LINE BY LINE

Transforming Student Lives and Learning with the Art of Poetry

A Longitudinal Study of Poetry Out Loud, a National Arts Education Program

Maine State Champion João Rodrigues Victor competing in the 2019 Poetry Out Loud Finals. Photo by James Kegley

Preface

Over the past 15 years, more than four million students from 16,000 schools across the country have participated in Poetry Out Loud, a poetry recitation competition for high school students. A program of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation, with support from state and jurisdictional arts agencies, Poetry Out Loud connects students with their literary heritage, instills a sense of poise and confidence, and in some cases, transforms lives.

Poetry Out Loud starts in the classroom, where teachers can use free Poetry Out Loud materials to teach poetry recitation and run classroom competitions. Students select, memorize, and recite poems from an anthology of more than 1,100 classic and contemporary poems, choosing poems that speak to them at a personal level. Winners at the classroom level advance to the schoolwide competition, which then leads to the state competition and ultimately to the National Finals in Washington, DC.

In addition to introducing students to a wide range of poetry, the program helps them to master public speaking and build self-confidence, which can be critical for young people finding their way through adolescence. As 2017 national champion Samara Elán Huggins said, "I would never have expected myself to be able to speak to more than one person and convey such strong emotions and ideas and messages, but I'm capable of that, and I appreciate this program for helping me find that out."

While some students move on in the Poetry Out Loud competition to regional, state, and national finals, the heart of Poetry Out Loud lies within the classroom experience, which is the focus of this study. The report explores the program's impact in three main areas: academic engagement and performance; social-emotional development; and poetry engagement and appreciation. Taken together, this study reveals how participation in Poetry Out Loud not only cultivates a greater appreciation of poetry, but also results in improved writing and analytical skills and gives students a greater understanding of themselves, their past, and others.

This report includes the perspective of students, teachers, and school administrators and also explores the positive role Poetry Out Loud can play in schools, from building community to providing students with new avenues for self-expression.

With this key research, we hope more schools will be inspired to add Poetry Out Loud to their curricula so that the gifts of poetry can reach a new generation of students.

Mary Anne Carter
Chairman
National Endowment for the Arts

Understanding the Impact of Poetry Out Loud: Findings from a National Study

POETRY OUT LOUD

What is Poetry Out Loud?

- A partnership of the National Endowment for the Arts, Poetry Foundation, and state and jurisdictional arts agencies, Poetry Out Loud™ (POL) encourages high school students to learn about great poetry by offering free educational materials and a dynamic recitation competition. Students select, memorize, and recite classic and contemporary poems, helping them to master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about literary history and contemporary life.

How do students benefit from participating in Poetry Out Loud?

Higher Academic Performance

- POL students said the process of deeply analyzing, memorizing, and interpreting poetry challenged them and fostered skills they applied in their English Language Arts courses as well as other subjects (e.g. history and even science), such as improved writing and analytical skills.
- Students and teachers likened poetry study to "resistance training with analyzing." Students reported that while they find poetry challenging and complex, its short form helps to build critical stamina, allowing students take more time for deeper analysis.
- Participating POL students were 1.7 times more likely to have 4-year college or graduate school aspirations than non-participants, even after researchers controlled for other factors.

Building Self-Confidence and Social Awareness

- POL students reported having more confidence in group discussions than their peers, as measured by differences in growth over the course of a school year.
- Several students found that reading and listening to poetry helped them think about situations from perspectives other than their own. POL participation also helped students seek emotional connections through their understanding of the world and others who inhabit it.
- POL students were 1.5 times more likely than non-POL participants to engage in community service and volunteering, even after researchers controlled for other factors.

Poetry Appreciation and Engagement

- Poetry reveals new ways to see world, fosters connection and empathy, and helps us reach a greater understanding of ourselves, our past, and others. Most students had limited exposure to poetry prior to POL participation. Through POL, students were given the opportunity to explore a wide and eclectic range of compelling poems. The study reports largely positive outcomes related to poetry appreciation and engagement.
- POL participants showed growth in poetry appreciation from pre- to post-survey. By contrast, among students who did not participate in the program, poetry appreciation declined from pre- to post-survey.
- POL gave students an opportunity to grapple with their positive and negative feelings toward poetry. Through multiple modes of engagement (i.e. reading, analyzing, memorizing, reciting, listening), POL gave students a wide variety of ways to connect with poems—and with each other.

How can Poetry Out Loud play a positive role in schools?

Study findings show that participation in POL can help schools become vibrant learning spaces and support students in their academic, literary, and social-emotional development.

- POL can have a positive influence on school culture by providing more avenues for self-expression.
- POL competitions can enhance school reputations and serve as a community-builder.
- Participation in POL can forge stronger connections between teachers and students.
- POL permits teachers to contribute to the school outside their usual formats; it nurtures teachers' own creativity.
- Through their shared experience, POL can bring together students who may not have otherwise formed connections.

POL Students:

"I think I gained a lot of self-confidence doing [POL], because you're up there and you're exposing yourself to all these people. You're showing them the real you, and the deeper part of you, and a lot of times that's really hard, especially in high school to do that."

"Poetry, and being graded on the theme of emotion that you can convey to a group of peers, is a really good skill to have and also pushes kids outside of their comfort zones in a really cool and healthy way."

POL Teachers:

"I think the kids are going to have an ethic of valuing poetry when they go out there or valuing the arts in general. They're more likely to go to an artistic performance in the community. I really believe that we are preparing them for a lifetime of arts, not just in a career, but just as human beings."

"When students feel confident that they have the ability to understand something and to express [themselves], it makes it easier for them to interact in classroom discussion and they make better editors of each other's work and they just feel braver, more courageous about interacting."

For more information on how to participate in Poetry Out Loud, including free educational materials, visit poetryoutloud.org.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS
AND POETRY FOUNDATION PRESENT

POETRY OUT LOUD ™

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Executive Summary

Poetry Out Loud (POL) is a national arts education program supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Poetry Foundation, and state arts agencies. POL encourages America's youth to learn about great poetry through memorization and recitation, helping students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about literary history.

 In 2016, the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation commissioned an efficacy study to better understand student-level outcomes associated with Poetry Out Loud when the program is implemented under optimal conditions. This study used mixed methods to understand the program's influence on (1) academic engagement and performance; (2) social and emotional development; and (3) poetry appreciation and engagement.

The following section presents key findings by each research domain.

Academic Engagement and Achievement Key Findings

Survey data and administrative records showed that, overall, POL was positively associated with academic achievement outcomes in English Language Arts (ELA) and other subjects. Interviews with

> *I definitely think I learned new ways to approach reading and even writing. After having looked through hundreds of poems and hearing other people recite stuff … I'm like, "This is a really nice way they phrased this, I can incorporate that into my writing."* - POL student

students shed light on how POL contributed to strong academic performance in ELA in particular. The students also described POL's role in supporting learning across a range of other subjects.

- **Students who participated in POL performed better on their standardized end-of-year assessments, experienced a boost in their GPA, and were more likely to have strong aspirations to attend college.** An analysis of standardized assessment data revealed that participating in POL increased students' ranking by 2.82 percentile points in ELA and 10.90 percentile points in math. Furthermore, analysis of administrative data showed that POL participants experienced a 0.13 boost to their weighted GPAs. POL students were nearly twice as likely as non-participants to report four-year college or graduate school aspirations.[1]

- **POL participation helped to strengthen vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and writing.** Students explained that poetry lends itself especially well to vocabulary development, not only because poems tend to have more words unfamiliar to the students relative to other reading materials, but also because each word carries greater weight. Readers are compelled to slow down and consider the definitions of each new word and its varied possibilities for meaning in the context

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[1] POL participants are more 1.7 times more likely than non-participants to have 4-year college or graduate school aspirations, when asked what level of education they aspired to complete after high school and controlling for mother's education, p<0.001.

of a poetic line and in an entire poem. Stronger reading comprehension grew through a rigorous process of analyzing poetry, which one student described as "resistance training with analyzing." Finally, many students and teachers said studying poetry affected students' writing skills and inspired them to take new approaches to writing.

- **POL participation influenced student achievement in the humanities and social sciences.** The most common connection students drew between poetry and a non-ELA subject was with history. Some students recognized how their study of poetry helped them engage more deeply and patiently with dense, primary sources in their history classes. A similar number of students saw connections between the skills they had developed through the study of poetry and their study of foreign languages. Some students explained that they used POL-related memorization skills and techniques when memorizing foreign vocabulary words. Students also identified connections to performing arts-related subjects, such as choir and theater, and even to courses in the sciences. For some students, engaging in poems focused on the natural world enhanced their appreciation of nature.

- **POL participation helped boost overall school engagement.** In interviews and focus groups, some students reported that their enjoyment of POL helped them become more engaged in school generally. To these students, poetry served as a "hook" for greater school engagement because they found more pleasure in it than in other subject areas. One student explained that her enjoyment of poetry (developed through POL participation) helped her build the mental stamina to persist in other areas.

> *I have such a bad focus problem, but when I do something that I enjoy, like poetry, I really stick to it and put all my brain power into it. And I use that technique in other aspects of school and life.*
> - POL student

Social and Emotional Skills Development Key Findings

High school students often experience immense social-emotional growth in adolescence as they begin to develop their sense of self, engage more deeply with their community, and understand the world around them. POL participation supported student social-emotional development by influencing their self-confidence and increasing their social awareness, empathy, engagement, and self-knowledge. It also contributed to greater extracurricular involvement, community service, and volunteering.

- **POL helped students explore their interests and achieve personal fulfillment.** The opportunities afforded by POL to engage in different skills—such as critical thinking, memorization, public speaking, and performance—allowed students to explore their interests, learn new skills and strengthen existing ones, and develop the confidence to pursue their passions. Through reading and studying poetry in POL, students were able to explore the emotions, thoughts, and values that help shape their understanding of personal identity. POL helped break down high school pressures by encouraging introspection, self-awareness, and connections through poetry.

- **POL participation helped students develop self-confidence to speak up in group discussions and form connections with others.** Program participants reported slightly greater confidence in group

discussions than did non-participants.[2] POL helped to open a line of communication between students who may not otherwise have formed connections.

> *Even just having to do that in front of the class, they break down some shyness so they might be more open to talking to [other] kids. And what I've really seen is, the audience empathy is amazing…. I think kids see the support of other kids. Because they don't always see that. And so they sit down, and all those people are like, "Good job" or "You did it." I think it does help the classroom culture in that unity, and taking a risk in front of a group where everyone is taking the same risk and then being supported.*
> - POL teacher

- **POL influenced students to take a more empathetic stance toward the world around them.** Interviewees explained how POL opened a window onto various types of thinking, perspectives, and lived experiences. Reading and studying poetry in the program gave students the opportunity to learn about different time periods in history, cultures, and points of view, broadening and deepening their connection to the world beyond their lived experiences. In addition to strengthening students' social awareness, the POL program included opportunities for students to develop empathy or take alternative perspectives. Several students found that reading and listening to poetry helped them seek emotional connections to better understand others.

- **POL participation influenced student engagement with the broader school and community environment.** Participants were more likely than non-participants to participate in two or more extracurricular activities.[3] While many student interviewees shared that they had participated in extracurricular activities *prior* to POL, being in the program helped some students to deepen the quality of their engagement in those other activities. Survey data also highlighted that students participating in POL are 1.5 times more likely to engage in community service and volunteering, compared to non-participants.[4]

> *I think I gained a lot of self-confidence doing [POL], because you're up there and you're exposing yourself to all these people. You're showing them the real you, and the deeper part of you, and a lot of times that's really hard, especially in high school to do that. But doing Poetry Out Loud, and when we do the competition for the school, people come who want to come. No one's required to be there, so you know that the people who are there respect you and they hear what you're saying.* - POL student

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[2] Specifically, the difference between pre-test and post-test scores was on average 0.07 higher for POL participants versus non-participants for group discussion, $p < 0.01$.

[3] POL participants were 1.6 times more likely to participate in two or more extracurricular activities $p < 0.001$, controlling for mother's education and college aspirations.

[4] Students participating in POL are 1.5 times more likely to engage in community service and volunteering, $p < 0.05$, controlling for mother's education and college aspirations.

Poetry Appreciation and Engagement Key Findings

In Poetry Out Loud, the teaching of poetry relies on several modes of performance and collaboration. Survey and interview data reveal that the shared work of memorizing poems, and practicing and performing them, improves students' *and teachers'* engagement with poetry and their appreciation of this distinctive literary form. Despite such benefits from POL participation, the genre remains challenging for many young readers.

- **Students' appreciation of poetry in many cases grew after participating in POL.** Survey data showed that attitudes toward poetry were significantly more positive for POL students who had participated for at least two years, relative to non-participants.[5] POL students were also significantly more likely to report that their teachers encouraged them to write their own poetry.[6]

- **Students were not uniformly positive in their opinions about poetry.** A number of students who were interviewed and who participated in focus groups were open and articulate about their frustrations with the genre or about the aspects of poetry they found challenging. The most common complaint across the respondent group, including input from several teachers, was that students sometimes find poetry difficult to understand. Most of the students interviewed explained that they did not read poetry at all outside POL and school in general.

- **Whether positive or negative, students' strong feelings about poetry suggested high levels of engagement.** The overlap between what students liked and disliked about poetry suggests, first, the ambivalence that often accompanies serious engagement in an art form or field. POL gave students an opportunity to grapple with their ambivalences. Also, because of the many modes of engagement available through POL (reading, analyzing, memorizing, reciting, and listening), POL gave students a wide variety of ways to access the genre. Students disliked poetry because it was difficult, but they liked the experience of having worked through the difficulty.

> *I just think that poetry is so gorgeous that I have trouble contributing myself to that, because I feel like I'm not as ... not just 'not as good', but not as aware of myself. I don't know, I just feel like I can't do it justice, and I spend a lot of time reading poetry [in order to do] it justice, so I know.*
> - POL student

- **POL created an avenue for teachers to connect with or learn about students in a different way.** Several teachers described POL as a program that allowed them to "see"—notice, learn about, and understand—students with whom they had not connected prior to POL. Teachers also recognized POL as a way to contribute outside one's regular teaching load and to nurture their own creativity. Several teachers indicated that participating in POL helped them contribute to the culture of the school and to their students' lives in ways that go beyond the classroom.

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[5] These students with two or more years of participation in POL scored, on average, 0.09 points higher on the Poetry Appreciation scale, p<0.01.

[6] The change from pre- to post-survey responses between participants and non-participants was, on average, 0.13 higher for students with more than one year of participation, p<0.05.

- **POL helped teachers grow more comfortable with poetry and celebrate poetry as an oral art form.** Recalling when they first had learned about POL and "the idea of making the performance of poetry the focal point instead of reading it," one teacher said, "I could never go back" and that "having access to this large, very curated, beautiful anthology of poetry, is just a gold mine." Similar to the way the students responded to POL, teachers said poetry came alive for them through POL.

> *"I've always been passionate about poetry, so I think [the students] see that, but what I loved about [POL] the most … is, even if I'm super passionate about something, I never saw the spark out of some kids. And I feel like [POL] gave them that spark."* - POL teacher

Chapter 1: Introduction

A national arts education program supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Poetry Foundation, and state and jurisdictional arts agencies, Poetry Out Loud (POL) encourages the nation's youth to learn about great poetry through memorization and recitation, helping students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about literary history.[7]

The program launched in 2005 as a pilot program in just two cities. Now in its fourteenth year as a nationwide program, POL has grown to reach more than 3.8 million students and 60,000 teachers from 16,000 schools in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands.[8]

The major POL program partners, National Endowment for the Arts (Arts Endowment) and the Poetry Foundation, commissioned an efficacy study to better understand student-level outcomes associated with the Poetry Out Loud program implemented under optimal conditions. In December 2016, the Arts Endowment awarded Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) a contract to conduct the study over a 29-month period spanning from December 2016 to April 2019.[9]

The current evaluation is the first since 2008. The prior evaluation focused on the reach, support, and engagement with POL by students and participating schools, providing compelling evidence that the program had continued to grow (over the course of its first three years) and reach increasingly diverse students, rural schools, and schools with and without existing strong arts programs. Additionally, the prior evaluation found that POL helped to facilitate both the engagement and retention of teachers by providing them resources to bolster existing curricula.

With respect to student-level outcomes, the prior evaluation focused largely on poetry appreciation and engagement. By contrast, this new evaluation focused not only on assessing student outcomes in poetry appreciation and engagement, but also on outcomes in social and emotional development and in academics. The study used a rigorous quasi-experimental design combined with qualitative data collection and analysis of program implementation in ten sample schools. The sample was selected to meet criteria established by the POL program partners. It was large enough to power a strong statistical analysis, and it allowed the research team to collect rich qualitative data to contextualize the quantitative findings.

This final report presents results from this evaluation study. Data were collected and analyzed via site visits, a pre/post student survey, and student-level administrative record data. The research team also convened a Technical Review Group of educators and researchers at the design and analysis stages, for a total of three meetings; their input helped shape the study and the resulting report. A brief review of the literature and a description of the evaluation, including research questions, instruments, school sample selection, and methodology is presented in this introduction.

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[7] Poetry Out Loud logic model

[8] https://www.poetryoutloud.org/about-poetry-out-loud/

[9] The Arts Endowment later approved a one-year no-cost extension to allow the research team to begin collecting data in Fall 2018 rather than Fall 2017, thus extending the project to April 2020.

Overview of Prior Research

This report focuses on POL's impact on three key research domains: (1) student academic engagement and performance; (2) student social and emotional development; and (3) student poetry appreciation and engagement. When examining existing research related to these three research domains, the literature shows a great deal of research focusing on the importance of English Language Arts (ELA) curricula for a variety of student outcomes.

Common Core, the current set of national standards for ELA and math sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, is widely recognized for its reliance on a foundation of extensive scholarly research and evidence (Jerald, 2008). And yet, because poetry tends to be grouped with ELA at large, there is no deep research base that can tell us about the value of poetry programs like POL for student outcomes. Thus, there is a need for evaluation studies such as this one to increase evidence related to the impact of poetry on student outcomes.

Because the body of empirical research on student outcomes associated with poetry in education is scant, the research team extended its literature review to account for student participation in arts programming generally, looking specifically at studies focused on outcomes similar to those of POL. The narrative below describes the existing research as it pertains to the evaluation's three outcomes of interest.

Academic Engagement and Performance

Existing studies related to the arts and academic engagement and performance largely found a positive link between arts participation and academic outcomes. For example, Vaughn and Winner (2000), who examined the relationship between number of years of arts participation and SAT scores, found that high school students who participated in more years of arts classes in school (including art, music, art history, dance, and theater) had higher math, verbal, and composite SAT scores. Given the new evaluation's investigation into outcomes related to the performance aspect of POL, it is interesting to note that Vaughn and Winner found that participation in theater relative to other art forms had the highest correlation with SAT verbal scores.

Catterall and colleagues' 1999 examination of the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) data also found that participation in the arts (inclusive of a variety of art forms) over a long time period resulted in consistently higher academic outcomes by the 12th grade when compared to non-arts involved students. Like Vaughn and Winner, Catterall's findings showed that sustained involvement in theater was linked to improvements in reading proficiency, gains in self-concept, and higher levels of empathy and tolerance.

In a 2012 Arts Endowment report, Catterall et al. expanded their analysis, looking at data from four different longitudinal studies to examine the relationship between arts participation and academic outcomes, focusing specifically on youth from "economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds." Catterall and colleagues found that arts-engaged youth from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds had stronger achievement outcomes than similarly disadvantaged youth who were not arts-engaged.

When examining the impact of arts participation on English Language Arts outcomes specifically, prior research shows a similar positive association. For example, a rare study that examined poetry

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memorization and recitation—the core elements of POL—in a school setting (Athanases 2005) focused on a single 10th grade classroom where students selected a poem (written by someone other than themselves) to recite to their classmates at the end of the unit. Using ethnographic methods such as classroom observations, observation of poem recitation rehearsals, and student reflections, Athanases found that the students strengthened their ability in writing about poetry, and in using and applying concepts such as assessment of dramatic situation and subtext. While not generalizable, the methods are instructive and the findings of this study point to the potential power of the performance aspect of poetry and how it is connected to strong literacy practices.

Indeed, in their study of an elementary school that transformed its approach to literacy instruction, Fisher and Frey (2007) named reading aloud as a literacy strategy that works, noting that hearing other students perform and hearing themselves read are effective strategies for facilitating fluent reading skills.

Furthermore, Koukis (2010) conducted a study of 19 under-performing ninth grade students, examining if, after a ten-week poetry reading and writing workshop in tracked English classes, they thought of themselves as more successful English students. The study also examined the extent to which students' knowledge of poetry increased, poetry sections of standardized tests improved, and knowledge of poetry-related concepts improved. Findings indicated that students had a better understanding and knowledge of poetry after the workshops, and that their test scores on literacy concepts and terms improved. Focus groups and interviews also showed that students developed a clearer understanding of metaphor and other poetry terms.

