

THE TEACHING OF POETRY
IN ARMENIAN SCHOOLS

by

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Introduction

In his famous essay “A Defence of Poetry,” the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1904) argued that poets are “the legislators of the world.” Indeed, poets are the people that can step out of the usual way of seeing things, challenge them, and define the ideas and norms for the future. On a much more personal level, poetry has the power to provide an outlet and give emotional healing to those that encounter it. Furthermore, it can create a love for language, playing around with it, and exploring all its possibilities. Clearly, poetry is and can be so important for each person and for the society as a whole; however, the reality is that not many people perceive it that way. While there are people that compare poetry to the air they breathe, the vast majority’s attitude towards poetry is a struggle with it; some people outright admit that they hate it, others deem it unnecessary for and irrelevant to their lives, and there are also those that desire to engage with poetry but wonder why poets could not be more straightforward, instead of talking in riddles and a pretentious language. This sense of detachment from poetry is a no less prominent issue in Armenia.

The amazing thing, however, is that those very same people that resent poetry were once the children creating and reciting poetry as they played outside, perhaps without even being aware of it. Something changes during their school years and my research has been aimed at discovering exactly that. I have attempted to understand the causes of this issue specifically in Armenia, since, first of all, that is where I grew up and, secondly, because no such known research has been conducted in this context. The teaching of poetry can often seem irrelevant compared to the more practical and urgent fields, such as medicine and law. Therefore, it is my intention to also propose why poetry is important and, consequently, why it deserves to be taught well.

Literature review

Poetry has been a part of every school's curriculum for a long time, but many researchers have begun noticing that sometime between the moment children enter the world of education and step out of it, their genuine love for rhymes and rhythm is replaced by a struggle with and even a resentment towards poetry. This issue is no less prominent in Armenia, where most people's engagement with poetry ends the moment they graduate and are no longer asked to memorize poems they can neither understand nor relate to. Clearly, this issue needs to be addressed, not just in Armenia, but internationally.

Many teachers and professors have already conducted research and experiments to find out the reasons for this resentment that is created towards poetry during literature classes and have experimented with and found alternative approaches to teaching poetry in order to nurture love and intimate engagement with it. According to Mark Faust and Mark Dressman (2009), the culmination of all these new research and experiments is what they call the "populist" perspective, which began developing alongside progressive education, roughly in the beginning of the 20th century (p. 117). They explain that the populist perspective, as opposed to the formalist one, sees poems as more personal and less "sacred." In other words, people are encouraged to engage with them, interpret them in a way that is meaningful for them, and write their own poems. They observed that most of the articles related to the teaching of poetry that were published in the *English Journal* – a journal providing ideas for English Language Arts teachers – between its creation in 1912 up to 2005, aimed to challenge and break free from the previous traditions of teaching poetry that they considered limiting and prone to creating resentment (p. 130).

David Wagoner (1954) identifies three main reasons for that resentment, one of which is the focus on deciphering the meaning of the poem, which subconsciously tells the child that the poem itself – and all the elements that comprise it – are not important (p. 19). The poem is stripped of its “rhythm, sound, imagery, symbol, length of line, punctuation, and fire” in the search for the idea and meaning behind it. Wagoner then says how, once that meaning is discovered, the child asks a very reasonable series of questions: “If that’s what the guy meant, why didn’t he just say it...in a couple of sentences or a paragraph? In other words, why does the poem have to exist at all?” (p. 19). If a poetry lesson is causing the child to ask such a question, then it is safe to assume that there is a problem. In his article “Why Kids Hate Poetry,” Kevin Stein (2010) also argues that teachers spend too much time analyzing the poems with children, instead of letting them first and foremost enjoy the musicality and fun play of words. By giving the example of many students he encountered who fell in love with poetry only after hearing it recited out loud, he argues that teachers often make the mistake of turning poetry into “didactic mewling” and moral lessons (p. 191).

It is important to understand that the teachers alone cannot be held responsible for this. Wagoner (1954) talks about how both the students and teachers are trapped in a system that requires tests and grades, which can only be conducted if the teachers ask questions that have right or wrong answers. Clearly, questions such as “Which of these three poems or poets do you like best” or “What images does this line bring to your mind?” cannot provide answers that can be graded or marked “incorrect.” Therefore, the easiest and, perhaps, the only way that teachers find to go about it is to focus on the meanings of the poems and their relation to the poet’s life and cultural context (p. 19). However, even within such a system, teachers can make changes to their teaching style and attitude towards poetry to instill an appreciation for its musicality.

That appreciation can go beyond the mere enjoyment of its sound as well. Gwendella Thornley (1962) talks about how the images that poetry evokes in children's imagination can be a fulfilling and exciting experience for children too. Sharon Ruth Gill (2007) takes this point further by discussing how "the rhythm of the poem [can] help us create the image [the poets] want us to see." She gives the example of reading "Mrs. Moon" to her students, who pointed out how the poem had the rhythm of a rocking chair and, therefore, suggested bedtime (p. 623). What all of this shows is not that the meaning of the poem is not relevant at all, but that it can be hidden within its sound and rhythm and the images it evokes, which can only be experienced if the poem is read out loud.

Thornley (1962) also emphasizes the importance of having "a large collection of good children's poetry," from where children can find poems and share them with the class. What will follow is a discussion about their initial reactions to the poem and an active engagement with it. She talks about how children need to see poetry as "something genuinely true, and a part of [their] real life experiences" (p. 694). She challenges the notion that poetry is written by the "great poets" and understood only by academics and people that have a certain amount of knowledge on poetry. She explains that this is what children are taught in schools, which is the reason why so few people read poetry (p. 622). Instead, this is how she explains what poetry is to her students: "We learn that poems can help us see things in new ways...we discover that some poets use the sounds of the words and the rhythm of the poem to help us create the image they want us to see" (p. 623).

She does not stop there; she takes her students beyond reading and hearing poetry and encourages them to write their own by capturing an experience, feeling, favorite place, etc. through their words (p. 622). Katherine Keil (2005) tried another approach: instead of merely teaching about the elements of poetry theoretically, she got students to write their own poems, applying

whatever they had learned. For instance, during a lesson on similes, they read examples of it written by other young writers and created their own, which resulted in an enjoyable time for both the students and herself, and amazing poems she had not expected (p. 98).

