

# OUTCOMES OF SLAM WRITING WORKSHOPS FOR HAITIAN STUDENTS AT THE END OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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## Abstract

In Haiti, the success rate in elementary school remains very low and the majority of teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of effective pedagogical approaches to writing which leads to demotivation and a low sense of effectiveness as scriptwriters among students. We chose slam as a genre of contemporary and urban poetry (Vorger, 2011) and the workshop device to work on slam poetic writing (Troia, Lin, Cohen and Monroe, 2011), ideal to improve students' writing skills, motivation and sense of effectiveness. The research took place in two primary schools in Port-au-Prince against the backdrop of a socio-political crisis. Twelve facilitators (10 women and 2 men), trained in advance, facilitated the workshops in 13 sessions of 90 minutes each. A total of 61 students aged 12-13 participated in the after-school writing workshops (26 boys and 38 girls). Students completed a questionnaire on their motivation and sense of writing skills before and after the program. A corpus of 41 texts of claimed poetry written by students is the subject of a thematic and linguistic analysis. The results indicate that students benefit from their writing and oral expression skills, self-confidence and empowerment, and that their texts demonstrate a high degree of linguistic creativity and thematic richness. The positive results are consistent with those obtained in other socio-cultural contexts (Patmanathan, 2014) regarding the impact of the writing workshops. They contribute to new knowledge about slam poetry as an appropriate literary genre for young people, even at the end of primary school.

**Keywords:** *Creative writing workshops, slam poetry, elementary school, Haiti, writing skills.*

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## 1. Background

In Haiti, the success rate in primary school (called basic school) remains very low. In addition, little time is devoted to writing in the classroom which leads to a lack of motivation and a low sense of effectiveness as scriptwriters among students at the end of primary school. Moreover, the majority of teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of effective pedagogical approaches to writing. In fact, writing is little taught and those who practice it do so by copying texts or "classic" writing without any recourse to the effective practices uncovered by the research of recent years (work on the writing process and on motivation, explicit teaching of writing strategies, development of metacognition, critical look at writing, variation in the devices and in the genres addressed, writing and reading workshops, creative writing, frequent feedback on writing, sharing and consultation among peers, etc.). As a result, students accumulate gaps and difficulties in writing and develop a fear of writing in a school context. In addition, teachers are sometimes helpless in the face of their students' difficulties and are sometimes themselves in difficulty with writing and its teaching, due to a lack of training and support.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and objectives

Haiti is in a situation of diglossia where two languages coexist: Haitian Creole and French. Why using slam? As slam is a genre that admits the possibilities of "code mixing" and "code switching", the choice was made for this kind of contemporary and urban poetry (Boultif, 2017; Vorger, 2011). Also, slam allows to work on oral and written reception and production. It is both the oral and written practice of urban poetry inspired by the daily life of slammers (M. Kelly Smith). It comes from the oral tradition of the American spoken word (Beat generation). It is an integral part of the hip-hop movement in the same way as rap, street dance, tagging and graffiti art (Vorger, 2015). Also, slam is close to the oral

storytelling art of lodyanse well known in Haiti.

This project is innovative because it aims to develop cultural and intercultural competence through creative writing workshops based on Quebec and Haitian works, as well as training in this device. The creative writing workshop is recognized in the scientific literature (Troia, Lin, Cohen and Monroe, 2011) as a way to foster motivation to write and a sense of competence in writing. The creative workshop device is also ideal to work on slam poetic writing to improve students' writing skills and sense of effectiveness.

As the writing workshop represents the ideal device to work on the dimensions and processes of writing, we decided to collaborate in the planning and organization of slam writing workshops and to rely on slammers, poets and authors from both countries, with the aim of training teachers and thus disseminating this approach to writing.

The objectives of the research project in this paper in particular were, at the end of 13 training sessions with students, to: 1) to assess late elementary students' motivation and sense of writing skills; and 2) to enhance their creativity in writing.

### **3. Methods**

The research took place in two primary schools in Port-au-Prince against the backdrop of a socio-political crisis. Because of our expertise in slam writing workshops, the Haitian partners took the initiative to ask us to set up these workshops in two schools that have opened their doors. The collaboration focused on developing a training program for teachers and trainers for primary school students that could be transposed to secondary school students, all in an intercultural context of sharing expertise and resources between Haiti and Quebec.

Twelve facilitators (10 women and 2 men), trained in advance, facilitated the workshops in 13 sessions of 90 minutes each. In order to have representative results for girls and boys, the recruitment in the two voluntary schools allowed us to have a population of girls and boys and to associate them as well as the teachers in order to have mixed writing workshops, which represents a first for the students of the two schools and their teachers. Finally, we chose to work with 6th and 7th grade, because these are the pivotal years that allow the transition to secondary school, which is more demanding in terms of writing and reading in French.

A total of 61 students aged 12-13 participated in the after-school writing workshops (26 boys and 38 girls). Students completed a questionnaire on their motivation and sense of writing skills before and after the program. A corpus of 41 texts of claimed poetry written by students is the subject of a thematic and linguistic analysis. The open-ended questions on the questionnaires and the students' texts were subjected to content analysis using the qualitative analysis software Nvivo 12.

### **4. Results and discussion**

The results indicate that students benefit from their writing and oral expression skills, self-confidence and empowerment, and that their texts demonstrate a high degree of linguistic creativity and thematic richness. Facilitators have seen beneficial effects in the young authors: they have improved their ability to express themselves freely, their mastery of figures of speech and their motivation to write. Facilitators and students would like to see this experience repeated in many schools.

The positive results are consistent with those obtained in other socio-cultural contexts (Patmanathan, 2014; Troia, 2007) regarding the impact of the writing workshops.

### **5. Conclusions**

The results contribute to new knowledge about slam poetry as an appropriate literary genre for young people, even at the end of primary school. In a context of educational reform in Haiti, this project has contributed to a renewal of teaching practices in connection with the reinforcement of reading-writing and the Haitian and Quebec cultural heritages.

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