HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES
WITH POETRY PEDAGOGY

A thesis presented
by
Mary Alice Young
to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
in the field of
Curriculum, Teaching, and Leadership

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2016
ABSTRACT

Poetry is the oldest and most universal of literary forms, rich in the oral and literary tradition of almost every culture, but fewer and fewer high school students today are given the opportunity to engage with the genre in their English classrooms. Educators, scholars, critics, and poets alike proclaim the great virtues of this art form, yet its pedagogy is not currently a priority in many American high schools, often due to the educational culture of standardization, performativity, objective testing, and attention to the STEM fields. Poetry’s vanishing act is important to address as there is continued evidence that it is a worthwhile subject and that ignoring it in the curriculum of high schools can be detrimental to students and teachers. The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of practicing high school English teachers involved in teaching poetry. The study was designed to investigate the phenomenon of poetry pedagogy, including what is most effective in instruction as well as the barriers that exist to instructional practice. Using the qualitative approach of an interpretive phenomenological analysis, 5 practicing high school English teachers were interviewed to gain greater understanding of their experiences with poetry pedagogy. The participants spoke candidly of their individual preparation, positionalities, values, and instructional practices. The data collected was analyzed to look closely at the themes of learning, respecting, effecting, and barring poetry. The teacher-participants had some differences in their respect for poetry as well as their methods of effectively teaching it, but held many commonalities in their perceptions of the barriers to effective practice and of their lack of preparation.

Keywords: poetry pedagogy, teaching poetry, English teachers, pre-service training.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Immense gratitude to everyone who worked with and encouraged me on this journey. To my family and all my friends and colleagues who supported me throughout this long process, I am overwhelmed with love. Incredible thank yous to Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters, Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed, and Dr. Rachel Dudley. Your help, support, and skills were critical to my success. Abundant appreciation to my study participants for your expressions and honesty. Thank you, DHS, for the time, and FGCU, for the place (in paradise). JC: you're the best. To all the teachers, students, and poets out there in the dark singing – keep the dream alive. We still hear you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................... 2  
Acknowledgement .......................................................................................................... 3  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................ 4  
Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................... 6  
  Research Problem ........................................................................................................... 7  
  Purpose ............................................................................................................................ 8  
  Justification ................................................................................................................... 8  
    Deficiencies in the evidence ......................................................................................... 10  
    Relating the discussion to audiences ......................................................................... 10  
  Significance of Research Problem .............................................................................. 12  
  Positionality ................................................................................................................ 14  
  Research Question ....................................................................................................... 16  
  Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................... 16  
    Components of PCK ................................................................................................. 17  
    Relevance ................................................................................................................ 22  
    Synthesis .................................................................................................................. 24  
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 25  
Chapter 2: Literature Review .......................................................................................... 27  
  The Value of Poetry ..................................................................................................... 27  
  The Value of Poetry Pedagogy .................................................................................... 31  
    Academic value .......................................................................................................... 33  
    Cultural and critical value ......................................................................................... 36  
  Teachers' Experiences with Poetry Pedagogy ............................................................... 40  
    Teachers' positive experiences .................................................................................. 40  
    Teachers' negative experiences ............................................................................... 48  
  Synthesis of Literature ............................................................................................... 59  
Chapter 3: Methodology .................................................................................................. 61  
  Research Paradigm ....................................................................................................... 61  
  Research Method .......................................................................................................... 62  
    Population and sampling ......................................................................................... 63  
    Recruitment and access ............................................................................................ 64  
    Context ...................................................................................................................... 65  
    Data collection and storage ...................................................................................... 65  
    Data analysis ............................................................................................................. 66  
    Trustworthiness ........................................................................................................ 67  
    Protection of human subjects ................................................................................... 68  
    Reciprocity .............................................................................................................. 69  
    Limitations .............................................................................................................. 69  
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings .......................................................................... 70  
  Profiles ........................................................................................................................ 71  
  Learning Poetry .......................................................................................................... 73  
    The genre ................................................................................................................ 74  
    The pedagogy .......................................................................................................... 75  
  Respecting Poetry ....................................................................................................... 78  
  Personally ............................................................................................................... 78
Chapter 1: Introduction

Perhaps without even realizing it in most cases, American high school students hear poetry every day. It is an art form that has been with them since their childhood nursery rhymes and has followed them, a language shadow, into their adolescence. It is in the music they listen to through their headphones as they walk to class; it is in the language they use to converse online and in the halls; it is shouted in their school cheers and written in bathroom stalls. Poetry is a critical literary form of personal expression, one that has been around almost as long as humanity; it is a communicative art that shows us “the ways in which we are all alike beneath the skin”, and that the “most important common denominator is the human heart” (Grimes, 2005, p. 23). Poetry is the oldest and most universal of literary forms, rich in the oral and literary tradition of almost every culture. But fewer and fewer high school students ever hear it coming from the mouths of their English teachers or are encouraged to discuss, analyze, write, or study it critically in their English classes. Educators, scholars, critics, and poets themselves far and wide proclaim the great virtues of this art form, yet it is the literary genre that is least taught in high schools today (Dressman & Faust, 2014; Xerri, 2014; Benton, 2000; Fleming, 1996).

The phenomenon of current poetry pedagogy in the high school classroom, therefore, is essential to investigate. The truth is that while many practicing high school English teachers may reveal positive attitudes toward and experiences with poetry in their classrooms, many other teachers may allow for the genre's vanishing act. Research into the phenomenon of poetry pedagogy thus seeks to understand the lived experiences of currently practicing high school English teachers, including their values and perceptions and their successes and failures in the classroom. This research seeks to gain greater awareness and understanding of the problem of poetry pedagogy.
Research Problem

Poetry as a genre is proven to have immense traditional, historical, academic, cultural, and critical value. It is well-regarded as a cornerstone in society’s imaginative, moral, and intellectual progress (Rorty, 2007). Its history as an incomparable, powerful art form is well-documented, which should therefore make it an essential part of any secondary education curriculum. Yet fewer high school English teachers today are making poetry study a priority. Though many educators declare poetry to be worthwhile in the classroom and relate incredible success in teaching it, others allow it to slip by the wayside. Evidence suggests that even when poetry is taught today, its teaching in practice is weaker than other aspects of English (Xerri, 2014). This phenomenon is certainly a problem worth exploring.

Part of the issue with poetry in current high school English classrooms is that secondary pedagogy is increasingly focused on teaching to the goal of standardized test success, which disempowers teachers who have to teach within the confines of an assessment system (Weaven & Clark, 2011; Benton, 2000; Pike, 2000). Indeed, the effects of an assessment-driven curriculum, and the restrictions and requirements found in systemic, standardized education, leave little pedagogical time for exploration of poetic arts, a genre that many consider a luxury (Xerri, 2014; Weaven & Clark, 2011; Benton, 2000). Such an educational culture of performativity certainly does not leave substantial room for creativity or compassion, as students are encouraged to pursue objective knowledge (Hennessy & McNamara, 2011).

Apart from the strict, pedagogical requirements of standardization, there are surely other reasons why poetry does not make it into the curriculum of many high school English classrooms. There is evidence that some English teachers just don’t see any worth in it; they may be dismissive of poetry as a genre, as some continue to call it a “fairly abstruse art-form”
and its study a “rarefied activity” (Benton, 2000, p. 83). Many English teachers report failed personal experiences with and/or apathy toward the subject of poetry, while others are discouraged or dissuaded in their pedagogy by their students’ poor reactions to the genre (Benton, 2000; Ray, 1999). Still other studies have found that teachers don’t feel educated enough, that they lack foundational content knowledge (Meyer, 2013), or that they feel ill-prepared to teach poetry themselves (Lambirth, Smith, & Steele, 2012; Keil, 2005; Benton, 2000; Pike, 2000; Wade & Sidaway, 1990).

Yet there is continued evidence that poetry is a worthwhile subject, and that ignoring it in the curriculum of high schools can be detrimental to students and teachers in a variety of ways. Dymoke (2012) writes that the absence of poetry in the classroom is a worldwide problem, stating vehemently that “it is vital to capture this increasingly endangered bird in flight” (p. 408). Certainly there continues to be many outspoken advocates for poetry’s inclusion in high school classrooms, as scholars and educators alike agree that the genre is of unquestionable personal, social, and pedagogical value. Therefore, research into the perspectives of educators on their experiences of poetry pedagogy helps to further investigate the phenomenon. Research also leads to greater understanding of the barriers teachers come up against when trying to enact meaningful poetry pedagogy, as well as provides details of effective pedagogical experiences, and encouragement for teachers to continue including this worthwhile genre in their practice.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain understanding of the poetry-teaching experiences of practicing English teachers at a suburban high school in the United States.

Justification
Studies on the phenomenon of teaching poetry in secondary classrooms have come from all over the English-speaking world, where researchers have found that teachers have a range of emotions and experiences regarding poetry and its pedagogy. While many scholars and educators in the Anglosphere assert poetry’s worth in the classroom (Dymoke & Hughes, 2009; Hanratty, 2008; Wade & Sidaway, 1990), and relate successful pedagogical endeavors (Keddie, 2012; Curwood & Cowell, 2011; Hennessey et al., 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a), many others share experiences on the other end of the spectrum. Studies have found teachers consistently demoralized by the boring poetry in many school curriculums as well as by the analytical and routine ways in which they are required to teach it (Weaven & Clark, 2011; Benton, 2000; Pike, 2000).

The force of standardization is also a thorn in poetry’s pedagogical side worldwide (Benton, 2000). In the United States, poetry is not often part of existing educational standards for high school students. Traditionally it has not been seen on the reading comprehension or writing sections of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), nor is it explicitly required by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative (2014). The CCSS (2014) requires students in grades 9-12 to analyze and write about literature, but lumps poetry in with the somewhat vague genres of stories and drama. The standards make no overt suggestions for the study of poetry or particular poets (Certo, Apol, Wibbens, & Hawkins, 2012), though they do suggest the study of a Shakespearean play, which would intrinsically include some poetry. Yet even in countries where poetry is taught widely, it is not always taught well. As Benton (2000) writes about the United Kingdom, their current educational culture has lead to “a falling off in enjoyment of poetry… and a loss of the creative to the analytical” (p. 92), which becomes a problem for everyone in an increasingly creative and innovative global marketplace (Marzano & Heflebower, 2012).
Teachers of English Language Arts (ELA) worldwide are therefore up against considerable barriers, which often lead to poor experiences in poetry pedagogy. While studies may confirm 100% affirmative responses from teacher-participants on whether they believe poetry should be taught (Ray, 1999), high school English teachers can still be put off by curricular demands, poor feelings of self-efficacy, and general apathy – not to mention their students’ pervasive notion that poetry is boring, unimportant, and only written by “dead, white males in frilly shirts” (Benton, 2000, p. 85).

In this light, researching the perspectives of practicing high school English teachers in the United States on their experiences of poetry pedagogy seeks to further investigate the phenomenon.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** There is a respectable amount of research relating to teachers’ perceptions of poetry and poetry instruction from other English-speaking countries – including the United Kingdom, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and Canada, among others – but a sizeable portion of it is quantitative. Additionally, many studies on teachers’ perceptions and experiences have concentrated on primary school teachers and on pre-service teachers. There seems to be a lack of qualitative research on practicing high school English teachers’ perceptions of poetry and its pedagogy, especially in the United States. This research project helps to gain understanding of these educators’ experiences of teaching poetry. The study is designed to add depth to the existing body of research by completing a qualitative study that examines the perceptions of practicing high school English teachers in the United States and to add their voices to the lexicon of the topic.

**Relating the discussion to audiences.** The study may be especially valuable to those in the trenches, the educators who teach high school English in the United States. ELA teachers in
grades 9-12 who are often the targets of the standards-based reform movement, and who may be forced to engage in high-stakes testing pedagogy, may be particularly interested in the topic of poetry pedagogy. To see how others in the same situation may be experiencing the phenomenon of teaching poetry in the classroom may be useful to educators’ understanding of their own personal and professional needs when pressed against barriers to effective practice. They may also be interested in learning more about the value of poetry and the operational and successful practices of others as they are revealed in the study.

Within school districts, stronger understanding of poetry’s worth in the curriculum may similarly be of great value. If administrators are more aware of the importance of the genre, as well as of English teachers’ personal and professional needs in its instruction, they may be more willing to help teachers and schools revise their curricula, missions, and agendas. As Hatch and Honig (2003) advocate, schools wishing to be progressive on matters of pedagogy must establish and revisit their mission statements and create structures that support professional development. School administrators may wish to rethink allocation of funds to stress the importance of critical pedagogy that encourages the study of poetry beyond standardized requirements.

The topic should especially interest those at the university level who are teaching or studying in the field of education. It would certainly be of relevance to those who are training future educators, specifically high school English teachers, to ensure that these burgeoning teachers receive comprehensive pre-service training in poetry pedagogy.

Members of local, statewide, and national educational reform initiatives may also benefit from a greater understanding of the role of poetry in the high school curriculum. A consideration of the value of poetry, as well as the heard voices of teachers explicating their experiences with the phenomenon of teaching it, may assist on many levels in the making of critical curricular and
pedagogical decisions. The United States government has long espoused a desire to bring to fruition more creative and critically-thinking students for the 21st century. If their mission is truly providing a sound, high-quality education to every young American as “vital to the health of our nation’s democracy and the strength of our nation’s economy” in the 21st century (www.whitehouse.gov), then they may be interested in research that seeks the same.

Significance of Research Problem

Poetry has immense academic, cultural, and critical worth both in the classroom and in society, as is documented in the available literature. The rejection of poetic studies in high school pedagogy, therefore, may disenfranchise students and leave them lacking in essential academic knowledge as well as in deeper, critical understanding of the social fabric of community and history and their individual places in those tableaux. Hanratty (2008) espouses that poetry allows students to investigate higher realms and to “explore beyond the world driven by market forces and the profit motive”; at best, it enables “the soul to breathe, the spirit to be enlarged, the mind to (creatively) wander, and the heart to be enchanted” (p. 148).

Though many are dismissive of this particular area of language arts, it has been proven by countless testimonials and research studies that poetry is incredibly valuable for high school students. It is well-understood that poetic study helps to develop understanding of language, gives pleasure to students, enhances creativity, stimulates writing and discussion, and ultimately develops the whole individual (Wade & Sidaway, 1990). Skills developed in the study of poetry can be utilized in any subject to discuss diversity, culture, and society, to enhance meaning through metaphor, and to augment creative thinking across the curriculum (Van Buskirk & London, 2012; Leggo, 2005; McCall, 2004). Poetry is also a critical, cultural art form with a history almost as long as humanity’s; it is the oldest form of language art that exists. It has been
in the background and sometimes forefront of many cultural revolutions, has been used as a tool of free speech and empowerment, and is known to be a purveyor of social justice and democracy (Ciardiello, 2010; Stovall, 2006). Poetry is cross-cultural, and as Grimes (2005) attests, it shows us our common humanity. Grimes (2005) claims that living as we do in a multicultural and global society, the failure to share the inclusive, universal power of poetry is done at our own peril.

Despite these exalted claims of significance, many people today, including teachers, still harbor poor impressions of poetry, deeming it irrelevant to the modern age, or even expressing fear of the genre (Carroll, 2005). While some may suggest that poetry is lofty, or an elitist, high-status art form (Benton, 1999; Stiles, 1965), there is comfort found in Heidegger’s (1971) philosophy, that “poetry does not fly above and surmount the earth… poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it” (p. 218). While individuals may continue to label poetry as strange, mysterious, or even as the subject of comic derision (Benton, 2000), the value of poetry to all of humanity, and its particular benefit to both students and teachers in the realm of education, is well-documented.

With this evidence, it proves significant for teachers to be enthusiastic about the value of poetry as well as to have strong beliefs in teaching it creatively, critically, and effectively. It is well-known that adolescents need assistance in understanding literature and are dependent upon their teachers for guidance in analysis and interpretation (Squire, 1964). It is also well-documented that a teacher’s enjoyment of a particular subject can influence their students’ subsequent enthusiasm (Lambirth, Smith, & Steele, 2012; Dreher, 2003). Students may develop increasing interest in poetry and its place in history and society should they be exposed to teaching methods that foster it (Pike, 2000).
As Dymoke (2012) points out, the marginalization of poetry as a subject as well as the perceived difficulties in teaching it have been key, recurring concerns for decades. Indeed, half a century ago, there was already a pressing worry that poetry was going out of favor. Stiles (1965) wrote pointedly: “Without poetry, learning becomes pedantic and life becomes existence merely, devoid of ideas and inspiration. Could this be the direction in which our schools are moving?” (p. 177). Unfortunately, such fears seem to have come to fruition. We sit at a moment in history where hardly anyone in America’s high school English classrooms is celebrating poetry (Keil, 2005). This phenomenon must be reversed, and this research study is meant to make audible the voices of those standing in front of those high school English classrooms trying to engage students with poetry, and to illuminate the great significance in their attempts.

Positionality

My background in the fields of literature and writing, as well as my experiences as an educator, have led me to this aspect of study. As an undergraduate I majored in English, with concentrations in creative writing, history, and education. I hold a master’s degree in teaching as well as an M.F.A in creative writing (fiction and poetry), so I have not only a solid academic background but also an ardent belief in the importance and value of these subject areas. I have always felt a deep connection to written texts, being an avid reader and surrounding myself with books, especially poetry books, since I was a child. I have a profound belief in the power of language, having studied it from countless aspects of literature, rhetoric, history, culture, and education, but I also have a deep love and affinity for it, making it a part of my community and becoming a published poet myself.

I have been an educator of English literature and composition for more than 13 years. For two years I was a full-time faculty member in the Language and Literature department of a
university in Florida where I instructed in courses of composition and literature. There I saw first-hand that the requisite university-level classes in English tend to focus primarily on the reading and writing of analytical texts, with particular stress on non-fiction, argumentation, and professional writing. English, as a study of literature, was not a popular major at the university where I worked. I saw very few university students showing a dedication to the world of literature and rather more than a few showing outright disdain toward it.

Currently I work in Massachusetts as a full-time high school teacher of English, where I have 11 years of experience. My high school students have been routinely subjected to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and the Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and my pedagogical practices, as well as those of my colleagues, are often forced into test-preparation. Instructional time, therefore, is frequently spent on the analysis of complex reading passages with precious little time to dedicate to the discussion, analysis, writing, or enjoyment of the more creative and critical arts of the English language. I certainly understand first-hand the professional complications and restrictions high school English teachers face.

Fortunately for me, the high school in which I am employed allows for substantial leeway in teacher choice for the curriculum. Though my courses have traditional frameworks, I am allowed to choose most of the authors and literary works used in my classroom. Since I have such a love for poetry, I have taught many diverse and century-spanning poetry units in my English courses. I hang pictures of poets on the walls and attempt to engage students in not only discussion of the poetic elements, such as rhyme, symbolism, metaphor, and meter, but also of the critical and cultural importance of the genre. I try to tie verse into different aspects of my curriculum and to make it relevant to my students' lives (as best I can being white, female, and
middle-class). I am not always successful in my pedagogical ventures, but I do always endeavor
to show students the pleasure and significance in the art form of poetry.

I am not so sure that my contemporaries in teaching share my feelings or experiences. In
informal discussions with my high school colleagues especially, I've often found that while they
understand poetry’s value, they are frequently hesitant to teach it for a variety of reasons. They
may say that they don't know which poets or poems to teach, don't particularly take pleasure in
poetry themselves, or are frustrated by their students’ lack of knowledge in and/or enthusiasm for
the genre.

I am optimistic that this research will be able to better illuminate the pedagogical
experiences of high school English teachers. It is my hope that others will learn from the
participants in the study and understand more fully not only the formidable roadblocks that exist
in practice, but also the great innovation in, significance of, and joy of teaching poetry.

**Research Question**

The essential, qualitative research question of the study was: *How do practicing high
school English teachers describe their experience of teaching poetry?*

**Theoretical Framework**

In seeking to explore how practicing high school English educators experience poetry
pedagogy in their current classrooms one must come open-minded and ready for a great range of
possible responses. In order to approach the study through a theoretical lens, it seemed
responsible to choose a general, encompassing, theoretical framework, one that was relevant to
teachers' training, positionality, beliefs, values, and experiences with teaching poetry. The
theory selected for this study, therefore, was pedagogical content knowledge (PCK).
Components of PCK. Pedagogical content knowledge, or PCK, can be seen as the talents and attributes that help someone transfer the knowledge of content to others (Geddis, 1993), in other words: to teach. In some of his seminal work on the subject, Shulman (1987) defined pedagogical content knowledge as the “special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding” (p. 8). Shulman (1986) originally saw PCK as the essential synthesis of three knowledge bases: subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of context. These three bases are still the groundwork for the theory today. Gumundsdottir (1990) built upon it with another important component, however, suggesting that teachers' personal values and belief systems are also part of their pedagogical content knowledge, as these attributes tend to influence an educator’s decisions, understandings, and practice.

Originally, the concentration of PCK focused on pre-service teachers and how they trained and learned their content and pedagogy (Howey & Grossman, 1989; Shulman, 1986), but the theory has grown monumentally and expanded into other arenas, encompassing all kinds of teacher knowledges and beliefs including subject matter, orientations, resources, aims, purposes, and student characteristics (Hashweh, 2005). PCK often tends to borrow from the theoretical work of Dewey; constructivist and student-centered strategies are popular outreaches of the model, as proposed by Cochran, DeRuiter, and King (1993). It is certainly a theory that has gone through constant evolution, and has expanded in recent years to reach down various theoretical avenues. These include exploration into the digital age with the theory of technological pedagogical knowledge, or TPACK (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), as well as ventures into equity and social justice (Darling-Hammond, 2006), and literacy pedagogical content knowledge, or LPCK (Love, 2010).
With its slippery definitions, the new incarnations of PCK, and many differences of opinion about its attributes, it can be difficult to converge on a clear conceptualization of pedagogical content knowledge (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008; Hashweh, 2005). But for the purposes of looking into the experiences of high school English teachers involved in poetry pedagogy, a very specific subject matter, one may fall back upon some of the initial descriptions of PCK. Shulman’s (1986) seminal theory combined the knowledges of subject matter, pedagogy, and context, and for this study it will also be important to look at the later development focusing on the constructs of teachers’ beliefs and values and how these influence their choices and practices.

For the purposes of this research study, these four components of knowledge – pedagogy, content, context, and values – seemed to be the most important considerations of investigation into the phenomenon of practicing teachers engaged in poetry pedagogy.

*Pedagogy and content.* As Shulman (1986) pointed out, beliefs dating over a century ago held that the defining characteristic of pedagogical accomplishment was knowledge of one's content or subject matter. Shulman (1986) found that this was not a sufficient paradigm; as elucidated by Gumundsdottir (1990): "content does not stand in isolation" (p. 47). Just being an authority in one’s content specialization does not, essentially, provide one with the knowledge needed to teach it. It therefore became necessary to look into what knowledge bases make teachers teachers of their specific content rather than just experts in their field; it became necessary to separate teachers and their unique practice of their content knowledge from others who may use the same knowledge in another way (Cochran et al., 1993) – for example, to differentiate a history teacher from a historian. Shulman (1986) argued that teachers must understand their content beyond its facts and concepts; they must understand it with an eye
toward pedagogy. The question behind the theory of PCK was what kinds of knowledge and experience distinguishes “the understanding of the content specialist from that of the pedagogue?” (Shulman, 1987, p. 8). PCK was therefore introduced as a subcategory of teacher content knowledge and included such specific pedagogical knowledge such as knowledge of representations, of learning difficulties, and of practical strategies for overcoming those issues (Hashweh, 2005). Moreover, a strong educator is expected to understand why a particular topic is central to a discipline whereas other topics may be peripheral (Shulman, 1987). This is the particular work of teachers.

With his theory of PCK, Shulman (1986) began by noting that teachers must understand why a particular topic in their content area is essential and then know how to teach it. Shulman (1986) asked questions such as how do teachers decide what to teach and how to represent it; how do they make decisions about questioning students; and how do they deal with problems of misunderstanding? PCK includes the most useful forms of pedagogical representation of the content, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations (Shulman, 1987). Hashweh (2005) later defined pedagogical content knowledge as the “repertoire of private and personal content-specific… pedagogical constructions that the experienced teacher has developed as a result of repeated planning and teaching of, and reflection on the teaching of, the most regularly taught topics” (p. 277). But PCK is not just about teaching subject content in a way that is comprehensible to others; Shulman (1987) proposed it as one of the seven categories of teacher knowledge that also included curriculum knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts, and knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values. Shulman (1987) wrote that PCK should include the teacher’s ability to understand and present topics to the diverse interests and
abilities of their students, noting that greatness comes in “the capacity of a teacher to transform
the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet
adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students” (p. 15). In other
words, it is an essential part of PCK for the educator to also understand the educational context.
Other theorists built on these ideas.