Additionally, Wiseman (2010, 2011) studied 22 eighth-grade students' responses to a year-long poetry program conducted via weekly 45-minute workshops in students' English classrooms and taught by a teaching artist from the community. Workshops focused on having the students write and read poetry and often included contemporary hip-hop and rap songs among the poems taught. Wiseman used ethnographic and observational methods to document students' experiences and responses to the program throughout the year. Findings included positive outcomes in areas aligned with POL's goals, including improved reading comprehension specifically regarding poetry, comfort with poetic devices, analytical capacity, self-confidence regarding self-expression, and "creative manipulation of emotional and social topics while integrating and expanding students' language" (Wiseman 2011, 76).

Social and Emotional Development

Given that this study focuses on understanding the relationship between POL participation and social and emotional development (e.g., self-concept, self-confidence, positive behavioral change), the research team reviewed literature relevant to arts and poetry's connection to this domain.

Overall, existing literature pointed to a positive relationship between arts participation and social and emotional development. While most empirical studies reviewed were small, one mixed-methods study conducted in England by Harland et al. (2000) was significantly large and focused on students at the high school level.[10] This study included the administration of over 2,200 surveys to 11th graders at 22 schools,

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[10] England and the United States have very different school systems; thus, while the team found the findings of interest, it remains circumspect about their broad applicability to the current study.

qualitative case studies of five secondary schools noted for having strong arts reputations, and an examination of performance on national academic tests for 27,607 students in 152 schools.

In terms of social-emotional outcomes, relevant findings emerged from the case studies. School administrators reported that the arts contributed to a more positive school culture by encouraging a positive, cohesive atmosphere, while students reported that participation in arts classes provided opportunities to learn about social and cultural issues and contributed to their personal and social development. They also reported having enriched expressive skills and a greater sense of self-confidence as a result of arts participation.

Furthermore, Daykin et al. (2008) conducted a comprehensive review of research on the impact of performing arts participation on adolescent health and behavior. Some of the studies they highlight include a randomized control trial study by McArdle et al. (2002), which yielded some evidence of student-reported improvement in self-concept as well as teacher-reported improvements in behavior. This study, however, was focused on a very specific and younger target population ("at-risk" 11-year-olds).

The research team leading the POL evaluation also found it important to contextualize findings in the broader literature on adolescent social and emotional development. Specifically, a study by Zimmerman and Iwanski (2014) aimed to understand differences in emotional regulation across age groups. Findings showed that one's ability to regulate emotions such as fear, sadness, and anger declines throughout adolescence (particularly between ages 11-17) and then rises again in adulthood.

Furthermore, Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor (2010) found that the effects of mindfulness curriculum on social and emotional learning were positive for pre-adolescents but largely mixed for early adolescents. The authors hypothesized that the increase in self-awareness in the early-adolescent phase may mitigate positive impacts of an intervention designed to enhance social and emotional awareness.

Regarding students' engagement with school, or the degree of attention, curiosity, and interest students demonstrate in school activities, using a sample of 1,148 students tracked from grades seven through eleven, Wang and Eccles (2012) found that school engagement decreased over time. They also reported that sense of belonging to the school and self-regulated learning decreased from seventh grade to eleventh grade. Thus, existing literature points to a potential decline in social and emotional growth during the adolescent years, which is an important backdrop for the social and emotional development domain explored in this study.

Poetry Appreciation and Engagement

Similar to the other two domains, existing research, while scant, points to a positive relationship between arts education and poetry appreciation and engagement. Specifically, reading poetry out loud can lead to greater enjoyment of (and therefore engagement in) poetry and literature in general. A study by Crozer (2014) demonstrated that framing poetry curriculum and instruction as "play" for a sample of fourth, fifth and sixth grade students increased both student and teacher engagement with literature. Similarly, in a study by Ivey and Broaddus (2001), which included surveys and interviews of 1,765 sixth grade students in 23 schools and follow-up interviews with 31 students, students reported strong enjoyment around reading poetry and plays out loud.

Some literature suggests that poetry engagement can also be influenced by the *platform* or *medium* used to teach poetry. Hughes (2009), for example, looked at how performance and the medium for teaching poetry influence outcomes. In particular, Hughes studied the performance aspect of digital new media—the way in which the creation and posting of content foregrounds the persona of the content creator/poster—as a mechanism for teaching and creating poetry. She collected data from a single classroom of 28 eleventh grade students in Ontario, Canada, using photographic and video documentation and semi-structured interviews. A key finding was that students were more excited and engaged with poetry after participating.

While this research was focused on a poetry writing program and digital media, many of the same elements fostered via the medium are present in POL. For example, the performance aspect, the audience focus (students shared their poems with the class), and the collaborative ethos described by Hughes are aspects that are also present in POL. The study provides a compelling argument that alternative modes of teaching poetry that draw on performance elements—elements key to the structure of POL—are key to increasing student engagement.

As shown in this review of extant literature, the opportunity to study the impact of POL on student outcomes is not only relevant to understanding the importance of arts education in general and poetry in particular, but also fills a gap in the current research base. This report therefore endeavors to build from the literature and present new findings that contribute to public understanding of how programs such as POL impact academic achievement, social and emotional learning, and poetry appreciation.

The Evaluation of Poetry Out Loud

The purpose of this evaluation is to understand student-level outcomes associated with the implementation of POL in optimally implementing states.[11] The program sponsors and the research team hypothesized that the outcomes of POL would be more readily detectable in schools showing optimal fidelity of program implementation.

Research Questions

Specifically, the evaluation is designed to answer the following research questions, organized by the evaluation's three key research domains:

1. **Student academic engagement and performance**

    Does student participation in POL correlate with increased academic engagement in English classes and/or in school more generally?

    Are there other types of skill development correlated with POL participation?

2. **Student social and emotional development**

    Do students experience increased self-confidence in their public speaking abilities, social skills, intellectual abilities or, in general, after participating in POL?

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[11] See subsequent section focused on the POL Evaluation School Sample for characteristics related to optimally implementing states.

Do students feel more secure, empowered, and/or articulate in expressing themselves after participating in POL?

Are students more likely to engage in civic activities during or after participation in POL?

Are students more likely to engage in extracurricular activities during or after participation in POL?

3. **Student poetry appreciation and engagement**

Does participating in POL correlate with students' increasing their likelihood of reading or writing poetry for pleasure?

Does POL promote the sharing of poems among students and, if so, by what means?

Do students talk about poetry or POL on social media networks after the participation versus before?

Does POL participation correlate with any attitudinal changes toward poetry, academics, public speaking/performing, or post-high school aspirations?

Data Sources

Each research question is underscored by a set of outcomes and indicators detailing how the question will be addressed. Matrices detailing these outcomes and indicators are found in Appendix A. (All appendices ultimately will be posted online. Meanwhile, they can be obtained by contacting the National Endowment for the Arts at research@arts.gov.) Furthermore, these matrices detail the data sources used to answer each question. The following quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed to answer the research questions:

1. **Student Interviews:** Student interviews were conducted on-site at each of the participating schools. Interview questions were designed to address each of the three research domains as well as the implementation of POL at each school. The student interview protocol detailing questions asked during each interview can be found in Appendix B
2. **Student Focus Groups:** In addition to student interviews, focus groups were held at each participating school. The student focus group protocol can be found in Appendix B.
3. **Teacher Interviews:** While teachers are not the explicit focus of the research questions, SPR interviewed teachers at each of the participating schools to collect an alternative perspective on how POL impacted students (as related to the three research domains), as well as further detail on how POL was implemented at each school. The teacher interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.
4. **Administrator Interviews:** Finally, an administrator from each school was interviewed on-site to provide further insight into each of the three research domains and POL implementation. These interviews in particular provided a higher level of understanding about how POL was viewed at each school and how it fit in with the rest of the school's academic and extracurricular curriculum. The administrator protocol can be found in Appendix B.
5. **Student survey:** A comprehensive student survey was administered to all students at participating schools during fall 2018 (pre) and spring 2019 (post). Survey administration was timed to correspond with each school's POL implementation schedule. Thus, the pre-survey took place prior to POL implementation and the post-survey took place after the regional/state competitions

had been completed. In general, the survey questions addressed all three research domains, andwith the exception of the questions pertaining to the Poetry Appreciation and Engagement domain, all items and dimensions were drawn from previously validated instruments. The survey contained 145 items and 11 dimensions. For a complete description of the survey items and dimensions, please refer to Appendix D.

6. **Student administrative data:** SPR collected a set of administrative data for all students at each

    participating school for the 2018-19 school year. Appendix G details the full set of administrative data received from each participating school. However, in general, this set of data contained information on student academic achievement (standardized test scores, grade point averages, and English Language Arts course grades) and student background characteristics. This administrative data was obtained from school district maintained student information systems that integrate data from multiple sources, including school attendance records, assessments, and student demographics. Therefore, the administrative data were designed to address research questions under the student academic engagement and performance domain.

POL Evaluation School Sample

School Selection Criteria

As part of the POL evaluation, Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) undertook an effort to partner with ten schools to serve as the study sample. Because this evaluation was deemed an efficacy study, SPR sought to recruit schools that reflected the optimal conditions for program success. Thus, recruited schools were only from states that offered these conditions. The POL program partners' criteria to determine whether states offer optimal conditions for POL[12] were as follows:

- An overall count of participating students exceeding 2,500;
- An overall count of participating schools exceeding 20;
- Presence of ancillary activities supporting state finals competitions, direct student exposure to a working artist, and celebratory activities for students and families such as a welcome banquet or reception;
- Formal teacher recognition at the state level;
- Opportunities for winning students to perform at local arts events throughout the state;
- Strong support for the POL program from executive leadership at the state arts agency;
- Workshops for teachers and/or students facilitated by the state arts agency;
- Matching or overmatching of POL grant money with funds from the state arts agency; and
- An annual program assessment.

According to the POL program partners, 18 states were identified as meeting optimal conditions for POL implementation.[13] In addition to these criteria, the research team set three selection criteria that individual schools needed to meet to be included in the sample. These additional criteria were set to ensure that the quantitative data would have the required structure and statistical power needed to measure the impact of POL. Specific criteria were as follows:

1) Schools have mandatory POL programming at the classroom level, with some but not all classrooms participating[14];
2) Schools meet the necessary conditions to implement the study, including having a minimum of 360 POL-participating students and about 360 non-participants[15], allowing SPR to implement a

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[12] These optimal conditions identified by POL program partners included indicators of strong community outreach (e.g., overall count of participating students exceeding 2,500), effective program practices (e.g., formal teacher recognition), and robust state arts agency support (e.g., matching or overmatching of POL grant money).

[13] These states are California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia.

[14] Poetry Out Loud is implemented in schools and classrooms in generally one of two ways—requiring mandatory student participation or allowing students to voluntarily participate in the program. Mandatory participation means that a teacher requires his or her entire class(es) to participate in the Poetry Out Loud program. Some schools may additionally require grade-level participation or even schoolwide participation. In contrast, some schools may opt to have students voluntarily participate in the program. This means that students self-select to participate in Poetry Out Loud whether this is in the classroom or in an after-school club. Mandatory programming was selected as a study criterion to reduce or eliminate the bias associated with self-selection. The study team also included an option in its screening criteria for schools that had mandatory participation for entire grade levels, but ultimately did not screen any schools that had mandatory participation by grade-level.

schoolwide online survey, and having the ability to provide student-level data for all students in the school; and

3) Schools possess other features so as to achieve a good mix of school sites in terms of geography and student body composition.

School Selection Process

To reach potentially eligible schools, SPR communicated the selection criteria to eligible State Arts Agencies (SAAs) and requested a list of potential schools from SAAs in each optimally implementing state. Some SAAs supported SPR by preparing lists of potential schools to participate in the study.

Specifically, SAAs either provided lists of schools or sent SPR's contact information to the schools and asked schools to respond if they met the criteria and were willing to participate. The latter approach yielded a more limited result compared to the scenario of SAAs creating lists of potentially eligible schools and sending the lists directly to SPR. SPR received lists from the following states: California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. SPR reviewed each state's list, totaling 59 schools, and identified schools that matched the study criteria.

SPR also followed up with schools that had failed to report information needed to determine eligibility; some schools responded, and others were nonresponsive. From this process, SPR created a list of 31 eligible schools representing the following states (total schools in parentheses): Georgia (1), Mississippi (1), Nevada (1), Ohio (2), Texas (1), Washington (8), New Jersey (6), California (4), Pennsylvania (1), Massachusetts (6). One school in Virginia was later added to the list to address concerns with geographic diversity when other eligible schools in Texas, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Massachusetts were non-responsive. With support from the POL program partners, SPR then reached out to each school's POL contact and principal to review the study's details and ask for their participation. SPR successfully contacted POL liaisons at 28 of the 31 schools.

Of the 28 schools, nine of the schools were either ultimately determined to be ineligible or declined to participate, and six schools had non-responsive school administrators. Of the 13 schools that agreed to participate, SPR then reached out to the corresponding school district to receive approval. For the purposes of the selection process, schools were considered confirmed sites in the study once SPR received a signed Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) from the district or an indication from the district that the DSA was in process. Of the 13 schools, ten districts agreed to participate and returned signed DSAs.

School Sample

As discussed, the nature of the selection criteria and process limited potential schools to a select group that possessed the resources and staff time to both optimally implement POL and assist with implementing the study. As a result, the group of participating schools came from five different states (CA, MA, OH, VA, WA) in primarily suburban regions. Exhibit I details the specific states, region-type, and racial/ethnic breakdown of the student population.

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[15] The results of our power analyses utilizing 360 student participants and 360 non-participants per school yield minimum detectable effects (MDEs) of 1.37 for a sample of 3,600 (360 for each of the ten schools). The research team therefore determined that participating schools should have a minimum sample of 360 POL participants.

Exhibit I: POL Evaluation Study Selected Schools[16]

State	School Population	POL Participants	Urban/Suburban /Rural	Racial/Ethnic Profile[17]
School A	2199	537	Suburb (Large)	86% White; 7% Hispanic; 1% Asian; 0.4% Black; 4% Multiracial; 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native
School B	2182	450	Suburb (Large)	77% White; 7% Asian; 7% Hispanic; 7% Multiracial; 1% Black; 0.4% American Indian/Alaskan Native
School C	1741	420	City (Small)	68% White; 25% Hispanic; 3% Asian; 2% Black; 2% Multiracial; 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native
School D	1143	670	Suburb (Large)	94% White; 3% Asian; 2% Hispanic; 1% Black; 1% Multiracial; 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native
School E	1623	491	Suburb (Large)	82% White; 10% Multiracial; 6% Hispanic; 0.1% Asian; 1% Black; 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native
School F	1500	1000	Suburb (Midsize)	74% Hispanic; 21% White; 2% Asian; 2% Black; 1% Multiracial; 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native
School G	1834	1100	City (Small)	70% White; 10% Asian; 9% Hispanic; 2% Black; 9% Multiracial; 0.3% American Indian/Alaskan Native
School H	1450	530	City (Small)	63% White; 26% Hispanic; 5% Asian; 5% Multiracial; 1% Black; 0.1% American Indian/Alaskan Native
School I	1766	400	Suburb (Large)	89% White; 6% Asian; 3% Multiracial; 1% Black; 1% Hispanic; 0.1% American Indian/Alaskan Native
School J	2606	>360	Suburb (Large)	34% Hispanic; 29% White; 23% Black; 7% Asian; 7% Multiracial; 0% American Indian/Alaska Native

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[16] Population, geographic distinction, and racial/ethnic profile according to Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data

[17] Racial/ethnic categories appear in descending order.

Methodology

Given the mixed method nature of the evaluation design, the analytic methods were designed to complement one another, providing both depth and breadth to addressing the research questions. As described below, the methods included a quasi-experimental design involving a treatment group of students participating in POL and a comparison group of non-participating students from the same schools. The quantitative design included two components:

a. Survey analysis: A correlational study intended to analyze the difference in pre/post growth between POL participants and non-participants.
b. Administrative data analysis: A causal study intended to measure the impact of POL participation on student academic achievement.

These quantitative analyses were coupled with qualitative on-site data collection to help understand POL program implementation and the counterfactual (i.e., the experiences of those in the comparison group).[18] This design allowed the research team to analyze all outcomes of interest. It also helped provide insight into the factors affecting those outcomes and to identify how outcomes had changed after implementation of the program.[19]

Qualitative Data Analysis

Between December 2018 and March 2019, a total of 22 teachers, 38 students, and ten school administrators participated in interviews during the data collection phase. In addition, SPR facilitated nine student focus groups that included between 3-8 POL participants (*n*=46) to ensure that a strong student voice was incorporated in the evaluation of the program. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and later transcribed for coding using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software. The first round of qualitative analysis lifted general themes around the implementation of POL at each school and the influence of POL on academic engagement and achievement, social and emotional development, and poetry appreciation and engagement. SPR also conducted a second round of analysis to further refine these themes and highlight the most salient findings from these three domains.

Survey Analysis

The pre-survey took place between September 7 and November 19, 2018; the post-survey took place between March 29 and May 19, 2019. A total of 3,707 out of 9,745 students across the ten participating schools took both the pre-survey and the post-survey, representing a 38% response rate. Within this sample, 56% (*n*=2088) had participated in POL, 38% (*n*=1395) had not participated in POL, and 6% (*n*=224) were not sure if they had participated in POL. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each item and each dimension in the survey for (1) all respondents; (2) POL participants; and (3) POL

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[18] A detailed understanding of the counter-factual—the programming that the comparison group, students not participating in POL receive—is important, but the scope of the study precluded site visits long enough to observe non-participating classrooms and interview non-participating teachers and students. Thus analyses of any differences between treatment and comparison groups will focus on the pre/post survey, which both participating and non-participating students took.

[19] All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Office of Management and Budget, reference number 3135-0139.

non-participants.[20] Following these summary statistics, the correlational study utilized multiple linear regressions to analyze all survey dimensions and key questions within dimensions to compare difference from pre-test to post-test between POL participants and non-participants, controlling for key student characteristics.

As discussed in the findings section and alluded to in the literature review, it is common to see a decline from pre-test to post-test when conducting surveys of student attitudes across a single school year. Therefore, the coefficient of interest for the multiple linear regressions, in most cases, reflected the extent to which POL participants' decline from pre to post was less than non-participants' decline from pre to post. Furthermore, multiple logistic regressions were conducted for individual questions with binary outcome variables (e.g. planning to go to college or not). This analysis illustrated key differences in growth along the three research domains between POL participants and non-participants. A complete description of the survey sample size, response rate, and statistical models can be found in Appendices D-F. (All appendices are posted online accompanying this report.)

Administrative Data Analysis

The administrative dataset contained 14,216 students across all ten schools. Among these students 6,020 participated in POL during the 2018-19 school year and 8,196 did not. While the survey analysis was a correlational study, the administrative data analysis was designed to be causal. Because randomization was not possible in this context, the research team employed a quasi-experimental design to demonstrate causality. Specifically, the research team used a propensity score matching design to simulate a randomized treatment and control group. Student standardized test scores and the weighted GPA were used as the outcome variables to address the academic engagement and performance research questions. A detailed description of the administrative data sample and propensity score matching method can be found in Appendix G.

Report Overview

The proceeding chapters aim to tell a comprehensive story of the impact of Poetry Out Loud on student outcomes. Therefore, quantitative findings are weaved through complementary qualitative findings to provide detail and context when necessary. Technical details regarding the quantitative approach and findings can be found in the Appendices D-G.

The report begins with an overview of the Poetry Out Loud program model and goals, then delves into how this model was implemented at each of the participating schools. Key differences in implementation among participating schools are highlighted throughout this chapter.

After a detailed review of program implementation, the report explains key findings related to each of the domains. Specifically, findings in the academic achievement and engagement domain are presented first and include results from the propensity score matching analysis as well as complementary survey and qualitative findings. Findings focused on the social and emotional development domain follow, which show key insights from the survey as well as supportive findings from site visits. Next, the chapter illustrates key impacts as they relate to poetry appreciation and engagement. Similar to the prior

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[20] To ensure maximum sample size, respondents that did not know if they had participated in POL were grouped with the non-participants.

domain, both survey and qualitative data are married in this section to explain POL's impact on student poetry appreciation and engagement. Lastly, in order to capture all the nuances from the qualitative data analysis, the findings chapter concludes with additional important considerations that fall outside the three core domains.

The report concludes with recommendations and considerations for programmatic improvements, as well as needed data collection and analysis for continued study of POL. This final chapter aims to synthesize key takeaways from the report and elevate thoughtful insights for both practitioners and researchers.

