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Youth Voices: Performance Poetry as a Platform for Literacy, Creativity, and Civic Engagement

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Everyone has a story to tell. Thirty years ago, there was a group of creative writers who wanted to share the joy of stories with children. They grabbed their pencils and paired up with public school teachers to form Writers in the Schools (WITS). WITS poets and authors make learning an exciting adventure, while improving the academic, social, and creative abilities of 23,500 children and teachers each year. WITS is the top-rated arts education organization in Texas and the leader of an international movement for creative learning, expanding from schools into libraries, museums, parks, hospitals, community centers, and summer camps. Recently, WITS has expanded from "page to stage," helping youth explore their truths through performance poetry and the acclaimed program, Meta-Four Houston.

The youth slam poetry movement is growing in Houston. WITS adopted Meta-Four in 2012 after collaborating with the program since 2009. WITS performance poets work with teens across the city, partnering with schools, libraries, and community centers. The participating 1,100 youth represent the diversity of Houston, economically, racially, and culturally. Approximately 61.9 percent of WITS students are Hispanic, 25.2 percent African American, 8.2 percent white, 3.5 percent Asian, and the remainder are from other ethnic populations.¹ The Meta-Four program draws students from the Houston Independent School District as well as

neighboring districts in Fort Bend, Katy, and Humble. Young people sometimes even travel to slams via the Metro bus. The Meta-Four program provides safe platforms for young people to be seen, heard, honored, and taken seriously. Students experience poetry slams, open mic events, writing workshops, and poetry performances. Students also vie for a spot on the flagship slam team, which competes internationally and performs throughout the city at festivals, community events, and pop-ups, including TEDxHouston and TEDxYouth. Meta-Four events are designed to be visible to the public so these youth are celebrated and their voices are heard. Aligned with the writing process, celebrations are a critical part of the WITS teaching model. By sharing original work and stories, students connect to one another, developing a sense of belonging as well as a literary identity as a writer.²

Performance poetry thrives on collaboration. From the inception, Youth Speaks in California and the international Brave New Voices festival have brought programs together, resulting in replication, collaboration, and cross pollination with dozens of programs. “If we can call youth spoken word a movement, it is because of this momentum – the people who participate in this work share a strong belief in its power and are willing to contribute their experiences and expertise.”² In Houston, Meta-Four was born out of collaborations between the Houston Chronicle, DiverseWorks,

WITS, Voices Breaking Boundaries, and the University of Houston. These community partnerships allowed accessibility to slam workshops, such as the *Life is Living* Festival, which focused on sustainability and the civic responsibility through volunteering, gardening, house building, and hip-hop. WITS has helped expand the reach of Meta-Four into school and community classrooms, including monthly workshops and slams at Hope Stone, Inc. and projects with the Houston Public Library, Alley Theatre, and Society for the Performing Arts. WITS provides Meta-Four where kids already are, or builds programs specifically for them that involve poetry slam culture. For instance, students from Yates High School only have to go across the street after school to the Smith Neighborhood Library, where Meta-Four has provided after-school workshops every Wednesday for the past four years. On these Wednesday afternoons, the room is transformed to a poetry haven. Discussions often revolve around a sense of place and self-pride with powerful place-making poems about Third Ward or the Tre (inner-city neighborhoods). Every Wednesday, students share their thoughts, humor, stresses, or open mind to the craft of poetry slam.

Performance poetry encourages creative self-expression and literacy among youth, while building a literary culture and platform for social change. WITS Board member and Meta-Four founder Shannon

Buggs explains, "Through Meta-Four Houston, the next generation of city leaders discovers what matters most to it and how to express that purpose using the most powerful tools available — its own words and voices." The discovery of voice is powerful. Studies have pointed to how programs, similar to Meta-Four, can positively influence emotional attitudes, including empathy, a sense of belonging, social networks and connections, creativity, and a sense of being listened to and valued.⁴ Meta-Four uses slams, public presentations, workshops, and performances as media to find and celebrate individual words and the collective voice of Houston youth. By teaching youth to own their words through vocal performance, they learn to understand their potential power and become freedom thinkers, wielding their words for positive and effective change.

Poetry slams bring people together to share stories and listen to our tomorrows. Young people write their truths about their lives, communities, schools, and environment. They learn and deepen communication skills through the art of performance. But, the nature of slam poetry is competitive. Equipped with their words, young poets perform an original poem in front of an audience, scored on a 0-10 point scale by five randomly picked judges. Poetry becomes an interactive game, drawing snaps and hollers from the audience. Meta-Four monthly workshops take place year-round with the Space City Slam Series

culminating the season. Nearly 150 young writers participate in a gauntlet of seven planet-themed slams, with the 21 finalists advancing to the Space City Grand Slam. Students are enthusiastic and excited about poetry, with six students winning a slot on the Meta-Four Slam Team. The team is newly formed each year and performs across the city for an entire year. Every summer, the Meta-Four Slam Team competes in the Brave New Voices International festival. This youth poetry slam competition convenes with 500 students from 60 cities to share and celebrate each other's stories with power of poetry. Because of Meta-Four, Houston is on the map for youth slam poetry with the top-ranked youth team in Texas.

Performance poetry can be a vehicle for education. Students who are highly involved in the arts perform better in school, are more likely to graduate, attend college, and obtain employment than students with less exposure to the arts.⁴ The librarian from a local high school shared that since students began working with their Meta-Four coach, "I have seen the kids blossom into more self-confident and capable students. Some of our students show pride in their work like never before!" Through formative assessments, including teacher feedback, observation, surveys, and reflective journals WITS has documented the qualitative impact of its program. Since 1999, the success of the WITS program has been verified through a third-party summative evaluation led by Dr. Carl Scott of the

University of St. Thomas, using pre- and post-service surveys to analyze writing and creativity skills as well as comparisons in standardized test scores for reading and writing. Dr. Scott recently reported that “Writers in the Schools is a national model for quality arts education with more than a decade of empirical results, creating a lasting impact on student writing, confidence, standardized test scores, and creative self-expression.”⁵ Meta-Four Houston builds upon the teaching of reading and writing to include speaking and communications, a fundamental pillar of literacy.

Performance poetry creates community. According to a recent study, spoken word programs are holistic with social and psychological benefits, providing support and mentorship to youth, while engaging them in community building.² The work of Meta-Four is beyond competitively performing poetry. Meta-Four is a resource for our community, connecting youth to volunteer opportunities, jobs, scholarships, and visible events. Performance poetry raises civic and social leaders, helping helps young people articulate their truths and discover new ways to creatively advance themselves and their community.

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