**Context.** Having expert knowledge of one’s content along with effective pedagogical
methodology is not always enough. In their understanding of their experiences teachers must
also take into account the context of the educational environment, which may include the
classroom, the curriculum, and/or situations involving students (Shulman, 1987). As Grossman
and Stodolsky (1994) attest, the educational environment can certainly influence both teachers
and students in many ways. If context is defined as “the whole situation, background or
environment relevant to some happening”, the enormity and complexity of the context of
teaching becomes apparent (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994, p. 181). There are so many
overlapping contexts that can influence teaching and learning, including the school, the district,
and the larger community, and understanding of these contextual environments are all part of a
teacher’s PCK (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994).

However, the most influential educational context is likely the classroom that the teacher
inhabits on a daily basis, facing a changing cast of characters “from period to period” (Grossman
& Stodolsky, 1994, p. 181). While recognizing the importance of subject matter knowledge and
pedagogical knowledge, researchers of PCK must also focus on teachers’ knowledge of students’
abilities, attitudes, and motivations (Cochran et al., 1993). The students are a continuous
variable, and teachers must always take their attitudes, responses, biases, and prior knowledge
into consideration in teaching content to them (Ball et al., 2008; Grossman, 1990).
Still, there are multitudes of environmental factors for a teacher to take into account when constructing his/her understanding of the teaching experience. There are all kinds of social, cultural, and political aspects of educational contexts (Cochran et al., 1993). While grade level and subject matter assignments can affect a teacher’s knowledge and understanding of context, so can aspects of departmental life “including curriculum deliberations, departmental norms and policies, teacher and student assignment to courses, and professional development” (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994, p. 180). A high school teacher is undoubtedly a member of a scholarly community (Shulman, 1987), usually a subject department. Administrative department chairs at the secondary level often make decisions that can influence individual teachers in their construct of perspectives and practices (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994). Indeed, the context of their educational environment, the requirements, restrictions, and standard practices, can have bearing on teachers’ beliefs and values about their PCK. Still, as Van Driel and Berry (2012) are quick to point out, even teachers who work in the same educational environment may have different perceptions and understandings of their context.

*Values.* Whether they are aware, the values and beliefs that teachers carry with them about their subject, their pedagogical practices, and their contextual setting can certainly come into play in their experiences. Each individual educator certainly holds strong beliefs “about issues such as what they view as good teaching, how they think students learn, and which standards they wish to stress in a curriculum” (Van Driel & Berry, 2012, p. 27). As for practices, Hashweh (2005) argued that teachers with more constructivist knowledges and beliefs tended to have richer pedagogical content knowledge than those with strictly empiricist views.

When looking at the correlation of values/beliefs and subject matter, the concept of pedagogical content knowledge “having a component related to the teacher’s beliefs about
content” originated with Shulman (1987), and continued with the work of Gudmundsdottir (1990) and Grossman (1990). As Gudmundsdottir (1990) pointed out, while reflecting upon the “moral purpose of the educational enterprise" and the passionate aspect of teaching, teachers’ value orientations to their subject matter tend to influence “their choice of content, their use of the textbook, pedagogical strategies, and their perceptions of students’ instructional needs" (p. 44). This may be especially true of high school English teachers who make content decisions every day and often have liberty to decide on which texts to teach. Grossman (1990) argued that teachers’ orientations toward literature can affect the way they approach it with their students. Therefore teachers’ individual beliefs and positionalities about their subject matter, including poetry, are intertwined with other aspects of their pedagogical content knowledge.

It can be said that teachers’ values “cement pedagogy and content to create their practical and powerful pedagogical content knowledge” (Gudmundsdottir, 1990, p. 45). As such, PCK takes into account not only the teacher being well-versed in content and context knowledge and pedagogical strategies, but also the special attributes a teacher possesses that allows him/her to help a student find true, personal meaning in the curriculum (Shulman, 1987). If teachers can impart positive values in their context they can certainly influence their students in myriad ways. Historically, the interest in values and character building being on par with cognitive development has been important to educational philosophy since the ancient Greeks (Gudmundsdottir, 1990). As Gudmundsdottir (1990) points out, the value of education comes in transmitting something worthwhile in a moral manner, and educating students means changing them for the better. This sentiment is largely the hope of poetry education.

**Relevance.** PCK is especially relevant for a study of educators in that it concentrates on how teachers feel about their content, how they construct their knowledges about their subject
matter, educational context, and pedagogical strategies, and how their understandings influence their practice. A study focusing on one department of English teachers can certainly depict interesting similarities and discrepancies in the teachers' PCK. While teachers in a single department may share commonalities in their context (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1994), they may reveal significant differences in training, pedagogical strategies, positionalities, and beliefs about their educational context, their subject matter, and their experiences. As Van Driel and Berry (2012) note, pedagogical content knowledge is “highly topic, person, and situation specific” (p. 26). PCK is also a theory that is relevant to a study that focuses on a particular aspect of a curriculum, such as the genre of poetry within an English course repertoire, as it is meant to be specifically related to a topic within a discipline (Van Driel & Berry, 2012). These are all aspects ripe for exploration in the experiences of high school English teachers practicing poetry pedagogy.

While many previous studies on teachers of poetry have focused on pre-service teachers, this study delves into the lives of those who are currently in practice. An important factor to recognize in relation to this study is how significant instructional experience can be to effective PCK. As Shulman (1987) notes, “teaching is, essentially, a learned profession” (p. 9). The voices of teachers with some experience are vital to add to the literature on the topic. While many early studies of PCK involved pre-service teachers and their knowledges, Cochran (1997) points out that such teachers-in-training often find it difficult to articulate the relationships and components involved in PCK. They often have low levels of pedagogical content knowledge and therefore teach less effectively, with strategies frequently falling on the objective use of recall and basic knowledge (Cochran, 1997). Hashweh (2005) explains that most pedagogical
content knowledge comes from experience, and therefore studying pre-service teacher education programs may not be the best route to fuller understanding in this field of research.

It is hoped that with some practical experience comes some wisdom. As Hashweh (2005) points out, “PCK is a collection of teacher professional constructions”; it is “a form of knowledge that preserves the planning and wisdom of practice that the teacher acquires when repeatedly teaching a certain topic” (p. 290). Such wisdom should be preserved, as the experiences of the teachers in this study will be. Gudmundsdottir (1995) notes that “values and narratives are inexorably intertwined”, indicating a development in thinking about pedagogical content knowledge to include not only the importance of the recognition of values in the subject matter but also how narratives help people to understand the world (p. 28). It is important for teachers to have a voice, and to be able to construct narratives of their experiences, with Gudmundsdottir (1990) noting that teachers’ quests for “meaning and purpose” can be driving forces in their practice (p. 44).

In this study of teachers who are involved in poetry pedagogy, the teachers themselves share their experiences to the benefit of others. This ideal follows the work of Cochran (1997) who made many recommendations for practicing teachers developing their PCK, including having them begin to think and to reflect more about their beliefs and practices and to talk to each other about their knowledge and strategies. This research study may help them to do just that.

**Synthesis.** The ultimate goal of better understanding teachers’ experiences with poetry pedagogy in the classroom is to have them share their experiences through descriptions of their PCK. As Shulman (1987) noted, teachers have a level of professional understanding about a subject matter that is distinguishable from other types of content experts. Practicing high school
English teachers certainly have much to add to the current understanding in describing their experiences of teaching the content of poetry. Shulman (1986) originally described pedagogical content knowledge as the conglomeration of subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and context knowledge, and for the purposes of this study the knowledge of values and beliefs, as advocated by Gumundsdottir (1990) will be added. The teacher-participants will certainly be able to describe not only their knowledge and experiences with teaching the content, but also their understandings of the contexts of their educational environments and their beliefs about the value of poetry pedagogy.

The current inclement educational atmosphere may be one of strict standardization and empiricism, yet teachers are still the most potentially powerful force for positive change (Giroux, 1997). As Breunig (2005) advocates, teachers have the power to “develop pedagogical theories and methods that link self-reflection and understanding with a commitment to change the nature of the larger society” (p. 116). If high school English teachers believe in the power of poetry and advocate for its inclusion in the classroom, if they are secure in their knowledges and the synthesis of their content, pedagogy, context, and values, they can give their students incredibly powerful and meaningful educational experiences.

Conclusion

Whether they recognize its spectral presence, poetry does already exist in the social and cultural lives of today’s high school students. It is a genre rich with scholarly attributes, cultural significance, and the potential to encourage personal and social growth. Poetry is a vital, creative, and critical art form, yet it is frequently marginalized or even absent from the classroom. Unfortunately, America’s teachers often face an uphill battle when attempting to make effective and innovative curricular and pedagogical decisions; they may be plagued by
doubts and hostility, especially in today’s educational climate. Yet society’s continued focus on English Language Arts and literacy as essential subjects is a reminder that its educators have an amazingly important job to do, one that goes far beyond their students’ success on high-stakes tests. As disseminators of language, high school English teachers can control in many ways what their students hear, discuss, analyze, criticize, and relate to on a daily basis. They therefore have great opportunity to stimulate positive change. Language in verse form is just a fraction of the wealth they can offer their students, but it is a critical piece. Teachers of any subject can relate great successes and great failures in their classrooms experiences, but when English teachers’ pedagogical experiences with poetry in the classroom are positive, they can be incredibly rewarding for all involved. This study will illuminate the experiences of English teachers who are currently in the secondary arena, holding poetry up as a torch.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Poetry is an integral part of any high school curriculum, and English teachers have an essential role in encouraging its value and use in the classroom. These educators’ attitudes toward and experiences with poetry pedagogy are often diverse, therefore warranting a study on the phenomenon. However, before attempting to make sense of practicing high school English teachers’ experiences with teaching poetry in the United States, one must look into the available literature to understand the scope of work and research that has been completed on the topic.

Poetry and its pedagogy certainly hold a respectable sector of the available literature. To narrow the research down into that which may be appropriate for this particular study, the information being sought related to how poetry is valuable, how its pedagogy is important, and what practicing teachers have to say about their experiences with teaching it, both positive and negative. Like the study, this review of the literature was meant to be exploratory. Whilst wading into the deep waters of such literature, a comment Hanratty (2008) made in reference to the genre of poetry was held dear: “There is always the possibility that, looking into its deep well, one will ultimately spot, and, perhaps, grasp the quartz of truth” (p. 156).

This literature review first looks at the historical documentation of the value of poetry as a genre, along with the educational value of poetry pedagogy. Next, the review investigates the practices of teachers in poetry pedagogy, detailing their perspectives on the phenomenon as well as accounts of their experiences, both positive and negative. While many educators weigh in on this topic and various opinions are included, as applicable to this study, this review recounts the viewpoints of high school English teachers wherever possible.

The Value of Poetry

To understand why poetry pedagogy in high school English classrooms may be important, it is first essential to understand why poetry itself is valuable. The available literature
contributes the voices of countless poetry advocates through the years. It also illustrates a narrative of the genre’s personal and social worth throughout history.

As famous proponents of the idealistic, the natural, the lovely, and the lyrical, the scholars, educators, and poets of the 19th-century Romantic Era undoubtedly believed in poetry’s “imaginative richness” as well as its “capacity to provide moral guidance, or even instruction” (Hanratty, 2008, p. 149). Arnold (1880) claimed that poetry contains the utmost worth to all of humanity; as it forms “the soul and character”; it begets “a love of beauty and of truth”; it suggests “high and noble principles of action” and it inspires “the emotion so helpful in making principles operative” (as cited in Benton, 1999, p. 521). The Romantics knew that reason “can only follow paths that the imagination has first broken” (Rorty, 2007, p. 129). As Rorty (2007) writes warningly: “No imagination, no new words. No such words, no moral or intellectual progress” (p. 129). In other words, poetry as an imaginative, language art can be seen as the base of all human advancement.

In his seminal *Defence of Poetry* (1890), Percy Bysshe Shelley extolled poets as not only “the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting”, but also as “the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true” (p. 5). Indeed, many of the 19th-century Romantic Era’s writers proclaimed poetry’s ability to stimulate the intellect, the passions, and the morality of people, making it essential for democratic ideals (Link, 2003). William Butler Yeats argued that poets are more honest than politicians, and their words should therefore be heeded (Meydani & Tsur, 2014). Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow stated that the true glory of a nation exists not in its physical power but
in the extent of its mental power, in “the majesty of its intellect”, and in “the depth and purity of its moral nature” (as cited in Link, 2003, p. 53), all qualities depicted in and enhanced by poetry.

Poetry has played a pivotal role in history; it is woven into a rich tapestry of oral and literary tradition with a legacy passed down through generations. In the United States alone, from the bohemian, homosexual poet Walt Whitman (1881) claiming “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” to African-American, Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes (1926) declaring, “I, too, am America”, poetry has historically been an instrument of empowerment (Stovall, 2006). Though seemingly innocuous, poetry has consequently been viewed by some as dangerous to society. From Plato to the Puritans, many considered poetry’s “power to move” and to stir up “unworthy and vicious emotions and passions in audiences” as potentially disruptive to the social order (Lewalski, 2011, p. 757). As Ciardiello (2010) points out, poetry has been viewed as perilous and seditious by dictators and anti-democratic political regimes, who have attempted throughout history to suppress, silence, and arrest poets. Poetry’s value to the use and protection of free speech as well as its immense importance as a living, breathing, robust piece of social justice and democracy (Ciardiello, 2010) is therefore validated.

Poetry’s critical worth in relationship to individual and social purposes is widespread in all types of scholarly literature today. As Carroll (2005) points out, in times of great need, tragedy, or trauma, words have the power to soothe, to comfort, and to overcome, and in such periods of stress and of catastrophe poetry especially springs up as a universal mouthpiece. In the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 attacks, New York City was covered with improvised memorials from storefronts to bus stops that included poetry, revealing the genre’s insight and ability to console (Hanratty, 2011; Carroll, 2005). As Greene (2000) puts it: “Poets help us to penetrate the darkness and the silences and move on to visions of possibility” (p. 275). It is often
in times of such extremity and challenge that we long for hope and to “hear another human voice letting us know we are not alone” (Carroll, 2005, p. 164). As poet Adrienne Rich (1978) put it, this is the goal and nature of poetry, the “dream of a common language” (p. 16). This universal idea is prevalent in the literature of modern sciences as well, as it is established that poetry has cathartic properties in therapy as well as medical benefits toward mental health (Tegnér, Fox, Philipp, & Thorne, 2009; Carroll, 2005; Keil, 2005).

As a boon to contemporary society, poetry has been proven to bring people together as a shared experience full of widespread truths and ways of knowing. Today, more than ever, poetry is “powerful, dynamic and multimodal” (Dymoke & Hughes, 2009, p. 93). It is “embedded in the rhythms of everyday life” through song lyrics, “tweets and text messages, through street talk, protest rallying calls, football songs and advertising jingles” (Dymoke & Hughes, 2009, p. 93). It is widely performed at slams and open-mic events, accessed through a variety of websites, and broadcast on YouTube (Dymoke & Hughes, 2009). This broad dissemination shows that poetry is still a living medium and one to be reckoned with as communal “truth wrapped in beauty” (Stiles, 1965, p. 175). Poetry has the power to bring people together peaceably, as former poet laureate Ted Kooser (2005) explains simply: poetry can make the world a “more peaceful, more reasonable place” (as cited in Certo et al., 2012, p. 102-103). True (1993) shows how the medium can advocate for social change and nonviolence, quoting from poet Denise Levertov (1987) who writes that peace, just like a poem, "can’t be known except / in the words of its making, / grammar of justice, syntax of mutual aid. /… dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have / until we begin to utter its metaphors” (as cited in True, 1993, p. 19). Poetry is also known to politically break down the barriers between groups and individuals (Meydani & Tsur, 2014).
As the value of poetry to individuals and humanity is shown, it is then essential to look into the realm of educational literature to understand how poetry can be particularly beneficial to both students and teachers in advancing our intellectual, mental, and cultural majesty.

**The Value of Poetry Pedagogy**

As with any art form, poetry has been traditionally shunted to the side when more pragmatic concerns rule, especially in education. As far back as the 19th century, educators as well as other members of society worried about the role of the arts in the face of the rising revolution of science, mechanics, and industry. Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* (1890) was a shaping, literary treatise on the subject. O’Brien (2004) explains in his analysis of *Defence* that “while Shelley’s wife fretted over scientific progress in *Frankenstein*”, Shelley himself similarly despaired that poets had “been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists” (p. 27). This sentiment remains relevant today, as Blake (1992) points out that logical-mathematical intelligence and the scientific method are held up as the dominant modes of thinking in our culture, and have insidiously reached for control of our schools. Indeed, since the Digital Revolution, increased emphasis on corporate interests, globalization, and the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, has trickled down into our educational systems, making those subjects much more central and valued in pedagogy than the humanities.

Like all art – a painting, a play, a monument – poetry is not often viewed as utilitarian. Many question its function. As Shelley wrote in 1890: "It is admitted that the exercise of the imagination is most delightful, but it is alleged that that of reason is more useful" (p. 27). O’Brien (2004) articulates how the poet must challenge such an outlook: “What is the use of a park? It has none from a banking and real estate standpoint. Yet parks have their uses – intangible, incalculable… unquantifiable” (p. 28). O’Brien (2004) argues that Shelley’s rhetoric
should still echo in our current societal need for “smart growth” (p. 28). In striving to offer the best education to students, the focus should not be solely on scientific and technological progress, but should also take culture, environmental health, the quality of education, and the emotional wellbeing of society into consideration (O’Brien, 2004).

It is certainly important to remember how essential the arts can be in students’ achieving a full education. As Roberts (2007) points out, students need art, and poetry especially, “to make sense of the world around them, to reflect, and to resolve conflict in their lives” (p. 104). This belief is an echo of Shelley (1890), who wrote that poetry has the ability to awaken and enlarge the mind. However, a pervasive, cultural, and academic misconception exists that the arts, including poetry, deal with fantasy rather than reality (Stiles, 1965). Yet poetry especially has been proven to have real-life applications and opportunities for critical thinking. Stiles (1965) points out that poetry does in fact deal “with reality – with the bitterness of life as well as the sweet”; it records the drama of the world, the “conflicts and controversies, the hopes and aspirations of people, the choices that confront nations and individuals, the ongoing struggles of right versus wrong” (p. 176). O’Brien (2004) further notes that our respect for human rights and democracy has evolved through arts which provoke insight into how humans think and feel. Thus, as Wilson, MacDonald, Byrne, Ewing, and Sheridan (2008) attest, arts pedagogy is still essential. It is consistent with building the academic skills required in current educational policy objectives, yet is also held as effective in promoting creativity, insight, social inclusion, and citizenship values (Wilson et al., 2008).

As a language art, poetry is likewise validated throughout the literature as being extremely valuable to high school education. Educator-advocates for poetry pedagogy are easily discovered. Ray’s (1999) surveying of 48 pre-service teachers in England gathered that 100% of
the respondents believed poetry should be taught. Dymoke (2012) found in her interviewing and observation of secondary educators across 6 schools in both England and New Zealand that some teachers may even be considered zealots on the topic. Benton’s (2010) study found the great majority of teachers surveyed, over 70%, view the study and discussion of poetry as “very important” (p. 524). Similarly, one can find Hanratty (2011) labeling poetry an essential weapon in a teacher’s armory, Perfect (1999) claiming that she could not imagine a day in her classroom without it, and Stiles (1965) urging her fellow teachers to teach poetry every day, to make it a priority, to keep it alive. Wilson’s (2013) surveying of 33 primary and secondary teachers in England likewise elicited positive, metaphoric responses to teaching poetry, calling it “a lifeline” and “a pool of freedom around a rock” (p. 80). Overall, it is common in the literature to find teachers expressing a “keen interest and commitment to poetry” (Pullinger, 2012, p. 383) for a variety of reasons.

It can be shown then that most scholars and educators will espouse the significance of poetry pedagogy in some way. Certainly the academic as well as the cultural and critical value of poetry seems not to be in dispute.

**Academic value.** On a scholastic level, educational literature proves that the study of poetry is beneficial as it can promote many useful skills in students. Reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanical skills are often improved through poetic study (Weaven & Clark, 2011; Keil, 2005; Ray, 1999; Wade & Sidaway, 1990; Dunning, 1966). In their research, Wade and Sidaway (1990) surveyed both middle school students and teachers in England, finding that the teachers gave 39 different, valid reasons for teaching poetry. Of the most common reasons given, teachers stated that poetry develops language skills and encourages writing and discussion (Wade & Sidaway, 1990). Winding through a poetry unit helps students
to develop deeper understanding and usage of the English language (Wade & Sidaway, 1990) and to look with wonder at it (Dunning, 1966). It is also a useful genre for enhancing the faculties of communication (Roberts, 2007), critical thinking (Pithers & Soden, 2000), and even risk-taking (Locke, 2013; Dymoke, 2012). Today’s 21st-century high school students are faced with greater literacy demands than ever before; the fastest growing professions in the America today are those with the highest demands on literacy (Meyer, 2013). In the global economy, more and more high school graduates will be required to think creatively and critically (Marzano & Heflebower, 2012; Hennessy & McNamara, 2011), skills that may be enhanced by the academic study of poetry (Weaven & Clark, 2011).

In a sense, poetry may be both the most scholarly and most enjoyable art form in literature. As Dunning (1966) proclaims, in the “fabric of the humanities” poetry is one of the “brightest threads” (p. 161). It forces students to concentrate on both the power and the playfulness of language and to learn a great amount about both. While stories and drama may distract with their characters and plots, poetry forces students to look closely and critically at literary compositions (O’Neill, 1973). In other words, because verse is more condensed than prose, it ultimately makes greater academic demands upon the inferential processes of its readers (Peskin, 1998), forcing them to think more critically and to use specialized sets of deduction skills. Poetry is a genre characteristically rich with literary devices, sound, imagery, and diction highlighted for meaning; “it is language crystallized, language distilled,” write Certo et al. (2012). It forces students to deal comfortably in metaphor, personification, representation, and symbolism (Xerri, 2014) and can thus act as a catalyst for developing visualization abilities and creativity (Williams, 2011; Hanratty, 2008; Stovall, 2006; Leggo, 2005). Since it does not have to follow traditional syntactical or grammatical rules, poetry allows students to explore and toy
with language in a way that other genres do not (Xerri, 2014; Jocson, 2005). As Bradley (1901) puts it: "The value of versification...can hardly be exaggerated... the value of diction, is the specific gift for poetry, as distinguished from other arts" (p. 10).

In another academic light, many educators extol poetry as a useful genre in accessing the minds of reluctant students and those who struggle with learning. As a literary form, poems come in many shapes and sizes – from the shortest, imagistic haiku to the epic sprawl of novel length – making it a genre ideal for differentiated instruction. As Perfect (1999) notes, the diversity of poetry helps make it accessible to all types of learners, as teachers can easily select poems based on length, difficulty, and subject matter, and can encourage reticent students to read aloud short lines or stanzas. Jocson’s (2005) research depicts poetry as useful for students who do not do as well with the more structured aspects of English class, such as the study of vocabulary, grammar, and essay writing. She notes that for many students poetry writing may assist as a means of speaking about their experiences in uncensored and unstructured ways, free from the stringent rules of language mechanics (Jocson, 2005). For her part, Calo (2011) champions the use of graphic poetry, which combines poetry’s language with visual imagery, to reach out to labored readers and/or visual learners.

Much of the literature also shows that poetry has incredible interdisciplinary worth. Within the English Language Arts curriculum, poetry is proven to be valuable in helping students make connections between literary genres (Ackerman 1968) and can be used effectively as a means of conversation between literary works and writers to reinforce themes (Moore 2002). Yet it also has value in cross-curricular studies. Perfect (1999) notes that “poetry has been written about virtually any topic imaginable, making it a logical and practical source for linking language, imagination, and creativity with other areas of the curriculum” (p. 730). Poems can
certainly be viewed in their historical context and can be used in myriad ways to tie in historical themes with other works of literature (Danks, 1996), or to gain understanding of the social and political climates in which they were written (Meydani & Tsurb, 2014). As Meydani and Tsurb (2014) also attest, poets carefully choose every bit of diction and punctuation to exploit their expressional powers, yet sometimes their meanings are developed or broadened over time. Therefore, poems take on additional meaning when processed and compared with “memory and meaning files” (Meydani & Tsurb, 2014, p. 148), and students may need to access many different areas of interdisciplinary content knowledge over time to gain complete understanding—a worthwhile scholastic exercise.

