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“That’s my worst nightmare”: poetry and trauma in the middle school classroom

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This article explores how two middle school girls told stories of family conflict and trauma through poetry. Situated within literature on critical literacies and trauma studies, the article uses a case study approach to consider what happens when stories of trauma emerge within the literacy classroom. The authors explore (1) how the girls used poetry to understand and represent their trauma; (2) how the classroom contexts supported the development and sharing of trauma narratives; and (3) how classroom relationships were affected by the sharing of trauma narratives. The authors argue that the genre of poetry and the classroom contexts supported the girls in asserting “narrative control” and opened up spaces for deeper and more collaborative relationships among members of the classroom community. They also contend that the girls’ writing and experiences can prompt reconsideration of what topics are “appropriate” for school.

Keywords: poetry; trauma studies; critical literacy; adolescents; writing

It is 7pm on a Thursday evening and the art room has been transformed in preparation for tonight’s poetry coffeehouse. The eighth-grade students and their teacher have strung Christmas lights across the blackboard and have cleared a large performance space for the poetry reading. Parents and students find their seats and a hush comes over the crowd as Theo, a community member, starts the coffeehouse. As the students read their poems, their classmates cheer as they share works exploring relationships, families, and current events. Nothing seems to be off limits and there is a feeling of comfort and acceptance among the participants.

It is Sherie’s turn to come forward and read. Her poem begins, “How could you?/My mother/You were supposed to be my friend /Have my back to the end/How could you?” Sherie’s poem details her experience of being placed in foster care after being sexually abused at home. Although she is still striving to accept what has happened to her, her voice is strong and unwavering as she reads. Near the end of the poem, Sherie begins to tear up. Her mother walks to the front of the room to give her a hug. Sherie’s classmates stand up and give her a round of applause, complementing her poem and commenting on her bravery.

Danny, a community member from the agency who funds the partnership between the community poet and classroom teacher, is aghast. He turns to me and says, “Topics such as that should never be written in school and do not have a place here. She should have never been allowed to read that.”

Danny’s sentiments strike us as a disturbing, but all too common, response to stories of trauma in the English Language Arts classroom. The sharing of out-of-school experiences,

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especially stories of trauma, can challenge conventions of what is considered “appropriate” in school and present unique challenges to the school community. Schultz (2003) explains it this way:

One risk of inviting students to bring their home and community experiences into school, in order that we may listen more broadly to their lives, is that it puts teachers in the position of deciding what topics and language are appropriate for school and what to do with information that might put them in difficult or compromising positions. (p. 84)

In considering the invitations for students to write about personal experiences that shape many progressive writing pedagogies, Jones (2004) shifts focus to how those invitations may put the students themselves in vulnerable positions. She argues that there is often a false assumption that all stories are welcomed and valued in the same way, writing:

There is a catch within this pedagogy – it is comfortable and “natural” for teachers to listen and respond to stories that correlate with their own experiences, or experiences that are valued in our society, but when topics are raised that make teachers squirm, this pedagogy may backfire as many respond in ways that end up silencing or marginalizing the student. (p. 463)

Jones’s work prompts us to consider how the telling of stories of trauma in classrooms that do not recognize or validate them can lead to further silencing of students.

As literacy researchers, we have both pursued inquiries into the potential and the possibility of poetry within classrooms (Wiseman, 2007, 2009; Wissman, 2007, 2009). In sharing insights with each other about our research, we were both struck by how students across our studies told family narratives that pushed against idealized notions of a conflict-free, two-parent family, and instead recounted those of arguments, deaths and abuse. In this article, we present case studies of two middle school girls who claimed a poetic space to narrate their stories of family conflict and trauma and who claimed a classroom space in which to share them. Stake (1995) contends that within case study research, “we will have a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and feeling that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case” (p. 3). We came to feel “we may get insight into the question” of the possibilities and challenges of inviting students to bring trauma narratives into the classroom through the consideration of the two students from our studies in relation to each other. The following research question guides our inquiry in this article: How do students use poetry as a way to share their trauma narratives?

After discussing our theoretical frameworks of critical literacy and trauma studies and situating our methodology within perspectives on case studies and narrative inquiry, we present two cases that illustrate how students told stories of family conflict and trauma through poetry. We contend that while poetry invites students to explore complicated issues within their lives, it can also open up spaces for deeper and more collaborative relationships among members of the classroom community and prompt reconsideration of what topics are “appropriate” for school.

