

Rhyme and reason: Poetry for the heart and head

Is poetry an integral part of your reading curriculum? This article explores why and how poetry should be read and enjoyed by students and teachers at all grade levels.

What aspect of your teaching do you consider most important? Would you say textbooks, or technology, or even planning periods? For me the answer is easy. Poetry. I could not imagine teaching a day without poetry in my classroom. It starts our day, shapes our day, and sometimes helps us get through the day. It doesn't take long for students to be captivated by the allure of poetry once it begins to weave its magic in the classroom. In this article I explore the considerable benefits of reading poetry, why poetry is often neglected, and some of the ways I bring poetry and children together.

Why poetry in the classroom?

A student once wrote in response to the topic of poetry: "Why do I like poetry? Let me count the ways" (Painter, 1970, p. 17). Poetry can be a rewarding and joyful experience. Poetry appeals to the near universal fondness children have for rhyme and rhythm. It nurtures a love and appreciation for the sound and power of language. Poetry can help us see differently, understand ourselves and others, and

validate our human experience. It is a genre especially suited to the struggling or unmotivated reader. Poetry easily finds a home in all areas of the curriculum, enhances thinking skills, and promotes personal connections to content area subjects. Such attributes deserve a closer look.

Almost every child comes to school having had some experience with poetry. Unlike fiction or expository text, poetry as a genre has usually been part of a child's life since birth. Early language experiences are rooted in lullabies, childhood chants and songs, and first books shared on laps. Children develop early an affinity for rhyme and rhythm and easily memorize and say (or sing) simple verse again and again. Rhythm in the form of playground games, music, and other cultural play makes the link between oracy and literacy a natural one (Lenz, 1992; Opie & Opie, 1984).

Poetry is meant to be said out loud (Denman, 1988; Graves, 1992; Heard, 1989; Painter, 1970); thus it becomes a powerful tool for early literacy. Cullinan, Scala, and Schroder (1995) wrote that "poetry is especially appropriate for language learning because it contains language used in its most beautiful forms. . . . Children wrap it easily around their tongues and play with its sounds" (p. 3). Those sounds, that particular language found in poetry, are what Denman (1988) called "word wonderments" (p. 113), a quintessential feature that makes every poem an opportunity for discovery and delight. Because "children love the sound of language, they thrive on the rhythm of a word or the flow of a stanza. Sound always comes first, understanding later" (Whitin, 1983, p. 457).

Lenz (1992) said that listening to poetry and reading it aloud have helped her first and second graders "develop a feel for the texture and power of language" (p. 597). Together they found that poems read aloud "had the potential to capture the ear, imagination, and souls of their listeners" (p. 598). "As sculpture is meant to be touched, poetry is meant to be heard" (Morelli, 1997, p. 76). This joy in the feel and sound of language is often the point of departure into a deeper love of poetry, not just for the young but for students of any age.

The playfulness or poignancy of words, the ability of language to hold us almost captive in its intensity, beauty, or genius, is particularly apparent in poetry. Its spare and carefully chosen language compels us to pause and to wonder. One of the poet's skills is to help us see things in new ways (Cullinan et al., 1995; Lockward, 1994; Rogers, 1985; Siemens, 1996). "Poetry helps broaden children's experiences with new concepts and provides fresh outlooks on the ordinary things that surround them" (Strickland & Strickland, 1997, p. 203). Teachers can help students see the fundamental truth "that poetry, like all art, is grounded in the everydayness of experience" (Kazemek, 1989, p. 114). This everydayness, where we live out our lives in families, in neighborhoods, and within ourselves, is the very place where we need a voice to claim and name the events we live through no matter how awesome or ordinary. Poetry can be that voice.

