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Enriching poetry experiences in a fourth grade classroom

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Abstract

Children's responses to poetry and ways to enrich poetry offerings in a grade four classroom are explored. Specific poetry and related experiences, both incidental and teacher-directed, along with learning centers, are presented. Support for children's poetry writing is also offered.

Enriching Poetry
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Abstract

Children's responses to poetry and ways to enrich poetry offerings in a grade four classroom are explored. Specific poetry and related experiences, both incidental and teacher-directed, along with learning centers, are presented. Support for children's poetry writing is also offered.

It's that time again! Time for teachers to introduce the genre of poetry to their classrooms. Each year teachers and students approach this traditional learning experience with trepidation. Why do so many teachers dread teaching this genre? Why do so many children avoid reading and writing poetry? What are the advantages of teaching poetry, and why should teachers take the time to introduce and develop this genre with their students?

Experiences with the genre of poetry can nourish children's appreciation of language and can enhance their language abilities. Its sound can serve as invitations for children to respond (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1993). The elements of poetry are around us everywhere. Rhythm, sound, and imagery are part of playground games, conversations, and the books we read (Chatton, 1993; Lenz, 1992). We need to make poetry an active part of life. It is not enough that we use language; we must also understand its power (Chatton, 1993).

Teachers and librarians can help nurture children's interest in poetry throughout the school program (Harms & Lettow, 1991). There are many fine poetry examples available for children. However, these examples are not always presented because many teachers have had little or unpleasant experiences with them (Heard, 1989). When children are provided with numerous experiences with quality poetry from preschool throughout their

school life, they can be motivated to express themselves poetically (Hopkins, 1987).

Poetry is meant to be shared aloud with others. Then its song can be experienced (Graves, 1992). By reading and rereading poetry aloud, children develop a reader's ear. They listen to literature and learn to hear the power of the words and different language patterns (Huck et al., 1993).

Many aspects of poetry naturally appeal to children. The surprise element in poetry encourages children to consider the emotions in commonplace experiences and enhance their understanding of literature (Harms & Lettow, 1989). The sound elements and word play that contemporary poets enjoy attracts children's attention. The use of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and repetition enhance children's poetry enjoyment (Harms & Lettow, 1991).

Children's Responses to Poetry

In presenting poetry as part of the school program, teachers need to understand children's responses to this genre and ways to incorporate them into the program. Poetry is the natural language of children. All children show signs of being born a poet. At a very early age, children's responses demonstrate basic elements of poetry. Babies cooing and babbling in the crib are trying out an approach to language. Children play

with poetic elements as they learn to speak. Often the earliest words children say are animal sounds, such as "meow," and onomatopoetic words, such as "crash," "zoom," and "woosh" (Chatton, 1993). As children grow older, their enjoyment of poetry depends largely upon hearing poems read aloud and then becoming actively involved in the rhythmical language of the poem (Larrick, 1991; Moore, 1981).

One of the consistent findings of studies of children's poetry preferences is that they definitely know the types of poetry that they prefer. Many poetry preference studies have been conducted, and the findings of these studies are closely similar to Ann Terry's 1974 national survey of intermediate grade school children (Huck et al., 1993). In Terry's study, children's highest preference was for humorous poetry and poems with familiar images, particularly animals. Contemporary poems were favored over traditional poems. Preferred forms were narrative and limerick poems. Children enjoyed poems with strong sound elements.

Poetry in the Language Arts Program

Poetry must be shared naturally every day by teachers who love it (Kutiper & Wilson, 1993; Huck et al., 1993; Harms & Lettow, 1983). Teachers need to find poetry that fits many occasions and then read it aloud whenever these occasions arise

(McElmeel, 1983; Hopkins, 1987). 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, 1989). Because poetry responds to a whole range of emotions in a multitude of experiences, it is easy to include it as a part of the literature base in all the school subject areas. Poetry can also 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., 1993).