Though poetry has great academic worth within English class and across other disciplines, some of its greatest power is in its unique ability to articulate the human experience (Certo et al., 2012, p. 104), which therefore makes it valuable in aspects of learning beyond the strictly scholarly reign. O’Neill (1973) finds that verse helps students to develop their personalities, to widen their interests, and to deepen their sensitivities; it makes students aware of their place in humanity. He states that the subject of poetry “is not merely grammar, composition, punctuation, interpretation: it is the whole man alive” (O’Neill, 1973, p. 12). So while it is overwhelmingly shown that poetry pedagogy is valuable for its many academic qualities, it is also proven worthwhile on a grander scale, one where critical literacy and critical pedagogy converge.

Cultural and critical value. Lopez (2011) writes, “there is no higher social calling than to teach critical approaches to the consumption and production of language” (p. 75). Language surrounds us; it is powerful and persuasive, and giving students the tools to better understand it may be one of the greatest gifts of strength a teacher can impart. As Gioia (1992) warns, if
people fail to develop the ability to construct thought into appropriate language or to understand the power behind well-constructed language, they may fall prey to those who do. Poetry pedagogy in high schools, therefore, can prove exceptionally valuable for the practices of critical education.

The literature proves that the teaching of poetry can help students to become more conscious of shared histories and cultures and of their individual places in those designs. Verse can transport students to greater understanding of the social tapestry and lead to more awareness and civic responsibility. As Muriel Rukseyer (1968) once wrote: “All we can show to people is themselves; show them what passion they possess, and we will all have come to the poetry” (p. 40). With this type of critical pedagogy in mind, teachers allow students to come to the poetry in the practice of construction rather than exegesis, making meaning from the text rather than extracting it (Cervetti et al., 2001). This type of pedagogy allows for students to know the world, along with the word, and is meant to lead to both personal and social transformation (Cervetti et al., 2001). Poetry is therefore critically valuable to students; when it is taught effectively, it can be an essential piece of what Fisher (2005) calls literocracy: the intersection of literature and democracy.

On a personal level for students, poetry pedagogy can have many positive influences on their hearts and minds. It is proven to be therapeutic and constructive in self-awareness. Poetry enables students to gain new perceptions and emotional experiences, and may even tap unrealized potential (Williams, 2011; Hanratty, 2008). As long as teachers approach the material with cultural and critical values in mind, in the light of offering students opportunity, guidance, and support, poetry can be a successful means of aiding students in coping with complicated emotions, in repairing negative attitudes, and in gaining a sense of empathy and a sense of
community (Williams, 2011). Roberts (2007) advocates using poetry writing in English class pedagogy for student conflict resolution, to help students deal with difficult emotions, and to come to a more peaceful classroom and society.

Poetry is a way of knowing, of knowing about one’s culture and of becoming a member of that culture (Blake, 1992). As poet Adrienne Rich (2002) elucidates, “the language of any poem is the language of a society” (p. xv). It is a proven tool useful for culturally-responsive pedagogy, which allows for teachers to take into consideration the culture of their diverse student populations and to engage students on a critical level (Stairs, 2007). In the 21st century, many voices converge in verse, and part of the delight of teaching poetry in the millennium includes the opportunity for teachers to bring varied voices into the classroom lexicon. As the late Caribbean-American poet, June Jordan (1985) proclaimed, the modern age revels in the emergence of “New World” voices, and New World “means non-European; … it means heterogeneous; it means unknown; it means free; it means an end of… privilege, and the violence of power” (p. 11). She continued: "It means wild in a sense that a tree growing away from the earth enacts a wild event. It means democratic” (p. 11). Verse is an opportunity for students to hear voices they may find similar to their own. Poetry therefore lends itself well to effective, meaningful, and critical education.

Jocson (2005) points out that poetry pedagogy can be an empowering experience through which “voices, access, dialogue, and understanding of literature, co-exist” and can potentially lead to social change (p. 136), hence proving its significance in education. Working from the writings of Jordan (1985), Jocson (2005) argues that poetry can be used to challenge and replace Old World ideas inherent in the “elitist American literary establishment” of most English classrooms (p. 135). Indeed, often just hitting students where they live, applying poetic texts that
are culturally relevant can help students to progress. Certo et al. (2012) explain that modern, contemporary poetry is more in tune with the themes, events, and language relevant to today’s students and tends to create more aesthetic responses than the traditionally-taught and standardized canonical poetry. Many studies have found that when teachers use pop music lyrics, rap, or hip hop to engage students in the study and analysis of poetry, student performance improves (Jocson, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Performance poetry is also considered a useful pedagogical tool, as advocated by Fleischer and Fox (2005) who studied positive student reactions to spoken-word poetry along with the theoretical connections between literacy, democracy, oral language, and the written word.

Topics such as social justice, oppression, marginalization, non-violent protest, and democracy are themes that can come up in the English classroom, and English teachers are somewhat uniquely qualified to discuss such topics in a critical way, helping students find the language that they can use to express themselves (Bruce & Davis, 2000). As Keddie (2012) notes, current society requires curriculum that can both “bear the weight of difficult and painful knowledges” as well as “console and provoke” (p. 318). Ciardiello (2010) advocates for the teaching of the poetry of social justice as early as grade school, noting that “for the oppressed and marginalized, this poetry represents power as the voice of the dispossessed” (p. 466). As True (1993) attests, poetry has a long history of non-violent protest and social change all over the world. It should therefore be easy for teachers to use the genre to teach students about these critical themes through poetic veins. Perhaps it might even be possible “to teach English in such a way that people stop killing each other” (O’Reilly, 1993, p. 30).

In both the critical and academic modes, therefore, the available literature reveals poetry to have great pedagogical worth in education. Undeniable support for poetry pedagogy is
elicited for its continued value to teachers, students, and society, and English teachers certainly seem to have strong feelings about its practice. Since they are the classroom instructors who deal with the subject matter on a daily basis, employing verse in diverse, academic, and critical and culturally-relevant ways, it is essential to explore their impressions of and experiences with poetry pedagogy, the up beats as well as the down.

**Teachers’ Experiences with Poetry Pedagogy**

The literature contains many varied experiences teachers have had with poetry pedagogy, negative along with the positive, that are worth investigating. For the purposes of this study, the literature was viewed with the idea of exploring the perceptions of the experiences of teachers – high school English teachers wherever possible – engaged in the phenomenon of teaching poetry.

**Teachers’ positive experiences.** A fair amount of research captures the positive attitudes and experiences of poetry teachers. For example, Hanratty (2008) disseminated 75 questionnaires in Northern Ireland to teachers of secondary and grammar schools asking for their feelings about poetry. His findings included that almost all teacher-respondents endorsed poetry as valuable, and even considered it the most stimulating area of English study (Hanratty, 2008). The teachers in this study seemed to feel that while poetry’s rewards may be elusive, in other words, its value is “not necessarily registered in examination results”, it can still tap all kinds of great benefits for students (Hanratty, 2008, p. 154). These educators also agreed that poetry’s inclusion in the curriculum made teaching and learning more stimulating, with a consensus emerging that poetry can be a “catalyst for excellent teaching”, as the “porous, open-ended nature of the discussions” generated by the genre can be a “springboard for some truly exciting lessons” (Hanratty, 2008, p. 154).
Poetry is a genre that certainly encourages the best in some teachers, such as those in a similar study by Hennessey, Hinchion, and McNamara (2010). Through their mixed-method interviewing and surveying of 80 post-primary teachers in Ireland, the researchers found 60% of poetry teachers asserting positive experiences and optimistic reactions to teaching poetry (Hennessey et al., 2010). The teacher-respondents made common, affirmative comments about poetry’s ability to enrich student lives and open their minds to critical issues, but also revealed that teaching the genre gave them confidence as instructors, allowing them to encourage passionate engagement and a lifelong love of poetry in their students (Hennessey et al., 2010). Likewise, the 33 teachers surveyed in Wilson’s (2013) study in England overwhelming believed that teaching poetry improved their efficacy and confidence by allowing them opportunities to test their own beliefs, values, and pedagogical approaches, to be innovative, and to offer critically important lessons to their students.

Throughout the available literature, there are numerous pedagogical practices endorsed by teachers that help to make poetry lessons scholarly, cultural, authentic, and engaging. As Hanratty (2011) insists, the “educational and imaginative benefits” of poetry “cannot be underestimated” and can “undoubtedly transcend the merely academic benefits” of the subject (p. 424). The positive experiences of educators of poetry pedagogy are uncovered far and wide in educational research. The following are some of the most common, positive experiences shared from English teachers themselves, which may be interpreted as their form of advice for effective and successful poetry pedagogy.

**Write, critique, share.** Many English teachers proffer encouraging responses in discussing their experiences with having their students write, critique, and share poetry. In a solicitation of best methods for poetry pedagogy, the work of Haugh et al. (2002) uncovers a
great range of positive ideas from practicing educators. One English teacher suggested
designating one day each month to having students creatively write and critique each other’s
poetry (Haugh et al., 2002). An AP English teacher advised asking students to write extensively
about a new poem at least twice a week, allowing them to critique whatever they notice, and as
the year goes by the teacher will find every student improving at poetry analysis (Haugh et al.,
2002). Another teacher pointed out that teenagers already worship poets, they just need help
recognizing their favored singers and bands as such; allowing students to print out and analyze
the lyrics of their favorite songs can keep them engaged in poetic study (Haugh et al., 2002).
Other constructive ventures championed by high school English teachers found in the literature
included allowing students to write short, imagist poems in the manner of modernists such as
Ezra Pound, to write poems in groups (Haugh et al., 2002), to use poetic formulas for
construction (Tompkins, 2000), or to start writers’ clubs (Sara, 2000).

Working together to write and gather poetry seems to be a confirmed pedagogical
practice that recurs in teachers’ experiences. Haugh et al. (2002) note teachers’ success when
allowing students to work collectively in generating anthologies of favorite poems. This
sentiment is echoed by Keddie (2012), who interviewed teachers of indigenous students in
Australia. The oft-marginalized students in these classes were encouraged to write poetry to
share their lives and to assemble it into a collection (Keddie, 2012). The teachers revealed that
the pedagogical method promoted a sense of powerful, political agency (Keddie, 2012). They
also noted that poetry in general can be a useful tool for both investigating and moving beyond
difficult knowledges (Keddie, 2012). In New Zealand, Locke (2013) found similar positive
responses from secondary English teachers when having their students engage in a school-wide
poetry competition. In their small, diverse school, most of teachers interviewed reacted
positively to implementing creative writing lessons followed by the competition (Locke, 2013). Though competition itself is traditionally viewed as a negative force in education, the teachers in this particular study found that the experience was overwhelmingly affirmative, especially when the competitive side of the lesson was deemphasized (Locke, 2013). They also confirmed their students’ growth in creative writing as well as their enthusiasm in the collective effort of putting together a class booklet of poetry (Locke, 2013).

**Perform.** Another popular mode of poetry pedagogy in teachers’ experiences is performance or spoken-word poetry. As shown in the literature, there are many aspects of oral poetry that make it appealing to English teachers, including its tendency to liven the classroom and to engage students academically and personally (Tamalavage, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Performance also has the desired ability to relate critically to students’ cultures (Biggs-El, 2012; Jocson, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

The literature reveals that many teachers have found great pedagogical triumph in pushing poetry into the spoken realm. Tamalavage (2008) writes about her success in encouraging her students to recite poetry out loud. She asserts that besides making her classroom more animated during formal poetry units, performing poetry has helped her students to learn more about the characterization, mood, structure, tone, and other poetic devices the writer intended, and has prompted the desire in her students for further investigation and critical thinking (Tamalavage, 2008). American pedagogical theorist Ladson-Billings (1995a) reinforces this idea, showing in her 3-year study and observation of successful teachers of African-American students that when the students were encouraged to perform hip hop and rap songs, they became more connected to the classroom. Ladson-Billings (1995a) found that the practice also allowed for the merging of academia with cultural competence. When the teachers...
reproduced the familiar lyrics for the class to discuss meanings along with the more “technical aspects of poetry such as rhyme scheme, alliteration, and onomatopoeia”, the students excelled, with their understanding of poetry far exceeding local and state requirements (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 161).

English teachers frequently report that opening up their classrooms to performance can promote cultural awareness and personal engagement in their students. Students learning in their comfort-zones, using their favored music for poetic study, allows the teacher to effectively create a bridge between the classroom and the outside world (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Indeed, the use of culturally-relevant, lyrical, spoken texts as poetry, namely rap and hip hop, is well supported by educators (Biggs-El, 2012; Jocson, 2005). Bruce and Davis (2000) advocate effective learning in their classrooms when a more culturally-aware, humanizing pedagogy is utilized. They found their urban students reacting positively to being introduced to poetry slams as a method of creative and constructive expression (Bruce & Davis, 2000). As such, encouraging the spoken word in the classroom can also help students find their voices. Jocson’s (2005) study of the Poetry for the People (P4P) program in a California high school, a 6-week poetry curriculum aimed at displacing the historically-offered white male agenda, found that the urban students were persuaded by their instructors’ pedagogy to write and speak about their experiences in uncensored ways. As they were encouraged to read their original poems aloud – to take their experiences “to the mic” – marginalized youth traditionally conditioned and socialized into silence were opened up, an experience heartening for both the students and their teachers (Jocson, 2005, p. 144).

**Digitize.** Though poetry may be considered an archaic art form by some, it is still proven to have great worth in the fast-paced world of the 21st century. Undeniably, teachers describe
many success stories in their experiences relating poetry to a subject most millennial students
love and will readily access: technology. The available literature reveals that English teachers
have certainly realized that the wealth of information and communicative tools bestowed upon
the digital age allow for innovation and hugely positive experiences in their poetry pedagogies.

With the advent of the internet teachers and students now have almost the entire canon of
poetry at their fingertips at any given time. Since the technological revolution more
methodology is also possible, as today’s classrooms come equipped with all sorts of access tools
to multimedia platforms. From laptops to tablets to digital cameras, from visual and educational
programs to graphic and film-making applications, today’s high school teachers have many
opportunities to pique student interest (Roberts & Schmidt, 2002). Teachers can also digitally-
enhance communication through messaging, blogging, and the use of wikis and social media
(Prensky, 2005), just to name a few. These instruments can add up to a powerful and positive
euphony of poetic experience in the classroom.

Many teachers of the new age will point out that compared with old literacies (books),
new literacies are “more participatory, collaborative, and distributed” (Curwood & Cowell, 2011,
p. 111) and therefore more appealing to today’s students. Educators Curwood and Cowell’s
(2011) research reveals great achievement in designing and implementing a digital poetry
curriculum for their high school sophomores. The students in their Midwestern U.S. study read,
analyzed, and wrote poetry in traditional ways with print text, and then were encouraged to
employ digital tools and the “progressive use of multiple modalities” to represent their
understanding (Curwood & Cowell, 2011, p. 111). Their students used wikis, digital remixes,
YouTube, and feedback solicited on social media for their projects, proving that poetry’s reach
can expand beyond classroom walls (Curwood & Cowell, 2011). The practice of communicating
and sharing their learning with the outside world, which is well-known to be an essential piece of authentic education (Roberts & Schmidt, 2002), reveals technology’s importance in modern education.

A similar experience shared by Sara (2000) confirmed that when her students created a web site to share their poetry, their learning took on a new dimension. The responsibility of writing, editing, and publishing poetry on a web site helped the pupils to think more critically about the writing process as well as about audience and purpose; it even helped them to win an award (Sara, 2000). Van Wyhe (2000) writes about starting a poetry exchange called “Pass the Poetry” between her classroom and another 4,000 miles away. Using online media, her Alaskan secondary students could read, write, discuss, analyze, and respond to poetry with students from across the country (Van Wyhe, 2000). Technology, like poetry itself, successfully negates distance.

In the current time period, pre-service or student teachers are often part of Generation Y or the millennial generation themselves – whom Prensky (2005) calls “digital natives” (p. 8). As such, their feedback on pedagogical experiences with technology are frequently sought and documented. As Washburton and Campbell (2001) point out, current student teachers, much like today’s high school students, have often had “their imaginative worlds” influenced more by visual, screened images than by books or by the reading of poetry; “their media are not the quill and ink, but the keyboard, the screen, the camera”, which makes them perhaps more likely to report positive, pedagogical practices that reach students through these channels (p. 587). In their study of student teachers in Canada, Washburton and Campbell (2001) therefore express that such strategies as having students illustrate their understanding of poetry and its devices through computer graphics to be extremely effective. They also found asking students to write
an original poem and digitally animate it to be a successful practice (Washburton & Campbell, 2001). Dymoke and Hughes (2009) record similar, positive experiences in their observation and interviewing of 56 pre-service ELA teachers in England and Canada. Their teacher-participants found that the use of wikis for collaboration of poetic construction, reflecting upon personal attitudes toward poetry, and sharing ideas and strategies to be immensely effectual pedagogical experiences (Dymoke & Hughes, 2009).

While poetry had been traditionally taught in the United States through text books, memorization, structure, and analysis, today’s teachers are more apt to adapt creative pedagogical methods and to use these to positively influence their students (Enochs, 2010). This is especially true of the millennial age, where language is increasingly shared and performed, and where ever-developing digital technology offers continued opportunities for successful poetry pedagogy. As found in the positive reflection of poetry educators, “when students move from passive consumers to active producers” of literature and understanding, they are more likely to engage in critical and higher-order thinking (Curwood & Cowell, 2011, p. 112), and with the continued, appropriate use of social technology, students can develop a sense of community both inside and outside of the classroom (Sara, 2000). As the literature has shown, English teachers today have many impressive methods of reaching their students and helping them to enhance not only their talents in analyzing, writing, and comprehending poetry, but also their 21st century skills of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and media literacy. The positive experiences of teachers advocating for these practices reveal the light of the new age.

Yet no era is without its dark spots. While positive feelings and experiences from English teachers are found again and again throughout the scope of literature on poetry pedagogy, some studies do reveal educators’ struggles with the genre.
**Teachers’ negative experiences.** For some teachers, poetry is just not seen as a vital lifeline in their classrooms. For example, in Ray’s (1999) study, the data gathered many negative or neutral responses to poetry in survey responses, with teachers commenting that while they believed poetry to be somewhat worthwhile, holding “a vague, underlying optimism” for its study, they weren’t always convinced of its value in the classroom (p. 406). Similar feelings are also found in work the work of Certo et al. (2012), who looked into the attitudes of 23 pre-service English teachers, with their interviews inquiring how these student-teachers felt about poetry and its pedagogy. On trend with Ray’s (1999) study, two-thirds of the pre-service respondents in Certo et al.’s (2012) research recounted negative or neutral experiences with the genre. There are many possible reasons why English teachers may report such pessimism. Some of their negative experiences, along with certain barriers teachers are up against in effectively teaching poetry, crop up repetitively in the literature. Though this is not an all-inclusive list, negative experiences with the phenomenon of poetry instruction often seem to stem from teachers’ self doubts, from the current curricular requirements of forced standardization, and from poor student reactions to the genre.

**Doubts.** Over and over again does the literature reveal practicing teachers’ personal discomfort with poetry and its pedagogy, which can lead to negative classroom occurrences. A general fear of poetry, a lingering sour taste from their individual, academic experiences with the genre, as well as an anxiety about their own expertise can lead to negative experiences in their current practice (Linaberger, 2005; Baart, 2002; Moore, 2002; Perfect, 1999; Ray, 1999; True, 1980; Stiles, 1965). These factors can certainly combine to command the crisis of confidence (Wade & Sidaway, 1990) many teachers of English feel when faced with a page of verse and a room full of adolescent faces.
Some research suggests that teachers often harbor fear and learned dislike of the genre of poetry and cannot relate any personal, past experiences that they found to be encouraging. Ray’s (1999) analysis of pre-service, primary school teachers in England uncovered that many do not often engage with poetry on their own time, with some respondents admitting they would only read poetry if by accident, or only if they were forced. Their inherited distaste for poetry often stems from their past intellectual confusion, as many teachers surveyed admitted that they never understood the poetry given to them in English class (Ray, 1999). In her research, Lockwood (1994) also discovered that many secondary teachers expressed that they themselves had never had an English teacher who taught the genre effectively, and that they therefore held no positive role models to emulate. Compounded negative experiences are particularly troubling, as Parr and Campbell (2006) argue that teachers’ poor attitudes can be passed down from one generation of teacher to the next and, consequently, from one generation of students to the next, leading to a cycle of poetry animosity.

Such fear and hostility can certainly lead to more anxiety and doubt. Much of the research seems to suggest that teachers do not feel educated enough or feel generally ill-prepared to teach poetry (Lambirth et al., 2012; Certo et al., 2012; Keil, 2005; Benton, 2000; Pike, 2000; Wade & Sidaway, 1990). In Harrison and Gordon’s (1983) investigation of the teaching of poetry in secondary schools, teachers reported that they felt afraid to teach poetry and were destructively inhibited by it. A study by Benton (1986) gathered several main concerns about teaching poetry volunteered by primary, middle, and secondary teachers. Of the secondary teachers surveyed, 23% admitted they hesitated due to their own lack of knowledge or experience (Benton, 1986). Similarly, Benton’s (1992) work revealed poetry to be the area of the curriculum “where teachers feel most uncertain about their knowledge, most uncomfortable
about their methods, and most guilty about both” (p. 127). The teacher’s anxiety is then transferred onto the students, “so that the classroom ambiance of poetry becomes one of anxiety… rather than one of enjoyment” (Benton, 1992, p. 127). Part of the reason for this phenomenon may be that pre-service teachers do not have enough deep, compelling experiences with poetry in their teacher education (Certo et al., 2012), a sentiment expressed by Moore (2002), a high school English teacher, who stated that neither his English major nor his methods courses prepared him to effectively teach poetry. But even if their training has been adequate to excellent, English teachers still seem to experience many reservations when tasked with poetry pedagogy, and their self-doubts can be damaging.

As such, there are many studies that reflect teachers’ personal doubts, as their own disbelief in their personal efficacy as instructors of poetry or as critical educators in general can lead to negative experiences in practice. As noted by Bordelon, Phillips, Parkison, Thomas, and Howell (2012), efficacious teachers have confidence, expect success, are innovative in their pedagogical practices, report more job satisfaction, and invite students to participate in a democratic classroom. But these talents may be difficult to develop, and they can certainly be shut down in the often confusing and complex pedagogy of verse. As Lockwood (1994) writes, teachers with such low self-efficacy, “often suspect they are killing rather than instilling a love of poetry” in their students, and “no one wants to be accused of murdering a poem” (p. 30). In questioning her English teacher colleagues, Lockwood (1994) found that many were paralyzed by their fear of teaching the genre poorly, concerned that their lack of skill and confidence would translate into boredom for students (Lockwood, 1994).

Teaching poetry, in all its open-ended and personal glory, takes a certain type of skill that many teachers just may not comfortably or only dubiously possess. Indeed, as Hanratty (2008)
found in his study in Northern Ireland, so many teachers answering the questionnaire testified that more than any other area within the English classroom, poetry requires enthusiasm as well as a wide range of pedagogical strategies. As such, poetry studies may be more difficult for teachers who are comfortable with rote, concrete craft and structure, but who lack belief in their ability to analyze or to connect to literature on a deeper level. Poetry by its nature is creative and aesthetic, and the best practices in its pedagogy are found to be transactional (Enochs, 2010). This fact means that teachers must be comfortable encouraging a shift in teaching from the “rigid authority of the text” to the “creation of meaning through the acts of reading and responding to literature”, which in particular, rescues poetry from forced, inauthentic analysis (Enochs, 2010, p. 29) and lifts it into a more critical realm. As Brewbaker (2005) notes in his surveying of 55 high school English teachers, good poetry pedagogy may require a certain “formlessness”, a willingness on the part of the educator to ask open-ended questions, and to then sit back and let the student responses pour in (p. 21). This methodology, though, requires plenty of confidence on the part of the teacher (Brewbaker, 2005).

While internal doubts may plague teachers of poetry, there are also external factors coming into play when teachers try to advocate for and teach poetry. It is clearly illustrated throughout the literature that the high demands of standardized curricula and the assessment culture in contemporary education can lead to negative pedagogical experiences or dissuade teachers from teaching poetry altogether. Wilson (2010) found in his survey of 33 primary and secondary school teachers in England, that the lack of time for poetry in the curriculum may explain why it is the least confidently taught genre in English classes. Indeed, the researcher noted that teachers could be losing their professional confidence and developing new doubts in an educational environment where the measurement of standards is considered of utmost
importance (Wilson, 2010). Hanratty’s (2008) survey of teachers in Northern Ireland found that 85% of the respondents complained of the pernicious influence of an exam culture and curriculum on poetry pedagogy. In the current educational climate, therefore, it is easy to surmise that teachers are up against considerable barriers which can lead to negative experiences with poetry in their classrooms.