Because it speaks so often of our common human condition and experiences, poetry is a bridge between ourselves and the poet, ourselves and others. It can validate our feelings and help us make sense of the events of our lives. When I read *Been to Yesterdays* by Lee Bennett Hopkins (1995), any student, third grade or above, who has experienced a divorce in the family will connect to the images and emotions evoked by the poems. Though sad, these students seem also relieved that their hurtful or angry memories are important enough to have been written about by a poet. "Homework! Oh, Homework!" from Jack Prelutsky's (1984) *The New Kid on the Block* offers more lighthearted support for what many students see as a dreaded part of school. Though less serious, it is no less valuable as a

means for giving children a voice about their own truth. This is a powerful thing that poetry can do, enabling us to connect to others but also to our own inner selves. Morelli (1997) believed this power is a gift that poetry gives us: "It reminds us just how things are. It comforts us and sustains us. It lets us know that we are not alone" (p. 76). The poet Robert Kendall saw poetry in a similar way. By giving our students the gift of poetry, we give them a means

for gaining new insights on old problems. Learning to read poetry can also help people learn to read the world better. It can teach them to look beyond assumptions and prejudices, to look beneath the appearance of people or situations, to look past temporary unhappiness or failure. (in Lockward, 1994, p. 70)

It is this paradox about poetry that makes it so useful and so applicable to every student. It is highly universal and public yet allows for private and personal response. Myers (1998) commented that

Carefully selected poetry has the potential to engage readers' minds, to elicit intense emotional and sensory reactions, and to arouse intrinsic passions. . . . Once students believe that personal responses evoked by poetry are valid and valuable, they may become motivated to seek the written word as a means to explore and understand the complexities of their personal lives. (pp. 262, 270)

At a time when the complexities of the world grow ever more confusing and even more frightening, poetry not only can grant us a place of beauty and temporary escape but also can give us the language and imagery to make sense of our reality. It can take us away or it can keep us grounded. Sometimes the same poem does both. In his book about teaching poetry to children, Denman (1988) wrote that poets are the "caretakers of the human experience" (p. 3). He explained further:

Poets through the ages have created, by means of their own resources, observations, and genius, poems that are capable of fulfilling the human need to live more fully and meaningfully—poems that beckon us to experience life; that allow our imaginations to be merged in another individual's vision; that heighten and enhance our perceptions of ourselves, as well as our *inner* selves. (p. 7)

Classroom activities that focus on poetry have convinced some teachers "that poetry touches all children in a meaningful way" and that it "can be *the* genre that excites children and motivates them to read and write" (Duthie & Zimet, 1992, p. 14). Even one good poetry an-

thology in the classroom offers plenty of choice. Poems of appropriate length and difficulty can be readily selected to suit diverse ability and interest needs within a classroom, making it available and accessible to all learners.

Siemens (1996) noted an advantage of poetry not always found in prose: Children who had been reluctant to read prose aloud willingly volunteer to read the shorter passages that typify most poetry. Cullinan et al. (1995) concurred

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that "because poetry usually has only a few words on a line, it looks manageable to the hesitant reader" (p. 60). Poetry's frequent repetition, rhyme, and predictable language make children eager participants in oral and choral readings. A poet's skillful or playful use of words also makes poetry highly conducive to performance reading and dramatic interpretations.

In an article on the effects of daily poetry, Durham (1997) said she wanted poetry in her classroom "for its affective power, its ability to inspire children to love language and, therefore, be more inclined to read" (p. 78). Loving language can do that. Coupled with increased confidence brought about by their success in oral poetry reading, joy in the spoken word can make students enthusiastic about reading not just more poetry, but other genres as well. Poetry gave Durham's students a "shared language with which to express and celebrate our interactions" (p. 78).

Making connections

This dynamic feature of frequent poetry reading has influenced my own classroom again and again. I call it both *intertextuality* and *intercontextuality*. My students often notice links between a poem and a story or chapter book we've read.... It is not unusual for one of them to say, "That's just like in the poem you read about." Even single words from a poem can grab our attention. After reading a poem that used the word *trousers*, I

commented about the sad demise of such great old-fashioned words that children of more modern times seldom hear or get to know (*galoshes*, *arithmetic*, and *spooning* are other examples). I was amazed and encouraged by how their eyes and ears picked up the word *trousers* in other texts and situations over the next few months. Poetry, like contextually rich language in other genres, is able to open our ears, and eyes, and hearts in remarkable ways. It heightens sensitivity even to things that, at first glance, seem unrelated.