According to Tonya Perry (2006), one of the mistakes that teachers make is introducing students to the masters of poetry first, intimidating them, and then asking them to write their own poetry. Her solution is to help students "find value in their own developing voice," while at the same time being able to connect to and learn from other poets (p. 110). She points out how learning to engage with poetry in an intimate way can lead to a better and healthier relationship with the famous poets from whom they can learn (p. 110). But how can that relationship be established in the first place? Stein's (2010) suggestion is to start teaching students poems from their own "historical moment," instead of being taught the classics that make them feel like "kids schussed from the room when the parents start the adult talk they're not privy to." He argues that it is necessary to teach the classics, but to make sure that they will appreciate them, the children need to have acquired an "aesthetic sophistication," which can only be built with time (p. 198).

In an attempt to get her students to show "what the poem means to them" and to "place it in a setting that relates to their life and not to a literary vacuum," English teacher Sarah Stieglitz (1950) decided to not assign any poems to the class (p. 9). Instead, she gave them the task of finding one that spoke to them and presenting it in any way they liked - plays, sculptures, drawings and paintings, puppet shows, music, and other creative means. The result was the students had fun, while unintentionally memorizing, fully engaging with, and understanding the poems. One of the students even wrote that this assignment "makes you think about the poem" (p. 10). This shows that this is not merely a fun exercise, but actually accomplishes what English classes are aim at - getting the students to think about and analyze the poems.

Keil (2005), on the other hand, created an online platform where her students could post their poems and encourages her students to read each other's poetry. She does this in an attempt to demonstrate how poetry is actually intimate and a part of our lives and that of our peers (p. 100). Only once the students believe that does she believe that they are ready to be introduced to the literary canon (p. 100). Whatever approach the teachers take to "convince" the students of poetry's relevance, it is an important step to take, because only then can the students view the poems of the canonic poets in the same light and have enough faith in them to make extra effort to better understand and appreciate them. Only then will they stop being intimidated by the great poets, but be excited to learn from them and master their own writing skills.

Rushworth M. Kidder (1973) talks about how teachers and students often take either of the following two extreme stances when faced with challenging poetry: they either believe that the poet's intended meaning can never be deciphered, therefore it is useless to try, or that it simply does not matter what the poet intended and, therefore, all that matters is what the poem means to the reader. He argues that both stances permit the student to ignore the poem, because by "holding these beliefs, he is free to champion whatever meaning he stumbles upon, and is liberated from the demand that he investigate carefully the language of the poem and come to terms with it" (p. 774). According to him, the first task of the teacher is to remove from the student's mind the belief that he or she is incompetent to understand poetry. He suggests that instead of "pampering" students into believing the poetry is simple, they can be shown that, although it is sometimes complex, it is not impossible to unravel it and the results are certainly rewarding (p. 775).

Keil (2005) talks about how anyone, whether gifted or not, can benefit from poetry. One of the reasons is that poetry provides an outlet and brings emotional healing (p. 100). Furthermore, in his famous essay "A Defense of Poetry," Percy Shelley (1904) argued that by nature, all people

are poets: we are constantly observing, analyzing, and giving names to the things we see in the world around us. He believed that poets are people that can step outside of the usual way of seeing things; they can challenge the norms and create new ones. In other words, poets are the “legislators of the world.” This shows that beyond the personal experience, poetry is also important on a much grander scale. Therefore, the teaching of poetry is an important task that ought to be done with great care. Instilling love and appreciation towards poetry from a young age is very important, because once the window of opportunity to win over the students is missed, that window may remain closed for good.

Wagoner (1954) writes: “Children like poetry. They make it up on the sidewalks, they chant it at each other when they skip rope or play games...it's always there, an intimate part of their lives” (p. 20). One only needs to take a stroll through any Armenian neighborhood to realize how true this statement is for the Armenian context. In my research I want to ask the same question that Wagoner asks in his article: “What happens to these children, as they go through grade school, high school, and college that changes their minds?” (p. 20).

Although the existing research has very effectively and deeply examined and covered the main causes, as well as various solutions, to the problem of how poetry is taught in a way that instills resentment, it is only relevant to the context of most Western countries. In countries such as Armenia, the context – and therefore, the problems – are different. The core problem that schools create a dislike and detachment from poetry is the same; however, it is not the lack of memorizing and reciting, nor the mere analyzing of the poems that causes this. In fact, in most Armenian schools, children are assigned to memorize and recite the famous Armenian poems found in the literature textbooks, and neither analyzing nor understanding them are considered

relevant. In an article about the different stages of poetry education in the United States of America, poet and professor Laura Apol (2017) writes:

In 19th- and early 20th-century classrooms, “schoolroom poetry” was memorized and performed as a way to promote citizenship, to create a shared sense of community, to develop an American identity...Because they were meant to be learned ‘by heart,’ the poems taught usually rhymed, had regular meter and used language that was easy to understand, remember and repeat.

This description fits perfectly with the current state of the teaching of poetry in Armenian schools: its main aim is to instill nationalism in children and no personal or intimate connection with poetry and the use of language is expected or considered important. As someone who went through that system and came out feeling completely detached from poetry and believing that it had no relation to my everyday life, and because no research exists in Armenia about this issue, I have conducted my own research in search of solutions and a better way of teaching poetry; a way that takes students to the roots and origins of poetry – the appreciation of its musicality, rhythm, rhyme, and play of words.

Statement of Central Research Questions

The central question of my research was the following: How can the teaching of poetry in Armenian schools be improved in such a way that it fosters the initial love that children have towards rhymes and rhythm, instead of eradicating it? Several sub-questions that helped answer that question were the following:

1. What is the main opinion that teachers have about the purpose of poetry? How are those reflected in the methodologies that they implement while teaching poetry in schools?
2. Which aspects of those attitudes and methodologies create a love towards poetry among students? Which parts create a detachment from and resentment towards poetry among students?
3. To what degree is the perspective that poetry is a form of creating nationalism and maintaining the Armenian cultural and national heritage dominant? How does that affect the view of poetry as a more personal and individual experience, if it does?

The answers to these questions have provided a foundation on which to build my own research and analysis of this issue.

Methodology

The lack of existing data on this issue required me to conduct my own research and fieldwork. I accomplished that through an online survey and several interviews with poets, teachers, and students.

Online Survey

The online survey was targeted at anyone who has or is still studying in an Armenian school in Armenia. It was created with an online survey tool called “Survey Monkey” and spread through social media. The survey was taken by 73 participants, who were chosen at random, the only criteria being their education in an Armenian school in Armenia. Although they were asked about their age, gender, and decade in which they had graduated or are to graduate, those factors were not criteria in the choosing of the participants.