Curricular and pedagogical requirements. It is no secret that secondary pedagogy, not only in the United States but around the world, is increasingly focused on teaching to the goal of standardized test success, which may leave teachers who have to teach within the confines of such systems feeling powerless and disheartened (Weaven & Clark, 2011; Benton, 2000; Pike, 2000). As shown, poetry is largely an aesthetic art form, and one that can be essential to critical education, but it is not always a popular avenue in standardized testing, especially in the United States. Verse is often pushed aside when strict curricular demands and the pedagogical preparation of assessment strategies are considered of paramount, educational importance. When poetry is taught, it is frequently with narrowly-ranged, canonical verse, which many educators find dispiriting (Pike, 2003; Benton, 2000). Its pedagogy is also often confined to strict, structured analysis, which likewise disheartens teachers (Weaven & Clark, 2011; Keil, 2005; Pike, 2000; Coston, 1972; Ackerman, 1968). As such, many English teachers recount negative experiences when discussing how curricular and pedagogical requirements of the standardized educational culture affect their teaching of poetry.

School discourse today tends to be dominated by the process of initiation-response-evaluation, or IRE (Cazden, 2001), which does not exactly leave much room for creativity or critical education. In Hennessey et al.’s (2010) study, “question and response” emerged as the most commonly used pedagogical strategy for poetry, with 88% of the teacher-respondents citing
the frequent use of this approach (p. 181). As Hopkins (1987) points out, the way poetry is taught today often focuses on “dissecting, analyzing, and meaninglessly memorizing poetry to death” making it an art form less to be enjoyed as “a test of endurance” (pp. 11–12). Teachers largely disprove of the limiting practice of dissecting a poem, as a scientist might a specimen (Lott, 1989), and find that the forced practice of analyzing poems rationally, systematically, logically, or inductively in the manner required for testing leads to an “almost total disregard” for a poem’s “emotional impact or moral worth” (Blake, 1992, p. 17). This thought echoes that of the many educators who stress the pedagogical ideal that poetry should be appreciated for its aesthetic appeal and meaning and be taught as an experience (Coston, 1972; Ackerman, 1968). As scholar-practitioner Ackerman (1968) writes, “I should far rather have a student share the experience of a poem, feel its mood, or begin pondering the idea it embodies than know it is written in trochaic tetrameter” (p. 1001). Being forced into standard pedagogical practices can certainly demoralize high school English teachers and prevent them from teaching effectively.

English teachers far and wide lament the loss of the creative and the artistic in the high-stakes culture of test preparation. In many foreign, English-speaking countries, such as the U.K., Ireland, and New Zealand, poetry is part of the prescribed, national curriculum. While this may mean that poetry is very much part of English teachers’ practice, studies find that the subject is rarely taught for enjoyment (Dymoke, 2012). In Hanratty’s (2008) data, the consensus of the British teachers in the study showed that more than in any other subject in the curriculum, “delight, enjoyment, and imaginative stimulus should be at the heart” of poetry pedagogy and that these elements are often snuffed out by the pressure of upcoming examinations (p. 155). One teacher surveyed explained that a subject like poetry, which has the potential to “touch pupils’ emotional and affective life so profoundly cannot necessarily be best tested (if at all)
within the somewhat clinical conditions of the examination hall” (Hanratty, 2008, p. 155). Yet teachers are confined by requirement. In their mixed-method approach with quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews, Hennessey et al. (2010) found that nearly half of the secondary-level Irish teachers they studied felt that their responsibility in teaching poetry was to help students pass their exams. Therefore, their pedagogical strategies involved providing various notes and questions on selected poems and helping students to understand basic poetic strategies such as structure, imagery and theme (Hennessey et al., 2010).

Certainly the practice of test preparation in English classes worldwide can put a damper on teachers’ motivations and leave them less likely to teach poetry in creative or critical ways. As Hennessey et al. (2010) note in their findings, teachers are increasingly required to live “an existence of calculation”, working within a “framework in which ‘value’ appears to replace ‘values’” (p. 181). Dymoke (2012) would agree, showing through her studies in New Zealand and England that the pressure to deliver results stands in direct opposition to the desire expressed by educators to teach in a way that is “culturally responsive and acknowledges the social literacies of students beyond the classroom” (p. 395).

Without a doubt, critical education takes a hit in the classrooms of many high school English teachers due to curricular constraints. Educators are likely to report their inability to teach poetry in constructive, socially-conscious, or critical ways when faced with the mountain of responsibilities included in the standardized programs prescribed by their schools. English teachers must often instruct students in writing that is scripted and formulaic, with intense focuses on mechanics and grammar (Seely & Tropp Laman, 2012) as preparation for assessments. As an end result, students rarely write creatively or imaginatively, especially with poetry as a genre, and end up with a writing curriculum that does not connect to their lives and
does not provide any opportunity to grapple or think on paper about socially-significant topics (Seely & Tropp Laman, 2012). In the same fashion, finding voice in the creative writing of poetry is also less encouraged in current pedagogy (Wilson & Myhill, 2012), as it is not often a talent on which the students will be tested. As evidence, most of the poetry teachers in Hennessey et al.’s (2010) study admitted not wasting time asking students to display their learning in varied or culturally-relevant means, such as illustrating poems, participating in dramatic readings, or creatively writing within the genre.

Overall, it is clear to see that curricular and assessment concerns, though they may be beyond a teacher’s control, can lead to negative experiences with or a shunning of poetry pedagogy. As Mathieson (1980) notes, the assessment culture may ensure that poetry continues to be taught, but it does so in such a way that not many people are finding satisfaction in it. Interestingly, as a matter of research, Lockwood (1994), a teacher herself, asked poets what advice they would give to teachers for best practices in poetry pedagogy. The poets surveyed offered many gems as suggestions, including “do not give tests over poetry; stay away from analysis; give multiple oral readings of one poem; do not be afraid to venture into the unfamiliar” (as cited in Enochs, 2010, p. 30). The poets in Lockwood’s (1994) study continually reiterated that there are no right answers in poetry analysis, and therefore testing of the subject is essentially “moot” (as cited in Enochs, 2010, p. 30). Unfortunately, by today’s standards, the words of poets often go ignored. So while teachers continue to espouse acknowledgement that positive experiences with poetry rest on the development and use of a wide range of pedagogical strategies including aesthetic and critical approaches, most often the demands of the standardized system win out (Hennessey et al., 2010), leading to negative experiences for both teachers and students.
Student resistance. Indeed, another major influence on teachers’ experiences with poetry pedagogy is found to be the reactions of the other members of the English classroom – the students. Teachers are not the only ones expressing a fear of or lack of interest in poetry, and student opposition to lessons can cause teachers to avoid such subject matter (Benton, 2000; Ray, 1999), and can contribute to their poor perceptions of the genre as well as their senses of low self-efficacy (Mulholland & Wallace, 2001). While many high school English students may be enthusiastic about poetry, especially when it is taught in creative, artistic, and aesthetic ways (Hennessey & McNamara, 2012), the reactions of those who are less inclined can have dramatic, unfavorable effects on their instructors. Student resistance to poetry pedagogy may not be a negative experience in itself, though it can certainly be construed as a formidable barrier to a teacher’s positive experience, as evidenced in the literature.

It is no secret that students come to class loaded with antagonistic attitudes toward the genre of poetry, which they often consider sentimental, effeminate, pretentious, and obscure (Benton, 2010; Mecklenburger, 1970; Ackerman, 1968). Student distaste of poetry is well documented, with Ray’s (1999) study in England documenting 84% of students as disliking it and Hanratty’s (2011) surveying of secondary-level students in Northern Ireland reporting 92% of girls and 95% of boys with aversion. O’Neill’s (2006) work found teachers in New Zealand rating their students’ attitudes toward poetry from apathetic to hostile, and Benton’s (2010) findings reveal teachers to be bitter about their students’ seemingly ineradicable enmity toward the genre. The attitudes of their students can certainly have an effect on high school English teachers, who report frequent complaints from their pupils, including asking why they need to understand or learn about poetry, especially when they’re not planning to major in English (Baart, 2002; Moore, 2002), to be demoralizing.
Like their teachers, secondary students too tend to find the curricular requirements and routine, instructional practices of poetry to be a drag. In a study by Painter (1970), the surveyed students were excessively critical of their experiences with poetry, disparaging of their secondary school teachers’ dull presentation, poor oral reading, lack of enthusiasm, and focus on rhyme and other poetic devices that they largely considered dull and pointless. Students in Painter’s (1970) study also recounted being forced to purposelessly memorize poetry, sometimes as punishment, giving them an unfavorable impression of the genre, even cringing at its mention. The number 1 reason students gave for disliking the genre was the pedagogical practice of “tearing apart” a poem “in order to find one meaning – the teacher’s” (Painter, 1970, p. 15). In their younger years, students are encouraged to delight in the sounds and experience of a poem, but in their secondary schooling they are forced into obsession over the more arduous tasks of deconstruction and analysis (Linaberger, 2005; Fleming, 1996). As Mecklenburger (1970) quotes one high school student saying, “I liked ‘The Raven’… until we studied it” (p. 264). Likewise noted by Wallace (1981), many students leave high school convinced that poets are “boring and obscure” and that a poem is just a “cryptic word puzzle” to be decoded by the teacher (p. 556).

Yet, even when students find the poetry curriculum acceptable, they may still think of it as simply something they have to muddle through, rather than an art form to be enjoyed. Today’s high school students are also caught up in the culture of standardization and assessment, and are sometimes even more concerned with testing and grades than their teachers are. In terms of poetry pedagogy, this obsession may lead students to focus on the rote skills of poetry analysis or to ignore the genre altogether. Hennessey et al. (2010) found in their study of Irish students that the majority of them asserted themselves as confident in their understanding of poetry, but
the “primary reason cited for this sense of self-confidence amongst respondents was ownership of ‘good notes’” (p. 181). In a follow-up study of 200 secondary students in Ireland, Hennessey and McNamara (2011) found that the pupils were similarly secure in their abilities and were approving of their teachers’ routine pedagogical approaches. Though many said that they thought the lessons were boring and that they weren’t personally able to engage or to offer their opinions, they felt confident in the strength of the instruction, making comments of their teachers such as “She makes sure we know the correct meaning of the poem” and “We don’t have to waste time figuring out the meaning so we can move on quickly” (Hennessey & McNamara, 2011, p. 216). So while high school English teachers may be interested in teaching poetry in critically-relevant or aesthetic ways, they may encounter resistance from their students in their attempts, which may lead to their negative experiences and feelings of discouragement.

As Mecklenburger (1970) documents one, demoralized high school English teacher complaining of her students’ reaction to a particular Marianne Moore poem, “They won’t even read it… They won’t get past the first stanza” (p. 263), pessimistic attitudes seem to be common among teachers of the subject. It is certainly a challenge that English teachers face: trying to teach in “energising, purposeful, and imaginative” ways, while simultaneously bridging the disconnect between their enthusiasm for the genre and their students’ apathy (Hennessey & McNamara, 2012, p. 382). It may take a lot of onerous work on the part of the English teacher to patiently re-educate students on the subject (Ackerman, 1968), a task they may be unwilling or unmotivated to undertake, depending on their own level of training, confidence, and enthusiasm (Hennessey & McNamara, 2012). It is indeed recognized that teachers can struggle in maintaining pupil engagement while also staying true to their pedagogical values (Hennessey &
McNamara, 2012). The responses of students can therefore be limiting to teachers and may lead to negative experiences in their poetry instruction.

**Synthesis of Literature**

Overall the scope of literature concerning poetry and poetry pedagogy is enlightening. It is widely acknowledged that poetry is a valuable art form (Ciardiello, 2010; Hanratty, 2008; Link, 2003, etc.) and that its pedagogy is still important and relevant to the modern age (Lopez, 2011; Roberts, 2007; Jocson, 2005; O’Brien, 2004; Perfect, 1999; O’Neill, 1973, Stiles, 1965, etc.). Yet the attitudes toward and experiences with poetry expressed by teachers themselves reveal many different viewpoints coming to the fore.

It can definitively be gleaned from the available research that English teachers often support the teaching and learning of poetry, which is seen to have value in academic, cultural, and critical ways (Dymoke & Hughes, 2009; Hanratty, 2008; Jocson, 2005; Wade & Sidaway, 1990; Ackerman, 1968; etc.). The classroom experiences of poetry educators are often positive, with many pedagogical strategies proving effective and rewarding for both teachers and students (Keddie, 2012; Curwood & Cowell, 2011; Hennessey et al., 2010; Hanratty, 2008; Jocson, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, etc.).

On the other hand, though teachers may largely agree that poetry itself is worth teaching, they do not always do it, and when they do their experiences are sometimes negative. Many teachers do not teach poetry in effective, critical ways, or they avoid, rush through, sterilize, or gloss over the subject. There are a number of possible reasons for this phenomenon. Influences toward negative experiences include doubts on the part of the teacher (Certo et al., 2012; Hanratty, 2008; Keil, 2005; Benton, 2000; Ray, 1999; Wade & Sidaway, 1990, etc.), a menacing culture of curriculum standardization and high-stakes assessment (Dymoke, 2012; Weaven &
Clark, 2011; Benton, 2000; Pike, 2000, etc.), and student resistance to the genre (Hennessey & McNamara, 2012; Hanratty, 2011; Mecklenburger, 1970, etc.).

So while all of these themes and hypotheses are recurrent in the research, the literature is in no way exhaustive. This is especially true when attempting to find studies related solely to the impressions and experiences of currently-practicing high school English teachers in the United States. Many studies found were done in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and other Anglophone countries (Dymoke, 2012; Keddie, 2012; Hennessey et al., 2010; Hanratty, 2008; Ray, 1999; etc.). While perhaps similar in teacher sentiment, these studies may not be entirely relevant to the educational environment of the United States. Though there are also many studies to be found concerning the impressions of pre-service teachers (Certo et al., 2012, Dymoke & Hughes, 2009; Ray, 1999), primary and middle school teachers (Perfect, 1999; Wade & Sidaway, 1990), and even students themselves (Hennessey & McNamara, 2012; Hanratty, 2011), yet again there seems to be a lack of research completed from the mouths of current high school teachers. While the literature teems with quantitative and mixed-method studies (Hanratty, 2011; Hennessey et al., 2010; Hanratty, 2008; Ray, 1999) and informal questioning (Brewbaker, 2005, Perfect, 1999; Lockwood, 1994; etc.), the process of qualitative, interpretive interviewing is also not fully realized.

This project, therefore, attempts to gain further comprehension of the lived phenomenon of teaching poetry in the high school classroom through its qualitative methodology. The study is designed to deepen the well of existing literature by completing research examining the perceptions of practicing high school English teachers in the United States and to make meaning of their lived experiences.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the experiences of practicing English educators teaching poetry at a suburban high school in the United States. The essential research question of the study was: How do practicing high school English teachers describe their experience of teaching poetry?

The methodology of this study was purposefully chosen to be qualitative. A qualitative study was best suited to address the particular research problem as qualitative studies are best used for purposes of exploration (Creswell, 2013). Such methodology seeks to gather data through interviewing, with questions presented to subjects in open-ended ways that allow for participants to shape authentic responses (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative studies are also marked by discovery, and the collection of data from a small number of individuals to be analyzed and interpreted for larger meaning is inherent in the method (Creswell, 2013). As such, the qualitative method made the most sense for this particular study of a small group of high school English teachers and their perceptions of their experiences with poetry pedagogy.

Research Paradigm

A research paradigm sets the context for an investigator’s study (Ponterotto, 2005), and this study was grounded in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. Constructivism, attributed to the work of psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget (1896-1980), assumes that there are multiple, apprehendable and valid realities constructed by people, but that their meanings may be hidden and therefore must be brought to the surface (Ponterotto, 2005). Similarly, as depicted by the philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1972), interpretivism is a research approach that is based upon the researcher’s desire to understand the meaning behind something (O’Donoghue, 2006). Together, these two interconnected paradigms were associated with this research in its attempt to
understand a culture group from the inside, with the goal of knowledge construction through interaction with the group being studied (Taylor & Medina, 2013).

Under the umbrella of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm in educational research, the researcher is allowed to build rich understandings of the experiences of teachers and how they construct and make sense of the cultures of their classrooms (Taylor & Medina, 2013; Lincoln, 1998). This paradigm clearly fit the structure of my research study into the pedagogical practices of high school English teachers. According to O'Donoghue (2006), interpretivism relies upon the social skills of the researcher, and since my research was guided by social interaction in interviews, this design made sense. As a small variety of high school English teachers were interviewed, interpretivism was logical as its structure allows that people’s interpretations of their world can lead them to different understandings and actions (Gage, 1989).

**Research Method**

The method of my qualitative research study was based in phenomenology. Developed from the classical philosophical traditions of the ancient Greeks by Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology is meant as a more rigorous, yet experiential approach to research. A phenomenological study is defined as one that describes the meaning of the lived experiences of individuals about a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). This research technique was sensible for this study as I sought to gather, analyze, and find meaning in the lived experiences of individuals – high school English teachers – about a concept or phenomenon: the experience of teaching poetry.

Interviewing was the primary method of gathering data and the spoken descriptions of the participants were of utmost importance. In such qualitative, phenomenological studies, findings are generally presented in colloquial language and incorporate participants’ own words to
describe the experience or phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2005). While some may argue that interviewing and collection of knowledge through narrative is not as scholarly as scientific experimentation, in the realm of education it can be argued that language and stories are meaningful in accessing individuals’ ways of knowing about their experiences (Seidman, 2012). Language, after all, is essential to human inquiry (Seidman, 2012), and this may be even more true when attempting to understand the lived experiences of English teachers involved in poetry pedagogy, individuals who deal deeply with language in their experiences every day.

The methodology used was interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is an approach with a relatively short history, yet it is one that is committed to examining how people make sense of life’s experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As shown by Maggs-Rapport (2000), interpretive phenomenology focuses on the world that participants subjectively experience. In other words, IPA research focuses on meaning-making in analyzing the lived phenomenon of a select group. IPA is informed by hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, and leads the researcher into interpreting the interpretations of others, which ultimately leads to greater understanding of the experiences of the participants (Smith et al., 2009). The three stages of such a study include fore-understanding of a phenomenon, interrogation and investigation of the phenomenon, followed by reflection and analysis (Maggs-Rapport, 2000). IPA made sense for this particular study as these types of qualitative studies are meant to examine the experiences of a small, often homogeneous sample to get the best idea and greatest comprehension of the lived phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

**Population and sampling.** The population studied was a group of 5 practicing high school English teachers chosen in the method of typical, purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013). Additional participants were sought and chosen in case of incidental circumstances in which a
subject might discontinue participation, but were not ultimately needed. As Creswell (2013) notes, it is functional in qualitative research to study a small number of individuals as the ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture lessens with added individuals and/or research sites. Therefore, a small group of 5 high school teachers employed at one site was an appropriate sample for this qualitative study. As far as the population sample, some variation was sought and expected in a typical group of 5 teachers along the lines of status (veteran or new teacher), gender, ethnicity, identity, pedagogical attitudes, etc. There were some limitations of this particular sample in the sense that all of the English teachers were members of one high school English department and thus reasonably bound in their pedagogy by the curriculum at their school. Still, the teachers had varying opinions and experiences with teaching poetry that they were able to share.

**Recruitment and access.** The participants for the study were recruited on a volunteer basis and in no way coerced into participation. Allowed access to the participants, and the protection of these individuals as human subjects, was of paramount importance, with the understanding that being ethical encourages openness on the part of participants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Access was secured with clear amenability to conversational partnerships with the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The setting of the suburban high school was familiar to all involved as their collective place of employment. As advocated by Rubin and Rubin (1995), carrying out research in a location in which the researcher already has access makes the process easier and smoother, and as advocated by Creswell (2013), access to the site was gained through approval by appropriate gatekeepers, in this case the district superintendent.
Context. The research was conducted in a middle-class, suburban high school in the Northeast. The school is in a town that is bordered on one side by a large, liberal-leaning city, which happens to be the social, cultural, and financial center of the state. The town is one of the oldest in the United States, being incorporated in 1636. The population of the town is around 25,000 people, comprised of some with a very upper-middle class socioeconomic status and others who may be considered on the lower end of the middle-class spectrum. The student population of the high school is roughly 750 students in grades 9-12, of which about 25% are minorities. There are approximately 80 full-time teachers in the school, about 10 of whom teach English.

Data collection and storage. Data collection by interviewing was intended to develop in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of poetry pedagogy through the spoken experiences of high school English teachers. Data collection through interviewing is grounded in the theory of interpretive phenomenology (Creswell, 1998). The original data came from the process of interviewing the 5 teacher-participants in the sample to gain an understanding of each individual’s experience with poetry pedagogy. All of the teacher-participants were interviewed with questions related to the overarching research question as designed in the interview protocol. Since qualitative research requires the researcher to pose broad, open-ended questions to participants and to allow them to share their experiences and beliefs in an unrestrained manner (Creswell, 2013), this is how the interviews were conducted. As is common in qualitative research, most of the inquiry questions aimed at exploration (Yin, 1994). Interview questions overall were broad enough to allow for expansion and were encouraged by follow-up questions in order to get the best idea of the phenomenon being studied (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The design of the interviews followed a method that is qualitatively iterative, meaning that the
process was somewhat repetitive as all interviews were conducted in the same manner with broad swaths of general information being collected and then later whittled down to focus on a clearer vision of the phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

For the assurance of accuracy, the research methodology included audio recording of all interviews. This was enacted with participants' permission granted, and with due respect to the process of protection and confidentiality of the subjects. As the primary researcher, I completed all transcripts of the interviews and took field notes during the process of interviewing, as encouraged by Creswell (2013). The process of inductive analysis in this qualitative study required that I provide summaries of the findings and seek to provide theories or conclusions based on the collected data.

The proper procedure of safe data storage was followed throughout the research process. All collected data was stored appropriately in an organized and protected manner. All computer files and audio recordings were kept organized on my personal devices and password-protected for safety. Backup files were created on flash drives, which were also password-protected and physically locked in a personal file cabinet. Printed material, including my notes and transcriptions of interviews, were also locked in a secure file cabinet as advised by Stake (1995). As the data was protected throughout the process, there were no opportunities for it to be tampered with in any way.

**Data analysis.** Qualitative data can be notoriously difficult to analyze in that it is a collection of impressions garnered from interviews, researcher notes, and personal documents, which can be highly subjective. The analysis of such qualitative data is in many ways interpretive and subject to the individual perspective of the researcher (Creswell, 2013). As Yin
(1994) points out, the objective of the qualitative researcher is therefore to treat the evidence fairly and to produce compelling interpretations and conclusions.

During the interviews and in between them, I collected and assessed my impressions of the data, looking for interlocking themes and deciding which areas deserved more examination (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The formal procedure began with the organization of all collected materials and the onset of coding the transcribed data. Several levels of coding – dividing the text into segments, labeling, examining, and collapsing the text into overlapping themes – were performed on all transcripts (Creswell, 2013). This lengthy process, done by hand, was necessary to identify themes and to draw conclusions from the collected data (Creswell, 2013). Ultimately, the final goal was to integrate all themes and concepts and to offer an interpretation of the phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Description allowed for me to accurately represent and report the findings in a narrative discussion (Creswell, 2013). This discussion, in turn, led to the development of implications in the area of study, allowing for connections to be made to broader theories and policy issues in education (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The end result of the data analysis is hoped to be a full report that is “convincing, thought provoking, absorbing, vivid, and fresh” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 257).

**Trustworthiness.** Throughout the entire research process, it was imperative to ensure that the study was trustworthy. This value went not only for my own reputation as being reliable and respectful, but for the integrity of the study as being accurate and validated as well. Therefore, all precautions were taken to make the process honest and fair for all involved.

It was important for me to gain the trust of the participants even before the study began, so I introduced my study to them through documentation, had them sign informed consent forms,
and answered questions with candid honesty in order to make the participants feel completely at ease. Establishing conversational partnerships with the subjects was the first step in developing honest rapport, and it was important to ensure open communication (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). During the process of data collection, I knew that I had the sole responsibility to make sure that the subjects were comfortable and felt that their confidence was protected. In the process of interviewing the participants, I endeavored to remain neutral to all responses and only to seek more information through follow-up questioning. I attempted to be self-reflective about my role in the research, being aware of how data may be subjectively interpreted and how one’s personal experiences, beliefs, and history may shape interpretations (Creswell, 2013).

To ensure that the collected data was accurate and credible, I sought clarification from subjects on certain points and offered the participants transcribed accounts of the data, to make sure that the work was fair and representative (Creswell, 2013). In analysis, I hunted out commonalities in evidence that would support developing theories, as advised by Creswell (2013). The final report was deemed public, with access to all participants provided.

