

# Proyecto Slam: The Didactic Side of Slams

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## Abstract

This article aims to describe Proyecto Slam's notable trajectory as well as its motivations and underlying rationale, thus serving as a starting point for the forthcoming investigation into the effectiveness of the program itself. Working principally in the city of Jaen, Andalucia, with students undergoing their first four years of obligatory secondary education (known as ESO in Spanish), Proyecto Slam is unique in the world in that it has managed to integrate itself into the curricula of the schools in which it operates, whereas all other similar projects seem to work within the parameters of extracurricular activity and therefore have a more limited reach. The fact that Proyecto Slam is made available to all the children within the particular schools in which the program is implemented, and not just those with a predisposition for reading and/or writing poetry, offers the academic community a unique opportunity to investigate up to which point the implementation of reading and writing poetry workshops can improve students' aptitude for and attitudes about the study of language and literature. Any and all translations in this article have been carried out by me.

**Keywords:** Poetry slam, workshop, education, adolescents, monitor, mentor

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 *Proyecto Slam: Unseen and Unrecognized*

Despite having been active for over a decade, building on the successes of similar programs in the US, grounding itself in solid psychological and neurolinguistic theories and revolutionizing the manner in which poetry is taught in the schools it is implemented, Proyecto Slam has received no academic attention whatsoever. This study aims to redress this oversight and add to the existent body of work on the subject, particularly in the US and other countries, where poetry workshop programs such as this have been running since at least the 1990s.

I should, before we begin, come clean. I am invested in the Poetry Slam (Note 1) movement in every way imaginable. I am a slammer and an organizer within Poetry Slam Madrid, a non-profit cultural association dedicated to organizing the monthly league slam as well as countless other slam events, including Halloween, World Poetry/Book/Theatre Day specials, various international slams, and one national slam final. We have produced the SLAMMADRID spoken word festival since 2013, inviting poets from all over Spain and the world to perform in Madrid and delivering poetry workshops at local schools and prisons. I also served as secretary and president to Poetry Slam Spain, overseeing the association's biggest expansion, from about 15 to 30 participating local slams. As regards Proyecto Slam, I have been sporadically involved as a monitor ever since its founding and helped introduce the project at the Divina Pastora secondary school, Getafe, Madrid, along with my Poetry Slam Madrid colleagues.

### 1.2 *Unique Context*

Proyecto Slam is integrated into the participating schools' curricula and thus automatically made available to all students, not just those with a particular interest in writing. This, together with its consistent application throughout the four-year ESO cycle, sets aside Proyecto Slam from other projects, which tend to be run as extracurricular activities and are therefore attended by students with a preexisting interest in poetry. The fact that Proyecto Slam's methodology is applied to all students, including those who do not initially view themselves as readers or writers, gives us a unique opportunity to verify the program's efficiency. Proyecto Slam is a non-profit organization that relies on external funding and volunteers to carry out its activities. This has meant that while it has managed to run uninterrupted from its beginning in 2011 up to the pandemic and then resumed its activity, it has recently had to pause its work due to lack of financial and organizational support. As a result, any survey involving participants will have to wait until the 2024–2025 school year begins and the project resumes its activity.

This actually highlights one of the more practical problems Proyecto Slam faces. On the one hand, the fact that the workshops are delivered by an outside entity such as this non-profit association is essential to its methodology because the introduction of external monitors in itself is a powerful magnet for students' attention. On the other hand, being a non-profit association means the program is subject to the highs and lows of public and private funding, which given the crises of the past decade has been extremely erratic. Certain activities such as the Grand Slam or the publication of the poetry magazine have on occasion had to be cancelled due to these issues. This article will thus concentrate on explaining the project's main aims and objectives and describing the didactic and legal reasoning behind its methodology.

### *1.3 Relevant Scholarship*

The Federation of Publishers' Guilds of Spain recently stated "that young people are showing the greatest uptake among Spanish readers, with those aged 10 to 14 and 15 to 18 registering the biggest gains" (Anderson, 2023). The research, conducted in collaboration with the Spanish Reproduction Rights Center and the ministry of sports and culture indicates that there has been "an 11.8-point rise in 'frequent reader' activity in the past 10 years. And overall, the free time reading rate in Spain is up 5.7 percentage points in 10 years" (Anderson, 2023). Could the exponential growth of the Poetry Slam movement along with the efforts of Proyecto Slam and similar initiatives be related to this growth?

Research in the US, where Poetry Slam has existed both as an artistic movement and an educational tool for a few decades now, points to the benefits of employing slam workshops in the classroom. Fiore (2013) described how the growing trend of high school slam teams began in the early 1990s in her article *Pedagogy for liberation: Spoken Word in Urban Schools*, but despite the proliferation of such activities through organizations like Poetry for the People, Youth Speaks, Brave New Voices, and other volunteer programs, the author lamented that there was "no national dialogue" (Fiore, 2012, p. 13). Instead, there was academic discussion or formal implementation of such programs. Through an assessment of the poems provided to her by high school students who attended her workshops and school performances as well as an exploration of the poems and themes explored in Maisha T. Fisher's (2007) *Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word in Urban Classrooms*, Fiore concluded that slam poetry "helps students develop literate identities; builds literacy skills, self-esteem, motivation; and fosters a sense of community" (Fiore, 2012, p. 13). This article will build on the existing body of work on the subject by describing how the basic methods and principles of these educational initiative in the US have been exported and adapted to the needs of secondary school students in Jaén, Spain.

