

12-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Sepura, B. J. (1994). Read It Again!: A Study of Young Children and Poetry. *Reading Horizons*, 35 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol35/iss2/3

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Read It Again!: A Study of Young Children and Poetry

Barbara J. Sepura

She sells sea shells by the seashore. This little tongue twister came back to me recently as I first experienced collecting little shells along the shores of the Atlantic. It wasn't too surprising that my mind rambled so. Little meaningful rhymes and verses have always had a habit of popping into my head in a variety of situations. I recall having learned most of these from my mother in the early years of life. In her natural way she gave me a heritage rich in rhyme, verse and song that has supported me in daily living.

As a classroom teacher and observer of young children, I have noted a lack of poetic verse in many of my young students' literary repertoires. Instinct (and my own rich experience) told me that a conscientiously planned and implemented program of poetry might arouse children's natural interest in verse while enriching their literary backgrounds. Perhaps others had made a similar prediction. I began to peruse recent articles about young children and poetry. This research revealed that when poetry is an integral part of young children's literary environment, they are empowered with rich language and beguiled by the beauty of poetry (Brown and Laminack, 1989). This empowerment can be brought about by sharing a great deal of poetry in a natural setting on a daily basis (Lukasevich, 1984).

During further exploration I came across a study that piqued my interest. Michael Ford (1987) had done research concerning young children's concepts and attitudes about poetry in his doctoral thesis. In that study Ford looked at young children's poetry concepts and attitudes and developed his own pre- and post-survey instrument to monitor changes in a treatment group in comparison to a control group of children. He also developed the poetry program used by teachers of the treatment group. Both the instrument and poetry program were field tested over a four week interval. One preselected poem a day was read aloud to the students by their classroom teachers, following a specific order and procedure laid out by Ford. The children listened to the poem and sometimes had a follow-up activity assigned at the option of the classroom teacher. A summary of his findings revealed a few, limited improvements in young children's attitudes and concepts about poetry through his program of Daily Oral Poetry. Most noteworthy of these was the "impact on young children's abilities to define a poem, identify a poem, and identify a poet" (Ford, 1987, p. 36).

As I read the study, Ford's findings raised some questions for me. While I supported his hypothesis, I questioned the validity of the results he reported based on only four weeks of intervention. In my opinion, the choice of methodology was also problematic. I wondered whether an objective survey instrument would tell enough about children's change in behavior and attitudes about poetry. Might a longer study yield quite different results when measured using Ford's instrument? I felt that these were important questions. Thus stimulated, I began a year long study in my classroom concerning the concepts and attitudes of young children about poetry.

The students

Involved in this study were 23 seven and eight year olds in my second grade classroom. These 13 boys and 10 girls were part of a primary, suburban elementary school. The students came from mixed socio-economic backgrounds ranging from lower class to upper middle class incomes. Thirty percent of the students qualified for the free and reduced breakfast and lunch program. Our school also qualified for Chapter 1 funding. Forty percent of the students in my class were from single parent families. The class had one identified gifted student, six students receiving reading support, four learning disabled students and one emotionally impaired student. The latter five students spent all day in my room as part of an inclusion program. Documented reading levels ranged from kindergarten to high school level.

Eighteen of my students attended first grade at our school and had been exposed to poetry at an average rate of one poem per week. These poems were teacher selected and went along with holidays, famous people's birthdays, seasons and weather. Each month was begun by using a month poem from *Chicken Soup With Rice* (Sendak, 1962). Poetry exposure also occurred when incidentally found in the literature program. The other five students transferred from other schools and their prior experience with poetry was unknown.

Procedures

The main framework adhered to during the poetry program was as follows. Each day one poem was read in a shared reading format. These poems were handwritten on chart paper for whole class presentation. Each poem was read aloud by the teacher as a model and then by the whole class, using a variety of choral reading techniques. The poem for the day remained on the chart stand throughout that day and into the next until the new day's poem was shared. Current chart

poems as well as previous ones were available for student use. A bulletin board near the large group area held recent poems.

When removing poems from this display area to make room for newer ones, the children frequently would request to keep the old poem in view so they could go back and read it individually. We began tacking up poems in any available space we could find. Soon poems could be found throughout the room and in the adjacent hallway where they could be easily referred to as students chose. Sources for the poems were shared with the children and those sources (poetry books, magazines, clippings, etc.) were placed in the classroom library. Poems were always presented in the context of themes, activities or special occasions that affected the lives of this particular group of students in some way.