Theoretical frameworks

Critical literacy and poetry

Critical literacy provides a lens for understanding how poetry can create transformative learning opportunities within classrooms, particularly for students who have been silenced or marginalized in school settings (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Fisher, 2007; Morrell,

2005). Shor (1999) writes that critical literacy “connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical” and provides opportunities “for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity” (p. 1). Pedagogies emerging from these perspectives aim to encourage students to engage with local realities, to consider power relationships and to critique social injustice (Comber & Nixon, 2005). Morrell (2005), for example, advocates for pedagogies that “draw upon the everyday language and literacy practices of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies and to work toward empowered identity development and social transformation” (p. 313).

Taught from a critical literacy perspective, poetry has potential to broaden the range of literacy practices available to students in school. Poetry has been incorporated into classrooms to link families, schools and communities (Wiseman, 2009) and to create opportunities for students to take on identities as “creative, caring, and critical intellectuals” (Reyes, 2006). Kinloch (2005) named the interactions that students and teachers have in the space of a poetry classroom as *Democratic Engagements*, pointing to the ways in which poetry can decentralize authority in the classroom and encourage students to claim their voices in the service of personal and social change. When the poetry curriculum is informed by critical literacies, there is potential to transform the classroom space into a forum where students can reflect critically on their own experiences and identities (Wissman, 2009), while simultaneously engaging the multiple viewpoints of other members of the classroom community (Jocson, 2006).

Trauma studies, trauma narratives and poetry

While making a space for personal narratives in the writing curriculum can invite critical literacies, we feel that it is important to understand how those narratives work to support students’ meaning making related to difficult and traumatic events in their lives. Bruner (2004) describes the creation of a personal narrative as actively constructing the way that an event has occurred as it is told to others. He writes:

eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic process that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very “events” of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives. (p. 694)

To Bruner, the way that narratives are constructed provides us with both an understanding of an experience and an opportunity to order our emotions surrounding that experience. The genre of poetry lends itself to this kind of self-expression, including stories of trauma. Because poetry can allow for a psychological distance through imagery and rhythm, it is often used as a therapeutic tool in counselling contexts to support the development of self-understanding (Lorenz, 1998). The way that a story of trauma is received can be just as significant as the process the author goes through in reflecting on and composing the story. In trauma studies, the act of sharing is referred to as testifying, which can be defined as both listening and evoking the power to respond (Felman & Laub, 1992). A significant aspect of the healing process is how the testimony is received or witnessed; if it is rejected or not heard, it can cause one to re-experience the situation, feeling the same painful emotions that occurred during the event.

In their groundbreaking work, Felman and Laub (1992) describe how a college classroom context can be transformed into a cultural space with a collective response to

traumatic historical events. Still, with few exceptions (Dutro, 2008, 2009; Dutro & Zenkov, 2008), there is a pervasive silence about how students, particularly children, are affected by writing and sharing their own personal traumas in classroom contexts. Dutro (2008) contends that it is important to value trauma narratives when they occur in classroom literature discussions, arguing that these responses cannot be predictably linked to specific topics or stories. Rather, trauma narratives can be revealed in response to almost any classroom event. She writes:

trauma also lurks in the everyday lives of children and youth who suffer from private, personal difficulties such as the loss of grandparents, parents or siblings, family members in prison, placement in foster homes, family and community violence, eviction from their homes, or testifying against molesters. Just as with large-scale traumas, I argue that the personal traumas that enter our classrooms can also reveal the limits of the language we have thus far employed to theorise the relations between students' encounters with texts in school and their life experiences. (p. 424)

Understanding the role of trauma in literacy research has important implications for critical literacy scholarship. Many insights have been generated about the importance of providing students opportunities to write about topics that resonate with them (Lewison & Heffernan, 2008) and that encourage them to see the connections between poetry and social justice (Jocson, 2006). However, further understanding is necessary to consider the pedagogical implications of supporting students when stories of trauma surface in the classroom.

Data collection and analysis

The data shared in this article are part of two separate and larger research studies that document, describe and interpret literacy learning and teaching in public school contexts.

Angela's study: a community-based poetry workshop

This research took place in an eighth-grade English classroom in an urban public middle school where 97% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Of the 22 students in the classroom, 17 were African American, one was Asian and four were Hispanic; and nine were male and 13 were female. The poetry programme began because Pamela, the teacher in this classroom, was looking for a way to connect students' learning in the classroom to the community. She is a white teacher who chose teaching as a second career. By working with a local non-profit educational organization called Urban Voices in Education (UVE), she was introduced to Theo, an African American youth co-ordinator at a nearby neighbourhood centre. Theo was a poet and artist and agreed to teach a weekly poetry workshop and then emcee bimonthly evening poetry coffeehouses.