Poetry has been written about virtually any topic imaginable, making it a logical and practical source for linking language, imagination, and creativity with other areas of the curriculum. The use of well-chosen poems extends and enhances the atmosphere surrounding more fact-laden subject areas, which can make content area study more palatable, meaningful, and user friendly. According to Rosenblatt (1980), "cognition, it is now increasingly recognized, is always accompanied by affect or feeling" (p. 388). Writing about the importance of bringing the aesthetic and efferent together, McClure and Zitlow (1991) stated that when children are encouraged to see a content area topic from an aesthetic perspective, a whole new dimension of thought and appreciation opens up. They asserted that

Concern for teaching the facts has caused us to neglect forging an emotional connection between those facts and the lives of our children. Adding the aesthetic dimension, through literature and particularly poetry, can help students look beyond the facts to discover the beauty and richness that lies within a subject. . . . When teachers encourage students to view the ideas they are studying from an aesthetic perspective, they are in fact combatting meaninglessness. (p. 28)

Rosenblatt (1982) agreed that aesthetic response deserves more attention: "The quality of education in general is being diluted by neglect of, sacrifice of, the rich organismic, personal, experiential source of both efferent and aesthetic thinking" (p. 274). Combatting meaninglessness by inviting aesthetic response is a way of bringing heart and head together and making ownership of one's learning more likely.

Cullinan et al. (1995) suggested that poetry helps children think like scientists. "Scientists observe with a clear eye, record their observations in precise, descriptive language, and craft their expressions. Poets do the same thing" (p. 72). This deeper layer of

thought that poetry can create through aesthetic response turns even the driest body of knowledge into a rich and personal encounter.

But this rich and personal encounter will seldom come to children on its own. Classroom teachers must bring children and poetry together, each and every day. We have a rare opportunity to become a "joyfully literate mentor" (Denman, 1988, p. 168) for the students we teach. Why, then, do so many of us pass it up?

Confronting the negative

Research shows that "poetry is the most neglected component in the language arts curriculum" (Denman, 1988, p. 57), that children experience less and less exposure to it as they go through the grades, and that "our curricular side step of poetry. . . has relegated it to an optional status" (p. 57). If poetry is such "an amazingly effective, but underused, genre in literature-based curricula" (Cullinan et al., 1995, p. 60), one needs to ask why. Why do many teachers see teaching poetry as a "difficult and often unfruitful task" (Rogers, 1985, p. 296), and why do most children view poetry as the "literary equivalent of liver" (McClure, 1990, p. 6)? In reviewing the literature, I found several issues mentioned often: fear, lack of comfort, teachers who feel compelled to teach reading skills, anxiety over method and knowledge, negative school experiences, and overanalysis and interpretation. Perhaps by discussing each of these, teachers may be convinced to dismantle their fears or negative feelings and become willing to give poetry a new try.

From her own observations as an English teacher, Lockward (1994) maintained that "poetry is the genre most English teachers seem least comfortable with" (p. 65). Her colleagues admitted they neither enjoyed nor read poetry on their own; others stated they liked poetry, but were unsure of how to teach it. This lack of confidence may come from never having "had an English teacher who taught poetry effectively and, therefore, they had no models to emulate" (p. 65). These colleagues also feared that student boredom resulted from their own faulty methods or uncertainty, and that "they [were] killing rather than instilling a love of poetry" (p. 65).

Benton (1992) voiced a similar concern:

Handling poetry is the area of the . . . curriculum where teachers feel most uncertain of their knowledge, most uncomfortable about their methods, and most guilty about both. . . . The neglect shows both in our knowledge and our pedagogy. . . . Worry about rightness, both of a poem's meaning and of our teaching methods, predominates, and the worry is conveyed to the children so that the classroom ambience of poetry becomes one of anxiety at a difficult problem with hidden rules rather than one of enjoyment of a well-wrought object. (p. 127)

Anxiety about rules or rightness is not the least of it. Many teachers, concerned with accountability, proficiency testing, and their perceived need to teach mastery of specific reading skills, have become little more than "curriculum clerks" (DeLawter, 1992, p. 103). Literature (and I include poetry here) essentially becomes a vehicle for teaching skills, not for making meaning or finding enjoyment. "The major purpose of discussion should be to provoke thought rather than to check comprehension or to teach poetic techniques" (Shapiro, 1985, p. 10).

