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Poetry experiences across the fourth-grade curriculum

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The genre of poetry can foster children's personal-social and thinking-language abilities. Poetry offers much pleasure for children, insight into their lives' and those of others, and models for their expression.

When teachers understand children's poetry preferences and ways to present this genre, it can add another dimension across the curriculum. Poetry experiences reported in this article were presented incidentally and in the social studies program of a fourth-grade classroom. Webbing conducted to identify important concepts in a social studies unit supported the fourth-graders poetry writing. Poetry forms were taught for children to use as structures for their writing.

Poetry Experiences Across the Fourth-Grade Curriculum

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by

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Abstract

The genre of poetry can foster children's personal-social and thinking-language abilities. Poetry offers much pleasure for children, insight into their lives' and those of others, and models for their expression.

When teachers understand children's poetry preferences and ways to present this genre, it can add another dimension across the curriculum. Poetry experiences reported in this article were presented incidentally and in the social studies program of a fourth-grade classroom. Webbing conducted to identify important concepts in a social studies unit supported the fourth-graders poetry writing. Poetry forms were taught for children to use as structures for their writing.

Poetry that is developmentally appropriate for children and is read aloud, capitalizing on its unique elements, can bring much pleasure to children. Poetry's sharp images created by imagery, figurative language, and sound elements can nudge children into forming sudden understandings that are frequently a surprise. Such surprises are delightful to children. Poetry's strong images serve as natural invitations for children to participate-reciting lines and moving with the rhythm (Harms & Lettow, 1989; Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 1997; Larrick, 1991).

Poetry can lead children to new insights about themselves, others, and the world around. Its emotional intensity adds a special dimension to understanding concepts and events; thus, it has potential for fostering in-depth understandings (Huck, et al., 1997; Atwell, 1987). Quality poetry calls up memories and images associated with occasions of real life. One student said that reading a poem was like peeling the layers of an onion. A poem can convey one layer of meaning or many (Atwell, 1987).

Poetry can offer interpretations that are just right for the moment propelling children to become involved in the emotions of experiences and events. Through this close identification with an element of living, children frequently engage in some type of expressive activity (Harms & Lettow, 1983).

Much of poetry is carefully structured through its sound elements, such as rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, and repetition, and is commonplace in children's lives as they play games and converse (Lenz, 1992; Lukens, 1995). These patterns are powerful models for children to use in their poetry making (Livingston, 1991).

Children's Poetry Preferences

Before children enter school, they seem to have a natural enthusiasm for the sounds and rhythms of language (Huck, et al., 1997). A school-age child prefers narrative poetry and works with strong sound elements and images representing familiar experiences and animals (Kutiper & Wilson, 1993). Teachers and librarians need to select poems that will build upon these inclinations thus appealing to children's interests and also to find opportunities to extend children's preferences (Huck, et al., 1997).

Teachers who further develop children's delight in poetry will find time to share it with them sometime each day. They know that anytime is a good time to read a poem to children, but they will especially want to capitalize on exciting experiences like the first snow, a birthday party, or the arrival of a classmate's new baby brother. Perhaps, some of the class members are grumbling and complaining; then, it might be a good time to share poetry about

feelings (Huck, et al., 1997). This interest must be cultivated slowly and sensitively by caring teachers who themselves are truly interested in the genre (Kutiper & Wilson, 1993).

When encouraging children's responses to poetry, teachers need to avoid asking, "*What* does a poem mean?" But as John Ciardi has suggested ask, "*How* does a poem mean?" The *how* refers to the feeling the poem has evoked in the listeners: they can sense an image in a fresh way. In other words, they have gained further insight into an image or experience (Livingston, 1991).

Ways to Present Poetry

As in all shared reading experiences, the emphasis is on enjoying and appreciating the poems (Routman, 1991). Children should be able to relax and relish the humor and beauty that the sharing of poetry affords (Huck, et al., 1997). The poems selected for presentation must relate to children's prior knowledge and meaningful experiences in the school program (Davis, et al., 1988). Children cannot be expected to develop an appreciation for poetry when they only hear it once a month or during a poetry unit.

