4-1-2008

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Poetry Proves to be Positive in the Primary Grades

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──────── **Abstract** ────────

Learning to read and write and achieve good conduct are crucial in the primary grades. One teacher from a state in the Midwest implemented poetry with her second grade students to guide classroom conduct and improve literacy. This article discusses poetry as a literature genre, the benefits of poetry, and poetry curriculum where children read and write poems, enhancing critical thinking skills. In addition, student feedback, classroom orientation, classroom management, poetry as bibliotherapy, and the teacher's evaluation of poetry and student progress are discussed.

Many teachers commit some time in their busy professional schedules to search for additional strategies and meaningful methods to improve student learning. One second grade teacher contemplated a number of resources, while searching specifically for opportunities to improve literacy and, at the same time, encourage good conduct. Her self-contained second grade classroom is in a school located in a Midwestern state and includes eighteen students with eight boys and ten girls.

Approximately 98% of the children in the classroom were Caucasian. Based on her experience in the classroom, this teacher realized the connection between student enjoyment and student learning. She realized the many uses of poetry may have potential for enhancing literacy while simultaneously improving conduct because the children in her classroom readily enjoyed poetry. Selecting poetry as a genre allowed her to create a curriculum that would help students improve performance in classroom subjects, address the learning capacity of all students, and establish early guidance in good conduct.

It is important to recognize the significant role teachers play in literacy learning and addressing student needs (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Rasinski and Padak (2004) maintain that teachers do more than teach reading and their roles as educators may change as student needs arise. In an article in *The Washington Post*, Epstein (2005) noted that teachers today may have roles beyond educating involving child rearing, with discipline as a prominent school concern. Epstein also stated that building character has been vital since the beginning of American schools. The expanded role and influence of teachers is further highlighted with the teacher being more important than any theory, method, or material because of their personal involvement with children in the implementation of strategies and curriculum (Leu & Kinzer, 2003; Rasinski & Padak, 2004). In particular, in the early grades, teachers implement many strategies that build skills in reading.

Learning to read is a significant cognitive process and an essential tool for learning and appreciating all subject matter. According to Antonacci and O'Callaghan (2004), reading is a crucial tool of young learners for academic success. These authors referred to reading as a prime, expansive, and interactive education topic. Likewise, Leu & Kinzer (2003) depicted a number of significant comprehension components for effective reading: word recognition, syntax, semantics, discourse, affect, and socialization. Effective readers use these components as needed to form meaning from text and teachers need to support children in terms of these components. In the second grade classroom discussed in this article, the teacher believed learning poetry could be an effective interactive strategy for literacy and a useful way to address misbehavior through making personal connections with the content of the poems. Charles (2005) reported that student misbehavior is one of the most troublesome challenges teachers face. Problematic behavior often stifles student learning and instruction, increases stress levels, and lowers teacher and student morale. Creating a positive classroom atmosphere was an important part of this teacher's plan to encourage good conduct and to improve literacy learning.

The purpose of this article is to describe how a second grade teacher implemented poetry to improve literacy and behavior in her classroom. We discuss literature genre and the benefits of poetry, selecting poems and poetry curriculum, children's feedback to the poems, classroom orientation, classroom management and literacy, poetry as bibliotherapy, and the teacher's evaluation of poetry, respectively.

