

CREATING COMMUNITIES OF POETRY READERS

CRIANDO COMUNIDADES DE LEITORES DE POESIA

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we introduce readers to the art of reading poetry with children. Beginning with a brief definition of poetry and how it works, followed by a discussion of the benefits of reading poetry with children. Next, we examine the neglect of poetry in schools, as well as recommendations for addressing this neglect. These recommendations are focused primarily on immersing students in poetry on a daily basis, reading poetry aloud to students and encouraging students to read poetry themselves. The author then shares research on children's poetry preferences in order to support teachers in choosing poetry to share with their students. Finally, we explain how reading poetry can lead to writing poetry. Our primary goal is to provide teachers and teacher educators with knowledge on how to invite students into the world of poetry.

KEYWORDS: poetry, reading, children, preferences

RESUMO: Neste artigo, nós apresentamos aos leitores a arte de ler poesia com as crianças. Começando com uma breve definição de poesia e como ela funciona, seguido por uma discussão sobre os benefícios da leitura de poesia com as crianças. Em seguida, examinamos a negligência do uso da poesia em escolas, bem como recomendações para lidar com essa negligência. Estas recomendações têm como foco principal orientar um trabalho de imersão com o texto poético para alunos em uma base diária, lendo poesia em voz alta para os alunos e incentivando-os a ler poesia autonomamente. Nós compartilhamos uma pesquisa sobre as preferências das crianças por poesia, a fim de orientar os professores na escolha de textos poéticos para a partilha em sala de aula. Finalmente, explicamos como ler poesia pode levar a escrever poesia. O nosso principal objetivo é fornecer aos professores e aos formadores de professores com conhecimento sobre como convidar os alunos para o mundo da poesia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Poesia, leitura, crianças e preferências

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TO START...

One of the most important goals I have in every class that I teach is to develop “a community of poetry readers, poetry writers, and poetry lovers” (PERFECT, 1999, p. 736). My objective in writing this article is to introduce readers to the delight of reading poetry with children in order to create these vital poetry communities. Perry Nodelman, an internationally recognized scholar of children’s literature, claims that if we want children to enjoy poetry, then “we need to provide them with knowledge of the possibilities of poetry and of attitudes toward the experience of it, and with techniques and strategies for deriving both understanding and enjoyment from that experience” (1992, p. 128-129). I will endeavor to provide readers with a variety of techniques and strategies for sharing the joy of poetry with children.

WHAT IS POETRY AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Poetry is one of the oldest art forms (Untermeyer, 1938). Poetic impulses exist at the origins of language use; poetry has been produced by every civilization since people began to communicate (BOYD, 1973; KOCH, 1998). “All societies through all of history have given voice to their experiences in order to understand them, and by doing so have created some form of poetry” (DENMAN, 1988, p. 7). The earliest forms of poetry were simple chants and hymns honoring nature (NORTON; GRETTON, 1972). “Poetry and song were originally one art” (KENNEDY; GIOIA, 2007, p. 150). Poetry is a universal art form that utilizes the music of language to express experience.

Defining poetry is not a simple task; many poets and theorists claim that poetry actually defies definition (ANDREWS, 1994; APOL; CERTO, 2011; KOCH, 1998; UNTERMEYER, 1938). Despite this challenge, many poets have attempted to articulate a definition of poetry. David Verble, a poet educator in the U. S., considers a poem to be “a living, breathing, active thing” (1973, p. 30). In fact, in the Inuit language, “*anerca*,” the word for poetry, also means “to breathe” (SLOAN, 2003a, p. 99). Jane Yolen, an award-winning children’s author and poet, describes poetry as “a short, lyrical response to the world. It is emotion under extreme pressure or recollection in a small space. It is the coal of experience so compressed it becomes a diamond” (2006, p. 87). J. Patrick Lewis, the 2011 U.S. Children’s Poet Laureate, compares great poetry to “a circus for the brain,” and he believes that there is “nothing in any language more beautiful, more inspiring and thought-provoking than poetry” (VARDELL,

2011, p. 1). Poetry works on a different level than prose: “You inhabit a novel,” but “a poem inhabits you” (CAREY, 1989, p. 14). The above attempts by poets to define poetry tend toward the poetic themselves.

