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Fostering Reading Fluency in the School Library

by

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In this era of high-stakes testing there is, in many schools, a focus on testing at the expense of a broader literacy oriented curriculum and a diminishing appreciation of affective considerations, especially relative to students in schools designated as low-achieving schools (**International Reading Association, 1999**).   This drive for more and more statistical accountability has led to school curricula so test-focused that today's classroom teachers have little or no time to focus on the affective domain of student development.

The value of affective development for learning has been well researched. Educators and psychologists have for many years demonstrated the importance of involving learners physically, emotionally, as well as academically in their learning. Vygotsky (**l978**) was a pioneer in demonstrating the importance of socialization as a vital component of learning. Vygotsky proposed that there is a zone of proximal development in which the learner is ready to learn but must receive support in both social and academic contexts.

Such support is comprehensively described by Rasinski (**2003**) as scaffolding, wherein the learner is led from total dependence on the person in the role of leader/teacher to independence. In Rasinski's context, the student is supported initially by being read to aloud by a more competent reader. This initial state is followed by assistance in the form of help with word identification and key ideas. Eventually, the reader will reach the point where he or she can read independently, that is, without any outside assistance.

A natural outcome of scaffolding, as described by Rasinski above, is learning that enhances the learning of key onsets and rimes which Adams (**1990)** concluded is essential for developing fluency and comprehension. In this light, Rasinski, Rupley, and Nichols (**2008**) presented strong arguments that poetry is a natural and enjoyable vehicle for learning rimes and onsets effectively and efficiently.

Following the lead of Vygotsky, the importance of social acceptance and creating a self-image as a successful learner was strongly advocated by Bandura (**1997**). The work of Vygotsky, Bandura, and many others of like minds provided the foundation for the constructivist movement in education with its emphasis of "hands-on" learning and developing the whole person in schools as well as learning information and skills. In addition, the work of Gardner (**1993)** powerfully demonstrates the need for involving as many modes of intelligence as can be integrated into the learning environment.

Parkay and Stanford (**2001**), who based their work primarily on the findings of Swiss biologist and social scientist Jean Piaget, determined that children learn most effectively and efficiently by engaging in physical, social, and academic activity within their environments. Children need to be physically and

mentally active rather than passive learners. Piaget's work also suggested to these researchers that activity is not only physical manipulation but also fosters mental action that transforms into creating new, exciting, and permanent learning. In this light, Csikszentmihalyi (**1997**) determined that when a child likes what he or she is doing and is encouraged to do it, "focusing the mind becomes effortless" (p. 27). Further, Peterson (**2006**) determined that positive emotional climates foster "broader attention, greater working memory, enhanced verbal fluency, and increased openness to information" (p. 58).

In this light, the authors propose that the library can be a haven in the school where affective dimensions of literacy instruction can be emphasized. The school library can be a place where students are invited to explore their feelings and emotions through a variety of poetry experiences that are not test driven but rather deliberately focus on the affective domain to encourage language appreciation and development. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines poetry as "writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm" **(2008).**

In diverse cultures the world over, we observe adults interacting with young people using traditional oral forms of nursery verse, lullabies, and wordplay and we observe these young people respond with laughter, singing or clapping. Savage (**2000**) states, "Young people seem to be intuitively drawn to the poetic elements—language, rhythm, rhyme, imagery, humor, and meaning—in children's verse" (p. 254). Parents and teachers alike observe young people voluntarily memorize simple verses for the sheer pleasure of repeating them in rhyming words – the interplay of hearing and speaking – that simply delight their senses.

Poetry serves as an efficacious bridge from the informal language instruction done in the home to the more formal instruction the young person encounters at school. Indeed, one of the first types of literature children are apt to experience in the home is Mother Goose rhymes like, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star", "The itsy bitsy spider" or "One, two, buckle my shoe". One of the best methods of developing phonological awareness in young children is through the "exposure to nursery rhymes, chants, poems, and stories that play on the sounds of words" (**O'Donnell &Wood, 2004, p.31**).