Literature Genre and Benefits of Poetry

Early in the school year, the teacher recognized the children's love for poetry when she read Maurice Sendak's (1990) book *Chicken Soup With Rice: A Book of Months*. Sendak's book embodies a poem for each month of the year and is useful for discovering the calendar and poetry concepts including rhyme, rhythm, repetition, alliteration, and phonemic awareness. "Awareness of rhyme, rhythm and alliteration together with phonemic awareness distinguish effective readers from readers at risk" (Parr & Campbell, 2006, p. 38). Although poetry is a less frequently utilized literature genre for educating young children and may even be neglected by some (Parr & Campbell, 2006), poetry can be very influential. From the associated rhyme, rhythm, sounds, and words poetry serves to inspire an interest in reading and writing (Stange & Wyatt, 1999). According to Morrow (2001), poetry is one of many useful mediums for improving literacy. Poetry also inspires thought and supports early success with literacy (Parr & Campbell, 2006; Routman, 2000). Tompkins (2005) revealed that poetry not only supports reading, but also enhances enjoyment of language and learning. Language learning is an integrative process comprising reading, writing, speaking, and listening in meaningful contexts. Improvement of a particular language process also facilitates improvements in other language processes (Templeton, 1997). More inclusively, Graves (1992) asserts that poetry should not be limited to writing time, English, or language arts, but should be used throughout the curriculum. Poetry is not a genre "on a hill" (Graves, 1992, p. 171), but a form of communication to be meaningfully integrated during instruction.

"Poetry is the first genre that most children hear" (Manning, 2003, p. 86), and is an oral tradition (Cramer, 2001) for families of young children and for early readers. Children "are natural poets" (Tompkins, Bright, Pollard & Winsor, 1998, p. 414) as they jump rope, clap their hands or dance to a song. In addition, "if children can sing or recite poetry, they will soon be able to read it, and if they can read it, they will soon be able to write it" (Parr & Campbell, 2006, p. 38). Poetry is motivating and builds phonemic awareness, while enhancing the alphabetic prin-

ciple, vocabulary, fluency, expression, and writing skills and the genre also has the potential to make reading a positive learning experience (Parr & Campbell, 2006).

Selection of Poems for this Classroom

In this second grade classroom, the teacher utilized a number of poems for enhancing literacy learning and improving her children's conduct. Several poems are mentioned in this article and a selected list of authors is provided at the end. Additional resources can be found by searching the Internet (see Figure 1). The teacher was especially interested in authors like Ruth Heller and Judy Lalli as their poetry afforded a variety of opportunities for children in her classroom to learn peer group solutions to problems. The poems also contain varied language for learning an array of words.

**Use Search Engines to Locate
Poetry Resources on the Web**

- www.poetry4kids.com includes rhyming dictionary, poetry games, poetry contests, news and surveys, discussion forums (and more) or search for poetry resources for teachers.
- www.colegiobolivar.edu.co/libary/primary_poetry.htm includes various forms of poems (limericks, free verse and more), thousands of poems and poets (indexed), collections of rhyming poems and stories and links, lesson plans and assistance for teachers.
- www.ebscohost.com includes a search tool which allows selection of poems by title and authors, available in PDF and HTML full text downloads.
- www.perfectpoems.com is a poetry collection site for beginning reading and writing of words.

Figure 1. Internet Poetry Resources

Poetry as Socialization and a Self-Acceptance Resource

Judy Lalli's (1997) book *I Like Being Me* was ideal for modeling socialization and self-acceptance. The book includes useful poems categorically organized for learning about compassion, fairness, citizenship, honesty, self-discipline, respect, and integrity. For this classroom, such poems inspired a heightened awareness of treating others in a positive manner as encouraged by Charles (2005). These poems reinforced "poetitude" (Parr & Campbell, p. 36), the value and power of poetry as

a teaching tool. The following explains how particular poems by Lalli and Heller addressed the positive issues of cooperation, risk-taking, and trustworthiness.

Cooperation

Many Luscious Lollipops by Ruth Heller (1998) proved to be an exemplary poetic book to involve the children in cooperative learning. Using a big book, the children read the patterned story together, while the teacher emphasized adjectives, rhymes, and pointed out the colorful illustrations associated with lollipops. The poem presented a way for the children to identify with one another, discover a positive perspective for problem solving, and develop a sense of community.