Denman (1988) concluded that some students (and teachers) have difficulty grasping the range of purposes found in poetry between "Mr. Wordplay and Ms. Serious Poet" (p. 85). These students tend to "see poetry as one thing or get stuck at one end of the spectrum" (p. 86), unable to experience or appreciate the variety of poems available. Many can enjoy the playfulness of words in lighthearted or nonsense poems, but then become perplexed or turned off by more subtle poetry. Some may be "turned off to all forms of poetry, thinking that all poetry has to be heavy with some sort of deep, hidden meaning that they, for the life of them, cannot see" (p. 87). Helping students see the need and purpose for all kinds of poetry is the challenge of language arts teachers.

Being "turned off" by poetry is not a new phenomenon, but one that may have started far back and has persisted across time. Decades ago, Painter (1970) surveyed university students and asked them to respond freely to the topic of poetry. They spoke of being discouraged by poetry, dreading it, and even cringing at the mention of it. Students criticized a teacher's dull presentation, poor oral reading, or lack of enthusiasm; figurative language or obscure references that were difficult to comprehend; and focus on rhyme scheme and other poetic devices, which students considered tedious and pointless. Students also recalled

being frequently required to memorize lines or entire poems, usually without purpose and sometimes as a punishment. The teacher decided what was significant to memorize: the student had no voice in the matter.

To further confound the issue, however, some teachers and poets see memorization not as an affliction but as a valuable exercise. "Although recent pedagogy has given memorization a black eye," some poets occasionally recommend asking students to memorize poems (Lockward, 1994, p. 67). While views on memorization remain mixed, I tend to agree that "memorization is a form of ownership" (p. 67). I have seen memorization of poetry become a powerful form of ownership for 8-, 9-, and 10-year-old students who have memorized poems of significant length—poems they choose to remember and make theirs in this special way. I believe the critical issues regarding memorization are choice and purpose: Who gets to choose and for what reason?

Though the problems already mentioned are substantial enough, I have saved the biggest complaint about poetry till last. Most criticism of poetry by both teachers and students focuses on the issue of interpretation. Whose meaning matters the most in response to a poem? Painter (1970) found the most frequent explanation for students' dislike of poetry was "the tearing apart of a poem in order to find one meaning—the teacher's" (p. 15). Students' personal interpretations were seldom the same and often fell far short of what the teacher found, causing one student to lament, "How can there be only one correct interpretation?" (p. 16). This fundamental issue of where meaning resides and who owns it is central to the criticism surrounding the teaching of poetry.

Haliburton and Smith (1911) tried to capture the essence of poetry when they wrote:

The first appeal of a true poem is never to the mind, but to the soul, and it is thus that every true poem should be taught.... Over-analysis to discover the exact thought may prove...fatal to a pupil's love of a good poem. (p. 10)

If the appeal is to one's soul, then response to poetry becomes a highly personal act. By imposing meaning on their students, teachers have typically wrenched the poem out of the souls of students and, hence, have effectively wrenched the soul out of the poem. Such dis-

regard for personal meaning making may be at the root of a widespread dislike of poetry.

The strong degree of antipathy to poetry that Dias (1992) noticed among junior high and high school students as well as a reluctance on the part of teachers to teach poetry influenced his research in this area. Dias (1987) guessed that students' aversion came from their belief that "they could not make sense of and appreciate a poem unless a teacher mediated that process" (p. ix). Further, he believed that reading poetry was "primarily and essentially a teacher-directed classroom activity" (p. ix), a pedagogical practice he called the "full frontal approach, with the teacher at the head of the class directing the reading and interpretation of the poem for the class" (p. 73). Rather than finding their own meaning in response to poetry, Dias (1992) feared that "students in most classrooms arrive at destinations without having traveled. Often, the teacher, like an overly conscientious tour guide, has done the traveling for them" (p. 158). With so little trust and respect given to students' right to their own meaning, it's no wonder they treat poetry with indifference or disdain.