English instruction in Pamela's classroom was a balance of skills instruction and projects where learning was connected with experiences within the community. Her innovative ideas often conflicted with pressures from the administration to focus a majority of teaching on test preparation due to low test scores. The weekly poetry writing workshops lasted approximately 45 minutes and were designed by Theo. Topics were open ended and most students responded by writing very personal responses, some about their own traumatic events while others voiced opinions about ideas or current events.

Ethnographic techniques of participant-observation were applied to the classroom setting as data were gathered throughout a full school year (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data

involved observations on an average of twice a week, during weekly poetry workshops and regular English lessons. My role as participant–observer was a balancing act of documenting the classroom and circulating to help as the students wrote or completed assignments. I was not from this community and am a white, middle-class female. I attended poetry workshops, regular English-class sessions, field trips and also met participants for interviews and member-checks in the community. In addition, I held four focus groups sessions with students who were identified by the teacher as representatives of students in this classroom based on race, ethnicity, academic success and interest in poetry. Sherie, the focus of my case study, participated in the focus groups. I used primarily open-ended questions (Seidman, 2006) such as “Tell me about your family participation in the poetry coffee-houses” or “Tell me about the poetry you wrote today”; and from there, I moderated the focus groups while students discussed their ideas and thoughts. At times, Pamela and Theo suggested discussion topics for the focus groups based on their observations and interactions with the students. Data were generated from classroom observations and poetry events; poetry written by students, teachers and parents; teacher interviews; and focus groups. Classroom lessons, focus groups and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in order to be analysed (Coffee & Atkinson, 1996).

Kelly’s study: a digital poetry project

This research took place in a seventh-grade English classroom in a high-needs urban public charter school. At the time of the study, the school was being reviewed by the state in order to renew its charter; the stress of this review and the school’s subsequent failure to achieve it created a context of uncertainty. The classroom teachers, Ace and Rachael, who are both white, were also part of a teacher inquiry group of five teachers that I co-ordinated. During one academic year and summer, this inquiry group met monthly to explore the possibilities and challenges of incorporating out-of-school literacies and multi-modalities into their pedagogies. Of the 16 students in Ace and Rachel’s class, eight were white, five were African American, two were Latino and one was Senegalese.

Ace and Rachael worked from constructivist principles of teaching and learning, while also attempting to navigate the unstable atmosphere in their school due to its pending closing. With the support and advice of other teachers in the inquiry group, Ace and Rachael invited their students to create digital poems. Students first chose from poems they had written earlier in the school year for a poetry unit and a memoir project. In both projects, the teachers actively encouraged the students to draw from their personal experiences to inform their writing. To create digital poems, the teachers invited students to select images and music and to record themselves narrating their selected poem. The students worked individually and collaboratively to orchestrate these multi-modalities (Kress & Jewitt, 2003) towards the completion of their digital poems which were shared with the entire class at the end of the project. The poems varied widely in form and topic, from a free-verse poem exploring the meaning of heroism to a list poem describing the students in the class. Three of the poems explored traumatic family events, namely, a family shooting and suicide, a devastating house fire and a violent argument between parents.

Two research assistants and I observed and participated in Ace and Rachael’s classroom approximately twice a week for three months. I am white, while one research assistant is Latina and the other is white. Data sources included interviews with Ace and Rachael; interviews with the students; student writing and digital products; classroom observations; transcripts from monthly meetings of the inquiry group; and written reflections by the teachers. All three of the researchers participated in all aspects of data collection. Our role

in the classroom was primarily as observers, but we also helped individual students with their poems and with the movie-making software.

Data analysis

We present our research in the form of two case studies, an approach to qualitative data collection, analysis and representation that provides multi-dimensional perspectives on phenomena by drawing on multiple data sources (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Stake, 1995). Our data analysis involved a recursive process of questioning and analysing our data separately. Individually, we began with purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2005) of the students observed in our research contexts. Once we each identified students who used poetry to testify to the trauma they had experienced in their lives, we engaged in repeated reading and inductive analysis of their poetry, interviews and field notes of classroom observations (Merriam, 2009). After writing vignettes that provided thick descriptions of the classroom contexts and the case study students, we then began our joint analysis by sharing data with each other and providing comments and feedback on each other's cases. We reviewed data to determine the nature of the students' poetry, the features of the learning context and how the cases informed our understanding of the research question (Stake, 2005). Our analyses were further informed by narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) which prompted us, especially when considering the students' poetry, to "listen to the narrator's voices – to the subject positions, interpretive practices, ambiguities, and complexities – within each narrator's story" (Chase, 2005, p. 663). We developed three themes related to the research question: (1) how the students used poetry to understand and represent trauma; (2) how the classroom contexts supported trauma narratives; and (3) how classroom relationships were affected by the sharing of traumatic events. We present cases of two girls whose experiences provide complementary and contrastive insight into these themes.