The survey consisted of 10 questions, which aimed to put the individual experiences of the participants into general statistical data. The questions were regarding the participants' experiences of learning poetry in school, their opinions about the methodology and selection of poems with which they were taught, and their general opinion of and current involvement to poetry. Without making it apparent, I have tried to find the link between their current relationship with poetry and their experiences of being taught poetry in school.

Interviews with Students

Since at the basis of this topic are the students themselves, whether currently or in the past, I decided to get a more in-depth understanding of several students' individual experiences and opinions. The survey could only provide a general picture, but the interviews allowed me to ask follow-up questions as well and go deeper into their individual memories and reflections.

The interviewees were mostly chosen at random, the only attention being given to including both students currently engaging with and interested in poetry and ones that are not. As a result, I interviewed three people, one of whom is not very actively engaged with and interested in poetry, the other one loves to read poetry, while the third one also writes poetry and has a collection of poems that she wishes to publish. All of them graduated high school within the last three years and are currently either in university or employed.

Interviews with Teachers

In order to understand and present the teachers' side. I interviewed two people that teach poetry in the context of Armenian Literature classes. One of them teaches in university, while the other in high school. The interview questions revolved around their own experiences of and

approaches to teaching poetry, as well as their memories of their own school years, their students' involvement level, their opinion of what poetry is and why it is important, and what if, anything, would they change or improve in the general Armenian educational system in regards to the teaching of poetry.

Interviews with Poets

As people that have both gone through the educational system, have long reflected on this topic, and are aware enough to make more objective observations, I decided to interview an Armenian poet. The interview questions centered on her experiences, opinions, and suggestions on this topic.

The other interviewee is an Armenian filmmaker, musician, and writer that grew up abroad. However, his experience of incorporating lessons related to poetry in his filmmaking classes and instilling a love towards it among Armenian students made him a very important interviewee in this research project. The questions directed to him were on a more general scale and included ones about his own perceptions of what poetry is and why it matters, and how it can be taught in order to be more relatable and enjoyable for children.

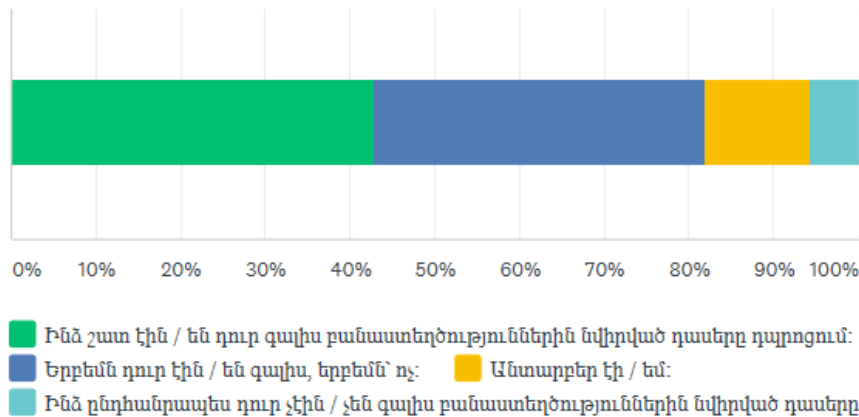
After conducting my own fieldwork and gathering all of the local data I needed, I also analyzed the existing research and literature on this topic about other countries in order to see how the solutions they have found, combined with the suggestions of the people I interviewed, can be applied to the Armenian context and provide solutions and means of improvement.

Research Findings

Online Survey

The online survey was taken by 73 participants, the majority of which were between the ages of 18 and 25, and had graduated or were planning to graduate between the years 2010 and 2020. Since 94% of them answered positive to the question of whether or not they have studied poetry in the context of their literature classes in high school, their responses directly contribute to this research project.

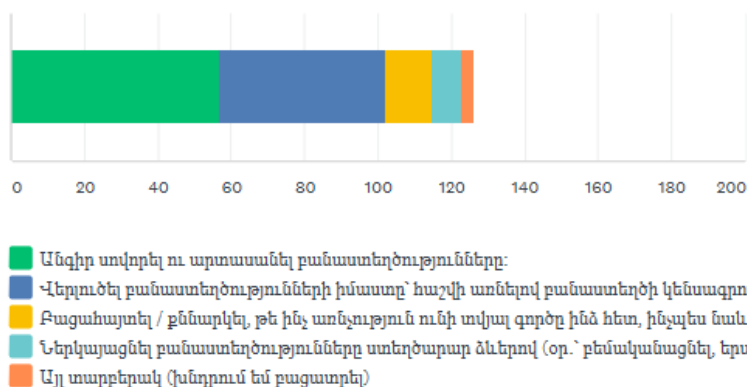
The first question they were asked about this topic is how they would describe their experience of learning poetry in their school. The most common answer, more specifically 43.06%, said that they really loved and enjoyed them. 38.89% said that they sometimes enjoyed it and sometimes not, while only a total of 18.05% either did not like them or were indifferent.



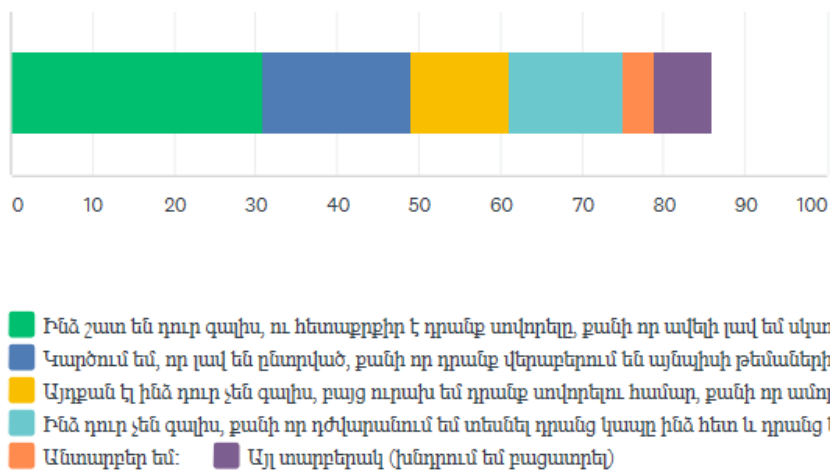
When asked about the methods with which they were taught, given the opportunity to choose more than once answer, not surprisingly the most common answer that was chosen (79.17%) was the method of memorizing and reciting. The next most popular answer (62.50%)

was the method of analyzing the poems’ meaning based on the life of the author and the context in which the poems were created. Only about 18% mentioned being asked to find a connection between the poem and themselves, their life, experiences, and feelings, and about 11% were asked to engage with and present the poems in creative ways, such as through dramas, music, and so on.