Because of the sound images in poetry, experiences with it integrates the language processes--oral language (listening and speaking) and written language (reading and writing). Children's oral responses flow easily from listening to poetry. Many types of related creative drama activities can extend these listening experiences and strengthen children's oral language abilities as well as foster their reading abilities. Children can pantomime action-filled poems while the teacher or a child reads them thus building self-confidence in reading poetry. From adding body movements to the poetry experience, students can better understand the content and emotion of a poem. Story poems can be read aloud and pantomimed (Danielson & Dauer, 1990). Choral

speaking can involve individual children or small groups speaking different parts of a poem. A group reciting aloud poems with strong rhythmic qualities is most appealing to children and can unite the class as well as extend language abilities (Larrick, 1991; Danielson & Dauer, 1990).

Poetry can contribute to the print rich environment of the school. Poetry posters, commercially- or teacher- or student-prepared, can be displayed. Books of poetry and teacher-developed collections from many poets can be provided in the classroom to extend a theme or unit. Poets can be studied as part of the author study with their works available for reading (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

All children have potential for writing poetry. Listening experiences can nurture this ability (Moore, 1981). Through writing poetry, children can use language, in both imaginative and precise ways, by playing with words and ideas and by creating compelling images and metaphors (Lies, 1993). Children also are able to create meaning through poetry as they address the emotions associated with familiar images (McClure, Harrison, & Reed, 1990; Huck et al., 1993). Such activity can also encourage children to observe the world more closely by recording sensory experiences. These experiences can lead children to more fully understand their own feelings and those of others (Lies, 1993).

While writing poetry, reading, discussing, redrafting, and revising can extend children's thinking-language abilities (Lies, 1993). The writing workshop model with emphasis on the recursive writing process and collaborative learning through peer review, extends poetry writing (Lies, 1993; Comstock, 1992). The purpose of the writing workshop group is to help each member become a better writer by reading and commenting on each other's writing.

Children often choose to write poetry using a form that they feel comfortable with and one that best expresses their feelings. They are not afraid to experiment with different poetry forms. One of the great advantages of writing poetry is that children can work and play with the words until they get them just right (Graves, 1993).

Extending Poetry Experiences in the Language Arts Program

The poetry experiences discussed in this section were developed in the author's fourth grade classroom to extend the literature base of the language arts program. Some experiences were introduced as events unfolded while others were planned and delivered through teacher-directed sessions or learning centers.

Incidental Experiences with Poetry

Teachers can compile ongoing collections of poems to read at the right moment. Such poetry reading can provide insight into

experiences and events of the moment, facilitate personal-social needs, and arouse interests. For example, a student had an argument with the friend. The poems, "Wrestling" from *Best Friends*, by Kathleen Fraser, selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins (N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1986), and "Best Friends" from *Don't Read This Book Whatever You Do!* by Kalli Dakos (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1993) were read. These poems were the basis for a discussion of friendship. The children began to realize even though friends have disagreements, they are valuable and worth working to keep. These poems also helped students see the need for forgiveness.

The day when several things had been forgotten the poem, "I Left My Head," by Lilian Moore, in *A Jar of Tiny Stars* (Boyds Mills Press, 1996) helped everyone see the humor in the situation. When a storm suddenly arrived shortly before recess, the poem, "Recess," by Lilian Moore, from *A Jar of Tiny Stars* was shared. Students were anxious to go outside and see if anything had been erased.

One very hot fall day at school the poem, "Lemonade Stand," by Myra Cohn Livingston, in *Worlds I Know and Other Poems* (N.Y.: Atheneum, 1985) was read to the students. We went to the drinking fountain and imagined that it was a lemonade stand. On another very hot school day to stay cool the poem, "It's Hot" in *A Light In The Attic*, by Shel Silverstein (N.Y.: Harper, 1981) was read. The students were eager to share what they do to stay cool. Some

children said they ate ice cream. Then, the poem, "Flavors," by Arnold Adoff, in *A Jar of Tiny Stars* was read, and the children eagerly shared their favorite ice cream flavors.

When the weather turned cold, the children had to wear a lot of clothing to stay warm. The poem, "Winter Clothes," by Karla Kuskins, in *A Jar of Tiny Stars* was read. Students could empathize with the emotions in the experiences addressed in the poem--being overdressed and not being able to get up again if one fell down. When the first snow fell, the poem, "Toboggan Ride: Down Happy Hollow," by Myra Cohn Livingston, from *Worlds I Know* was read. Students enjoyed telling of their activities in the snow.

