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Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tjpt20>

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Version of record first published: 09 Nov 2012.

To cite this article: Nicholas Mazza (2012): Poetry/creative writing for an arts and athletics community outreach program for at-risk youth, *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education*, 25:4, 225-231

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2012.738491>

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Poetry/creative writing for an arts and athletics community outreach program for at-risk youth

Nicholas Mazza^{*}

The focus of this article is on the creative writing component of a two-week arts and athletics summer camp for disadvantaged middle-school-age (11–14) youth. An overview of the camp is provided followed by a description, illustration and analysis of the creative writing methods. Preliminary findings from this pilot study indicate that the writing exercises were helpful in contributing to positive youth development (e.g., promoting self-esteem, problem-solving, team building, and prosocial behavior).

Keywords *Arts; athletics; community outreach; creative writing; middle school; poetry; positive youth development*

The focus of this article is on a creative writing component of a two-week arts and athletics summer camp developed by a College of Social Work as part of its community outreach program for youth (middle school age) from low-income families (Florida State 24/7: The News Site of Florida State University, 2012). The use of athletics to reach at-risk youth is not a new concept. Nolan (1955) noted that through sports, children and youth learn (without being aware they are learning) about respect, the rights of others, fair play, and the general rules of social behavior. More recently, Fraser-Thomas, Cote and Deakin (2005) identified the positive effect that athletic programs can have on youth development. And perhaps the model program for promoting life skills through athletics is the Learning in Fitness & Education (LiFE) Sports youth program administered by the College of Social Work, Department of Athletics, and Department of Recreational Sports at Ohio State University (Life Sports, n.d.). Similarly, the use of the arts for the personal development of youth has a significant history. Schaufler (1931) compiled an anthology of poetry for children and youth that included a major section on “Sportsmanship Tonics” including “fair play, teamwork, graceful winning, gallant losing, and stick-to-it-iveness” in *The Junior Poetry Cure: The First-Aid Kit of verse for*

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the Young of all Ages (pp.35–122). More recently, Camilleri (2007) and contributors examined the place of the creative arts with inner city youth. It is beyond the scope of this paper but a more in-depth historical examination would include the ancient Greek Olympic games, drama, and mythology (Apollo as god of poetry, music, medicine, and more).

The unique aspect of the College of Social Work Arts and Athletics program is the integrated use of sports and the arts in combination with academic support programs and a local housing authority with the purpose of promoting positive youth development. The two-week summer camp was conducted on campus with transportation and meals provided. Full use of classrooms, playing fields, and other services were also provided by the university. Designed to advance academic development and life skills (e.g., problem-solving, team building, leadership, self and interpersonal awareness, and conflict resolution), the activities included athletic sessions (including volleyball, sand volleyball, tennis, and softball), art, poetry/creative writing, leadership skills, human rights awareness, public speaking, dining etiquette, and communication skills. The sessions were conducted by student athletes, faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, and other academic personnel. There were 21 participants (20 African American, 1 Caucasian; 11 boys, 10 girls) and each activity lasted 75 minutes. The program included a celebratory luncheon at the University President's Box (stadium) overlooking the football field with invited guest from the community. The middle school participants took an active role in speaking and introducing guests. The camp was a pilot project funded through a private donation with the expectation of refinement and expansion based on an analysis of preliminary qualitative data (Mazza, 2012).

Running with words: Creative writing that matters

The purpose of the two session “running with words” creative writing activity (one on the first day of camp and one on the last day) was to help young people unleash their imagination, learn about themselves, encourage creative thinking, build self-esteem, and strengthen interpersonal relationships. This was accomplished through a series of individual and group poetry reading and creative writing exercises. This included: reading and responding to preselected poems and songs, the use of prompts (e.g., Hope is the color...), a six word story, group poems, and performance activities with symbolic meaning. While building their writing skills in a creative and supportive environment, it was expected that students would gain confidence that will benefit them in social (school, recreational) and home environments. The methods and techniques used in the session were drawn from Mazza's (2003) R.E.S. poetry therapy model. This model includes an integrative theoretical foundation (humanistic, cognitive-behavioral, ego psychology, systems, narrative, and strengths perspective) and the best available practice-research evidence. The model consists of three major dimensions:

1. **R**–Receptive/prescriptive involving the introduction of poetic material into practice,
2. **E**–Expressive/creative involving written and oral expression, and
3. **S**–Symbolic/ceremonial involving the use of symbols, ceremonies, and rituals.

The following sections of this report include highlights of the two sessions including the techniques, original material from the participants, and brief analyses.

Session 1 (last session of first day of camp)

Receptivelprescriptive

In this first session, Maya Angelou’s (1975/1994) poem “Alone” was introduced, and the students were asked to respond to the poem (What did they think of it? What does it mean to them? Any particular line or stanza particularly important to them? Were they familiar with Maya Angelou?). The poem proved to be a good springboard for discussion. Most of the students were familiar with the poet and saw her as a source of inspiration. We discussed “being alone” and the importance of friendship, teamwork, and support. The point that we are interdependent does not negate our individual identity and strengths.

Following the poem, the song “Greatest Love of All” (Creed & Masser, 1977) performed by Whitney Houston was played, and students were asked to react in a similar way as to the above poem. Again, most students were familiar with the song and artist and appeared to take strength from the piece. The importance of dignity and self-worth was clearly communicated. This discussion leads to the following writing exercise.