It is interesting that the great majority of the people that said they had liked and enjoyed or had sometimes liked and sometimes disliked the poetry-related classes in school were those that had at least one other answer accompanying the “memorizing and reciting” method of being taught. In the same way, the great majority of people that had either “disliked” or were “indifferent” to the classes were those that had only been asked to memorize and recite poems. More specifically, 41 out of the 46 participants that had analyzed the meanings of the poems either really liked or partially liked the lessons. The same for seven of the nine people whose lessons had implemented creative methods, 11 out of the 13 that had been asked to find connections between themselves and the poems, and 46 of the 59 people who had been asked to memorize and recite poems.

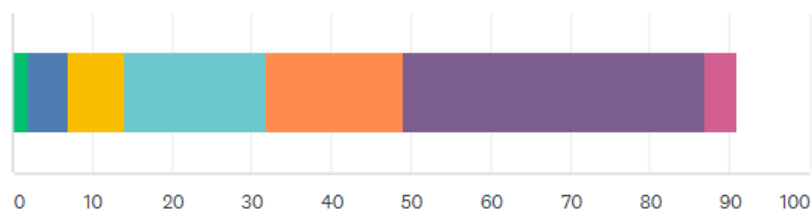


The next question referred to the participants’ opinion of the poems that are included in the curriculum. Once again, they had the choice to choose more than one answer. 31 people voted for the answer “I really liked and found it interesting to learn them, because they familiarized me with my nations’ classic literature, culture, and history.” Another 16 also talked about how they were glad to have covered them, but only because it would have been embarrassing not to be familiar with their nations’ literature. 18 people answered that the poems were well chosen, because they related to themes and feelings that they experience in their own lives, while 14 said that they had trouble seeing its connection to themselves and its relevance to their lives.



This question was followed by a more general one about their view on poetry in general. These were the answers, in order of their popularity: “Poetry’s importance lies in that it helps one understand and maintain their nation’s culture. It is not necessarily important for it to be related to one’s personal life” (54.29%), “I really want to understand and relate to the poems I read, but often it does not work out” (25.71%), “I live and breathe by poetry. Poems help me so the everyday and ordinary things from a new and fresh perspective; therefore, I believe that they

are very useful and interesting” (24.29%), “It is boring and/or overly emotional” (10%), “Poems sound beautiful, but I don’t understand why poets couldn’t just say what they were thinking more directly, clearly, and with a more comprehensible language” (7.14%), “It is a waste of time, since it has no relation to real life and doesn’t change anything significant” (2.86%). 5.71% voted for the “Other” option and clarified that poetry helps to build a good vocabulary, develops the mind, is the “song of the soul,” and so on.



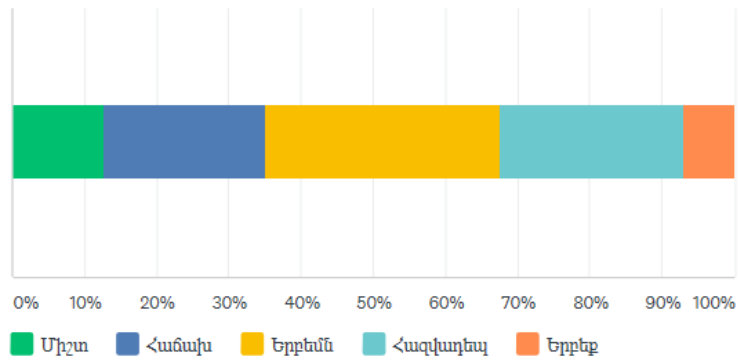
- Այն ժամանակի վատնում է, քանի որ ոչ մի առնչություն չունի իրական կյանքի հետ ու ։
- Շատ գեղեցիկ են հնչում, բայց չեն հասկանում, թե ինչու՞ բանաստեղծները իրենց մտա
- Ձանձրալի է և/կամ չափից շատ զգացմունքային:
- Շատ են ուզում հասկանալ ու ինձ գտնել իմ կարդացած բանաստեղծություններում, բր
- Ես սալրում ու շնչում եմ բանաստեղծություններով: Դրանք ինձ օգնում են առօրեակա
- Բանաստեղծությունը կարևոր է ազգի մշակույթը հասկանալու ու պահպանելու համա
- Այլ տարբերակ (խնդրում եմ բացատրել)

Since one of the main purposes of the survey was to understand the effect of the aforementioned factors on a person’s later-on relationship to poetry, the final question asked them how often they currently engaged with poetry, whether by reading, writing, participating in poetry-related events, and so on. The answers to this question were fairly balanced; about 32% said “sometimes,” 25% said “rarely,” 22% said “often,” 12% said “always,” and 7% said “never.”

Some interesting discoveries were made while cross-analyzing the above statistics. To the question about the poems included in the curriculum, the most common answers among those

that “rarely” or “never” engage with poetry were the following: “I do not really like them, but I am glad to have covered them, because it would be embarrassing not to be familiar with my nation’s poetry” and “I do not like them, because I cannot see their relevance to myself and their significance to my life.” To the same question, those that “always” or “often” engaged with poetry answered that they enjoyed learning more about their national identity and/or found the poems they read in class to be relatable and relevant to their lives, feelings, and experiences.

To the question about their opinion of poetry in general, the two most common answers among those that “rarely” or “never” engaged with poetry were the following: they believed that poetry is important for the purpose of understanding one’s national identity, history, and culture, without there being a necessity for it to be relatable, and/or they wanted to understand and relate to poetry but could not. To the same question, the most common answers that those that “always” and “often” engaged with poetry voted for were the following two: “I live and breathe by poetry. Poems help me see every day and ordinary things from a new and fresh perspective; therefore, I believe that it is very useful and interesting” and “poetry’s importance lies in that it helps one understand and maintain their nation’s culture. It is not necessarily important for it to be related to one’s personal life.” None of them voted for the answers that deemed poetry to be a “waste of time,” “non-relatable,” “unnecessarily confusing,” and “boring/overly emotional.” Those answers only received votes from those that hardly or never engaged with poetry. Clearly, there is a connection between how frequently the participants were engaging with poetry and how relatable they found it to be.



