Influence of children's prior knowledge on reading and writing poetry

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Influence of children's prior knowledge on reading and writing poetry

Abstract
School programs that are based on literature across the curriculum are being implemented in many schools. In order for children to become literate, they need to engage in the reading process more than in reading class. Children's literary experiences can be extended in other curricular areas, such as the social studies and science. By doing so, children can naturally experience the contributions of the different genres of literature within the functions of language.
Influence of Children's Prior Knowledge
on Reading and Writing Poetry

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Introduction

Rationale for Study

School programs that are based on literature across the curriculum are being implemented in many schools. In order for children to become literate, they need to engage in the reading process more than in reading class. Children's literary experiences can be extended in other curricular areas, such as the social studies and science. By doing so, children can naturally experience the contributions of the different genres of literature within the functions of language.

Poetry is one genre that is often overlooked in the school program. Some children entering school may know nursery rhymes, a form of verse. The majority of students have little prior knowledge of poetry and do not know poetry as one of the genres in children's literature. By listening to/reading poetry and then writing it, children can become more aware of the nature of humankind and the world and can find a model for communicating their feelings about themselves, others, and the world around them (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1994).

Poetry experiences frequently are not offered to children in the schools because the teachers do not feel comfortable with poetry or lack knowledge of quality poetry experiences that are developmentally appropriate for their students. Thus, children do not show much interest in poetry when it is offered. The
poetry experiences are not successful for the teachers and the students because both parties' prior knowledge is limited.

**Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this project is to assess students' prior knowledge of poetry, to extend their understanding and appreciation of the genre, and then to observe their ability to compose poetry using their prior knowledge.

**Procedures of the Project**

The children in this project included seventeen third grade students, five boys and twelve girls. These children were in one classroom and academically ranged from average to above average.

This project began with students completing a questionnaire to assess their prior knowledge of poetry. The students were offered a print rich environment of poetry throughout the year featuring many different poets and their works. To promote the enjoyment and appreciation of listening to/reading and writing poetry, these instructional devices were used: posters, transparencies, modeling examples, chanting, sharing, rhythm activities, conferencing, and book design. Five types of poetry--couplets, haiku, diamante, cinquain, and concrete--were introduced to the students throughout the school year within the context of units in science, social studies, and the language arts. The students were encouraged to write about real experiences within these instructional experiences. The
culminating activity involved students choosing poems they authored to be printed in a class poetry book with each child receiving his/her own copy. To determine the impact of teaching poetry in the curriculum, the students answered the same questionnaire about poetry which they responded to at the beginning of the project to see if their knowledge of poetry had been extended.

Pertinent Terms to the Project

**Literature across the curriculum** refers to the literature base and related expressive activity that can extend different areas of the curriculum.

**Prior knowledge** is the learning from past experiences that influences responses in the present.

**Couplet** is two lines of poetry that rhyme. Examples are:


**Haiku** is a poetry form that captures a moment in the world of nature or in a season of the year. The form is three lines with five syllables in lines one and three and seven syllables in line two. Examples are:


**Diamante** is a poetry form addressing two contrasting concepts. The seven lines of this poem form a diamond shape. One word representing a concept is placed at the top of the diamond, and a word with the opposite meaning is placed at the bottom. Words about the first line are started on the second line and continue to the center of the diamond. At the center, a transition statement is made that leads into writing about the concept on the last line. An example is:

Hopkins, Lee Bennett (1972). *Pass the Poetry, Please*. New York: Citation.

**Cinquain** is a poetry form that describes in five lines a concept:

Line 1 is the concept using one word.
Line 2 describes the concept using two words.
Line 3 describes an action using three words.
Line 4 describes a feeling using four words.
Line 5 refers back to the concept using one word.
Examples are:

New York: Knopf.

Livingston, Myra Cohn (1979). *A Sliver of Liver.*
New York: Atheneum.

Concrete poetry is the collaboration of the visual and verbal to explore meaning. The message of the poem is presented not only in the words but in the arrangement of the words.

Examples are:


Limerick poetry is a five line poem with lines one, two, and five rhyming with an iambic, anapest, anapest meter organization; lines three and four may not rhyme and have an anapest, anapest meter pattern. Examples are:


Alliteration is the repetition of an initial sound, usually a consonant in two or more words of a phrase or line of a poem.

Onomatopoeia is a word that is pronounced as the sound element of its concept.

Review of Literature

Prior knowledge is being considered more and more as educators plan instructional programs, for they are realizing that people's responses are greatly influenced by the knowledge they have gained in previous experiences. Prior knowledge, or people's theory of the world, is the basis of all perceptions and understandings. Thus, prior knowledge is what people base their actions on (Smith, 1994).

Smith (1983) refers to the use of prior knowledge as prediction and that reading is impossible without prior knowledge. People not only predict the outcome of a story but also what an individual letter is and what word is created by putting these letters together. Therefore, whatever readers recognize in print depends on their prior knowledge.