Risk-Taking

Judy Lalli (1997) wrote a useful poem to encourage risk-taking, a favorable condition for learning (Cambourne, 2000/2001). In all efforts to encourage literacy and behavior, it is important to treat children with dignity (Charles, 2005). Reading Lalli's poem that follows, offered guidance to the children on how to react to mistakes and treat others with respect:

> *Mistakes can be good, they can help you grow,*
> *And they can show you what you need to know.*
> *So whenever you make a mistake, just say,*
> *Now I'll try it another way.*

<div align="right">

Excerpted from *I Like Being Me* by Judy Lalli © 1997.
Used with permission of Free Spirit Publishing, Inc., Minneapolis, MN;
800-735-7323; www.freespirit.com. All rights reserved.

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During poetry writing lessons, the teacher purposely inserted mistakes such as spelling, capitalization, and punctuation errors for the children to detect. Acknowledging the mistakes engaged the students in discussion ultimately leading the teacher to discover that the children were more comfortable discussing mistakes thereby resulting in fewer mistakes.

Trustworthiness Poem

The teacher was very partial to Judy Lalli's (1997) poem about trustworthiness. She thought it would serve to increase self-concept, self-confidence, and self-awareness as children engaged in learning activities. Parr and Campbell (2006) stated that thinking positively about poetry is necessary for writing and reading poetry

which can transfer to other areas of learning and responsibilities. The following Lalli poem was beneficial for setting personal expectations:

> *I didn't believe I could do it,*
> *I was afraid to try,*
> *My teacher believed I could do it,*
> *And next time, so will I.*

The teacher described this particular text as the signature poem to improve behavior and literacy and actively engage children as it informed children of expectations in the classroom, a crucial factor for good discipline (Charles, 2005). Poetry is a very useful tool for extending children's concepts and developing relevant meanings. According to Swartz (2003), "poetry is a way to see and express life" (p. 54). Poetry helps teachers enter the children's zone of proximal development, the highest level of independent learner function and provides the necessary scaffolding to extend language and reading in a social cultural context (Vygotsky, 1986). When children connect the texts read to their lives, they recognize that what is read relates to the larger world beyond their universe of home, school, and neighborhood (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

Poetry as Curriculum

Children Read Poems

The teacher's poetry curriculum incorporated a number of strategic elements to encourage reading. To begin, she used colorful markers and recorded the poems on flip chart paper. The children also received copies of the poems to read and enjoy in school and at home with their parents. The teacher initially read them aloud and the children then read, reread and discussed each poem. Often, one or two students lead the class in a shared reading of a poem. During choral readings, children used a pointer to model left to right reading and speech to print matching. Students and the teacher discussed and interpreted each poem relative to themes. For example, some poems conveyed the importance of telling the truth or believing in one's ability. The children used their dictionaries to search for words they did

not understand or recognize and they also helped each other form compositions. They often recorded their interpretations of poems through simple word processing and paint programs.

Throughout the process, the children assumed active roles by sharing insights. Routman (2000) reported that shared readings of rhyming poetry increased reading confidence and competence of developing and struggling readers. Campbell (2001) stated that as children read and listen to poetry, it increases their desire to read additional poems.

Children Wrote Poems

The teacher also supported her students learning by having them compose their own poetry. According to Campbell (2001), one positive consequence of reading poetry aloud is that it inspires children to write poems. Children began by constructing poems related to conduct, activities, and places at school. They created a simple anagram poem by first thinking of a word and then using the sequential letters to form additional words, phrases, and expressions pertaining to behavior.

Children's anagrams suggested their knowledge and thinking patterns. One child chose the word LIBRARY and wrote *"Look In Books Read and Read Yawn."* This poem shows an awareness of the functional aspects of reading. The teacher inferred that the writer was thinking about the purpose of reading acknowledging that while reading is relaxing, it can also be tiring and require short breaks. Selecting RECESS as a word, another child wrote *"Respect Each Child, Everyone's Sweet Success."* This expression signified awareness of the value of treating others well, along with the belief that success was likely when children are encouraged to take risks.