Interviews

An important question with which to begin the discussion of this issue is the question of what poetry actually is, because, as Armenian poet Anna Davtyan put it, “In order for a teacher to be able to pass on and teach poetry, they have to first understand for themselves what it is.” According to her, not understanding what poetry is is a huge gap among the teachers in Armenia. She believes that poetry can be something different for each person, but according to her definition, it is the act of seeing the world with your own unique perception and then trying to formulate it and put it into words. She provides the example of a child who was experiencing numbness and tingling in his leg for the first time and described it as sparkling water being poured down inside his leg. The reason why poetry comes so easily to children, without their even realizing it, is because they still do not know the “correct” ways of describing things and can therefore formulate it in their own way. But what is the measuring stick with which we recognize what is poetry and what is not? Davtyan says that she recognizes poetry by the experience of what she calls a “poetic moment.” In other words when you read something that you had also “guessed,” but had never been able to put into words. When you read it, you know it is true, because you had also felt it. “The sparkling water example is poetic because all of us have experienced it but had never thought to phrase it like that.”

This understanding of poetry goes hand in hand with the way filmmaker and writer Zareh Tjeknavorian talks about it. “My understanding of poetry,” he said, “is not merely in the literary sense. Of course, we can talk about it in the classic sense as well, which is words on a page or a song that is sung, but whatever form it is in, poetry for me is a way of looking at the world, seeing beyond the surface of things, and seeing deeper into reality. It is something that makes us look twice at objects or situations that we do not usually pay attention to, and to see their metaphoric value. It is a mystery to me how understanding the metaphoric meaning of something helps you get closer to the truth of it.” He used the following words of William Blake to summarize his understanding of poetry: the “[cleansing] of the doors of perception.”

Armine Hakobyan, a teacher of Armenian Language and Literature, sees the value of poetry in its ability to educate, instill values, and develop the mind and character. She said that poetry is especially important now, since all of these technological advances are leading to a more materialistic world and we need literature more than ever to nourish and enrich the spiritual inner world of people, to develop good values in them, and to awaken somethings inside of them that will prevent them from living like robots.

Similar to Davtyan’s definition of poetry, Siranush Dvoyan, a professor of Armenian Language and Literature, believes that poetry is one of the ways of formulating and putting into words our experiences. Consequently, reading about how others have written about those experiences – and even ones different from ours – can make us feel less alone in the world, even if we do not agree with the way they have made sense of their own experiences.

Anna Tadevosyan, a recent high school graduate who herself writes poetry, also finds that while reading poems, you are able to see the world through someone else’s eyes and

discover new ways of looking at life experiences that you yourself might have had. For her, what sets poetry apart from other forms of literature is that it describes human feelings in a more imaginative way and through comparisons. She also adds that poetry is not just about gaining knowledge, but feeling a connection with another person that felt the same things that you did, a connection that can make you feel less alone. Unlike many of the abovementioned people, she does enjoy the nationalistic poems too. She brings the example of Gevorg Emin's poem "Չգն՛ւյշ խոսի՛ր Հայաստանում" (Speak Carefully in Armenia) and says that it makes her love and be proud of her nation.

"I do not agree with the idea that poetry is only meant for maintaining or understanding one's national identity," Davtyan says. "Our poets wrote in Armenian because it was their first language. This perception could partially be caused by the selection of poems included in the curriculum, but the bigger problem is actually in how we read those less personal and human poems. Even those poems are extremely personal and human." According to her, the question is, do we continuously read it with the rhetoric that literature has saved and maintained our national identity or do we also consider the question of what kind of a person was formed in that regime. Even if the author did have the desire to maintain his national identity and culture, at the end of the day, the question is, who is the person that wrote that? We tend to take out that part and focus only on the national aspect, but why do we think that Goethe's or Flaubert's experiences were any more human and universal than Eghishe Charents's or Khachatur Abovyan's? "If we keep in mind that that person, while doing the work of writing, was also having a human experience, we would not have this issue," she concludes.

Tjeknavorian agrees that as much as it is a good thing to be proud Armenians, in our lives that only goes so far. "There's all this human experience that is not exclusive to being

Armenian,” he says, “And to try and see everything in such patriotic and nationalist terms certainly is a way of limiting what art can be. At the end of the day, for all the good that it can do at a given time, not everything in our lives has to do with Mount Ararat and being Armenian or Russian or American. It has to do with just being human and with love and what it means to hope, to desire.” He believes that in order for poetry to truly matter, we need to be able to see ourselves reflected in it and be able to explore our human experience through it.

Davtyan says that although she is not against learning, being familiarized with, and loving the classic poets, she tells students that it is important to love them consciously. “I explain to them the difference between modernism and post-modernism and how Paruyr Sevak fits into the ‘drawer’ of modernism and if you appreciate him, appreciate him in that drawer. To not see him as the ultimate poet, but to understand which cultural drawer each poet fits into.” She believes that the school curriculum could benefit from including more modern writers as well, such as Shushanik Kurghinyan, Zabel Yesayan – if she has poems – Marine Petrosyan, Hasmik Simonyan, and Karen Antashyan. She says that for her it would be interesting for the students to read the poetry of her generation and to discuss it. “Most of the dialogue that currently exists is with the dead. I agree that even the classic poets have beautiful poems besides the nationalistic ones we cover in school. But I think that the poets of this generation would resonate more with your generation because after all you are living in the same times. Even if the topics were not as relatable, the ‘heartbeat’ of the era is the same.”

Tadevosyan thinks that there are poems that every Armenian needs to know and, therefore, she finds the poems in the curriculum to be well chosen. She explains that the poems in the textbooks are the most famous poems of Eghishe Charents, Paruyr Sevak, Petros Duryan, Hamo Sahyan, and other prominent writers. She believes that even if a student does not like

poetry, they need to know at least those poems, and those that do like poetry can then go deeper and discover more of their poems for themselves. Nonetheless, she adds that she wishes that she had been given the option to choose poems. “I would have liked the teacher to assign us to find a poem that we liked from that poet and explain why we liked them. I don’t remember having discussions like that in school. It makes it more interesting and also causes the students to read more poems.” Another gap she notices in her own experience is that she was never asked to write poetry. However, overall she greatly enjoyed her Literature classes in school. “Before memorizing the poems, the teacher would explain to us the meaning of the poem line by line, based on the author’s life, and then we would discuss it,” she recalls, “During the next class we would start reciting and that was my favorite part, because everyone loved the way I recited.”

