what Lesson termed a stream of consciousness activity in which the students were encouraged to write as much as possible while listening to three pieces of music played in a row. The students were encouraged not to brainstorm but to jot down on paper whatever came to mind. Lesson told the students, “I want you to come up with as much text as possible. More words. I need more words on the page.” His choice of music for this activity was quite varied and it seemed to affect the students’ level of concentration. For example, I noticed that while listening to Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* the students seemed highly focused on their writing. In fact, at one point Lesson asked the students, “Have you noticed how different music helps you write in different ways?” The free writing activity was somewhat challenging for certain students, mainly because they were not used to producing text in an unstructured manner. In fact, one student asked Lesson, “How do you think of things to write about? Because even though I want to write stuff, nothing comes into my head.” Such students might have perhaps benefited from being in a smaller group or from being assigned more structured writing activities before being expected to engage in free writing. This underscores the significance of poets being provided with adequate training prior to facilitating workshops in schools.

At the end of each workshop, the students were asked to form a circle and different individuals were invited to recite their last poem. Even though some students felt shy about doing so, the majority enjoyed the experience of sharing their work with a group of peers whom they clearly trusted. After every workshop, the booklet in which the students had written their poems was collected so that Red Room Poetry could publish the poems online. The act of providing students with a sense of audience and with the opportunity to publish their work is fundamental, especially in the case of spoken word poetry given its origins in the oral tradition (Lesus & Vaughan, 2022).

Conclusion

My observation of Luka Lesson’s residency confirmed the idea that spoken word poetry can be highly engaging for young people. However, banking solely on residencies by professional poets to attain such engagement might be insufficient. Teachers need to play a more active role in providing all young people with regular access to spoken word poetry; that entails positioning themselves in such a manner whereby residencies by spoken word performers help to complement the work done in poetry lessons.

By encountering a spoken word performer at school, students are further encouraged to challenge the belief that poetry is boring, irrelevant and difficult, something they might feel forced to read and study because of the curriculum and examinations. They are increasingly shown that it can be fun and that it can be used to give anyone a voice. A spoken word poet can help to broaden their conceptions of poetry and enable them to appreciate the value of creatively engaging with language. As Lesson mentioned in the interview, “Poetry can form the basis of lyrics writing, the basis of script writing, the basis of a lot of experiences with words.” Lesson is one of those people who believe that “there has been a woeful neglect of the enormous contribution poetry can

make to young people's knowledge and intellectual development" (Dymoke et al., 2013, p. 1). However, despite how vital it is for spoken word poets to visit schools, my observation of Lesson's residency has highlighted some important implications.

First, poetry is a democratic genre and hence activities like spoken word workshops should be open to as many young people as possible. If teachers limit access to such activities only to academically oriented students, those who fail to benefit from them are likely to continue seeing poetry as "dull and pointless ... an elitist art form" (Booktrust, 2010, p. 12) that they are obliged to tackle in order to pass an examination. If students are not given the opportunity to experience such a creative approach to poetry as that synonymous with its performance, then poetry is "vulnerable to becoming a packaged commodity" (Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2011, p. 217) that is consumed for assessment purposes only. Hence, it is important that teachers are equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and confidence to make spoken word activities an essential part of students' poetry education.

Second, poetry's democratic nature implies that a residency like the one I observed should also seek to engage teachers. Teachers need to be enthusiastic about poetry and demonstrate a willingness to participate in spoken word activities. This is crucial because research shows that creative writing is best fostered by teachers who are willing to engage in it themselves and who see themselves as writers (NAWE, 2023). Teacher education is fundamental in this regard since it helps to nudge teachers into adopting the stance of teacher-poets (Xerri, 2014). It is by positioning themselves in this way that teachers can be fully convinced of the necessity to engage as many students as possible in writing and performing poetry. An over-dependence on professional poets to provide young people with the opportunity to enjoy the art of writing and performing poetry might minimize their engagement with it given that this can only take place when a poet is invited to a school.

Finally, the passion that spoken word poets like Lesson have for their art does not minimize the value of pedagogical training. In fact, the writer and creative writing teacher Lesley Thomson (2013, p. 45) believes that just because one is a writer it does not mean one can teach: "while possessing the knowledge of their profession, to teach inexperienced and motivated writers, a writer needs knowledge of effective teaching approaches". This implies that in order for spoken word residencies in schools to be fully successful, poets might benefit from developing some of the knowledge and skills that teachers acquire thanks to pre- and in-service education.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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