Expressivelcreative

The students were introduced to the “six-word story” a literary form often attributed to a challenge posed to Ernest Hemingway that became a popular activity for a range of populations including adolescents (Smith & Fershleiser, 2009). The task for this group was simply to write a story (in six words) about themselves. Here are some examples:

I like playing football every day.
I got punched by a girl.
I really love Florida State football.
I shoot. I score. I win.
I kissed her for her birthday.
Aiden was born on May ninth
I wish I could draw now.

The above individual creations are playful but reflect issues of identity (Aiden was born . . .), self-consciousness (boy who got punched by a girl), allegiance (I love FSU), affirmation of strength (I shoot . . .), and aspirations (football, drawing).

This exercise was followed by a discussion of “good days” and “bad days” and led into the sensory poem, a group exercise (which could also be used as an individual exercise) with the senses prestructured into the poem (Ghostwriter, 1993). The following poem was created (*italic words are those contributed by group members*):

A Good Day: A Group Poem

A good day is the color *yellow*.
 It sounds like *a buzzing bee*.
 It feels like *a soft pillow*.
 It tastes like *Gummy Bears*.
 It smells like *cotton candy*.
 It makes you feel like *playing*.

Symbolic/ceremonial

The group was asked for a volunteer to read the poem. One student promptly volunteered and after reading was cheered by the group. This led to the symbolic/ceremonial component of the R.E.S. model. The students were asked to create a poem about a *good days* without using words but rather physical expression like a dance (Mazza, 2006). Several groups of students volunteered (almost spontaneously) to the request. We later discussed how dance and sports are similar to poetry. For example, both contain powerful communication, require not only individual talent but also working together in the actual performance with little or no verbal communication, and rely on cohesion (work together for common good). Several small groups of students took turns with their performance.

At the end of the session, the students were given personal journals so that they could write about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings over the next 2 weeks and beyond. This served to encourage students to “keep writing” and provided an opportunity for students to reflect on their experience.

Session 2 (last session of last day of camp)

Expressive/creative

This session started with identifying themes about the camp experience. Students were asked: If you were writing a headline trying to capture what your experience was like at the camp, what would it be? Students were directed to work independently on this task then they would have the opportunity to share their work with the group. Here are some examples of what the students created:

Together we can accomplish anything here
 We are together as a team
 We are one big puzzle
 I will be your pal if you are mine
 We are one big family

Lean on me
Responsibility is the key
We are all family all together forever
What I like about camp is the sports people
We are together as one in the world
We're the helping hands
Be a great leader not a follower
We are the children of your future
We are good on our own but we are greater together
All for 1 and 1 for all

Merging of receptive prescriptive and symbolic ceremonial

Hughes's (1926/1994) "Dreams" was shared with the students. One student quickly volunteered to read the poem and proceeded (without prompting) to sing the poem. The close relationship between music and poetry was evident. The student was cheered by the entire class. This allowed the opportunity to discuss the importance of poetry as performance. All of the students appeared to be genuinely engaged with the poem and shared some of their hopes and dreams. This led to the sharing of the song "I believe I can fly" performed by Kelly (1996). Several students through their own choreography, movement, and dance performed the song. This symbolic and ceremonial activity served to advance cohesion within the group and affirmed the students' abilities to communicate in very powerful ways.

Merging of expressive creative and symbolic ceremonial

As a closing exercise, a collaborative poem about summer camp experience (each person has the opportunity to contribute one or more lines) was used:

College of Social Work Arts and Athletics Summer Camp
Meeting new people
leadership, teamwork and being respectful.
Responsibility is the key.
Sportsmanship is everything.
There's no "I" in team.
Participation awarded
by having fun with friends and making new friends.
Caring is loving
You don't have to like everybody to be a good team
Don't give up!
Unexpected fun may come to you.
We should have a healthy community

The group was asked: Who would like to read your group poem? Three students volunteered and they agreed to read it together (each person reading four lines). In the reading, the students also used movement to express their interpretation of the

poem. This poem clearly reflected the students' positive experience with the camp but perhaps more importantly, their ability and pride in working together through the arts and sports. It also reflected the students' ability to problem-solve (e.g., three volunteers to read one poem). By reading the poem, ownership was attributed to the group advancing their individual and collective self-esteem in a ceremonial and symbolic manner.

Discussion

The methods (individual and group) and techniques drawn from the R.E.S. model appeared to contribute to positive youth development. Poetry and other forms of creative writing were effective and consistent in integrating arts and athletics into a community outreach program for disadvantaged middle school age youth. The findings for this report are preliminary and reflect only one component of the entire program. Further application and evaluation of the creative writing component and the overall program are warranted. The early findings do indicate the R.E.S. model proved to be nonthreatening and culturally sensitive, providing a sense of empowerment to the students. The students were writing their own individual and group "stories" that affirmed their experiences, history, family, community, and dreams (goals). Poetry writing provided a vehicle to discuss their experiences with art, athletics, and educational/personal development activities. The model addressed the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of the students' experience within a family and community context. Through word and performance, hope was instilled for personal, physical, and educational/career development. Through moments of triumph or defeat, happiness or despair, the words that these middle school age youth created indeed do matter and will serve them well in the future.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my good friend and poetry therapy colleague Sherry Reiter (2003) who came up with the phrase "running with words" when referring to me as a marathon runner and poet in writing an introductory note for my keynote address at a poetry therapy conference.

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