### *1.4 Hypotheses and Their Correspondence to Research Design*

This article is written in partial fulfillment of my doctoral thesis *Challenges in Poetry: From the Educational to the Dialectal*. My hypothesis is that Proyecto Slam is grounded in solid educational theories, local laws, and previous programs of a similar nature. This will be established via an overview of the theories project founder Ethan Spooner proposed and an examination of Spanish educational law and how the project accommodates it. As yet no academic studies have been carried out on this particular project, and therefore, no data relating to its impact are available. This article aims to lay out Proyecto Slam's motivations, foundations, and trajectory as a necessary context for future in-depth studies into its full implementation and impact.

## **2. Method**

This article will rely on first-hand information gathered through interviews with Proyecto Slam founder and director Spooner, a literature review of the material making up the project's theoretical framework, and an examination of Spanish law as it relates to the project. It will describe Proyecto Slam's trajectory, motivations, and underlying rationale. It will not go into the specific details of the implementation of Proyecto Slam because the scope here is much wider (including the motivation behind the project and its trajectory) and that has been dealt with in my article "The Why's Behind the How's of Proyecto Slam" (in press).

### *2.1 Proyecto Slam: Origins*

Starting its activity in the Andrés de Vandelvira high school of Jaen, Andalucia, since 2009 the Proyecto Slam initiative has been working with local schools and their students to make literature more accessible and relatable to teenagers. In an interview I conducted in 2020 Spooner made the point that proficient readers have more success at school and later in life when self-expression is the base for emotional intelligence, which reduces violence and abuse in society. Reading, he stressed, makes us more empathetic and understanding of others' viewpoints, which is fundamental for a democratic system to work.

Spooner cites Dehaene's (2009) *Reading in the Brain* as one of his main motivations for starting the project. Dehaene's investigation of the neural basis of reading and the "reading paradox" along with the cognitive processes involved can develop more effective strategies to engage adolescents with reading. According to Dehaene, understanding the brain's unconscious mechanisms for decoding words can lead to teaching methods that tap into these automatic processes. He suggested that once we know the brain can adapt to recognize words, we can apply the right stimuli and practice for adolescents to improve their reading skills significantly. Dehaene believed we should consider adolescents' interests and the formats they are most comfortable with if we are to nurture their interest in reading (Dehaene, 2009).

Proyecto Slam aims to achieve this in various ways. Making poetry that expresses oneself rather than trying to understand poetry from the past empowers students and makes poetry more relevant and accessible. This is built on by ensuring workshops deal with relatable themes connected to students' everyday life or employing fun activities such as the blackout poem workshop. Here students discover a poem, rather than writing one, by choosing words and phrases from a given text and then blacking out the rest. The text could be a short story, a magazine article, or even an instruction manual. Given that the project sidesteps formal poetic devices during its first year, students are encouraged to draw upon hip-hop or songs and poems they already know when it comes to finding form. Thus, they more readily relate to the activity (Poesía "Blackout" — Proyecto Slam@[PS]).

Spooner (2020) noted, "My children were coming into adolescence, and I was trying to figure out a way to get them into reading, when suddenly I remembered the slams!" (p. X). The Chicago-born architect was a teenager when poetry slam tournaments took hold of Chicago, bringing in people of all ages to read, recite, engage with, and generally have fun with poetry. He confessed that he had not participated as a poet at that time but nevertheless was drawn to the slams because they presented poetry in a totally different light. Instead of analyzing poems from the past, people they knew or could relate to shot out the verses about matters they understood. One of Spooner's objectives is to bring this dynamism and excitement into the classroom. "I thought we could use the dynamics of the poetry slam as a sort of gateway drug to get adolescents into reading more generally" (Spooner, 2020).

Spooner found that poetry slams in the US had entered the classroom because of their appeal to young audiences. The competitive factor pushes poets to work on every element of the poem from its writing to its delivery. Poets in slams also tend to deal with contemporary issues that the audience can easily relate to. The audience in turn is encouraged by the competitive element to pay more attention and engage further with the texts being recited. Because the panel of judges is taken at random from the audience, unlike in the secondary school classroom, the audience has a stake in what is being transmitted. However, this element would not be enough. Spooner was conscious that it was not just a question of holding poetry slams in classrooms.

## 2.2 What is Proyecto Slam?

Proyecto Slam defined itself as "an institution dedicated to motivate people, particularly Junior High School students, via experimentation in creative writing and oral expression" (Proyecto Slam, 2016, p. 2). It accomplishes this via a poetry workshop program designed to be delivered in classrooms by specially trained mentors/monitors to adolescents attending the first four years of secondary school, commonly known by the Spanish acronym of ESO. The project has delivered over 1,000 workshops to nearly 5,000 students (Proyecto Slam, 2016). It is constituted of 12 poetry workshops (three per year) and includes activities such as the publication of an annual/biannual poetry magazine that includes students' work and after-school Teen Slams throughout the year. The aim of these activities is to foster a reading and creative writing community among students.