Every effort was made to make poetry feel like a natural (albeit special) part of the school day. Hence, the decision was made to base poetry selection on themes, current activities and events that could be termed emergent curriculum, as well as on student interest and reactions to specific poets or kinds of poems. Initially, poetry was teacher selected. As the year progressed, children sometimes suggested poems found in books or brought in from home. These requests were always honored.

Survey instruments for determining changes in attitudes and concepts about poetry in young children were administered during the first week of school and just before the end of the school term. The attitude survey was once again given to children in small groups of four to five students and was read aloud to them. The concepts questionnaire was given individually by me or my classroom assistant. Observational data was also collected at weekly intervals.

Although Ford's approach was used as a basis for this study, some modifications were made. Like Ford, I read one poem each day and administered pre- and post-surveys. To obtain further information about how the children felt about poetry I designed an original attitude survey and adapted his poetry concepts and attitudes questionnaire (see Appendixes A and B).

Other distinctions between this study and Ford's included the time interval. I wanted to see if there would be more significant change over time (9 months rather than 4 weeks) concerning attitudes and concepts about poetry for young children. I also felt a need to present the poems in more than just an auditory modality, since not all children learn equally well in this way. I felt children needed to see, read, and write poetry in addition to listening to it. Third, I wanted to see the effects of exposure to poetry in a natural, integrated format as part of the on-going thematic curriculum of my classroom. Finally, I felt a need to make a conscientious effort to provide children with a variety of poetry as an available option when self-selecting literature.

Results and analysis

Poetry became a natural part of our daily school lives. Rose Fyleman's "Mice" (De Regniers and Brown, 1988, p. 71) was read as an introduction to a new read aloud book, Beverly Cleary's *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* (Cleary, 1965). Likewise, "The Pickety Fence" by David McCord (1921, p. 7) was used in harmony with a toothpick patterning activity for math. Dorothy Aldis' "Crunch and Lick" (Prelutsky, 1986, p. 67) was an addition to a display of giant ice cream cone pictures the children had brought back from a session with the art teacher. After an overnight snowstorm, "It Fell In The City" by Eve Merriam (Prelutsky, 1986, p. 75) became a class

writing springboard from which we created "It Fell In Ferrysburg." As the year concluded I was feeling very positive about the experiences with poetry and the reactions I had observed in the children throughout the school year. Confidently, I began to compile data from the pre- and post-surveys. The results were not at all what I had predicted. What the surveys were saying and what my eyes and ears told me on a daily basis were very different.

Most surprising were the negligible numerical differences on the items on the attitude survey. While some variations in mean scores showed up in items on that survey, such as an increase in liking to read poems to the family and a decrease in liking to sign out poetry books in the library, overall composite scores remained the same (see Appendix C).

The poetry concepts questionnaire showed positive growth over the year for most of the items. Most notably, an increased number of children were able to recognize poems by rhyming sounds and visual format. In addition a greater percentage of children were able to name a poem and a poet from memory (see Appendix D).

The more I reviewed these findings, the more I began to question the usefulness of the survey instruments in determining information about the children's response to poetry. Frustrated, I looked to the observational data I had kept during the year. I reviewed my journals, the student interviews, and parent comments. There were numerous indications that the attitudes as well as the concepts about poetry held by my students had indeed been altered significantly throughout the year. Many observable changes in behavior suggested that most students were now choosing to read, write, and share poetry amongst themselves and with significant adults.

The first such indicator occurred when Shel Silverstein's poem, "Slithergedee" (Prelutsky, 1983, p. 209), appeared on the chart one morning complete with a colorful picture of the fictitious monster. Pure enjoyment ensued as the children reread the poem with me, laughing at the end and crying out spontaneously "read it again!" even after we had read it together three times. I made a mental note to add more humorous poems to the selections. Soon after, four copies of Shel Silverstein's (1974 and 1981) poetry books were added to the classroom library and became the first books selected (and hoarded) at choice reading time.

My next enlightenment came when using "Broom Balancing" by Kathleen Fraser (Prelutsky, 1983, p. 122). This led to a small discussion on how we, too, have special talents of our own. Spontaneously, students began to tell about talents that they had. One student suggested that we could write our own poem about things we could do well, so we did. Children waited eagerly while their peers listed their talents, and then added one of their own. By class vote the poem was entitled "Special Talents." It was illustrated by the children and became one of the classroom favorites. I made another mental note: Children respond actively to poems that are personally important to them.

In the fall we linked our learning around a unit on insects. "I Like Bugs" by Margaret Wise Brown (1988) was a natural concluding poem for the unit. Later, we used this poem as a frame for a class poem about trees. It was made into a book and placed in the classroom library, becoming another popular selection for independent reading. In January a student asked if she could use the book as a pattern to write a "book poem" about birds during Writing Workshop. Several other children liked her idea. We ended up with published

books entitled "I Like Birds"; "I Like Dogs"; and "I Like Clowns," all based on the poem by Margaret Wise Brown.