If poetry is used only during a special "Poetry Week" or in a poetry unit and is not presented throughout the rest of the school year, students may see this genre as insignificant (Heard, 1988). Poetry

can be extended throughout the entire school year by using it during transition times, such as before going to lunch or during the last few minutes of the day (Huck, et al., 1997).

The intensity of the literary elements found in poems frequently calls for immediate rereading. The unique phrases and figurative language also can prompt rereading to savor their meaning. As poems are reread, children can be encouraged to respond orally to repetitive lines and physically to strong rhythms (Huck, et al., 1997).

Children experimenting with ways to share poetry with their friends, may discover interesting ways to present it, for example, chanting a poem while background music is being played, using a tape recorder to provide appropriate sound effects, showing slides to establish the setting, or creating a puppet show to dramatize a story poem (Larrick, 1991).

Poetry Experiences Across the Curriculum

Throughout the school program, teachers and librarians can nurture children's interest in poetry. Poetry can be presented along with fiction during literature periods in the classroom and library and in thematic units across the areas of the curriculum if presented separately or within an integrated school program. For example, Arithmetic, by Carl Sandburg (1982) sets the stage for good-humored

attention in mathematics. Myra Cohn Livingston's Sky Songs (1984) and Space Songs (1988) that explore the wonders of the elements of the sky and can stimulate imaginative inquiry into the unknown and prompt questions and comparisons. The volume All the Colors of the Race, by Arnold Adoff (1982), celebrates the cultural and ethnic diversity within families (Bosma & DeVries Guth, 1995).

Within units of study, poetry centers can present experiences with this genre. The poetry center features collections of poems with images related to various units of study. For example, a collection of poems with the images of rain and bodies of water can accompany a science unit on raindrops and streams. A unit on pond life can be enhanced by a collection of haiku poetry with images associated with ecological system. Copies of a reference booklet that explains the structure of different forms of poetry and provides examples can be made available in the center to assist children in writing poetry (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Support for Children's Writing

Poetry is thinking and feeling; therefore, this genre is an avenue to express thoughts and feelings (Graves, 1992). When students become acquainted with poetry as they are exposed to it through read aloud experiences and related expressive activity, they may turn to this

genre to reflect upon their feelings and try to give shape to their inner experience (Atwell, 1987).

To prepare children for poetry writing experiences, it is essential that they have listening experiences throughout the school program and related discussion of its elements and expressive activity. After students have written poetry, they can extend their meanings and understandings of writing by reading aloud their pieces to their classmates and their teacher. Such experiences help children to order their thinking through written form as they initiate transactions with an audience. These transactions can further extend children's responses to the emotions in experiences (Cambourne, 1988; Huck, et al., 1997).

Constructing a web of images related to an experience or a unit of study can assist children in writing poetry. A linear webbing can incorporate the elements of poetry with a topic: images, emotional responses, imagery (sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste), figurative language, and forms. The elements may have been a part of a previous study and can be related to the immediate experience, or they may need instruction before children can be successful in the writing process.

Writing a poem frequently takes time. Janeczko (1994) relates writing a poem to a construction project:

It is not like building a model of a ship, using carefully numbered plans to assemble with many perfectly fitting pieces. It is more like building a tree house in the woods or a hideout in the far corner of a vacant lot. It takes time to build a good tree house (or a good poem), time to observe and decide what you would like your tree house to look like, time to remember other tree houses you have seen, time to build, and time to change it if something does not work out or you find something new to add that will make the tree house better. While engaged in the process of writing a poem you will have an image and feelings to respond to. They come from observing, listening, and changing your writing as many times as you want (pp. 2-5).

Expanding Poetry Experiences Across the Curriculum

The poetry experiences discussed in this section were developed in the author's fourth-grade classroom as literature-based experiences were extended across the curriculum to the social studies area. Some of the experiences were introduced as the curriculum and the events of the school year unfolded while others were planned and delivered through teacher-directed sessions or learning centers.

