



## Poetry as a Core Reading Text for Younger and Struggling Readers

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*“The longer I live, the more I see there’s something about reciting rhythmical words aloud—it’s almost biological—it has the ability to comfort and enliven human beings.”*

~Robert Pinsky, Former Poet Laureate of the United States~

**N**arratives, or stories, have traditionally formed the core of reading programs in the United States. Over the last decade informational texts have been increasingly added to the corpus of materials used to teach reading. As a result of this expanding emphasis on narrative and informational texts, other types of reading materials have been relegated to second tier status. Among these has been poetry. This is curious because the first type of language children are exposed to is often poetic. The oral tradition from which nursery rhymes, songs, and lullabies emerge echoes poetry. In this paper, we argue that rather than diminishing poetry in the elementary classroom, poetry should be a core reading text. Moreover, we, along with other scholars (e.g., Perfect, 1999; Wicklund, 1989), feel that poetry offers particular advantages for teaching essential reading competencies for younger and struggling readers.

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directors, literacy coaches, and former classroom teachers, they use poetry as a core reading text when working with younger struggling readers. We draw from our experiences in these varied roles to make the case for using poetry to teach reading. Additionally, we offer compelling considerations for incorporating poetry into the literacy instruction of young children who find learning to read difficult.

### Why Poetry?

Why indeed! Perhaps the most immediate reason for bringing poetry into the classroom is that it is specifically identified as a text for instruction in the Common Core State Standards in Literacy (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). Indeed, poetry is included in the reading standards at every grade level from kindergarten through grade 12. Poetry is important because our standards indicate that it is important. Of course, there are many other reasons why poetry deserves a place at the reading instruction table.

Reading poetry is fun. Many children who strug-

gle in reading do not view reading as fun. A critical reason for using poetry with younger and struggling readers is that reading poetry is an immensely enjoyable experience. Certainly the content of poetry offers children the opportunity to learn about life, to enjoy a joke, or be surprised. The very nature of poetry itself, the rhyme and rhythm embedded in poetry for young children make poems fun to read. As poet Robert Pinsky mentions in his quote that begins this essay, the act of reciting a poem has a positive effect on the reader that is physical as well as emotional.

Poetry is accessible in ways that some basal readers, anthologies, curricular texts, and even trade books are not. The rhyme, rhythm, and repetition of children's poems invite multiple readings that have the propensity to increase the comprehension, fluency, word recognition, and vocabulary of the reader. Poems are intended to be read aloud so they are written with plenty of voice rendering them ideal for practice and performance. From a visual standpoint, poems are less intimidating to young, struggling readers since poetry texts usually contain artistic images to support meaning, include attractive and interesting formats, and have ample white spaces. Finally, poems may tell brief stories on topics of high interest to children, are often laced with humor, use irresistible language forms such as onomatopoeia, and intentionally appeal to the senses. These configurations work together to create non-threatening, meaningful, and joyful texts that children find captivating to read, perform, and even write. Simply stated, poetry permits success.

### **Phonemic Awareness**

In a review of research into effective reading instruction, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000) identified phonemic awareness as a key competency for success in learning to read. Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to hear, isolate, and manipulate the sounds of language. Early in life, most children learn to do this by manipulating the sounds of the language spoken in their homes and school environments. The very nature of phonemic awareness involves play with language and language sounds. When children read "Betty Botter bought some butter, but she thought the butter's bitter," they are playing with particular language sounds – not just through hearing the sounds, but also through their physical articulation. Poetry promotes phonemic awareness. By focusing on poetry's rhyme, alliteration, and assonance, young and strug-

gling readers are attracted to the tempo, cadence, and sound of the text.

### **Phonics**

The National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) also identified phonics as an essential competency for children to acquire early in their school lives. Phonics is the ability of readers to translate the written form of words into their oral representation. One of the most effective strategies for developing phonics is through onsets and rimes (Adams, 1994). Rimes are the part of a syllable that begins with the vowel and contains any subsequent consonants; onsets are any consonants that precede the vowel in a syllable. In the word *school*, *-ool* is the rime and *sch* is the onset. Rimes are particularly important because they can be generalized to many words in English. For example, if a reader knows the sound represented by *-ill*, she will be able to read simple words such as *will*, *Bill*, *fill*, *mill*, *chill*, *still*, *gill*, *grill*, as well as longer words such as *fulfill*, *chilling*, *illness*, and many more.

