

Abstract

Spoken Word Poetry in the Classroom to Promote Positive Learning Environments, Engage Students, and Strengthen Social and Emotional Skills

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) has partnered with researchers from Peabody College of Vanderbilt University to assess the effectiveness of spoken word poetry practices and programs in middle school classrooms as an integrated approach to promote classroom climate, student engagement, social and emotional learning, and student academic skills and achievement. Many of the district's students are at risk of poor educational outcomes. Seventy-eight percent of students across all schools are enrolled in the FRPL program; only 40.4% of students are proficient or advanced in English and 39.6% are proficient or advanced in math. Over the past 7 years, many teachers have integrated spoken word poetry programming in their classrooms. These consist of 3-5 day residencies in which poets team-teach the fundamentals of spoken word poetry and lead students through the composition, editing, and performing of their own works, culminating in a public slam. The program has grown and anecdotal data and now results from a recent pilot evaluation conducted in the spring of 2015 suggests that integrating spoken word intentionally in classrooms promotes positive classroom climate, increased student engagement, social and emotional learning, and stronger social supports for students. Given that the literature regarding its effectiveness in schools is limited, and gaps in best understanding about innovative practices that are easily integrated in classrooms, more rigorous evaluation of outcomes associated with school-based spoken word is needed. To answer questions of overall program effectiveness, we will use a cluster randomized design in which we utilize 20 schools as blocks and then randomly assign one of two eligible grades per school (7th and 8th) to participate in the program in Year 1 (treatment) and the other to a delayed start in Year 2 (control).