Chapter 2: National Program Model and Implementation Variations Among Sample Schools

This chapter begins by outlining the POL National Program Model to provide insight into the key activities, anticipated outcomes, and goals of POL programming. Given that the evaluation was designed to be an efficacy study, understanding the program model is integral for interpreting subsequent findings. Following this overview, the chapter highlights key implementation characteristics observed across the school sample and concludes by highlighting key takeaways in how POL was implemented. This final section is intended to provide important findings related to the ways in which schools implement POL, as well as critical context for the remainder of the report.

Overview of the National Program Model

Poetry Out Loud was first implemented in 2005 and has evolved and expanded in both scale and curriculum. While implementation of the POL program may vary, the general program model begins at the classroom level, when participating students select a poem from an anthology of over 1,100 poems produced and revised annually by the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation. Students then typically engage with that poem for a protracted length of time,[21] focused on exploration, analysis and memorization, with their efforts ultimately resulting in recitation of the poems in a classroom competition.

Throughout this process, teachers provide instruction and support students' engagement and recitation of their selected poems. The Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation offer a Teacher Guide and other resources on the Poetry Out Loud website (poetryoutloud.org)to outline how teachers can implement POL in their schools and classrooms. Within this Teacher's Guide, the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation suggest that teachers help prepare students for the classroom competition via a four-step process:

1. **Explore**: Students browse poems on the online anthology and discover new poets by reading one new poem at the start of each class period.
2. **Understand**: Students select poems to memorize and discuss them in class. Furthermore, students are provided with tips to memorize their poems, such as "Rewrite your poem by hand several times. Each time, try to write more and more of it from memory."
3. **Recite**: Teachers model poetry recitation and engage students in a discussion of best practices and habits to avoid when reciting poetry. Additionally, teachers allow class time for students to practice reciting their poems.

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[21] The Poetry Out Loud 2019-2020 Teacher's Guide presents a sample class schedule extending three weeks.

4. **Write**: Students engage in creative writing activities to complement their Poetry Out Loud activity.[22]

Classroom winners advance to a schoolwide competition, where competitors recite two or three poems each for a panel of judges. School winners advance to a regional and/or state competition, and ultimately to the National Finals, where competitors must recite three poems. Awards and placements are determined by judges' scores based on Poetry Out Loud evaluation criteria, including accuracy, physical presence, voice and articulation, dramatic appropriateness, evidence of understanding, and overall performance.

Each winner at the state level receives a $200 award and an all-expenses-paid trip with an adult chaperone to Washington, DC to compete for the national championship. The state winner's school receives $500 for the purchase of poetry materials; some schools also benefit from increased visibility, as these competitions are often broadcasted. The first runner-up in each state receives $100, with $200 for their school. At the National Finals, a total of $50,000 in awards and school stipends is awarded annually.

The POL program model reflects thoughtful efforts by the Poetry Foundation and the Arts Endowment to provide a vehicle for enacting the program's mission and achieving a larger set of goals connected to poetry study. These goals and the strategies for achieving those goals, are well-articulated in POL's logic model, which is described in the next section.

The Poetry Out Loud Logic Model

The mission of the Poetry Foundation, co-creator of Poetry Out Loud, is to elevate the visibility and influence of poetry in our culture, and to "discover and celebrate the best poetry and place it before the largest possible audience." The POL logic model articulates how the program works to meet the Poetry Foundation's mission as well as other, more youth-development centered goals focused on academic outcomes and social-emotional wellbeing. These goals, as described in the program mission statement, involve "encourag[ing] the nation's youth to learn about great poetry through memorization and recitation, helping students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about literary history." As an early task in the evaluation, SPR worked closely with members of the POL team[23] to update the POL logic model (shared as Exhibit II) in order to update and more succinctly articulate the program's mission, its goals, and the strategies and resources that work in support of these goals.

The POL mission provides conceptual grounding for the elements of the logic model listed beneath it. The core elements of the logic model include: the *inputs* provided by POL to support effective programming; *contextual factors* with the potential to affect POL implementation and outcomes;, key *strategies* in program implementation; the anticipated *outcomes* that POL program partners hypothesize will result; and the key areas of *impact* that program staff ultimately hope to achieve through POL. Below, these impact areas are described in detail:

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[22] The Poetry Out Loud website offers a number of lesson plans to help teachers integrate creative writing with the POL process: https://www.poetryoutloud.org/teachers-organizers/lesson-plans/.

[23] This team includes key staff from both the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation

- **Inputs.** Given the national scope of the program, POL leverages the resources and expertise of key partners in an effort to ensure consistent, high quality programming across states. The National Endowment for the Arts provides funding for program resources and support for state arts agencies to implement the program. It also funds the administration of the national POL competition through an agreement with Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, a regional arts agency. The Poetry Foundation supports poetry engagement generally and the teaching of poetry in particular by providing teachers and students with easily accessible materials to increase exposure to poetry and support poetry study. These materials include the POL website, app, teaching tools, curriculum, and easy access to a robust (and ever-growing) online anthology of poems. The Poetry Foundation also funds contest prizes and travel to and accommodation for state champions attending the National Finals. State arts agencies (SAAs) support program participation and increased visibility of the program by publicizing the program, recruiting teachers and schools for participation, and conducting the state-level competitions.

- **Strategies.** POL encompasses an array of strategies that leverage the resources noted above in service of program goals. These strategies include, but are not limited to, providing easy access to a wide array of poetry from diverse authors, supporting effective instruction by providing educators with strong teaching tools and tested curricula, and, through the competition, creating opportunities for performance that elevate the visibility of the program and its participants.

- **Impact and Outcomes.** The Poetry Foundation and the Arts Endowment believe that, when implemented effectively, the POL program can have a positive impact in four key domains: student academic performance, the social and emotional health of students, teacher knowledge and confidence in teaching poetry, and awareness and appreciation of poetry and arts programming. Tied to these domains are specific hypothesized outcomes (e.g. increased analytical skills and proficiency in English Language Arts, increased confidence, and increased poetry exposure) that serve as indicators of progress towards the program's desired impacts.

- **Contextual Factors.** While POL has a strong program model that is designed to equip teachers and students to explore and effectively engage in poetry, the Poetry Foundation and Arts Endowment recognize that any number of external factors can affect POL implementation and outcomes. These factors range from teacher experience (generally and with POL or poetry in general), differing levels of financial support (e.g. some states are able to provide supplemental funding to augment the effort), socioeconomic factors that can impact learning in general, etc.

The POL logic model is intended to outline the impact of Poetry Out Loud on students and teachers in the event of ideal program implementation. Thus, as mentioned, this study was designed to be an efficacy study to include schools that were optimally implementing POL to see if this intended impact was realized. However, as noted under the Contextual Factors heading, it is unlikely that all schools (even among those that are optimally implementing POL) are implementing POL in the same way. Therefore, the proceeding sections will outline how schools in this study sample implemented POL and summarizes how these implementation methods may be similar to and/or different from the National Model.

Exhibit II: Poetry Out Loud Logic Model

Mission Statement: A national recitation contest supported by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Poetry Foundation, and State and Jurisdictional Arts Agencies (SAAs), **Poetry Out Loud** encourages the nation's youth to learn about great poetry through memorization and recitation, helping students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about literary history.

Inputs

POL leverages **strong partnerships** to ensure consistent, high quality programming:

- The **NEA** provides funding for SAAs to implement the program and to run the National Finals as well as support and resources for state and local-level partners, teachers, and students.
- The **Poetry Foundation** provides easy access to free educational materials for teachers and students.
- **State Arts Agencies** publicize the program, recruit teachers and schools to participate, and develop and conduct the state-level finals program.[1]

Contextual Factors

There are a number of external factors that can affect POL implementation and outcomes, including (but not limited to):

- Prior experience with POL
- Years of teaching experience
- Socioeconomic factors that can impact learning (e.g. poverty rates)
- School social/cultural context
- Differing deployment of POL funds by state
- Availability of supplemental state and/or private resources

Strategies

POL seeks to elevate poetry and harness its power to support student development by:

- Developing and providing easy access to a robust, diverse, and growing anthology of poetry
- Engaging students in thoughtful, complex curricula that encourages deep engagement with and analysis of poetry
- Providing educators with easy access to strong, tested poetry curriculum
- Providing a comprehensive package of teaching tools and resources to support effective instruction
- Nurturing and promoting the expressive and performative aspect of poetry
- Creating a highly visible, national performance venue to challenge students and celebrate their accomplishments

Anticipated Outcomes

- Students' analytical capacity grows
- Students' engagement in learning increases
- Students' knowledge of literary history increases
- Students' language arts proficiency grows

- Students' confidence increases
- Students' sense of self/identity grows
- Students' engagement in the larger school community grows

- More teachers exposed to arts education programming
- Teachers' knowledge and appreciation of poetry increases
- Teachers strengthen their ability to effectively teach poetry
- Teachers' enthusiasm for teaching poetry increases

- Students and community experience increased exposure to poetry
- Students and community express appreciation for arts programming and poetry
- Students and community are exposed to the work of State Arts Agencies, NEA, & the Poetry Foundation
- Students and community members increase their participation in arts programming

Impact

Students' Academic Skills & Performance are Strengthened

Students' Social and Emotional Health Improves

Teacher Knowledge of & Confidence in Teaching Poetry Increases

Awareness and Appreciation of Poetry and Arts Programming Increases

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[1] Some SAAs supplement NEA funds with additional state funds and/or private donations, or establish organizational partnerships, that enable special trainings and workshops for participating students and teachers or add to the prize amounts.

POL Implementation at Sample Schools

While the prior section provided a high-level overview of how POL is meant to be implemented, this section provides further detail into how POL was implemented at the ten schools participating in the study. This description is categorized by core areas of POL implementation: (1) starting and maintaining a school-based POL program; (2) program participation; (3) classroom implementation; and (4) competitions.

1. Starting and Maintaining a School-Based POL program

A variety of teachers championed POL at the sample schools. These teachers were typically English Language Arts teachers, but occasionally, other teachers focused in humanities or arts such as theater or communications implemented POL. These teachers had varying years of teaching experience and varying years of experience implementing POL.[24] Teachers who were responsible for bringing the program to the school in the first place (true of several of the teachers we interviewed) had heard about it through their county department of education website, at a professional conference, or from another teacher at a different school. Most of the teachers interviewed explained that it was the enthusiasm of other teachers at their school and a pre-existing enthusiasm for poetry that led them to participate in the first place. Principals interviewed identified POL as a passion project for the teachers that brought the program to the school and for those that participated in it, often year after year.

While teachers are typically the organizing force behind POL at the sample schools, they often receive support from school and district administrators. During site visit interviews, school principals often referred to themselves as "cheerleaders" for the teachers running POL. At one school in the sample, POL is featured by school administrators with other school programs in a slide presentation offered for new students and their parents at freshman orientation at the beginning of every school year. Administrators also help coordinate the logistics around scheduling space for the school competition. District administrators also support POL: at one school in the sample, the school district offers a workshop about POL as a way to encourage participation.

2. Program Participation

Across the 10 schools in the sample, not all English Language Arts teachers in the school chose to bring POL into their classrooms, which meant that some but not all students at the school participated in POL. As noted previously, *teachers* decide whether to bring POL to their classrooms. The points below outline how program participation was implemented across the school sample.

> *There's always a way to do it. There's always a way to include more poetry if you are open to it.* - POL Teacher

- **Courses and grades participating in POL.** All ten schools had participating English or Literature classrooms across the grade spectrum – that is ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth-grade classes participated in POL. Of the 58 classes that participated in POL in the sample, there was close to an even split in participation between Honors or AP classes (27 classes, or 47%) and classes that were not in an advanced track (31 classes, or 53%). In a few schools, POL was offered in drama,

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[24] Mandatory school-wide participation does occur but the study team selected only schools with mandatory classroom-level participation in order to ensure a comparison group for the quasi-experimental design.

communications, "bridge to college," creative writing, and general humanities classes. Teachers interviewed for the study shared that they participated because they enjoyed POL, were often passionate about poetry, found that many of their students enjoyed participating, and felt that POL added value to their teaching, their classrooms, and for their students.

- **Student participation requirements**. While all POL classes in the school sample required program participation from all students in the class, some teachers elected to make participation in the classroom competition voluntary. Some offered extra credit to students who chose to participate rather than enforce it as a required component of the curriculum. One teacher who made the competition voluntary said that very few students ended up deciding to participate. Some teachers recognized that, for some of their students, requiring them to participate in the competition may not be the best choice. Some shared that in those instances, they altered the rules of the competition—for example, they might have allowed a student to recite to them one-on-one after school (rather than in front of the class). In at least one case a student with a learning disability was exempted from having to memorize the poem. These slight alterations to the program guidelines enabled more students to reap the benefits of participation.

- **Student attitudes toward participation.** Both students and teachers pointed out that there were always many students who were not enthusiastic about the competition and did not take it seriously, which indicates that while POL was transformative for many (as described later in this report), there were many others for whom it was more or less just another school requirement. However, a number of students and teachers valued the mandatory nature of participation in the classroom competition because it challenged students to be vulnerable and open up emotionally, which would have been difficult to do if others did not have to go through it or were not as invested in the same way. The theme of everyone being in the same situation came up numerous times in the interviews, especially with students, many of whom expressed appreciation for the fact that everyone in the class had to recite a poem in front of the others. This often resulted in an empathetic environment in the classroom that students and teachers appreciated and that often carried into the rest of the year. Teachers and students interviewed pointed out that giving everyone a chance to participate can lead to surprise discoveries, both on the part of students who realize that they love or are gifted at memorization and recitation, and on the part of teachers, for whom POL makes some previously "invisible" students visible to them.

- **Teacher non-participation.** As noted previously, not all English Language Arts teachers participated in POL. While the research team did not interview non-participating teachers, participating teachers were asked why they thought some teachers do not participate. Most teachers interviewed across the sample said that teachers typically do not participate in POL because they are managing already tight timelines and full curricular requirements in their classes and feel that POL does not "fit." Conversely, a few teachers mentioned that there is a perception among some teachers that POL is "too hard" for lower-level English classes. Some teachers thought decisions not to participate were influenced by the timing of the schoolwide competitions. Schoolwide competitions have to be completed in time for state competitions which themselves must occur before the national competition in February or March, because the school competition often falls at final exam time. Several teachers from different schools in the sample suggested that POL requires a lot of trust between students and their teacher, and that can be intimidating for some

teachers. Finally, several teachers commented that poetry itself can be intimidating for teachers and that some do not see the value in it for the students' futures.

3. Classroom Implementation

While POL programs in the sample adhere to the core components of the POL program, there was quite a bit of variation in the way POL was implemented within classrooms. These areas of variation are highlighted below.

> *I'm so in love with this program because my first year that I taught here, I read a poem every day and then I kept handing the baton to students to have them read a poem every day. And we got so invested in the poems we really had to stay focused to get back to what we were doing. So now I've learned, I try as many different ways every year to involve poetry [and] we do poetry with everything we study. There's always a connection.*
>
> -POL teacher

- **Program dosage.** The majority of teachers interviewed indicated that POL is offered over the course of two to four weeks, often interspersed with other activities. In a few classrooms, POL provided the only vehicle for poetry exposure over the course of the school year. Students from one school shared that POL was limited to just one week of school; noting that within that week the students would choose a poem from the anthology on the website, memorize the poem, and perform it in front of the class, but were not given opportunities to analyze or discuss the poems, nor was POL integrated into any other aspects of their class. On the other hand, SPR interviewed several teachers who employed a deeper approach. These teachers shared that they spend a month on POL and also teach a separate poetry unit that could last another month, with poetry interspersed throughout the year among the other literature the students are reading. Many teachers indicated that they bring in poetry to support other units, such as reading poems from the Black Arts Movement while reading the novel *Native Son,* or coupling Shakespeare sonnets with a reading of a Shakespeare play.

- **Use of POL tools to support instruction.** Most of the teachers described using the lesson plans and instructional tools prepared by the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation for introducing and teaching POL. For example, several teachers shared that they use different analytical or "glossing" tools, often based on acronyms – such as TP CASTT, an acronym which stands for Title (predict what the poem will be about), Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude/Tone, Shifts, Title (interpreted after having read the poem), and Theme. Multiple teachers described assigning the tone maps – guides to noticing and describing tonal shifts in poems – that are part of the lesson planning materials provided by the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation. Many teachers said they had used several of the curricular materials when they were new teachers or new to POL, but that, over time, they began to develop their own tools and ways of doing things and now might use one or two of the POL lesson plans (the tone map was particularly popular), combined with more of their own tools or those that had been shared with them by other POL teachers. One teacher explained that the teachers in her department maintain a shared folder with a range of instructional tools, including tools for teaching POL, which they use to share tools with each other.

> *I let them explore the history of POL, what are the benefits, according to past contestants? What are the possible monetary incentives to be a part of this whole thing? And just the lifelong benefits of being somebody who can unpack poems and use that as a way to enrich our experience.*
>
> - POL teacher

- **Introduction to poetry and POL**. Some teachers spent time at the beginning of the POL "unit" showing videos of previous champions and talking with students more generally about poetry as an art form and why participating in such a poetry-specific program and competition might be of interest and value to them. Several teachers described the importance of introducing POL early, so that students had time to get used to the idea that they would be memorizing and performing a poem for the class. Students then had time to explore the anthology and not make, in the words of one teacher, "a hysterical choice" at the last minute. One teacher described the opening activities of POL as *"poetry therapy, because they all hate poetry. It's like 99 [out of 100] – you'll have the one outlier, but most of them just hate poetry."* Thus, a big part of introducing POL is softening the students' learned resistance to poetry and lowering anxiety levels about performing in front of their peers. Another teacher, describing moments of insight and performance triumph for students despite the aforementioned resistance and anxiety said, "it might not be all the kids, but I think it's worth it even if a few kids have those moments."

- **Poetry selection.** Many teachers give students time with the anthology to explore possible poems that they might want to memorize. One teacher described doing this on a Friday afternoon, putting on music, and for half an hour letting students (who in this school all had laptops) use their laptops to explore the anthology and pick poems. Some teachers require students to select several poems and go through exercises with each of them in order to get to know the poems better and understand which of those several will be the best one for them to memorize. For example, one teacher requires the students to read through and annotate ten poems – marking the poems with literary terms such as symbolism, alliteration, motif – and then looking up any words they do not understand. Another teacher requires short "explication essays" about each of several poems under consideration. A few teachers did not provide any specifications for students other than that they had to choose one or more poems from the anthology. However, some teachers had more structured guidelines. For example, a few teachers had line minimums; one teacher prohibited Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice" (a nine-line poem with very short lines). Some teachers had a relatively low line minimum but one allowed students to earn extra credit by selecting and reciting a poem of at least twenty-four lines.

- **Poetry analysis.** Some teachers combine the "analysis" step with showing more videos – either from the POL website or found on YouTube – of people reciting poems. One teacher shows three videos of three different people reciting the same poem so that students can see how dramatically different poems can sound depending on the interpretive and performance choices that have been made by the performer. Some have students copy out their poem by hand and then illustrate or otherwise mark important words or phrases or rhythms in the poem. One teacher described taking a more biographical approach, instructing the students to look up their poet on the internet and answer some questions, such as *Who is your poet? Find their name, what does Wikipedia say about them? The years that they were [alive]? How many poems were they known for? Is this the only poem that they are known for? Were they known for doing other things? And this was just something that they did in their spare time because they didn't have phones and didn't have PlayStation. Who was this person?*

- **Poetry memorization and recitation.** Teachers used a variety of methods to help students memorize their poems and practice poetry recitation. All the teachers described spending at least some time in class having the students practice reciting their poems in pairs – often a sequence of pairs, such as instructing students to find a partner, recite poems or portions of poems to each other, then find another partner, three times over – or in front of a small group, and often, finally, in front of the whole class (but before the competition). Overall, teachers offered a wide array of strategies to support poetry understanding and recitation. Many teachers and students said how difficult it is to effectively perform a poem when one does not fully understand it or connect with it and gave examples of seeing poems performed when it was clear that the performer did not understand the poem. On the other hand, many described how incredible a performed poem can be when the performer has fully understood and internalized the poem and made it personal.

> *When performing a poem, I'm taking my experiences, and I'm merging it with the experiences that the author had, and what the author is intending to say. So it makes … It forces you into a place where you have to connect it to your own life, into your own world. You can't half do it.*
>
> *- POL student*

- **Preparation for classroom competition.** Teachers employed a number of strategies to help their students prepare for their classroom competition. A number of teachers talked about students' anxiety about performing in front of the class and different approaches they took to helping mitigate anxiety. These approaches typically involved having students do lower-threshold tasks in front of the class – everything from saying tongue-twisters and doing dance moves to reading (from a paper) part or all of their poem aloud. A couple of teachers noted that they offered to provide afterschool coaching to students who really wanted to excel (or who were struggling with anxiety about performing). Some teachers performed poems for their classes and had the students score them using the POL scoring rubric. Others had students watch videos of poems being performed and asked them to score the performance using the rubric. One teacher said, "teenagers are so critical, but forcing them to be critical with attention to a rubric" is a learning experience for them and helps them be better performers and judges.