Cases

Sherie: "a brave and courageous writer"

Sherie, an eighth-grade African American girl, characterized herself as "a brave and courageous writer" and believed that she was a voice for other children in abusive situations. Sherie wrote poetry in and out of school, mostly to communicate with family and friends and to work through the problems in her life. In a focus group, she noted, "There's nothing I can't write about; I try to really get people to understand me." Her writing topics included relationships with boys, family and friends; she often developed her ideas from interactions and discussions with peers or teachers. One of the most tragic experiences in Sherie's life involved sexual abuse, as described in the opening vignette. During one poetry workshop, she crafted two poems – one that showed anger at her mother and another where she articulated her beginning acceptance of the situation. An excerpt from her first poem reflects her anger:

How could you?
 My mother
 You were supposed to be my friend
 Have my back to the end
 How could you?

You don't believe me
 But why?
 Why lie?

In this poem, she was able to communicate her very painful feelings of betrayal stemming from her mother's denial of the abuse. Her second poem, which was written on the same day, shows not only the complexity of her emotions, but also how Sherie was moving to accept the situation and understand her mother's perspective:

We all make mistakes
 But that's okay
 We make them everyday
 But still I say
 Ma, it's okay
 We have all had trials . . .

Sherie's poetry was a testimony to her trauma and mirrored the way that her relationship with her family was progressing; at times, she felt intense anger and betrayal, and other times, she was ready to make amends. Her conflicted emotions were reflected in a poem where she asked, "Am I ever going to get over the past?/If so will it be fast?/Am I going to stay mad?"

Not only did Sherie write poetry to her parents, but they also responded to her in poetic form because they discovered that it was a valuable way of communicating. At one poetry coffeehouse, her mother performed a poem in response to Sherie's questions, expressing, "Little does she know when I holler at her I'm sad./She doesn't know what I'm going through yet/I'm trying to teach her things she won't regret . . . is she listening?" The refrain of the poem was "I try my best/I put myself to the test" and it ended with "I love you more than words can say/That love increases each and every day." Her mother conveyed that even though there were experiences and emotions that they were working through, she was "trying her best" and cared very deeply for Sherie.

Poetry was a medium that increased communication in Sherie's family, while also creating a connection between her home experiences and classroom learning. Sherie recognized that her classmates were an important aspect of her learning community and encouraged them to use poetry to process their experiences, even about difficult topics. For instance, when one student read about his cousin dying, Sherie related to his experience by sharing how she felt sad when her grandmother died and how she decided that writing and sharing a poem provided a way to remember her. In one focus group, several students attributed Sherie's encouragement to their own writing development. One student remembered Sherie telling her that her poem was "vicious!" and commenting, "I wish I could write like that!" and how these words encouraged her to share her piece. It was evident that Sherie worked to build the classroom community by encouraging others and by sharing her own work.

Sherie received encouragement and support from Pamela and Theo, who were aware of how the family was dealing with her traumatic event and used this information to support her in various ways. Pamela often met with her before or after class to talk and to lend a supportive ear; Sherie described her as "really there for us". Theo knew Sherie, her parents and extended family because they attended the same church and he used this connection to help her think about how to use her poetry to communicate with her parents. In an

interview, Sherie told me, “I may not talk to him exactly like I do my friends, but I can really talk to him. It’s just a little different because he’s an adult. But it’s different than talking to other adults.” Theo often referred to her family when he spoke with her in class and was aware that her parents were supportive of her efforts to write about her experiences and feelings. For instance, one time he told her, “You gotta do your work. I see your grandma, your aunt, your dad on the weekend.” This connection to school learning provided Sherie with a positive environment that she described as “caring”, stating that both teachers “really wants to teach us”.