Incidental Experiences with Poetry

The first story in the fourth-grade literature anthology to be presented at the beginning of the school year was an excerpt from Anna, Grandpa, and the Big Snow Storm, by Carla Stevens. To engage the children in “thinking snow” in August, we read Eve Merriam’s poem “It Fell in the City.” The repeated pattern of “all turned white” offered a powerful model for the children’s first poetry experience. Each child then wrote a stanza using this pattern, mounted it onto a dark piece of construction paper, and created an accompanying winter scene with a white crayon. Examples of the children’s responses are presented below:

The treetops

all turned white

The American flags

all turned white.

Gardens and corn

all turned white

Trees in the yard

all turned white.

Another poetry experience followed after the children's visit to the River City Roundup celebration in Omaha. The fourth-graders toured the stables where rows of horses were boarded; the barns where award-winning hogs, sheep and cattle were penned; and the petting barn. At this last stop, children were thrilled with the opportunity to hold and cuddle the baby farm animals! They examined every angle of each animal they could get their hands on in the short period of time. Upon the return to the classroom, they were buzzing with excitement from their first-hand experiences. Capitalizing on this energizing experience, we created a web on the chalkboard of the stops on the barnyard tour. A brief mini-lesson followed on the poetry form haiku. Using these images from the web, the children created haikus. An example is given below:

I heard the cow moo

I held a baby rabbit

I felt the sheep's wool

Poetry in the Social Studies Program

The fourth-grade social studies curriculum focuses on the five regions of the United States. By late fall, our study leads to the history of the

southeast region and the Civil War period. During the study, attention is given to the Underground Railroad. The children are fascinated with Harriett Tubman and her work as a “conductor” to lead slaves to freedom. The poem “Harriett Tubman,” from Eloise Greenfield’s Honey, I Love (New York: Crowell, 1972) was shared aloud with the children. At the end of this study, the class constructed a web on the overhead projector of key concepts and related vocabulary associated with Harriett Tubman and her work. Then, a mini-lesson was presented on the Japanese lantern poetry form – a five-line poem: line 1-one word, line 2-two words, line 3-three words, line 4-four words and line 5-one word. Each child chose a concept from the web to explore through the Japanese lantern form. The focus in writing the poem was on content so the children did not have to adhere strictly to the poetry form. The children copied their poem on yellow construction paper in the shape of a lantern. The completed poems were displayed on a bulletin board as to light the way from the south to the north. An example of one of the poems is given below:

Moses

North Star

Followed drinking gourd

Never lost good souls

Freedom

The ballad Abraham Lincoln: A Man of the People, by Myra Cohn Livingston (New York: Holiday, 1993) was read aloud to the fourth-graders. Then, the name poem form was introduced to extend the Civil War study. This form involves the use of each letter of the writer's first or last name. The letters of the name are listed vertically, and then each line is filled in with the first word beginning with the letter listed on the left. First, the class practiced with their own names. An example is offered below:

Climbs trees a lot

Unique and unusual

Right-handed

Tacos are my favorite food

Incredibly good at throwing a baseball

Sure loves to play with my friends

As the class completed the study of the Civil War focusing on the role President Lincoln played, a web was assembled on the chalkboard. Using the form of the name poem, children write the word Lincoln vertically on the page and filled in the lines with important facts or a word representing an important concept associated with Lincoln. Examples are presented below:

Abe's wife was Mary Todd Lincoln

Born on February 12, 1809

Returned money to a customer by walking six miles

At twenty-one moved to Illinois

Honest man

A hard working individual

Moved the nation away from slavery

Lawyer

In 1865 was assassinated

Never lied

Congressman

Owned a log cabin

Led the United States during the Civil War

Nation said good-bye to Abe on February 11, 1861

Summary

Poetry experiences brought much pleasure to the students in a fourth-grade classroom. They were presented incidentally to address the emotions at specific moments in time.

Poetry offered another dimension to the social studies program. From webbing experiences to identify significant concepts and instruction in poetry forms, the children engaged in poetry composition.

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