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Using Poetry With Adolescents in a Remedial Reading Program: A Case Study

**Sheila Shapiro
Mary Welch**

Teachers who teach reading to low-achieving adolescents know that good, high-interest, low-vocabulary instructional materials are difficult to find and sometimes unavailable. Even when good materials are available in the form of magazine articles, short stories, and easy novels, they are often overwhelming to an adolescent who is reading four-to-five years or more below grade level.

Fortunately, a great deal of good contemporary poetry is now available for adolescent audiences in the form of attractive, well-illustrated books. Using poetry with adolescents in a remedial setting has several advantages over the use of other types of instructional materials. Poems are quite short compared to prose pieces. Teenagers who have suffered through many years of reading failure and are threatened by a "sea of print" are not scared away by a poem of five or ten to twenty lines that can serve as the basis for a lesson. Another benefit, related to the brevity of poems is their format. Even though poems are relatively short, the format is not necessarily childish, and therefore not insulting to the adolescent learner.

Contemporary poetry for youngsters can be sophisticated or silly, yet the vocabulary tends to be relatively easy. Additionally, the elements of rhyme, rhythm, and repetition help low-achieving readers develop fluency as they read and reread favorites.

Poetry is meant to be read aloud — and performance needs to be backed up by practice. This forms the perfect rationale for practicing the oral reading of poems to be recorded on a tape recorder or read for another audience at a later date. Finally, poems serve as models for writing poetry, an activity that can help remedial readers strengthen encoding skills, without diminishing the primacy of content over form.

Recommended sources

There are many options as to the type of poetry to use. You can find poetry written about almost any topic or theme, including adolescent favorites such as cars, friendship, love, self and *food!* We haven't met a youngster yet who didn't respond to the laughter and nonsense of books of poetry by Shel Silverstein, Jack Prelutsky, or Spike Milligan.

Other adolescents prefer more serious themes found in books like *Back to Class* by Mel Glenn or *Rainbows are Made* by Carl Sandburg. Eve Merriam's love poems in *If Only I Could Tell You* provide yet another dimension of poetry appropriate for teenagers. Book-length single poems such as *Tornado!* by Arnold Adoff or books of a series of related poems that build a "story" such as *Waiting to Waltz* by Cynthia Rylant offer a minimal number of words with illustrations that enhance meaning and provide a basis for discussion and follow-up activities. (A list of recommended books is provided at the end of this article.)

A portrait of Eddie

Eddie, a fifteen-year-old boy, classified Severely Learning Disabled (SLD) in school, had been attending our university-based reading clinic for several semesters. This study is based on his attendance at a four-week summer session where he was provided with one-on-one instruction. Eddie's folder was full of details regarding behavior problems in school, lack of interest, short attention span and little motivation to read. A previous teacher had written, "Eddie will do anything to avoid reading." Eddie was going into tenth grade and read at approximately a high fourth to fifth grade level.

Eddie's reading comprehension varied depending on the length of the material to be read. Given brief prose pieces, he could read with good comprehension at the fourth-to-fifth grade level. However, his comprehension of longer pieces fell dramatically because of his short attention span.

Eddie's oral vocabulary was quite good, especially when he talked about his favorite topics — cars, motorcycles, and fifties music. When reading, Eddie was overdependent on phonic analysis to decode unfamiliar words. Often, when he succeeded in saying a word, he continued reading along, even if he was not getting any meaning from the print. He rarely self-corrected.

Eddie's oral reading was very slow and halting. He read in a monotone as he carefully decoded words. His slow silent reading rate indicated that he was using the same procedures when reading silently.

Clinicians in past semesters had experienced negative results using journal writing, written conversations or any

other activities that involved writing. One of the possible reasons cited for this was the fact that Eddie’s handwriting was very poor, and sometimes illegible. Indeed, Eddie mentioned during the first meeting that he did not like his handwriting.

Eddie walked in the first day of clinic and announced, “My teacher thinks I’m obnoxious.” If he intended this comment to set the tone for his level of participation, he must have been surprised when Mary, his teacher, shot back, “Good, I like to eat obnoxious kids for breakfast!”