**Protection of human subjects.** The protection of participants was guaranteed before the process began by the obtainment of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. All participants were made aware of the study’s approval status with the IRB beforehand.

As the sole researcher and transcriber, I offered full protection to the participants in the study, guarding all information and the anonymity of the participants at all times as essential (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Each individual was given a pseudonym in the study, allowing for full anonymity. The 5 participants were volunteers over whom I had no authority, and they all signed documents of informed consent. Participants were given full knowledge of the purpose of the study, the results, and any likely consequences of participation (Creswell, 2013).
Participants were likewise made aware that they would be allowed to refuse participation, and/or to withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell, 2013). The participants knew they were allowed to ask any questions about the research or the theories involved at any time, and that such questions would be answered without reservations.

Since qualitative research depends on participants’ honest and forthright answers, I made it well-known to them that they would not be held responsible for their opinions personally or professionally. Since the collected data was in the form of interview transcripts and researcher notes, permissions were secured during the data collection process, including permission for audio recordings. The participants were encouraged and allowed to review collected data and transcriptions to ensure accuracy. At the conclusion of the study, the participants were given gift cards for appreciation, but these incentives were in no way large enough as to be considered unethical (Creswell, 2013).

Reciprocity. It is my hope that the participants will gain in their understanding of their own experiences through the words of their colleagues. Teaching is an often isolating experience, and ideally this study will help those involved in poetry pedagogy to more completely comprehend the phenomenon and to give them insight into the lived experiences of their contemporaries in the field.

Limitations. This study was limited in its relatively small scope of a few English teachers in one, suburban American high school. The study’s sample population and setting was obviously limited in terms of geography, politics, gender, race, culture, and so on. The research was in no way meant to be all-encompassing or indicative of all experiences of all English teachers across the United States who are teaching poetry.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

This project was guided by the research question: *How do practicing high school English teachers describe their experience of teaching poetry?* I asked many questions of the teacher-participants that endeavored to reach deeply into and to understand their lived experiences. The idea behind the interviews was to explore their perceptions of the phenomenon, which is their experiences of poetry pedagogy.

The study participants were 5 high school English teachers all working in the same English department in a northeastern, suburban school in the United States. All of the teachers are identified as white, middle-class individuals with their ages ranging from their 20s-40s. The 4 female teachers were given the pseudonyms Ms. Sanders, Ms. Malcolm, Mrs. Rock, and Mrs. Dover. The 1 male teacher was given the pseudonym Mr. Neverland. The range of high school English-teaching experience among these individuals was from 4 to 14 years. Most of the participants teach a full course load of 5 English courses, ranging from freshmen to seniors (grades 9-12), and these classes are where they engage in poetry pedagogy.

Each interview took place in a quiet classroom space within the school environment. Since the teacher-participants are all colleagues of mine, I came to the interviews with some advance knowledge of their backgrounds and personalities, but I certainly learned plenty I did not know, including in-depth descriptions of their lived experiences with poetry pedagogy. Since all of the teachers work in the same department, they do have some similar experiences and perceptions, but they are also individuals whose experiences and perceptions are in many ways unique. Some additional information will forthwith be revealed about their particular identities and job responsibilities in order to differentiate the study participants. The profiles are described in the order in which their interviews took place.
Profiles

Ms. Sanders is a bright and creative teacher in her 40s who is also an accomplished artist. In her interview she was clear, articulate, and unreserved. I quickly discovered that she has been teaching high school English classes for 6 years. Prior to this employment, she taught middle school English classes for 8 years, mostly in the same district where she currently works, and she also has some charter school experience. At the time of this study, she was teaching all freshman courses at the high school. Ms. Sanders is known to be a lively and engaging educator; her classroom is decorated with the artwork of her and her students, and anyone walking through the English hallway on March 15th will see her dressed as the Soothsayer from Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* warning the students to beware the Ides of March.

Ms. Malcolm is the newest and one of the youngest members of this high school English department. I met with her in her classroom, where the student desks are consistently formed into groups to encourage collaborative work. She is known to be a very active teacher who often uses her voice and hand signals to engage students in kinesthetic learning. My conversation with Ms. Malcolm was the longest of all the interviews I conducted as she had plenty of unique insight to offer on the topic of poetry and its pedagogy. At the time of the interview, Ms. Malcolm was in her 4th year of teaching high school English. She mostly teaches 10th grade English courses, yet is also a certified special education teacher. Aside from her regular English classes, she teaches special education strategies classes and co-teaches in another English teacher’s classroom.

Though she is one of the older teachers in the department, Mrs. Rock has been teaching high school English for just 5 years. She came to teaching later in life, starting as a substitute and resource aid for the students in the district, and later transitioning to a full-time teacher of
English. Mrs. Rock has always and currently only teaches 9th grade. She is also the advisor for the online student literary magazine. She is known to be a strict grammarian who is very interested in curriculum development. At the time of the study, she was working on the revision committee for the ELA curriculum in the district. Though she loves literature, Mrs. Rock did warn me at the onset of her interview that she was not poetry’s “biggest fan”. Her responses throughout the process were likewise open and candid.

My discussion with Mrs. Dover revealed that she is an exceedingly intelligent, thoughtful, and determined educator. Mrs. Dover is in her 30s and has been teaching high school English for 11 years. She has always worked in the same district; she even completed her student-teaching internship in the high school where she currently works. She is known to be an intense and rigorous teacher, but one who is fair and friendly and always available to students. She can often be found before the bell rings, standing outside of her classroom door, greeting students as they come in. She has had a wide range of pedagogical experience at the high school, teaching an assortment of grades and levels of English, but is currently teaching 11th and 12th grade English courses. Within this course load, Mrs. Dover teaches the Advanced Placement (AP) English literature course for seniors, which is the only course at the school that expressly requires poetry study as part of its syllabus. In addition to her teaching, Mrs. Dover is the co-advisor to the school’s chapter of the National Honor Society.

Mr. Neverland is a well-liked and creative teacher who is currently the only male on staff in the English department. As a fun-loving musician, his classroom is adorned with posters of his literary and rock heroes, from Shakespeare to the Beatles. The jangly sounds of an always-on-hand guitar can often be heard coming from his classroom. Mr. Neverland came to his interview with reams of paper evidence of his poetry pedagogy on hand and was very willing to
engage with the subject. I learned that he had been teaching high school English classes for 12 years, mostly in his current district, though he did previously work in a charter school. He currently teaches an assortment of 10th and 11th grade English courses, as well as journalism classes. He started his career working for a major newspaper and is consequently the advisor for the high school’s popular student newspaper, which is printed 5-6 times per school year.

There were many subjects that I wanted to broach with the participants in order to gain a full and rich understanding of the phenomenon of poetry pedagogy. As such, each individual interview delved deeply into the teachers’ perceptions of poetry and their experiences teaching it. An immense amount of data was collected in these interviews. In order to better understand and interpret the teachers’ experiences of poetry pedagogy, I coded and separated their responses into themes. The themes that follow came organically from the participants’ explanations of their experiences, as they discussed how they learned about poetry and its pedagogy, to what extent they respect and value the genre, the methods they use to teach it, and what may cause them to avoid teaching it. The themes elicited from the data therefore were learning, respecting, effecting, and barring poetry.

**Learning Poetry**

One of the first topics discussed in each interview was about the extent of the teachers’ knowledge of and experiences with poetry and poetry pedagogy before they started teaching. I asked these questions to better understand the participants’ backgrounds and where each individual teacher was coming from in perceiving his/her own experiences. The first theme of learning poetry therefore emerged as I asked the teacher-participants about their experiences pre-service.
The genre. All of the teacher-participants were English/writing majors in college, so most of them attested that they had taken at least one course in their English studies during which they themselves had learned at least a bit about the genre of poetry. Ms. Sanders said she only took one course on poetry in college, a survey class in her sophomore year where the class was given an anthology to study the genre. She stated that she feels she therefore lacks expansive poetry knowledge, and that poetry is something she wishes she knew more about. Mrs. Rock noted that she studied some poetry in the context of courses such as French literature and Celtic literature, but she did not have a course solely on poetry. She said, “It’s not that I wasn’t exposed to [poetry] in school, but I was exposed to it as part of a bigger picture, not as a stand-alone.”

Ms. Malcolm was a creative writing major in her undergraduate studies, and therefore spent a great deal of time in her college program learning how to write poetry. She stated that she took many creative writing courses where she, by choice, wrote poetry in form, but she never actually took a course in school that was dedicated solely to poetry or poetry analysis. She admitted that her main motivation in choosing poetry as her preferred genre for creative writing was “because it required less writing than narrative fiction.” She continued, “I found that I could write things like ‘the peaches… are… purple’, and that would, like count. So I really enjoyed poetry because it was, like, less work.” She also stated that the creative writing courses she took were mostly “workshops and seminars” where they did not necessarily discuss the technical aspects of the poetic form. She said, “People would write their crappy little poems and we would all critique them, do a round table critique of people’s poems. Um, but there was never anything that said like these are different poetic forms. Try.”
Other teachers in the study had prior experiences that were a bit more substantial. Mr. Neverland claimed that in his college years he took Victorian literature, a course on Whitman, and some poetry survey courses. He said that his survey courses were based mostly on reading poems and taking assessments on them. He explained that his collegiate studies “focused mostly on American lit”, as was his preference, because he enjoyed “the Whitman and the Dickinson, and the… transcendentalist stuff.” Mrs. Dover seemed to have the most extensive past experience with the genre. She stated that she took many courses devoted exclusively to poetry in her undergraduate and graduate work, including courses on colonial poetry, Renaissance poetry, confessional poetry, as well as American and British literature survey courses that were both at least 25% poetry study.

**The pedagogy.** All but one of the 5 participants studied education formally in their training to becoming English teachers. Despite this fact, as far as learning about teaching poetry – poetry pedagogy – most of the participants agreed that they were trained only to the barest extent or not at all.

Mrs. Rock was the one participant who never majored in education or studied it officially, so she stressed that when taking English courses in college and studying poetry she never thought about its pedagogy. She said: “I wasn’t training at that time to be a teacher. So I wasn’t thinking at that time I’m going to use this for anything other than my own entertainment and enjoyment right now in these classes.” She mentioned that when she, later in life, decided to become an English teacher and had to take the state exam for her license, she thought about poetry, though not necessarily about its pedagogy. She said:

When I had to figure out what was on the teacher test that I was going to study for… [poetry] is not an overly-emphasized part of the teacher test. Or if it was, it was more
here’s a poet, and what in general did they write about? Rather than being very specific… So I didn’t find I needed to do as much with it in order to prepare for the test, other than to know what poets were writing during what periods, so that I would recognize their names. So it wasn’t even something that was emphasized when I was preparing to become a teacher that way.

Yet even the remainder of the study participants, who did expressly attend school to become English educators, emphasized their lack of training in and experience with poetry pedagogy. When asked how she was prepared in her pre-service education to teach poetry, Ms. Sanders replied emphatically, “I wasn’t!” She said she was told by professional educators that poetry could be added as a supplementary work to a novel when teaching English. Therefore, she emphasized, “I wasn’t prepared to teach a unit on poetry.” Mrs. Dover reported a similar experience. She said, “Um, in my ed courses, we probably covered poetry. Probably the briefest little unit on teaching poetry. And it was mostly looking at literary terms.” She stated that when she was doing her student-teaching practicum, she was encouraged, in a similar fashion as was Ms. Sanders, to use poetry in the classroom by pairing a complementary poem with a larger unit. In her case, she used poems as supplements to the novel, Lord of the Flies.

Mr. Neverland and Ms. Malcolm echoed the sentiments of Ms. Sanders and Mrs. Dover by also claiming they lacked pedagogical preparation. In response to the question of how he was trained to teach poetry, Mr. Neverland responded, “Not very well.” He added, “I’m thinking of my ed courses… uh… almost nothing at all in my actual ed courses. Like, I never had any formal training with how to teach poetry properly… or if there is a way to teach poetry properly?” Ms. Malcolm responded to a similar question about her learning with the direct statement of: “I was
not trained to teach poetry.” She remarked that all of her pedagogical training for becoming an English teacher was focused on other areas of the subject:

Everything I saw in terms of English training was reading strategies, literacy strategies, um, you know… sort of how to design a unit, how to do backwards design method. But never actually like this is how you teach somebody to read like, uh… figurative language or something like that. Everything I know about teaching poetry comes from how I was taught poetry.

She said that she has had to mentally reach back to her own high school experiences and to recall how her high school English teacher taught poetry as a model for her own pedagogy. Most of what she can remember involved her high school English teacher approaching poetry through the strict lens of form, having the class “read a couple of examples” of different poetic forms and “practice writing them.” She explained further of her high school teacher’s instruction:

She taught us the poetic forms, and I really enjoyed the challenge of having to write within those forms… or how to take large ideas and condense them down into a concise… uh, synthesis of what I wanted to say, and how to cut out all the unnecessary words.

Ms. Malcolm felt that she had benefitted from this strategy, and so when it came time for her to teach poetry in her own classroom, she turned back to this learned methodology.

It was clear from these interviews that despite the fact that 4/5 of the participants studied English education formally, their pedagogical training in the subject of poetry was collectively minimal. One might assume that poetry pedagogy would be a required aspect of learning to be an English teacher, but judging from the data collected in these interviews, that certainly does not appear to be the case. Since pre-service learning will certainly affect a teacher’s practice, I
would assume that any narrow or negligible experiences in their background may translate to the classroom, which could be problematic for both the teachers and their students. Though much learning for educators comes from on-the-job experience, a significant hole in pedagogical training may be difficult to overcome.

Also apparent from the collected interview data was that the teachers’ individual experiences with learning about poetry were somewhat limited, despite the fact that they were all English/writing majors. Whether to study poetry at all may be a personal preference, as many universities allow for some choice in course selection, even among majors. It seemed that when given the option, some of the teachers in this research study were not intrinsically motivated to study the genre, even though learning about poetry seems essential to being able and willing to teach it. Because not all of the teacher-participants in the study seemed desirous to learn about poetry, I was curious about how these individuals actually felt about the genre. Further interview questions investigated whether they valued poetry and found it a worthwhile subject to teach their students in their English classes. The theme of respecting poetry then emerged.

Respecting Poetry

The teacher-participants were very honest in elucidating their feelings about poetry, and in whether they did or did not respect it as a genre personally and professionally. Their individual feelings and relationships to the genre differed, as did their views on poetry’s social worth as a cultural and critical phenomenon. Most of the participants expressed at least some conviction that poetry does have value and should be respected in a high school English curriculum. Whether their school district agreed emerged as another talking point.

Personally. Just as their prior experiences with the genre did, the teachers’ personal perceptions of and respect for poetry varied. Some expressed deep love for the genre, with one
teacher going so far as to have a portrait of a poet stamped on his leg – “I have a nice tattoo right here of Whitman” – while others were a bit more reticent about their feelings or lack thereof.

Most of the teachers in the study did express some warmth and respect for the genre, even if limited. Some admitted to reading poetry on their own on occasion, but usually only if they stumbled across it, as Ms. Malcolm said, “like in The New Yorker.” As previously mentioned, Mrs. Rock admitted that she is not “the biggest fan of poetry.” She claimed she would not “gravitate toward” poetry “for the sake of it” and does not seek it out, a feeling that was reflected in Ms. Sanders’s comment: “I haven’t gone out of my way to look for poetry.” Ms. Malcolm concurred, stating, “I would never sit down and read an entire book of poetry.” She claimed that she owns a copy of Berryman’s Dream Songs, but admitted that she has never read it. She said, “I don’t think I would ever, like, read a… you know, anthology, or, like, Sylvia Plath.”

Mrs. Rock did say that when she’s been presented with a poem, especially when there is something personal going on in her life, like a loss, she has found poetry valuable and useful. She stated that sometimes poetry expresses emotions “in a way that I can’t, or that a piece of prose perhaps can’t… sometimes poetry captures it.” She said that she finds poetry most valuable when she can “develop a personal connection” to it. Ms. Malcolm agreed, stating that “I might seek out poetry for a specific purpose, and like, read it, and then, you know, go from there.”

Indeed, most of the teacher-participants did have some personal experiences with the genre that they found valuable. Both Ms. Sanders and Mrs. Dover claimed to have attended poetry readings, dramatic performances of poetry, and Shakespearean plays on their own time. Mrs. Dover admitted to being an acolyte since childhood, stating: “I think there will always be
those of us who memorize lines of poetry from the time we are young and... continue to revisit the genre [because] we find wisdom there.” Ms. Malcolm, the former creative writing major, said she likes to write her own original poetry on occasion, but admitted:

I really don’t do anything with it. It’s sort of like... the idea is that one day when I have free time I’ll sit down and, like, edit all of my work and submit it for publication.

Um... and then I will... be the Poet Laureate... But that will never happen.”

Mrs. Dover and Mr. Neverland seemed to be the most fervent advocates for the genre. Both stated enthusiastically that they love and value poetry in their own lives. Mrs. Dover said, “I love reading it.” Mr. Neverland revealed a tattoo of Walt Whitman on his calf and said he reads “a lot of Whitman.” He mentioned that he carries a pocket-sized version of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and enjoys, on occasion, scrolling through poetry apps on his iPad. He said:

You know, I’ll flip through that stuff. Uh, just for the fun of it. Not even... not, you know, thinking about teaching it or anything. Just to kind of see if I can read it and understand it and kind of connect to it.

He added that he’s “fascinated” by poetry and enjoys “as Whitman said, you know, getting the meaning behind the poem.” Paraphrasing from Whitman’s (1881) “Song of Myself”, Mr. Neverland avowed his love for the genre:

[Whitman] said, “Have you ever felt so proud to get at the meaning of a poem?” You know, so that’s, that’s... kind of where I come from when I teach it. That’s how I think about it too. Like, I’m actually proud when I get it. Still to this day.

When asked about poetry’s value and whether they personally felt that it was respected in society, the teachers were mixed in their responses. Mr. Neverland attested to poetry’s social value as “a pure form of artistic expression.” Many of the teachers indeed affirmed that they
found poetry’s voice to have incredible cultural and critical worth. Mrs. Dover stated: “Poetry is valuable in our society as a unique literary form that, for readers and writers, can provide inspiration and insights… present a snapshot of a culture, and make accessible… voices and experiences that are not part of the mainstream.” Mr. Neverland said: “We are human beings who feel and love, and poetry, better than any other form of communication, is able to express who we truly are. What could be more valuable than that?”

Mrs. Rock, however, disagreed. She expressed her belief that poetry, while perhaps being valued by individuals in individual situations, isn’t respected overall “as an absolute form.” She said: “People like hearing a poem that helps them express grief or love or happiness, but are not likely to go buy a book of poems to read. Like many forms of creativity, it is expendable.” Mr. Neverland had to concede a bit on this point. Though he personally professed a great admiration for the genre, he realizes that he is in the minority. He said of poetry: “I think it’s only valued by a small group of people. Most people I associate with, and this includes teachers and other educated professionals, do not read poetry and could [not] care less about it.”

**Professionally.** While the teacher-participants in the study seemed to hold varying degrees of respect for poetry’s worth in their personal lives and in the culture at large, it was then important to ask them to what extent they thought poetry was valuable for their students. In other words, I wanted to know whether they respected the genre in a professional sense, and for the most part they did. Both for its academic and critical purposes, most of the teachers did express that they believed poetry to hold an important place in high school pedagogy.

** Academically.** All of the teachers in the study seemed to respect the academic properties of poetry. In particular, they expressed a range of academic skills that they believed poetry could help enhance in their students. Mr. Neverland said that he believes poetry can help students to
“learn a lot about language… and the way words work, word choice, and nuance, and symbolism… all that stuff.” Mrs. Dover found students were able to learn more about language and expression through the analysis of poetry:

I think learning to break down a metaphor is um… I mean, I’ve done some reading on it, and just looking at the ways we look at the world and the ways we deal with complex emotions and feelings about it… metaphor is kind of our entryway into that.

She added that poetry can also entice students who don’t love to read: “For some students, it’s um, it’s a great way to get into reading. Especially since poems can be shorter.. for our, um, reluctant readers.” She added that poetry has the unique ability to “articulate timeless themes in a more compact structure than short stories or novels, and… may be engaging for an expert or a neophyte.” Ms. Sanders agreed with that statement, as she professed that her lower-leveled students tended to like poetry more because of its manageable brevity.

Ms. Malcolm asserted that she thought that poetry can make students better writers. She clarified: “It makes a student a lot more thoughtful in terms of how you phrase things, how you raise your sentences up, how you break up your paragraphs… How do you incorporate figurative language?” She said that poetry helps in teaching her students how to use sensory details and figurative language in their writing. She pointed out that making students write poetry, especially in form, helps them to be more creative in their other writing as well, asking rhetorically, “How else will you communicate your inner most thoughts in a haiku, unless you use a metaphor?"

**Critically.** While poetry for academic purposes seemed to garner plenty of respect from the teachers, when asked about poetry in a critical or cultural sense, the teachers’ beliefs in ascribing professional, pedagogical worth to the genre were less cohesive and clear.
Mr. Neverland averred that he often teaches poetry in the critical sense, meaning for appreciation’s sake, noting, “It’s the ultimate form of expression really.” But other teachers were more unsure. Ms. Malcolm admitted that if her students were to ask about poetry “Like, why does it matter?”, she would “have to think for a minute.” She said, “I don’t know what I would say at that point. Like, it’s educational, or just social.” She said she would really not know how to answer the question “Why do we read poetry?”.

Despite not having a comprehensible answer, Ms. Malcolm lamented her perception that poetry is not respected or taught today with an eye toward its cultural, critical, or even historic value. She said:

I don’t think there is a foundational education in poetry. Like, we teach foundational literature. Everybody reads *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Night*, *Of Mice and Men*, “Huck Finn”, and everybody knows how to write an essay about that. But we don’t really have a foundational education, um, or like, a philosophy of education… like, this is what we expect our students to know about poetry and how they should understand it.

She declared that she believes poetry to be the well-spring of literature, and to be very valuable in that sense. Yet she feels that poetry is not often taught that way. She said, “It’s sort of where so many literary devices come from. Like, this is where imagery comes from. Like, poetry came before narrative fiction. Narrative fiction borrows a lot from poetry, and I don’t think it’s really taught that way.” She mentioned poetry’s historic roots more to the effect that students don’t often get to “see how important poetry is, how historical it is, and the legacy of it, and um, how much it impacts our language.” She seemed to think that the lack of a foundational, high school curriculum in poetry has continued to certify poetry’s status as an elitist art form. She pointed out:
For the few [students] who are lucky enough to go to college, and the few… who are lucky enough within the college to… uh, be creative writing majors or English majors, uh, they sort of get invited into that world… the, uh, poetry snob world. Like, people who think about poetry and read poetry and critique poetry… they get invited into that little world… But unless you’re in that very small group, you’re… you’re left behind. And is that going to mean poetry survives?

Ms. Malcolm also indicated that she felt that the deep respect for and focus on other forms of literature, specifically novels, plays, and non-fiction, has taken over the pedagogical trend in high school English classes, and that this has caused students to lack essential understanding of a profound, cultural, literary legacy. She remarked:

I think a lot of people think that poetry isn’t written anymore. And there’s a lot of really interesting modern poetry out there, um, and even some maybe dorky stuff out there. But I think that people need to see that poetry comes from poets. And poets are still around. And, uh, this is something that [students] can do, and something that still happens.

Ms. Malcolm felt that pushing for poetry’s value in the classroom would help students to comprehend that poetry is part of a rich tradition that is actually still ongoing.

As the teachers seemed to hold degrees of professional respect for the genre of poetry, I wondered whether they felt it was pedagogically valued as part of the school’s English curriculum, as directed or imposed by administrators. In other words, in the collective, educational environment of their English department, what were their individual perceptions of the professional respect for the genre?

Departmentally. “I feel like it’s largely ignored,” said Ms. Sanders, and the others tended to concur. Ms. Sanders and Mrs. Rock both teach exclusively freshman classes, and they both
said that their perception is that poetry is not required in that grade’s curriculum. Mrs. Rock
said, “Um, as far as I know, in the freshman curriculum… I don’t have to do it.” Ms. Sanders
would add, “For the freshman curriculum, we haven’t designated a certain number of poems
we’re going to cover or a certain genre of poetry or… um, it’s never been discussed.” Mrs. Rock
noted, “We pay lip service to it, by saying we’re reading The Odyssey. So we’re reading an epic
poem. Or we’re reading Shakespeare so that’s poetic language as opposed to being actual
language.” Despite it not being a required genre, both teachers said that in their freshman
courses they would make attempts, as Ms. Sanders said, at “squeezing it in.” Overall, poetry did
not seem to be a valued or overwhelmingly respected aspect of the freshman English curriculum.
Mrs. Rock said, “I try not to ignore it totally”, but she also made clear that poetry is “the
expendable item” in her classes.