Decodable texts have been advocated for instruction with struggling readers. A decodable text is a text that contains multiple instances of targeted phonics elements so that students have opportunities to encounter those elements in real texts. The problem with many decodable texts is that they are often contrived. By controlling for word selection and over-emphasizing particular phonetic elements, meaning is sacrificed or distorted. Decodable text that over-relies on phonics and word selection separates word recognition from meaning making (comprehension) as part of the reading act. Poetry allows teachers to present decodable text in context, where students practice decoding words and making sense of what they are reading simultaneously. When children read "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight," they are given multiple opportunities to read the *-ight* rime in a text that is authentic and enjoyable to read.

### **Vocabulary**

Vocabulary, too, has been identified as a key element of successful reading instruction. Struggling readers need to be exposed to rich vocabulary. In the absence of authentic text, struggling readers are not likely to encounter the rich, compelling, and complex words needed for children to improve as readers and word learners. Children who struggle in reading are often provided a steady diet of decodable and contrived

texts where vocabulary is intentionally restricted. Vocabulary learning, then, may be stunted. Poetry provides young and struggling readers the opportunity to acquire vocabulary efficiently, in authentic ways. Children are exposed to a variety of rich words in short manageable and meaningful segments in poems. Moreover, the very rhyming or rhythmical nature of poetry makes poems an optimal and authentic decodable text.

Consider the following children's poem by Robert Louis Stevenson:

### **The Cow**

The friendly cow all red and white,  
I love with all my heart:  
She gives me cream with all her might,  
To eat with apple-tart.

She wanders lowing here and there,  
And yet she cannot stray,  
All in the pleasant open air,  
The pleasant light of day;

And blown by all the winds that pass  
And wet with all the showers,  
She walks among the meadow grass  
And eats the meadow flowers.

Although relatively short (73 words total), readers encounter such rich vocabulary as *pleasant*, *meadow*, *lowing*, *wanders*, and *tart*. These are literary words that authors (and poets) purposely use in their composing. Through teacher guided exposure to these words in poems such as these children have opportunities to deepen their knowledge of and appreciation for the words that authors and poets use to create meaning.

### **Fluency**

Research has identified fluency as a critical goal in reading (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). A proven way to improve fluency is through repeated readings of relatively brief texts. In many commercial manifestations of fluency programs, students are asked to do repeated readings of informational texts for the primary purpose of reading it faster. We view this as a corruption of the concept of fluency. As a result, a recent survey of reading experts indicated that fluency instruction is no longer a "hot topic" in

reading (Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2011).

We view poetry as a near perfect text for fluency instruction. Poems are meant to be performed for an audience. In order to be performed in a way that is enjoyable and satisfying to a listener, the poem needs to be rehearsed by the performer. Rehearsal is an authentic form of repeated reading. Readers practice not for speed, but to be able to read the poem in a way that a listener will find meaningful. Moreover, the rhythmical nature of poems makes them ideal for developing prosody or expression, a key component of fluency that is often overlooked in fluency programs.

The potential of rhythmic language, however, may be of even greater importance with a particular type of struggling reader—those who struggle because they possess a strong aptitude for rhythm. What must it be like for a child imbued with a strong aptitude for rhythm to attempt an oral reading of an arrhythmic text? Imagine the frustration of attempting to waltz to the music of a bandleader who cannot maintain three-quarter time. A strong sense of rhythm is an aptitude that some children possess and some do not. For children who do not possess it, the rhythm of poetry is an aid to fluency. For children with a gift for rhythm, poetry is a lifeboat of success.

### **Comprehension**

Comprehension, of course, is the goal of reading. Instruction in comprehension has been shown to improve students' ability to construct meaning while reading (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Poetry is ripe with meaning. And, since poets are able to distill meaning into relatively brief texts, poems again provide a superb textual platform for teaching comprehension strategies. The ability to create and interpret metaphor, for example, is one of the highest levels of comprehension (Ortony, 1993). Poetry, even for children, is filled with rich metaphors that teachers can use to explore this form of meaning with students.

In his poem *Mother to Son*, Langston Hughes creates a metaphor by describing life in terms of walking up a flight of steps. Tim recently observed a master elementary teacher engage her fifth grade students, many of whom were struggling readers, in an in-depth discussion of the poem. Questions such as these were asked and responded to.

What do the events portrayed in Mr. Hughes' poem correspond to in real life?

What else might happen as you walk up a flight of stairs?

What do these correspond to in life?

What other activity might be used as a metaphor for life?

After this brief but lively discussion, the teacher worked with her students to create their own metaphors, using the structure of *Mother to Son*. New poems such as *Coach to Team*, and *Well Son Life for Me Ain't Been No California Vacation* were written, rehearsed, performed for an attentive audience, and eventually published in a class book. Sometimes school doesn't get much better than this.