In *Poetry Matters*, an instructional book aimed at teaching students how to write poetry, Ralph Fletcher shares his belief that poetry “is good for the soul,” and he identifies three pillars that undergird how poetry works as an art form: emotion, image, and music (2002, p. 14). Emotion, the first pillar of poetry, is the foundation of poetry (LOWELL, 1985). Because language and experience are rooted in the feeling world, poetry is naturally imbued with emotion (WORMSER; CAPPELLA, 2000). Fletcher instructs novice poets that a poem “is like an X-ray of what’s going on inside you” (p. 14). All poetry originates and emanates from the feelings and experiences of our deepest selves (ORR, 1983). Poetry then transmits these feelings into form through the vehicle of language (BOOTH; MOORE, 2003). Poetry can help students access their emotional lives like no other genre of writing, and it is for this reason that we invite poetry into our lives and the lives of our students (HEARD, 1999, 2009).

Imagery is the second pillar of poetry. Image-making power exists at the heart of poetry (JOHNSON, 1990). Imagery, or the communication of mental pictures, is “the verbal representation of sense experience” (NORTON; GRETTON, 1972, p. 142). Sensory images provide readers entrance into the poet’s experience of the world (MCKIM; STEINBERGH, 1983). Helen Frost, a novelist in verse, explains the connection between emotion and image: “Poetry relies on specific sensory details to create an emotional landscape” (2011, p. 55). Music is the third pillar of poetry. The music of language exists at the core of poetry (BOYD, 1973). Fletcher instructs novice poets that poems have sounds and rhythms that “burrow deep inside us and become a permanent part of who we are” (2002, p. 31). Poetry is an art form that makes music with words (JANECZKO cited in FRANCO, 2005; KOCH, 1998). Harry Behn, a poet and English professor, asked a group of young school children what poetry should be. In answer, a little girl pronounced: “I think a poem should simply make music with words, that’s all” (1968, p. 56). Emotion, imagery and music are at the foundation of how poetry functions as an art form.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF READING POETRY WITH CHILDREN?

Throughout the literature on poetry, poets speak to the magic and power of poetry (FRANCO, 2005; TIEDT, 2002; WONG, 2011). Poetry fosters genuine literacy and

improves language skills (SLOAN, 2003B; TRAVERS, 1987). Georgia Heard, a poet and poet-in-residence for schools and universities in the U.S., attests to the transformative power of poetry: “Poetry has the power to change us, by helping us sift through the layers of our lives in search of our own truths and our own poems” (1999, p. 118). Sharing poetry with students can help to develop imagination, foster self-understanding, validate experience and connect children to each other.

Poetry nourishes imaginative intelligence, emanating as it does from the connection between the poet’s imagination and the physical world (ABERCROMBIE, 1926; BROOKS; WARREN, 1976; CULLINAN; SCALA; SCHRODER, 1995). It is in the realm of poetry that intelligence of thought and intelligence of feeling meet (BENTON, 1992). The imaginative experience of poetry can serve to combat what poet Adrienne Rich identifies as the “apartheid of the imagination” (2001, p. 111). Following a six-month daily immersion in poetry, a first grade poet exclaimed: “Poetry is like directions for your imagination!” (DUTHIE; ZIMET, 1992, p. 24). Poetry provides teachers with a powerful tool for cultivating children’s imaginations.

Poetry fosters self-understanding by validating our human experience and providing a vehicle for listening to our inner, private selves (SKELTON, 2006; STEINBERGH, 1994). Children ask the same questions the world over: “Where did I come from? Who am I? Where am I going?” (BEHN, 1968, p. 43). Poetry helps children answer these questions by illuminating the truths within, allowing a deeper appreciation of the self (HEARD, 1999). Paul B. Janeczko, noted U. S. poet and anthologist, declares that poetry changed his life: “Reading poetry has helped me to see, feel, and think in new ways. Everyone deserves the chance to explore themselves and their lives through poetry” (2003, p. 142). Poetry can help nurture meaningful self-awareness and insight.