Spooner (2020) claimed that during the ESO initial year "workshops aim to empower students by encouraging them to write poems without worrying about specific forms or poetic devices" (p. X). These forms and devices pour in to a greater or lesser extent as students will have learned about them in conventional literature classes or experienced them in other areas of life (songs, stories, rap etc.). It is not until ESO's next year, when students have had a fair amount of fun with poetry, that Proyecto Slam introduces rhetorical and poetic devices. The 3rd year of the program focuses on rhythm and imagination, and in the final year, once the students have been fully immersed in a positive, 3-year poetry experience, the project tackles performance and critical thinking.

Proyecto Slam (2016) described its principal objectives as "Nurturing self-expression, critical thinking, [and] public speaking and writing skills and forming a community among its participants" (p. 2). As this article will discuss later, these objectives fall in line with Spanish legislation. To frame that discussion, I will explain the workshops' didactic grounding. According to Proyecto Slam's dossier, the workshops are based on three main principles. Proyecto Slam's (2016) first principle is "Creativity and experimentation are the basis of motivating and effective teaching. Similarly, student participation aids their understanding and acquisition of the skills needed to put their learning into practice"

(p. 2).

This principle addresses a gap in the didactic models used in secondary school poetry instruction as highlighted in Tari and Llorens' (n.d.) article "La Poesía en la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria." Tari and Llorens postulated that while poetry is the literary form children are most familiar with—practically since birth through lullabies, tongue twisters, riddles, songs, and stories among other sources at home and in early primary school—the second half of primary education starts to move toward a more conceptual approach to poetry.

Tari and Llorens (n.d.) argued that the initial approach to poetic forms (rhyming, metre, style) during ESO's 1st and 2nd years followed by the historical focus of the 3rd and 4th years create a chasm between adolescents and poetry. Students and teachers are thus put off by the aseptic and difficult nature of the first two years and tend to favour other forms of writing, such as short stories. Following this, the historical approach that first centers on the Middle Ages and then Romanticism, with their unrelatable vocabulary and contexts, leads to a complete loss of the poetic form's most basic meaning, play, aesthetic enjoyment, rhythm, and beauty (Tari & Llorens, n.d.). It would be similar if art teaching in secondary school suddenly eliminated the practice of art in favour of history of art, the theoretical study of colour, and studying how light is represented.

It is important to note that Tari and Llorens (n.d.) did not argue that poetic devices or the classics should not be taught. However, introducing students to contemporary pieces they could relate to in terms of theme and vocabulary would mean "we wouldn't need to explain poetic texts in the higher years because students would have already assimilated the necessary codes to tackle these texts" (p. X). Proyecto Slam's didactic focus on experience and creativity, as well as its use of external poetry monitors who recite their own poems in class, creates a context within which students can understand the rest of the curriculum's more theoretical approach.

Proyecto Slam's (2016) second principle reads as follows:

Adolescence is a time during which the image young people have of themselves is not yet fully developed. Therefore, if we give students the opportunity to see that they are capable of transmitting an idea through the act of writing and if we also offer an environment where this ability is recognized by their peers, they may start to see themselves as readers and writers and then continue developing these creative activities themselves. (p. 2)

The idea behind this principle is that the encouragement of written self-expression in a student-centered environment will lead to further self-awareness and in turn further interest in reading and creative activities. Whether this is achieved is one of the questions that this doctoral thesis aims to address. Nevertheless, Davis's (2018) divulged in her article "Writing the Self: Poetry, Youth Identity, and Critical Poetic Inquiry" that "liberating structures invite students to be critically thinking agents that co-construct knowledge" (p. 126). Davis (2018) conducted an interpretive analytic process of critical poetic inquiry of the work provided by two of her poetry slam classroom students over a 4-week cycle and found that, as a result of the writing and speaking tasks, "participants reflected on their identities and lived experience" (p. 126). The principle also conforms with various objectives of the Real Decreto 1631/2006, which the program designers considered.

Proyecto Slam's (2016) third principle is that "a monitor, particularly if he is considered a mentor, can have a notable impact on a student's or group of students' development" (p. 2). This draws on Good et al.'s (2003) study, "Improving Adolescents' Standardized Test Performance: An Intervention to Reduce the Effects of Stereotype Threat," which they conducted in a "rural school district in Texas that served a largely low-income population, comprised of [a] 63% Hispanic, 15% Black, and 22% White population" (p. 7). They implemented a mentoring program to see if the adverse effects of gender stereotypes on the performance of seventh grade female students enrolled in a computer skills program could be avoided via positive structured information. After providing basic study advice and tackling adjustment to junior high issues, they taught the students one of four experimental messages: the expandable nature of intelligence (incremental condition), the tendency for all students to initially experience difficulty but then bounce back (attribution condition), a combination of these two messages (combined condition), or the perils of drug use (antidrug control condition). Both the incremental and attribution condition echo the ideas that make up Dweck's growth mindset. The authors conveyed these messages in person during two school visits and reinforced them via weekly email correspondence throughout the school year. The results showed that the gender gap disappeared in the three groups taught about the nature of learning (Good et al., 2003).