Figurative language exists for the very purpose of empowering the reader to comprehend. Done well, it can make the content irresistible to the imagination of the reader. A child reads discursive prose in a geography text and is indifferent to the sea. The same child reads *Sea Fever* by John Masfield and dreams of sailing the world.

### **Readers Experience Success and Satisfaction**

Reading poetry is also something that children master fairly easily. The patterned rhythm and rhyme embedded in poetry for children offers a learning scaffold that makes it easy to learn to read a poem. Moreover, the brevity of children's poetry allows poems to be learned easily and quickly. When struggling and young readers meet with success in brief passages, such as poems, they gain self-efficacy. Self-efficacy allows children to approach longer text with greater confidence. When working with young and struggling readers, our goal is for students to be able to leave class every day with the ability to read a new text (usually a poem) well.

Poetry is a central text in the Kent State University Reading Clinic. Everyday children rehearse poems that they eventually perform for fellow students, teachers, parents and other audiences. Not only do students enjoy their work in the clinic (which we call Camp Read-A-Lot), they also develop a greater love of reading and language, make exceptional improvement in reading, and, perhaps most importantly they begin to view themselves as readers who are able to learn to read well. The look on students' faces when they read their newly mastered poem to a parent, other adult, or sibling is breathtaking.

By learning to read a poem every day, young and struggling readers develop a sense of appreciation and self-efficacy that is essential to success in reading. As Shultz continues in the same essay, "Poetry should be a matter of passion, not survival." In other words,

poetry can act as an entrée to the world of reading creating, as readers become more proficient, a conduit to literacy success. In a recent five week reading clinic where students were provided with 90 minutes of reading instruction, using poetry, four days a week, students made significantly greater gains in word recognition, fluency, and comprehension than they had previously been making in a more traditional school setting. In fluency, for example, students made approximately double the normal gain that would be expected in five weeks of instruction (Zimmerman & Rasinski, 2012).

### **And More...**

Utilizing and performing poetry is an ideal approach for assisting struggling readers to develop greater reading skill and literary appreciation (Walther & Fuhler, 2010). Poetry helps children to advance their social skills, self-confidence, and diction as they read and reread selected poems silently, orally, and for performance. Additionally, poetry connects to content area reading. For example, there are a host of poems that cover mathematics, social studies, and science concepts. Nile Stanley, a reading specialist and literacy scholar, contends that acquainting children to poetry on a regular basis can increase reading enjoyment while also enhancing performance on high-stakes tests since it gives children's minds an "exhilarating workout" as it "inspires them to read more, imagine more, think more, discuss more, and write more" (as cited in Wagner, 2005). Developing these capacities will certainly help all readers to experience greater test success.

Children who experience difficulty with reading often find writing to be equally challenging. This is problematic since writing is an essential pathway to critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity development. As such, writing has become a major focal point of emphasis in the Common Core State Standards. When teachers intentionally blend poetry into literacy instruction, it sparks enthusiasm for the written word as well as a model or scaffold for students to structure their own writing, while simultaneously providing another gateway to reading success for less confident and competent readers. Pulitzer Prize winning poet Philip Shultz (2011) describes his own struggles with learning to read and how poetry provided a means not only to literacy, but to a lifelong love of words:

I imagined being able to sound out the words by putting letters together into units of rhythmic sound and the words into sentences that made sense. I imagined the words and their sounds being a kind of key with which I would open

an invisible door to a world previously denied to me.

Although Shultz writes that poetry should be a “matter of passion, not survival,” we have found that poetry indeed can be a key to literacy survival for many students who struggle in learning to read. Poetry needs to be given a prominent place in our efforts to help children learn to read. Making poetry an integral part of the literacy program can actually enhance students’ performance on high-stakes tests. According to Nile Stanley, a reading specialist and literacy scholar, “Poetry helps students do well on high-stakes tests because it gives their minds an exhilarating workout. Poetry inspires students to read more, imagine more, think more, discuss more and write more.” All of which, of course, will help them on tests, and so much more.

Early experiences tend to shape long-term attitudes. Reading material that fails to engage young imaginations can trap children in failure; it can make children “hate” to read and become a near insurmountable obstacle to the development of age appropriate levels of reading achievement. Poetry goes a long way toward helping children achieve the kind of success that forms the foundation for ongoing achievement as readers. Poetry needs to be given a prominent place in our efforts to help our younger and struggling students learn to read.

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