The teacher-participants who teach the upper grades for the most part had a similar
reaction to the question of poetry’s place in their department, and there seemed to be some
confusion over its role and significance in the curriculum. Mr. Neverland responded to the
question of whether poetry was an administratively-required aspect of his courses with, “I’m not
very sure.” He added:

If you put a gun to my head I couldn’t say if it’s required or not required. I remember
way back when… [the former department chair] saying to us everybody should be
working with poetry. But I don’t know what that means. ‘Should’ is kind of, like, a
vague word.

Mrs. Dover responded to the same question with “I think it’s required.” However, she
thoughtfully added, “Coming from the department, there’s really no set list of poets or pieces
that we’ve decided as a department should be taught.” Ms. Malcolm’s impression was that
poetry is included in the school’s English curriculum “like chocolate chips are included in a recipe for Rice Krispies. In that, it’s nice if you add it, but it’s not necessary.” In other words, she said, poetry tends to be ill-regarded as “fluff”; it’s “fluff curriculum.”

Indeed many of the teachers expressed that poetry was typically, pedagogically viewed as subsidiary material to the “real” literature – longer works, such as novels or plays. Ms. Malcolm said about her own curriculum: “There isn’t a unit on poetry, which is a shame.” She pointed out her perception is that teachers tend to use poetry only as a supplement in their curriculum:

It’s sort of, people use it like as ancillary texts… Or if you’re like reading a book about an old white guy, here’s a poem by a black woman. Um, and that stinks, because I feel like that undermines poetry. And it also undermines the poets. Like here is somebody who really sat down and slaved over this poem and put pen to paper for us, and, like, read this in ten minutes and write a little ditty on it and move on.

Ms. Malcolm stated firmly that she did not think that poetry was “as valued as it should be or could be” within the school’s curriculum. Mrs. Dover would concur, for even though she claimed her perception was that poetry was a requirement for the English department’s curriculum, she noted “if you look at the texts that we’ve purchased… um, it’s really not, highly valued.” Ms. Malcolm similarly stated, “There’s not a whole lot of poetry resources within the school.” She said that the English department has general textbooks for use with all grades, but that the poetry and the lessons within those books do not advocate well for the genre. She claimed:

There’s poetry in the textbooks, but it’s kind of crappy, and it doesn’t really talk about form or anything. It mostly just talks about the feelings of the poem or the narrative voice of the poem. It’s not really explaining, like, the mechanics of a poem, or why
[poetry] is not just taking creative narrative and just, like, putting it in a list form. And I think a lot of students think that’s what [poetry] is.

Ms. Malcolm also pointed out that she thought there was no consensus within the department about poetry’s value in the curriculum or how it should be taught. She spoke of a new, departmental push toward “common assessments”, but noted that there was no common, accepted method in place to assess what students know about poetry. She indicated that some teachers might think it most important to teach poetry from an academic standpoint, working with poetic forms, while others might stress figurative language, and others might just teach poetry for appreciation purposes. At any rate, her impression was that there didn’t seem to be a consensus on whether poetry was required to be taught in the school’s English department anyway.

After listening to the teachers detail their perceptions of respect for poetry, both personally and professionally, the only conclusion can be that there is a scale of variation in their feelings and experiences. While some claimed abundant love for the subject and attributed great worth to its pedagogical properties, others were less inclined to enjoy or even teach the genre. Respect and teaching seemed to go hand-in-hand, though, as the teacher-participants who claimed to have more respect for the genre were also those who seemed more ready and willing to teach it. The professional respect for poetry from the educational environment – the English department – was universally enumerated as low by the teachers, but this fact seemed to have diverse degrees of effect on the teachers’ outcomes. Some of the teacher-participants seemed to ignore their department’s perceived ambivalence toward the genre, continuing to teach poetry on their own terms, while others seemed to use the non-enforcement as an excuse to continually avoid poetry in their pedagogical practice.
Effecting Poetry

Since most of the teachers did express a general belief that poetry is a valuable genre for pedagogy, especially in the academic sense, I wondered how they did use poetry in their classroom and what kinds of activities, methodologies, and strategies seemed to be positive and meaningful in their classroom pedagogy. Their perceptions of the effective practice of teaching poetry therefore became the next important theme.

Within the interview data, there were many pedagogical strategies that overlapped as being effective in the minds of the teachers. As one of the most popular methodologies across the board, Ms. Sanders, Ms. Malcolm, Mrs. Dover, and Mrs. Rock all spoke of using poetry in their classrooms to look at larger concepts that may be occurring in the literature. Ms. Malcolm mentioned bringing supplementary poems “dealing with wealth and power, or with the role of women, or… prejudice and racism” into her unit on Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. Mrs. Rock said she had had success tying poems from the Harlem Renaissance thematically in with Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She discussed teaching the Harlem Renaissance poems mostly for their structure, metaphors, and themes which could then be compared with those of the novel. She said she liked teaching it this way so that students could at least latch on to a few lines of verse that made sense to them, and maybe expand their understanding from there. While the teachers found success in using poetry in this ancillary way, very rarely would any of them teach poetry as a stand-alone unit.

Many of the teachers also spoke of teaching poetry in strictly academic ways. While these practices are perceived to be less popular with students, the teachers found it academically effective to instruct their students in investigating poetic structure, form, and devices. As a teacher of the AP Literature course, Mrs. Dover affirmed she uses poetry frequently, as it is an
integral part of the AP exam her students take in the spring. For the purposes of preparing her students for the test, she said she teaches poetry at least every two weeks. She spoke of teaching poetry using methodology learned at AP training for teachers, drilling the students in practice of analyzing metaphors, “looking at the literal and the figurative, the tenor and the vehicle.” Other pedagogical strategies she has used require students to break down poems by paraphrasing, providing summaries, and investigating the employment of literary devices and poetic terms. Ms. Malcolm spoke of teaching poetic devices including caesura, line breaks, and forms. She said she frequently will teach a poem as if it were a short narrative, having the students look at plot, meaning, imagery, and tone.

While teaching poetry in rote, academic ways can be an efficient methodology, especially for teachers such as Ms. Sanders, who claimed to lack the pedagogical content knowledge of poetry to teach it any other way, some teachers in the study spoke of teaching it more effectively in more creative ways. Two of the teachers mentioned using song lyrics as more engaging versions of verse. Mrs. Rock spoke of having the students tie in song lyrics with their independent reading books. She said, “I’m trying to at least expose them to a different form of expression other than just standard sentences, or what have you.” Mr. Neverland also mentioned this tactic. He said that when he teaches the narrative poem “Richard Cory” he ties it with a Simon and Garfunkel song, and when he teaches the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* he shows the students corresponding lyrics from the band Green Day. He also mentioned on occasion asking his pupils to find song lyrics that display what they’ve learned about a character’s feelings in a literary work.

One of the more popular and effective areas of poetry pedagogy for both students and teachers seemed to be creative writing in the genre. To supplement a literary unit on the novel
Ms. Malcolm spoke of giving students different poems on the theme of identity. She said, “I give the students all the poems and they do like a jigsaw activity, and then they answer the questions about the poems, um, and then I ask them to write their own poems. Write your own identity poems.” Ms. Sanders also spoke of having students write their own verse. She said her students tended to enjoy such activities, noting, “Freshman still really like it… I am always surprised by the students who really enjoy writing it.” She stated that those who enjoy the creative writing especially are those in lower-leveled English classes. She said she once had such students write a collection of poems, instructing them to write in various forms including sonnets and free verse. She noted:

Some of them loved it. And the, uh, English-as-second-language students, two of them really got into it. And they… I am no judge of whether they were good poems… but they were so excited when they turned them into me.

Mr. Neverland reported a similar experience when he had his students write their own creative verse pieces following the model of Whitman’s poem “There Was a Child Went Forth”. This activity allowed the students to write about their own lives in a narrative, autobiographical, and yet lyrical way. Mrs. Rock said that having students exposed to writing poetry “often opens their minds in a different way and kind of leads them thinking on a different path, and, uh… gives them another way to express themselves.”

Because she also works closely with the student-run literary journal, Mrs. Rock mentioned that she deals frequently with students who enjoy the creative writing of poetry. She said that some of the students write abundant amounts of poetry: “They come in and they have binders. They’ve written them, and they’re very personal, you know… and sometimes to the point where you say, I’m not sure I can publish this… you may be exposing yourself too much
here?” But she says these students perhaps enjoy poetry mostly because they are not working with it in an academic sense. She says that when poetry becomes too scholarly, “it’s like anything. When you’re forced to do it, you take a step back and say, this isn’t fun.”

Making poetry fun seems to be one of the challenges the teacher-participants frequently face, but it is a challenge some of the teachers have eagerly tried to take on. Mrs. Dover spoke of teaching units of poetry that have been “rewarding experiences” for both her and her students. She commented on having the best and most effective experiences when she can get students past their fears to make poetry “enjoyable.” Mr. Neverland also spoke freely of trying to make poetry a rewarding and enriching experience for his students.

Of the teachers in the study, Mr. Neverland seemed to be the biggest advocate of poetry in the classroom. He espoused teaching poetry from an appreciation standpoint so that the students “come at poetry from a certain perspective” whereby they learn to enjoy rather than to fear it. He said he always starts his poetry units with a promise to students that he will not assess them on the meaning or message of the poem, but will only assess them on “technical things, like, you know, the symbolism, stanzas, strophe, verse, metaphor, simile, all that kind of stuff.” He stressed that this approach makes the students less nervous: “It takes a lot of pressure off.” He said he makes the students learn poetic structure, but doesn’t “test them on, like: read this poem and tell me exactly what it means.” He said the pedagogical tendency to focus so intensely on the meaning of the poem makes students “intimidated and fearful” and leaves them “kind of, like, second-guessing themselves.” He assured that his strategy works better in making students grow fond of and appreciate poetry, “because I’m not assessing them on exactly what it’s saying.” He said he allows the students to come up with their own impressions of the poetry’s message, “although, let’s be frank, there are wrong… there are wrong interpretations for sure.”
He spoke of what he considered his most successful and effective pedagogical tactic, which was to create a packet of poetry for his students with a variety of poets including, among others, Langston Hughes, Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, and William Shakespeare. He said he spends weeks with his students covering a poem per day, having them work in groups, discussing, answering questions, and doing worksheets on the poems. He averred that his poetry lessons are meant to increase appreciation, so that students are “not going to be like, so aggravated, and hate poetry.” He said he wants students to come away not being afraid to “tackle a poem, challenge themselves.”

Mr. Neverland explained that including poetry in his curriculum was very gratifying to both his students and to himself. He stated:

It’s like the purest form of teaching. Because you’re working with the literature, with the kids, and it’s a great back and forth, and you know, at the end of the day it’s like… the kids have this kind of rewarding feeling, and they’re kinda like, Oh, I figured that one out. So it’s… You drive home that day, like, yeah. Good class. You don’t often have those days.

Listening to the teachers describe their positive experiences with poetry pedagogy was illuminating and encouraging. They seemed to hold many effective strategies which they could draw upon to create what they considered wonderful and rewarding encounters with their high school students. Though teaching poetry in academic ways, such as strict analysis, can be effective for students’ scholarly pursuits, those practices do not always garner the most passion for the subject. According to the participants, students prefer practices that allow them to be creative and to connect with the many voices of verse. Methodologies used by the teachers that
exposed students to or elicited an appreciation for the genre seemed to be the most effective in mustering student engagement with and enthusiasm for poetry.

**Barring Poetry**

Despite the scores of effective teaching practices, like all experiences in education, the negative can come along with the positive. In discussion with the teachers in the study, I found that they reported many negative experiences in their attempts at poetry pedagogy as well. Many barriers came up in conversation as roadblocks to effective practice, and many reasons as to why teachers might avoid teaching poetry became apparent. Self-doubt, restraints, and resistance all emerged under the theme of barring poetry.

**Self-Doubt.** Many of the teachers expressed doubts about their personal knowledge and understanding of the genre as well as their self-efficacy in teaching poetry. When asked whether she felt qualified to teach poetry, Mrs. Rock replied succinctly: “No.” Ms. Sanders responded to the same question emphatically, “No, I don’t!” She was the first to admit that she felt she lacked the knowledge and understanding of the genre to teach it well. She said she cannot enjoy teaching poetry because it makes her anxious, noting that she has “nervousness about teaching it, or teaching it wrong.” She described scrambling to find out everything she possibly could about a poem before having to teach it: “I’m embarrassed to admit this, but I was nervous that I was going to misinterpret the poems or that I was leaving it too wide open for the students.”

Plagued with doubts about their abilities and lacking training in more effective pedagogical strategies, some teachers commented on their tendencies to teach poetry mostly through strict, academic discussion of poetic terms and devices. Though she said that she doesn’t desire to teach poetry from such an “artificial” angle, Ms. Sanders admitted that she has done so “invariably.” She said that when she taught the creative writing of poetry, she taught it
in a way that felt very inauthentic. She had asked her students to write a collection of verse, but without any strong, personal understanding of poetic writing, she remarked that she “wound up putting things into the rubric like: you have to use alliteration, you have to… like, all these rules that people do not apply to their own poetry.” She also admitted that she had difficulty figuring out how to assess the students’ writing once it was done.

Without any other methodology on hand, some of the teachers tended to teach poetry half-heartedly or to wholeheartedly avoid its pedagogy whenever possible. Mr. Neverland said his tactic in poetry pedagogy has been student-centered, though not always in the best way, as it tends to be mired in their limitations. He said his strategy is “kind of, like… [informally] assess the class and see where they’re at. And then it’s like, okay, this is what we can kind of do with it.” Ms. Sanders indicated that she has sometimes tended to steer discussions away from poetry. She said that when she teaches Shakespearean plays she doesn’t have the students look at the bard’s work with a poetic lens, except maybe “pointing out couplets when they occur.” Ms. Malcolm made a similar statement. She stated that her pedagogical strategy for Shakespeare is to focus less on the verse aspects of the play and “more on just, like, what’s going on.” She said her methodology is to look at Shakespearean plays “from more of a narrative fiction standpoint.”

Ms. Sanders admitted candidly that overall, for her, teaching poetry has been a “struggle”, largely due to her “own barriers.” Of all the genres inherent in an English class, she said that asking her to teach a unit on poetry is “like asking me to teach math.” She said that she felt as though she “could do it if somebody told me exactly what to do.” In other words, her confidence in her pedagogy was not strong enough, but she appeared willing to engage in professional development in this area. She said:
I just feel like I don’t have the training, or I haven’t been mentored. If I had somebody sit down and be like, hey, let’s work on a unit of poetry, and it was somebody that I felt knew a lot about poetry, I would happily work that in.

In a similar fashion, Ms. Malcolm spoke of a desire for more training. She said, “I would love to do professional development on poetry analysis, like teaching poetry. If they offered it, I would do it.” Mrs. Dover said, “[Poetry] is the area I go back to the most when I look at, um, professional development. I go, I seek out… and there really aren’t a lot of poetry-rich, you know… courses.”

Some teachers had perhaps a bit more confidence in their abilities to teach poetry than others. Mrs. Dover said that overall she felt “pretty confident”, but did admit that when it comes to teaching poetry, “I still don’t feel like I’m doing the best job.” Ms. Malcolm said, “I think I’m as qualified as any teacher” but tempered the statement with the admission that she can “fake it pretty well.” Mr. Neverland seemed to feel similarly, attesting to a personal assurance when it came to certain types of poetry. He said, “I’m confident about the stuff that I’m personally into, that I read, and know well and am familiar with.” But he admitted he has to thoroughly research a fair amount of the poetry he works with in his lessons, and expressed some apprehension about certain aspects of the genre. He said, “I can be intimidated by, like random poetry selections”, such as those that might show up on standardized tests and what he called “the more intimidating stuff, like the Brit lit stuff.” He admitted that he is not confident enough with poetry “to riff with it off the top of my head in front of the students.” He said, “I’m… afraid of it sometimes.”

Aside from their lack of self-assurance, there are other constraints teachers face even when they do endeavor to teach poetry. Many spoke of their packed schedules and the excessive curricular requirements which have also often led them to bar poetry from their classrooms.
**Restraints.** All of the teachers in the study remarked on the lack of time in the curriculum to engagingly or even adequately include poetry in their pedagogical practices. Taught well, poetry requires time, as students must be given space and time to think creatively and critically, as well as academically. Ms. Malcolm claimed simply, “There’s no time.” She said, “It stinks, because I’m sort of up in the air in terms of I want to give my students a wide view of poetry, so they can see there’s all different types of poetry… but we’re starved for time.” She added:

If you’re teaching poetry you also have to teach the performance of poetry. Um, and that takes time. You want to get students to create their own poetry. That takes time. Because you’re going to spend all your time just trying to get the kids to look at the damn poem. Um, and then, how do you assess poetry?... How do you assess language, uh, and the use of language, and the student’s ability to… um, to write creatively? There’s no time for that.

Ms. Malcolm also attested to the many requirements that already exist in the English curriculum and the aforementioned lack of value and respect placed on poetry in her department. She said:

We’re under so much pressure in terms of we have to read certain books, and we have to… there’s the books we have to read and the books we want to read, and the things we need to teach in order to get ready for MCAS. Poetry really kind of gets lost in the shuffle there.

Mrs. Rock expressed similar concerns with the constant addition of requirements to the English curriculum, which can leave a dearth of time in pedagogical practice. She remarked:
You know, you sit in a meeting, and it’s like… Okay, now to better support the social studies curriculum we want you to teach *Animal Farm*. Okay, great. But that’s a whole other book. So now what do I do with everything else? You haven’t told me I don’t have to teach something else… So, um, I’ve run into those problems.

Mr. Neverland would agree with this statement. He noted that at department meetings they’re “always talking about argument writing” and other skills the students should be taught. He said, “We’re always talking about doing our work on SAT skills and vocabulary, and just… yeah. [Poetry] doesn’t seem to be on the forefront on the agenda for the curriculum.” He stated that there is so much material that the English teachers are expected to cover. “The required titles, the SAT, the MCAS, the vocab, and, you know, the argument writing,” he declared. “Next thing you know, you’re out of time.”

Many of the teachers expressed that the requirements around standardized tests can lead to leaving poetry out of their curriculum or just teaching it in ways that can be less interesting to students. Ms. Malcolm said she’s always thinking about the state test, the MCAS, even though she does not like teaching toward its specific goals. Mrs. Rock pointed out that at departmental meetings the English teachers are instructed that they should be “spending a little bit of time prepping for MCAS” for those students in ninth and tenth grades and that “older students… need prepping for SAT.” She said that sometimes she could use the standardized preparation time in her classroom to teach poetry, since poems do appear on the state exam, and there are sample poems available for preparation. But Ms. Malcolm pointed out that the poetry on the state exam appears infrequently, as the trend is toward non-fiction. She therefore doesn’t think about teaching poetry to her students too much. She said:
So, like, what ends up happening… if it’s not on the test I don’t have to teach it. And if [poetry]’s not on the test, then like, it must not be important. Because it’s all non-fiction. We’re moving… we’re in the age of non-fiction texts now.

She noted that if she does teach poetry in her classroom, however, she would lean toward teaching it in rote, standardized ways, stressing the elements the students might be asked about on the tests, such as imagery, detail, and other poetic devices. This sentiment was echoed by Mr. Neverland who said he feels he has to teach the literary elements of poetry for the sole reason that they might show up on standardized tests.

When time becomes of the essence, and teachers have a choice in their pedagogical decisions, many tend to leave out poetry altogether. Mrs. Rock, who had previously admitted to not being a strong supporter of poetry, confirmed this point, stating of the genre:

It’s not something... if I’m looking at the course of my year and I’m thinking I’d really like to include some poems, and then I’m having a time crunch, the poems are the first things that are going to go. By the time, I, you know, finish up the school year…. It’s the expendable item. Yeah.

She added that she doesn’t “expose” her students to poetry that much because of the time constraints on her teaching. She said, “I can’t really do it as much as I want to.”

Even the teachers who claimed to love poetry admitted it can get lost in the constant shuffle and requirements of the English curriculum. Mrs. Dover said that her department’s freedom of choice in the curriculum “kind of just leaves it open for the teacher to blend [poetry] in”, and for that reason “it just kind of gets lost in the planning sometimes.” Mrs. Rock would concur, stating:
It’s all just where does it kind of get stuck in? Not in some… let’s celebrate this genre kind of fashion, but more in a, uh… I really want to expose you to it and I just have to find more random ways to do it, because I can’t do it in a, you know, a put together unit.

At the end of the day, even when teachers do squeeze poetry into their pedagogy, their students do not always respond well, which can affect the teachers’ future pedagogical decisions. Indeed, student reactions to poetry pedagogy can be a barrier to effective instruction, and can force teachers into the unfortunate stance of barring the genre from their classrooms.

**Resistance.** Many of the teachers spoke of their students’ trepidation and apprehension about the genre of poetry which, as Mrs. Dover stated, can make teaching poetry “painful.” She stated, “Most students are so put off by it.” Ms. Sanders said that there are just too many students who “get stuck and are like, I can’t do poetry, because it’s poetry.” Ms. Malcolm said her students “are just so overwhelmed… that I am making them read it. Aloud. In front of people.” Mr. Neverland remarked that “most of them definitely kind of come off, like, they definitely sigh when they find out we’re going to do poetry. You know… they’re fearful because they’re afraid they’re not going to get it.”

Overall, as Mrs. Dover claimed: “There’s a lot of fear.” She said of her students: “They’re definitely inhibited. By past experiences with it… or feeling like it is an entirely different animal than anything else they’ve ever done.” She commented that her students’ biggest struggles lie in trying to work with the poetic structure, as well as dealing with metaphors and lyrical and figurative language. She said that her students find it difficult to grapple “certainly with some of the more archaic, you know, inverted… sentence inversions” and added
“I think just a lot of my students are just very literal, and by definition poetry is asking you to use that, like, figurative side.”

Getting students past their academic difficulties can certainly make pedagogy a struggle for teachers. However, Mrs. Rock commented that helping students dig into poetry with a certain pedagogical toolbox can help them hone in on poetry’s message and perhaps enjoy it more. She remarked: “Most of the time... you get that ‘I don’t get it’. But... um, I think... that’s where we should be teaching. Because at that point you can help them figure it out.”

She noted that teachers have the ability to help students with their skills and to potentially turn their opinions around: “If you can give them... some strategies, and some steps to work through what the message is. And um, I mean, it is something that you can teach a student how to do.”

Other teachers commented that their students simply don’t like poetry, or that the students think they don’t like it, which can be detrimental to the classroom environment. Mr. Neverland said of his students, “The popular forms of communication and expression these days are those fast and easy, like texting, tweeting, snapchatting... Poetry doesn't fit in with that crowd.” Ms. Malcolm said her intuition is that her students won’t “dig Emily Dickinson” or any other poet, and that such an impression might lead herself as well as other teachers to avoid the subject. As Mrs. Dover stated, her students can be so “put off” by poetry, that she says, “We don’t really go there.”

Ms. Malcolm also pointed out that part of the reason students tend to show distaste for poetry might be the pedagogical strategies their teachers have used with them in the past. Mr. Neverland would agree with this idea, stating of his students: “They've been conditioned to fear it rather than appreciate it, which is unfortunate.” He pointed out that many of his students’ fears seem to stem from having been wrong in their comprehension of poetry in the past. He said the
students get anxious and stop enjoying poetry because when “they say what they think it means, the teacher kind of shuts them down.” According to Ms. Malcolm, lackadaisical poetry pedagogy can also turn students off. She said:

[The students] think that [poetry] might be dorky. And a waste of time. And not heavy, important literature. And I think that they have every right to think that, because that’s how they’ve been taught. We never do it, and we never talk about it as purposeful and meaningful.

Her feeling was that students can be encouraged to like the genre more if the teachers impress them with poetry that is enjoyable. She said, “The poetry has to be interesting. The poetry has to be modern.” Mrs. Rock would concur. She noted that “young children have a great deal of exposure to poetry in early books and early education experiences” and that they tend to like the genre. But this phenomenon changes when the students reach the secondary level; she said: “There seems to be a shift, when it is perceived as hard or boring perhaps. For teenagers it could be that it involves too much thought.” In other words, when they are taught to dissect poetry in an academic sense, it becomes more of a struggle and less enjoyable for the students.