> **Preparing Outside the Classroom**
>
> In one unusual example of classroom competition preparation, a teacher required the class to attend an open mic night at a local bookstore and participate in it, reciting the poems that they were memorizing for the classroom competition. Several students who had participated in that activity described it as "a wake-up call" (meaning they realized how much harder they needed to work on their poem in order to do well) and also how it enhanced the feeling that *"there's no weird awkward stigma because we're all the same boat together,"* thereby lowering students' performance anxiety somewhat and encouraging more class camaraderie than might otherwise be there, given that, as one student put it, *"most English is done alone, you know, by a reading light."*

4. Competitions

In general, there are four to five competitions in the POL lifecycle – classroom, school, regional (for some areas only), state, and national. For every participating school in the study sample, there were

always classroom competitions and a schoolwide competition. The study noted key similarities and variations in the way the competitions were implemented, as described below.

- **Classroom competition format.** Depending on the context and teacher preferences, classroom competitions were presented to students in a variety of ways. At one school, a teacher reframed the competition as a speech exercise where students recited their poem in front of the class. In another, the classroom competition had two rounds. The first was required for all students while the second (involving a second poem) was for extra credit. One teacher had two of their classes compete against each other.

- **Classroom competition judging.** While all classroom competitions required students to recite a poem in front of the class, a mix of approaches were used for judging the competitions. In many cases, teachers used the POL scoring rubric to score each student and awarded winner status to one, two, or three students with the highest scores. In other cases, teachers used a second score sheet for accuracy. One teacher described using the accuracy score from the rubric as the predominant method and did not use the "overall performance" indicator. However, in other cases, the teacher gave each recitation a "grade," but the class voted for the winners (typically using the POL scoring rubric). Some teachers took the class vote into account but combined it with their own assessment. In one case, a teacher recruited winners from previous years' classroom competitions to judge the current year's competition.

- **Advancing to the schoolwide competition**. Across all schools, one or more winners of the classroom competition would advance to the schoolwide competition, where they competed before judges against other classroom winners for the opportunity to go on to regionals or the state competition. Classroom winners were sometimes offered additional preparation assistance by teachers. A few teachers noted that they invited classroom winners to practice their classroom-winning poems (and second poems for the school competition) in front of the class in the days leading up to the school competition.

- **Schoolwide competition format**. School competitions typically occurred in an auditorium or other performance space on campus and included announcements about the POL competition (which is often open to parents and community members). Additionally, competition winners were sometimes featured in the school newsletter or emails. One school in the sample provided funds for the purchase of prizes for school competition winners and runners-up. Students who advanced to the schoolwide competition typically used the poem they memorized for the classroom competition and added one more poem, as the school competition requires students to recite two poems.

- **Student perspectives on the schoolwide competition**. The school competition was not typically required for winners of classroom competitions; rather, it was seen as an opportunity. A few students and teachers explained that some classroom winners declined the opportunity to compete at the school level. However, for most classroom winners, competing at the school level was part of the reward for having won the classroom competition. Some students saw the schoolwide competition as an accomplishment and an honor, with the accompanying excitement that, if they won the school competition, they would move on to compete at the regional or state level.

- **Regional and statewide competitions**. In some of the schools in the sample, there was a regional competition among the schools in a particular geographic area of the state. Regional winners advanced to the state competition. A few schools in the sample had a student from a previous school year participate in the statewide competition, one of whom won and went on to participate in the national competition. In general, there was a lot of excitement generated around these students – they were celebrated at the school level and by individual teachers offering POL.

Overall, students, teachers, and principals who were interviewed for the study highlighted the competition aspect of POL as unique in arts programming. One teacher said, of students who participated in the schoolwide competition, "they glow afterwards because it's such a good event and it's a big deal at our school, and for a poetry performance, lots of people come to watch it. They get the feel of that glow. They know they've been a part of something special."

Similarities to (and Variations on) the National Program Model

As discussed, the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation provide a guide for teachers outlining suggested ways to implement Poetry Out Loud in individual schools. The previous discussion of implementation within each of the schools in the study reveals ways in which this implementation aligned with or differed from the national guidance, as described below.

- **Teacher role and support**. The POL Teacher's Guide suggests that participating schools identify one or two teachers to coordinate POL and recruit fellow teachers to participate. Schools within the study sample mirrored this approach. In each school, one or two teachers coordinate POL – typically sending out an announcement and information about the program early in the year, to allow teachers to decide whether to participate. In some cases, the lead teacher or teachers put POL on the agenda for departmental planning meetings held early in the school year. Many teachers have already participated in previous years, so they know what to expect and are only deciding whether to participate. Teachers new to the school or who have never participated in POL before may have questions about how the program operates and lead teachers answer those questions. However, a strong teacher role did not always guarantee widespread support for POL. In a few cases, POL was not valued as highly by the school at large. One teacher noted that the district had expressed some questions about the program's value. But in most cases, POL teachers indicated that they felt well-supported by the district and the school administration. For example, at one school, the school budgeted for the POL lead teacher to receive a small stipend for coordinating the program. Thus, while schools are aligned with the teacher-driven nature of POL programming, as acknowledged in the context component of the POL logic model, support for teachers and the program varied.

- **Use of instructional materials.** The Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation encourages the use of free instructional materials made available on the POL website, noting that these materials are intended to complement and not replace other ELA content. Schools in this study used these materials, with teachers citing specific lesson plans and strategies found on the POL website. This observation implies that the instructional materials provided by the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation do support teachers in implementing POL programming in ways that deepen student engagement and analysis with poetry, as intended in the logic model.

- **Introducing students to poetry**. While participating teachers had different guidelines for selecting a poem (e.g., line minimums and number of poems), all teachers utilized the POL anthology for poem selection and most teachers showed the video performances available on the POL website and YouTube. Thus, the Arts Endowment and Poetry Foundation's intention for the anthology and videos to serve as accessibility points for student introduction to poetry is indeed occurring in the schools included in this study. Furthermore, as suggested by the Teacher's Guide, students need time to explore potential poems, either through class time or homework. Several teachers echoed this guidance and acknowledged that poetry can be intimidating for students and setting aside class time for students to explore poems at their leisure helped with the introduction process. Furthermore, as described earlier, the POL Teacher's Guide encourages teachers to model poetry recitation. While not all teachers engaged in this process, some teachers used this approach to help students think through their own recitation performance.

- **Judging the competitions**. The Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation provide scoring rubrics (both a "Contest Evaluation Sheet" and an "Accuracy Score Sheet") for judges to utilize in scoring individual performances. As described, teachers most commonly used the Contest Evaluation Sheet; however, there was variation in how much weight was put on the overall performance versus accuracy (when the Accuracy Score Sheet was used). In many ways, teachers seemed to implement the judging structure that they felt was most appropriate for their school/classroom. And, in some cases, this meant that these teachers deviated from the national suggestions.

- **Publicizing POL**. Several schools mentioned inviting parents and community members to the schoolwide competition, as well as promoting schoolwide competition winners in the newspaper. These strategies mirror the tips on publicizing POL offered in the POL Teacher's Guide. However, there was little mention of using social media or the POL hashtags.

As shown throughout this chapter, teachers implemented POL in alignment with the POL National Program Model and logic model while adapting POL guidelines and suggestions for their school and community contexts. This alignment provides a strong foundation for evaluating the impact of POL on student academic achievement and engagement, social and emotional development, and poetry appreciation, as discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 3: Findings

This chapter provides an overview of student outcomes connected with Poetry Out Loud participation in the ten study schools. The chapter is organized by the three student impact areas in the logic model: (1) academic engagement and achievement, (2) social-emotional development, and (3) poetry appreciation and engagement. Within these three impact areas, the outcomes are organized by their corresponding research question. These outcomes were assessed using both qualitative and quantitative data, including student and teacher interviews, student focus groups, student surveys, and student administrative data; findings from each of these data sources will be presented throughout the sections below, followed by a discussion of limitations regarding survey instruments, methodology, sampling, and differences between POL participants and non-participants.

While a fuller set of limitations are outlined at the end of this chapter, there is one important limitation to consider prior to reading the survey findings, which is an inherent limitation to measuring student attitudes during a single school year. The survey was administered during the fall (pre-POL) and spring (post-POL) of the 2018-2019 school year. Therefore, student responses could have been influenced by factors associated with the cadence of the school year, such as higher levels of stress associated with end-of-year testing, which would have a negative effect on post-test findings. In fact, prior research indicates that measures of social-emotional learning decline during a school year (Wang and Eccles 2012). Given that the timing of survey administration was consistent for both POL participants and non-participants, this phenomenon does not bias the results, but rather limits the research team's ability to report growth.

Academic Engagement and Achievement

The POL program provides a unique learning experience for students by combining a traditional (although often deemphasized) element of English Language Arts (ELA) – the study of poetry as a literary form – with an artistic performance component. Recognizing that the dynamic study of poetry can not only strengthen student performance in ELA, but support students in developing skills and attitudes that transcend subject matter, this section explores POL's influence on student academic engagement and achievement in ELA, in connection to other subjects, and on student engagement in school.

Does student participation in POL correlate with increased academic skills and capabilities in English Language Arts?

"Chekhov used to say, the essence of poetry is everything that's unnecessary is taken away and the essence is left. When you are able to write that way, it improves all of your writing, it improves all of your reading. And so I might be biased, but I see a direct link in how they interact with the text. The more intimate the knowledge they have with a poem, it enables them to interact with other texts with more clarity, with more understanding." –POL Teacher

While POL is typically just a small component of the ELA curriculum at study schools, survey and administrative data show a connection between POL participation and stronger grades and test scores in ELA. Interviewees provided insight into the ways in which POL strengthens specific ELA skills, including reading comprehension and analytical thinking, vocabulary development, and writing. The points below outline the connection between POL participation and student outcomes in ELA.

- **The survey of students in the study schools demonstrated a connection between POL participation and grades in English Language Arts.** In particular, participating in POL for multiple years appeared to have a compounding effect on self-reported grades in ELA. Students who participated in POL for at least two years were 1.2 times more likely to report earning straight As in English Language Arts than their non-participating peers (predicted probabilities are shown in Exhibit III).[25] Participating in POL for just one year was also associated with higher self-reported grades, but the difference is not statistically significant.[26,27]

Exhibit III: Predicted Probabilities of Reporting Straight A's in English Language Arts
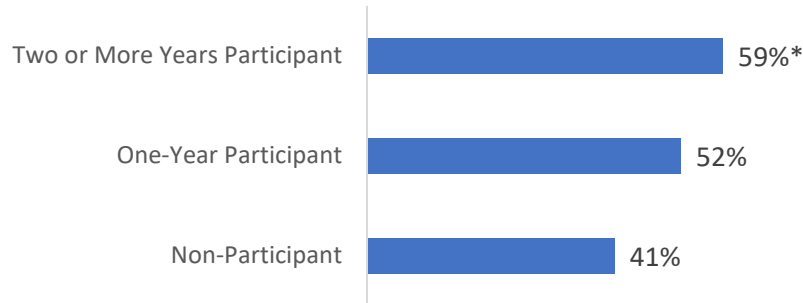
Note: This survey dimension reflects an 8-point scale of Mostly A's to Mostly D's.
* Denotes a statistically significant finding; p<=0.05
Source: Poetry Out Loud Survey

Furthermore, **students who participated in POL also performed better on their ELA standardized end-of-year assessments.** Specifically, using a propensity score matching design, findings showed that, on average, participants' percentile ranks on their respective 2018-19 ELA standardized test were 2.82 percentile points higher than if they had not participated in Poetry Out Loud. For example, if a student would have scored better than half of their peers (50th percentile) in the absence of POL, participating in POL resulted in a score in the 53rd percentile, approximately (see Exhibit V for a summary of administrative data findings and Appendix G for a detailed description of the analysis).[28] [29]

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[25] Adjusted to control for underlying differences between participants and non-participants in mother's education and enrollment in an honors ELA course; p=0.021

[26] P=0.156

[27] See Appendix F, Exhibit 1F-IV for the item and corresponding analysis asking students about self-reported straight A's in ELA and detailed results by years of participation.

[28] Percentile ranks were used for standardized tests as a way to create a common metric across different standardized tests. The rank represents the percentage of students that an individual student scored higher than (within specific schools).

[29] P=0.009

- **When asked whether studying poetry had helped improve their work in English class, students were most likely to report a greater ability to understand and analyze other works of literature.** Students and teachers explained that because of poetry's depth and density, studying its meaning was "like resistance training with analyzing." One teacher explained, "if you're critically reading and can deconstruct a rough poem, then when you're reading a textbook, I almost feel like it's just easy peasy, you know?" While interviewees agreed that poetry's complexity make it more challenging than other literary forms, at the same time it can be more accessible for deep analysis because of its short form; students can slow down and take their time and build analytical stamina. POL in particular provides students with the time needed to immerse themselves in the meaning of a single poem and analyze it from every angle. In other words, POL gives teachers and students permission to focus on depth over breadth.

  > *I think that the way that Poetry Out Loud forces them to keep looking at a single poem...is a tremendous help to attacking any piece of literature.*
  > - POL Teacher

  In addition, interviewees focused on the analytical tools they learned in their study of poetry that can be applied to other forms of literature. For many students, poetry helped them understand the elements of literary style – such as tone, mood, theme, and metaphor – more deeply, which they also utilized when reading novels, short stories, and plays. Studying poetry also seemed to have an effect on the lens with which students approach literature. For example, some students explained that because poetry was such a personal experience to the author and the reader, poetry helped them appreciate both the author's point of view and their own connection to the words in a written work more deeply. Reading in this way has helped students appreciate the nuance of language and how the same text can have multiple meanings. One student emphasized that studying poetry and participating in POL especially helped her see "how writing can be alive in your own mind" and made her "a more thoughtful person when approaching literature."

- **Students also described ways in which studying poems had expanded their vocabulary.** Students explained that poetry lends itself especially well to vocabulary development, not only because poems tend to have more unknown words than other forms, but also because each word carries more weight, so they are forced to slow down and figure out the definition of each new word. One student actually found it easier to learn new words through poems than other forms, because lines of poetry evoke stronger "feelings" in addition to traditional context clues. Another student explained that poetry brings words to life, which leads to a deeper understanding of their meaning. Particularly during the POL competition, students were motivated to have a strong understanding of the meaning of each word because it increased the chances of a compelling performance.

  > *I definitely think I learned new ways to approach reading and even writing. After having looked through hundreds of poems and hearing other people recite stuff… I'm like, "This is a really nice way they phrased this, I can incorporate that into my writing."*
  > - 11th grade student

- **Many students and teachers described how studying poetry affected their writing skills and inspired them to take new approaches to writing.** When reading poems, students are exposed

to new possibilities of how words can be used and brought together to express ideas and emotions. One teacher described how her students take more risks in their writing after interacting with poems, employing new methods to improve the flow of their writing or convey meaning. One student explained that in poetry, a common approach is to "show and not tell" (i.e. helping the reader experience the emotion of an event rather than just explaining what happened), and that their teacher has encouraged students to try this technique in their own writing.

Some students explained that reading poetry made them realize they could "write from the heart," which had helped them develop their voice and confidence as a writer. Other students had a contrasting perspective; they felt that reading poetry had caused them to become more intentional in how they structured their writing, the literary devices they employ, and their word selection, because they see the connection between these choices and the quality of written work. One student explained that poetry taught her the importance of how words *sound* when you string them together, which she wanted to incorporate into her writing.

One student summarized how he felt POL had helped his writing and his grades in English in the following way: *"I feel like even as simple as poetry may seem, it's so complex too. And all of a sudden when you learn a new style of writing, all those skills that you have from poetry, can flip right back into that style that you just learned and all of the sudden you become a master at it. And it's like, I don't remember the last time I've had a bad grade in English. Because like, all of that just integrates, I'm just writing my heart out because it's so easy for me to do that now."* – 11th grade student

Does student participation in POL correlate with increased academic skills in and connection to other subjects?

While students and teachers in the sample most frequently drew a connection between POL participation and ELA skills, many students and teachers also described ways in which engaging with the analysis and performance of poetry has influenced their skills and capabilities in other subjects.

Students described how the skills they developed through POL – including analytical skills, memorization, communication and presentation (oral and written), reading comprehension, abstract and critical thinking, creativity, and persistence – had benefitted them in other classes, as these skills applied across subject matters. Examples of how studying poetry bolstered student performance and engagement in non-ELA subjects are described below.

- **The most common connection students drew between poetry and a non-ELA subject was with history.** For some students, they recognized how their study of poetry was helping them engage more deeply and patiently with dense, primary sources in their history classes. Other students explained that reading historical poems influenced their enjoyment of and engagement with history and had helped it "click." Reading poems written in different time periods deepened their understanding of that historical context because they could better appreciate what real individuals in that setting were feeling:

    "There's a huge crossover there, I mean like it's really cool to be studying the 1860s and then come across Thoreau and Emerson. Because when you learn history, you learn the facts and you learn what the emotions that people were having were. [The teacher is] like, "Oh, like the Federalists felt this way," or whatever. But then when you read the

poetry... like there's a whole other thing to it, and that's really, really cool." - 12th grade student

- **Students saw connections between the skills they had developed through the study of poetry and their study of foreign languages.** Some students explained that they now use the memorization skills and techniques they gained through the POL competition in memorizing foreign vocabulary words. Others focused on how "decoding" the meaning of unknown words – by looking for context clues or understanding root words – was mutually-reinforced through the study of foreign language and poetry. In addition, some students have started reading poems written in their original languages, which has helped them appreciate the nuance of language in general – how the meaning of similar words can be subtly different, and the way in which they are arranged can impact meaning and emotion. One student described how reading a poem by Pablo Neruda in its original Spanish and then in English caused her to realize, "*Wow, the translation that I read really impacted the way that I received that last line*," and described the experience as both interesting and sad because it made her appreciate how much is lost in translation.

- **Several students reported that participation in POL has influenced their stage presence and performance skills in choir and theater classes.** Particularly in choir, several students explained that the lyrics in songs are poetic and having the experience of engaging with poetry deepens their engagement with the lyrics and helps them sing with more emotion. As one student explained, "*now I look at all the songs, and they're similar to poetry, so I try to analyze the songs and I actually care about the lyrics*." Similarly, in theater, students felt that participating in POL provided valuable experience performing and connecting with an audience.

- **A few students and teachers drew connections between poetry and science.** For some students, engaging in poems that focus on the beauty of the natural world increased their own appreciation of nature. This appreciation made at least one student feel more curious about "how it all works" scientifically. One teacher underscored this idea that poetry can inspire a curiosity of the world around us and a desire to engage with the physical world more deeply.

- **Survey responses also demonstrated a relationship between participation in POL and academic achievement across subjects**, as measured by students' self-report of their grades. In fact, participants were 40% more likely to report straight A's in all subjects than non-participants (predicted probabilities are shown in Exhibit IV).[30] Participating in POL for multiple years was associated with an even higher likelihood of reporting straight A's; this compounding effect was statistically significant.[31] [32]

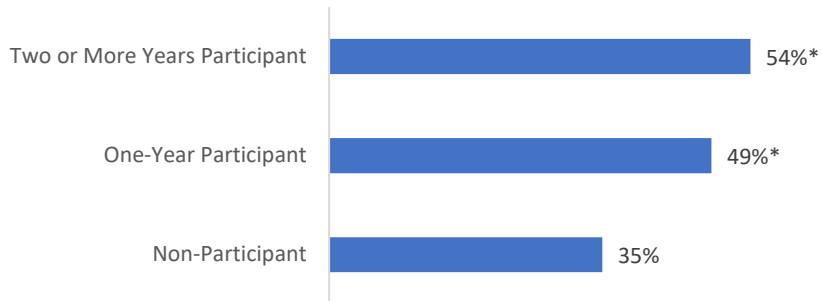[30] Controlling for mother's education; $p<0.001$

[31] $p<0.01$

[32] See Appendix F, Exhibit 1F-II for the item and corresponding analysis asking students about self-reported straight A's in all subjects and detailed results by years of participation.

