

heard the horror stories of the parent conferences, the parents who attack before you get two words out. But this is one of the few places we have to make some changes in perception, to persuade, to get the message out that we are doing a good job, often in the face of some horrendously difficult circumstances.

We need to stick together. We need to keep bonding over the mission of bringing young people into the profession. Their passion keeps me young. But as I regularly travel between their passion and the

complexities of schools, I am fearful about whether we are doing enough to prepare them well and keep them working in the profession. I know the simplistic faith in testing won't get us there. Embracing and thriving in the complexities of real classrooms will.

Reference

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Poetry: The Magic Wand for Reading's Ills

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In the movie *Miss Congeniality*, when the beauty pageant contestants are asked, "What is the one most important thing our society needs?" they each respond, in turn, "World Peace." However, when Gracie, the protagonist, herself a beauty contestant but really an undercover FBI agent, is asked, she responds, "That would be ... harsher punishment for parole violators." The pageant hall is silent, until Gracie adds, "And world peace!" at which point the crowd cheers enthusiastically.

So here I am, confronted with the question, "What would you change if you had a magic wand?" and I imagine around me a chorus of voices giving answers that center on standardized tests and the debilitating effects they're having on our teachers, schools, and students. Professional journals, politicians' promises, NCTE listservs, newspaper editorials, and a president's mantra all seem to circle around what standardized tests *can* do for our kids, what standardized tests *aren't* doing for our kids, and what standardized tests are doing *to* our kids. As professionals, we literacy educators are pretty clear that something needs to be done and it's not a small task. The magic wand answer, then, might look something like, "an intelligent plan (funding, education, classroom teacher support) that genuinely leaves no child behind."

In the middle of that chorus, imagine the respondent who, when asked "What would you change if you had a magic wand?" answers "Poetry—the reading of it. The writing of it. The teaching of it." The silence in the teacher's lounge would be deafening. Poetry is not in vogue these days; it's not a talking point among those concerned with teacher preparation or accountability. It is not a topic that propels us toward raising standards or measuring outcomes. Still, that probably says more about the current political and educational climate than it does about human souls and what they need. And outside the classroom, poetry is flourishing in the form of poetry slams, novels written in poetic form, poems posted on buses and subways, and rap music.

So why a magic wand wish used for poetry?



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When he was selected U.S. poet laureate, Joseph Brodsky advocated that poetry be sold in supermarkets and left in every motel room in America, right next to the Gideon Bible, because "Poetry doesn't just make you feel good, it makes sense out of the world, and it can be neglected only to the nation's detriment." Brodsky was simply articulating what poets from Robert Frost to Rita Dove, from Donald Hall to Audre Lorde have all expressed: Poetry is not a luxury. Poetry matters in our everyday lives. Poetry makes us human. And we are born with an ear and a voice for poetry. As William Stafford put it, "The question is not when I became a poet, but when other people stopped."

Most children enter school with this love for poetry—the play of language, the images and ideas, the taste of words. But somewhere along the line, poetry becomes to most of them something *other*—something written by people who are unusually gifted, and understood by people who are unusually smart. They stop imagining poetry as a way of *being* in the world and start imagining it as language bound by rules—rhythm and rhyme—and limited to funny topics, butterflies or flowers, or angst over things like love and tragedy and death. And who can blame them? They are often assigned to write poems in which they slot in words ("three adjectives that describe your locker" or "a phrase comparing yourself to an animal") with little sense of why they might want to *read* a poem, much less why they might want to *write* one. Poetry is not, for them, "a momentary stay against confusion" (Pritchard, 1984); poetry is confusion itself. It belongs in a world utterly "out there"—far removed from their interests or concerns.

My understanding of the power of poetry in the lives of children is much, much different. Poetry gives students language, perception, beauty, power, art. These students write because they have something to say, and they find in poetry a forum and a form for saying it. Poetry gives shape to their anger and their joy, their dreams and their fears, their senses and their emotions.

How does that happen? By reading poems that matter; by learning some rudimentary poetic techniques; by finding authentic things to say and believing that poetry is the best way to say them. By having an

audience that matters, and a place to hear and speak the language of poems. By having teachers who offer poetry as a way of being in the world, rather than as a unit reluctantly completed in the year.

Higher test scores? Perhaps. For when students begin to pay attention to the best words in the best order, as Coleridge has said, they begin to notice in language what they may not have noticed before. When students think about the craft of writing, the art of paying attention, the power of expression, they bring those skills to other reading and writing tasks as well. Really, though, it's the wrong question. Poetry isn't about test scores. It's about soul. As one of our nation's greatest poets, William Carlos Williams wrote in his 1955 poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," "it is difficult/to get the news [or, one might add, higher test scores] from poems/yet men die miserably every day/for lack of what is found there" (Microsoft, 2005).

Perhaps our self-proclaimed "education president" would benefit from the words of another president, who once said, "When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses" (Wikiquote, 2005).

A magic wand? Maybe poetry doesn't need a magic wand—maybe it *is* a magic wand. That's what I hope. Oh—and I also hope for world peace.

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