Mr. Neverland agreed. He said that to increase participation and interest in his appreciation unit on poetry, he picks poems that are “engaging.” He claimed that giving students enjoyment and increasing their appreciation of the genre will make students more likely to want to understand poetry. At the conclusion of his aesthetic lessons in poetry, he noted that many students come to him and say, “Are we going to do another poem, Mr. [Neverland]?” He attested that, indeed, by the end his poetry unit, the students, “usually… really appreciate it.” He said: “You know, you can’t get everybody on your side. But… you know, far more than we started with…come on to the poetry side.”
Reasons abound as to why high school English teachers might bar poetry from their classroom. Even if doubts about their own personal efficacy can be overcome, student doubts creep in, and finding effective ways to celebrate poetry in a tense environment can be trying. Classroom teachers have a lot on their plates, and the teacher-participants in this study are no exception. While they may have the best intentions about exposing their students to poetry, it seems that attempting to tackle all of the requirements of a sundry, heavily-assessed English curriculum may leave them in a strained position in which subjects that are not well-respected, such as poetry, may be left behind in the chalk dust.

Conclusion

Interviewing these 5 practicing, high school English teachers was certainly an informative and rich experience which helped me to understand more about the phenomenon of teaching poetry. Some of what they said fell right in line with the scholarly findings on the topic, and therefore did not surprise me, while other elements mentioned were unexpected and enlightening. Looking back at the themes of learning, respecting, effecting, and barring poetry, I can certainly find many invigorating ideas upon which to expound, some expected and some very unexpected.

As I sifted through the interview data by theme I was not by any means surprised that a small collection of English teachers would ascribe immense worth to the genre of poetry. After all, it would be expected that they would be among its greatest advocates. That most of the high school English teacher-participants would assert personal respect for poetry, however, was still heartening. I was encouraged to hear that some of them still read and engage with poetry on their own time and feel it to be a valuable, cultural meme. Though many of them did mention society’s somewhat negative view of the genre, such descriptions were not unforeseen, as it is
shown in the literature on the topic that poetry is frequently, culturally viewed as elitist, difficult, mysterious, and even boring.

It was also not surprising that the study participants who professed the most learning in and respect for poetry were also those who perceived themselves as most effective at teaching it, but this was still an important finding. Perhaps these individuals had a natural proclivity toward and love for poetry which led them to want to learn more about it in school, and even to become English teachers. But it was certainly clear that those who had studied and engaged with the subject more prior to becoming educators were also those who claimed more positive experiences teaching it. Their respect and love for the genre, and their inclination to transfer those feelings to their students, seemed to reward them with what they felt were more effective pedagogical experiences in their classrooms.

Indeed I was inspired by the many positive experiences the teachers highlighted in their pedagogical practices. Having the participants remark upon encouraging experiences with teaching poetry for cultural, critical, aesthetic, and appreciation purposes certainly left me with a feeling that perhaps this genre can survive the harsh, standardized educational environment in which it must dwell. Of course, many negative pedagogical experiences were mentioned by the participants, and barriers to effective poetry instruction abound. However, none of the roadblocks the teachers mentioned were unforeseen, and luckily, none of them seemed insurmountable either. The hope is that the teachers will continue to build on their positive experiences and avoid a complete barring of poetry from their classrooms.

While I was not surprised that the teacher-participants who had taken the most poetry courses in school were currently more likely to assert that they were effectively teaching the genre, the fact that none of the participating teachers could point to any specific preparation for
teaching poetry in their pre-service training was certainly astonishing. The majority of these teachers were trained as educators of English, yet none had ever extensively learned about effectual poetry pedagogy. While each individual could easily discuss learning how to teach novels and plays and more methodological elements such as unit design, all of the participants who had gone to school to become English teachers said that poetry pedagogy was largely ignored in their preparatory work. This fact is shocking, and clearly calls for change at the pre-service level. If poetry is to be a valuable and respected part of English study, English educators must be trained to teach it, and to teach it effectively.

I expected there to be some variation in how the individual participants valued and respected poetry. I was disheartened to hear that some English teachers did not seek out or engage with poetry in their own lives. I was startled, however, by the way they described their perceptions of their school’s attitudes toward the genre. While most of the individual teachers held poetry in some regard, it seemed that the educational environment of their school did not. None of the teachers could point to any official requirement in their English department’s curriculum concerning poetry, nor could they attest to it ever being truly or thoroughly discussed. Clearly a lack of conviction concerning poetry by those making major curricular decisions had trickled down into the classroom and onto the teachers and students. One comment made by one of the participants struck me as particularly remarkable: her perception that there doesn’t seem to be a foundational education in poetry as there is in other literary genres. Typically, American high school students are given a wealth of titles to read focused on the accepted canon of Shakespeare and some of our more luminous American and British novelists, but the cornerstone of poetry is often left out of the building. This sentiment is certainly reflected in the teachers’ perceptions of the curricular requirements of their particular English department. A
foundational education in poetry would be a boon to all high school English students, and should be addressed at the local, statewide, and national level.

At the conclusion of this study, it is safe to say I enjoyed discussing poetry pedagogy with these teachers. They all had individual experiences that collectively brought me to an enlightened state on the phenomenon. With their in-depth comments about their perceptions, knowledge, practice, and pedagogy, I was able to move on to a deeper analysis of how their experiences fit into the larger scope of scholarly thought on the topic.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

This research study was created with the purpose in mind of gaining understanding of the experiences of the English teacher-participants at a suburban high school in the United States. The qualitative research study was guided by the question: How do practicing high school English teachers describe their experience of teaching poetry? The study was designed as an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of the high school English teachers as they described their own perceptions of their values and pedagogical experiences relating to poetry. The data collected was analyzed to investigate the most significant findings in the study. The discussion that follows looks into the collected data in relation to the theory behind the study, the literature reviewed, and the significance to practitioners and scholars on the topic of poetry pedagogy.

Discussion in Relation to Theoretical Framework

**Pedagogical content knowledge.** Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) was chosen as the theoretical framework for the study. PCK is relevant to teachers' training, positionality, beliefs, values, and experiences, and these were topics broached with the participants in relation to their experiences with teaching poetry. Four common components of knowledge in PCK – pedagogy, content, context, and values – were considered the most important factors in investigating and learning about how practicing English teachers perceive and explain the phenomenon of poetry pedagogy.

**Pedagogy and content.** As noted previously, the basis for PCK as a theory started with Shulman (1986) who advocated that teachers must understand why a particular topic in their content area is essential, and then they must know how to teach it. Some of the first questions asked of the teacher-participants, therefore, had to do with their pre-service learning and
experience. The participants were asked how much they knew about the content of poetry and about the teaching of the genre.

Though all 5 of the participants in the study were English/writing majors and claimed to have studied poetry to some extent in school and to have at least a basic knowledge of its content, their level of content knowledge certainly varied. Those who had taken the fewest poetry courses in their university years – Ms. Sanders, Mrs. Rock, and to a lesser extent, Ms. Malcolm – were also the least likely to admit they enjoyed the genre or were willing to spend much time with it in their classrooms. Though they may have expressed individual wishes and desires to know more about the genre, or to have more time to include it in their pedagogy, overall they were counted as poetry’s lesser fans. Just as Ms. Sanders and Mrs. Rock seemed to concentrate less on the genre while in university, neither of these participants admitted to spending much of their own current, personal time with poetry either. Their lack of background knowledge in the content, as well as their ongoing reluctance to engage with the genre, may therefore indicate that they will continue to avoid poetry in their classroom environments.

It seemed that those who had taken the most courses on poetry in school and who continued to read and take personal pleasure in poetry – Mrs. Dover and Mr. Neverland – were also the genre’s biggest advocates in the study. These teachers both claimed to love and respect poetry and were the most likely to teach it in their classrooms. It seemed that their content knowledge helped them in figuring out ways to include poetry in their curriculum, especially in ways that the students might enjoy. In this study it can be shown that those educators who spent more time studying and engaging with the content of poetry prior to becoming English teachers, and those who currently spend more time reading and experiencing the genre on their own, are more likely to advocate for it in their classrooms.
It must be noted, though, that an affinity for poetry may have already been personally engrained in the participants Mrs. Dover and Mr. Neverland, which would have led them to study the genre more prior to becoming teachers and to currently engage with it more in their personal lives. Their inherent love for the genre may have led them to gain more knowledge of its content, which then led them to becoming more fervent educators of the subject.

It is worth remembering, however, as Gumundsdottir (1990) pointed out in relation to PCK, that "content does not stand in isolation" (p. 47). For the most successful PCK to be present, teachers must combine their knowledge of content with their pedagogy. As Shulman (1987) wrote, greatness comes in the ability of educators to transform their content knowledge into pedagogically-powerful forms. Yet as far as pedagogical knowledge was concerned in this study, all 5 of the teacher-participants attested that they had little to no training in teaching poetry. Even the majority of the participants, who studied education and were formally trained as English teachers, admitted that they had not, for the most part, been taught how to teach poetry and knew little about its formal pedagogy. Not one of the participants in the study could point to a specific methodology or lesson in poetry that he/she had learned while studying to become a teacher.

The pedagogical strategies of the teachers therefore varied, with Mr. Neverland making up his own appreciation lessons, Ms. Malcolm reaching back into the recesses of the past to recall how she was taught poetry in high school, and Mrs. Dover pointing to formal AP workshops for assistance with her pedagogical strategies. It would appear, therefore, that the lack of training in how to teach poetry negatively affects the classroom experiences of the genre. Such deficiencies in preparation may also play a role in teachers putting poetry in the backseat of the curriculum, teaching it inauthentic ways, or treating it as an ancillary topic rather than as
significant in its own right. Though some of the teachers, including Ms. Malcolm and Ms. Sanders, expressed a readiness to learn more about poetry pedagogy through professional development, the opportunities for this sort of learning in current practice seem rare. It is worth noting, though, that the teachers expressed a willingness and even eagerness to improve their PCK.

Knowledge of poetry’s content and its pedagogy certainly seems important to its being taught well in the classroom. But, as Shulman (1987) pointed out, having even expert knowledge of one’s content along with effective pedagogical strategies is not always enough for meaningful teaching. The educational context and the values of the teacher and the environment must also be taken into account.

**Context and values.** In their understanding of their experiences, teachers must value their subject matter and take into account the context of their pedagogy, which may include the classroom, the curriculum, and situations involving students (Shulman, 1987). Effective pedagogical content knowledge, therefore, must also contain understanding of poetry’s value and its place in a larger, educational context.

As evident in the individual work of Shulman (1987), Gudmundsdottir (1990) and Grossman (1990), teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about their content is an essential part of their PCK. A willingness to understand and to see poetry as valuable therefore seemed significant in the inquiry into teachers’ experiences teaching it. As shown in this study, high school English teachers often have the ability to make content-based decisions in their curricula, deciding on a daily basis which aspects of the literature they will teach. Attributing worth and respect to poetry as part of an English curriculum, therefore, and teaching it in a way toward developing similar beliefs in students, is essential to effective poetry pedagogy.
For the most part in this study, the teachers expressed a belief that poetry is valuable. Though there were varying degrees of enthusiasm for the genre – with only one teacher going so far as to have a representation of it eternally engraved on his body – they all expressed some belief in poetry as a part of English class. Ms. Malcolm especially seemed to believe that poetry has deep-rooted value in literary study, calling it a foundational cornerstone of literature, but lamented that it largely remains an elite form of language art. Though it would seem, in keeping with the theory of PCK, that her value system would lead her to more positive experiences in the classroom, this did not appear to be the case. Though Ms. Malcolm expressed her belief in poetry’s importance, she would note that she did not teach it more extensively mostly due to time and other curricular constraints.

In accordance with the theory of PCK, those who espoused the most personal belief in the genre’s value, those who found it most striking and significant in their own lives – Mr. Neverland and Mrs. Dover – were also the most likely to teach it, and to endeavor to teach it, at least occasionally, for appreciation and enjoyment purposes. This finding seems to follow the PCK model of Grossman (1990), who argued that teachers’ beliefs about literature can affect the way they approach it with their students. According to the theory of pedagogical content knowledge, if teachers can impart positive values in the context of their educational environment, they can certainly effectively influence their students in positive ways.

All of the teachers in the study did express at least a general conviction that poetry is worth teaching, especially in consideration of its scholarly properties. Yet not one of the participants in the study could strongly state that their educational environment, meaning the English department and the administration, felt the same way. In the context of their school, they couldn’t declare that poetry was deeply valued. Most of the teachers pointed to the
departmental focus on other necessities for students, such as preparing for standardized tests. Ms. Malcolm, Mrs. Rock, and Mrs. Dover pointed to the longer works of literature, the required novels, as being more important in the department’s agenda and to the sore lack of poetry in administratively-purchased texts. Either way, the majority of the teachers in the study claimed that they did not even think poetry was a requirement in their English department’s curriculum. Therefore, when left with a choice on whether to teach it at all, or even whether to force it into their already-packed curricula, many teachers were disinclined. Mrs. Rock, Ms. Sanders, and Ms. Malcolm were certainly among those who felt that poetry’s perceived optional status in the department gave them a pass in their pedagogy.

PCK was especially relevant for this study of practicing high school teachers involved in poetry pedagogy in that the information sought concentrated on what the participants knew about their content and its pedagogy, how they perceived its value, and how their understandings influenced their current practice in context. The 5 teachers in this study had a range of pedagogical content knowledge in relation to the genre of poetry. Overall, it seemed that those with the best PCK – those who seemed to have the most content knowledge, the most positive experiences, and the most eagerness to place value on the genre in context – not only were more willing to teach poetry, but were also more likely to attempt to teach it in ways that they felt would transmit their value systems to their students.

**Discussion in Relation to Literature**

The literature review performed prior to the study looked deeply into the subject of poetry and its pedagogy. First investigated were the historical perceptions of poetry’s value both as a genre as well as an educational topic. Next, the available literature was searched for documentation of the practices of teachers involved with poetry pedagogy, looking for their
perspectives on the phenomenon, both positive and negative, and yearning to understand more about the barriers to effective poetry instruction.

Interestingly, the experiences recounted by the practicing high school English teachers in this study echoed much of what was found in the available literature on the topic. Though there were some surprising discrepancies, the teachers’ perceptions of poetry’s value, as well as their descriptions of their lived experiences with its pedagogy, for the most part fit neatly into what has already been written in the previous decades of research.

**Poetry’s value.** The high school English teacher-participants in the study reflected some of what has been written in the literature about poetry’s value as a personal, social, and cultural force. They seemed to agree that poetry can be a valuable art form, but their degrees of devotion to that belief varied. Mrs. Dover and Mr. Neverland extolled their personal love for the genre rooted in poetry’s particular ability to express human emotions, as shown in the work of Certo et al. (2012) and Hanratty (2008). Mrs. Dover mentioned the genre’s valuable ability to contribute the voices of the marginalized to the social lexicon, as illustrated in Ciardiello (2010) and Stovall (2006). In line with the work of Carroll (2005), Mrs. Rock focused on poetry’s worth as a personal, cathartic tool for dealing with emotion.

While the literature espouses the myriad ways in which poetry is valuable to culture, including its historical importance in social movements (Ciardiello, 2010; Stovall, 2006), its ongoing political power (Meydani & Tsur, 2014; O’Brien, 2004; True, 1993), as well as its current cultural forms such as its prevalence on the web, in hip-hop music, and in advertising (Dymoke & Hughes, 2009), none of the teachers in this study mentioned those aspects of the genre. In fact, in the overarching view of society, Mrs. Rock was especially quick to assert that poetry is a dispensable and somewhat disposable art form, just as O’Brien (2004) feared.
Yet all of the teachers in the study averred at least a general belief that poetry was worth teaching in high school English classes. The value of poetry as a pedagogical tool was affirmed, though the extent to which the teachers’ fully adhered to this belief, in both mind and practice, seemed to fluctuate.

**Pedagogical value.** In line with many previous studies in the literature, including Dymoke (2012), Benton (2010), and Ray (1999), the teachers in this study for the most part seemed to hold a general optimism for poetry and espoused belief that poetry should be taught to some extent. The teachers did not always advocate for or teach poetry themselves, but there seemed to be a general agreement that the genre should ideally be part of a high school English classroom. As depicted in the literature, the teachers found poetry worthwhile for its academic as well as cultural and critical purposes in their pedagogy.

**Academic value.** Poetry can certainly be viewed as a valuable tool for teachers wishing to hone students’ English-class skills. Most of the teachers in this study, including Mrs. Dover, Mr. Neverland, Ms. Malcolm, and Mrs. Rock affirmed a belief that poetry study can help students in their academic endeavors. They elucidated poetry’s ability to enhance reading, writing, and language skills. The belief that poetry contributes to scholarly ventures has been supported countless times in the literature, including through the work of Weaven and Clark (2011), Keil (2005), and Wade and Sidaway (1990). Mrs. Dover, Ms. Malcolm, and Mr. Neverland all articulated their conviction that studying poetry can encourage students to look at language in more critical ways, as evidenced in the work of Wade and Sidaway (1990), and Dunning (1966). They also found that poetry can help students to think more figuratively and to understand ideas and emotions on a more metaphoric or symbolic level, as highlighted in the work of Xerri (2014) and Peskin (1998). Ms. Malcolm mentioned how studying poetry can aid
in making students more creative and detailed writers, allowing them to understand the nuances of language and the use of sensory detail and figurative speech. This belief is also commonly held in the literature (Weaven & Clark, 2011; Wade & Sidaway, 1990).

Poetry’s value as a cross-genre and cross-curricular tool has been illuminated in the literature as well, and many of the educators in this study mentioned using poetry in this vein. Within English class, poetry can be used to bridge the gap with other works of literature, as shown in the work of Moore (2002) and Ackerman (1968). Mrs. Rock, Mrs. Dover, and Ms. Malcolm all discussed using poems to tie in with the other literature that they were teaching in class. Many of the teachers also mentioned that they had been encouraged to teach poetry this way, as a thematic tie-in with novels and plays. Teaching poetry along with other disciplines, in a truly cross-curricular fashion, was less popular with the teachers in this study, though it is mentioned quite a bit in the literature. While Meydani and Tsurb (2014), Perfect (1999), and Danks (1996) all show how poetry can be tied to any other subject in a school’s curriculum, including history, science, and even mathematics, the teachers in this particular study did not mention this idea, perhaps because they do not have many authentic opportunities to do cross-curricular work in their school.

Another popular mindset about poetry’s academic value is that it can be enticing for students who struggle with reading and writing. Both the literature (Jocson, 2005; Perfect, 1999) and the teachers in this study seemed to support this idea. Mrs. Dover mentioned how the brevity of poetry is appealing to her reluctant readers, those who might look at a novel or a play with trepidation. Ms. Sanders mentioned how her students in lower-level English classes enjoyed writing poetry, even in form. She also noted that writing with the ease of voice and language that poetry seems to allow was appealing for her students who were English language
learners (ELLs). Overall, poetry’s diversity of form and length seemed to be appealing to the teachers in this study, especially when dealing academically with differentiated learners, as supported by the work of Jocson (2005) and Perfect (1999).

**Cultural and critical value.** Although the literature advocates the importance of teaching poetry for its cultural and critical value (Lopez, 2011; Cervetti et al., 2001; Blake, 1992), allowing students to understand their places in society and a rich, social tapestry of words and voice, not many of the teachers in this study saw poetry pedagogy in this light.

Ms. Malcolm lamented poetry’s general absence in the school’s curriculum, but especially in practice of its cultural and critical purposes. She, along with Mrs. Rock, mentioned striving to use poetry as a means of opening her students’ minds and hearts to different cultures and voices, as promoted in the literature of Stairs (2007), Jocson (2005), and Jordan (1985). Mrs. Rock mentioned bringing the African-American voice in verse to her unit on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Ms. Malcolm discussed including a feminist, verse perspective to her unit on *The Merchant of Venice*. Yet both teachers noted that this practice becomes difficult with the restrictions on time and space in the curriculum. In line with the work of Certo et al. (2012), Ms. Malcolm did mention wanting to use engaging, contemporary poetry to expose her students to the cultural relevancy of the genre, but again noted that this was not always possible in her day-to-day practice.

Teaching poetry in culturally-relevant ways indeed seems to be a difficult task when the teachers are faced with so many other responsibilities, yet there did seem to be a few attempts made by the study participants. The pedagogical methodology of asking students to incorporate pop music lyrics into their learning or to write creatively in their own voices, as depicted in the individual work of Jocson (2005), Bruce and Davis (2000), and Ladson-Billings (1995a) were
popular models used by most of the teachers, including Ms. Malcolm, Ms. Sanders, Mrs. Rock, and Mr. Neverland. But again, these strategies were not employed widely or frequently. None of the teachers in the study mentioned the idea of using poetry to expose students to marginalized voices or arenas of social justice, or as a means of challenging the established literary order, as shown in the work of those such as Ciardiello (2010), Jocson (2005), and Jordan (1985). But perhaps this isn’t surprising in a school where the majority of educators, including all of those in this study, are of the dominant demographic.

Valuing poetry in pedagogy for both its academic as well as cultural/critical purposes appears equally important in the literature. The teachers in this study, however, seemed not to see it as such. For the most part, they seemed to be concentrating on the academic uses of the genre.

While poetry may have a sparse role in their individual curricula, they did have some positive experiences with the genre that reflected aspects of the literature on the subject.

**Teachers’ experiences.** The literature contributes many varied, positive experiences teachers have had with poetry pedagogy. This study contributed some as well, though perhaps in less defined terms. The desirable notion in the literature that poetry pedagogy can lead to invigorating discussions and lessons for both teachers and students (Hennessey et al., 2010; Hanratty, 2008), seemed to be less common in the teachers interviewed for this study. Though Mrs. Dover and Mr. Neverland both mentioned rewarding experiences with poetry in their practice, for the most part the teacher-participants were less enthusiastic about poetry’s role in their classrooms. The literature’s advocacy of positive pedagogical practices related to poetry, such as writing, critiquing, sharing, performing, and digitizing the genre, however, were followed by the participants in this study to certain, constructive extents.
Write, critique, share. Writing, critiquing, and sharing poetry are certainly popular methods of pedagogy shared by both the literature and the teachers in this study. Almost all of the teachers in the study mentioned having their students write about poetry or write their own poetry as being worthwhile exercises in their classroom. Ms. Sanders, Ms. Malcolm, and Mr. Neverland all pointed to especially gratifying experiences with having their students write their own verse. This practice reflects the work advocated by Haugh et al. (2002). Ms. Malcolm and Ms. Sanders both encouraged their students to write in form, as advocated by Tompkins (2000), and found that their students enjoyed such activities. Mr. Neverland mentioned that asking his students to write verse modeled after a famous poem, in his case a Whitman poem, was an engaging and successful lesson, which is similar to a lesson championed in Haugh et al. (2002). As the lone AP teacher in the study, Mrs. Dover noted that her students must critique and write about poetry frequently, and that this practice helps them to improve in their analytical skills, as also proposed by Haugh et al. (2002).

Having students work in groups to share and discuss poetry was another popular method championed by Mr. Neverland and Ms. Malcolm, and reflected in the work of Haugh et al. (2000). Mr. Neverland counted his experiences with having students critique poetry in groups and discuss poetry in the frame of appreciation as among his most successful pedagogical practices. Since he did not enforce the knowledge or understanding of a dictated message onto his students, Mr. Neverland felt that having the students share poetry in this way allowed for them value the genre beyond its strictly academic purposes, as shown in the work of Hanratty (2011). Mr. Neverland seemed to count his methodology as successful in the sense that he felt he had instilled his love of poetry onto many of his students, as this particular practice is meant
to generate (Hennessey et al., 2010) and had likewise crafted a significant solidification of his own worth as an educator (Wilson, 2013).

As the advisor to the literary magazine at the school, Mrs. Rock likewise noted that many of her students love to write and to share their poetry, even on a school-wide basis, should their poems be accepted for publication in the journal. Though Mrs. Rock’s experiences with these students were not strictly pedagogical, she did seem to find that students continue to view writing and sharing poetry as a positive mode of expression, as shown in the work of Sara (2000).

Perform. Performing poetry, while supported in the literature as a significantly important pedagogical tool (Biggs-El, 2012; Tamalavage, 2008; Jocson, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995a), did not seem to be as popular with the teachers in this study. The only teacher who mentioned poetry performance was Ms. Malcolm, and she did so in a tone of regret. She noted that poetry performance is positive and essential for students in truly understanding the genre, but that she did not have adequate time in her curriculum to teach it. She said that she asks students to read Shakespeare aloud, but that this had not been a positive experience for her or her students as they reacted negatively to the practice. None of the teachers seemed to have encouraged awareness or practice of open-mic or poetry slams, as backed by Biggs-El (2012), Jocson (2005), and Bruce and Davis (2000).