In addition, Roser, Roach and Horsey (**2009**), found that the most effective teachers relied on a variety of genres in children's literature to improve instruction, especially poetry. Vardell (**2006**) advocates for the use of poetry: "It introduces new vocabulary and figurative language, reinforces phonemic awareness, is rich in imagery and sensory language, and is stimulating to the imagination" (p.35). Unfortunately, classroom teachers find their time spent almost exclusively on preparing students for the standardized tests that are of utmost importance to school administrators seeking federal dollars. It is no surprise that educators Darigan, Tunnell, and Jacobs (**2002**) find that poetry is often the most neglected component of the language arts curricula.

School librarians working collaboratively with the classroom teacher and utilizing the resources of the library media center can share a variety of poetry experiences with students that address both cognitive and affective domains of development. The library can be a place where poetry is celebrated through displays, resource centers, reading centers, listening and writing centers, and hands-on projects.

When asked why one may like one poem rather than another, most people have a difficult time explaining "why". Usually it is a matter of "I just know when I like it"! While frustrating for researchers who like quantifiable answers, this signifies poetry's ability to evoke a personal emotional response reflecting feelings that are individual to each person. While it is very difficult to evaluate what criterion constitutes quality poetry, there are some basic questions to ask when evaluating poetry for sharing with children:

1.Does the poet present fresh, imaginative ideas and feelings?
2.Does the poetry have the potential to evoke sensory images and elicit an emotional response?
3.Does the poetry have a cadence, a beat, a definite rhythm? Is it one that children can mimic?
4.If the poetry is written in a rhyming format, are the rhymes natural?
5.Are the sounds and words of the poem appealing?
6.Does the poet use language in unique and impressive ways to present ideas, descriptions, and emotions?

Using poetry and working together both librarians and classroom teachers can facilitate the young person's learning of important language arts skills but, most importantly, not at the expense of the affective domain of feelings. Rather, working collaboratively both teacher and librarian acknowledge and build emotional literacy while providing an outlet for the expression of feelings and emotions in a safe, fun and educational environment.

Poetry Resources for Teachers and Librarians

Barton, B., & Booth, D. (2004). Poetry goes to school: From Mother Goose to Shel Silverstein. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers.

Bauer, C. F. (1994). The poetry break: An annotated anthology with ideas for introducing children to poetry. New York: H.W. Wilson.

Chapman, J. (2004). Sing a song of sixpence: A pocketful of nursery rhymes and tales. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.

DeRegniers, B. S. (Ed.). (1988). Sing a song of popcorn: Every child's book of poems. Jefferson City, MO: Scholastic.

Harrison, M., & Stuart-Clark, C. (Eds.). (1998). The New Oxford treasury of children's poems. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hoberman, M. A. (1998). The llama who had no pajama: 100 favorite poems. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

Hopkins, L. B. (Ed.). (1998). Pass the poetry, please. New York: HarperCollins.

Janeczco, P. (1999). Favorite poetry lessons. Jefferson City, MO: Scholastic.

Koch, K., & Padgett, R. (2000). Wishes, lies, and dreams: Teaching children to write poetry. New York: HarperCollins.

Larrick, N. (1999). Let's do a poem: Introducing poems to children. New York: Delecorte Press.

Norris, J. (1999). How to make books with children. Monterey, CA: Evan-Moor.

Philip, N. (Ed.). (1998). The New Oxford book of children's verse. New York: Oxford University Press

Prelutsky, J. (1983). The Random House book of poetry for children: A treasury of 572 poems for today's child. New York: Random House.

Stevenson, R. L. (2008). A child's garden of verses. New York: Star Bright Books.

Sweeney, J. (1999). Poetry aloud here! Sharing poetry with children in the library. Chicago: American Library Association.

Teachng poetry: Yes you can! Jeffereson City, MO: Scholastic.Vardell, S. (2006).