Myra Cohn Livingston's "Give Me A Book" and Lee Bennett Hopkins' "Good Books, Good Times," both poems found in Hopkins' collection, *Good Books, Good Times* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1990) was read the day the class experienced their first silent sustained reading period. Students enjoyed hearing about all the places they could go by reading a book. They were anxious to choose a book that would take them on a vacation.

On the day a student found a caterpillar and brought it to school, the teacher read "Caterpillar," by Valerie Worth, in *All the Small Poems and Fourteen More* (N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1987). By dismissal time, the caterpillar had started spinning a cocoon.

Then, "Caterpillar," by Eve Merriam, in *Blackberry Ink* (N.Y.: Morrow, 1985) was read.

In the fall, the class studied Halloween origins and customs. They discovered that in some areas of the United States a riddle has to be told before a person is given a treat. The book of poem riddles, *My Head Is Red and Other Riddle Rhymes*, by Myra Cohn Livingston (N.Y.: Holiday, 1990) was shared. The students enjoyed guessing the answers.

During the fall, the students began to notice seasonal changes. The poems, "October" and "It Is Late," by Arnold Adoff, in *In For Winter Out For Spring* (Harcourt, 1991) were read aloud. Children shared changes that they had noticed. The poems, "What Is Gold?, What Is Black?, What Is Brown?, and What Is Orange?" by Mary O'Neill, in *Hailstone and Halibut Bones* (Philomel, 1989) helped children become more aware of the visual changes that occur in the fall especially when leaves begin to turn colors. When the wind blew loudly one day reminding the class of impending cold weather the poem, "Crick Crack!" by Eve Merriam, from *Blackberry Ink* was shared. The students enjoyed the onomatopoeia "crick crack" and "snit snat." Then, they pantomimed the actions in the poem. This poem was read many times on windy days.

To introduce a unit on dinosaurs, the poem, "Dinosaurs," by Valerie Worth, in *A Jar of Tiny Stars* was read. The poem, "What

If," by Isabel Joshlin Glaser, in *Good Books, Good Times*, selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins, was also shared. This poem prompted speculation about what if dinosaurs were alive today.

Poetry in the Language Arts Program

Oral and graphic art activities as well as writing experiences were presented as part of the language arts program. Learning centers extended the literature base and supported the expressive activity. Instructional sessions were presented to develop students' understandings of poetry elements and forms, thus supporting their composition activity.

Oral and Graphic Arts Experiences

Choral speaking, puppetry, and illustrating activities were among the oral and graphic arts activities presented.

Choral speaking. Children enjoyed speaking and reading poetry that has a strong rhythmic quality, such as many of the poems in David McCord's *Every Time I Climb A Tree* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), Eve Merriam's *Blackberry Ink* (N.Y.: Morrow, 1985), and Paul Fleischman's *Joyful Noise* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1988) and *I Am Phoenix* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1985), which provided poems to be read in two voices.

Puppetry. Puppets of the insect images in Fleischman's *Joyful Noise* were made from paper sacks. The movements of the puppets were synchronized with the rhythm of the poems as they were read.

Illustrating. The children used several types of media in constructing posters of favorite poems and in illustrating their own poetry compositions.

Learning Centers

Some of the sustaining centers, maintained throughout the school year with their content changing with the curricular study, were part of the poetry study.

Listening/reading center. The center was supplied with poetry volumes as well as works of other genres. These poets' works were provided: Arnold Adoff, John Ciardi, Eloise Greenfield, Nikki Grimes, Karla Kuskin, Myra Cohn Livingston, David McCord, Eve Merriam, Lilian Moore, Judith Thurman, and Valerie Worth. The center also contained teacher- and student-prepared cassette tapes and posters of favorite poems.

Author/illustrator center. The center focused on the poet, Myra Cohn Livingston, and her works. A biography of this poet was displayed. These literature-based activities were included in the learning center.

Literature Experience:

Look at these books written by Myra Cohn Livingston:

Livingston, M. C. (1985). *Celebrations*, Illus. L. E. Fischer. Holiday.

Livingston, M. C. (1979). *O Sliver of Liver*, Illus. I. Van Rynbach. N.Y.: Atheneum.

Livingston, M. C. (1984). *Sky Songs*. Illus. L. E. Fischer, Holiday.

A cycle of cinquain poems.

