



Regina Reid observes Adrienne Bee, 13, left, and Artiee Hayes, 12, writing poetry Wednesday at Wilford L. Coffey Middle School in Detroit. Reid is an instructor and staff member for InsideOut, a nonprofit organization that places professional writers in Detroit public schools.

Photos by KIRTHMON F. DOZIER/Detroit Free Press

RHYME AND REASON

DESIREE COOPER



AS I FOLLOW Regina Reid through the spotless halls of Wilford L. Coffey Middle School on Detroit's west side, a teacher is

quietly reprimanding a seventh-grade boy in the hallway. He's looking down while she lectures, but as I pass, he looks up. His eyes are large and pleading, his expression sad and troubled.

Reid opens the door to a second-floor classroom where she's come to teach poetry. The students sit quietly, making a list of the different writing styles for their language arts teacher, Kimberly Newberry.

Suddenly, the kid who was being disciplined in the hallway comes in. Sulking, he sits in the back and plops his head on top of his notebook. I learn later that his name is Allen Jones.

Newberry ignores the interruption and hands over the class to Reid, who goes to the board and writes "metaphor," the topic of the day's lesson. She reads aloud a poem called "Separation" by W.S. Merwin: "Your absence has gone through me/Like thread through a needle/Everything I do is stitched with its color."

"I think that's about verbal abuse and racism," says Arthur Allen, latching on to the poem's reference to color.

"I think someone is gone, and they miss that person," says Jesse Edwards. "Their absence is going through them."

It's heady conversation for a room full of 13-year-olds, especially on an unseasonably warm

day when all most kids can think about is playing outside.

"What metaphor would you use to describe yourself?" challenges Reid, a prize-winning poet. "A rock? A lion? Write a poem about it."

Some kids take up their pens — they're off! Others stare wistfully at the ceiling or a blank page, waiting for inspiration. Allen Jones sits in the back of the class, chatting with his neighbor and writing nothing.

Unlocking doors with words

Reid is an instructor and staff member for InsideOut, a nonprofit organization that places professional writers in Detroit public schools. The program was started by Detroit poet Terry Blackhawk in 1995.

"Poetry is something that kids can use immediately to express themselves," says Blackhawk, a retired teacher who taught in Detroit schools for 28 years. She'd

been bringing established poets to her high school English classes. But after her retirement, she received a grant to do it full-time.

"There's something very essential about poetry that's different from other kinds of writing. You have to be aware of your word choice, unity, imagery and metaphor. It's a way to make meaning in kids' lives."

These days, InsideOut operates writing workshops in 14 Detroit high schools, five middle schools and two elementary schools. The poets teach 25 sessions between October and May. InsideOut publishes a yearly anthology for each school featuring student work. The organization also hosts workshops after school and during the summer.

"What was so powerful is that our best writers aren't always our A students," says Janis Lindsay, principal of Coffey Middle School. "Some of the most insightful writing is from those who

had the most problems in school. They have had significant event in their lives and don't know how to deal with it."

One student, says Lindsay, had lost a brother, but because the children had different last names, no one knew about the child's grief — until it came out in a poem. Another child was a constant aggressor at school. But when her poetry was published by InsideOut, the student melted. The recognition boosted her self-esteem.

That's why Lindsay has four of the \$5,000 in her budget to support the program for the last two years. Lindsay says the money has been well spent.

"Sometimes I just sit and write and write and write," says Dominique Suttles, a solid student. "It makes me feel better to write my feelings down."

When her grandmother died of a heart attack last year, this is how Dominique coped:

*Out of nowhere a tear
Rolled down my face when
I stepped closer and saw
Her big, brown eyes and long,
Black hair. I fell to my knees,
wavering*

*Like the sea, my face turning
red.*

*I couldn't move one bit, so I
melted*

*And walked away for now
Carrying her with me in my
heart,*

In my soul.

Poetry turns them inside out

On the playground, I talk to Adrienne Bee, a quiet 13-year-old who wants to be a singer. For her, poetry often comes out in the



Dominique Suttles, 12, works on a poem Wednesday at the school. "It makes me feel better to write my feelings down," she said.

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songs she makes up for her little sister. But there are days when inspiration can come from a painting during a museum visit:

*the little girl reading
time all to herself
cute and cuddly
in a garden of blooming stories
her imagination takes her to
a whole new world of interest-*

*ing
words and adventures
colorful and bright
like a dozen birthday balloons.*

Poetry, however, is the last thing on Allen's mind. He takes a break from playing football to tell me about himself.

"I got suspended on my 13th birthday. I try not to act up in school, but I just get mad. I don't feel like some teachers respect me," he says.

A rough-and-tumble kid, there's a nick in his left eyebrow and a healed burn on the back of one hand. He makes direct eye contact. "They don't see what's on the inside. I'm nice. I'm thoughtful. I'm caring."

He walks me back to his classroom, where Reid asks students to share their metaphor poems.

One child stands and reads his work:

*Unknown
I am, because no one sees me
I'm in the darkness, not know-*

*ing where
I come to be
Not being able to quite touch
the light in front of me*

*Trying to call out for my mother
As the wind blows by, no one
can see me*

I'm unknown, my father is not

there

*So I leave him alone
One day I will touch the light
But for now
I'm unknown.*

As the class applauds, Artice Hayes stands to read his poem. He's chosen a rocket as his metaphor. His poem speaks of exploring the stars, then ends with the question:

*When I'm floating in space, I
think:
What is beyond space,
What are the stars holding on
to?*

Others raise their hands to read as Reid surveys the class. "Allen, do you want to read yours?"

"I didn't finish one," he says with a shrug.

But as he leaves, I notice that he has written a poem. I ask to see it. The lines are written in perfect form, his handwriting tall and neat. As I read, I think Allen is right. Maybe his teachers really don't know him. And maybe poetry is the way he will one day come to know himself.

*I am like an egg
I'm hard on the outside
And soft on the inside.
When the egg falls, it feels like
my heart is broken by someone.
When the egg is in the pot
It feels steaming hot with my
bad temper.*

► For more information about InsideOut or how you can support its programs, call Terry Blackhawk at 313-965-5332.

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