



TAPPING THE POWER OF *Poetry*



When students read and recite poems and songs, they build foundational literacy skills that support comprehension.

Timothy Rasinski

Second grader Jennifer is nervous. Ever since she was referred for special intervention in literacy at the end of last year, she has viewed herself as a poor reader. Now, near the end of 2nd grade, she'll be performing Brod Bagert's poem "Caterpillars" for classmates and parents with a partner with whom she's been practicing for the past several days.

No need for nerves. Because Jennifer has been rehearsing this text, she is able to perform it flawlessly, with expression that reflects both the meaning of the text and

her newfound enthusiasm for reading. Her performance is greeted with snapping fingers, clapping, and positive comments from her teacher, parents, and classmates. Jennifer is on her way to becoming a competent and confident reader.

Start with Foundational Skills

The Common Core State Standards call for more close reading and deeper comprehension of complex texts. To reach this lofty goal, readers must have a strong foundation of basic reading skills. The standards identify these foun-

dational competencies as phonemic awareness, word recognition, and reading fluency. Proficiency in these areas prepares students to build the deep comprehension that is the true goal of reading instruction.

Research into elementary school students who perform poorly on reading comprehension tests has indicated that a significant portion of these students manifest difficulties in one or more of the foundational competencies (Valencia & Buly, 2004). If the foundational skills remain underdeveloped throughout the elementary grades, students are likely to continue to struggle in literacy and other subjects in middle and high school.

So educators universally agree that it's important to teach foundational literacy skills in the early grades. The jury is still out, however, on which instructional approaches and methods are most effective for developing these skills (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Poetry and the Literacy Foundation

I have become increasingly convinced that poetry offers one of the best—and often most underused—resources for developing literacy foundations. Children's poetry includes several features that make it ideally suited for teaching phonemic awareness, word recognition, and reading fluency. Here are a few reasons why it's ideal.

Children's Poems Are Short and Easy to Learn

The foundational skills, as implied by their name, should ideally be developed early in a student's school career as he or she emerges into conventional reading. Young children generally don't have the stamina to read long texts. Most poetry for children is relatively short, usually 4 to 16 lines. This means that children can read the text quickly—and, with some practice and support, fluently. Imagine the sense of accomplishment and pride that emergent and struggling readers like Jennifer develop when they're able to read or

recite a new poem for their parents and friends every day!

In addition to brevity, poems and songs have rhythm and rhyme that make them easy to read or memorize. All of us can probably remember many poems and songs that we learned and memorized, almost without trying, during our elementary school years. Indeed, my wife and I visit periodically with patients at the Alzheimer's unit of a local nursing home, and we've regularly found that these patients—who often cannot remember us from one week to the next—can remember the classic songs and poems that we share during our visits.

Poetry can help build the sight-word recognition—the ability to recognize words instantly, effortlessly, and holistically—that is an important foundational competency in literacy. The fact that children's poems are easy to remember makes them a good way to develop and expand young children's corpus of sight words.

“There's something about reciting rhythmical words aloud—it's almost biological—that comforts and enlivens human beings.”—Robert Pinsky

Poems Play with the Sounds of Language

Phonemic awareness, a foundational competency recognized in the Common Core standards and also identified by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) as essential to students' overall success in reading, is a precursor of phonics. Before children can make the connection between written letters and the sounds those letters represent, they need to be able to hear, segment, blend, and manipulate the sounds of language.

Listening to and reciting poetry are wonderful, engaging, and authentic ways to develop phonemic awareness. Most poetry for children plays with the sounds of language through rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and assonance. When students hear and recite “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,” they are likely to notice the /p/ sound repeated throughout the text.

Poems Make Phonics More Engaging

Although educators debate the best way to teach phonics, some potentially productive approaches do exist. For example, the rime method (Adams, 1994) teaches students



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consistent sound-letter patterns, often referred to as *rimes* or *word families*. A rime is the portion of a syllable that begins with the vowel and contains any consonants that come after the vowel. The rime in the word *sing*, for example, is *-ing*. If children learn how to pronounce the *-ing* in *sing*, they will be able to sound out other words, such as *wing*, *ring*, *thing*, *swing*, and *sting*.