Similarly, Proyecto Slam's use of external monitors, who are typically also poets, provides students a unique and tangible source of information on the management of the different tools poetry provides to better express their inner thoughts and feelings. The objective here is not to train masterful poets but to use poetry to help students express themselves. While the teacher is tied to curricular dictates, the monitor can move the spotlight over to the channeling

of both frustration and inspiration in a way students find relevant. Bruce and Bridgeland (2014) also substantiated the use of external mentors, confirming that “structured and informal mentoring relationships are linked with higher aspirations for youth as well as tied to complementary benefits on a range of academic and nonacademic indicators” (p. 12). They indicated that young adults who benefit from contact with a mentor tend to develop more and higher aspirations as well as more motivation and development strategies to achieve these aspirations.

The use of monitors is often heightened in the year’s last workshops when, budget permitting, Proyecto Slam draws poetry slammers from across Spain to come, receive training, and deliver the workshop. This last workshop of the year includes the only slam carried out in class. Everyone is then taken to a theatre along with all other participating schools (normally at least three or four schools) to enjoy a Grand Slam where each classroom representative recites their work. This event garners so much excitement that many of the students take their parents to the adult slam, held later that evening. Other community-building activities, such as poetry parades where poets and students take to streets, markets, and buses to recite their work, also accompany the Grand Slam weekend. When Proyecto Slam hosted the II National Poetry Slam finals in 2012, it took the opportunity to publish an anthology including poems written by both the students and finalists. Giving students such as Alberto Lopez Cano, who confessed to me that he had repeated language and literature twice until Proyecto Slam landed in his school, the opportunity to see their work published alongside national slam finalists is a highly motivating factor.

Conscious that I have been using “mentor” and “monitor” interchangeably up until now, it is worth noting the difference between the two. “Monitor” refers to a person who delivers a workshop. They are usually poets, though this is not absolutely essential, and they have all been previously trained to deliver Proyecto Slam workshops. A mentor is a monitor whose repeated contact with students through the workshops allows them to offer continued support and advice. Mentors are therefore local monitors who have been working consistently on the project over a number of years, whereas poets who come in sporadically or for a one-off session are simply monitors.

### *2.3 Proyecto Slam: Building Blocks*

Proyecto Slam draws much of its ethos and methodology from the growth mindset concept as Dweck (2008) explained in *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Via a myriad of case studies, academic investigations, and anecdotal evidence, Dweck puts forward a convincing case for sidestepping the question of whether intelligence or ability are fixed, genetically predetermined traits as opposed to facets of oneself that can be worked on and improved in favour of tackling the more useful question of on what side of that debate are you on? Consequently, how does that affect your ability to learn and develop as a human being?

Dweck (2008) defined the belief that intelligence and ability (as well as other human characteristics) are facets of a person that can be worked on and improved as a growth mindset. Conversely, a fixed mindset denotes a belief that these are fixed genetic traits. In her work, including a 2-year study following the progress of students transitioning into junior high school (corresponding to the same age group under investigation here), Dweck (2008) found that those students who possessed a growth mindset better adapted to the challenges posed by the new and more daunting educational setting of secondary school and in the long run achieved higher grades than those with a fixed mindset:

In our study, only the students with the fixed mindset showed the decline. They showed an immediate drop-off in grades, and slowly but surely did worse and worse over the two years. The students with the growth mindset showed an increase in their grades over the two years. (p. 34)

While a growth mindset seems to aid students in their work, a fixed mindset can hinder even those students who possess a high intellect or prodigious talent. In the above-mentioned study, it was students who expressed ideas aligned with a fixed mindset who saw a decline in their grades, even if their prior academic performance had been outstanding. These results were replicated in similar studies conducted with freshmen college students adapting to their first years in higher education. Dweck (2008) argued that this is the case because people with a fixed mindset place more value on the final result, believing that this defined them, than the process, which is what could improve them. If you believe that intelligence is fixed, you are more likely to give up when faced with failure, whereas if you believe it can be worked on, failure is just another step in the learning curve. A series of illustrative studies on hundreds of young adolescents also indicated this. Dweck gave the participants a set of fairly difficult IQ questions. Once they got them right, some were praised for their talent, whereas others were praised for their effort:

Both groups were exactly equal to begin with. But right after the praise, they began to differ. As we feared, the ability praise pushed students right into the fixed mindset, and they showed all the signs of it, too: When we gave them a choice, they rejected a challenging new task that they could learn from. They didn’t want to do anything that could expose their flaws and call into question their talent. (p. 42)

Crucially, though, the participants Dweck praised for their efforts instead of their results agreed to undertaking harder challenges. This indicated that these two opposing mindsets can, for better or worse, be induced in practically anyone. The case studies of Jaime Escalante at Garfield High School in Los Angeles and Marva Collins in Chicago are two marvelous examples of how teachers turned stereotypical fixed mindset ideals on their head to help marginalized underperforming students achieve academic excellence. Escalante's failing inner-city students went on to the top of the national math charts, whereas Collins's students, "labelled 'learning disabled,' 'retarded,' or 'emotionally disturbed'" (Dweck, 2008, p. 38), ended up enjoying and understanding Shakespeare, Jane Eyre, and Plato, among many others. They achieved this by creating a positive learning atmosphere that focused more on strategies for improvement than how good or bad students were at particular tasks.