Poetry offers children a glimpse into the universality of human feeling and experience (COHEN, 2009). “What is true for someone on the deepest level is often true for us all” (REMEN, 1997, p. xiv-xv). When children recognize themselves in a poem, when they find that someone else’s words echo their own emotions and experiences, it may remind them that they aren’t alone in the world (GLENN, 1993). “When we feel a strong connection to a poem, it is often because our own reality has been illuminated. We sigh with relief and our souls sing out with that ‘yes! yes!’ of being understood and therefore validated” (PERFECT, 2005, p. 104). The

social bonds of poetry can offer comfort and heal loneliness (HEARD, 2009). “It can be a great comfort to hear our own voices emanating through the letters of words that come from someone else” (PEACOCK, 1999, p. 4). Poetry has the power “to break isolation...show us to ourselves when we are outlawed or invisible, remind us of beauty where no beauty seems possible, reminds us of our kinship where all is represented as separation” (RICH, 2001, p. 111). Through its ability to connect us to one another, poetry can offer readers comfort and a sense of community.

Poets frequently point to the humanizing affects of poetry, as exemplified by the following statements: “Art is an exchange of our humanness” (SEARS, 1990, p. 132); “Poetry is a soul-making activity” (HIRSCH, 1999, p. 31); and “Poetry is a life-cherishing force” (OLIVER, 1994, p. 122). Terry Hermsen, a poet and professor of creative writing in the U. S., claims that poetry is a force that works “to resettle humanity” (2009, p. 201). As a result of engaging her fourth graders in a daily practice of poetry, Durham found that poetry helped her students become more aware of their feelings and that the sharing of those feelings through poetry “helped humanize the interactions between children” (1997, p. 78). David M. Johnson (1990), a U. S. poet in the schools, asserts that poetry can help us to more genuinely connect with one another:

It is our responsibility to take the materials at hand – the inner world of mythic voices and dark mysteries, and the outer world of beaming sunflowers and stainless steel – and create a home for ourselves: a place where we are reconciled with each other and with earth and sky. (p. x)

IF POETRY IS SO BENEFICIAL, WHY IS IT NEGLECTED IN SCHOOLS?

Poet educators and researchers have been calling attention to the marginalization and neglect of poetry in U.S. schools for many years (DENMAN, 1988; DRESSMAN; FAUST, 2006; HUGHES; JOHN, 2009; KOCH, 1970; SLOAN, 2003B; TERRY, 1974). For many years poetry has been consigned to a peripheral role in American classrooms (SLOAN, 2003a). In 1972, Ann Terry conducted a national survey of U.S. children’s poetry preferences in the upper elementary grades. A significant amount of teachers reported that they only occasionally read poetry to their students, and they very seldom had them write poetry. Terry comments on these results: “After considering all the findings of this study, one conclusion is paramount above all others. Poetry is a neglected form in most elementary school classrooms”

(1974, p. 58). In light of the many benefits afforded by poetry, it is quite concerning that poetry is such a neglected art form in U.S. schools.

Teachers' own school poetry experiences serve to shape their perceptions of poetry and attitudes toward teaching poetry (RAY, 1998 as cited in CUMMING, 2007). Kathy A. Perfect, a middle school reading and language arts teacher in the U. S., reviewed the literature on poetry pedagogy and found several issues mentioned repeatedly that account for why poetry is so often neglected by classroom teachers: "fear, lack of comfort, teachers who feel compelled to teach reading skills, anxiety over method and knowledge, negative school experiences, and over-analysis and interpretation" (1999, p. 731). The manner in which poetry was presented to teachers when they were students has a powerful influence on those teachers' own classroom poetry practices.

In her literature review of poetry pedagogy in U. S. schools from the 1960's to the 2000's, Elizabeth L. Enochs, an elementary school librarian, concludes: "Defining poetry pedagogy means understanding poetry as a literary genre that took a manifest beating from those who misunderstood and misused it in classrooms during the first half of the twentieth century" (2010, p. 35). Over-analyzing poetry in search for hidden meanings is primarily responsible for causing a dislike of poetry (COLLINS, 2003; PERFECT, 1999; SLOAN, 1981, 1998, 2003a, 2003b). The biggest complaint that Perfect hears against poetry from teachers and students alike is the practice of dissecting a poem in the search for its single, legitimate meaning: "...the method of analyzing a poem to get at its meaning by tearing it apart, word by word or line by line, can tear the heart right out of the poem" (2005, p. 9). Teaching poetry through this process of dissection can result "in a detestation of the very word poetry" (STURDEVANT, 1917, p. 437). Undesirable school poetry practices such as the ones discussed above can alienate students and teachers from the world of poetry. These practices often destroy any pleasure students might discover in reading poems, effectively killing the spirit of poetry (GLICKSBERG & GORDON, 1939; NODELMAN, 1992).