Exhibit IV: Predicted Probabilities of Reporting Straight As in all Subjects

Note: This survey dimension reflects an 8-point scale of Mostly A's to Mostly D's.
* Denotes a statistically significant finding; p<=0.05
Source: Poetry Out Loud Survey

- These survey findings listed above are further corroborated by administrative student data, which show that participating in POL results in statistically significantly higher grade point averages (GPAs). Specifically, SPR's propensity score matching analysis showed that students who participated in POL experienced **a 0.13-point boost to their weighted GPA** due to their participation in POL, as shown in Exhibit V.[33]

- **While no interviewed students explicitly reported a connection between studying poetry and math, POL participation resulted in a statistically significant boost to math standardized assessment scores.** SPR's propensity score matching analysis showed that the percentile rank for students who participated in POL was 10.90 percentile points higher for their respective 2018-19 math standardized assessments due to their participation in POL, as shown in Exhibit V.[34] One possible explanation for this relationship, offered by members of the Technical Review Group, is that students are better equipped to closely and accurately read lengthy, complicated math problems after having strengthened these close reading skills through POL.[35]

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[33] P<0.001

[34] p<0.001

[35] See Appendix G, Exhibits G-VI, G-VII, and G-VIII for propensity score matching results using GPA, ELA percentile rank, and math percentile rank.

Exhibit V: Standardized Assessment and GPA Percentile Ranks for POL Participants and Non-Participants

	POL 2018-19 Participants	POL 2018-19 Non - Participants	Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT)***
2018-19 ELA Standardized Test Percentile Rank**	34.88	28.66	2.82*
2018-19 Math Standardized Test Percentile Rank	38.58	25.10	10.90*
2018-19 GPA	3.29	3.01	0.13*

* denotes statistically significant impact at 95% confidence level
**Note: Percentile ranks were used for standardized tests as a way to create a common metric across different standardized tests. The rank represents the percentage of students that an individual student scored higher than (within specific schools).
***Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT) represents the difference between what POL students achieved and what they would have achieved in the absence of POL.
Source: District administrative data, School Year (SY) 2018-2019.

Does student participation in POL correlate with increased engagement in school more generally?

In addition to strengthened academic skills and enhanced interest in certain subjects, interviews, focus groups, and survey data indicated that POL influenced students' engagement in school and future aspirations. Exhibit VI below provides a snapshot of survey findings related to engagement and shows that the effect of POL on these indicators is mostly positive, though only statistically significant on the dimension of "Behavioral Engagement in English Language Arts." Specifically, data in Exhibit VI illustrate the difference in pre/post growth between POL participants and non-participants for the following dimensions: Affective Learning,[36] Behavioral Engagement in School,[37] and Behavioral Engagement in ELA.[38] More detailed findings on these key indicators, including qualitative findings, are described below.

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[36] Affective Learning (overall) was measured using the Student Engagement in Schools Questionnaire (SESQ) instrument (see Appendix D, Exhibit D-VI); see coefficient estimates for Affective Learning as the dependent variable by participation and years of participation in Appendix F, Exhibits F-1 and F-II.

[37] Behavioral Engagement in School (overall) was measured using the Student Engagement in Schools Questionnaire (SESQ) instrument (see Appendix D, Exhibit D-VII); see coefficient estimates with Behavioral Engagement as the dependent variable by participation and years of participation in Appendix F, Exhibit F-III and F-IV.

[38] Behavioral Engagement in ELA (overall) was measured using Chicago Public Schools Five Essentials Survey of Students (CPS5) instrument (see Appendix D, Exhibit D-IX); see coefficient estimates with ELA Engagement as the dependent variable by participation and years of participation in Appendix F, Exhibits F-V and F-VI.

Exhibit VI: Average Difference in Pre/Post Survey Growth Between POL Participants and Non-Participants

	Difference between All Participants and Non-Participants	Difference between 1-year Participants and Non-Participants	Difference between 2+ years Participants and Non-Participants
Affective Learning	0.02	0.02	0.02
Behavioral Engagement in School	0.004	0.02	0.02
Behavioral Engagement in English Language Arts	0.06*	0.08*	-0.0003

* Denotes statistically significant impact at 95% confidence level

Note: These numbers represent the average difference in pre/post change between POL participants and non-participants for dimensions means on a scale of 1-5.

Source: Poetry Out Loud Survey

- **Qualitative findings indicate that for some students, POL can influence affective learning, which measures students' enjoyment and interest in learning across all subjects.** In interviews, some students explained that poetry serves as a "hook" for increased school engagement because they simply find more pleasure in it than they have in other subject areas. As one student said, "when you're doing something that you really like, it helps you power through the other stuff." The survey findings show that pre/post change for the affective learning dimension was on average .02 higher for POL participants; however, this finding was not statistically significant.[39] [40]

- **POL also appears to affect behavioral engagement, reflecting how hard students try in school.** One student explained that her enjoyment of poetry is what helped her build the mental stamina to persist in other areas: "I have such a bad focus problem, but when I do something that I enjoy, like poetry, I really stick to it and put all my brain power into it. And I use that technique in other aspects of school and life."

  Several teachers and students explained how they had witnessed POL "draw in" historically unengaged students. One teacher described how POL had revealed many "diamonds in the rough" over the years – that is, students who had the talents and skills to be successful but had been unable to find an avenue to express them in traditional academic activities – as described by a teacher's story of one state finalist:

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[39] p=0.267

[40] For analysis details, please refer to Appendix F Exhibit F-II.

"I remember my own student [Name]. He was a state finalist. But he's ... he's from [town name]. Very gang-riddled, and he's a rough-and-tumble guy and he picked a poem and the first day we recite, and it's kind of optional. There were a couple of his buddies were like go, you should go....He got up there and he recited 'I Find No Peace' and you could hear a pin drop in that room because he was perfect. He took really risky pauses and that's the one I cried. I was speechless. I didn't even know what to say. And he went on to be a finalist. He was phenomenal. Like that's kind of ... When you think about this program, we would have never seen that in any of my other assignments. It just kind of was magical...it ignited him." - POL teacher

A student from a different school also shared her experience watching POL increase engagement among her peers:

"When POL comes, I feel like a lot of students who are typically unengaged or quiet and reserved become kind of hyper-focused and it kind of draws them in. And, I feel like there's more class involvement from people that you wouldn't necessarily assume would be involved." - POL focus group student

These vignettes illustrate what the research team heard from several teachers and students: that poetry provided an academic niche for some students, which helped them build confidence and experience success within school in a way that they previously had not. Survey findings also suggest that POL had a significant influence on behavioral engagement in ELA specifically. On a measure of engagement in ELA, the difference in pre/post shows that POL participants scored on average .06 points higher on a scale of 1-5, than their non-participating peers.[41,42] For behavioral engagement overall, survey results showed that the pre/post difference between POL participants and non-participants was more or less the same (0.004) and not statistically significant.[43,44]

- **POL participants are more 1.7 times more likely than non-participants to have 4-year college or graduate school aspirations**, when asked what level of education they aspired to complete after high school (predicted probabilities are displayed in Exhibit VII).[45]

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[41] P<0.05

[42] For analysis details, please refer to Appendix F Exhibit F-VI

[43] p=0.816

[44] For analysis details, please refer to Appendix F Exhibit F-IV

[45] Controlling for mother's education; p<0.001

Exhibit VII: Predicted Probability of Having 4-Year College Aspirations

Category	Value
2 Years or More	88%*
1 Year	81%*
Non-Participant	70%

Note: The College Aspirations survey item reflects a 7-point scale of planning to complete graduate or professional school to not planning to complete high school, including undecided.
* Denotes a statistically significant finding; p<=0.05
Source: Poetry Out Loud Survey

Overall, POL appears to be positively associated with academic outcomes as measured by survey and administrative data sources. While these quantitative findings provide valuable insight into POL's contribution to academic learning, the qualitative findings allow us to uncover the *mechanisms* by which these positive outcomes operate. In particular, the close reading of a single text – prioritizing depth over breadth – provides students the space to strengthen skills like reading comprehension, analysis, and vocabulary development, while greater exposure to poetry has inspired students to take new approaches to their writing. These skills gained through the study of poetry extend to subjects beyond ELA, such as history, foreign language, performing arts, and even science and math. Students who discover a passion for poetry can draw connections between what they learn through their study of poetry and the content and skills required in their other classes. In some cases, POL can even ignite student interest in learning and engagement in school overall, particularly for historically less engaged students.

Social-Emotional Development

Adolescence is a period wherein youth, when given encouragement and opportunity, can discover their unique traits, explore new activities, develop new skills, and form interpersonal relationships. High school students often experience immense social-emotional growth in adolescence as they begin to develop their sense of self, engage more deeply with their community, and understand the world around them. This section focuses on key findings from the POL pre/post survey, interviews, and focus groups that illustrate the benefits of POL participation on students' social-emotional development. Quantitative findings from the POL pre/post survey can be found in Exhibit VIII below as well as Appendix F (see appendix posted online accompanying this report). Data in Exhibit VIII illustrate the difference in pre/post growth between POL participants and non-participants for the following

dimensions: Group Discussions,[46] Speech,[47] Public Speaking,[48] Reliance,[49] and Leadership Development.[50] Furthermore, Exhibit VIII shows differences in growth between non-participants and: (1) all POL participants; (2) POL one-year participants; and (3) POL participants with more than one year of experience.

Exhibit VIII: Key Survey Findings for Differences from Pre- to Post-Survey

	Difference in Pre/Post Growth between All Participants and Non-Participants	Difference in Pre/Post Growth between 1-Year Participants and Non-Participants	Difference in Pre/Post Growth between 2+ years Participants and Non-Participants
Group Discussions	0.07*	0.09*	0.04
Speech	0.002	0.02	-0.05
Public Speaking	0.02	0.03	0.002
Reliance	0.01	0.01	0.02
Leadership Development	-0.10	-0.14*	-0.004

* Denotes statistically significant difference between participants and non-participants at 95% confidence level.
Note: The numbers represent the average difference in pre/post change between POL participants and non-participants for dimensions means on a scale of 1-5.

Do students feel more empowered and self-confident in their public speaking abilities, intellectual abilities, or in general after participating in POL?

Opportunities to develop self-awareness and self-confidence in adolescence can be important for helping youth explore their sense of identity, determine areas for future development, and bolster their confidence to engage in new activities and be open to new experiences. Findings showed that POL

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[46] Group Discussion (overall) was measured using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) instrument (see Appendix D, Exhibit D-XV); see coefficient estimates in Appendix F, Exhibits F-IX and F-X.

[47] Speech (overall) was measured using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) instrument (see Appendix D, Exhibit D-XVI); see coefficient estimates in Appendix F, Exhibits F-XI and XII.

[48] Public Speaking (overall) was measured using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) instrument (see Appendix D, Exhibit D-XVII); see coefficient estimates in Appendix F, Exhibits F-XIII and F-XIV.

[49] Reliance (overall) was measured using the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) instrument (see Appendix D, Exhibit D-XVIII); see coefficient estimates in Appendix F, Exhibits F-XV and F-XVI.

[50] Leadership Development (overall) was measured using the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) instrument (see Appendix D, Exhibit D-XXI); see coefficient estimates in Appendix F, Exhibits F-XVII and F-XVIII.

supported students in their journey towards building self-awareness and self-confidence in the following areas:

- **Several students shared through interviews that their participation in POL helped them discover and tap into unique abilities and intelligences.** Specifically, the opportunities to engage in different skills - such as critical thinking, memorization, public speaking, and performance - in the program allowed students to explore their interests, learn new skills and strengthen existing ones, and develop the confidence to pursue their passions. While poetry is often perceived as complex and less straight forward than other forms of literature, POL helped interviewed students gain confidence with understanding poetry. And, as explained by one teacher, "when students feel confident that they have the ability to understand something and to express [themselves], it makes it easier for them to interact in classroom discussion and they make better editors of each other's work and they just feel braver, more courageous about interacting."

> *I had a student who is on an IEP [Individualized Education Program]. He really didn't think he was going to be capable of memorizing it and I was like, let's take it step by step. He gave one of the best performances and it made his day. He was like, 'I was top three.' I emailed his parents and they were just so excited because they could see the excitement when he came home too."*
> - POL teacher

While the speech domain in the survey did not yield statistically significant differences between participants and non-participants (as shown in Exhibit VIII),[51] qualitative data showed that the in-class and schoolwide competitions created space for students to develop or uncover memorization, public speaking, and performance skills. Some students spoke about how their ease of memorizing poems gave them the confidence to challenge themselves in reciting longer or more complex poems. Others shared that performing poetry helped them recognize their talent of performing for an audience, which fostered their confidence to participate again in POL and continue honing their skills. More importantly, it gave students with different strengths a "chance to shine in a way that they haven't been able to shine in other ways."

- **Through reading and studying poetry in POL, students explored emotions, thoughts, and values that helped shape their understanding of themselves as individuals.** Adolescence can be a challenging period for youth as they become more self-aware and explore different facets of their identity while also balancing the desire of acceptance among their peers and social circles

> *I think it's important to have poetry as a unit in high school, to have it focused on as much as possible because I think vulnerability and emphasis on being in touch with your emotions isn't something that's super celebrated in high school. We're almost, kind of like, pulling out our cool cards, but poetry, performing in front of your peers too, and being graded on the theme of emotion that you can convey to a group of peers is a really good skill to have and also pushes kids outside of their comfort zones in a really cool and healthy way.*
> - 12th Grade POL Student

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[51] The average difference in pre and post-test results between participant and non-participants for the speech domain was 0.002, p=0.952.

(U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2018). There is pressure to put on a façade and act a certain way to live up to social pressures in high school. POL helped break down those pressures by encouraging introspection, self-awareness, and connection through poetry. For example, the process of identifying a poem to memorize on the POL website created an opportunity for students to explore poems that they could connect with in various ways, such as emotions, points of view, cultures, and life experiences. A 12th grade POL participant shared, "There's the element of I let myself be who I am, and I think that studying poetry makes me get more experience with a bunch of different emotions, and Poetry Out Loud in particular has taught me to allow myself to feel those things and allow myself to express those things."

- While average responses did go down for both participants and non-participants (as explained in the introduction to this chapter), **survey data showed a statistically significant difference between POL participants and non-participants in confidence related to group discussions and public speaking.** Specifically, the difference between pre-test and post-test scores was on average 0.07 higher for POL participants versus non-participants for group discussion; the average responses corresponding to this finding shown in Exhibit IX.[52] Furthermore, the difference between pre-test and post-tests scores for the public speaking domain was on average 0.02 higher for POL participants, but this was not

> *I think I gained a lot of self-confidence doing [POL], because you're up there and you're exposing yourself to all these people. You're showing them the real you, and the deeper part of you, and a lot of times that's really hard, especially in high school to do that. But doing Poetry Out Loud, and when we do the competition for the school, people come who want to come. No one's required to be there, so you know that the people who are there respect you and they hear what you're saying.*
>
> - 10th Grade POL student

statistically significant (see corresponding Exhibit X). While many POL participants identified public speaking as a challenging component of the program, the in-class and schoolwide competitions created a unique and supportive space for them to overcome their fear, share aspects of themselves through poetry, and tap into their emotions in their performances to connect with others. Student interviewees explained that performing poetry helped them learn that what they have to say is important. In a student focus group, an 11th grade participant reflected:

> *"I really like the 'out loud' part of poetry because, I get it's super hard and I know a lot of people struggle with it … but I think it gives you confidence as you do it more and I think like honestly in life, there's a lot of times when you're going to have to stand up and voice your opinion or be vulnerable and say things that maybe not everybody's going to agree with or just that might be hard to say, or just express your ideas in front of people so I think starting now, in high school, to be able to get up and be in front of people and be vulnerable … and practice that and get more confidence is really helpful and beneficial."*
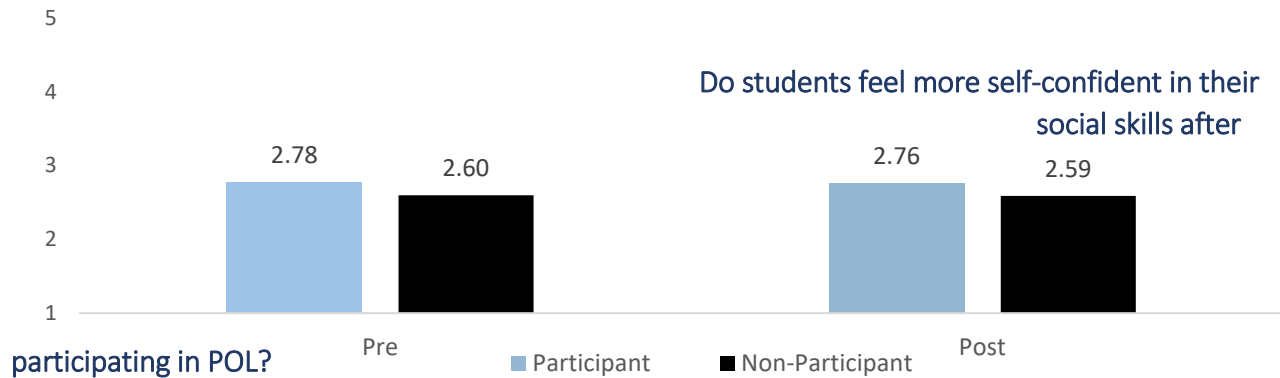
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[52] P< 0.01

Moreover, students came to understand that they had an ability to captivate the attention of people in the audience through their words, emotion, and physical presence, which helped reduce decline of their self-confidence and encouraged them to continue participating in POL beyond the current academic year.

Exhibit IX: Differences in Mean Confidence in Group Discussions at Pre/Post

3.33   3.18   3.30   3.11

Pre   ■ Participant ■ Non-Participant   Post

Note: The Confidence in **Group Discussions** survey dimension contains 4 items and reflects a scale of 1-5: (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither Disagree nor Agree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly Agree

Exhibit X: Differences in Mean Confidence in Public Speaking at Pre/Post

5

4   Do students feel more self-confident in their
                                                          social skills after
3   2.78   2.60   2.76   2.59

2

1
                Pre   ■ Participant ■ Non-Participant   Post
participating in POL?

Note: The Confidence in **Public Speaking** survey dimension contains 4 items and reflects a scale of 1-5: (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither Disagree nor Agree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly Agree

Another essential area of social-emotional development during adolescence is the strengthening of social awareness, empathy, and interpersonal connections. Understanding the feelings and perspectives of other people is important for building positive social skills and interpersonal relationships. Poetry has the potential to expose youth to the diversity in the world and to help foster a better understanding of others who are different.

- **Interviewees said POL provided a window into various types of thinking, perspectives, and lived experiences through poetry that helped bolster social awareness.** Reading and studying poetry in the program gave students the opportunity to learn about different time periods in history, cultures, experiences, and points of view that helped expand their understanding of and deepen their connection to the world that is beyond the environment that they live in. A couple of POL teachers pointed out that there has been "more diversity than there was ten years ago in the anthology" on the POL website and noted this contribution to not only expanding the view of their students but also their own. Furthermore, it also helped students connect with a broader community of people with similar experiences despite being from a different part of the world or era. One 12th grade interviewee explained:

> *We just read "Boy Breaking Glass" … it was pretty abstract and I didn't really understand what it was about at first, but then we dissected it as a class, and I mean it was essentially about racism and what it's like growing up as a black child. Through [our] classroom discussion, I just gained so many things that I wouldn't have ever even thought of … just a lot of insights. It really opens your eyes to different perspectives on life.*
>
> *- 11th Grade POL student*

> *"I think it really helps people become more in touch with how they view the world, how they view people in the world. A lot of poetry is based on social interaction, and about interactions with things or with how they see what's around them so it's eye opening because you're getting these experiences from people who lived, in many cases, in different time periods than you, in different ages, in different places … and we're also similar. Culture is very diverse, but many of the things you'll find trace back to the same place which is something that you can take, and then take that understanding and bring it into other forms of art."*

Additionally, students shared in interviews that hearing other POL participants perform different types of poems exposed them to varying interpretations and perspectives, which helped them learn to appreciate diversity.

- **In addition to strengthening students' social awareness, the POL program included opportunities for students to develop social perspective taking or empathy.** While not a large effect or statistically significant, the survey data corresponding to measures of empathy showed a slight positive change for POL participants compared with non-participating peers.

> *I think it's really powerful and [opens] your eyes to experiences you've never had and just kind of broadening your scope. So for example, [one of my] poems for the school competition was called Eulogy for Blue. It was eulogy for a dog. I've never owned a dog or experienced any of that, but I could really connect with what the author was saying and how they were talking about that experience.*
>
> *- 12th Grade POL student*

Specifically, the average change between pre and post-test for the reliance dimension was 0.01 higher for POL participants (see Exhibit VIII).[53,54] However, interview data revealed that several

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[53] The reliance dimension includes measures tied to self-awareness, empathy, and self-efficacy.

students found that reading and listening to poetry helped them think about situations from different perspectives than their own and seek emotional connection to better understand others. As one 9ᵗʰ grade student reflected, "In a documentary that we watched about poetry slam, [they followed] a poetry slam team from a high school in Chicago, which is very far from my personal life. They recited a poem that was about a drive by shooting, and I can't relate to that personally. That has never happened to me or someone that I know, but the way that they [expressed] emotion … you can relate to feeling sad or feeling angry or guilty. I feel like it definitely [gave me] more understanding and more empathy. I feel like it's a good way to relate to other people and other experiences."