This approach is promising for several reasons. First, the sound or pronunciation represented by rimes is usually stable and consistent; the */-ing/* sound is the same across words that contain *-ing*. Second, rimes are an efficient way of processing written words. Rather than processing the word *bark* as four separate sound-symbol units, as some letter-by-letter phonics programs teach, a rime approach requires the recognition of just two units: *b* and *ark*. Third, many rimes are ubiquitous. Fry (1998) found that knowledge of 36 of the most common rimes in English could help students sound out 654 single-syllable words and partially decode many more multisyllable words. The rime *-am* can help students figure out words like *ham*, *slam*, and *jam*; it can also help them read more challenging words, such as *hamster*, *ambulance*, *camera*, *family*, and even *Amsterdam*.

Education publishers have developed easily decodable texts to give students practice in using rimes (“Ms. Fay cannot stay this day”), but many children balk at reading such engineered texts. Poetry and song lyrics are more engaging. When teaching the *-ay* word family, for example, the simple poem “Rain, rain,

go away/Come again another day/Little Johnny wants to play” offers a more authentic alternative to Ms. Fay. Similarly, when working on the *-ob* rime, the teacher might teach students the song “When the Red, Red Robin,” the first two lines of which contain five *-ob* words:

When the red, red robin comes bob,
bob, bobbin’ along, along,
There’ll be no more sobbin’ when he
starts throbbin’ his old sweet song.

With repeated exposure to these engaging and easily memorized texts, students are sure to master *-ay*, *-ob* and many more word families without much difficulty.

Reciting Poetry Builds Reading Fluency

For years, reading fluency was the neglected goal of the reading curriculum (Allington, 1983). But according to the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), fluency is crucial for reading success. The two components of oral reading fluency—automaticity and prosody—are both associated with high achievement in silent reading (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). Automaticity refers to the ability to recognize words in text so effortlessly that readers can apply their attention to the more important task in reading, com-

prehension. Prosody is the ability to read aloud with oral expression, volume, phrasing, and speed that appropriately reflects and expands on the meaning of the text.

The best way to develop both automaticity and prosody is through practice and support while reading aloud. Practice consists of repeated reading—a student reads a text aloud multiple times until she or he can read it well. Supported or assisted reading means that a student reads a text aloud with another reader who can read the same text fluently, either in person or on a recording.

Poetry provides many opportunities for authentic oral practice. When students rehearse their reading of a poem, they repeatedly read the text aloud for a real purpose—to prepare to perform it expressively and meaningfully for an audience. In contrast, many commercial reading fluency programs



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require students to repeatedly practice reading a text aloud, but the only purpose is to build speed.

Poetry also lends itself to supported or assisted reading. Poems and songs are often performed chorally. (Think of students reciting the Pledge of Allegiance or singing patriotic songs on national holidays.) In choral reading or singing, the group acts as a support for each individual reader. Poems and songs can also be performed in smaller groups of two, three, or four. If at least one reader in the group can read the poem fluently, he or she will support the others as they read together.

Once students are able to read their text fluently, it's easy to record their oral reading of poetry and performance of songs. Innovative teachers can use these recordings as models and supports for other students who are working on the same poem. There are so many ways to use rhythmic texts to build fluency in an authentic manner.

Moving Beyond the Foundational Competencies

But rhythmic text offers much more than opportunities to develop students' reading foundations. For instance, poems often contain sophisticated words that teachers can use to highlight and build vocabulary.

One 3rd grade teacher opens each day with a poem that students read chorally and that reflects a time of year, holiday, or topic that her students are studying. She asks students to notice any interesting words in the poem. "Usually students can come up with at least five words they think are interesting or unusual," she notes. She writes the words on a daily word chart, discusses the meanings of the words, and challenges students (and herself) to use the words in their oral and written language over the next several days. "It's amazing," this teacher

observes, "how students will take up the challenge and find ways to use words like *emblem*, *acquaintance*, or *odious*. Not only are they learning new vocabulary from poetry, but they are also taking delight in words."

Reading and reciting poetry provide opportunities for students to make meaning and build comprehension. Because poets are able to distill meaning into relatively short texts, readers must engage in high-level inferential comprehension to gain meaning.