HOW DO WE BEGIN TO ADDRESS THE NEGLECT OF POETRY IN SCHOOLS?

The first step in addressing the neglect of poetry in schools is to recognize the significant role the teacher plays in guiding children into the world of poetry. Baron Wormser, a poet educator, and David Cappella, a poet and teacher, view the teacher as the "institutional

gatekeeper of poetry in our society” (2000, p. ix). Molly Travers, in a review of research on poetry in the classroom, concludes that “the particular teacher has more influence on results than the particular method” (1984, p. 367). She found that good poetry teachers share their appreciation of poetry with students, show enthusiasm for poetry, emphasize the pleasure of poetry, exhibit flexibility around the study of poetry, set up a risk-free environment in which to explore poetry, and acknowledge the real, emotional experience of poetry. It is critical for teachers to grow a personal love of poetry so that they may in turn share this love of poetry with their students.

One of the most commonly recommended poetry practices for helping children enter the world of poetry is the daily immersion of students in poetry (BAUER, 1995; GLOVER, 1999; HONIGSFELD; DOVE, 2008; JARRETT, 2008; MYERS, 1997; NAPOLI; RITHOLZ, 2009; PARR & CAMPBELL, 2006; 1999; RIEF, 2002; SINGER, 2010; TERRY, 1974). Daily exposure to poetry from an enthusiastic teacher is a powerful motivator (FORD, 1992). Wormser and Cappella argue: “Poetry is an environment; it is not something that is simply trotted out for 2 weeks in May” (2000, p. 334-335). Sloan agrees; she instructs teachers to make poetry “an integral part of daily living, embedded in the ritual of the classroom” (2003a, p. 105). Janeczko, in his visits as a poet in U. S. schools, identifies the best poetry teachers as those who promote a year-long “ongoing love affair with poetry” (2003, p. 20). Amy McClure, a professor of children’s literature in the U. S., spent a year in two intermediate classrooms where children were engaged in an interdependent cycle of reading and writing poetry throughout the year. McClure points to “continuous, sustained exposure” to poetry as a necessary prerequisite for developing a love for poetry in children: “If children are to love poetry, they must be immersed in reading and writing it. Neither a short-term poetry unit nor an occasional read-aloud session on a rainy Friday afternoon is sufficient to nourish this love” (2003, p. 83). Poet Naomi Shihab Nye reminisces about her second-grade teacher who, as a “devoted lover of poetry,” placed poetry at the center of her classroom’s universe. She surrounded her students with poetry, which they read, recited, responded to and wrote all year long. Nye fondly recalls: “It was really a miraculous and simple curriculum that she developed” (LEHR, 2008, p. 327). Daily immersion in poetry by a teacher passionate about the art form is a powerful model for developing communities of children who love poetry.

One way to begin immersing children in poetry on a daily basis is to simply read poetry aloud to students. Because poetry is an oral art form, reading it aloud is a necessary step in developing an appreciation and love of poetry (MCCLURE & KRISTO, 1996). Poet Marilyn Singer's mantra is: "Poetry demands to be heard" (2010, p. 31). This belief is echoed by many poets and poet educators (CULLINAN et al., 1995; GRAVES, 1992; TIEDT, 2002; WORMSER; CAPPELLA, 2000). Poet Eve Merriam believes that "no one learns to love poetry without hearing it read out loud" (SLOAN, 1981, p. 958). Reading poetry aloud brings poetry alive for the LISTENER (VERBLE, 1973). Because poetry is meant to be heard, reading poems aloud to students is thought to be a critical pedagogical practice for introducing children to poetry (ELSTER & HANAUER, 2002; HADAWAY, VARDELL; YOUNG, 2001; LINABERGER, 2004; MIGUEZ, 2005; MOORE; MOORE, 1990; SEKERES; GREGG, 2007). Poet Naomi Shihab Nye urges teachers to find poems they love, then "sneak them into that chaotic moment before they go home, read a poem to open or close the class, or invite students to read poems out loud regularly" (LEHR, 2008, p. 334). When determining classroom poetry practices, reading poems aloud should be a priority (ENOCHS, 2010).