Expressive Activity:

1) Choose an interesting seasonal concept to describe and compose a poem.

2) Draw an illustration to accompany your poem.

Student Response:

While working in the center, these cinquain poems were written.

Snow	Camping
Small and white	Adults and kids
Floating, gleaming, shining	Sleeping in a sleeping bag
Fall from the sky	With a green forest around you
Winter	Outdoor

Bookmaking. This center provided directions and materials for making books. In the books that the children constructed, they collected poets' works and illustrated them. Also, they created books of their own poem writing.

Elements of Poetry

The elements of poetry were presented in teacher-directed sessions. They combine to address the emotions in experiences to create an imaginative, provocative message.

Rhythm. In some poems the rhythm of the lines are suggestive of the movement or mood of the poem. The arrangement of lines frequently encourages readers to emphasize a particular rhythm. Examples of rhythm are found in these volumes:

Moore, L. (1982). *Something New Begins*. Illus. M. J. Dunton. N.Y.: Atheneum.

Merriam, E. (1985). *Blackberry Ink*. Illus. H. Wilhelm. N.Y.: Morrow.

Merriam, E. (1988). *You Be Good And I'll Be Night*. Illus. K. L. Schmidt. N.Y.: Morrow.

Sound of the language. Along with rhythm, several sound elements contribute to the song of poems.

Repetition is a line or refrain repeated throughout a poem. Examples of repetition are:

Hoberman, M. (1974). *A House Is A House For Me*. Illus. B. Fraser. N.Y.: Viking.

Prelutsky, J. (1976). "The Bogeyman" in *Nightmares*. Illus. A. Lobel. N.Y.: Greenwillow.

Alliteration is the repetition of the beginning sound of words. Such repetition can be meaning bearing, such as "sh" is a soft sound and "cr" is a hard sound. Examples of alliteration are:

Kuskin, K. (1980). *Dogs and Dragons, Trees and Dreams*. N.Y.: Harper.

"Thistles"

Steig, J. (1992). *Alpha Beta Chowder*. Illus. W. Steig. N.Y.: Harper.

Onomatopoeia represents the sounds of images, such as, bang, hiss, scratch, zoom, buzz, or crunch. Examples of onomatopoeia are:

Cummings, E. E. (1989). *Hist Wist*. Illus. D. K. Ray. N.Y.: Crown.

McCord, D. (1986). *One at a Time*. Boston: Little.

"The Look and Sound of Words"

"The Pickety Fence"

"Song of the Train"

"Take Sky"

Rhyme is the repetition of the sounds of the vowel and last consonant or consonant combination in words. Examples of rhymes are:

De Regniers, B. S. (1988). *So Many Cats*. Illus. E. Weiss. N.Y.: Clarion/Ticknor & Fields.

Kuskin, K. (1980). *Dogs and Dragons, Trees and Dreams*. N.Y.: Harper.

"Alexander Soames: His Poems"

Imagery. This element refers to the sensory images of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste presented in poems. It

appeals to children because it reflects one of the major ways they explore their world. Examples of imagery are:

Hopkins, L. B. ed. (1984). *Surprises*. N.Y.: Harper.

"First Snow" by Marie Louise Allen

Yolen, J. (1990). *Bird Watch*. Illus. T. Lewin. N.Y.: Philomel.

"Woodpecker"

Figurative language. This element associates characteristics of one image with another, by comparing or contrasting to extend meaning. Similes and metaphors are common figurative language used in poetry.

When authors present similes, they tell their audience they are comparing or contrasting images by using "like" or "as." Examples of similes are:

Merriam, E. (1986). *A Sky Full of Poems*. Illus. W. Gaffnew-Kessell. N.Y.: Dell.

"Cliche"

"Simile: Willow and Ginko"

Yolen, J. (1989). *Best Witches*. Illus. E. Primavera. N.Y.: Putnam.

"The Witch's Cauldron"

A metaphor is a comparison or a contrast that must be inferred by the audience. Examples of metaphors are:

Livingston, M. C. (1990). *My Head Is Red and Other Riddle Rhymes*. Illus. T. LoPrete. N.Y.: Holiday.

Livingston, M. C. (1988). *Space Songs*. Illus. L. E. Fischer. N.Y.: Holiday.

