

# EXPLORING GLOBAL ISSUES THROUGH POETRY

Teacher Development Day – 7/1/2011

# Why Literature?

From Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching: A guide for teachers and trainers*, pp. 15-19

- Motivate students
- Provide access to cultural background
- Encourage language acquisition
- Expand language awareness
- Develop interpretive abilities
- Educate students as whole people

# Why Poetry?

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- A change of pace
- Conveys meaning in few words
- Creative expression
- A chance to write without strict grammar rules
- Art as activism
- Cultural value of poetry

# Overview of Activity

- Volunteers read each poem aloud
- Check understanding of the general meaning
- Students choose a poem and get into small groups to discuss comprehension and discussion questions
- Volunteers summarize group discussion and answer questions (from other groups) on meaning and vocabulary
- Back in groups, students read through and brainstorm on the poem writing suggestions
- Individually or in groups, students write poems, using the poems they chose as models
- Volunteers share poems with the class

# Poem 1: God to a Hungry Child by Langston Hughes

Both poems are from Bigelow, B. & Peterson, B. (Eds.) (2002).  
*Rethinking globalization: Teaching for justice in an unjust world.*

Hungry child,  
I didn't make this world for you.  
You didn't buy any stock in my railroad.  
You didn't invest in my corporation.  
Where are your shares in Standard Oil?

I made the world for the rich  
And the will-be-rich  
And the have-always-been-rich.  
Not for you.  
Hungry child.

## Poem 2:

# Two Young Women by Deidre Barry

**I'm 18, and years older than that.**

I'm 18, and I can't believe I'm that old.

**I get up before sunrise, because I have to be at work.**

I get up at 6, because I need time to do my hair and makeup before school.

**I walk two miles to work, the blisters on my feet open from wear.**

I drive to school, and walk carefully, because I need to keep my shoes clean.

**I spend my day inside a factory, with hundreds of other girls, unable to take breaks, and unable to leave.**

I spend my day in classes, wanting only to get out.

**I would give anything to go to school, to learn, to be able to get somewhere in life.**

I would give anything to be done with school. Who cares anyways?

**I would quit, but I can't. I have parents, brothers and sisters to support, and jobs are hard to find.**

I'd drop out, but then my parents would be pissed.

**At 4:00, we get a five minute break for water, and then it's back for more work.**

At 3:30, we get out, and I head for basketball practice.

**I sew the Swoosh on, time after time, hour after hour, until my fingers bleed, and my knuckles ache.**

I lace up my Nikes, my new ones.

**I earn barely enough to live, and not even near enough to help my family. I get paid per pair, and I can only make so many.**

These cost me \$130, and everyone has a pair.

**My lungs burn with every breath, and I cough up dust every night when I get home.**

My lungs burn as I run up and down the court, but I know it only makes me stronger.

**I sew pair after pair, trying to earn enough to buy food and clothes.**

These shoes hurt my feet. I think I'll buy a new pair.

**I go home, and cry. I want out, but it's such a vicious cycle. I work to get out, but I always need to work a little more before I have enough.**

I go home, and lie on my water bed. I can't wait till college. I can get out.

# Comprehension Questions

1. Underline a few vocabulary words that you aren't sure about. Ask your group what they mean and write the definition next to them.
2. Ask your group about any parts of the poem that you don't understand.
3. Tell the group what you think the poem means. What is the poet trying to say? What is the poet's message or point?

# Discussion Questions

## For “God to a Hungry Child”

1. Do you agree with the poet that it seems that God “made the world for the rich”? If so, what makes it seem that way? If not, who do you think it seems that God made this world for?
2. Imagine that there is a hungry child in your hometown. Whose responsibility is it to take care of the child? Besides food, what else should all children have? Who should provide these if the parent(s) can not?
3. This poem was published in 1925. Do you think things better or worse for hungry children today? Why? Give specific reasons.

## For “Two Young Women”

1. Which countries do you think these two young women are from? Why? Do you think that life for young women in these countries is getting better or worse? Why?
2. Which of these women's lives is more similar to yours? How is it the same? How is it different? What else can you imagine about the lives of these two women?
3. The last line of the poem ends with “I can get out.” What does this young women want to get out of? Is she more or less trapped than the other young woman? Why?

# Poem Writing Suggestions

## For “God to a Hungry Child”

- Think about some of the things that are unfair or difficult in the world. How might God explain that to a child? Instead of a child, is there another type of person or thing (like a plant or an animal) that God might explain this to? Talk to your group about your ideas.

## For “Two Young Women”

- Who are two people (or things) that have very different points of view? What details would be different? What would be the same? Talk to your group about your ideas.

# Ideas for Extension

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- Look more critically at the poems
- Look at other examples of art as activism
- Research the factual context of the poems
- Research the lives of the poets (limited in the case of “Two Young Women”)

# Discussion

- Do you know of any other poems that relate to global issues?
- What has been your experience with having students read or write poetry (or, perhaps, other types of creative writing)?
- Where in our existing curriculum could an activity like this fit?
- In what other ways could this activity be extended?