Poetry Websites

Here are a few excellent poetry sites on the web for teachers and librarians:

•Poetry for Kids Links Page - Websites of published children's poets, poets who visit schools and classic children's poetry online. **http://poetry4kids.com/links.html**

•Kristine O'Connell George - The official website of award-winning children's poet, Kristine O'Connell George. Ideas for sharing poetry with children and for celebrating National Poetry Month. **http://www.kristinegeorge.com/**

•Poetry for the Elementary Classroom - An entire curriculum unit for teachers from Yale- New Haven Teachers Institute. **http://www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1991/4/91.04.06.x.html**

Making Comb-bound Books

We have found that making comb-bound poetry books is a wonderful way to involve children in their learning in a most productive and enjoyable manner. The ideas presented herein engage the theories of the researchers presented above in practical classroom activities. We will first present information concerning construction of comb-bound books. The reader will find there are countless variations on our approach.

Materials

1. A comb-binding machine such as the Ibico Kombo provides the means for binding the books. We have found that many schools have a binding machine of this type. They are, however, in most circumstances rarely used except for occasional reports. Comb-binding machines are available at all office supply stores such as Office Max and Office Depot. When purchasing a comb-binder we recommend getting a sturdy machine capable of easily punching through mat board. We suggest keeping the machine on a rolling cart for ease of transport since many of them are fairly heavy.

2. Plastic combs used for binding are also available at all office supply stores. We have also found that there are often large supplies of them in school storage closets. We cut the 11- inch combs into sections of six comb rings for the project described herein. The half-inch comb size works well. The standard sized combs contain 19 binding rings; however, be sure to see that the combs are compatible with your comb-binding machine.

3. Make pages for the books from 110 lb. or 67 lb. cardstock. Regular weight copy paper (24 lb.) is too flimsy for making durable pages   Start by cutting one inch off the top with a paper cutter making the paper 10" x 8.5". Next, cut the pages into fourths (4.25" x 5") using a paper cutter. This will give you four pages per sheet. Now, line up the pages on the comb-binding machine so that you can punch six holes. There are guide marks on the comb-binding machine to designate where to punch or you can add your own with a sticker(s).

4. Cut mat board 5.5" x 4.5" using a sturdy paper cutter. We get lots of colorful scrap mat board free from frame shops. It is easy to make front and back matching covers. Punch six holes in the mat board. When punching the front cover and the back cover be sure to reverse the punching procedure for each cover so they will match perfectly when aligned. That is, punch the front cover with the colorful side facing upwards and the back cover with the colorful side facing downwards. The placement of the mat board on the comb-binding machine will be slightly different from placement for the pages because the mat board is a little larger. This adjustment can easily be made.

5. We like to make name plates for our students. For example, using impressive looking bond paper we affix the typed name of each student and the title of the book. We make one set of name plates (1.5" x 2.0" when cut out), that can easily be modified for many different titles. We use the "Replace" option on Microsoft Edit to easily make a new set of name plates. The professional looking name plate is very impressive, easy to create, and encourages students to treasure books they make even more than they ordinarily would. We also make name plate frames (2" x 3") from construction paper and cut pieces of clear plastic adhesive such as ConTact to cover the name plate frames (3.5" x 2.5").

Constructing the Poem Book

1. Prepare a set of typed poems that will comfortably fit on the pages. We put each poem in a box on the page to make it easier for children to cut them out. We have collected a large number of poems that appeal to children but we limit the number to 10 for logistical reasons.

2. Provide materials for the students: poem collection, glue sticks, construction paper for frames for the poems on the pages, scissors, 10 blank pages, front and back covers, personalized name plate, six-ring comb, and whatever else you would like to add.

3. Provide a model for the students to see how the finished product will look.

4. Invite the students to cut out poems they like from the collection provided, make a frame for the poem out of construction paper, and affix the poems and frames to the pages using a glue stick.

5. We encourage the students to write a "wonderful" poem themselves. The idea of the "wonderful" poem was brought to us by a colleague who experienced this strategy being used successfully with young children in Australia. The "wonderful" poem is always in the following format:

Cats, Wonderful Cats

By Ima Librarian

Cats, wonderful cats,

Purring, softly rubbing,

Sitting in the sun,

Waiting for me to come home,

Friends, warm and fluffy,

Cats, wonderful cats.

The students all eventually add their wonderful poems to their own book of poems and place their poems on a bulletin board. We also produce a 9" x 6" comb-bound book of poems containing all of the "wonderful" poems produced by the members of the class.