Biography poem

Eddie’s first encounter with poetry was with writing a biography poem to be displayed with other students’ poems on a bulletin board in the hall. The format of the poem is as follows:

- Title*
- First name*
- Three adjectives*
- Brother or sister of* _____
- Who likes* _____
- Who fears* _____
- Resident of* _____
- Last name*

Mary introduced the assignment to Eddie and wrote her own “Bio Poem” along with him to model the process she was using. She especially wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to show Eddie that the writing was anything but instantaneous. This assignment became the basis for a great deal of informal, introductory talk. Mary learned about Eddie as they chose adjectives to describe him, and discussed his likes and fears. Eddie relaxed and responded positively as Mary shared information about herself with

him. After much discussion of the line beginning, "Who fears...", Eddie wrote, "Who fears talking to girls." When he learned that the poem was going to be "published" on the bulletin board, he revised the line to read "Who fears nothing!!" The final revision of the poem read:

Mr. Harley

Eddie

Cool, understander, nice

Brother of Michael

Who likes all kinds of music,

Harley Davidsons, girls

Resident of Chicago

Williams

Eddie had a positive response to writing the poem. He enjoyed the conversation and the opportunity to talk and write about himself and his interests. He especially liked the fact that other kids in the clinic read his poem.

During the first few lessons, Mary read a variety of poems from *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein, *Eats* by Arnold Adoff and *The New Kid on the Block* by Jack Prelutsky. Eddie enjoyed the humor of these poems, listened attentively and sometimes read along with Mary on the second reading.

While these activities were successful, other reading and writing activities introduced were being met with indifference and/or avoidance behaviors by Eddie. One of his favorite diversionary tactics was to start talking about cars. After reviewing Eddie's responses to these preliminary activities, Mary decided to use poetry as the basis for Eddie's instructional program.

Acrostics

Since the format of the biography poem provided a nice framework from which to write, Mary thought it would suit Eddie's needs best to continue using some prescribed poetic form. At the same time, she didn't want to limit Eddie's writing to a glorified "fill in the blank" experience. Acrostics, while not as highly structured as the biography poem, would provide the needed framework for writing.

Mary brought in rough drafts of acrostics written by the eighth graders in her classroom. Using drafts rather than final copies again reinforced the idea that the poems did not emerge as finished products. Mary and Eddie read the acrostics together, talked about them, and their responses to them. When Mary suggested that they write their own acrostics, Eddie immediately chose the word "Harley" to work with. Eddie wrote the following acrostic:

Harley

*Have fun with the guys
Awesome to ride on the highways
Really loud
Loan to a friend
Easy Rider
Yes, I want one.*

Meanwhile, Mary continued to read poems from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. During one lesson, she handed the book to Eddie, saying, "Here, you find one and read it to me." Eddie paged through the book to find the shortest poem and read it – first silently, then aloud. He then found one of the longest poems in the book and challenged Mary to read it aloud. The poem, "The Dirtiest Man in the World" is eight stanzas long, the text filling almost two complete pages. The first three stanzas of the poem are:

*Oh I'm Dirty Dan, the world's dirtiest man,
I never have taken a shower.
I can't see my shirt – it's so covered with dirt,
And my ears have enough to grow flowers.*

*But the water is either a little too hot,
Or else it's a little too cold.
I'm musty and dusty and patchy and scratchy
And mangy and covered with mold.
But the water is always a little too hot,
Or else it's a little too cold.*

*I live in a pen with five hogs and a hen
And three squizzly lizards who creep in
My bed, and they itch as I squirm, and I twitch
In the cruddy old sheets that I sleep in.*

When Mary finished reading the third stanza, she stopped and announced with mock horror, “This is absolutely disgusting! I’m not going to read anymore of that...” And with that, she shut the book. This was all the challenge Eddie needed to pursue this poem. He opened the book, hunted through the pages until he found the poem, and tried to cajole Mary into reading it. When Mary refused, Eddie went ahead and read the entire poem, needing only minimal help with the words. He loved Mary’s negative reactions to the poem, and did his best to emphasize the truly revolting lines!