Satenik Torosyan, another recent high school graduate, had a similar experience of her teacher analyzing and explaining the poem to them, and connecting it to different events in the poet’s life. For her, understanding the poems in light of the author’s life made them so much more fascinating for her. “I think especially in Armenian Literature, a lot of what the poets wrote were based on their biography, for instance their first-love experience, unless they are nationalistic poems,” she says. Although she is satisfied with the selection of poems in high school textbooks, she thinks that a lot of the poems and literature in general included in textbooks for younger students are inappropriate for their age. She recommends adding more poems from Hamo Sahyan, since they are mostly about nature and they are lighter reads. She also recommends cutting out some of the Soviet era writers, such as Kostan Zaryan and Nairi Zaryan, because the poems of theirs that are included in the curriculum are “pointless” and “irrelevant” for the students. Tadevosyan adds that Avetik Isahakyan and Hovhanness Tumanyan are also more appropriate for younger readers. She gives the example of Tumanyan’s “Շուրճիկս քեզ

կասունն” (The Dog and the Cat) as the type of poems that would appeal to children. She also mentioned how children now have a class called “Ծրջակա միջավայր” (The Surrounding World), the textbook of which is full of nice children’s poems about nature and other such themes.

For Nina Baklachyan, learning poetry was a mechanical process, albeit one she oftentimes enjoyed, of memorizing poems without necessarily understanding them. “I feel like I didn’t have the ‘tools’ or ‘supplies’ to understand poetry. It was not a language I was trained to understand, rather had to simply guess.” She explains how poetry is solely based on symbolism; every word can represent something so much better. “In school, I didn’t learn the concept of ‘symbolism,’ to understand what the author is really talking about. I mostly just felt, without necessarily understanding.” In university, she very much liked how the professor connected the poem to the author’s life or explained it line by line or based on the context, whether the politics of the time (what the poet was referencing to) or the author’s emotional experiences (e.g. being in love and how a flower in a poem could be a metaphor for the girl he loves); it gave the poem an even greater meaning.

What made poetry appealing to her even before being given the tools to understand it a little better were her experiences related to poetry. “The poems I have learned are all connected to different events and memories in my life,” she explains.

“For instance, one of the poems that my mom had taught me was Pushkin’s “Я вас любил” and if I’m honest, I didn’t understand most of it. One of the poems had the word “гений” (genius) in it, but I would say “Гена” (Gena), who was a character from the Russian cartoon “Чебурашка” (Chiburashka), and my mom would laugh at me. But even the fact that she would laugh at me so sweetly and that the word “Гена” was such a joke

is all imprinted in my memory. Now when I read that poem, I understand it in a different way, but at that time, I enjoyed it because it was a game and because of the moments I associated it with.”

Interestingly enough, she enjoyed learning poems at home with her mother and grandmother more than she did in school. She explains that it could be because of the language barrier (Armenian not being her native language); however, her childhood experiences also show that a positive and warm experience of learning poems can create a love towards the craft as well.

Interestingly, for Baklachyan, the complicated nature of poems is equally a positive thing as it is a negative one. “I think the greatest thing that attracts me to poetry is the very fact that it is so unclear, because then I can see in it whatever I want and need to see at that moment,” she says. “I read and the words in the poem that don’t connect, I create my own connections in my head; I weave my own thoughts and ideas with the words on the page.” Her definition of poetry differs from the many traditional ones; for her, poetry is less literary and more mathematical. “You take an idea and put it in a container – you give it a shape,” she says. “Poetry is a more organized and serious form of art, and very important.” She is fascinated by how each word is so precisely chosen and has its place, and compares it to the structure of music. “You are using math to create music in another person; I think poetry *is* very much like music.” Even when she does not consider herself to be “good at” understanding poetry and does not engage with it frequently, her example shows that poetry can still be an enjoyable experience for someone like that.

When asked if they believe that anyone can appreciate poetry, the answers of the interviewees varied. Hakobyan believes that not everyone is poetically inclined; some people

have an innate lyrical and emotional nature and poetry appeals to them more because it helps them view life in a more romantic way. Such people find great joy in the rhythm, rhymes, word play, and all the other elements with which poetic texts are created. That text cannot have an effect on everyone. For instance, once she was reading Duryan's 'Տրտնուիցք' (Lament/ Complaint) poem to her class; some of them began crying, some started laughing. Clearly, the reactions were very different. Davtyan believes that when it comes to writing, there is something innate in a person that makes them better at writing poetry, whether we call it a "gift" or something else, in the same way that learning languages might come more easily to someone than music.

Nonetheless, she believes that anyone can appreciate poetry and that a lot of times, it is the least expected of people that tend to see things more poetically; perhaps the ones that shine the least in the classroom, because they do not have the "straight A" syndrome and because they are the most sensitive. For instance, the "քյարթոն" (kyartous) – a stereotypical type of Armenian men that are not highly respected and are often joked about as having an old-fashioned mindset, acting macho, and wasting most of their time on the streets doing nothing – are what they are because they are more sensitive and need to protect themselves. "Once I had a student at TUMO who would refuse to write anything and would constantly make a joke out of everything I said. Since he liked making fun so much, I asked him to write a poem just making fun of me. He was surprised but then he started writing and writing and he wouldn't stop, and then I was crying when he was reading because it was amazing! The particular type of poetry we were practicing is what we decided to call "հաշվելուկ," (hashveluk) in which the rhythm and rhyme were very important. He had managed to do it so well!"

She explains that a teacher has to reveal to each child the poetry they have inside of themselves and what they can extract from within themselves. Once they understand that, then the students will start applying that to poetry in general; until that point, for them it is just a piece of work with rhymes that some genius people have written, whom we need to place on a pedestal and only praise, never criticize, and that is why they do not like it, because they are just unnecessarily asked to memorize without discussing, without understanding, even when memorizing and reciting poems can be a good thing sometimes as it can develop a sense of melody and rhythm in someone. Tjeknavorian believes that everybody has a human right to be exposed to poetry. “The assumptions we make about who can and cannot is in itself unpoetic, because we are looking at the surface of things to understand who we each are, but how can we possibly know that? A little girl or boy in a village might have the greatest appreciation for Shelley if only they were exposed to it.”

