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Using Poetry in the Intermediate Grades

Luethel M. Kormanski

Poetry is the natural language of children. When children are observed at play, their enjoyment of rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and other elements of poetry is obvious. For example, children delight in reciting jump-rope jingles, rhymes for hide and seek, and refrains to popular verse. One would assume that poetry would be emphasized in language arts instruction; however, this literature form is often a neglected aspect of this curriculum. Survey research suggests that the sharing of poetry by teachers with their classes decreases as students enter the intermediate grades and middle school grades (Kutiper, 1985; Terry, 1974). Terry (1974) notes that 75% of surveyed teachers read poetry to their students nine times or less during the academic year.

In interest surveys, students often rank poetry near the bottom (Terry, 1974). Teachers who are not interested in poetry or who know little about poetry may feel hesitant to use this literature form in the classroom. Often poetry is an optional element in the curriculum; therefore, many teachers do not feel the need to include poetry in their classroom routines. Thus, many children do not have the opportunity to read and to share poetry. Since most students do not have experience with poetry on a regular

basis, interest in poetry declines as students progress through the grades (Kutiper, 1985; Terry, 1974).

The goal of this article is to enable intermediate teachers to become more comfortable using poetry in their classrooms. Criteria for selecting poetry appropriate for use in the intermediate grades will be included; guidelines for presenting poetry will be suggested; and strategies for involving intermediate students will be noted.

Selection criteria

There is little difference between poetry that is enjoyed by adults and poetry which is appropriate for intermediate students. A key rule of thumb is that teachers should enjoy the poetry that they choose to present to their classes. If the teacher likes a poem, it will probably be enjoyed by the children. Poetry for children should appeal to their interests and meet their emotional needs. Children tend to enjoy poetry that has rhyme, rhythm, and repetition. Often they do not care for poetry that includes abstract or figurative language. Research surveys indicate that teachers sometimes present traditional, meditative poetry that children don't enjoy rather than contemporary, humorous poetry that delights students (Bridge, 1966; Fisher and Natarella, 1982; Terry, 1972). When teachers present poetry that is appealing and consistent with their students' interests, students develop healthy attitudes about poetry (Matanzo and Madison, 1979; Shapiro and Shapiro, 1971; McCall, 1979).

Children's preferences for poetic form appear to be similar across demographic data, age, sex, and time. They are attracted to poetry that contains humor, nonsense, familiar experiences, imaginative story lines, animals, holidays, and people. Children prefer narratives and

limericks to less concrete forms such as haiku and free verse (Terry, 1972; Ingham, 1980; Simmons, 1980; Fisher and Natarella, 1982; McClure, Harrison, and Reed, 1990).

Children should be introduced to a variety of poems. Teachers should select poems that are both short and long. They need to include ballads, narratives, and nonsense poetry as well. Children need the opportunity to become familiar with as many poets, topics, themes, forms, and literary devices as are found in the anthologies. An excellent source for teachers is *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children* selected by Jack Prelutsky (1983). Other thematic anthologies such as *Nightmares: Poems to Trouble Your Sleep* written by Jack Prelutsky (1976); *Munching: Poems about eating*, selected poems by Lee Bennett Hopkins (1985); and *Cat Poems* selected by Myra Cohn Livingston (1987) provide the intermediate teacher with a wide variety of poetry from which to choose. Once teachers become familiar with children's poets and poetry, they will discover a vast amount of appropriate poetry available for children in the intermediate grades.

Guidelines for presenting poetry

An important step to having students enjoy poetry themselves is reading poetry aloud in the classroom. Reading poetry aloud should become an integral and routine part of the school day. Hopkins (1987) suggests a few simple guidelines for introducing poetry into the classroom. First, a poem should be read aloud several times so that the teacher "feels" the words and rhythm. Teachers may wish to mark words or passages that they want to emphasize. Second, teachers should follow the rhythm of the poem. Poetry should be read naturally without artificial exaggeration. The physical appearance of the poem may dictate the rhythm and mood of the words. Third,

teachers need to plan pleasing pauses in their reading. Fourth, teachers should read poems in a natural, sincere voice. Students need to know the teacher's feelings about the poem. Sharing can model personal ways to appreciate poetry. Finally, pause after reading the poem. Teachers should be careful not to ruin the mood of the poem by asking a lot of questions at its conclusion. Too often teachers think that poetry needs to be analyzed and dissected.

Strategies for using poetry in the classroom

McClure, Harrison, and Reed (1990) note that the poetry curriculum should include a mixture of reading and writing, sharing and listening, structure and freedom. Introducing children to poetry should be seen as an artistic endeavor. Teachers should read poetry with feeling and drama. Poetry needs to be read aloud several times to be enjoyed.

Rereading is one strategy to use to increase children's appreciation of a particular poem. Each time the poem is read, a different word, phrase, or idea can be emphasized. Children should be encouraged to join in on repeated or familiar lines. After several readings children should be encouraged to talk and write about their favorite parts.

Another related strategy for sharing poetry in the classroom is choral reading. Although almost any poem can be read using choral reading, *Joyful noise: Poems for two voices* written by Paul Fleischman (1988) is a collection of poems about insects that intermediate children typically enjoy. Poems can be broken down by line, couplet, stanza, or parts of verses. Children can be divided for reading poetry by rows, the front of the room and back of the room, or the left side of the room and right side of the room.

Children can be assigned reading lines or verses by the colors they are wearing. Ways to assign parts for choral reading are endless.

Reading poetry aloud is the first step to the enjoyment of poetry. However, passive listening frequently does not provide children with a depth of understanding or appreciation. Children do need help to comprehend subtle nuances and to understand the emotional connection between the poet and reader. While dissection, line-by-line analysis, and meaningless memorization is not recommended, children need opportunities to discuss poetry in both large and small groups. Children need to understand that there is no one correct interpretation and that an understanding of poetry is often a very personal experience.

Another way teachers and students can share poetry is through the use of the poetry journal or notebook. Poetry journals or notebooks can contain poems studied in class as well as poems children have discovered on their own. Children may not always write the complete poem but may choose to write a favorite word or phrase from the poem. Students can be instructed to write the poem on one page of their notebook or journal and write their response on the opposite page. Children should be encouraged to write anything that appeals to them. Feelings, ideas about the poem's meaning, and descriptions of how the poem related to their own lives are appropriate responses. After a class discussion, children may be directed to record the class response and compare their ideas to those of the class. Teachers should be willing to accept the responses of each student. Some students may only be willing or able to respond on a literal level; other students will be able to respond more critically.

In addition, students may want to develop their own thematic anthologies. After the teacher shares themed anthologies such as *Mice Are Nice* compiled by Nancy Larrick (1990) or *Best Witches: Poems for Halloween* by Jane Yolen (1989), children might be encouraged to collect poems about a particular topic. These poems may be included in their class poetry journal or kept in a special notebook and can be shared with the entire class after the student has developed his theme or topic.

Conclusion

Poetry is a natural language of children. Teachers can enhance this simple form of literature for children by simply sharing appropriate poetry. Teachers can become more familiar with poets and poetry by collecting poems they enjoy. Teachers who include poetry as part of their teaching strategies become more open to sharing poetry with students. When teachers share a variety of poems with children several times a day, children develop positive attitudes about this genre of literature. As poet Beatrice Schenk de Regniers (1989) has written, "Put a poem in your pocket and a picture in your head."

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