In her extensive survey of children's poetry preferences, Terry (1974) found that three fourths of the teachers surveyed reported reading poetry aloud only occasionally. She considers this to be: "an appalling finding of the study, especially since all the evidence suggests that merely reading poetry aloud stimulates children's interest" (p. 53). Terry underscores the importance of regularly reading poetry aloud to students: "Simply reading and sharing poems with students is the first step toward developing lasting interest in poetry" (p. 52). Reading poetry aloud gets at the heart of poetry by educating "the ear as well as the intelligence of the imagination" (SKELTON, 1986, p. 95).

When we read poetry aloud, we take it off the pedestal where it has lived out of reach for so many years and "make it live among us-warm and welcome" (SINGER, 2010, p. 31).

During my second year of teaching fourth grade, I took a poetry class as part of my master's program in integrating the creative arts into the curriculum. The instructor-poet challenged us to begin each school day by reading a poem or two aloud to our students. At that time my students began their day with a dry and boring activity of correcting the grammar and punctuation in sentences. Once I began sharing some of my favorite poems instead, I found a marked difference in the classroom atmosphere. The beginning of the day was lighter, happier

and more engaging. I brought in a variety of poetry books for my students to read during free reading time. They spontaneously began to ask to read aloud their own favorite poems. Soon we were spending 45 minutes reading poems aloud every morning. We had to start a sign-up sheet just so we could get through the rest of the day's curriculum! Reading poetry aloud is not limited to elementary school students. I currently begin all of my college classes by reading a poem or two aloud, and my students consistently report taking great joy from this gentle opening ritual. When teachers and children read and share poems together, they create a community of poets (CULLINAN et al., 1995; MCCLURE, 1993).

HOW DO WE SUPPORT CHILDREN IN READING POETRY THEMSELVES?

Along with reading poetry aloud to children on a daily basis, having children read poetry themselves is the most common recommendation made by poets and poet educators to help children enter the world of poetry. Reading poetry offers children a means of learning the language of poetry; when students read poetry they become their own poetry teachers and discover for themselves how poetry works (JANECZKO, 2003; KOCH, 1998; SLOAN, 2003a, 2003b). Reading a variety of poetry books in order to build an anthology of favorite poems can help students develop their personal poetry preferences (PARINI, 2008; SLOAN, 1981, 1998, 2003a, 2003b). Bee Cullinan, an expert in children's literature, claims: "The best way to build a love of poetry is to browse slowly through a number of poetry books, stopping to read what catches your eye, and meandering back to savor again what rings in your ear" (1996, p. 5). Creating personal poetry anthologies of their favorite poems gives students individualized access to the world of poetry.

When children read poetry, as with any literary text, it is critical that teachers honor Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading Literature (ROSENBLATT, 1976, 1994). According to this theory, reading is a dynamic transaction between a reader and a text, one in which the reader and the text enter into a reciprocal relationship (Rosenblatt, 2005a). A literary transaction takes place in the connection between a reader and a text, and this transaction is viewed "as the heart of reading" (LEHMAN, 2007, p. 26). During the transactional process, a reader attends to and draws on the images, emotions, and thoughts stirred up by the words of the text (ROSENBLATT, 1976, 1985, 2000, 2005b). From what is stirred up, a poem, or literary work of art, is evoked in the live circuit that is established between the reader and the text

(ROSENBLATT, 1982, 1994). One becomes a reader by virtue of one's relationship with a text, and a set of marks on a page becomes the text of a poem by virtue of its relationship with a reader (ROSENBLATT, 1994). Teachers play a key role in assisting students to develop reciprocal relationships with poetry.

