

Collaboration Through POETRY

Cindy McGee

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I’d always found collaboration with the middle school teachers a struggle. Their tight timetables just didn’t seem to allow for scheduled library time. So, when I heard that the Grade 6 teachers at my school were planning to start their poetry unit, I decided this presented both an opportunity and a challenge, and I offered (well, maybe I insisted on giving) help. I understood the fear of teaching something unknown. In fact, I shared those feelings about the poetry unit, but I knew that if I showed any hesitation, I would lose my chance at collaboration, so I took a deep breath and made my partnership pitch. The teachers had decided to set up poetry centres, so I offered to set up an additional centre in the library, where the students could explore Spoken Word, adding another dimension to their experience of poetry.



Photo : Julie Millan

Spoken Word was something that I had experienced only once, so it was very new to me. I needed to learn more about Spoken Word before I could feel comfortable teaching at this centre. In conversation with my colleagues, I learned that one of the Grade 2 teachers had done undergraduate work with Spoken Word. She was a fantastic resource! She lent me CD sets and tutored me, and her confidence and her willingness

to share her knowledge increased my confidence. I also discovered that one of the Grade 6 teachers had books of poetry for two voices that I could use as resources.

Now, with knowledge, confidence, and resources, I could set up that library centre I’d offered, a centre at which students could listen to Spoken Word and then select, practice, and perform a poem of their own. Because I worked with the students in small groups, each teacher needed to book five library sessions. I wanted to make this as easy and painless as possible for the teachers, so I went to them, daytimer in hand. It took about four weeks to see all of the groups in each of the three classes. Two of the teachers chose to have the students perform in their own classrooms, at their convenience. The third teacher decided to take it one step further—by booking time in the library for a “poetry café.” We served juice and cookies in an effort to make the students’ experience both more authentic and memorable.

Looking back, I am glad that I recognized the opportunity, accepted the challenge, and persisted in my efforts to become involved in the Grade 6 poetry unit. This effort has led to consistent partnering with teachers and a greater involvement with students. And, as a bonus, I’m more comfortable with poetry and no longer cringe when it’s time to teach that particular curriculum topic! ■