Teachers' insistence on their own meaning drives the joy right out of an encounter with poetry. We need to be reminded that children of all ages naturally enjoy and respond to the rhythm and sound of poetry. We must examine practices that ruin this enjoyment. Heard (1989) challenged us:

to revive those old responses to poetry and trust them again. . . . Reading or hearing a poem should feel like jumping into a cool lake in the summer or drinking a cold glass of water when you're thirsty. But most of our encounters with poetry have had the life squeezed out of them. We've been asked to memorize, analyze, write, and answer questions about poems we don't even choose to read. . . . In order to want to talk about poetry, people must first like it. When I like a poem, my understanding of it has begun. (p. 1)

And when you like a poem, you *care* about understanding it. But it must be an understanding you can personally embrace. One's own understanding is a vital element in forging personal connections to poetry and making the reading of poetry an activity one seeks instead of dreads.

Unfortunately, the freedom to explore and derive personal meaning from poetry is lacking in many classrooms. Perhaps because this is the way they were taught or because they

this way of thinking do a great disservice to their students, to the poet, and to the poem. "Instead of being allowed to explore the poem through natural talk, curiosity, and revelation, students are forced to answer somebody else's questions, meant to help them 'understand' the poem" (Heard, 1989, p. 2).

Answering somebody else's questions designed to extract somebody else's meaning removes the heart from what poetry should be: a personal (and personally meaningful) encounter with a poet's words, however frivolous or profound, that touches you in such a way as to bring you back and back again for more, always more, because you can't get enough. This is what poetry can mean if we know what to do with it. Benton (1992) entreated us to consider current practices and attitudes:

To deprive children of poems is to deny them the society of clear, single voices and an irreplaceable range of feeling. We neglect poetry at our own peril. We need to know more about what is available and what to do with it. (p. 128)

To overcome the neglect, avoidance, and abuse of poetry in our teaching, an encouraging voice could be helpful. In the following section, I describe some of the ways I create a classroom community that honors poetry and poetry readers.

Poetry in the classroom: Loving it and living it

On the first morning a new class of students enters my room, I barely introduce myself before launching into Shel Silverstein's (1981) poem "Whatif." The poem is a litany of typical fears children face in the world: "Whatif a bolt of lightning strikes me?" (p. 90). It allows me to share with them some of my own whatif fears about teaching (Whatif I bore them? Whatif they won't listen?) and to invite my class to offer their own worries about this new school year. It tells my students two important things about me: I care about what they think and feel and I love poetry. Thus begins the sure but gentle weaving of a thread that will bind us together for the next 9 months.

I strongly believe in immersing children daily in poetry of all kinds—rhymed and free verse, serious or silly—to help make poetic

- Adoff, A. (1977). *Tornado! poems*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Adoff, A. (1979). *Eats*. New York: Mulberry Books.
- Adoff, A. (Ed.). (1997). *I am the darker brother: An anthology of modern poems by African-Americans*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Adoff, A. (1997). *Love letters*. New York: Blue Sky Press.
- Ciardi, J. (1985). *Doodle soup*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Cole, W. (Ed.). (1979). *Beastly boys and ghostly girls*. Cleveland, OH: Wm. Collins.
- cummings, e.e. (1988). *In just-spring*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Dakos, K. (1990). *If you're not here, please raise your hand: Poems about school*. New York: Four Winds Press.
- de Regniers, B.S., Moore, E., White, M.M., & Carr, J. (Eds.). (1988). *Sing a song of popcorn: Every child's book of poems*. New York: Scholastic.
- Dunning, S., Lueders, E., & Smith, H. (Eds.). (1967). *Reflections on a gift of watermelon pickle... and other modern verse*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Giovanni, N. (1993). *Ego-tripping*. New York: Lawrence Hill.
- Goldstein, B.S. (1992). *Inner chimes: Poems on poetry*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press.
- Greenfield, E. (1991). *Night on neighborhood street*. New York: Dial.
- Holbrook, S. (1996). *I never said I wasn't difficult*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press.
- Hopkins, L.B. (1993). *Extra innings: Baseball poems*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Hopkins, L.B. (1995). *Been to yesterdays: Poems of a life*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press.
- Hopkins, L.B. (Ed.). (1995) *Small talk: A book of short poems*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Hopkins, L.B. (1996). *Opening days: Sports poems*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Janecko, P. (Ed.). (1987). *This delicious day*. New York: Orchard Books.
- Janecko, P. (Ed.). (1990). *The place my words are looking for*. New York: Bradbury Press.
- Larrick, N. (Ed.). (1990). *Mice are nice*. New York: Philomel.
- Livingston, M.C. (1992). *I never told and other poems*. New York: Macmillan.
- Mavor, S. (Ed.). (1997). *You and me: Poems of friendship*. New York: Orchard.
- Merriam, E. (1981). *A word or two with you*. New York: Atheneum.
- Merriam, E. (1989). *Chortles: New and selected wordplay poems*. New York: Morrow.
- Morrison, L. (Ed.). (1992). *At the crack of the bat*. New York: Hyperion.
- Myers, W.D. (1995). *Glorious angels*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Myers, W.D. (1997). *Harlem*. New York: Scholastic.
- Nye, N.S. (Ed.). (1992). *This same sky: A collection of poems from around the world*. New York: Four Winds Press.