Some teachers also noted instances in their classrooms where they observed students empathizing and connecting to other people's lived experiences through poetry. One teacher shared, "[There is a poem] about the coyote, the immigration one. They used the word coyote in that piece and so somebody didn't know what that meant and then the kids that had experiences with relatives crossing the border talked about personal stories about their family members that came across and didn't have water. Some coyotes were good to them and some, I guess, take their money. It was really kind of an eye-opening first-hand account from some of these kids. I think there [were] real moments that happen where there [was] some real empathy built and they [understood]."

- **Students who participated in POL connected with each other through their shared experience in the program.** This in turn helped open a line of communication between students who may not have otherwise formed connections. For example, studying poetry in class created opportunities for students to talk about the poems they selected to memorize and share what it meant to them. One POL teacher mentioned setting time aside during class for students to practice reciting their poem and purposefully pairing students together who typically do not interact to encourage communication and relationship building. In addition, the program helped teachers connect with students in a different way that helped strengthen relationships so that students feel more comfortable turning to teachers for support. One teacher described:

> *It definitely gave me a reason to like school. Not many people like high school. There are people, they like it because their friends are here but people like me, sophomore year I didn't have many friends. I only moved here. Everyone here in this small town grew up together. It's like, I moved here from far away and I don't have a lot of friends that I grew up with. I didn't have that many friends and this thing, poetry is my thing and it's like you make connections. It definitely made me really look forward to something for school.*
> *- 11ᵗʰ Grade POL student*

> *"There have been times with freshmen and seniors that, as the teacher-student relationships [has] gone, just hasn't made that connection and then all of a sudden I bring in Poetry Out Loud and then I'll go up there and I'll read a poem for them, show them some poetry, or put on a rap song for them. They suddenly see me as more than just this obstacle for a grade.*

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[54] p=0.445

They can see that I'm trying to relate with them and show them something that they could enjoy themselves and that seems to be helpful. Some of them have been able to open up and actually share their poetry with me that they've written or poems that they've liked. Then they start asking, 'Hey, can you share that spoken word YouTube video with me? I have one I think you'll really like. Can you show it [to] the class?' They get to connect in a way that they haven't before."

Are students more likely to engage in extracurricular activities and civic activities during or after participation in POL?

High school brings new opportunities for students to explore different interests. As found in the qualitative findings, POL helped introduce some students to the arts and build skills that could be applied to other activities. The following points below highlight the specific ways that POL fostered engagement in extracurricular activities and civic participation.

- Data from an individual survey question that asked about students' extracurricular involvement revealed that **POL participants were 1.6 times more likely than non-participants to participate in two or more extracurricular activities** (see Appendix F, Exhibit 1F-VII for more information on this individual survey item)[55] While many student interviewees shared that they participated in extracurricular activities *prior* to POL, for some, being in the program helped to deepen the quality of their engagement in some of those activities. For instance, one 10th grade student drew the connection between the effective communication skills she learned in POL and how she applied it to her role as a commander in the U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC). Another student noted, "Poetry Out Loud has helped me [be a part of] the school magazine, because we do a lot of critiquing of poems. The more you read, the more you know what to look for, and what can

> *Becoming a pastor means I need to increase my public speaking, which has helped me a ton, especially doing the Poetry Out Loud stuff. I preached my first sermon and it was nerve wracking but as I continued to progress with poetry, which is why I connect with this so well, because when I'm preaching a sermon, I need to be speaking truth, but also beauty.*
> — 11th Grade POL Student

be changed and things like that." Some students also explained that their participation in POL helped with being in front of an audience, public speaking, and performance in certain extracurricular activities, such as theater, choir, band, and sports. An 11th grade student shared:

"I realized that I really needed to get over my fear of being in front of people. I definitely want to start something where I would be in front of people and I joined gymnastics this past year for the school. It was something I'm new at so it's like, I'm not at the same level as other people. Similar to Poetry Out Loud, I wasn't at the same level as all the people who have had four years of experience and it's their senior year. I'm always going to be one year behind the people who I'm competing against. It definitely helped me to go put that mindset

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[55] p<0.001; controlling for mother's education and college aspirations

into gymnastics where it's like, I am not at the same level as all my peers but I can still do
this. I can get over my fear of being in front of people and competing in front of people."

Furthermore, several students also explained that they view the POL schoolwide competition itself as an extracurricular activity, especially if their teacher does not implement the program in their classroom. Student and teacher interviewees spoke about the opportunities for students to continue participating in the competition aspect of POL throughout their high school career. For example, teachers invited students from other classes to participate in their in-class competition to qualify for the schoolwide competition. One of the school sites held schoolwide auditions for the recitation and performance component to engage more students in POL.

- Responses to an individual survey item also highlighted that **students participating in POL are 1.5 times more likely than non-participants to engage in community service and volunteering compared to non-participants**; predicted probabilities are shown in Exhibit XI.[56],[57] Qualitative data on the interview did not provide clear insight on this finding, perhaps due to the difference between how the survey question and interviewees defined civic participation (see Appendix F Exhibit 1F-IX for the individual survey item analysis and Appendix B for the interview question about civic participation). While the survey looked at students' self-reported volunteering or community service participation, interviewees talked about civic participation as attending events or engaging in activities in the community, such as open mic nights. Many students mentioned that their busy schedules do not allow them to participate in community activities, but a few interviewees said that they were aware of arts-related events in their community that they would consider attending if they had more free time. Interestingly, survey data related to civic participation (Leadership Development dimension) revealed that the average difference between pre- and post-test was 0.14 lower for POL one-year participants as compared with non-participants. These survey questions (as outlined in the leadership dimension explicated in Appendix D Exhibit D-XXI) ask about students' ability to engage with community issues (e.g., ability to organize a petition or contact an elected official about a problem). This survey dimension may not be well-aligned with student contexts or how students think about or participate in civic engagement.

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[56] $p=0.5$; controlling for mother's education and college aspirations

[57] Odds-ratio estimates for participation in volunteering or community service by participation or years of participation presented in Appendix F, Exhibit 1F-IX and 1F-X

Exhibit XI: Predicted Probability of Volunteering or Doing Community Service
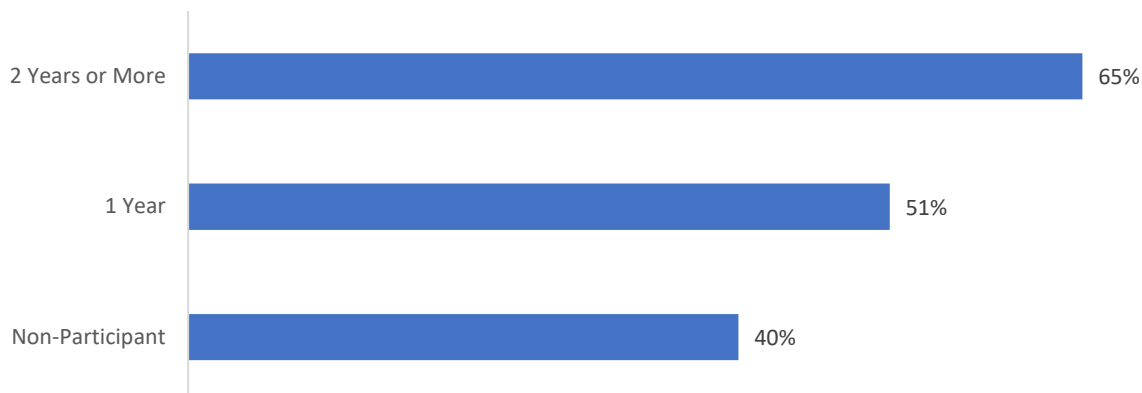
Category	Percentage
2 Years or More	65%
1 Year	51%
Non-Participant	40%

* Denotes statistically significant difference between participants and non-participants at 95% confidence level.
Note: The After-School Activities survey question is a yes/no question asking about participation in community service.

Social-emotional learning opportunities in adolescence are crucial for supporting the healthy development of youth as they transition from childhood to adulthood. Arts education programs can not only support academic success, but also create space for high school students to explore their identities, expand their worldview, and develop a sense of belonging. Findings from this study point toward POL participation as being positively associated with gains in the social-emotional development domain among participants. Reading and studying poetry provides students opportunities to explore their own emotions, values, and thoughts as they begin to establish their identities. It also allows them to learn about and better understand the diverse world beyond the communities where they live. Furthermore, poetry memorization and recitation can be an avenue for students to uncover skills that make them unique, face their fear of public speaking, and feel empowered that their voice matters. High school can be a difficult time for youth as they learn to navigate social pressures and seek a sense of belonging, but the shared experience amongst participants in the program can help build connections between students and promote deeper engagement in school.

Poetry Appreciation and Engagement

POL is a program that foregrounds student memorization and recitation of poems performed in competitions. As profiled in the Implementation chapter, in order to help students select and memorize their poems, teachers provide classroom instruction designed to help students understand poetry through close attention, discussion, and performance practice. The study hypothesized, based on a review of the existing research, that there would be a positive relationship between POL participation and poetry appreciation and engagement. Specifically, that reading and reciting poetry out loud would lead to greater enjoyment of (and therefore engagement in) poetry and literature in general, and possibly to other activities such as reading, writing, and sharing poetry for pleasure. Literature discussed in our earlier review suggests that modes of teaching poetry that draw on performance and

collaborative elements—such as, in POL's case, the frame of the competition and the shared work students do to memorize their poems and practice performing them —are likely to increase student (and teacher) engagement and appreciation (Crozer 2014, Hughes 2009, Ivey and Broaddus 2001). In this section, quantitative findings are presented from the survey and qualitative findings from the interviews and focus groups about poetry appreciation and engagement.

As discussed in the limitations section following the main findings, student interview and focus group participants were all POL participants and had been selected by teachers and thus represent only a small respondent group who were more likely to – and did – offer predominantly positive feedback. However, using the survey data, which offers a more balanced respondent base of participants and non-participants, and looking at Poetry Appreciation as an entire *domain*, the research team found that it is the only one of the three domains in which POL participants increased (in this domain, their appreciation for poetry) from pre to post while non-participants *decreased* (see Exhibit XIII).

Exhibit XII below provides a snapshot of survey findings related to two dimensions: poetry appreciation[58] and the sharing of poetry on social media;[59] individual items within the poetry appreciation dimension were also analyzed, as noted in italics in Exhibit XII. The exhibit shows that the effect of POL on these indicators is small but mostly positive, and statistically significant with more years of participation in the areas of poetry appreciation as a whole, as well as – within the poetry appreciation scale – the indicators ease of reading poetry, reading poetry in one's spare time, reciting poetry, and reporting teacher encouragement to write poetry.

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[58] Poetry Appreciation (overall) was measured using items adapted specifically for this study (see Appendix D, Exhibit D-XXIII)

[59] Poetry sharing on social media (overall) was measured using items adapted specifically for this study (see Appendix D, Exhibit D-XXV)

Exhibit XII: Key Survey Findings for Poetry Appreciation and Poetry Sharing on Social Media

	Difference in Pre/Post Growth between All Participants and Non-Participants	Difference in Pre/Post Growth between 1-Year Participants and Non-Participants	Difference in Pre/Post Growth between 2+ years Participants and Non-Participants
Poetry Appreciation	0.04	0.01	0.09[*]
Ease of Reading Poetry	0.03	-0.01	0.12*
Reading Poetry in Spare Time	0.02	0.01	0.10*
Memorizing Poetry	0.11	0.07	0.20*
Reciting Poetry	0.09*	0.04	0.18*
Writing Poetry Outside of School	-0.10	-0.04	0.01
Teacher support with understanding poetry	0.09*	0.10*	0.10
Teacher encouragement to write poetry	0.04	-0.01	0.13*
Poetry Sharing on Social Media	-0.01	-0.02	0.014

* Denotes statistically significant difference between participants and non-participants at 95% confidence level.
Note: The numbers represent the average difference in pre/post change between POL participants and non-participants for dimensions means on a scale of 1-5. The italicized phrases represent individual items, whereas bolded phrases represent dimensions.

Does POL participation correlate with attitudinal changes toward poetry?

Students who participated in interviews and focus groups, all of whom had participated in POL for at least one year and often multiple years, described a range of attitudes about poetry after having participated in POL. In order to contextualize the findings, an overview of students' pre-POL experiences with poetry, drawn from the student interviews and focus groups, is presented first.

Exhibit XIII: Poetry Appreciation Mean Scores at Pre/Post
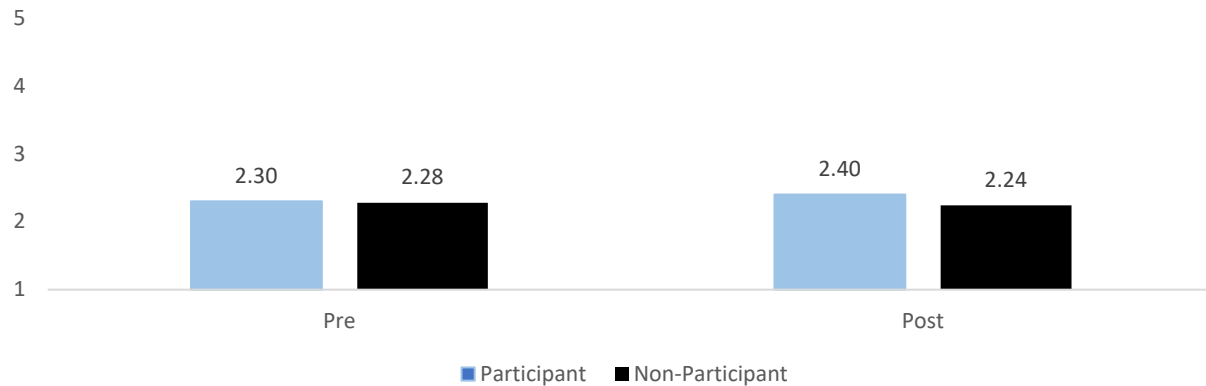
Note: The Poetry Appreciation survey dimension contains 18 items and reflects a scale of 1-5: (1) Strongly Disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither Disagree nor Agree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly Agree

Prior to participation in POL, most students had limited exposure to poetry. Many pointed to the cursory nature of previous study. Ninth and tenth graders referred to their elementary and junior high or middle school experiences, where the study of poetry tended to be more cursory or focused on one particular genre, such as haiku or limerick. Older students, eleventh and twelfth graders, had often been participating in POL since ninth or tenth grade and suggested that, in POL's absence, their English Language Arts curricula was thin on poetry, except in rare cases where an ELA class dedicated to poetry was available or in some AP classes where students had participated in a longer poetry unit in order to prepare for the AP exam. As one student put it, "We haven't really covered a lot [of poetry] since I've been here. None of my classes have done [poetry]. I feel like the closest we've gotten is to annotating a couple poems. Never really focusing on anything other than, 'What does this mean?' Really not much more. [Not] 'Why does the author put this word before this word? Why this line before that line?' It's not very in-depth in my opinion."

- **Students' appreciation for poetry in many cases grew and never declined after participating in POL.** Students expressed a variety of views about their engagement with and appreciation of poetry over time, as it relates to their participation in POL. Student responses ranged from already appreciating poetry before participating in POL and continuing to do so after; having always appreciated it but now appreciating it in new ways; and previously being ambivalent about poetry but now more appreciative. Further, almost every teacher interviewed had a story about one or more students who had a transformative experience through POL, or who was transformed in the teacher's view because of their performance. Most teachers also acknowledged that the experience of participating in POL does not typically result in a dramatic change for all students; however, several explained that POL did have benefits for all students, including that it gives all students a window into why poetry might be so difficult (as many students indicated), and how close attention to a few poems, memorization, and recitation might help them grow their analytical capacities and be more invested in working harder with difficult texts of all sorts. As one teacher put it, "I always say, *we're* hard to figure out! We can't tell what somebody's like by just looking at them. And so, you have to reread a person just like we reread poetry over and over again to get it." Teachers also pointed to the change in

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classroom dynamic after POL – that is, after the students had gone through this competitive, performance process together. Complementing earlier findings around student confidence with group discussions, teachers said classes were often more open with each other, supportive, and more likely to work together as a class through discussion and group activities after having gone through POL together.

The qualitative data is further supported by survey findings; for the Poetry Appreciation dimension, the pre/post difference between participant and non-participant attitudes toward poetry was significantly higher for POL students who had participated for at least two years.

Specifically, difference in pre/post shows that POL students with more than one year of participation scored on average 0.09 points higher on the Poetry Appreciation scale than their non-participating peers (average responses are shown in Exhibit XIII).[60] POL one-year participants were on average 0.01 points higher than non-participants; however, this difference was not statistically significant.[61]

> *[W]hen you've got 30 people in the room listening to 30 different poems [as you do with POL], I think there's an awareness of what poetry can be that has not been achieved by any English class previously. Because we tend to have the anthologized pieces of poetry and the standard questions and the multiple choice answers. And just the fact that you can hear 30 poems in a day and not have to answer a bunch of questions about them, but actually just be asked which ones you enjoyed and to write about how you connect with them. I feel like it has an opening kind of effect on students who might have been turned off in the past."*
>
> - POL teacher

- **Students who were interviewed and who participated in focus groups were not uniformly positive in their opinions about poetry.** A number were open and articulate about their frustrations with the genre or about the aspects of poetry that they found challenging. The most common frustration across the respondent group, and including input from several teachers, was that students sometimes find poetry too inaccessible. Or, as one student put it, "Ugh, I don't know if my brain can handle this." The inaccessibility can come from arcane language, from the apparent lack of a clear narrative structure, because of unusual syntax, metric or stanzaic organization, or from vocabulary that readers do not understand. A number of students reported having many experiences of being "lost" while reading a poem, of becoming frustrated or overwhelmed. However, a number of students attributed to POL a sense of breaking through the difficulty. As one student put it, "Before Poetry Out Loud, I never realized how structured [poetry] was […] I had never really known how to properly speak it. Or the rhythm and stuff like that, it was kind of all new to me…" A teacher echoed this in more direct terms, "I think that one of the things that happens [after students participate in POL], is students who really delve into [poetry] aren't afraid of poetry, it takes down that barrier."

The other aspect of POL that had a salutary effect on students' frustrations with poetry is that the POL anthology includes a wide array of poems, diverse in terms of the historical periods

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[60] P<0.01

[61] p=0.675

represented, stylistic approaches, and identities of the poets represented. For some, having access to poems that were more contemporary was a big help. As one student put it, "I do think [poetry's inaccessibility] is a bit [improved] though with more contemporary poetry. Where it is just people speaking in the language of the people instead of [in a] high class Lords in upscale London way." Other students pointed to finding poets in the anthology who wrote about experiences that they recognized – including related to racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, or gender and sexual orientation. In short, POL introduced students to a much wider array of poets and poems than they had ever had before. "That was really what made Poetry Out Loud so special," said one student, "is hearing all those different poems because we don't really get to see that anywhere else."

- **Students' strong feelings about poetry, positive and negative, indicated high engagement.** The overlap between what students liked and disliked about poetry suggests, first, the ambivalence that often accompanies serious engagement in an art form or field. Students disliked poetry because it was difficult, but they liked the experience of having worked through difficulty. One student said, "that's my biggest complaint about poetry – it can be hard to understand, but when you get it, it feels really good." It also suggests that different students were drawn to (and frustrated by) different aspects of or approaches to poetry. POL gave students an opportunity to grapple with their ambivalences and because of the multiple modes of engagement (reading, analyzing, memorizing, reciting, listening), gave students a wide variety of ways to engage. In addition, many students appreciated that poetry is open to interpretation – they found freedom in that and embraced that freedom, especially because it was often preceded by classroom experiences where they had been taught that there was "one right answer" or that the only analytical work to do with a poem was to "figure out what the author meant." After POL, especially in light of the interpretive choices they realized they could make when performing their poems for the competitions, many embraced the freedom to bring their own experiences and ideas to their interpretations. Students also liked the rhythm, music, and fluidity in the words and the structures of the poems. Their insights grew from the intensity of attention that they brought to the study of their poems in order to prepare for the POL competition and from the experience of actually reciting poems and listening to poems being recited by their classmates. Numerous students also spoke about poetry as a vehicle for communicating emotion, and that drawing on their own emotional experience allowed them to connect to poems that they were memorizing or hearing.