Sherie’s positive engagement in her English class was unique and she attributed it to having opportunities to write about self-selected topics and to developing close relationships within the class. In school, teachers had identified her as a student who was at high risk of dropping out of school because of her negative attitude towards learning and disregard for homework. While other teachers in school had disciplinary problems with Sherie and described her as having behavioural issues that mostly stemmed from what one of her teachers described to me as a “major attitude problem”, she was highly engaged and responsive in her English class, often volunteering answers and asking questions. During interviews, Sherie indicated that she responded to positive reinforcement. As she put it, “You need encouragement. You don’t need to just hear when you mess up”. Allowing personal expression in the poetry workshop created opportunities for Sherie not only to work through emotions from her traumatic experience, but also to enhance her academic accomplishments in English as she cultivated relationships with her peers, family and teachers.

Hayley: “it’s like really cool and really scary at the same time”

Hayley, who is white, was in the seventh grade during the study. When her teachers invited the students in her English class to create digital poems, she knew the exact poem she wished to use for the project. Earlier in the year, she had written a poem entitled “My Worst Nightmare” which describes an argument between her mother and father. This argument served as a catalyst for their later divorce. As the eldest of seven children, Hayley felt a particular responsibility in caring for her siblings during this time. She described the inspiration for her poem in this way:

Well, when I was six it was around the time my parents got divorced and they had this really bad fight . . . It was really tough because it kinda changed my life around. I had to go to different houses. I had to go to two different places. And I mean, it didn’t just affect me, it affected my brothers and sisters, too. It’s just one of those things that I’ve always carried around as baggage.

In her poem, she wrote:

Sitting with Dad, watching TV
 Mom comes home, and starts right in
 Crashing, banging, glass everywhere
 Hiding under the table, scared
 Blanket by my side, while swearing comes alive
 My worst nightmare has arrived.
 Cops show up at the door

Sirens going off everywhere
 Mom leaves, and squealing tires fill the air
 That's my worst nightmare.

Hayley chose this poem not only because she felt she could “do more with it” in terms of the choice of images and sound to accompany the words (see Appendix 1 for a transcription of the digital poem and its multi-modal elements), but also because of its impact on her own understanding of the situation. In an interview she told me,

Well, when I was young, I thought it was maybe my fault, but now I know that it's their problem. It kind of helped me to understand why it was so bad to me when I was little, and now it's a poem about how I got over it and it's just the past.

In addition to helping her clarify her feelings about a difficult time, Hayley also noted that writing the poem within a classroom community helped her to consider how her experience would be perceived, noting,

I wanted to show what some people went through as little, little kids. I don't want people to feel bad or sympathetic for me because I lived through it since I was seven years old. It was kind of hard, but I lived through it.

These sentiments are also evidenced in the music she chose to play at the conclusion of the digital poem as the credits were rolling: Kanye West's (2007) lyrics from “Stronger”: “Th-th-that don't kill me/Can only make me stronger”. Composing and presenting this poem also encouraged Hayley to consider her message, a message that was primarily directed to adults. She argued that:

Parents should keep their arguments away from the kids, because when you have the arguments around the kids, it gets them involved and makes them scared. It makes the kids scared and they don't know everything about it, so keep the arguments to yourselves. Don't let the kids hear it or anything.

To the young people, she noted that her message was “If you're a kid, just stay strong and live through it. Just be yourself.” To get across this message of resilience, Hayley made deliberate choices related to words, images and music; her reflective discussion with me surrounding the process and intention of creating her digital poem further illuminated this message.

While Hayley told me she often wrote poems about her family outside of school, she noted the importance of an in-school space in which to compose and share her writing:

Hayley: Well, I like working on it by myself and most of the time with friends . . . and, uh . . . if I did it at home I wouldn't get very much done. I'd just kind of sit at the computer playing around.

Kelly: So it's important for you to have people who can see it and talk to you about it?

Hayley: And help me with it.

Hayley's contention here suggests that schools can play an important role in assisting students in expressing and coming to terms with life experiences. When I asked her how she felt about sharing this poem publicly, she explained that she had never written about this

incident in school, but she welcomed the opportunity to do so. She described, though, a compelling complexity to the public act of sharing:

Hayley: It was kind of scary to share it because for someone I didn't know to see that I've been through this and through that. . . and, you know, it's kind of personal so it's tough to read to everybody.

Kelly: What have been the reactions so far to it?

Hayley: A lot of people like it. My memoir's about some tough things that've happened in my life and a lot of people are like, "Wow, I didn't know that happened to you!" It's like really cool and really scary at the same time.