Johnson and Johnson (1988) believe "comprehension is an interactive process wherein information from the text is integrated with the reader's prior knowledge to achieve understanding" (p. 1). In order to nurture children's comprehension and their enthusiasm to read all genres, it is important for educators to expand the student's prior knowledge.
A child's knowledge of the world and of language is usually in place by the time they enter school. Unfortunately, some children enter school with limited prior knowledge which curtails their emerging literacy. In these cases, schools are faced with a difficult time to compensate for this lack of background experiences (Smith, 1994).

Children frequently do not realize that they have had experiences with poetry and thus have prior knowledge. Educators can access this prior knowledge by reading aloud, singing, or dancing the familiar songs and rhymes from children's early childhood. Nancy Larrick (1993), relates "From a very young age, kids respond happily to music and song. Infants may smile as a song is directed to them. Toddlers may wave arms and legs to show their pleasure in the tune that comes directly to them. Soon they will pick up repeated words and make them their own" (p. 97-98).

Children learn about their world through the senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Small children are always exploring whatever they can reach or see. The imagery of a poem which brings sensory experiences to the text has a special appeal for children because it reflects one of the major ways they explore their world (Huck et al., 1994).

Because nursery rhymes use many elements of literature, Lukens (1990) believes these can legitimately be called the
earliest literature and the beginning poetry experiences for the young child. There is a rhythm in the regular beat of rhymes that may correspond to the breathing and heartbeat within humans, a natural introduction to poetry. Huck et al. (1994) agree with Lukens that nursery rhymes, jump rope rhymes, tongue twisters, and the lyrics of some songs are the beginnings of real poetry for children. However, they write that even though these rhymes have strong sound elements as poetry, they do not contain the quality of imagination or the depth of emotion that characterizes real poetry.

As children move from these enjoyable early experiences with nursery rhymes and tongue twisters, they may come to view poetry in the later primary grades as having little meaning for them. Therefore, it is crucial for educators to assess the students' prior knowledge of poetry early in their educational life and plan instructional programs that draw on their prior knowledge of rhyming and rhythmic elements. If the students do not have this prior knowledge of verse, educators need to provide song and dance experiences (Galda, 1993).

With the whole array of quality poetry available today, informed educators should not have difficulty finding poems that would appeal to children, and in many cases, would become their favorite literature experiences. Fine contemporary poets write childlike poetry dealing with the emotions of children in many
different cultures and using many forms. They write in an imaginative way that gives children insight into themselves, others, and the world around (Harms & Lettow, 1983).

Poetry is the most personal form of literature, focusing on the affective, or the emotions of life experiences, with at least two people collaborating: the poet, whose words can only suggest an experience or idea, and the listener-reader who flushes out those lines, reflecting on his/her experience and his/her feelings, or prior knowledge (Larrick, 1993). Even though poetry can never be a substitute for an actual experience, a poet can access prior knowledge, extending it or nudging the child to understand it in a new way (Huck et al., 1994).

Because poetry is a vehicle for creating meaning out of experiences and interpreting emotions, children need to understand poetry in all its forms so they can explore their own ideas and feelings through reading and writing this genre. Poetry needs to be offered frequently in the school program for children to learn the value of this genre (Livingston, 1991).

Project: Influence of Prior Knowledge on Poetry Experiences

At the beginning of the project, children’s prior knowledge was assessed with a questionnaire. Then, a program to extend their understanding and appreciation of poetry was presented. The outcome of this program was then assessed with the questionnaire used initially in the project.
Initial Assessment of Prior Knowledge

In the project, the assessment of children's prior knowledge of poetry began with each student completing a poetry questionnaire without any discussion about poetry.

POETRY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is poetry? ____________________________________________

2. Tell what you know about poetry. ____________________________

3. Does poetry have to rhyme? ________________________________
   Why or why not? _________________________________________

4. Do you like poetry? ____________________________
   Why or why not? _________________________________________

5. What kinds of poetry do you like? __________________________

6. Do you read poetry? _____________________________________
   If so, tell about a favorite poem or poet. ____________________
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7. Do you write poetry? 

If so, tell about your poetry writing experience.

The students' answers to this questionnaire were short, and their content indicated that the children had little prior knowledge of poetry as a genre. Thirteen out of the seventeen children thought poetry is rhyming words and poems are short. Some believed poetry told a short story. In answer to the second questions "Tell what you know about poetry," some children repeated their answer to the first question, but a few children thought that poetry was about feelings and nature. It was interesting to find that ten out of the thirteen children who said poetry is rhyming words wrote in question three "Does poetry have to rhyme?" that poetry does not have to rhyme. The major reason given that it does not have to rhyme is because they have heard or read poetry that was unrhymed. Four out of the seventeen students indicated in question four "Do you like poetry?" that they did not like poetry but gave no reason. The other thirteen students liked poetry for auditory reasons, the sound of rhyming words. In responding to question five "What kinds of poetry do you like?," the children listed several
kinds—nature, animal, rhyming, and funny. Only one student indicated she liked Mother Goose poetry. Eleven out of seventeen students responded with a "yes" to question six "Do you read poetry?." Ten of these were able to list a poet or a title of a poem as their favorite. Only two responded "yes" to question seven "Do you write poetry?." Both students had written a limited amount, and it was funny and rhyming.