> *I think connecting to a poem, or even writing one of your own, is so awesome. It gives you such a really good feeling. Even if the poem has a really deep, sad meaning, it's really cool to show that to other people. And it makes you more aware of your life and the things that you don't really notice that kind of go by unnoticed.*
>
> 11th grade student

Does participating in POL correlate with students' increasing their likelihood of reading or writing poetry for pleasure?

Both the survey findings and the interviews indicated that participating in POL – especially for more than one year – is associated with a stronger likelihood of reading or writing poetry for pleasure. Though not common, students who did read and/or write for pleasure described reading and writing as ways to understand and express themselves and ideas about the world – their own ideas and experiences, and the ideas and experiences of others. In addition, some students suggested that the motivation to write

was connected to reading. One student said, "when I read poetry, I discover a lot of different structures, so writing schemes and things like that that poets use and so sometimes I'll, if I'm feeling really ambitious, [I think], 'oh I really want to do that,' so I'll work on that for a little bit and it's just kind of like a work in progress." Thus, while limited, for those students who did read and write for pleasure, students' reading and writing practices were closely interconnected.

- **Most of the students interviewed explained that they did not read poetry at all outside POL and school generally.** A few said that they did or that they had friends who wrote poetry (which they would read). Those students that read poetry often attributed the fact that they did to family members who were interested in poetry and had passed that on to the student, or memories of reading poetry as a child that had carried into the present in the form of reading habits, albeit sporadic or casual. These qualitative findings resonate with the survey findings.

When asked if students read poetry in their spare time, student responses at post-survey indicated that students largely disagree with that statement.[62] However, when looking at change in attitudes toward reading poetry in one's spare time from pre/post, the survey showed that the average change for POL students that had participated for more than one year was 0.10 higher than non-participants.[63] For students that only participated in POL for one year, the difference from pre to post was on average 0.01 higher than non-participants; however, this was not statistically significant.[64] Thus, overall, students were not strongly engaging with reading poetry in their spare time. Yet, multiple years of POL participation is associated with an increase in reading poetry in one's spare time.

> "There was this poem, […] and [the poet] used the word porpoised as a verb, as the past tense of porpoise. It wasn't grammatically sound [...] but it drew to mind, just like the movement of porpoises, doing porpoise stuff. I think he was talking about his dog. […] But I just thought that was super cool that he did that and it inspired me to incorporate some of those, like something along that line into my own work."
>
> - 12th grade student

Further, while not many students read poetry outside of school, a number of students and teachers made the connection between poetry and music, suggesting that contemporary vernacular art forms such as rap, hip-hop, pop, and country music were "poetry set to music," an insight that often came directly from the experience of students participating in POL. Thus, for these students, reading poetry became a lot like listening to music, as it involved appreciating poems as words that provided their own "music" in the form of devices such as assonance and rhythm. Several POL teachers had made this connection between poetry and music explicit when introducing and teaching POL and assigned students to create "playlists" for the poems they were memorizing or other texts the class was reading.

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[62] Average 1.68

[63] p<0.05

[64] p=0.754

- **About half of the students interviewed said that they had some experience writing poetry outside of school; the other half said that they did not have any experience writing poetry outside of school.** Of those that said they had some experience writing poetry outside of school, a few wrote frequently, but most described writing very occasionally or recalled having written poetry in the past. In one instance, focus group members described that their school had started a Slam Poetry Club; one of the members said that they were working on a group piece, writing a poem collaboratively. When asked if students wrote poetry in their spare time, student responses at post-survey indicated that students largely disagreed with that statement.[65] When looking at change in attitudes toward writing poetry in one's spare time from pre to post, the survey showed no statistically significant results in changes for POL students that had participated for one year, or for POL students that had participated for more than one year. That said, interviewed students who wrote their own poetry often attributed their writing to having participated in POL, or, in the case of those students who had been writing for years, attributed to POL changes to their writing, new ideas they tried out, and risks they took. Even when students described why they did not write their own poetry, occasionally it was connected to their exposure to reading poetry, either through school generally or specifically through POL. Some students who realize how exacting a good poem is to write suggested that having studied poetry has raised their standards. "It's not exactly my favorite activity 'cause, again, I have to sound out all the syllables, and I have to pay attention to everything," one student said.

> *"I just think that poetry is so gorgeous that I have trouble contributing myself to that, because I feel like I'm not as ... not just not as good, but like not as aware of myself. I don't know, I just feel like I can't do it justice, and I spend a lot of time reading poetry that does it justice, so I know."*
>
> - 12th grade student

Further exploration of engagement: student appreciation of poetry as unique among the language arts

As a way to think more deeply about student engagement with poetry and its relationship to POL, the research team asked students in interviews and focus groups – all of whom were POL participants – to think about what poetry is, how it differs from other language arts, and to assess its value generally and for themselves. While not explicitly about POL, these questions were asked in a setting explicitly identified with POL and to POL participants, and thus students' responses are assumed to be connected to students' experiences of poetry through POL. Findings are presented below about students' perceptions of and experiences with poetry, along with survey findings about student POL participant and non-participant attitudes toward poetry memorization and recitation.

> *"Poetry has a lot of boundaries to me, but to me it's also a box with the top part missing, like it blew off or something. There's all these limits that you have to look at, and then the top is totally gone, it can be interpreted in so many different ways, that there's no top at all, there's no end to it."*
>
> - 11th grade student

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[65] Average 1.76

- **Poetry is different from other kinds of writing.** As a way to gauge the way POL may have influenced students' engagement with and appreciation of poetry, the research team asked POL participants to talk with us about what poetry is, why it might be valuable, "how it works," and how it might be different from other kinds of language arts or writing. Students understood that poetry is different from other kinds of language and they offered a host of reasons why. One student said, "It's not straight speech," and another, "with the big words and the rhythm and the whole sound of it, it kinda curves around a bit," recalling Emily Dickinson's famous line *Tell all the truth but tell it slant* – and the next, less-remembered line, *Success in Circuit lies*.[66]

- **Poetry is more condensed than other kinds of writing.** "Simply put," said one student, "it's a lot shorter than other writing styles." Interviewed students identified (and often appreciated) one key aspect of poetry, which is that it tends to be shorter than other kinds of writing. What comes with a shorter form is also that poetry tends to be more condensed than other kinds of writing – that is, it is not just shorter because it has less information to convey, but rather because the words and the form they appear in are doing more work than something else that might be as short as a poem, such as a grocery list. As one student put it, "If you read a ten-page essay on depression versus if you read an Emily Dickinson poem that's *that* long [indicates short space with thumb and forefinger], you can get equal or greater meaning from that poem." Students had other ways of talking about this condensed quality. Some connected it to the fact that, as one student put it, "there's more emphasis on the art of the word." Most of all, as one student put it, and many students and teachers referred to, "you read it again and again and again. You get more and more from it each time."

- **Poetry is more expressive and offers more freedom than other kinds of writing; it can also produce more of an emotional response in its readers.** The POL-participating students talked about poetry's suitability for the expression of feelings and ideas, both personal and broadly shared by many people, and feelings, experiences, and ideas that are complex or difficult to articulate in ordinary language. Referring to being able to connect to poems not written by oneself, including through performance, one student said, "it's not necessarily [that] it has to be your own words. It could be words of another poet but making it your own is why poetry is such a beautiful way of releasing all the things that have been bottled up inside." Another aspect of the expressive capacity of poetry is that it can be a safe way to communicate experience. "[W]ith poetry you can express [a feeling or experience] and those who don't understand aren't gonna understand. They can't judge you for it, because they don't get what you're saying." And, implicitly, those who do "get what you're saying" – because they share personal experience or background or are likeminded – *will* understand. In addition to being a medium suitable for expressing emotions and ideas, the students also suggested that poetry is more likely to provoke an emotional response than other kinds of writing. Several suggested that poetry has a closer relationship to art forms such as dance or painting than to nonfiction or fiction writing. "It's art," said one student, ". . . it makes you feel things."

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[66] Poem #1263, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant-1263

- **Poetry is more constructed than other kinds of writing.** Simultaneous to its capacity for expression, students were aware, and attributed that awareness often to POL – to the way that poetry is constructed. That is, that poetry, perhaps more than other types of writing, relies on the deliberate arrangement of words and on the sounds made by those words – on the "flow," as one student put it. Another student said, "with poetry […] you have more to consider about how the words sound with each other and how you want it to be read, how you want to put the lines than with other types of writing like nonfiction or fiction…" Students also identified that poetry has access to a wide array of formal constraints such as meter and rhyme scheme; literary devices such as metaphor, simile, and analogy; and that the sound of the words, the rhythm, the space on the page, and the line breaks can all be as important as the topic or content. One student said, "For poetry I have to think all the time, especially [that] everything, like a period in a line, could mean something, or like a space, like double spacing could provide tension and you wouldn't see that in a book [of prose]."

- **Poetry allows for more interpretation than other kinds of writing.** Many students pointed to the open quality of poetry – that it can hold different interpretations. One student said, "[I]t's not so direct. You can take it how you want to take it. Everyone sees it differently depending on what they are going through and what they know and who you are as a person just changes the way you interpret things." Several students and teachers referred to this quality of interpretability as it emerges through the POL competition. One student described surprise and new possibilities opening up upon seeing a video of a former POL champion performing a poem that, on paper, read as a very sad poem but that the performer had completely reinterpreted, adding unexpected humor through tone, gesture, and facial expression. Several suggested that poetry *needs* readers to interpret it; that the poem alone (without any readers or interpreters) is only partially realized. Performing the poem was one way to bring the poem fully to life, through one's interpretation of it. "[T]he only way poetry works if it's read and understood," said one student. When asked if students enjoy memorizing poetry, student responses at post survey indicated that students largely disagree with that statement.[67] However, when looking at change in attitudes toward enjoying memorizing poetry from pre to post, the survey showed that the average change for POL participants was 0.11 higher than non-participants.[68] Thus, some POL participation as well as multiple years of POL participation is associated with an increase in enjoying memorizing poetry in one's spare time.

- **Poetry is meant to be read aloud and heard.** Most core to POL was the way that students had come to understand poetry as an oral and social art form – meant to be read or recited aloud and to be heard by others. One student referred to this aspect of poetry by referring to POL's full name, "[POL] really opens the doors for how you express yourself as a young person. And it allows you the option of experiencing art off the page. That's what Poetry Out Loud is all about. It's *out loud*, it's a different way of conveying emotion, whereas on the page it might seem difficult." Another student said, about participating in the competition, "It was a lot different

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[67] Average 1.88

[68] $p < 0.05$

and for the first time ever, I listened to someone read something and it actually stuck with me versus like just hearing words come at me. And it was, it was really powerful. I had a lot of fun just listening to everyone, everyone had their own twist when they got up there [to perform]…." When asked if students enjoy reciting poetry, student responses at post-survey indicated that students largely disagreed with that statement.[69] However, when looking at change in attitudes toward enjoying reciting poetry from pre-survey to post-survey, the survey showed that the average change for POL participants was 0.09 higher than non-participants, demonstrating that POL participation is associated with a slight increase in enjoying reciting poetry in one's spare time.[70]

Does POL promote the sharing of poems among students and, if so, by what means?

One of the study's research questions was whether participation in POL leads to students sharing poetry with each other, especially via social media – which, like reading and writing for pleasure – would be an indication of the integration of poetry into students' lives beyond the classroom. Both the survey and the interviews indicated that students are not doing much sharing of poetry with each other, either on social media or in general.

Neither POL participants nor non-participants reported sharing poetry via social media. From the survey, the difference between POL participant and non-participant responses to the "sharing poetry via social media" item on the social media scale was not significant.

Qualitative findings about students' use of social media as a platform for discovering or sharing poetry mirrored the survey findings. That is, students interviewed reported limited use of social media for reading poetry or sharing (posting) their own or others' poems. The majority of students interviewed did not use social media to share poems, either their own or those of other people. A few did, and of those, more posted the work of other people than their own poems. Students made distinctions about types of social media posting behavior. A few students said that they might put quotes from poems or songs in their Instagram bio, and one said that he had put a poem in an Instagram story that disappears after 24 hours, in contrast to Instagram posts, which are archived. Several students explained that they used to post their own work on social media when they were younger but no longer did.

> *Sometimes poems will pop up in my YouTube feed of some people reciting [poetry], [and] I'm gonna watch it. [But] I don't avidly look for them.*
>
> - 10th grade student

More common than sharing poetry was reading poetry posted by other people. Those that did mentioned doing so casually or in passing – reading a poem if it came across their feed rather than actively seeking it out using keyword search functions (though a few did that, either to look for poetry generally or to search for specific genres of poetry or poets with particular identities or affiliated with particular causes.) Platforms mentioned by students included Instagram (the most common), YouTube, Snapchat, Twitter, Amino, Pinterest, and Tumblr. Several students also mentioned contributing poetry to or reading online literary magazines – online magazines are not considered social media, but they are online platforms.

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[69] Average 1.95

[70] $p < 0.05$

For students who indicated that they did not post or read poetry on social media at all, their reasons were that they were not big users of social media regardless of the content, that they were not interested enough in poetry to search for it or share it on these platforms, or that poetry was more of a personal interest that they pursued in private, through writing poems in their journal, for instance. In one case, a student suggested that it was "out of fashion to post things like [poetry]," pointing to the influence of peers and perceptions of peer judgment, which a number of students referred to over the course of the interviews. Interestingly, when referring to the judgments of peers, students were often contrasting their everyday experience of high school to the experience of POL – which nearly all interview and focus group respondents reported to be supportive and non-judgmental.

Neither POL participants nor non-participants reported sharing poems with peers. Similar to the survey item about sharing poems on social media, the difference between participant and non-participant sharing of poems with peers (whatever the method) was not significant. A few students suggested that they did share poems with each other or look for poetry in other media, including through online journals, or in person through slam poetry or open mic events.

Does a teacher or a school's participation in POL correlate with greater incorporation of poetry in classroom/school instruction?

Although not the focus of the study, the research team did interview two teachers per school at each of the ten schools in the sample. Among the questions asked were whether and how POL has had an effect on them. Teachers described a number of ways that teaching POL has influenced them and their teaching.

- **POL was a way to encourage student creativity and improve analytic abilities.** Many of the teachers interviewed described poetry as a wonderful way to make space for student creativity and help them learn how to engage in a deep way with poems and with texts in general. The student survey bore this out; when looking at change in attitudes toward feeling that teachers help students understand poetry from pre/post, the survey showed that the average change for POL students that had

> *"I've always been passionate about poetry, so I think [the students] see that, but what I loved about [POL] the most […] is, even if I'm super passionate about something, I never saw the spark out of some kids. And I feel like [POL] gave them that spark."*
>
> - POL teacher

participated for more than one year was 0.09 higher than non-participants.[71] For students that only participated in POL for one year, the difference from pre to post was on average 0.10 higher than non-participants.[72] The research team also saw significance in the area of students writing their own poetry for students who had multiple years of POL participation. Specifically, the average change from pre to post between participants and non-participants for the survey item asking student if their teacher encouraged them to write poetry was .13 higher for students with more than one year of participation.[73] Although POL is not a program that

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[71] $p < 0.05$

[72] $p < 0.05$

[73] $p < 0.05$

involves student writing, the findings discussed above point to a deep interrelationship between reading and writing, perhaps further amplified through multiple years of participation in POL.

- **POL allowed teachers to connect with or learn about students in a different way.** Several teachers described POL as a program that allowed them to "see" – notice, learn about, and understand – students that they had not really connected with before POL. "One of the girls who I'm not real close to picked a [sports] poem and I know she's an athlete. […] When she got done with her poem I was like, whoa. Like she just killed it and she's kind of a weaker student. She just went up there and it gave me a different perspective of her." This aspect of POL helping make students who had previously not stood out very much – due to shyness, unremarkable academic performance, or simply because they are in a large class where teachers struggle to connect with all the students – "visible" to their teachers was a highlight for a number of the teachers. This finding mirrors what many principals and teachers said about the value of POL being in the way that it allows students to find a place and "shine" who have not previously found such a place in the school, either academically or via extracurricular activities.

- **POL allowed teachers to become more comfortable with poetry and to celebrate it as an oral art form.** Recalling when they first learned about POL and "the idea of making the performance of poetry the focal point instead of reading it," one teacher said, "I could never go back" and that "having access to this large, very curated, beautiful anthology of poetry, is just a gold mine." Another said, "For me it's like painting – and this is what Poetry Out Loud has revealed to me – poetry is like a painting, like a gesture, but it's in words and sounds. I think that's how Poetry Out Loud has changed me and my approach to teaching" – that, before POL, the study of poetry in the classroom was "very peripheral [compared to other aspects of the curriculum], very academic, dry." Similar, in fact, to the way the students responded to POL, teachers, too, felt that poetry came alive for them through POL.

- **POL offered teachers a way to contribute outside their regular teaching loads and to nurture their own creativity.** Several teachers indicated that participating in POL was a way to contribute to the culture of the school and to their students' lives in ways that go beyond the classroom. They enjoyed the sense that POL connected them to a larger community, including other students, teachers, and poets passionate about poetry. A majority of the teachers interviewed identified as being passionate about poetry – for some, that passion had motivated their participation in POL in the first place, while for others, poetry had transformed for them through participating in POL. One teacher said, "That's one thing when I was first new to Poetry Out Loud, I remember thinking, *I'm* learning ... I'm reading so many more poems than I would without being involved in this. Like, *I personally* have been exposed to so many different poets." For these teachers, in addition to seeing great benefits for their students from POL, POL represented a way to engage more deeply with poetry, and to participate in the cultural life of the school and community.

Overall, the findings point to a positive relationship between participating in POL and engagement in and appreciation of poetry. While activities such as reading and writing poetry for pleasure and sharing poetry on social media did not emerge as dominant behaviors, students nonetheless were appreciative of poetry, as indicated by a small but significant increase in appreciation among students who engaged with POL over multiple years, compared with non-POL participating peers.. In interviews and focus

groups, students were extraordinarily thoughtful about poetry as a literary art form, especially the way in which it comes alive during recitation, a core element of POL. In ways that connect to the findings about academic engagement and achievement and social-emotional development, students appreciated poetry for how it helps them understand and express their ideas and feelings about themselves and the world, a finding mirrored by teachers as they reflected about POL's influence on poetry engagement practices among students and teachers alike.

Study Limitations

When conducting a study in an observational setting (as opposed to experimental setting) that involves multiple survey dimensions and multiple sites, limitations to the data and its interpretations naturally occur. Therefore, a set of limitations and considerations for interpreting the data presented is discussed below.

- **Nature of an efficacy study.** The first consideration to keep in mind is that the findings apply to schools that have been *optimally implementing* POL and may not be representative of all schools and students that interact with the program. As discussed in the introduction, this study was designed to be an efficacy study in order to understand the impact of POL when the program is implemented optimally. Thus, given the range of implementation styles across all schools participating in POL, findings cannot be applied to the general population of participating schools.

- **Qualitative data sample.** It is also important to consider that even within optimally-implementing schools, POL affects students differently. Each student is at a unique point on the spectrum of "readiness" to engage deeply in creative self-expression. Overall, students selected for interviews had exceled in POL, while student focus groups tended to be more representative of the average students' experience. Therefore, the interview findings highlight may not be representative of all students who participate in POL, but rather provide a window into the experiences of students who were more deeply affected by their participation.

- **Quantitative methodology.** As outlined in Chapter 1, the quantitative methodology involves comparing the outcomes of POL participants and non-participants as measured by survey responses and administrative data (which includes standardized test scores and grade point averages). For both data sources, the research team used the most rigorous method available to understand POL's unique influence on these outcomes. For the survey analysis, this meant conducting a correlational analysis, which compared changes in responses between POL participants and non-participants, controlling for important background characteristics. For the administrative data, the research team was able to utilize a more rigorous quasi-experimental design (QED) and propensity-score matching to measure the effect POL had on those who participated.

- **Existing differences between POL participants and non-participants.** While the selected research methods get as close to eliminating measurable bias as possible, there were still small differences between treatment and comparison groups in background characteristics (see Appendix G). In addition, there may be important unmeasured differences between the two groups that result in a biased estimate of the true impact of POL. For example, students who did not participate in POL were assigned to a teacher that elected not to teach the curriculum.

Therefore, if choosing to teach POL is associated with higher pre-existing comfort with or enthusiasm for poetry, or greater capacity to adopt a new program, the positive outcomes among POL participants may be due in part to these pre-existing teacher characteristics.

- **Measuring student attitudes during a single school year**. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, another factor to consider is that the pre/post surveys were administered at the beginning and end of a single school year (fall and spring). Therefore, student responses could have been influenced by factors associated with the cadence of the school year, such as higher levels of stress associated with end-of-year testing, which would have a negative effect on post-test findings. In fact, prior research indicates that measures of social-emotional learning decline during a school year (Wang and Eccles 2012). Given that the timing of survey administration was consistent for both POL participants and non-participants, this phenomenon does not bias the results, but rather limits the research team's ability to report growth.