However, he does believe that like any art form, poetry is a language that students have to learn. He explains that someone who is new to music might not know what to do with hearing Shostakovich for the first time, but by immersing himself into it, learning about music and that specific era, he might learn to appreciate it. “It’s something that comes over time, especially if you can expose younger people to different art form early, you are giving them a huge advantage, just as children up to a certain age have a much better ability to learn a new language. You want to make it something that is not a chore, it is not a work or a task for them to learn how to appreciate poetry. You want to make it something that is very natural, a language that they have learned, something that becomes innate to them.”

In order to help instill a love and interest towards poetry, the interviewees talked about some of the approaches and activities that they implement or suggest for teaching poetry in school:

1. Since poetry is a means to an end, it is important to not simply sit down and try to self-consciously write a poem. Focusing on creating rhymes and rhythm is an exercise in just the form. First of all, the students need to know what the substance and purpose is. “The purpose is to just become aware of things,” Tjeknavorian says, “To be able to find the richness in the everyday experiences that we sleep-walk through. They have to find some sort of an idea that is meaningful for them, a sense of having something to say, and then when they have that, half the battle is won. The teacher can then ask them to try and transpose that as a poem.” The teachers have to get the students to write about something that is real and personal to them, something that matters. “If we are going to create and create effectively, inevitably it means getting in touch with our fears and desires, our anguish; it’s a way of working things out.” For him, poetry is the art of vulnerability.
2. By recalling what first drew him to poetry as a teenager, Tjeknavorian also suggests doing with the students what William Blake himself did: getting the students to create their own imaginative and mythical world. “I think that is something that children would be really responsive to. And then the idea would be to try and tell a story with it, a part of the task could be to try and tell that story in the form of verse.” In his own experience, the narrative form of poetry gave him something to “latch on” to – a character and story – which created an initial love for poetry before he could move on to more difficult poets such as Ezra Pound.

3. What Hakobyan recalls from her own literature classes as a student that were very fun and effective, and applies to her own classes, is the importance of reading the poems out loud in class. Recalling her own teacher, she says, “For instance, she would bring the ‘Sasuntsi David’ legend to class and read it out loud theatrically and with the different original dialects in which different parts were written. We would laugh so much and we loved it. She would also designate roles and we would try to read our parts like her; as a result, it would get imprinted in our brains.”
4. Hakobyan also says that she likes to adapt the lesson to the needs and interests of the students at the moment. For instance, if she walks into a classroom where the students have been fighting or if she finds out that many of the students are in love, she can decide what poems they can read to meet their needs. “The poems have to be relatable to the people who are going to be learning them.”
5. An exercise that Davtyan does in her Creative Writing classes in centers such as TUMO and Medialab is the comparison exercise. She gives her students the beginnings of phrases, such as “weird as...,” “hopeless like a...,” and “heavenly as...,” which the students have to continue. The only rule is that they are not allowed to write obvious things such as “heavenly as the stars.” They write such fantastic things sometimes! Even they are surprised with what they came up with and they ask, “Is this really what poetry is?”
6. Another exercise she does is giving them something familiar, such as the sense of itching, and asks the students to explain it to an alien who is not familiar with that word. They have to explain it in a poetic way. For instance, one person wrote, “Itching is when you have flowers on your bones and you want to pull them out by ripping your skin,” while

another one wrote, “Itching is a girl brushing her long hair that you want to brush yourself.”

7. Davtyan also tries to challenge them to not use the typical words and phrases associated with being poetic. “They tend to think that poetry consists of certain phrases...for instance, that if you wrote ‘հեղաճկունն աղջիկ’ (graceful lady) or ‘արևի ճաճանչափայլ շողեր,’ (radiant sunrays) then that means it is poetry. There are certain words that are tied together in their minds. The hardest thing is tearing those phrases apart.” She challenges them to think that maybe a fox can be something other than “clever” and if she ever sees the phrase “ծով աչքեր,” (eyes of sea) she says that they can take “ծով” (sea) and attach it to “մազեր” (hair) or anything else they want, and even take “աչքեր” (eyes) and attach it to “աղվես” (fox). She encourages them to switch around the puzzle pieces to create new patterns and structures. “Poetry is not a good repetition of the old. They think that if you write like Paruyr Sevak, then you created a good poem. You have to teach them that what is already written doesn’t need to be written one more time.”
8. Tjeknavorian suggests going back to the roots of poetry – its origin in music and oral tradition, which existed a long time before poetry became a written tradition. According to him, poetry is when you push language to get as close as it can get to what we achieve through music – this ability to have a profound emotional and spiritual experience through what is essentially sound and rhythm. “I think we need to first introduce poetry to children as something that is sung and then go from there. I think that is the most authentic way of appreciating what poetry is and where it comes from. Children love to sing and rhyme and that is legitimately poetry. It then becomes much easier to abstract the poetic experience from the printed page and by reading Shakespeare, Dante,

Tumanyan, or whoever. It gives them a foundation to appreciate the wellspring from which poetry flows.”

But why does any of this matter at all? Why is it important to invest so much time and thought into developing a field that seemingly does not make any significant or measurable difference in the world? Davtyan’s experience shows that it affects the students on a very individual and personal level. She says, “You can’t imagine how much the students change after our lessons. Sometimes the students who finish the Creative Writing workshops run into me and tell me, ‘You can’t imagine how much my life has changed! I look at life and talk about everything in a completely new way.’” Tjeknavorian would add that because poetry has such an impact on an individual level, it also has the power to change things on a societal scale. He explains:

“I think it is fundamental to a healthy, civil society to have a very strong arts education from a very early age. It creates a freer society, which is why a lot of societies do not have it. Poetry is an instrument of freedom. Those of us who appreciate poetry are free thinkers, because we challenge assumptions and explode stereotypes and encourage empathy. Any poem that makes you want to go and kill is antipoetic. Any poem that makes you feel more deeply connected to yourself, the world, and to others is really where the interests of poetry and spirituality really converge. It makes us more self-reliant. On some level, freedom is the ability to connect and to be compassionate and challenge yourself and see beyond a very limited perspective, which is often what we’re born into and raised to stay within, and certain societies do not want us to go past that and the kind of poetry they teach us is meant to keep us there. We are no longer susceptible to the

mechanisms that might manipulate us to be one way or another. To see beyond just ourselves and see others. At the end of the day, any poem that has mattered to me has mattered because it has made me more compassionate.”