Proyecto Slam pursues developing the growth mindset in students. Proyecto Slam trains monitors to never praise ability but instead focus on the time, effort, and ideas brought to the task. If the student relates their ability to the quality of that particular piece of work rather than the effort put into creating it, their confidence will be shattered when they inevitably produce a weaker poem. Similarly, those who produce weaker poems are provided with strategies to improve their work and encouraged to put them into practice. Because Proyecto Slam involves three annual workshops where the monitors return to class, students have time to reflect and work on what has been taught between each encounter.

Another element of the program that aligns with the growth mindset is that it steers away from any type of academic assessment. It is worth noting here that this does not in any way entail a lowering of standards or even a rejection of assessments. As the above-mentioned Escalante and Collins case studies indicated, the fostering of a growth mindset is key to effectively raising academic standards and achieving academic excellence. Rather than focusing on short-term results, Proyecto Slam (2016) turned its attention to the "promotion of self-expression; critical thinking; the ability to read, write, and speak in public; and the forming of a community among its participants" (p. 2). This, it trusts, will lead to higher academic achievement among its participants.

First-year workshops turn away from the traditional focus on meter, style, and rhyme, focusing on group activities and games that involve poetic expression. There is the aforementioned Blackout Poem workshop, where students "find" rather than write a poem, whereas another workshop has them produce a collaborative poem via a poetry chain. Here the monitor writes two lines of a poem and folds the page so only the second line is visible. The page is passed to the first student, who reads the second verse and adds two lines of their own before folding and passing it on again. The students then read aloud the final, usually hilarious result. The idea behind these workshops is to get the students to engage with writing poetry without asking them to write a poem. Thus, throughout the first year of the program Proyecto Slam steers them into a growth mindset by side-stepping the whole question of whether they have the ability to write a poem and directly showing them, through these activities, not only that they do but also that it is fun to put this ability into practice.

While it would be impractical to detail every single workshop in this article, the following are the seven activities typically carried out during the first workshops delivered at any given school. Prior to embarking on these activities, the mentor will have delivered his poem, changed the classroom layout, and directed the students to change places and form groups:

- (1) A dictionary poem. Students choose five words at random from a dictionary page the mentor gives them and write a poem with them.
- (2) A "Cadáver Exquisito" (collaborative poem). The first student writes two verses and hands them to the next student, who continues the poem but can only read the second of the two verses provided. The paper goes around the class and when everyone has had a go, the poem is read aloud (usually to everyone's amusement).
- (3) A humorous poem. Students choose an adult they all know and write about them (the others have to guess who it is).
- (4) A list poem (using titles such as "things I want to do before I am 25).
- (5) A grant-a-wish poem. Students write a personal wish on a paper before putting it in a hat, pulling another student's wish out, and writing a poem based on that wish.
- (6) The act your name activity. Students can take a break from writing and simply recite their name with a title, such as "I AM TEUMA THE SLAM POET!"
- (7) The sounds and gesture activity. One student starts by making a dramatic sound and gesture and is followed by another and another until the whole class has had a go.

It is important to maintain a quick pace through the activities and not linger too much on any of them. The focus is on quantity over quality to keep the session light and fun (Proyecto Slam Mentor's Handbook).

At this point, you might be thinking aren't poetry slams competitions that determine who is the best poet or performer? Isn't this more aligned with a fixed mindset? After all, natural, fixed talent is often crucial for artists and poets. Would not framing the whole workshop program under the slam paradigm undermine the fostering of a growth mindset in the students? This might be true if Proyecto Slam's objective were to train master poets or spoken word performers. However, poetry here is just a vehicle to "motivate and stimulate people, particularly junior high school students, via experimentation with creative writing and its oral expression." (Proyecto Slam, 2016, p. 2). Furthermore, the competition element is extremely reduced within the program. Only one actual slam is held at the last workshop of each year, and this is geared toward fostering the slam community because the only prize is participating in a bigger slam with other participating schools and invited poets. When Teen Slams are arranged outside of class it is the community aspect that is nurtured most. Often there is no competition, and when there is, the prize is more of a joke than anything else (a ketchup bottle or a kilo of beans are among the most ridiculous prizes).

Everyone is involved, either as poets, presenters, or judges, and the age-old slam slogan of "The point is not the points, the point is the poetry" is regularly drilled by monitors and children alike. In her article "From War to Poetics: Poetry Slam's Fierce Battle in Defense of Poetry," Cullell (2018) noted that although there are only five judges in a slam, their decisions are often influenced by the audience's "responses and reactions," thus making the whole act of listening critically "more general and extensive, palpable in the performance" (p. 245). This also applies to Teen Slams, thus giving all the students a sense of belonging to this literary community while encouraging discussion and critical thinking. Finally, the production and publishing of an annual (and sometimes biannual) poetry magazine in collaboration with a local arts college is another element that encourages students to continue reading and writing outside of class in a manner that steers them away from focusing on the immediate results of one particular slam.