An essential element of the reading process is the reader's adoption of a predominant stance, an attitude which helps guide the reader in what elements to attend to as they are stirred up during the process of evocation (HADE, 1992; ROSENBLATT, 1982, 1986, 1994; ZARILLO; COX, 1992). Rosenblatt (1986) identifies two possible reading stances: aesthetic and efferent, and she argues that every reading event must fall somewhere on the continuum that stretches between the poles of these two stances. In the aesthetic stance, the reader's attention is inwardly focused, centered on what is being created during the lived-through experience with the text (HOLLAND; LEHR, 1994; ROSENBLATT, 1982, 1986, 1994, 2005b). The reader concentrates on private and affective textual experiences, consciously registering the effect of the transactional experience as it is taking place (ROSENBLATT, 1994, 2005b). When a reader adopts an aesthetic stance toward a text, she pays attention to what is thought and felt during the evocation process by drawing on her past reservoir of life and text experiences (ROSENBLATT, 1982, 2005b). Rosenblatt extols the potentialities of transacting with literature in the aesthetic stance: "Precisely because every aesthetic reading of a text is a unique creation, woven out of the inner life and thought of the reader, the literary work of art can be a rich source of insight and truth" (1982, p. 276-277). Adopting an aesthetic stance when reading poetry can help promote meaningful transactional relationships between readers and poetry.

Unfortunately, teachers often ask students to adopt the efferent stance when reading poetry. During efferent reading, the reader is focused on extracting public and cognitive textual meanings, primarily concerned with what remains "as the residue *after* the reading" (ROSENBLATT, 1994, p. 23; emphasis in original). When teachers ask students to over-analyze poetry and search for hidden meanings, they are promoting efferent-based, analytical reading. Adopting the efferent stance when reading poetry can create distance between readers and poems, preventing readers from establishing active and personal relationships with poetry (VERBLE, 1973). A common classroom poetry practice asks students to search for the correct interpretation of a poem. However, poets and poet educators alike maintain that the meaning of a poem isn't fixed, nor can it be reduced down to a single, correct meaning (LOCKWARD, 1994). Rather, a

poem can have multiple interpretations (CERTO, 2004; COLLINS, 2008; FISHER, 2008; KOCH, 1982). Readers bring their lived experiences to the aesthetic reading of poetry, and it is out of these unique lived experiences that they make meaning out of poetry. Perfect (2005, p. 51) argues: “If there is no one right meaning, then what Louise Rosenblatt said is true: there are as many possible meanings to a poem as there are individual readers”. When teachers adopt Rosenblatt’s theory of reading literature to reading poetry with students, they help nurture vital relationships between readers and poems.

HOW DO WE GO ABOUT CHOOSING POEMS TO READ TO AND WITH OUR STUDENTS?

Poets and poet educators make a variety of recommendations with regard to choosing poetry to share with students. The first is for teachers to select poems that they personally enjoy; the teacher’s attitude and enthusiasm affect students’ willingness to engage with poetry (LINABERGER, 2004). Poet educator, Nina Willis Walter (1962, p. 20), argues that no one “can dissect and destroy the beauty of a poem that really means something to him personally”. One of the best ways for teachers to find poems to share with their students is to simply begin reading poetry themselves. Janeczko (1992, p. 57), in his article detailing the eight things he’s learned about kids and poetry, advocates: “choosers of poems...must become readers of poems”.

Janeczko (2003) recommends that teachers begin with poetry that is accessible to their students. In choosing poems to share, teachers should select poems that speak to children’s experiences and interests, thus building connections between students’ lived experiences and poems that echo those experiences (LESESNE, 2002; SLOAN, 2001). A useful resource for finding these types of poems is located in poetry written especially for children. Poetry intended for children speaks to children’s life experiences in ways that appeal to a child (KIEFER, 2010). Poets who write for children write about everyday childhood experiences; they write poems that engage children’s emotions and imaginations, as well as their sense of play and wonderings about the world (BOOTH; MOORE, 2003; MCCLURE, 2003). The subject of poetry for children often reflects what children naturally think about: “the beginnings of things, the creation of beauty, the understanding of plants and animals, of how alive stones and stars and wildflowers are, and how wonderfully different each is from the other” (BEHN, 1968, p. 12). To

develop a love of poetry, children need a teacher “who loves poetry and is knowledgeable about the wide array of available choices in children’s poetry” (MCCLURE, 2003, p. 84).