Students not only enjoy producing the book of poems, we use the poems to foster reading fluency. For example, we like the coffee shop strategy (**Rasinski, 2003**) where the students work on a favorite poem and present the poem to the class while sitting in the poet's chair. The audience, meanwhile, is enjoying hot chocolate prepared in cups with lids similar to those they would use in places like Starbucks.

In addition, we invite the students to select a favorite poem from their book to record on a CD. The students practice their poem and when they and their reading coach determine they are ready, they record. The reading coach can be an older student, teacher, instructional assistant, or parent volunteer. A digital recorder such as the Olympus WS-311M works very well. This recorder costs about $60.00 at stores such as Sam's. We put about 12 poems on a CD with each poem on a new track. Using a separate track for each recording is important for locating the poems and if a reader needs to start over only the new track needs to be erased. We make a professional looking label with the name of the class and the name of each reader. Label maker programs, such as the one produced by Memorex, are easy to use and inexpensive.

Producing a book of poems is a very enjoyable and academically sound undertaking. As mentioned above, in this age of high stakes testing much school time is devoted to test preparation and focus on skills oriented activities that are often dull and tedious. On the other hand, we have found reading competencies, initiated in the school library and further developed by classroom teachers, can be greatly fostered through exciting activities such a making comb-bound books. As described earlier, this is an issue that goes beyond pedagogy to basic human desires to do interesting and meaningful things. We have also found that making comb-bound books is a great subject for a school workshop/in-service.
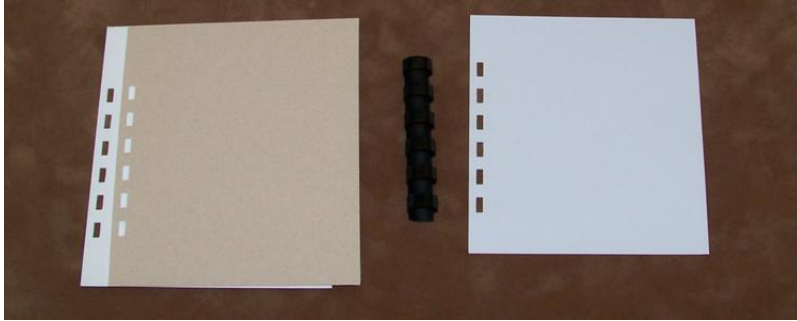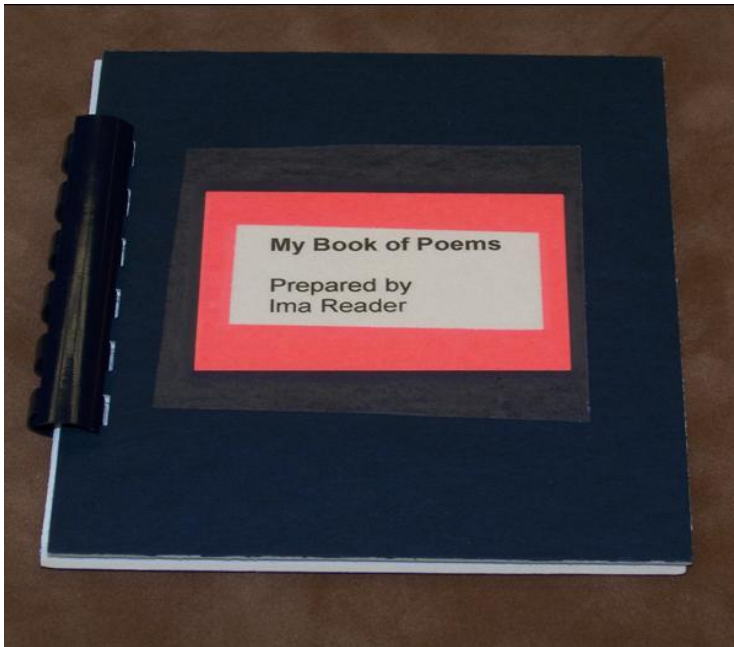
Figure 1. Basic materials: cover, comb, and page.

Figure 2. A completed book of poems.

Figure 3. Ethan prepares to punch out a book cover.

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