(continued)

Recommended poetry volumes (cont'd.)

- Nye, N.S., & Janeczko, P. (Eds.). (1996). *I feel a little jumpy around you: A book of her poems and his poems presented in pairs*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- O'Neill, M. (1969). *Fingers are always bringing me news*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Polinger, G. (Ed.). (1995). *Something rich and strange: A treasury of Shakespeare's verse*. New York: Kingfisher.
- Prelutsky, J. (Ed.). (1983). *The Random House book of poetry for children*. New York: Random House.
- Prelutsky, J. (1984). *The new kid on the block*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Prelutsky, J. (Ed.). (1989). *Poems of A. Nonny Mouse*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Prelutsky, J. (Ed.). (1993). *A. Nonny Mouse writes again!* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Rosen, M.J. (Ed.). (1996). *Food fight*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Rosenberg, L. (Ed.). (1996). *The invisible ladder: An anthology of contemporary American poems for young readers*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Rylant, C. (1984). *Waiting to waltz*. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury Press.
- Rylant, C. (1990). *Soda jerk*. New York: Orchard Books.
- Schertle, A. (1994). *How now, brown cow?* New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Schmidt, G.D. (Ed.). (1994). *Poetry for young people: Robert Frost*. New York: Sterling.
- Schwartz, A. (Ed.). (1972). *A twister of twists, a tangler of tongues*. New York: J.B. Lippincott.
- Schwartz, A. (Ed.). (1992). *And the green grass grew all around: Folk poetry from everyone*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Shields, C.D. (1995). *Lunch money and other poems about school*. New York: Dutton.
- Siebert, D. (1989). *Heartland*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.
- Silverstein, S. (1974). *Where the sidewalk ends*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Silverstein, S. (1981). *A light in the attic*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Starbird, K. (1979). *The covered bridge house and other poems*. New York: Four Winds Press.
- Thomas, J.C. (1993). *Brown honey in broomwheat tea*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Viorst, J. (1981). *If I were in charge of the world and other worries*. New York: Atheneum.
- Viorst, J. (1995). *Sad underwear and other complications*. New York: Atheneum.
- Wood, N. (1993). *Spint walker*. New York: Doubleday.

language both familiar and provocative. In my classroom, the routine of poetry begins our day, but poetry is never routine. Some days, on goes a mouse finger puppet that scoots across the top and down the sides of the book as I read mouse poems from *Mice Are Nice*

(Larrick, 1990). Other times, I might have one of the children put a hand puppet on while I read. But most of the time, it's just me, the poetry, and my class. I allow the reading of it to pull us in.

There is, as Durham (1997) said, "a poem for every moment, feeling, and experience" (p. 78). I start with poetry that's fun to hear and say. Early favorites are predictable: Silverstein, Prelutsky, John Ciardi, Eve Merriam, Karla Kuskin, Kaye Starbird, and Ogden Nash. Once they are hooked (and this doesn't take long), I introduce students to the more subtle or serious poetry of Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Carl Sandburg. They love e. e. cummings, first for the way he breaks the rules of capitalization and then for the way he uses words.

And who said William Shakespeare is only for older students? Third- and fourth-grade students become avid fans when given lines from *Romeo and Juliet* (yes, the famous balcony scene) to perform. "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?" one asks. Another answers, "It is the east, and Juliet is the sun." They may not comprehend every nuance of Shakespearean thought, but they understand that this language conveys a love so deep that Romeo would even settle for being "a glove upon that hand, that I might touch that cheek."