Hayley's contention that to share this experience in school was "really cool and really scary at the same time" reflects the potential for writing about personal experiences to make students vulnerable, while also pointing out how poetry can bring people together by sharing experiences. Hayley explained that this project enabled her to work closely with her teachers to improve her poem and her performance of it, noting,

With this one, Mr. Collins helped me choose words that would be a better fit. And he helped me shorten some of the sentences . . . After I had the poem finished, Mr. Collins wanted a copy of it and that made me feel really good.

Hayley also found a great deal of support from students who engaged her in conversation about this time in her life. It is this dialectical tension that Hayley speaks of – the risk and the possibility, of being simultaneously "really cool" and "really scary" – that seems important to consider when reflecting on what it means to invite students to bring in personal experiences to the classroom, especially stories of family conflict.

Looking across the cases: seeking "narrative control"

When we consider the cases of Sherie and Hayley, we see two girls claiming a poetic space to narrate difficult family experiences and claiming an in-school space in which to do so. In exploring some of the most destabilizing and often silenced experiences of family conflict, trauma and violence, both Sherie and Hayley embraced poetry as a venue for reflection and the working through of complex emotions. As young children, Sherie and Hayley were witnesses to, and unwilling participants in, situations where they had little to no power to shape an outcome or to protect themselves from the results of adult behaviours around them. Through poetry, they were able to seek what we have termed "narrative control", a way of using language to claim the right to name their own experience and to shape their own understanding of traumatic situations and experiences.

Sherie and Hayley provide insight into how poetry writing can enable students to seek narrative control in the midst of recounting family traumas that eclipsed their personal power at the time. The genre of poetry allowed them to pursue this inquiry in quite different ways unique to their situations and writing identities. Sherie's poetry has a searching quality, as evidenced by her frequent use of questions. Her questions are directed outwards towards her family, particularly her mother, for not protecting her. For Sherie, the beginning steps of claiming some degree of narrative control in her poems were to acknowledge the abuse and to ask questions of others. It is clear that this healing process will take considerable time and resources beyond the writing of poetry, but in this

classroom, space was opened up for Sherie to begin to name and document her experience and to enrich her own understanding by trying to understand the perspectives of others.

Where Sherie's poems are full of inquiries, Hayley's poem is descriptive and declarative. It is characterized by an accumulation of carefully chosen images that render the experience from her perspective. Her image of herself as a young child hiding under the table with her blanket by her side communicates volumes about the fear and helplessness she experienced at that time. The poem's written lines and the steady and deliberate way in which she read them in her digital poem are in marked contrast to the chaos of the situation she experienced. She made purposeful decisions in her word and image choices to leave the viewer of her digital poem with a sense of her strength and good humour. She contrasts the image of herself as a frightened and hiding young girl to an image of herself as a knowing and resilient young woman who created this multi-modal presentation. In strikingly different ways, then, Sherie and Hayley claim poetry as a venue to claim agency in narrating their experiences both to themselves and to a larger audience. We find it notable that neither Sherie nor Hayley blames herself; rather, both use the space of their poems to call attention to the behaviours of adults and to establish their own voices in recounting their experiences.

Looking at the pedagogy and classroom context across both cases provides insight into how the learning environments shaped the creation and sharing of trauma narratives. In both contexts, the teachers pursued the development of pedagogies that were purposeful in their intent to cultivate the sharing of student experiences through poetry. In Pamela's seeking out of a community poet and in Rachel and Ace's introducing of digital poetry into their curriculum, the teachers were pursuing efforts that ran counter to prevailing efforts that excited the personal and that focused solely on enhancing test scores through rote learning. For Ace and Rachel, their participation in an inquiry group exploring multi-modal pedagogies impacted their development and pursuit of this poetry project. The very fact of their school's upcoming closure also opened up a space for more experimental and student-centred pedagogies to occur. Ace argued:

I think it helps at our school because we don't have anyone breathing down our necks, saying, like, "You're not learning a standard right now. You're going to be falling behind on your ELA preparation" . . . So I can understand where the fear of doing something comes in, where [teachers] are afraid of having someone walk in and see them doing something not on the agenda.

Pamela contended with the climate of high-stakes testing in an immediate way, a climate she shaped to her own ends, however, to invite personal stories into the classroom. Pamela addressed the test-taking pressure by teaching test preparation on other days of the week and expressed that poetry instruction was a valuable learning opportunity, explaining, "I never find problems matching those projects to our standards". However, when she found out that 10 of her students failed English the following year, she wondered if there was another way to have students retain information they needed for the ninth grade.