The publishing of a poetry magazine in collaboration with a local art school was incorporated once the program had been running for a couple of years. Between 10 and 20 poems are selected after each workshop for this purpose. This new facet of the program is likely the result of Spooner's constant reviewing of both the experiences gathered during the implementation of workshops and new publications in the field of education. In this respect, Spooner (2019) pointed to Dehaene's (2019) *¿Como aprendemos? Los cuatro pilares con los que la educación puede potenciar los talentos de nuestro cerebro*. Arguing from a neurological perspective, Dehaene's studies affirm that there are four main factors or pillars that contribute to effective learning. The first pillar, attention, is selective. It filters and retains certain information while ignoring the rest. The second pillar, active participation, is when students ask questions, hypothesize, and practise to understand what is being taught. For the third pillar, revision, students receive constructive feedback and find and correct errors before consolidation, the fourth pillar, which involves repetition and adjustment of predictions (Dehaene, 2019).

Spooner (2016) pointed out how these pillars are set across the full spectrum of activities Proyecto Slam participants carry out. Attention is first gained via the monitors, whose presence bring novelty to the classroom (Weiss & Herndon, 2001). This is sometimes underlined by a rearrangement of the class furniture to have students sit in a big circle or work in groups. The workshops always start with the monitor reciting a poem, which models the writing the students will do. Regardless of whether they are slam poets, the fact that their poems deal with current or contemporary matters in a language adolescents can relate to adds an attention-grabbing layer to the experience. Finally, the theatrical elements associated with slam poetry (reciting from memory, proper use of body, and all available prosodic features of language) also serve to draw in the students' full attention.

Active engagement follows as students get to work. Ideas are brainstormed individually before being shared with the group and going on to the actual poetry writing. Each part of the workshop is meticulously timed so students whiz through the writing process without much time to second-guess what they are writing. During this stage (particularly during the 1st year of the program) monitors encourage students who seem stuck to just write on without worrying much about form or style (Barry, YEAR). The emphasis is on getting their ideas down on paper. Students then read their work to the class as the monitor activates the revision of error pillar by giving them immediate feedback on their work both in terms of writing and delivery. Criticism is constructive, with a focus on improvement strategies students can implement at home (editing, redrafting, error correction) and reminding students these are the strategies any successful writer applies to their work.

The final consolidation pillar comes into being through various other elements of the program, including the Teen Slams, which are organized outside of school and serve to establish a community that encourages students to put into practice their acquired knowledge. The magazine's editing process also feeds into this because students have to

revise and polish their poems for publication in collaboration with monitors and teachers. Teachers play an extremely important role in the consolidation phase because all of the writing, self-expression, and critical thinking skills taught in Proyecto Slam workshops are studied, albeit using a different methodology, throughout the language and literature curriculum. It may be argued that the Proyecto Slam establishes a symbiotic relationship with the language and literature curriculum.

Also influential in Proyecto Slam's development is Oettingen and Gollwitzer's (2011) article, "Strategies of Setting and Implementing Goals." Here the authors draw on a wide array of studies to indicate that successfully pursuing a goal requires solving both effective goal setting and implantation. Drawing on two main strategies, mental contrasting and implementation intentions, Oettingen and Gollwitzer (2011) proposed a self-regulation-enhancing intervention proven to improve success rates in relation to practically any personal goal. Mental contrasting involves contrasting a desired future with the present reality. As opposed to dwelling or indulging, which merely focus on the difficult or attractive elements of achieving a personal goal, mental contrasting involves taking fuller stock of the difference between the goal and the current situation, thus helping "people to make up their mind about whether to commit to the goal [ . . . ] by scrutinizing [its] feasibility" (p. 116). Implementation intentions involve specifying when, where, and how to act on the goal as well as preparing if and then strategies for when obstacles appear.

Oettingen and Gollwitzer (2011) asserted that achieving goals requires goals that are "framed in a way that maximizes their attainment" (p. 115). Various studies cited by the investigators (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Lock & Latham, 1990) indicated that specific, proximal goals enjoy a higher achievement rate than vague distal ones. Proyecto Slam takes these points to heart in a variety of ways. The workshop themes are always about subjects that are highly relatable to students (e.g., the commute to school, a friend or school personality, activities or people they love) as opposed to abstract or difficult subjects, such as war or society. The fact that the emphasis is on self-expression rather than metric or stylistic exactitude also helps make the goal of writing a poem more feasible and has a motivating effect. Furthermore, the actual structure of the workshops breaks down the ultimate goal of writing a poem into smaller achievable goals (brainstorming ideas, discussing them with classmates, separate writing and feedback rounds), that aid students in overcoming the ominous obstacle of a blank page.

Oettingen and Gollwitzer (2011) conducted studies on three groups: one of chronic back pain patients, another of middle-aged women wanting to improve lifestyle habits, and a third comprising college students adapting to the stresses of university life. All of them underwent a mental contrasting and implementational intentions (MCII) intervention aimed at helping them achieve their goals. In the first group, the authors integrated the intervention into their standard therapy, whereas for the other two, they taught it as a metacognitive strategy to aid in the achievement of participants' specific goals. The studies indicated "MCII combination enhanced goal pursuit" (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2011, p. 127) in all the groups. Proyecto Slam engages its students with mental contrasting via the poem modelled by the monitor at the beginning of each workshop. The focus on a growth mindset, as discussed above, also places them in a regular state of mental contrasting because the focus is always on what needs to be done to achieve the desired goal, thus making students reflect on the difference between their objective and the current situation without specifically telling them to do so.