For example, poets often use metaphor, and the ability to create and interpret metaphor is one of the most sophisticated forms of comprehension (Ortony, 1993). As they learn to read Walt Whitman's "Oh Captain! My Captain!" with expression and attention to its meaning, students can engage in a deep analysis of the poem to determine how a ship's captain can be a metaphor for President Abraham Lincoln. Students must determine what the "ship" in the poem represents, what "prize" was won, and what historical event is represented by the "fearful trip."

Poetry also promotes close reading comprehension in another way. To perform a poem with meaningful expression, students have to read the poem closely and deeply so they can determine the appropriate phrasing, changes in pitch, dramatic pauses, changes in volume, and so on. Although the intent of this close reading is a meaningful performance,

the analyses and rehearsals that precede the performance require students to be cognizant of the meaning they wish to convey.

Poetry can even contribute to the writing curriculum. Poems for children often have a distinct pattern or structure that students can use as models for their own writing. Children's poet Bruce Lansky calls these *parody poems*; on his website Giggle Poetry, he provides a guide for helping teachers and students create their own

rhythmical texts using the structure of familiar poems and songs (see www.gigglepoetry.com/poetryclass.aspx).

Copy-change is another term often used for this approach to writing, which can also be employed with poems intended for older students. For example, upper elementary students have copy-changed the metaphor in Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son"

("Well, son, I'll tell you. Life for me ain't been no crystal stair") into "Well, son, I'll tell you. Life for me ain't been no Caribbean cruise," or "Well, team, let me tell you. Coaching for me ain't been no Super Bowl Sunday." By emulating the poets they enjoy and admire, students engage in a deeper analysis of the poems and may begin to internalize the linguistic and poetic structures the poets use.

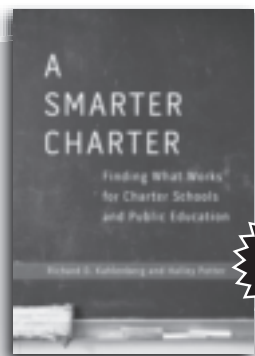
Not Survival, but Passion

Poetry clearly offers some interesting possibilities for teaching the foundations of literacy and beyond.

My Favorite Poets for Reading Aloud

Brod Bagert
Mary Ann Hoberman
Paul Janeczko
Lee Bennett Hopkins
Sarah Holbrook
Bruce Lansky
Patrick Lewis
Walter Dean Myers
Kenn Nesbitt
Robb Pottle
Jack Prelutsky
Shel Silverstein

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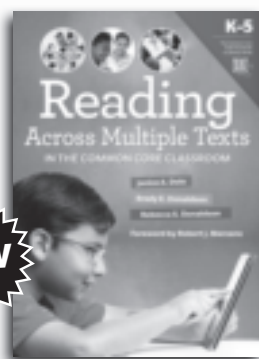
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Confidence, phonemic awareness, phonics and word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and even writing can be nurtured through the regular and intentional use of poetry in classrooms at all grade levels. Moreover, Wicklund (1989) suggests that poetry is an ideal text for students who struggle in reading.

In our own university reading clinic, we challenge students who struggle in reading to learn to read and perform a new poem every day. We find that students make remarkable progress, not only in their reading achievement, but also in their motivation to read and their confidence in themselves as readers (Zimmerman & Rasinski, 2012). Yet, despite such promise, many school reading programs have slowly reduced the amount of poetry students learn. Sharon Gill (2007) has called poetry the “forgotten genre.”

Even beyond the reading skills that poetry can help develop, the main reason we should consider making poetry and other rhythmic texts an integral part of the reading curriculum is that poetry is inherently enjoyable and satisfying to read and hear. Poets have their own way of making this point. Former poet laureate of the United States Robert Pinsky says, “there’s something about reciting rhythmical words aloud—it’s almost biological—that comforts and enlivens human beings” (quoted in Keillor, 2004). Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Phillip Schultz (2011) says that poetry should be a “matter of passion, not survival.” If we want our students to develop passion for language, not just proficiency with it, then we must bring poetry back into our elementary, middle, and secondary classrooms. **EL**

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