When Eddie finished reading, Mary complimented him saying that in spite of her dislike for the poem, he read it well. Eddie responded that the poem wasn’t really “that disgusting” and proceeded to reread and enumerate what he thought were the “most disgusting lines.”

Time for another challenge. Mary, tempting Eddie, said, "You mean to say you could write a poem even more disgusting than this one?" Eddie met her challenge with, "Well, maybe I could..." And with that, he became completely engrossed in developing a title that would out-do Silverstein's "The Dirtiest Man in the World." Picking up the character's name, "Dirty Dan," and the word "disgusting" that had been bandied about, Eddie decided the title for his poem would be "Disgusting Dirty Dan." Because Eddie had enjoyed writing the acrostic, Mary suggested that perhaps he could write another acrostic, using this new title.

"Okay," said Mary, getting down to business (or prewriting, if you prefer), "Let's go through the poem and pick out all the disgusting words." After making a list of these words, Eddie reread the poem to make sure that he hadn't missed any words for his list. Eddie and Mary then continued to generate other words to add to the list. As they took turns coming up with new words, Eddie reread the list several times, tossing out some words that "weren't disgusting enough." Rereading the words in the list over and over again provided Eddie with the opportunity to increase his familiarity with the words, thereby increasing his fluency. When neither could think of any more words, Mary suggested using the thesaurus as a resource. This research produced wonderful words such as "despicable," "unreasonable" and "dreadful."

After this list was completed, they began to group words according to the letter demands of the acrostic, the sounds of the words, and the content of the poem. Eddie liked to group words that began with the same letter. This led to alliterative lines such as "Gross, grimy, and greasy" and "Goopy, glumpy garbageman."

As the poem began to take shape, Eddie elaborated with adjectives, used some words – and even some lines – that he liked from Silverstein’s poem. The final revision of the poem read:

Disgusting Dirty Dan

Dreadfully disgusting Dirty Dan

Indigestible human being

Slob

Gross, grimy, and greasy

Unreasonable to look at

Slimy, swampy scumbucket

The cruddy old man

Itchy

Neighbor to maggots

Gooney, glumpy garbageman

Despicable

Icky, creepy, crawly

Really obnoxious

The cooties that run through his hair

Yellow through and through.

Dirtbag and sleazeball

A rusty, smelly stiff

Nasty man, nasty Dan.

This isn’t great poetry – or good poetry – or perhaps it’s not poetry at all. Perhaps the poetry happened when Eddie played with language to create the acrostic. The poetry happened when Eddie read it and dramatized it, using his voice to emphasize and elongate certain words for effect. Eddie read his poem to other children in the clinic, tape recorded it with great expression, and thoroughly enjoyed himself. He continued to read it at least once at every lesson that followed. The multisyllabic words strung together

throughout the poem are probably some of the most difficult words that Eddie had ever read with fluency and confidence.

Haiku and cinquain

Seeking to go beyond the acrostic form, Mary introduced Eddie to haiku poems in *Haiku* (Ward and Harper, 1973). After reading several of the poems, they discussed the demands of the form. Both Mary and Eddie wrote haiku, working through the syllable counts as they went. Eddie wrote:

*Harley Davidson
Ride into the setting sun
Stay with their design.*

Eddie loved the idea that he could think about, talk about and write about Harleys. He thoroughly enjoyed his haiku, and responded positively to Mary's suggestion that he try writing a cinquain about a Harley. Eddie wrote the following cinquain:

*Harley
Sleek, awesome
Good for highways
Always rule the streets
Loud!*

Lyrics

Eddie usually came in to the reading clinic singing or humming – popular songs, songs of the fifties, and rap lyrics. Mary used this interest of Eddie's as the basis for further writing. She read examples of raps written by others and she and Eddie had fun reading them together. When they wrote their own raps, both Mary and Eddie had some trouble working with the rhythm. Eddie helped Mary and she helped him, each acting as an audience for the other as

they drafted. Eddie was able to produce the following rap about — you guessed it — a Harley.