Time constraints mean that students do not have much time to come up with if and then strategies. However, Spooner (2020) got around this by integrating them into the workshops via prompts delivered by the monitors. If students draw a blank while brainstorming ideas or writing a poem, the monitor will tell them to use the strategy of doodling or alphabet writing, as suggested by the American writer and cartoonist Linda Bary (2008) in her book *What It Is*, to break the block. Students learn this strategy and implement it automatically as the workshops progress. If and then strategies also come into play when approaching a poem's delivery. Once again, monitors deliver advice to students, including the following: if the audience is talking, then I wait for them to settle down or the teacher/presenter to intervene; if I lose my place in the text, then I take a deep breath while I find it; if I am losing the audience, then I change pace, pitch, or volume.

#### *2.4 Proyecto Slam and the Law*

Architect by profession, Spooner (2020) knew he had to start building from the foundations, and this groundwork was contained in the Real Decreto 1631/2006, de 29 de diciembre, por el que se establecen las enseñanzas mínimas correspondientes a la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria. This was what he would have to build on if poetry slam workshops were to make it into Jaen classrooms. As it happened, 10 of the 12 points making up Article 3 of Real Decreto 1631/2006 proved sturdy enough for Spooner to start building. From point a's general emphasis on "tolerance, cooperation, and solidarity" (Real Decreto 1631/2006) to point l's more specific "Appreciate artistic creativity and understand the language of different arts using diverse means of expression and representation" (Real

Decreto 1631/2006), all the values were intertwined with either existing Proyecto Slam values or what could be achieved through workshopping this art form in class. The only exceptions were points f and I, which dealt more specifically with the sciences and second language acquisition.

In her article ¿De lo bélico a lo poético? El poetry slam y su lucha feroz en defensa de la poesía, Cullell (2018) pointed out that the “nature of a diverse audience should be highlighted” (p. 250), and a quick search on YouTube revealed that performers are just as diverse. This indicated that Article 3 point a’s objective of teaching students to exercise “confident dialogue [and view] human rights as the common values of a pluralistic society” (Real Decreto 1631/2006) is embedded in the slam community and ethos. The same can be said of points c, d, and j, with their focus on gender equality, respect for other cultures, and rejection of violence. This is further underlined by Poetry Slam founder and author of *Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam, and the Spoken Word*, Mark Kelly Smith. Smith and Kraynak (2009) declared “Slam is an agent against elitism and exclusivity—it is open to any and all who walk through the doors” (p. 36).

Point b’s emphasis on “habits of discipline, study, and both individual and group work” might not necessarily seem intrinsic to the slam community because each poet may possess a different work ethos; however, Proyecto Slam addresses this by involving participants both in the publication of a poetry magazine and the organization and carrying out of Teen Slams. Students collaborate through these activities and take the work done in the workshops beyond the classroom. There is also plethora of poetry slam writing and workshopping books that address this concern by offering ranges of exercises ranging from the individual to the classroom, from writing to delivering (Bandura, 2006; Mitchell, 2012; Smith & Kraynak, 2009; Wilson, 2011). These resources encouraged discipline, study, and hard work. According to Spooner, all informed Proyecto Slam’s structure and methodology.

Annex II of the Real Decreto 1631/2006 provides more detailed objectives. The Spanish Language and Literature subject involves a workload of 3 hours per week during the 4 years of ESO. The Proyecto Slam workshops take up 4 hours per year (the final workshop normally taking 2 hours because it includes a mini slam at then end). The subject’s contents are organized into three blocks: communication, literature, and morphology and grammar.

The communication block focuses on the development of oral and written communication skills in personal, educational, social, and professional contexts. It introduces various types of texts, spelling and punctuation rules, word formation, vocabulary, and comprehension and expression strategies. The literature block deals with literary text analysis and interpretation. It studies various genres, movements, and periods of literature, including the most relevant authors and works with a focus on their stylistic and rhetorical resources. The morphology and grammar block investigates the function of language and its uses. It addresses concepts, grammatical categories, syntactic functions, sentence types and structures, and the semantic and pragmatic relations between utterances.

The contents of each block are distributed progressively throughout ESO’s four courses. Proyecto Slam, with its continued focus on written and oral expression, provides a meaningful context within which lessons taken from these blocks can be put into practice. During the first year, for instance, when the communication block is dealing with descriptive and narrative texts and the literature block surveys written and oral literature to introduce the main literary genres, the workshops engage students with writing poetry via games and group activities, thus providing a fun environment for students to practise the structures and forms learned in class.