The poetic anagrams reinforced appropriate conduct and reminded the children of a shared purpose for learning. The writing activity supported spelling improvement as poetry reinforces letter and sound relationships in meaningful and manageable contexts for emergent second and third grade learners (Campbell, 2001). Poetry writing also extends preschool and kindergarten literacy knowledge such as sounding out the syllables of their names or tapping to rhythms and rhyming patterns. Campbell (2001) stated that a love of writing can result from composing poetry. In this classroom, poetry was engaging for all children as they applied their creative understandings.

Poetry Enhanced Critical Thinking Skills

As children proceeded through the steps of the writing process, they worked beyond the basics of knowledge and comprehension, because poetry is a synthetic and an interactive process that naturally encourages critical, creative, and higher ordered thinking (Fehl, l983). Scriven and Paul (2007) defined critical thinking as "that mode of thinking about any subject, content or problem in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking" (p 2.). After reading these poems, the children gleaned certain truths and drew a group consensus of trust and right and wrong. In addition, they acquired personal insights about family, friends, and acquaintances from reading and discussing poetry, and gained a higher level of learning, demonstrating their awareness of good behavior and positive thinking.

Classroom Organization

In a typical school day, these second grade students moved from one part of the classroom to another to complete their class assignments, from room to room for some subjects, and from one area of the school to another during recess and lunch. Such movement presented a distraction for some children, so the teacher implemented an activity using poetry. During transitions, the teacher invited the children to recite poems. One teacher-created rhyme encouraged good conduct through the language of the poem:

> *I am going back to my seat,*
> *You won't hear a peep*
> *When I am moving around,*
> *I don't make a sound.*

The teacher discovered that performing poetry often helped the children focus their attention during transitions. With attention focused on reciting poems, the teacher expanded instruction beyond the classroom to further enhance student learning. She also integrated activities for arrival and departure from school and to and from lunch. She included a wide variety of poems to promote fairness, citizenship, trustworthiness, honesty, integrity, compassion, and responsibility. A major goal was for the children to realize healthy social, emotional and cognitive development, and expand language and literacy. If students lack the focus needed during instruction or if they do not have self-discipline, it may be difficult for them to progress. Poetry provided a focus for the teacher to encourage improvement of reading and writing as well as student self-discipline.

Children's Feedback

Before children can develop a sense of right or wrong, they must first acquire sensitivity for the emotions of other people (Goleman, 1997). One activity the teacher used to gain information about these children's thoughts was to invite them to think and write about their behavior. She noticed that reading and writing poetry increased self-awareness and self-esteem in each of the young students in her classroom. Comments noted in Table 1 suggest insight and engagement as the children offered feedback about their conduct.

Table 1. Student Comments about Poetry

- When we use poetry for behavior, I feel proud of myself.
- I feel good. It made me feel like such a good child.
- I like to say poetry. I could say them all day.
- When we use poems, I feel good. This is because they make us be good. They help us be nice and good at recess.
- They help us behave in the hallway at school.
- When we use poetry for our behavior, I feel happy. This is because I like doing poetry. It helps us do good behavior.
- Poetry is nice. And the best thing of all, it stops our talking.
- When we use poetry for our behavior, I feel nice.
- This is because I make people happy and feel great.
- Poetry is good for you. And it helps you. And I like it.
- There is one poem I sing everyday called, I didn't believe I could do it.

Classroom Management and Literacy

Most teachers want to spend time helping children learn, rather than focusing on problematic behavior. While reasons for student misbehavior vary, students often misbehave wanting more attention, firmer limits, or for greater motivation. Charles (2005) referred to William Glasser's Model, noting behaviors are purposeful, fulfilling one or more of the five basic and genetically determined needs of survival, belonging, freedom, fun, and power.