As we consider both the nature of the students' poems and the contexts in which they were produced, our findings suggest the potential of bringing together trauma studies and critical literacy to inform literacy research and practice. This move seems especially

important in response to climates of standardization and high-stakes testing that increasingly constrict opportunities for urban students to bring their lived experiences into school and to claim literacy as a personally and socially significant practice. At the heart of Paulo Freire's pedagogical approach is the idea that naming the world is a first step in changing the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Sherie's poetry and Hayley's poetry suggest the power to seize narrative control to name experiences of trauma that are often silenced within schools and the broader society. While the poems written by Sherie and Hayley were deeply personal, they were also reflective of larger social issues and struggles outside of the school walls. By claiming her voice and her own anger, Sherie resisted both the shame and silence that often accompany sexual abuse. By claiming both her vulnerability and her resilience, Hayley expressed the traumatic aspects of witnessing domestic turmoil, while also using poetry to assert her own strength. In this way, both girls claim literacy as a practice of truth telling and meaning making about the social world. They could therefore be seen to move from "writing about" their lives in progressive writing paradigm to "writing for" (Schaafsma, 1996) their lives in a socio-political paradigm. That they did so in relation to traumatic events is significant and telling, especially given that the teachers did not explicitly elicit stories of trauma. Sherie and Hayley pursued critical literacy practices by naming their experiences, acts that were critical and transformative, even as they were deeply personal and even as they did not intentionally travel outside of the school walls in the form of a social protest or letter campaign as in many manifestations of critical literacy pedagogies. Sherie and Hayley also influenced the classroom community, prompting other students to share related stories of their own experiences, including being placed in foster care and experiencing deaths in their families. In this way, the girls' poems opened up consideration of a range of family experiences that often go unacknowledged within schools and also opened up a range of possibilities for members of the classroom community to share, witness, hear and support each other. Poetry facilitated the teachers' efforts to "teach for openings" (Greene, 1994) and to create school spaces where student stories could be conceived, lived and heard.

Shifting what is visible: possibilities and considerations

In our opening vignette, we described how Danny reacted strongly to Sherie sharing her poem about sexual abuse. While Danny's response was contrary to the overwhelmingly affirming experiences that Hayley and Sherie received in their classrooms, we realize the great risk that accompanied the sharing of these stories given the ways in which teachers can "squirm" (Jones, 2004) in response to student experiences perceived to be problematic, inappropriate or upsetting. Along with Dutro (2009), we therefore ask "What is required, then, for educators to serve as the witnesses that children deserve in schools?" (p. 232).

In considering what it means to witness stories of trauma or abuse in the classroom, we underscore the importance of teachers following their schools' protocols for responding to situations where child abuse is recounted or evident. We would also, however, encourage educators to witness the child's story, attending to the child and to the story in the moment. As Felman and Laub noted, "The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed" (as cited in Dutro, 2008, p. 428). Given the ways in which students may make themselves vulnerable in testifying to their stories, we advocate careful, non-judgemental and compassionate listening as essential in that moment and the moments to follow. When students share trauma narratives, they shift what becomes visible about themselves to other students, family members, educators and administrators. Educators may take what is visible and

create more responsive pedagogy, particularly if they are sensitive to their own assumptions about interpretations of students' lives (Dutro, 2009). In opening up not only their pedagogy, but also the physical space of the classroom, the teachers in our studies also created porous classroom communities in which differently situated adults, including community poets, parents and researchers, were invited in to work with and listen to young people, suggesting the power of opening up classrooms to the insights of other adults to create valuable opportunities for expression and witnessing.

As a genre, poetry is ideally suited for opening a space for this kind of meaning making and for the creation of a context for responsible and responsive witnessing. The experiences of Sherie and Hayley suggest how poetry can enable students to gain new perspectives on situations; disrupt traditional notions of school-sanctioned talk; help build collaborative relationships among teachers, students and parents; and strengthen students' sense of efficacy by making voices heard to multiple audiences. When a poetry workshop is taught where students are encouraged to take a critical stance on their own experiences, including traumatic ones, reading and writing poetry can take on a role of communication and action, empowering students to grapple with the complexities of real-world experiences. Understanding this literacy practice is significant; when students write narratives about their own trauma, this allows them not only to reflect on complex problems, but also to exert some degree of control over how to represent their own experiences and to perceive their life stories.

