**The Strong Young Women’s Project**

*Fostering Spaces of Identity Affirmation, Embracement, and Empowerment through Poetry*

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**Background**

I will be implementing this curriculum in an after school program at The XYZ School -- a small, nonselective high school that prides itself on placing at the heart of its mission, the dreams and needs of its users—its students, its parents, its teachers, and its community members. While this school does not have any afterschool programming aside from The Young Women’s Project at the present moment, they are in the process of surveying students to get their input on what programs and opportunities they would like to have access to in the upcoming year.

In engaging some students in informal discussions about what they would like to see happen, I quickly came to realize that many young women at The XYZ School wanted to see a space where they could express their life experiences, their passions, their dreams as young women with a group of peers. Poetry, though not my area of expertise, seemed to be a great primary vehicle for inquiry into identity because of its flexible structure, versatility, and apparent appeal among the students as a form of written expression.

**Proposal**

This unit is the first in a series that will be covered in The Young Women’s Project. The main focus of the following curriculum is to build community among young women at The XYZ School, particularly in response to recent tensions and physical fights among the young women in this community. Based on conversations with students and teachers, there seems to be a need for an additional informal space where students can share their stories and emotions and find common ground on which to relate to one another. Whether that common ground finds its form through an interest in poetry, a shared lived experience, or a love for Beyoncé, my hope is that students are able to find strength in this community of young women that permeates far outside the and time and space of our program. Following this unit of strength and empowerment through poetry, we will transition into other methods of reading, writing, thinking, and listening together around issues that help students embrace their complex personhood (Tuck, 2009.)

**Target Population**

The students that I work with are all in their first year of high school and range from 14-16 years old. All students in this program identify as young Black women and are united by an interest to engage in poetry and in a safe space. 20 students showed interest in co-developing and piloting this program; however, I am currently working with 10 of these students, once a week for an hour.

**Overarching Learning Objectives**

* Invest in the tightknit community and use the link of friendship as a vehicle of supportive reading, writing, listening, and speaking together (story-telling)
* Facilitate open relationships so that students work together to share their stories in spoken word poetry.
* Co-create a safe space with students to allow them: to share their invaluable innate knowledge as cosmopolitan beings (Campano); bring in relevant texts and media sources as a spring board for conversation and writing (Hill); and identify as students and teachers and cultivators of knowledge (Markus).

**Curriculum**

Week 1: Setting the Tone as Strong Young Women

**Intros:** **10 minutes**

Introduce yourself to the group by telling us your name, how you identify (can be any element(s) of your identity that you feel particularly connected to) and one guideline/rule that you would like this community to follow in order for this to feel like a safe, respectful, and empowering space for you.

**Icebreaker: 10 minutes**

Two Truths and a Lie

Think about three statements about your identity and your life experiences-- two of which are true and one of which is false. This is a way for us to introduce ourselves to each other that allows us to self-reflect on two really unique elements of our identity that other people in this group may not know too much about. Think about hobbies, hidden talents, passions, etc.

~Transition to the poetry activity by introducing the purpose of this program as a space that students take ownership over to share their experiences and celebrate their strength (individual and collective) as women. ~

**Strength: 35 minutes**

*Because a Strong Woman, I Am*

1. Read around (5 minutes)
2. Discussion (15 minutes)

What is Ana Monnar talking about in this poem?

When you read this, what did you see in your mind?

Were there images that she talked about that you can relate to?

Ideas:

* strength in being a woman
* confidence in yourself
* standards of beauty
* not letting people change you or who you are
* having goals for yourself

1. Write (15 minutes)

Think of times that you have felt strong and powerful [as a young woman].

Write a poem about what makes you feel strong. Write freely because this is a safe space and we are here to create art together and share our stories with one another.

**Wrap-Up: 5 minutes**

Share your poem.

Select one phrase from your writing that captures the essence of what makes you feel powerful as a woman. Wrap around share as a single, collective poem that captures how we feel at this moment.

**Materials:**

1*. Because a Strong Woman, I am* by Ana Monnar

Indeed I still struggle  
Swimming upstream with might  
Never giving up on what I care for  
Because a strong woman, I am  
  
You might use your jagged tongue  
To tear me down for what I do  
You are so cruel and judgmental  
Is it my strength that bothers you?   
  
I wept from your harsh words  
That took me by surprise  
In front of other guests  
Embarrassed I sure was   
  
Instead of wheeling and dealing,   
Writing poems and stories, too  
You think I should stop it all  
Does my independence bother you?   
  
I work full time at school and in my home  
Devoting ample time to my kids every day  
Cheering at their sports events, celebrations,   
Plus, all the pain and glory that presents each day  
  
Glance at the mirror  
Take a good look at your soul  
If what you see is perfection  
Then gently stroke your sharp tongue  
  
I am a strong woman  
I will continue to work hard  
My accomplishments and failures  
Are what make me who I am  
  
If I ever do it differently  
It will be because I will change  
For God, my children, and me  
Not because I am stepped and crushed  
  
I am who I am, not just anyone to fit in  
I refuse to fit the mold and take the easy route  
Tenacity and endurance is what I hold  
Because a strong woman, I am

Week 2: I Am Me

* Revisit Safe Space Guidelines
* What makes a space feel safe for you to share your thoughts and ideas and pieces of who you are? Add additional guidelines as students see fit.