"Satellites"

Worth, V. (1987). *All the Small Poems*. Illus. N. Babbitt. N.Y.: Farrar.

"Safety Pin"

Forms of Poetry

The teacher presented several forms to the children to enhance their understanding of poetry and to use as models for their own writing. The specific forms were displayed on charts.

Couplet. This form has two lines or a series of two lines of poetry that rhyme. An example is:

Livingston, M. C. (1976). *4-Way Stop*. N.Y.: Atheneum.

"For Mugs"

Children's Response:

A big pumpkin gave me a fight.
I ran and ran all through the night.
Pumpkin, pumpkin big and bright,
Pumpkin, pumpkin glow through the night.

Cinquain. This experimental form describes a concept in five lines. Examples are found in:

Livingston, M. C. (1979). *O Sliver of Liver*. N.Y.:
Atheneum.
"Wind: A Cinquain Sequence"
"T-shirt"
"Idea"

The form consists of five lines.

Line 1 is a concept containing one word.

Line 2 describes the concept using two words.

Line 3 describes the concept using three words.

Line 4 describes the concept using four words.

Line 5 is a synonym or summarizing one word.

Children's Response:

Spider	Black Cat
Big and black	Black and scary
Crawling, spinning, poisoning	hissing, scratching, staring
Found spinning a web,	Yellow eyes glowing at night
Web spinner	Feline

Diamante. This form addresses two opposite concepts. The seven lines of this poem form a diamond shape. An example is:

Tiedt, I. M. (May, 1969). "A New Poetic Form: The Diamante." *Elementary English*.

The form is as follows:

Line 1 has one word representing a concept.

Line 2 describes the concept on line 1.

Line 3 describes the concept on line 1.

Line 4 is the transition statement that leads into writing about the concept on the last line.

Line 5 describes the concept on the last line.

Line 6 describes the concept on the last line.

Line 7 has a word representing a concept with an opposite meaning of the one on line 1.

Children's Response:

Winter

Cold, fun

ice skating, snow building, sledding

Christmas, New Year's, Fourth of July, Easter

Swimming, hiking, vacationing

Cool, warm

Spring

Colorado

Snow, mountains

Skiing, climbing, skating

Skies, lift, beach, ocean

Fishing, waterskiing, beach house

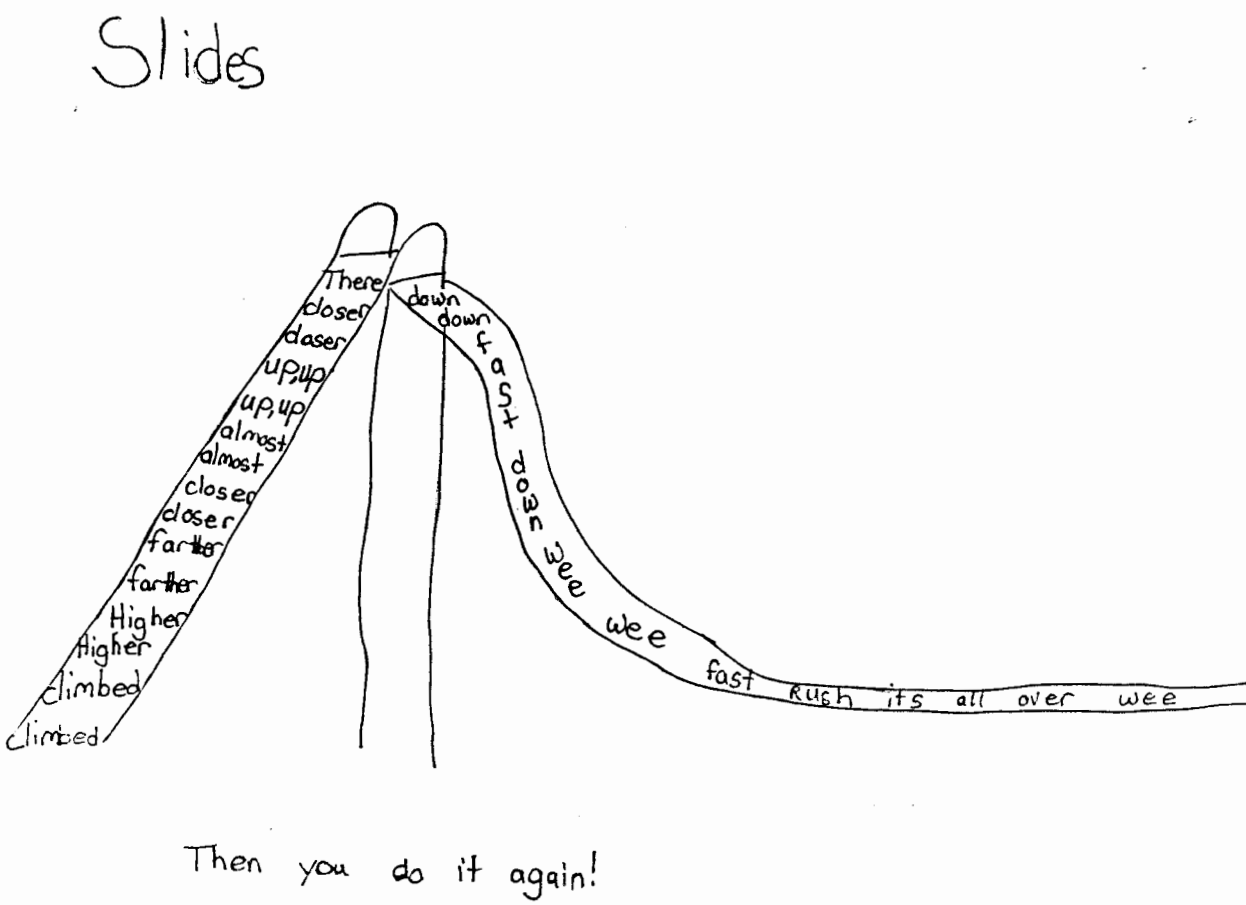
Sand, shells

Florida

Concrete poetry. This form is the collaboration of the visual and verbal to explore meaning. In a concrete poem, the words may be arranged in a shape related to the image of the poem. An example is:

Froman, R. (1974). *Seeing Things*. N.Y.: Crowell.

Children's Response:



Components of Poetry

Composition. Composing poetry can extend children's thinking-language abilities. It requires children to focus on an image and use language to create fresh, strong, and insightful meanings. It encourages children to closely observe their surroundings and find new and unusual relationships among things in their world (Livingston, 1991). Children need to listen to language and choose words and phrasing carefully when composing poetry.

Focusing on images. When children are selecting a topic for their poetry compositions, they may need help focusing on an image. Teachers can ask students to free associate words that come to mind about a given image in their journals. For example, students can write words that remind them of winter in their journals. These words can be used to create an illustrated chart that can be posted in the classroom. The chart provides a visual structure for associative thinking that may enable students to find several images for poems. Children can use the chart to create word webs, or maps, that can help them move from the general to the more specific when developing their poems.

Pre-composing activities. Teachers can begin the poetry composition session with reading poetry aloud, sharing some objects, and having a discussion. The discussion that evolves can generate ideas and lead to composition.

Collaborative poetry compositions. Many poetic techniques can be modeled with children by writing a collaborative poem. As children participate in this process, they can learn how a writer works. As the poem is composed, saying the words and phrases of a poem aloud can help children hear how the poem sounds and decide if changes need to be made.

Composing poetry. Composing poetry is an ongoing activity. It can involve selecting an image, drafting, reading, redrafting, reading, revising, reading, and publishing in some form. The writing workshop model with emphasis on the writing process and collaborative learning through peer review fosters poetry writing (Lies, 1993). The purpose of the writing workshop group is to help each member become a better writer by reading and commenting on each other's writing. Children will often read their poems to others in their writing group to see if they catch the humor or if they like the rhyme of the poem. As a result, classrooms can be buzzing with poetry talk.

Teachers can aid students in the revision process, thus extending the meaning of their poems by offering suggestions, such as taping the poem and then listening to it or listening to a poem while someone else reads it. Such procedures usually help students hear where changes can be made. Students can also make a drawing of their poem to clarify the image in the poem.

Summary

Listening and reading poetry provide children with the opportunity to hear and explore many language patterns. Experiences with a wide range of quality poetry by various poets will lead children to understand the elements and forms of poems and to come to appreciate it. Poetry composition experiences provide children with the means to explore their feelings and to create ideas.

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