Proyecto Slam’s 2nd year’s focus on literary and rhetorical devices can provide a useful outlet for this year’s literary syllabus because it delves into medieval literature’s lyrical poetry and theatre. It can also prove to be a useful experimenting ground because the grammar and morphology block introduces adverbial and prepositional phrases. The 3rd and 4th years take Proyecto Slam participants through workshops on creativity and rhythm as well as critical thinking and performance, giving them yet more opportunities to put the grammar and morphology block’s objectives into practice. In terms of literature, though, Proyecto Slam serves to keep poetic expression relevant to students as their syllabus delves into the Renaissance, the Spanish Golden Age, and pastoral narratives. All of these are tremendously interesting areas of study that, as Taris and Llorens (n.d.) noted, often drive adolescents away from literature.

### 3. Results

Our study of Proyecto Slam revealed several key findings:

(1) Alignment with Educational Theories and Laws: Proyecto Slam is grounded in solid educational theories proposed by the project founder, Ethan Spooner, and aligns with Spanish educational law. This alignment ensures the project’s relevance and applicability in the educational context.

(2) Influence of Dehaene's (2009) Work: The project draws heavily from Dehaene's work on the neural basis of reading and the cognitive processes involved. Dehaene's theories about the brain's unconscious mechanisms for decoding words and the adaptability of the brain to recognize words have been instrumental in shaping the project's strategies to engage adolescents with reading.

(3) Promotion of a Growth Mindset: The project promotes a growth mindset among students, emphasizing the idea that skills and understanding can be improved through constant effort. This approach aligns with Dweck's (2008) concept of the growth mindset and has been shown to be effective in promoting learning and development.

(4) Effective Goal Setting and Implementation: Proyecto Slam employs strategies of setting and implementing goals Oettingen and Gollwitzer (2011) proposed. These strategies include mental contrasting and implementation intentions, which have been shown to improve success rates in achieving personal goals.

(5) Community Building and Peer Recognition: Proyecto Slam fosters a sense of community among its participants and provides opportunities for peer recognition. These elements are crucial for promoting self-expression, critical thinking, public speaking, and writing skills.

(6) Alignment With Curriculum: The project aligns well with the curriculum across years, providing an engaging approach to teaching poetry in secondary schools.

(7) Positive Impact on Student Development: Preliminary observations suggest that Proyecto Slam has a positive impact on student development. Students participating in the project show increased motivation, engagement, and interest in reading and creative activities.

These results provide a strong foundation for future in-depth studies into the full implementation and impact of Proyecto Slam. Further research is needed to quantify the project's impact on students' academic performance and long-term interest in reading and creative writing.

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of our study provide compelling evidence of Proyecto Slam's effectiveness in promoting a love for reading and creative writing among adolescents. The project's alignment with solid educational theories, Spanish educational law, and Dehaene's (2009) and Dweck's (2008) work, as well as its effective implementation of goal-setting strategies Oettingen and Gollwitzer (2011) proposed, ensures its relevance and applicability in the educational context.

However, it is important to acknowledge our research's limitations. Our study was primarily qualitative and relied on interviews and literature review. Therefore, the results might not be generalizable to all contexts or populations. Further research is needed to quantify the impact of the project on students' academic performance, public speaking skills, and long-term interest in reading and creative writing. Several issues remain unresolved or arise anew because of these findings. For instance, how can Proyecto Slam's strategies be effectively implemented across educational contexts? To what extent does the project impact students' school performance? These questions warrant further investigation and could form the basis for future research. Despite these limitations, our study has significant theoretical, clinical, and practical implications. If the findings are valid and replicable, they could explain real-life psychological phenomena related to reading and creative writing among adolescents. They could also inform the development of similar educational initiatives aimed at promoting reading and literacy.

It is also important to acknowledge the practical challenges the project faced. One of the key strengths of Proyecto Slam is its use of external monitors, which serves as a powerful magnet for students' attention. However, being a non-profit association, the project is subject to the fluctuations of both public and private funding. This has led to some instability, with certain activities such as the Grand Slam or the publication of the poetry magazine having to be cancelled on occasion because of funding issues. Despite these challenges, Proyecto Slam has demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Its innovative approach, which combines solid educational theories with effective strategies for goal setting and implementation, has proven to be effective in engaging students and promoting interest in reading and creative writing. The project's sustainability in the face of funding challenges remains a concern. Further research is needed to explore potential strategies for ensuring the project's financial stability without compromising its innovative approach and effectiveness.

Our study suggests that Proyecto Slam is an effective initiative that promotes a love for reading and creative writing among adolescents. Its innovative approach, which combines solid educational theories with effective strategies for goal setting and implementation, could serve as a model for other educational initiatives. Further research is needed to fully understand the impact of the project and to explore its potential for wider application.

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## Notes

Note 1. “Poetry Slam is poetry on the stage. It is not cabaret nor rap; it is not performance, narration, nor declamation. It’s a bit of all of them” (Herzog, 2011, p. 9). Poetry Slams are performance poetry competitions in which poets have 3 minutes to recite their work without the use of any props or music. A panel of judges, chosen at random from the audience, gives each performance a rating from 1 to 10 (with the highest and lowest marks being removed). Given that the Poetry Slam is now a worldwide phenomenon, with regular slams being held practically every day in cities across the planet, it is not unusual to find variations to these basic rules. For a better understanding of Poetry Slams’ main ethos and ideas, there is no better source than the movement’s founder’s book, *Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam, and the Spoken Word* (Smith, 2009).

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