Describing the Teacher's Role

Teachers are "agents of behavioral change" and very significant to students' behavioral progress (Brodkin, 2001, p. 4) and literacy achievement (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). The significance of determining children's personal interests and backgrounds in order to modify behavior is helpful to inform and improve children's reading (Brodkin, 2001; Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Teachers can utilize a number of strategies to monitor student progress including surveys, informal discussions, and observations of behavior and reading. In this classroom, when the teacher implemented activities such as writing poetry, she asked the students to define their feelings. According to Graves (1992) "poetry is for thinking and feeling" (p. 171). Poetic self-expressions encourage learning, deeper thinking, and awareness of behavior.

Defining Conduct

Brodkin (2001) described two categorizations of problematic student behaviors: (1) disruptions to a learning environment and (2) subtle disappearing behavior. Such basic categorical representations are useful to teachers when determining whether or not intervention is necessary. Teachers can quickly recognize the more salient category of disrupting learning environment through classroom behavior such as "calling out, clowning around, making silly noises, getting up/down and acting intrusive or distracting (thereby interfering with others' ability to work), rowdiness in the halls and/or playground, bullying, disrespectfulness, overall poor self-control, verbal or physical aggression, and various disguised pleas for attention" (Brodkin, p. 4). In contrast, the more restrained category of disappearing student behavior personifies subtleties like tuning-out, withdrawing, daydreaming, not listening, avoiding participation, or showing little or no pride in their work and/or interest in their social surroundings. Subtle disappearing behavior, while seemingly not as urgent as disruptive behavior, is likely very disturbing to a classroom teacher inhibiting student achievement. Teachers should address such behavior in order to avoid negative effects on learning.

No matter how a teacher decides to address behavior, children must have and know clear classroom expectations. Many schools define rules of conduct, and certainly, many teachers help create rules. If a teacher decides to invent personal rules of conduct, Charles (2005) suggests using the golden rule as a starting point, adding one or two other rules as needed. As a literacy enhancing strategy in this classroom, poetry lent itself well for the development of rules and had a captivating record improving student behavior.

Poetry as Bibliotherapy

Abdullah (2002) posited that poetry is a natural means of improving behavior, a tool of "biblioguidance" (p. 3). Poetry bibliotherapy is sometimes termed poetry therapy (Longo 1996-2006). While poetry therapy is relatively new in the expressive arts, the concept of bibliotherapy is as old as the first chants sung by the tribal fires of primitive people. A term popular in the 1960s and 1970s, bibliotherapy is the concept of healing and molding minds through books and particular texts and dates back to the first libraries of ancient Greece (Bibliotherapy, l982).

Sigmund Freud related the values of poetry for learning and counsel (Meisel, l981). Freud maintained that poetry develops one's unconscious creative mental powers and imagination, is an ideal medium for counseling, often providing useful analog and metaphor for understanding, and is a natural function of the human mind (Meisel, 1981). In fact, Freud referred to the mind as "a poetry-making organ" (Meisel, l981, p. 107). Historically, poetry serves therapeutic purposes as a form of self-expression and as a form of art as children learn to understand nature and the world (Lerner, 1994). Personal, self-expression poems or "I" poetry, can be therapeutic by promoting greater self-esteem and motivation.

Conclusion

According to this teacher, using poems of well-known authors and allowing children to invent poems provided every child with creative choices to support alphabetic principle, spelling, and literacy. Selected poems ultimately provided a strong foundation for improving conduct and enhanced literacy learning. The variety of poems and related activities helped the children understand words and vocabulary associated with character education. The children internalized the principles in their daily actions and as they read and recited poetry, a group consciousness for best conduct developed. In addition, positive peer pressure inspired many children to implement better behavior. Poetry also noticeably increased student engagement as well as improved decision-making for good conduct.

All students in this classroom improved in reading and writing fluency by reading and composing poetry. This was evident as scores for spelling and word recognition increased. Poetry fostered a supportive learning environment with less lying, cheating, tattling, making fun of others, bullying, and other behavioral problems. It was also evident that when the children understood how to connect what they read to their daily lives, they realized the impact of their actions. Effectively utilizing poetry inspired what Brodkin (2001) referred to as a mutual respect and