**Intro: 5 minutes**

As we saw last week, there are many pressures in life that try to confine us to a box, strip us of our individuality, and put limits on what we can accomplish, however, we all seemed to find strength in overcoming these experiences and celebrating elements of our life that made us feel powerful. For that reason, I want us to come back to the idea of who we are and celebrate our unique voices, experiences, what makes us feel strong, despite all these pressures.

**Framing: 5 minutes**

Start off with a clip from poet and scholar Crystal Leigh Endsley reciting her piece, *I am*. This piece embodies and celebrates the stories, people, places, experiences, passions that make up this woman. She describes her struggles, but highlights and revels in how she’s overcome them to be who she is today—a strong woman, poet, scholar, artist, educator.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRL6Pcc6GOo>

**Journal and Discussion: 15 minutes**

* Initial thoughts or reactions? About the poem or the performance itself?
* What were some powerful images that came to mind as she recited her poem?
* How did the artist come across in her performance? What about her poem/performance gave you that impression?
* What are some things (people, stories, experiences, passions) that define the artist?
* This one is for your notebook. Quick jot: If you had to choose one of each of these elements of your life—person, story, experience, passion, that you strongly identify with and make you, you, what would they be?

**Experimental Collective Poetry: 35 minutes**

From your list that you’ve just jotted down, choose one these items and write it at the top of your sheet. Now write out one stanza of three lines maximum that capture how you feel about that person, experience, story, or passion. Take 10 minutes to craft a solid three line poem capturing this. Once you are finished, fold over your paper so that only the last line of your stanza is visible.

Once time is up, pass your paper to the right. Now, the new reader/writer will be in charge of writing another three line stanza in response to the last line of the previous poet’s stanza. You will have five minutes to complete this.

Continue rotations until each person has gotten a chance to create a stanza for at least 5 other folks in the group.

Return the poems to their owners. Have the original poet read through their now, multi-stanza poem and create a concluding stanza that captures who they are. In this stanza, you should address the question: how does this person, experience, story, or passion make you, you?

**Wrap-Up: 10 minutes**

Debrief: What was that experience like? One sentence responses.

Share your poem.

**Materials:**

1. Crystal Leigh Endsley’s poetry performance “I am…” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRL6Pcc6GOo>

Week 3: Standards of Beauty and Body Image through Beyoncé’s *Pretty Hurts*

**Intros: 10 minutes**

* Revisit Safe Space Guidelines
* What makes a space feel safe for you to share your thoughts and ideas and pieces of who you are? Add additional guidelines as students see fit.
* As we briefly touched on over the past two weeks, there are many pressures and systems that try and keep us in a box, without room to succeed, break boundaries, be innovative, strong people. Today, we are going to start talking more specifically about one of these systems: standards of beauty and body image that society creates for us as young women.
* If you look at the card on your desk, you each have been given a different question regarding body image and self-esteem. Take a few minutes to respond to your question in your journal. Use whatever format feels most comfortable—bullets, sentences, poem verses, etc. We will revisit this in a few moments.
  + Questions:
    - Describe a time that you or someone you know may have been judged based only on what you/they look like?
    - What are some standards of beauty that you see every day in advertisements, TV shows and movies, in beauty stores, etc.?
    - When you see images of what beauty is “supposed” to look like, how does that make you feel? Do you ever feel like you are comparing yourself to these standards?
    - Think of a time where you or someone you know wished that they could change something about their appearance just to please someone else or just to fit in. Describe that moment.
    - How do you think we as a society can make women feel happy and confident in who they are and what they look like? How do we help people find value in themselves?

**Framing: 5 minutes**

0:00-2:10

*Pretty Hurts* Beyoncé

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXXQLa-5n5w>

As you watch the first few minutes of this video, think about your jotting/ response to your question. Take a few seconds to add anything from this video that is relevant to your response.

**Beyoncé Meets Nayyirah Waheed: 25 minutes**

* Read Nayyirah Waheed’s poem *by the time we are seven.* Each person read one line, even if it is not a complete sentence. (3 minutes)
* One word reactions? (4 minutes)
* Watch a few more minutes of Beyoncé’s *Pretty Hurts* music video (5:25-6:15) without the volume. While we watch this, I am going to re-read Nayyirah Waheed’s poem *by the time we are seven* to see how these pieces fit together.  (1 minute)

Discussion (17 minutes):

* What are both of these pieces saying about how women (people) view themselves? How others view women?
* Can you relate to any parts of the video or the poem?
* Describe a moment in your life where you or someone you know was judged solely on their appearance. What did that feel like?
* Use your journal entries as a source for this conversation.

**Writing: (15 minutes)**

Play Entire Beyoncé *Pretty Hurts* and give students lyrics, with one line underlined. They must incorporate this lyric into a poem that conveys their response to their framing question or their emotions/thoughts about body image and standards of beauty so far.