To celebrate March as reading month the children wore hats with writing on them to school. A student said, "I think we should write a poem about hats!" Another chimed in, "We could do it like the one about trees." We drafted, published, and illustrated the poster poem, "I Like Hats." Mental note number three: Familiar formats are effective aids when children are starting to write poetry on their own.

As the year progressed spontaneous writing of poetry appeared at varied times. Students wrote poems to me and slipped them on my desk when I wasn't looking. When making cards to welcome a new baby into one of our classroom families, two children composed poetic verses. During Writing Workshop some children chose to write poems. One boy decided to write and publish his own original book of animal poems, focusing on animals that live in different environments.

Children who found a poem especially pleasing might go up to the chart stand and make a personal copy of the poem by copying it on a piece of paper. Some children used blank books to enter their collections of favorite poems. It was this kind of spontaneous behavior that had led me to believe that the children's attitudes and concepts were indeed growing and changing.

I watched for indications that a selected poem attracted the children's interest. I noted smiles, laughter, spontaneous reading along, clapping, or rhythmic body movements. The poem might be remembered the next day, reread independently or copied down by the children to add to a personal collection of favorites. I would see children flipping the

poetry chart pages back in search of a particular poem to read with a friend. I might hear "Read it again!"

Similarly, the message from the children was clear if a poem was not meaningful to them. The chart poem might be ignored the rest of the day. Whole class rereading would be less than enthusiastic. Some poems did not seem to lend themselves as readily to interaction or natural rhythm in reading. The length of a poem alone could be enough to generate disinterest. Poems that did not seem to be "kid grabbers" will not be used again next year.

Parents began to comment about the poetry we were doing in school. During the year one of the parents told me that her son had requested a book of poetry for a birthday gift. Another mentioned that her daughter repeated classroom poems at home. A third parent shared that his child was writing little poems at home on his own time. One day a parent came in to return a "borrowed" poetry anthology that her child had brought home. I had been missing that favorite book for several days.

When reviewing behaviors such as those described above, it was clear that significant development in attitudes and concepts about poetry had taken place during the one year planned poem-a-day program.

Summary

Using poetry in a planned program in the classroom began for me as an instinct based on my own experience. I had hoped to validate my ideas by using the concepts and attitudes questionnaires as evidence of change and growth after a year of a poem-a-day exposure. When the results of those surveys showed minor evidence of the growth I had witnessed, I sought other documentation that change had indeed

occurred. It became evident that I needed to look directly at what the behaviors of the children were telling me to get a true picture of their attitudinal and conceptual progress in poetry.

In the end, I became certain that convincing evidence can be gained when looking at what young children *do* over time. By watching the children I could observe self-selection of poetry at reading time. I could witness friends together rereading chart poems, poetry books, or class written poems. I could watch children sign out poetry books in the library, or conversely, bring in poems they had found at home. I could hear the laughter over a funny poem, or feel the silence when a poem was sad. I could note rhythmic clapping and spontaneous body movements. "Read it again!" still rings in my ears. I could observe budding poets struggling to find just the right word to fit into their own original poems. This documentation underlines the worth young children themselves put on the richness poetry adds to their own lives.

Where will I go from here with poetry? I had let the students guide me throughout the year. Why not get their opinions about what was effective in the poetry program? Children were interviewed as to what they might do with poetry if they were the teacher. Here are some of their comments:

I would use the funny ones, like "Slithergedee" by Shel Silverstein. I like the ending. I like how he didn't finish the sentence." -- 8 year old boy

Some children chose poems for their rhythmic, musical qualities. Others liked special characteristics in the poetic style as exemplified by the seven year old girl who liked:

...poems that turn things around like "Keep a Poem in Your Pocket." I liked how it began with "Keep a poem in your pocket and a picture in your head," and then at the end it said, "Keep a picture in your pocket and a poem in your head."

Another seven year old boy suggested:

If I were the teacher, I'd find poems that were very hard to find, and ones that don't make sense (nonsense poems). Then, if you're bored, you could sit and think about them and about how they might make sense.

An eight year old girl recommended:

If I were the teacher I would make poems by adding more pictures... so some people could see what the pictures are and you don't have to make them up in your head. Like when we did "It Fell In Ferrysburg." We made the poem and put it in the hall. We made pictures and made it beautiful.