Even within these possibilities, we nonetheless found that attendance to the ethical issues involved in creating spaces for and responding to trauma narratives in our research and teaching is important. As researchers, we each adhere to well-established means of maintaining confidentiality as well as approaches to building rapport and trust with participants (Maxwell, 2005). When the trauma narratives emerged, however, we were faced with a range of difficult choices, including when to audiotape and when to turn the recorder off; when to ask questions about the students' poems to further our understanding and when not to, for fear of furthering the students' pain; and how to approach family members who may not wish to discuss the traumatic experience referenced by the student. We carefully considered our own responsibilities when we heard students' narratives, wanting to be responsive witnesses to the students' experiences and to honour their vulnerability and risk in telling them. Given the scarcity of research exploring trauma narratives in literacy research, we found few resources available in the research literature to illuminate our dilemmas, an area that we certainly see as needing additional attention in the field.

For researchers, teachers and students, sharing trauma narratives within schools carries an undeniable risk. As Hesford (1999) states, "Autobiographical acts of self-disclosure can be viewed as contact zones – as practices through which individuals negotiate conflicting identities and contradictory discourses" (pp. 105–106). However, we feel that Sherie and Hayley have shown us the possibility and potential of connecting students' experiences with their literacy practices in school. As we continue to consider the importance of facilitating literacy learning that is significant and powerful for students, we find ourselves hoping that more students have the opportunity to tell their stories in environments that support them with people who hear and accept their trauma narratives.

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Appendix 1. Transcription of Hayley’s digital poem

Seconds	Visual	Auditory
:00	Black-and-white image of two people watching television, sitting on pillows or a mattress. The people’s backs are to the viewer, and the TV screen is facing the viewer. The screen has no image, just light in it. Bright light is also present behind the TV. Transition: none.	Sitting with Dad, watching TV
:04	Woman entering doorway wearing pink sleeveless shirt and white pants, possibly dragging luggage. Wall is beige with white trim. Transition: double diamond opens – one towards the centre of the screen; the other towards the edges.	Mom comes home, and starts right in
:08	Brown tile floor with black grout with a broken white dish on top. Transition: shattering tiles that seem to fly off towards the viewer.	Crashing, banging
:10	Broken pink and blue floral cup and saucer. Transition: skinny horizontal lines similar to poor reception.	Glass everywhere
:12	Young girl under table between chair legs. Chairs have checked fabric upholstery. Transition: enlarging heart-shaped opening starting at centre and expanding to edges.	Hiding under table, scared
:14	Crying baby with a blanket over the head and shoulders. Black background. Transition: plus opening from the centre outward.	Blanket by my side
:16	White cloud on black background holding characters to indicate cursing: @!! (star) # (upside down question mark)/*!	While swearing comes alive

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Seconds	Visual	Auditory
	Transition: quarter-turn clockwise pinwheel.	
:18	Image of a girl or woman crying. The image is sort of like a negative – dark with bright white highlighting of the outline of the eyes and tears, nostril, hair line, lip lines, and under-side of chin.	My worst nightmare has arrived
	Transition: opens as a box from lower right corner expanding to upper left.	
:21	Two policemen at the doorway to what appears to be an apartment building, standing on wooden porch with wooden railing, within amber lighting from the building.	Cops show up at the door
	Transition: corner peels up from lower right to reveal the next image.	
:24	Top of police car with five lights flashing – red, white, blue, white, blue.	Sirens going off everywhere
	Transition: corner peels up from lower left to reveal the next image.	
:26	Two cars driving in the dark on a road way that is either lit by the headlights or slightly foggy. The red sports car with headlights on is focal and in the front left section of the screen. The second car is further back and indistinguishable in the back right section of the screen.	Mom leaves
	Transition: box emerges and enlarges from the centre out towards the edges.	
:28	Skid mark on a roadway with weeds in the cracks and a blurred background of brush and trees.	And squealing tires fill the air. That's my worst nightmare.
	Transition: none.	
Notation	The text in the credits is centred and flies out towards the viewer as it grows from a small font to a larger font.	Selection of lyrics from “Stronger” by Kanye West are provided below as they play along with the credits.
:33	My Worst Nightmare	“work it, make it, do it, makes us
:37	Written by Hayley	harder, better, faster, stronger. Th-th- that that don't kill me
:42	Edited by my teachers	can only make me stronger. I need you to hurry up now
:47	Special Effects by Hayley	'cause I can't wait much longer. I know I got to be right now 'cause I
:52	Made Possible by Viewers Like You . . .	can't get much wronger. Man I been waitin' all night now. That's how long I've been on ya”.
:57 ends at 1:00	NOT!!!!!!!!!!	