But students don't land here on their own or by accident. The importance of teacher modeling cannot be underestimated. It is, I think, what Vygotsky's (1986) zone of proximal development is all about: that area between what children can do on their own and what they can accomplish with the help of others. My experience has shown that in the hands of a skillful or enthusiastic teacher, sophisticated poetry is not beyond the reach or appreciation of even young students.

Research suggests the importance of the "subtle yet powerful influence of a classroom teacher" (McClure, 1990, p. 78) and supports the notion that "the right teacher presence is essential" (Travers, 1984, p. 380). I believe that an enthusiastic teacher guides the development of student interest and provides a model for literate behavior and attitude (Chiodo & Lobaugh, 1995). I take my role as literate mentor seriously but have a lot of fun doing it. When introducing children to the lan-

of poetry, it is important that I model appropriate oral reading that is neither overly dramatic nor too dull. I want my voice to convey the tone and mood of the poem as well as show my delight with words. I share my passion and own honest responses to the poet I read. I might laugh or cry, be confused or even disappointed. When I risk having my own spontaneous reactions, I'm giving tacit permission for the children to have theirs. Accepting what they say and feel without judgment is essential.

During our daily poetry time, I sometimes create "an emotional readiness" (Morelli, 1997, p. 72) for the selected poem by sharing some of my feelings or thoughts about it in advance of reading it. "This one makes me feel happy" or "reminds me of my grandmother's kitchen and how it smelled." I appeal often to their own lives—poems about siblings or friends are always popular—to get them interested in what's ahead. Or I might don a chef's toque and apron with a banner on the board behind me announcing: "Today's Special: Food Poems served by Chef Perfect." Out comes my collection of food poetry and after a time or two of sharing these poems, students beg for Arnold Adoff's "Love Song," a tribute to chocolate from *Eats* (1979, p. 6) so they can join me in saying the ending lines:

you are no good
for me
you are no good
you are so good

(From *Eats* by Arnold Adoff. Text copyright ©1979 by Arnold Adoff. Reprinted by permission of Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, a division of William Morrow & Company, Inc.)

We close our eyes and draw out the last two words slowly—"so-o-o good"—as if we're in chocolate heaven. None of us can resist moments like these. And who would want to?

Readers who may falter when they encounter prose in content area and other expository texts are often delighted with the simplicity found in many poems. Reading poetry becomes an opportunity for reading success, increasing the confidence of more timid readers. *Small Talk: A Book of Short Poems* (Hopkins, 1995) is a lovely collection of poetry especially suited for brief language encounters that evoke strong images. I have found also that students of all ages and reading levels

enjoy the challenge of tongue twisters in such collections as Alvin Schwartz's *A Twister of Twists, A Tangler of Tongues* (1972). Readers of varying skill levels become literary equals when they trip over lines such as "The sixth sheik's sixth sheep's sick." No one is embarrassed over the predictable mistakes. Stumbling is the point. This kind of fun with language is a highly motivating event.

The vast array of poetry volumes available makes the use of poetry across the curriculum a logical and creative choice for integrating literature into content areas. For a rich and unique perspective on math, for example, I often share Carl Sandburg's *Arithmetic* (1993). The poem poses an enigmatic question about who is better at math—the mom who fixes two fried eggs for breakfast or the child who asked for only one yet ate them both. Poetry can help students—and teachers—see old subjects with new eyes.

Concluding thoughts

If I want my students to love and engage in poetry for its own sake, to form personal responses, and to read and write poetry of their own, I must create a classroom environment that is safe, supportive, and open to exploration and experimentation (Heard, 1989; Travers, 1984; Vogel, 1994). We become a community of poetry readers and writers each time a poem or response to one is shared. We share in the process of "constructing meaning" (Myers, 1998). I encourage students to be creative in this endeavor. Selecting a favorite poem and making a diorama of what the poem suggests is one of our most successful and pleasurable activities. We display the dioramas with a copy of the poem and invite other classes to come, read, and enjoy with us. We often hear our visitors imploring their teachers to let them do it too.