Research Analysis

What my research points to is that first and foremost, a change in the way we as a nation think about poetry is needed. What the online survey showed was that over half of the Armenians that went to an Armenian school in Armenia believe that poetry is important only because it maintains our national identity and that it is not necessary for it to be relevant to our personal life. The survey also showed that the people that rarely or never engage with poetry are those that cannot relate to it and learn it *only* for the sake of being familiar with their cultural heritage. Interestingly, even those that love poetry and enjoyed their Literature classes in school oftentimes also place the classic Armenian poets on a pedestal and see their poems as more static as opposed to dynamic.

An approach that would benefit our perception of poetry is the “populist perspective” mentioned in the Literature Review section, which encourages readers to not view poems as “sacred,” but to feel free to engage with and interpret them (Faust & Dressman, 2009, p. 130). This goes hand in hand with what Anna Davtyan said; children need to be taught to appreciate the great classic Armenian poets, but in the era and movement that they belong to, and not see them as the ultimate poets that cannot be criticized. Seeing them as the ultimate poems also turns their poems into the definition and standard of what poetry is, and deems everything that differs from their style of writing to be not poetry. “Poetry has long lost its rhyme, but the students still believe that poetry is a rhyming work,” she says. Part of the reason that students are locked in the

traditional ways of thinking about poetry is the lack of modern literature included in the curriculum. If children were introduced both to the classics and the contemporary writers, they would be able to see the bigger picture, the development of poetry over the centuries and in the context of the different literary movements, and be encouraged to explore different styles of writing and discover their own voice. This is in line with Stein's (2010) suggestion of introducing students to poems from the students' own "historic moment," and, as Perry (2006) put it, not intimidating them by first introducing them to the classics.

While the nationalistic poems serve a good purpose of making young Armenians appreciate and love their nation, they need to be balanced out by the perception that poetry is and can be a very personal experience as well. To help students feel that way, it is important to allow the students to choose poems that speak to them. (Stieglitz, 1950). Afterwards, they can present it to the class and explain why they liked it. This creates an active class discussion and engagement with poetry.

Both Tadevosyan and Torosyan, as much as they enjoyed the selection of poetry given to them, said that they would have liked to be given the chance to choose the ones that spoke to them the most. Tadevosyan also mentioned that she would have liked to be encouraged to write herself. As Keil (2005) pointed out, poetry can have so many benefits, one of which is providing an outlet and emotional healing. It is important to encourage students to write about feelings, experiences, places, and anything else they can imagine and create. Many of the suggestions that the interviewees gave could be applied in this category.

That would also make the lessons fun. As Nina's experience shows, the environment in which poetry is learned, as well as the associations created with the memory, can be vitally important in nurturing a love towards poetry. As Stieglitz pointed out (1950), there are so many

active and fun ways of engaging with poetry, such as doing puppet shows, creating music and paintings, which not only make the lessons fun, but subconsciously cause the students to think about the poems. In general, reading the poems out loud is vital, since so many of the elements that make poetry what it is – the written word aiming at music – are lost on the page (Stein, 2010). Poems are inherently so rich and well-constructed, that the teacher hardly has to do anything to make it meaningful to children, except expose it to them in a way that shows them that it can be interacted with. In other words, the teacher’s task is to expose children to poems – the poem itself will do the rest.

Two theories that might further develop our approach to poetry as a nation are the Reader-Response and Structuralism theory. Both of those are simply theories and neither one should be placed on a pedestal and seen as the only way to go. However, adding them to our list of ways to see poetry will create a greater engagement with it. According to the first theory, “readers are active participants who *create* a work of literature in the process of reading it. The meaning of a text...exists somewhere between the words on the page and the reader's mind.” (Reader-Response Theory, n.d.). In Armenia, this viewpoint is completely absent.

The Structuralism theory, on the other hand, finds that neither the reader nor the author are important to the meaning of the text; instead, the poem has to be divided into parts and the parts that make it a poem in the first place need to be examined, since that is where the core meaning of the poem lies (Structuralism, n.d.). Although the interviewed students mentioned how their teachers used to analyze the poems line by line, it was done based on the context of the author’s life and era. What this theory could add to that is encouraging students to pay attention to the very elements that comprise a poem and make it what it is – “rhythm, sound, imagery, symbol, length of line, punctuation, and fire” (Wagoner, 1954). This creates an appreciation for

the poetry as an art-form and eliminates the question of why, if the meaning is the most important thing, could the author not say it in more simple terms. It will also eliminate the resentment that Wagoner (1954) believed was caused by the focus on deciphering the meaning of the poem, which subconsciously tells the child that the poem itself – and all the elements that comprise it. It will also encourage a more intimate relationship with the poem, since it will no longer be about the author or some historic era, but about the very words on the page that the reader can analyze for himself.

However, the students cannot learn to read poetry for themselves if they are not taught the language for that, as Tjeknavorian pointed out. The students' experiences showed that the students did all of the analyzing for them. Even if analyzing the poems based on the poets' lives is the way to go – and their experience showed that it did make the poems more meaningful for them – it would be best for the students to be taught how to do it themselves. It is also important to not fall into the trap that Kiddler (1973) identified; to either believe that the poet's intended meaning can never be deciphered, therefore it is useless to try, or that it simply does not matter what the poet intended and, therefore, all that matters is what the poem means to the reader. Teachers should neither make the students believe that it is impossible to understand poems, “decode” it for them, or say that the text itself does not matter and they can understand it as they like. Instead, children can be taught that although at times poetry can be a struggle, especially once they come to the classics, it is worth the effort to understand them.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Although I think that my research managed to get to the core of this issue, I believe that the number of the online survey participants as well as the interviewees were few. This created a

limitation for my research and my arguments could have had a stronger foundation had that not been the case.

In the future, it would be good to have actual class visitations and observe the lessons as they are conducted over a span of time. During the interviews, a lot of times people say whatever is the accepted thing to say or what they have heard theoretically and never seen in practice. In other words, they give a lot of the “formula” answers, without realizing that they do not necessarily apply to their experiences. Therefore, the research would be to more effective and authentic if it incorporated observations as well. The researched would observe how the classes are run, how engaged the students actually are, and, if done over a span of time, what the results are.

Finally, although the research included interviews with students who graduated within the last three years, it would be more relevant if it also included students that are currently in school. Although the educational system, teaching approach, and the poetry included in the curriculum will not have changed much, the experiences will be much fresher in those students’ minds, as opposed to those that are no longer in the system.

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Appendices

Link to Google Drive Folder with the Interview Audio Recordings:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1kvwRB1BopZ1kWh3VxT6kwTO-qyxWkB->