The only pedagogical practice with the teacher-participants in this study that seemed to come close to this performance vein was the use of music lyrics as a tool in the classroom. The use and analysis of culturally-relevant, lyrical performance pieces is popular in the literature (Biggs-El, 2012; Jocson, 2005), and had been attempted with positive results by at least a couple of the teachers in the study, including Mr. Neverland and Mrs. Rock.
**Digitize.** Combining poetry with technology, though strongly hailed as a positive model of 21st-century learning in the literature (Curwood & Cowell, 2011; Washburton & Campbell, 2001; Sara, 2000; Van Wyhe, 2000), also appeared not to be a fancied practice for the teachers in this study. Despite having a wealth of technology in their school, including a 1-to-1 initiative in which every student has personal possession of an iPad tablet, none of the teachers discussed using digital media in connection with poetry. The closest incarnation of this idea came from Mrs. Rock and her work with the students on the literary magazine, which is published only online. As espoused in the work of Sara (2000), sharing poetry digitally with a greater audience can be rewarding to students and help them to think more critically about poetry’s construction, purpose, and reach. Although this was not a part of her regular classroom practices, Mrs. Rock did note that the students enjoyed sharing their work with a wider readership through the digital format of the literary journal.

Although the teachers in this study, as well as their students, have access to many digital platforms, it seems that the steady reliance on old literacies – mostly books – was pedagogically paramount. The lack of purchased textbooks containing relevant and engaging poetry was lamented by both Ms. Malcolm and Mrs. Dover, with no recognition of what content and experiences might be easily offered to students through technology, as advised in the work of Curwood and Cowell (2011) and Roberts and Schmidt (2002).

**Barriers.** More of the teachers in this study seemed to have less successful experiences with their classroom instruction of poetry. This sentiment is in line with the work of Certo et al. (2012) as well as Ray (1999). The barriers to effective poetry pedagogy outlined in the literature, including doubts of the teachers, curricular restraints, and student resistance, were echoed in the voices of the teachers in this research.
Doubts. Commensurate with the available literature, many of the teachers in this study reported having little pedagogical content knowledge as well as little motivation in the genre of poetry. Their self-doubts about their knowledge as well as about their ability to teach poetry seemed to have led to negative experiences and/or avoidance, as shown in much of the literature (Lambirth et al., 2012; Certo et al., 2012; Keil, 2005; Benton, 2000; Pike, 2000; Wade & Sidaway, 1990). Of the teachers in the study, Ms. Sanders admitted to having the most doubts about her knowledge and abilities, leading her to a fear of teaching poetry in her classroom, though not a complete avoidance. This feeling has not been uncommon in other studies of educators, as it is readily apparent in the work of Lockwood (1994), Benton (1986), and Harrison and Gordon (1983).

Part of the apparent problem with teacher self-doubt rests in the lack of pre-service training that English teachers receive in poetry pedagogy (Certo et al., 2012; Moore, 2002). This sentiment was reflected in each of the 5 teachers in this study. None reported feeling prepared to teach poetry by their pre-service education, with almost all reporting little to no effective training on the subject.

Another issue is that successful poetry pedagogy, as acknowledged in the literature, may require an efficacious teacher willing to engage with students on poetry’s aesthetic and creative levels (Enochs, 2010; Brewbaker, 2005). Many of the teachers in this study seemed to doubt their ability to teach this way, Ms. Sanders most of all. Mr. Neverland appeared to be the most willing to teach poetry in this transactional way, though he too admitted to occasional doubts about his content knowledge and ability to properly and effectively analyze poetic texts.

Another aspect leading to negative experiences has to do with time constraints in the curriculum. Intense focus on the part of a school or district on other aspects of the curriculum
can lead English teachers to avoid or to cast aside poetry, which compounds their doubts and fears of the genre (Wilson, 2010; Hanratty, 2008).

**Curricular restraints.** All of the teachers in this study mentioned time as being a giant obstacle to their effective instruction of poetry. They universally discussed the many other required aspects of their curricula, including compulsory novels and plays, non-fiction texts, and vocabulary and grammar. The curricular constraints on high school English teachers in particular seems to be of pressing concern. These are the teachers whose students face many high-stakes assessments on their paths to higher education and the workplace. Contemporary, increased focus on standardized test success has also left teachers with precious little time to focus on a more creative and artful genre such as poetry, as noted in the work of Weaven and Clark (2011), Benton (2000), and Pike (2000). Ms. Malcolm, Mr. Neverland, and Mrs. Rock all adhered that they were under considerable pressure to prepare students for the standardized assessments of the MCAS and the SAT, which often left them barring poetry, or at least putting it on the back burner as a less crucial aspect of their curricula.

Critical reading and writing skills, as well as freedom of expression, are paramount to a democratic society, yet because of the time constraints and importance of testing, teachers often force their students into reading and writing about poetry in skills-based, scripted, and formulaic ways, as described by Seely and Tropp Laman (2012). The teachers in this study were no exception. Both Mrs. Rock and Mr. Neverland mentioned teaching poetry with an eye toward what might be asked of students on a standardized test. The only teacher who found such test preparation to be a significant boon to her curriculum was Mrs. Dover, but this was because she teaches a course, AP English Literature, where poetry is part of the exam and therefore needs extensive instruction, albeit by more rote, and strictly academic means. In this light, her
instruction seemed to be mostly for the purposes of her students passing the exam, which is largely viewed in the literature as precisely the wrong reason to teach poetry (Dymoke, 2012; Hennessey et al., 2010; Hanratty, 2008).

Even when there is time in the curriculum for poetry, many of the teachers still reported negative experiences with the content and methodology used in their educational environment. Both Mrs. Dover and Ms. Malcolm expressed dissatisfaction with the available verse in the school’s canonical textbooks, echoing the work of both Pike (2003) and Benton (2000). Ms. Sanders and Ms. Malcolm noted their unhappiness with the way poetry is often, forcibly taught, mostly in inauthentic modes, given the time and space constraints in their curricula. Indeed, the notion that poetry pedagogy is too often confined to the disheartening practice of strict, scholarly analysis is also common in the literature (Weaven & Clark, 2011; Keil, 2005; Pike, 2000; Coston, 1972; Ackerman, 1968). The only teacher in the study who articulated confidence that his methodology had given students some aesthetic appreciation for the genre, as advocated in the work of Dymoke (2012), Hanratty (2008), and Blake (1992), among others, was Mr. Neverland. He seemed to firmly believe that his pedagogical practice of teaching poetry for its artistic properties, and engaging his students in solid enjoyment of the genre, had been a successful venture.

Though the work of Wilson and Myhill (2012) and Hennessey et al. (2010) suggests that teachers often shun creative writing in the genre due to its lack of importance in academia, in this study many of the teachers mentioned using it as part of their pedagogy. Ms. Sanders, Ms. Malcolm, and Mr. Neverland all reported success with creative writing in verse as a pedagogical strategy. They reported that their students tended to enjoy such activities.
Overall, the teaching of poetry was often regarded as ancillary, unimportant, or a waste of time by many of the teachers in this study. These attitudes directly mirror what Hennessy et al. (2010) found in their research. Most of the teachers, especially Mrs. Rock, expressed the belief that of all the content in a standard high school English class, poetry was among the most expendable, disposable aspects of the curriculum. Poetry is certainly, as expressed by both Mrs. Rock and Ms. Sanders, the genre that is simply squeezed in as an afterthought in pedagogical practices, or more often squeezed out.

The available literature on the topic reflects a recurring fear that poetry may become increasingly ignored or shunted out of place in schools. This research study, unfortunately, might add to those concerns. Most of the teachers in this particular study could not even state affirmatively whether poetry was a school or department requirement. Both Ms. Sanders and Mrs. Rock admitted to mostly ignoring the genre of poetry due to this lack of clarity. The others seemed to teach the genre, and were holding on to it in their pedagogical practice in whatever minor way possible, solely because they personally felt it to be valuable and important to do so. These teachers were attempting to share their values with their students, but the truth is that students are not always receptive.

**Student resistance.** Teachers are not the only ones who have doubts, fears, and distaste for poetry. The literature proves that student resistance to poetry instruction can leave teachers with a disinclination to engage in it (Benton, 2000; Ray, 1999), and similar findings were present in this study as well.

It is known that today's high school students dislike poetry; this fact was documented extensively in the survey studies of Hanratty (2011), O'Neill (2006) and Ray (1999) among others. The teachers-participants in this study agreed with this sentiment and spoke openly about
the sighing, complaining, and outright hostility expressed by their students when introduced to a new unit on poetry. Many reasons as to why students might not want to get involved with poetry abound in the literature. In this study, Mrs. Rock suggested that students get less interested in poetry as they grow older and the level of academic discourse around the subject gets more difficult and more intense, and Mrs. Dover pointed out that her students simply struggle with the comprehension of figurative language and the abstract thinking required for poetic study. Mr. Neverland said that his students feel nervous because they think they don't have the ability to understand poetry or that the teacher will be too harsh or critical of their interpretations. These ideas are all echoes of what is found in much of the literature, including explicitly in the work of Linaberger (2005), Fleming (1996), and Mecklenburger (1970).

Student resistance can be a very difficult barrier to overcome. If the students are in mutiny against a subject like poetry, teachers may get demoralized and make the choice to avoid it (Benton, 2010; Baart, 2002; Moore, 2002). Such inclinations were expressed by teachers in the study, including Mrs. Dover and Ms. Malcolm, who said that their students' reactions to poetry led them to occasionally leave it out of their practice.

As found in the literature (Hennessey & McNamara, 2012) and in this study, there are high school English students who enjoy poetry. Many students like reading it, as Mr. Neverland pointed out, and many more find pleasure in writing it, as vocalized by Ms. Sanders, Ms. Malcolm, and Mrs. Rock. Evidence exists that students can become enthusiastic about poetry in school if it is taught in creative, artistic, and aesthetic ways (Hennessey & McNamara, 2012). This sentiment was reflected by Mr. Neverland, who felt that his open discussions and appreciation lessons were engaging for his students and rewarding for him as an educator. As Hennessey and McNamara (2012) and Ackerman (1968) pointed out, teachers must have
training, motivation, confidence, and enthusiasm to re-educate their students on poetry. Some of these qualities may be inherent in the educators in this study, but all of them recognized that their lack of training was problematic and could easily leave them with less ability to surmount the barrier of student resistance.

Significance

Practitioner significance. Much of what was discovered in this study affirms what has already been documented in the literature over the past decades. All of the teachers in this study affirmed beliefs that poetry is a worthwhile subject for high school English students. Their willingness and ability to act on these convictions, however, varied. In effect, this study showed that poetry continues to be a subject that is valued by scholars, educators, students, and society at large, but is becoming increasingly difficult to include effectively in everyday classroom pedagogies.

Practitioners from many arenas of education may be interested in the content of this study for the eye-opening effects of understanding the values high school classroom teachers hold as well as the successes and difficulties they have experienced in their practice. As research has found before, this study supports the conclusion that while many high school English teachers find poetry to be of considerable worth and may be willing to include it in their pedagogy, they may be limited by the values and requirements of their educational environments, such as their school and districts. This study also convincingly shows that even if high school English teachers are willing to include poetry in their practice, they are sometimes unable to do so due to their lack of content knowledge, pedagogical training, and/or self-efficacy related to the genre. In effect, poetry pedagogy still faces considerable barriers to effective practice.
High school English teachers anywhere may find significance in this study as they may be able to understand and relate to the lived experiences of their comrades. Classroom teaching can be a sheltered experience, and English teachers may well benefit from hearing the voices of others who are experiencing the same phenomenon. They may gain knowledge from understanding how other teachers find poetry culturally, critically, and academically valuable. Practitioners can become more aware of successful pedagogical strategies related to poetry, which can be immensely helpful to those who lack training or belief in their personal efficacy. High school teachers may also be served by this study with a deeper understanding of what types of professional and personal needs they may have in attempting to teach poetry, by hearing the concerns of others in the field. With the information from this study, teachers may be able to impress upon their school districts the importance of poetry and its pedagogy and to push for more professional development related to the genre.

Beyond the high school level, practitioners at universities who deal in education should learn from the voices of current, practicing classroom teachers. All of the teachers in this study lamented a lack of pedagogical training in poetry, as their preparation for becoming English teachers lacked this basis of PCK. More training before they even enter into the field would certainly benefit teachers, and university leaders guiding and instructing future educators should be aware of this issue.

Through this study those at the administrative level will be made more aware of poetry’s significant benefit to students and teachers. Poetry is still a valuable cultural mode of expression that has both historic and current, social relevance. If those in position to make curricular decisions understand poetry’s importance, they may be more willing to press for its inclusion in English courses and beyond. This is true of all decision-makers at the local, statewide, and
national level. An understanding of the value of poetry, including its significance to a comprehensive 21st-century education, as well as the heard voices of teachers explicating their experiences with the phenomenon of teaching it, can assist on many levels in the making of critical curricular and pedagogical decisions.

**Scholarly significance.** As noted previously, there has been a fair amount of research regarding teachers’ perceptions of poetry and its pedagogy, but a great deal of it comes from countries outside of the United States, investigates the experiences of primary and pre-service teachers, and is quantitative. Therefore, this qualitative study, which solely explored the experiences of currently practicing high school English teachers in the United States, adds to the available literature on the topic.

Much of the research uncovered on the topic of teachers’ perceptions and experiences of poetry pedagogy came from other English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, and Canada. Additionally, as noted previously, many of these studies did not concentrate on the experiences of high school English teachers. While the perceptions of primary school teachers and pre-service teachers are certainly important to understanding the grand scope of poetry pedagogy, this study contributes the voices of practicing high school English teachers in the United States. Those who must face classrooms of high school students on a day-to-day basis decidedly have important perspectives and experiences to offer the scholarly literature on the topic.

In terms of methodology, this study certainly contributes to the scholarly body of work. A qualitative study using the method of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) on practicing high school English teachers’ perceptions and experiences in poetry pedagogy cannot easily be found. Though this particular study has limitations in that it concentrates on a small
sample of teachers in one English department in a northeastern suburban high school, it still contributes to the scholarly body of work on the topic. Many of the studies found on this topic were quantitative. A qualitative study based on interviews helps to explore the topic, elicit authentic responses, and allows for discovery. Studies based in the methodology of IPA have not been overly common in the field of education, yet this study allowed for educators to explain and offer their perspectives on their lived experiences in the classroom. Though somewhat limited in scope, typical IPA research allows for an intense interpretation of a phenomenon. Such a study had not yet been completed with the particular criteria of this research, and if anything, this study adds the voices of this particular group of teachers to the available literature.

Conclusion

In the nineteenth century, against the sweeping tides of the pragmatic, scientific Enlightenment and the technological boom of the Industrial Revolution, poet Percy Bysshe Shelley penned his influential *A Defence of Poetry* (1890), in which he categorized poets not only as "the inventors of the arts of life" but also as "the teachers who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true" (p. 5). Concerned that the poets would have to surrender their role in society to the "reasoners and mechanists", Shelley (1890) defied the wall of logical mathematicians, scientists, and industrialists, to champion the value of art, innocence, idealism, creativity, and the emotional self (p. 27).

Where we stand today in the 21st century is not all that different from where Shelley stood. We alight on the precipice of great industrial and technological advancements; we are certainly only on the edge of the Digital Revolution. Our society, and our educational systems as a reflection of that society, is therefore teeming with those who believe that logical-mathematical intelligence, the scientific method, and the STEM fields are of the utmost and only importance to
our young people. Of course, I do not take issue with technological advancements in society nor in education, but I do believe that it is irresponsible to leave 21st education solely to the "reasoners and mechanists" (Shelley, 1890, p. 27) and their corporate interests. We still need our artists, our critical, creative thinkers, our poets.

Although educational systems have advanced tremendously in the past half-century, the problem of poetry pedagogy remains a standing issue. As far back as 1965, Stiles was writing that “without poetry, learning becomes pedantic and life becomes existence merely, devoid of ideas and inspiration” and asking the disturbing question: “Could this be the direction in which our schools are moving?” (p. 177). Unfortunately, the answer was yes, and the situation has only gotten worse. Our schools have decidedly headed in the direction of including less and less poetry in their curricula. Despite the fact that poetry is viewed not just by poets, but by scholars, educators, and students alike as beneficial and valuable in all kinds of personal, academic, and cultural ways, it is quickly falling out of favor in an academic atmosphere rife with restrictions and high-stakes testing. Though the United States government advocates for 21st-century skills such as creativity, collaboration, and appreciation of diversity, many of which could be enhanced through the study of poetry, the limitations of the assessment culture stick hard in educational practice. As many scholars and practitioners have attested over the years, poetry is immensely valuable in our schools and in our society, and it may be irresponsible if not dangerous to continue to cast off and ignore it.

My research study was meant to make audible the voices of currently practicing educators, those who stand up in high school English classrooms every day, attempting to engage students with the priceless genre of poetry. I am one of them. I have a very intimate understanding of how difficult it can be to confront the bored and even annoyed faces of
teenagers as I tell them we're starting a unit of poetry. But a daunting task is not necessarily one that should be avoided. From my own experience and from my research study I know that most high school English teachers continue to value poetry and believe in its worth to students. But I also know that there are still considerable barriers to effective practice. Like the poet in Shelley's (1890) work, a practicing English teacher today can feel like "a nightingale, who sits in the darkness and sings" (p. 11). So the questions remain: How can poetry pedagogy become more universal and more effective? How can we teach all of our students to sing?

The first conclusion I've come to is that educators and administrators need to collectively recognize the importance of poetry, and perhaps all arts. As evidenced, art-based education has fallen out of favor in the educational culture of objective knowledge and testable performativity. All individuals involved in education must recognize the importance of creativity, diversity, and freedom of expression not only to teaching and learning but to American society. In that sense, I believe that there should be a foundational curriculum in poetry as there is in other literature. Through my research and experience as a scholar-practitioner, I've discovered that there is a canon of English-language literature that most students read during their educational careers. Great classical novels and plays abound in high school English classrooms, but a solid basis of poetry, the oldest form of language art, does not seem to be common. In a sense, students enter the literary house, but they are cut off from understanding the foundation on which it is built. If poetry were valued as part of all English-class study, then students would come to deeper understanding, appreciation, and respect for its roots, relevance, and significance.

That having been surmised, it is also clear that teachers need to teach poetry in cultural and critical ways. I know firsthand that my students come into class with lyrical verse and metered beats blasting in their headphones. Every day they bob their heads in sync with poetry.
Through all kinds of digital media, millennial students are tuned in. They recognize the power of words to transform, to enchant, and to speak truth, but when their teachers hand them a poem on a sheet of paper, they frown and tune out. From my research, I've learned that the fallback in poetry pedagogy is to instruct in strictly academic modes, stressing the importance of literary devices, forms, and structure. Yet it is clear that teachers report more success, engagement, and rewarding experiences with students when poetry is taught in creative, relevant, and aesthetic ways. Scholarly knowledge is important and should not be discarded, but appreciation for the language art form and its critical purposes allows students to see poetry as something more appealing and meaningful, just like the music they listen to on their way to class. Verse opens the doors of history and culture, and it brings varied voices into the sonic ether. If teachers are to teach poetry in more constructive and engaging ways, though, they have to be enthusiastic about the value of poetry, and they must have strong beliefs about teaching it creatively, critically, and effectively.

I have concluded, therefore, that in order for teachers to be confident and prepared to embark on the emotional and nuanced discovery of poetry with their students they must feel prepared and confident to do so. Their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) must be strong, as the alignment of their knowledges of content, pedagogy, context, and values is essential to effective instruction. High school English teachers need more training in their pre-service education and they need more support and opportunities for professional development in their current practice. My goal is to use what I've learned to reach out in my own educational environment. My colleagues have expressed a wishfulness about poetry pedagogy; they want to learn more, but are at a loss regarding how to do so. I intend to bring my study to my school, to share my research and my advancements in the work, and to hopefully influence administrators
and colleagues to encourage respect for poetry by including it as part of our professional
development services.

The work doesn't end at the local level, though. I definitively advocate the need for more
research into the heart of poetry pedagogy, especially concerning how it can be effective and
meaningful in 21st-century education. The limited scope of my research study surely does not
encompass all that practicing teachers may have to say about the phenomenon. Further study
could perhaps illuminate best practices in the digital age and the ways in which training and
professional development could be improved to augment these ideals. My hope — what Emily
Dickinson (1924) would call "that thing with feathers / That perches in the soul" (p. 19) — would
feature more research into the realm of teacher education. I am highly interested in the pre-
service preparation of high school English teachers, and how they can learn more about effective
poetry pedagogy before graduating into the field.

Surely no one would claim that they want our nation’s students to be “devoid of ideas and
inspiration” (Stiles, 1965, p. 177). The eagerness to learn, to imagine, and to create is what will
keep our country advancing in the 21st century. Poetry does not have to disappear from our
schools. There are multiple ways that the educational system can help both teachers and students
create successful pedagogical experiences with the beautiful verbal art of poetry. There is still
time to capture what Dymoke (2012) calls an “increasingly endangered bird in flight” (p. 408).
Teachers must converse in the language of the poets, push their students to dream, and allow the
experience of poetry to open up worlds. As Gregg (2008) wrote in her poem "Let Birds":

Let birds, let birds.
Let leaf be passion.
Let jaw, let teeth, let tongue be
between us. Let joy...

Let winter impress you. Let spring.

Allow the ocean to wake in you...

Let birds (p. 118).

As long as poetry as a genre is valued and respected, and our teachers are prepared to teach it effectively, we can return poetry to its rightful, exalted place in our high school English classrooms and encourage our students to soar.
References


APPENDIX A

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Investigators: Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters; Mary Alice Young

Title of Project: High School English Teachers’ Experiences with Poetry Pedagogy

Signed Informed Consent Document

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study:

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this study because you are a practicing high school English teacher in the selected suburban high school in the United States.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to gain understanding of the pedagogical experiences of practicing English educators teaching poetry at a suburban high school in the United States. The essential research question of the study is: How do practicing high school English teachers describe their experience of teaching poetry?

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to submit to an interview about your experiences and perceptions of teaching poetry at your school. The questions will be about your background in poetry and education and your experiences and perceptions about teaching poetry. You will be asked to answer questions candidly. All interviews will be audio-recorded.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

This interview will take place on school grounds at a time that is mutually convenient for both the research and you. The interview process may take 1-2 hours. You may be asked for a follow-up interview at a later date.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
No, we do not anticipate there will be any risk or discomfort to you.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help high school English teachers, such as yourself, gain greater understanding of the shared experience of teaching poetry.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way as being of this project. The researcher is the only person who will be using the information collected and this information will be used in her doctoral dissertation. No written reports will contain your name, as participants will be given pseudonyms. After the dissertation is accepted, all audio files will be destroyed.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have at your place of employment, the high school.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Mary Alice Young at young.mary@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact the principal investigator, Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters, at b.sankofawaters@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

Participants will be given a gift of a $15 gift card after the interview process is complete.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

No.
If you agree to participation, please sign below.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________  Signature of person agreeing to take part

Date:

____________________________________________  Printed name of person above
APPENDIX B

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Principal Investigator: Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters; Student Researcher: Mary Alice Young
Title of Project: High School English Teachers’ Experiences with Poetry Pedagogy

Interview Protocol

Introduction: exchange pleasantries, test audio equipment, explain procedure, reminder of consent and anonymity, no right or wrong answers.

Questions:

1. How long have you been teaching high school English classes?

2. What are your personal feelings about poetry as a genre?
   Possible follow-up prompts:
   - Do you enjoy poetry yourself?
   - Do you engage with poetry in any way on your own time?

3. How were you prepared in your education and/or pre-service training to teach poetry?
   Possible follow-up prompts:
   - Can you describe your level of content knowledge of poetry?
   - Do you feel qualified to teach poetry? If yes, how so? If not, why not?

4. In your understanding, how is poetry included in your English department’s curriculum?
   Possible follow-up prompts:
   - Do you perceive your educational environment (your department, the school, etc.) to be conducive to including poetry in the curriculum? Why or why not?

5. How do you teach poetry in your classroom?
   Possible follow-up prompts:
   - What methods or lessons do you use in your pedagogy?

*Note that these are the types of questions planned. Literature on IPA suggests that researchers be flexible and that interviews may vary and drift into other avenues, as the purpose of the questioning is for exploration. Any of these questions may be followed with prompts such as “Can you tell me more about that?”, and/or “Can you describe that more?”, etc.
6. Do you feel poetry is a valuable genre to teach your students? Why or why not?

_Possible follow-up prompts:_
- What are your perceptions of your students’ feelings about poetry?

7. Do you enjoy teaching poetry? Why or why not?

8. What kinds of barriers do you find when attempting to teach poetry?

_Possible follow-up prompts:_
- Can you describe any perceived curricular, departmental, or administrative barriers to teaching poetry?

9. Is there anything you’d like to add about your experiences teaching poetry, which we have not discussed?

Conclusion: thank participant, explain follow-up procedure should it be necessary.