Visual representations seemed very important. Repeatedly I heard suggestions like "draw pictures," "do torn paper pictures," "make them colorful," "do water color paintings," "make them in potato (potato prints) like I did in Cub Scouts," and "I'd like to do crafts and stuff to go with poems." The children had ideas on how to improve poetry time. One child asserted poetry time could be better if we:

used more poems with surprise endings. I also liked poems that started and ended with about the same line, like "I think mice are nice."

Others suggested:

*...use more funny poems
I like the silly ones
Have the class write more poems*

Another seven year old boy complained:

I don't have any poem books at home, but I wish I did. (We should) get more poetry books in the room so kids could read them and sign them out.

Students also discussed what they liked about poetry. One boy said someone else would like:

doing things (body movements) with poems like tick-tocking when we did "Hickory Dickory Dock."

Another said:

Someone else might like to copy down their favorite poems in a little book of their own. So they could read them when they wanted to. I liked doing that.

An eight year old girl insisted:

Writing our own poems is fun. Someone else might like to write their own poems. They should have a choice. Like, they could do it during Writing Workshop or something.

One student stated:

In the beginning I thought that poems were just kind of drama ones, but then I found out that there were lots of different kinds. Other kids can learn that, too.

I have my mandate. All children deserve opportunities to enjoy poetry as the special genre that it is. Through a

carefully planned daily poetry program children's attitudes and concepts about poetry have been and can continue to be positively affected for a lifetime.

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APPENDIX A
Poetry Attitudinal Survey

Name _____

Date _____

Show how you feel about each statement below by circling the stars. Four stars mean *most of the time*, three stars mean *quite often*, two stars mean *sometimes*, and one star means *not very often*.

1. I like to hear poems:

**** *** ** *

2. I like to read poems:

**** *** ** *

3. I like to write poems:

**** *** ** *

4. I like to read poems during independent reading time:

**** *** ** *

5. I like to sign out poetry books in the library:

**** *** ** *

6. I like copying poems in my personal poetry book:

**** *** ** *

7. I like reading poems to my family:

**** *** ** *

APPENDIX B
Poetry Concepts Questionnaire

Name _____

Date _____

1. Tell me what a poem is.
2. How is a poem different from a story?
3. How is a poem the same as a story?
4. Is this more like a poem or a story? (Read a short rhymed verse.)
Why?
5. Is this more like a poem or a story? (Read a short unrhymed verse.)
Why?
6. Is this more like a poem or a story? (Read a short narrative story.)
Why?
7. Does this look more like a poem or a story? (Show a page from a narrative story.) Why?
8. Does this look more like a poem or a story? (Show a page from a multi-stanza poem.) Why?
9. Tell me the name of a poem.
10. Tell me the name of a poet.
11. What kind of people are poets?

APPENDIX C
Pre- and post-test poetry attitude survey
*Data summary**

	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>
1. I like to hear poems.	2.9	3.0
2. I like to read poems.	2.8	2.8
3. I like to write poems.	2.7	2.7
4. I like to read poems during independent reading time.	2.6	2.7
5. I like to sign out poetry books in the library.	3.1	2.4
6. I like copying poems in my personal poetry book.	2.8	2.8
7. I like reading poems to my family.	2.8	3.4
Composite score:	2.8	2.8

*For ease of comparison, figures are given in mean scores. Scores are on a scale of 4 (most of the time) to 1 (not very often).

APPENDIX D
Poetry Concepts Questionnaire
Data summary

	<u>Pre</u>	<u>Post</u>
	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
1. A poem is		
rhyming words	21	40
short story	14	25
something written	21	3
about feelings	14	22
something you hear/say	4	3
like a song	0	3
don't know	11	3

2.	Poems are different from stories		
	shorter	39	45
	rhyme	15	28
	look different	19	11
	sound different when read	15	10
	convey feelings	8	0
	poems are not true	0	3
	don't know	4	3
3.	Poems are the same as stories		
	words/meanings	59	61
	read both	15	11
	pictures/no pictures	11	0
	people write them	7	7
	characters/title	4	7
	length (poems as stories)	4	4
	can sound alike	0	7
	can have rhyming words	0	3
4.	Recognized a rhyming poem by sound	76	78
5.	Recognized unrhymed poem by sound	52	39
6.	Recognized story excerpt by sound	78	96
7.	Recognized story format by sight	48	58
8.	Recognized poetry format by sight	78	96
9.	Could name a poem from memory	83	91
10.	Could name a poet from memory	57	65
	Knew what a poet was	52	96
11.	Stated people who write poems are		
	writers	74	78
	illustrators	9	9
	any person	9	12
	creative people	0	8
	don't know	8	3