- **Interpreting *p*-values and survey dimensions.** Throughout the findings section, footnotes are included for all quantitative outcomes with the *p*-value to give the reader a sense for the significance and magnitude of the quantitative findings. The *p*-value is the probability that there is no real effect of POL on the outcome of interest. Therefore, small *p*-values (<0.05) indicate that the effect of POL on that outcome is significant. The standard deviation is also included for each dimension in Appendix F. When the standard deviation is very small, even small differences between POL participants and non-participants are substantially important. This is because the standard deviation provides a sense for how widely outcomes vary overall; if outcomes do not vary widely (e.g., the vast majority of students rate a survey item the same), then even small differences between POL participants and non-participants are substantively important.[74] Furthermore, the Survey Methodology section in the Appendix D provides detailed information for each of the survey dimension, including items, scales, and psychometric properties.

- **Measurement error in outcome variables**. Finally, student grades are included as an outcome of interest to understand how participation in POL may influence students' engagement and achievement in school generally. However, grading standards can vary by individual teachers within schools, so these estimates could also be biased if grading standards vary systematically between POL and non-POL teachers.

These limitations lend further context to SPR's interpretations of the study data. While the limitations raise important points, the study's methodology yielded rigorous and thought-provoking findings, as has been described throughout this chapter. The main findings coupled with the limitations produce a unique set of considerations for teachers and administrators, the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation, and the research community. The following chapter outlines these considerations.

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[74] Furthermore, survey results throughout the findings chapter can be interpreted in terms of effect sizes. The Standard deviations provide additional context for understanding the magnitude of effect sizes.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The primary focus of this report has been to assess the extent to which POL, when optimally implemented, can achieve positive academic, social-emotional, and poetry-specific outcomes for students. The findings confirm that, **when optimally implemented, POL programs can have a positive impact on students' academic skills and performance, social and emotional health, and poetry awareness and appreciation**. Specifically, quantitative findings showed POL's significant impact on higher standardized test scores for both ELA and math, as well as weighted GPA. Furthermore, survey findings showed significant associations between POL participation and confidence in group discussions, participation in volunteer and/or community service activities, and poetry appreciation. Qualitative findings lent greater nuance and detail to the quantitative findings by highlighting the ways in which students' POL experiences supported greater engagement in key academic subjects, a deeper understanding of one's self, and stronger connections to poetry.

However, the evaluation also yielded other findings beyond testing the outcomes explicitly stated in the POL logic model and reported in the previous chapter. Below are shared these additional findings and their implications for people and groups who seek to implement or strengthen POL programs in the future.

Other Noteworthy Findings

POL benefits that were not explicitly stated as outcomes in the POL logic model, but which emerged from data in this study, are:

- **POL can have a positive influence on school culture.** Multiple principals in the study expressed the importance, to them as school leaders, that the school engaged every single student in an extracurricular activity. One principal said, "one of my goals for the school is that every student is involved in something, whether it's a club, an activity or a sport." The principals noted that sports are often a more visible aspect of school-wide activities (i.e. activities that engage the whole school, where students engage either as participants or spectators/supporters), but that POL provides another vehicle for school-wide student engagement, which creates more avenues for self-expression and connection for more students. One school principal noted that POL participation "crosses a wide social path" across the school, "from kids that may not be super engaged in school to people who are going off to the most elite colleges in the country."

- **POL competitions can enhance school reputations and serve as a community-builder.** The research team learned from students and teachers that the competition can help build community at the classroom level, but some principals in the study shared that it can also build community at the school and local community level as well. Some principals shared that POL carries with it a certain level of cachet which they feel enhances their school's reputation, which then encourages broader support from parents and community members. At some schools, parents

> "Any time you can feature students in a venue where they get to show something they're passionate about and you get the parents in, then that's great PR for the kids. It's great PR for the parents. It's great PR for the school. And it just really adds value…"   - POL school principal

and community members not only promote the competition but they also actively participate by serving as judges. In addition, several schools in the sample invite former students, those who have won or excelled in POL in the past, to return as judges. This inclusion of school alumni into POL is another means by which several schools in the sample created stronger bonds between the school and the community.

- **POL participation can have positive effects on a range of academic subjects beyond English Language Arts.** While the research team hypothesized positive effects of POL participation on school engagement generally and academic performance in English Language Arts specifically, it was somewhat surprising to see such a positive connection between POL participation and a host of other subjects, such as math, science, and foreign language study. It was interesting to learn from students about the ways in which they have been applying the skills they learned through POL to other subjects, and to understand that they were applying these skills *intentionally*. Students often benefit academically from arts participation in ways they don't often realize (e.g. performing better in math as a result of music study). That the students in this study could specifically articulate the ways in which they intentionally apply skills they learned through POL to other subjects underscores the tangible benefits of participation that POL may wish to promote.

- **POL encourages creative risk taking**. Qualitative data from both students and teachers indicate that participation in POL encourages students to take creative risks, both in performance and in their writing. Given the findings around greater levels of confidence in public speaking and group discussions for POL students, the increased comfort in taking risks in performances is not surprising. However, reports by teachers that students were also taking more risks in their writing as a result of participation in POL were intriguing. According to these teachers, the willingness to take creative risks strengthened student writings, as students grew bolder around trying different techniques that they learned from other writers.

- **Participation in POL can help forge stronger connections between teachers and students.** In the exploration of social-emotional outcomes related to POL participation, survey questions were focused on healthy interpersonal connections between *students*. Interviews with teachers, however, revealed that POL also helped in developing stronger connections between students and *teachers*. Teachers cited a number of reasons for this, from the poetry itself serving as vehicles for connections with students, to the ways in which student performances challenged assumptions teachers had about some of their students, to a growing sense of trust across some teachers and students as a result of some teachers' willingness to also make themselves vulnerable by reciting poetry in front of the students.

- **Deep engagement with a literary text for the purposes of memorizing and reciting it is a valuable activity for high school-aged youth that supports their development as humans.** Many teachers that the research team interviewed pointed to an outcome that is broader than any of the three specific domains of inquiry in this study, though closest to the social-emotional, and that is that POL helps students become more fully developed human beings. One teacher said, "reading and interpreting poetry and reciting and bringing it to life is one of the ways that you can find nuance in life." Another, reflecting on how POL helps make students into more

participatory members of their community, said, "I think the kids are going to have an ethic of valuing poetry when they go out there or valuing the arts in general. They're more likely to go to an artistic performance in the community. I really believe that we are preparing them for a lifetime of arts, not just in a career, but just as human beings" participating in human culture.

Also, during SPR's school recruitment process, researchers learned about challenges schools faced when implementing POL. For example, some schools shared that it can be difficult to adopt or fully implement POL at their schools because fitting it into already overloaded teaching schedules feels too challenging. Administrators at schools that serve populations experiencing significant achievement gaps indicated that addressing achievement barriers and meeting the needs of their students rendered implementation of programs a low priority. Conversely, some administrators at schools with high achievement rates also shared that adopting or fully implementing POL can be difficult because the demands of testing and AP requirements seem to leave little room for "extra" programming. Given that POL has been implemented in some AP programs in this study, the challenge may be rooted in the perception of POL as "extra" or just in knowing how to integrate it well and in ways that serve the larger purpose of learning and critical thinking as well as the achievement of strong AP test scores.

Implications for Future POL Programming and Research

Through the entire course of this evaluation the researchers learned a great deal about the benefits and challenges associated with implementing and participating in POL programs. Below are considerations for POL stakeholders—schools, program funders, and researchers and evaluators.

Considerations for School Administrators and Teachers

Interviews with school administrators, teachers, and students revealed ways in which POL's ability to impact student outcomes are influenced by administrators and teachers. Key lessons learned are:

- **Creating a culture of support for POL is critical to the success of the program and its participants.** Nurturing a schoolwide culture that actively supports POL can help to ensure the success of the program. One principal described it as "part of the fabric of what we do." Multiple principals made a connection between supporting POL and cultivating a school culture that supports the arts generally, noting that being in a school that embraces the arts makes it easier to incorporate the program into their curriculum and to engage students in the program, because it makes it "less of a leap." Examples of ways in which schools can create a culture of support for POL are included in the Arts Endowment and Poetry Foundation's Teacher Guide "Publicity Tips." Furthermore, schools could include POL in orientation materials or offer small prizes for winners, fundraised through parents.

- **Teacher interest and enthusiasm is a key ingredient for successful implementation.** As mentioned previously, teacher interest and enthusiasm were the driving force behind the implementation and sustainability of POL in the sample schools. Moreover, it seems that teachers in the study who were able to devote a substantial amount of time to it and who also actively engaged with poetry were able to articulate more benefits for themselves and for their students. Specifically, teachers may want to consider spending several weeks specifically on POL and poetry as well as integrate it into their curriculum throughout the school year. Furthermore, teachers could engage with poetry through performing a poem in front of their students or bringing them to outside poetry performance venues. Having a school environment that

supports this level of engagement, as described in the previous bullet, is helpful – including providing lead teachers with a small stipend, professional development support for attending the statewide competition or arts education conferences, access to quality substitute teaching during performances, or additional planning periods to support POL coordination at school.

- **Being flexible and willing to adapt program components to meet student needs can help ensure inclusivity.** While the competition is an important aspect of the POL program, it can also be a source of anxiety or stress for some students. While learning to manage stress is an important part of healthy development, certain stresses may be too overwhelming for some students, particularly students with learning disabilities or social-emotional challenges. Being able to creatively adapt certain program requirements (e.g. having a student perform for a teacher and not for an entire class) can help the student receive the benefits of the work (e.g. memorization mastery, opportunity for creative expression, performance-related confidence, etc.) without causing undue stress or harm. Furthermore, the variety of implementation modalities presented by the schools in the study highlighted that creativity around POL programming made participation more accessible. For example, giving extra credit for reciting a longer poem, letting students not in a POL-participating class participate by joining class competitions, or making POL an after-school program. One school even set aside designated school time for students in non-POL classes to practice their POL recitation. Overall, while implementation variety may not be ideal for measuring impact, this creativity fostered greater student participation.

- **The range of teaching tools offered through POL provide useful pedagogical supports to help teachers teach poetry confidently and effectively.** Teachers often share that poetry is a difficult subject to teach—some find it so daunting that they avoid teaching it. The teachers who were interviewed named a number of resources offered through the POL website that proved useful to them in their efforts to engage students in poetry in general, to teach students how to critically analyze poetry, and to generate interpretive ideas and consider performance choices. Teaching guides and videos of past performances were cited as especially helpful, as was the robust online anthology of poems. Interviewees especially appreciated the diversity of poetry and poets represented in the anthology and encourage its continued growth and diversification.

Considerations for the Arts Endowment and Poetry Foundation

The study design and data collection process highlighted ways in which POL's funders—the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation—can augment current reporting practices to support ongoing learning and a deeper understanding of POL's influence on students, teachers, and schools. Based on these insights, the research team recommends the following funder actions, many of which are ongoing:

- **Implementing ongoing data collection systems for participating schools.** Currently, the existing data collected from POL-participating schools is not systematic or consistent. Creating a simple and targeted data collection system to track participation, implementation, and attitudes may support the Arts Endowment's and Poetry Foundation's ability to understand the scale of POL participation and make programmatic shifts in response to evolving school contexts. For example, a brief form could be sent to all participating schools asking about numbers of participating classes and students, participating grades and courses, implementation of key POL features (e.g. details about school-wide competitions, teacher use of teaching resources, etc.),

teacher comfort with teaching poetry, and open-ended response areas for teachers to express any concerns or request topical or methodological teaching resources. Also, while a slightly larger lift, the pre/post survey used for this study could be condensed to include the questions deemed essential by the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation and administered to a sample of schools every year to create a longitudinal dataset on student perceptions. These data collection efforts can provide an ongoing picture of POL's scope and influence to support ongoing program refinements so that student outcomes from POL are maximized.

- **Creating access to poetry relevant to diverse communities.** As detailed in the findings chapter, POL participants often draw upon their own experiences to engage with and perform poems. Thus, ensuring that the POL poetry anthology contains material that can reflect multiple cultural, linguistic, and racial/ethnic backgrounds is an important component for increasing POL participation and engagement. This consideration is further supported by comments from Technical Review Group members regarding teaching poetry to diverse students. The members' comments point out that not only do the poems need to reflect multiple backgrounds, but the teaching pedagogy should also be appropriate for students from different cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and racial/ethnic backgrounds.

- **Offering resources that make teaching poetry and POL appropriate for and accessible to every student**. While some teachers shared that they do find the resources offered by the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation to be helpful, there is still a perception among some teachers (as discussed earlier) that teaching poetry can feel intimidating and that poetry and POL may be "too hard" for introductory level classes. Yet the value of poetry engagement is not limited to just those with a certain perceived level of aptitude--*everyone* can benefit from it. There are a number of things the Arts Endowment and Poetry Foundation could do to reduce the level of intimidation that comes with the idea of teaching or learning poetry. First, they may want to ensure that resources include strengths-based language emphasizing that POL is for *all* students. They may also want to consider creating new teaching resources that allow teachers and students to access poetry from multiple sources and that feels accessible to those with varying poetry knowledge and comfort. For example, there could be more resources that use engaging media, perhaps through continuing to post videos of winning performances and adding a teaching element that includes thought-provoking questions for students and teachers to help identify strengths of the analytic and performance choices of the winning students. They could also augment POL teaching resources to include accommodation suggestions for students with IEP or 504 plans[75], or offering resources specifically for English language learner classrooms. Thus, as the Arts Endowment and Poetry Foundation continue to expand the pool of resources offered to teachers, these new resources could be centered on supporting teachers who may feel challenged around teaching poetry in general, and those who could use more support in teaching poetry to a wide range of students.

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[75] An IEP is an Individualized Education Plan that confirms that a student has an identified disability, as recognized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and needs specialized instruction to close the gap between the student's academic achievement and those of the student's age peers. A 504 plan is for students who have a disability but do not qualify for education services under IDEA.

- **Making the case for poetry at a national level**. Given the national shift toward No Child Left Behind and standardized assessments-based accountability, there has been a decline in the national emphasis toward teaching and performing poetry across all academic levels (Weaven and Clark 2014). Findings from this study clearly point to the value of engaging students in poetry, thus presenting an opportunity for the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation to emphasize the academic and social and emotional benefits of poetry programming. Specifically, the Arts Endowment and the Poetry Foundation may consider asking teachers to contribute videos about what they enjoy about the program and how they think students are benefitting. Demystifying poetry and its influence on student outcomes may help mitigate the decreased national emphasis on K-12 poetry engagement.

Considerations for the Research Field

This study presented an opportunity to contribute to the arts education literature through a rigorous mixed-methods approach, including a quasi-experimental design. As discussed, there are relatively few studies in the arts education context that use an impact study design. Findings from this study therefore offer a unique contribution to the field of arts education. Moreover, this study opens up other avenues of research and reveals considerations for conducting research in an arts education context. Future opportunities include:

- **Understanding impacts at different levels of implementation.** As discussed in the introduction, the schools participating in this study were included because they represented schools that were "optimally implementing" POL. However, even within the school sample there were variations in how schools implemented POL in terms of duration, participating courses, and competitions (as discussed in Chapter #2). While this study points to the ways in which schools differed in implementation, the quantitative analysis does not address how impacts may vary by different key implementation factors such as number weeks of POL programming, use of teaching resources, or competition participation requirements. These additional analyses could shed additional light on the programming intensity required to impact student outcomes and which implementation features are most critical.

- **Understanding impacts across a range of school and teacher contexts**. The efficacy study design, in addition to challenges the research team experienced in recruiting schools with more diverse populations (e.g. non-responsiveness or unwillingness to participate), yielded a school sample that primarily consisted of suburban schools with a predominantly Caucasian student population. Thus, this study points to impacts for a specific school context, leaving opportunity for future studies to explore POL impacts in contexts centered on urban or rural schools, or schools with predominantly African American or Latinx/Hispanic schools. Furthermore, the data collected in this study did not quantify teacher experience and enthusiasm for teaching poetry and link that data to student outcomes. Participating in POL may be strongly influenced by the quality of teaching. This could be explored through systematic data collection on teachers and linking that information to student outcomes. Given this study's qualitative findings regarding teacher influence and the importance of poems to connect with students' lived experiences, conducting a follow up study in a variety of school and teacher contexts would be a meaningful addition to the findings in this study.

- **Considering the burden on schools that may feel "over-researched."** While conducting school recruitment, the study team attempted to recruit a school from an urban school district with a diverse student population. This school felt unable to participate because of the other research agendas currently present at their school. Thus, future researchers in the area of arts education may want to consider the burden of data collection and research involvement asked of schools that are often targeted for research studies, as well as consider the ways in which the research could be brought back to benefit the school and surrounding community. Minimizing burden and maximizing utility for schools and communities may help recruit schools that reflect a broader range of contexts.

- **Understanding longitudinal impacts.** This study collected data focused on the 2018-19 school year, so the quantitative data was only able to speak to the impact of POL over the course of one year; however, our survey findings suggested that, for some domains, impacts may be greater with more years of POL participation. Therefore, an important follow up to this study would be to understand the longitudinal impact of POL on student outcomes. Such findings would not only add to the arts education research base, but it may also encourage more teachers to participate in POL, knowing that consistent programming holds a significant benefit for students. Possible research designs that would support understanding longitudinal impacts could include following a cohort of students from a small number of schools or following a sub-group of students such as state or national champions for two, three or more years. Such studies could continue the mixed-method approach applied in the current study or could focus more exclusively on qualitative data collection through interviews with students, exploring, for example, the extent to which POL participants continue to engage in poetry or apply the skills they learned through POL in their current contexts.

- **Developing arts education-specific measures.** Apart from the Poetry Appreciation dimension, survey questions in all other dimensions were from previously validated instruments. While these dimensions reflect psychometric validity, it can be argued that the outcomes from an arts education program such as POL represent a unique construct that cannot be pulled "off the shelf" from an existing measure. While construction and validation of a new arts education instrument was outside the scope of this study, it points to an opportunity for educators and researchers to potentially create new measures that are better aligned with anticipated outcomes of an arts education program such as Poetry Out Loud. For example, the Leadership dimension used for this study, while psychometrically valid, may not have truly reflected the civic engagement and leadership skills cultivated by arts education in general and poetry education in particular. Conducting a rigorous construct development process around arts education would yield measures that may be more useful and appropriate for studies such as this.

- **Addressing the multiple purposes of arts-based research.** The timing for this study was ideal, in that it built off of an implementation study conducted in prior years. Thus, POL was at a point of readiness to pause and reflect about what stakeholders felt was the power of POL and how they thought that participation benefitted students. A quasi-experimental design therefore aligned with the lifecycle of the program and allowed the study to provide evidence that may resonate with policymakers and decisionmakers. However, another consideration, given that POL is situated in the arts, was ensuring that this study was also able to tell the story and impact of

POL from a creative and deductive perspective. The study's qualitative data not only triangulated the quantitative findings, but it also allowed this study to address dual purposes of evaluating the arts via pre-defined outcomes and evaluating the arts for "art's sake." Future research conducted in similar contexts may want to reflect on not only the program's readiness for an impact study design, but also the purpose for the study and to what extent the design aligns with that purpose.

Parting thoughts

The findings from this evaluation point to the strong benefits of participating in the POL program and of engagement with poetry in general. While it was gratifying to see the affirmation of hypothesized outcomes through analysis of quantitative data, even more revealing and enlightening were the reflections shared by teachers and students about how poetry study and performance has affected them personally as well as academically Together, the quantitative and qualitative study results underscore the value of poetry in the lives. They reinforce the importance of poetry in high school curricula.

Promoting the power of poetry and advocating for greater inclusion of poetry into the curriculum can feel like an uphill battle, particularly given the context of schooling, wherein certain subject areas are consistently framed as more "important" or "valuable" (e.g. STEM), and "success" is too often framed and measured within such narrow parameters (i.e. high grade point averages and test scores). Yet teachers and students in the sample schools report that one of the core benefits of studying poetry is that it encourages students to approach learning in ways that are in direct contrast to the fast-paced, testing-oriented achievement culture. They spoke of the value of being able to slow down, to focus, to analyze something in-depth, and to find joy in the process of discovery. Moreover, many teachers pointed out that the value of the arts, and poetry and POL in particular, is that they open students up to the richness of experience, to their own capacity to interpret what they are seeing and experiencing in their lives, and with a growing awareness of and empathy for other people and their experiences and that, ultimately, poetry and the arts help students become "more fully human."

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