A Harley Rap

*Harleys are cool, especially when they're blue
They look so fine, all of the time.
When I go for a ride, everybody wants a ride.
If I say no, you'll say go!
So bye-bye, it's time to fly.*

Mary then used *The Poetry of Rock* to introduce Eddie to written song lyrics. She also found the sheet music for “Surf City,” by the Beach Boys. Eddie had never before seen the lyrics to any of his favorite songs, and was delighted to see, read and sing “Surf City.”

At this point in the clinical sessions, Eddie's behavior had improved to a degree that we never could have anticipated. He was motivated, involved, and had established a trust level with Mary that enabled him to take risks. And take risks he did! Everyone working in the clinic wanted to know what was going on as they heard Mary and Eddie singing lines back and forth, trying them out as they wrote new lyrics to “Surf City.” Starting with the original first line, Eddie wrote:

Woody

*I have a thirty-four wagon and call it a woody.
Car show, here we come!
It's kind of old fashioned, but it's real groovin'.
Car show, here we come!
I put in a back seat and a rear window.
I got to give it a push just to make it go.
And I'm going to the car show on Monday night.
You know we're going to the car show,
and it will be all right.
You know we're going to the car show,*

*and it will be all right.
Two girls for every car!*

Eddie was able to edit, putting in words to fit the rhythm of the song. Interestingly, Mary noted that Eddie's handwriting had improved significantly as they drafted, revised, and edited the poems and songs he wrote.

The end of the summer session was nearing. Eddie had read many poems and written seven of his own. At this point, Mary typed all of the poems and presented Eddie with the idea of binding them into a book. Eddie was impressed with seeing his work typed, enjoyed rereading all of the poems again, and liked the idea of making a book. He and Mary worked together to order the pages for the book. Eddie drew a cover and after looking at several published "author blurbs," described himself in his "About the Author" section as a "girl watcher, Harley watcher, and old car watcher."

Concluding thoughts

At the beginning of this article, we discussed the rationale for using poetry with adolescents. Using poetry as the basis for this remedial reading program proved beneficial in many ways. The format of the poems didn't insult Eddie as a teenager; the brevity of the poems didn't threaten him as a disabled reader. This was evidenced in the positive attitude with which Eddie approached reading and writing poetry. His talk about being "obnoxious" changed to talk about Harleys, cars, girls and music. And this talk, rather than being diversionary, became the basis for his writing. Additionally, Eddie was able to play the role of teacher, telling Mary about cars and motorcycles as they drafted the poems.

Poems became models for writing that strengthened Eddie's encoding skills. The biography poem, haiku, cinquain, acrostics, raps and songs provided Eddie with "plans for writing" that were both accessible and engaging. As Mary and Eddie wrote together, Eddie watched Mary revise her work. As his confidence grew and he began to care about what he wrote, Eddie was willing to work at revising and editing his work rather than just "getting something down" to please the teacher.

Reading and writing poetry helped develop vocabulary skills. Rhyme, rhythm, repetition and poetic form all served to help Eddie focus on words, play with words, and enjoy words. This resulted in growth in meaning vocabulary and in his ability to read multisyllabic words.

Poetry became performance for Eddie. His self-confidence grew as he read and reread his and Mary's poems, and those of published poets. His pride in his work was clearly evident as he read his poems to others. As Eddie performed his poetry, two things occurred. First, his reading fluency increased as a result of rereading. Second, he became more and more aware of audience for his writing. Binding his poems into a handsome book provided him with a tangible product – evidence of his work – proof of its importance.

Working with reading handicapped teenagers can be difficult. Negative attitudes, limited abilities and inappropriate materials can combine to create barriers to further learning. Using poetry in the remedial setting is one means to provide teenagers like Eddie with productive and enjoyable reading instruction.

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Appendix I Recommended Books

- Adoff, A. (1989). *Chocolate dreams*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Causley, C. (1970). *Figgie Hobbin*. New York: Penguin.
- Dahl, R. (1982). *Roald Dahl's revolting rhymes*. New York: Bantam.
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