Now, you are going to get a chance to do some of your own poetry. Go back to the question that you answered at the very beginning of today’s program.

We are going to take the next 15 minutes to write a short poem based on what you jotted as a response to your framing question. If you would rather write a poem about something else related to conversations about body image and standards of beauty that is totally fine as well. The one catch with this is that you each are going to get one line from *Pretty Hurts* and you will use that line to either start or end your poem.

Each student gets one of the following lyrics from *Pretty Hurts* to incorporate into their poem:

* Plastic smiles and denial can only take you so far
* Reflection stares right into you.
* What's in your head, it doesn't matter
* we shine the light on whatever's worst
* You left with shattered mirrors and the shards of a beautiful past
* Are you happy with yourself? Yes
* We try to fix something but you can't fix what you can't see
* It's the soul that needs the surgery

**Wrap-Up: 5 minutes**

Share your poem.

Underline one phrase/ line from your poem that summarizes your feelings of body image/ self-esteem/ pressure from the media. Wrap around share to get a collective sense of where our thinking and emotions are at this point.

**Materials:**

1. Beyoncé *Pretty Hurts* Video: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXXQLa-5n5w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXXQLa-5n5w)
2. by the time we are seven by Nayyirah Waheed

i will crawl for white beauty

eat my arms.

barter my legs (make my thighs into altars of

grief).

for

skin that does not drink night.

hair that is not angry.

body that is not soil.

i place curses on my flesh

call them diets.

tell my ancestors

they are ugly.

howl at my nose until it bleeds.

run my heart across my teeth, repeatedly.

i am dying.

to be

beautiful.

but

beautiful.

is

something.

i

will never

be.

Note: This last lesson in the unit will allow for us to transition and dive deeper into discussions of body image and the impact of the media, advertisement, etc. on claiming authority over women’s bodies. Following this, we will have several other units that allow us to consider various facets of young women identity, building skills for the future, and creating opportunities for sharing this work with the community at large.

The entire semesters’ units will look something like this:

**Week 1: Smart Women, Strong Women**

* Identifying Strength in Yourself

**Week 2: I Am Me**

* Celebrating What Makes You, You

**Week 3-6: Body Image and Self-Esteem**

* Investigating Standards of Beauty
* *Missrepresentation* Screening
* Challenging Constructed Ideals of Womanhood
* Creating a PSA for Young Women to Support their Combatting of Society’s Constraints and Celebrating Strong Women

**Week 6-7: Relationships and Emotions**

* Engaging in Healthy Relationships—familial, friendships, romantic, etc.
* Acknowledging and Listening to Your Emotions

**Week 8-10: Skills for the Future**

* Modeling Conflict Resolution in Different Contexts
* Defining Dreams, Success and “Making It”
* Creating Closure-- Presenting Student Work Through Student-Organized Performance/ Open Mic

**References/ Rationale:**

1. Campano, Gerald. *Immigrant Students and Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Remembering*. New York: Teachers College, 2007. Print.

 Campano was used throughout the development of this curriculum because of the activities that he suggests from memory boards, to magic boxes, to treasures that students can bring in, to poetry workshops. His poetry workshop that he talks about in his writing inspired the poetry workshops done in this curriculum to help students engage, not only with themselves, their life experiences as funds of knowledge, but also the mechanics of the poetry writing process. Additionally, the message about valuing students as teachers, cosmopolitan beings and seeing their backgrounds, their languages, and their differences as treasures is invaluable in developing this lesson plan. It plays out significantly through the collaboration that is done among students and between the students and me in creating this program together, so that it is relevant and useful to each of their individual learning goals, but also to the entire group’s collective objectives.

2. Hill, Marc Lamont. *“Real Recognize Real.” Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity*. New York: Teachers College, 2009.

Marc Lamont Hill’s “Beats Rhymes and Classroom Life” demonstrated the poignancy of having students bring in pieces of media and art that spoke to them in a way that created agency and a space for them to not only acknowledge their identities as bearers of knowledge and informative experiences, but also as able to use these relevant media as a spring board for broader contemplation and conversation. Identifying students as experts in their life experiences and the media that occupies their realms of the world, I designed an entire lesson around Beyoncé’s video to respond to students’ interests in bringing in discussions of this video as a way to connect to their own experiences with body image issues. This allows students to use a familiar and current example of media to have a broader conversation about an important issue.

3. Markus, Hazel Rose. *Identity Matters: Ethnicity, Race, and the American Dream*

This piece informed the curriculum throughout because Markus discusses the fact that though an inevitable consequence of going to school should be a sense of belonging, this simply is not the case, particularly for minority students. She calls for the creation of public schools where more students feel like they belong and can identify themselves as students. This self-image as a student and the fostering of this identity are such important pieces to empowering these individuals in learning communities. Because The XYZ School is working on the premise that students’ dreams are at the core of the school’s every move, Markus’ piece is particularly important in considering how this afterschool program fits within such a rich and innovative space to help the users, the students create ties and thought and emotional communities of support.