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# [Evolution of a Poetry Program at the Rhode Island Training School]

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The poetry program at the Rhode Island Training School emerged out of classes I was covering as a substitute teacher. In the absence of any specific coverage assignments, I used class time to explore the uses of poetic language and the visceral impact of metaphor as a way of transferring aggressive energy. As students tended to show an incredible amount of interest in expressing themselves as artists, the program evolved into an after school mentoring project that provided a more specific forum and a more focused group of poets.

The after school groups are, first and foremost, informal and relaxed. No rules apply beyond honesty and trust, and censorship is minimally employed so we can move to what is real. During the early phase of the writing workshops, students are introduced to the impact of single words. The exercises we perform together center on how we come to understand the subtle shades and nuances of language. Also, early on, I use recall exercises in which students create links between memory and language. Free association exercises also help me put my students in touch with their natural linguistic "flow". I must note, though, that most of the exercises I employ are loosely structured so that my students can develop their own individual strategies. The most important lesson I have learned in teaching poetry here for the past three years is that you don't really teach your students how to write. What you do, ultimately, is provide a guideline and watch them construct individual methods of approach.

At the core of what I do with the young folks at the Rhode Island Training School is my desire to employ powerful language as a means of exploring issues of anger, fear, distrust and confusion. When students culminate their poetic energies and perform their works in front of an audience of community artists as they had on November 12, 1998, they begin to realize the impact their language has on the world outside these gates. On May 20, 1999, a 170 page anthology will be printed and ready for distribution. The book, entitled "Impact", will house 256 poems. We are also planning to expand on a seven minute documentary we have made on the poets here, and to transition students into the arts community. Currently, we are developing plans for an arts-based charter school designed specifically for inner-city youth.

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