Program of Poetry Experiences

Poetry experiences were then offered to the students. The teacher read selections aloud to them for enjoyment and to model different images, emotional responses, forms, kinds, and other poetry elements. At first, the poetry selections were nursery rhymes, tongue twisters, and limericks to access the students' prior knowledge of enjoyable early childhood experiences. Then other poetry, some serious and some humorous, was read to the children. The children also had the opportunity to read poetry to their classmates during these poetry times. Poems on chart pads were also chanted together.

Poetry as a genre and the difference between poetry and stories were explained. Many quality poems were read daily to the class. In the Author/Illustrator corner of the classroom, information about poets and their works, organized in folders, was a part of this center. Also, poetry books were available for individual reading.
Students were introduced to five different forms of poetry: couplet, haiku, diamante, cinquain, and concrete. Each form was introduced with a poster giving an explanation of the form with an example poem. Also, the teacher shared aloud several poems representative of each form.

After discussing and modeling each form with the children, a poem using that form was composed together on the board. The students then had the opportunity to work in pairs to compose their own poems. They shared their poetry with the entire class using some form of media, such as transparencies, posters, and illustrations. After learning a new poetry form and composing poems, sharing them became a learning experience. The students worked together making positive comments about the new poetry as well as critiquing the form of their poems.

Concrete and couplet poetry were enjoyed the most by the students. They were enthused about sharing their poetry, using the overhead projector and transparencies. Most of them wanted to illustrate their poetry. Before writing haiku poetry, the entire class practiced syllabication by beating out the syllables. Everyone had an opportunity to state a word that the rest of the class had to beat to.

A culminating activity was to publish the students' poems in a book. Each student selected two of their poems for publication. They made covers for their own book which were then
laminated. Each student edited their own poems for spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. They then rewrote their own poems, identifying the forms, and illustrating them. These pages were xeroxed for all students and then spiral bound between laminated covers. Also, included in the back of each copy were brief explanations of the different forms and example poems of that form. This section will enable the students to have a reference as they progress in their poetry writing.

Assessment of Children's Understanding of Poetry After Instruction

At the end of two months of learning about poetry forms, the students were given the same questionnaire that was administered to them at the beginning of the poetry experience. This time everyone began immediately to complete the questionnaire without questions as had been the case in the initial assessment. They spent more time answering the questions. On the first question "What is poetry?" fourteen of the seventeen students extended their responses as compared to their responses on the initial questionnaire. They now believe poetry is about feelings and stories that are written in short verses like Mother Goose.

All students somewhat duplicated their answers for question two "Tell what you know about poetry" and question three "Does poetry have to rhyme?." They all mentioned that poetry does not
have to rhyme in question two and again in question three. They explained that all poetry forms do not have a rhyming element. Four students responded differently to question four "Do you like poetry?." Two students who did not like poetry at the beginning of the project responded favorably to it because poetry can be funny. On the initial questionnaire, two students said they preferred longer stories in books rather than poetry. Two students had not changed their opinion of poetry after the project. Consequently, eleven students continued to enjoy poetry before and after the project, indicating they enjoyed it most because it was humorous.

Unlike the first questionnaire, the majority of students listed specific forms of poetry in answering question five "What kinds of poetry do you like?." Because of their exposure to the Author/Illustrator corner, they all answered "yes" to question six "Do you read poetry?." However, in their responses to the second questionnaire, they were able to list titles and authors of their favorite poems. Through this project, they also have had the opportunity to write poetry and therefore could answer "yes" to question seven "Do you write poetry?." They said that writing couplets and concrete poetry was the easiest.

Conclusion

The children in the project extended their understanding and appreciation of poetry. Through a rich learning environment
involving instruction in poetry forms and opportunities to read poetry in the Author/Illustrator corner and to write poetry, most children discovered a delightful genre. The questionnaire administered at the beginning and at the end of the project provided a tool to observe changes in understandings of poetry.

It could be concluded from this project that children need poetry experiences in school beginning in kindergarten. It appears that children without these experiences may only have prior knowledge of Mother Goose and other nursery rhymes. Students did not know the names of poetry forms before the project began. Exposure to these forms before third grade would have given these students prior knowledge to use while composing in the third grade. The results of the second questionnaire indicated that even after exposure to five poetry forms, the majority of children still prefer to read and write rhyming poems.

Consequently, the students involved in this project should be able to utilize the knowledge gained in third grade as prior knowledge throughout their lifetime. It is also realistic to believe that as the year progresses and these students are provided many more poetry experiences, their prior knowledge will be expanded and they will become more involved in reading and composing poetry.
It cannot be stressed enough that daily poetry reading in the classroom will help the students gain insight into poetry and its importance in their lives. Also, poetry experiences provided across the curriculum will enhance the understanding of the nature of poetry. As children gain an understanding of poetry, they will begin to gain insight into themselves as they compose poetry expressing their emotions.
References