Nancie Atwell (1987) wrote that "poetry requires personal response more so than any other genre because a poem is such an intensely personal response to the world" (p. 210). It is no wonder, then, that as students experience a wide variety of poetry over time and become accustomed to the emotions it evokes, they become interested in trying it out on their own. When poetry starts showing up as the way my students choose to personally respond to either literature or life, I know something wonderful

Recommended professional reading to support poetry instruction in the classroom

- Atwell, N. (1987). *In the middle: Writing, reading, and learning with adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Cullinan, B., Scala, M.C., & Schroder, V.C. (1995). *Three voices: An invitation to poetry across the curriculum*. New York: Stenhouse.
- Denman, G. A. (1988). *When you've made it your own...teaching poetry to young people*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Dias, P.X. (1987). *Making sense of poetry: Patterns in the process*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council of Teachers of English.
- Graves, D. (1992). *Explore poetry*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Heard, G. (1989). *For the good of the earth and sun: Teaching poetry*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Johnson, D.M. (1990). *Word weaving: A creative approach to teaching and writing poetry*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Koch, K. (1970). *Wishes, lies, and dreams: Teaching children to write poetry*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Koch, K. (1974). *Rose, where did you get that red?* New York: Vintage Books.
- Larrick, L. (Ed.). (1971). *Somebody turned on a tap in these kids*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- McClure, A. (1990). *Sunrises and songs: Reading and writing poetry in an elementary classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

has taken place. After listening to me read excerpts from Gary Paulsen's *Nightjohn* (1993), a novel about the harsh reality of slavery, Alison (a particularly sensitive 9-year-old) wrote this poem:

<p><i>Long Ago</i></p> <p>Long ago there were slaves. Their masters acting strong holding that long whip that hit their hard working backs with red thick blood running down.</p>	<p>Masters thinking slaves are just nothing but dogs that are to work in the fields and eat out of a trough like pigs.</p> <p>(Alison A. 5-6-98)</p>
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With Alison at my side, I read it slowly. Then I read it again. I was stunned and moved almost to tears by this compelling personal response.

I told her so. Work by other students about divorce, loss, and life shows up regularly, each child-poet buoyed up and encouraged by the community of poets that has developed in our classroom. I am in awe of this community.

In this classroom community, we have realized a day at a time the potential of poetry to influence our lives. We have learned together to love the people (e.g., *Soda Jerk* by Cynthia Rylant, 1990) and places (e.g., *Night on Neighborhood Street* by Eloise Greenfield, 1991) that poetry has brought to us. We have become a community of poetry readers, poetry writers, and poetry lovers. This journey begins and ends in joy.

Perfect has been teaching and sharing poetry and children's literature with elementary school students for over 20 years. She currently teaches third grade at Mantua Village School in Mantua, Ohio, USA, and can be contacted at 116 Spell Road, Kent, OH 44240, USA.

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Read to me!

Teacher, oh, teacher,
take me on a trip
to a faraway land aboard
a pirate ship.
Through the deepest, dark jungles
to the mysterious sea,
You can take me anywhere you
want me to be!
I can be a detective, a movie star,
a queen,
I could even be an animal or an
alien who's green!
I can travel back in time and feed
a dinosaur.
Or be with Christopher Columbus as he
landed on the shore.
I could blast through space in a future
rocket ship,
Oh teacher, please teacher, take me
on another trip!
You don't need a suitcase or a pocketbook,
Just sit back in your rocking chair and read
us another book!

Debbie Rovin-Murphy

*Rovin-Murphy teaches third grade at Goodnoe
Elementary School in Newton, Pennsylvania, USA.*

Bedtime stories

Bedtime came early and this we hated,
But bedtime stories for us awaited.
Never Tease a Weasel or *Old Black Witch*,
Two of our favorites we always would pick.
"This again?" my dad would say,
"I read this one just yesterday."
"Just one more time," we'd beg and plead.
Reluctantly Dad would begin to read.
He read each story with such expression,
To this day it has made a lasting impression.
Now the bedtime stories are read by me,
My young son perched quietly on my knee.
"How about the train book," he's bound to say.
"But, we read that one just yesterday."
"Just one last time," and for now he means it.
Tomorrow, however, it all gets repeated.
I open it up and so we begin,
I hope I can make an impression on him.

Lisa Garcia

*Garcia teaches fifth grade
at Woodland Intermediate School
in Gages Lake, Illinois, USA.*