Researchers recommend choosing poems that children will be likely to enjoy (ABRAHAMSON, 2002; TERRY, 1974). However, contrary to this recommendation, the research on children’s poetry preferences reveals that teachers often choose poems that do not correlate with children’s preferences (FORD, 1992). In her seminal study of children’s poetry preferences, Terry (1974) found that teachers’ selections of poetry to share with their students rarely reflected students’ prior experience with poetry or their current level of enjoyment. Additionally, the poems were frequently inappropriate selections for stimulating lasting interest. Of the 20 poems teachers reported were their favorites to read to their classes, almost half were disliked by a significant number of students: “These results seem to indicate that teachers in the upper elementary grades may need to seriously reconsider their poetry selections for classroom sharing” (p. 53). McClure (2003, p. 78) concludes from her review of the research on poetry selections for children that teachers need to move beyond what they think “children *should* like” to choosing poetry they think “children *would* like” (emphasis in original). The poems that teachers share can have a powerful impact on students’ attitudes toward poetry.

Knowledge of children’s poetry preferences provides teachers with a valuable resource in choosing poems that their students will be more likely to enjoy (THOMAS, 1989). A number of studies provide teachers with helpful insights into these preferences. Terry (1974) found that children in grades 4-6 favor poems that include rhyme, rhythm and sound. They also prefer narrative poems, as well as poems with humor and poems about familiar experiences and animals. Poetry forms least preferred by students are haiku and free verse. Children also care less for traditional poems than for contemporary poems with modern content. Carol Fisher and Margaret Natarrella’s (1982) study extends Terry’s research to children in grades 1-3. The researchers used the same schools that Terry used for her study, and they found similar results. Children in the primary grades prefer humorous and narrative poems, as well as poems about animals and childhood experiences. They like poems that rhyme and have rhythm, and they dislike haiku and free verse poetry.

In their study of the circulation records of three elementary school libraries, Karen Kutiper and Patricia Wilson (1993) found that children prefer poetry that rhymes, has humor and rhythm, and is patterned after easy-to-read narration, most often located in the

collections of Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky's poetry. In her review of research on children's poetry preferences, McClure (1993, p. 153) concludes that children tend to prefer poems with elements of "humor, nonsense, familiar experiences, imaginative story lines, animals, holidays, and people". She found that they also enjoy narrative and limerick forms, but dislike more abstract forms of poetry such as haiku. According to surveys conducted by teacher-researchers in Sloan's (2003b) graduate class on poetry for children, the teachers found that their elementary school students preferred humorous poems and poems that tell stories and rhyme. Studies of student poetry preferences reveal noteworthy consistencies; children prefer poetry with rhyme and rhythm, humorous poetry and narrative poems about familiar childhood experiences and animals. Teachers can use this valuable information when choosing poems to share with their students.

Rhyme and rhythm are key poetic elements. They are in fact: "the music of poetry" (MCCLURE, 1990, p. 177). Poems with these qualities are especially appealing to young children (FISHER; NATARELLA, 1982; KELLY, 2005). The language of young children has a built in awareness of musicality and sound (COLLOM; NOETHE, 2005; SLOAN, 2003). Children spontaneously explore rhyme, rhythm and sound (BOOTH; MOORE, 2003). The language of poetry provides a vehicle for this creative sound and word play that young children naturally engage in (CUMMING, 2007; THOMAS, 2007). In her profile of the poet Eve Merriam, Sloan reports on Merriam's insistence that: "Poetry and children form a natural partnership...Poetry's musical effects of rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration, extensions of children's own speech, naturally appeal to them. Children, like poets, are intrigued by the wonderful things that words can do" (1981, p. 958). Songs, nursery rhymes, tongue twisters and riddles are an essential part of many early childhood classroom experiences. Infused with rhythm and rhyme, they make excellent tools for exposing children to poetry. Poet and anthologist Lee Bennett Hopkins encourages us to "do all we can to preserve and nurture the love of rhyme, rhythm, and the feeling for words that young children have in them" (1987, p. 18). When teachers choose poems with rhythm and rhyme to share with young children, they capitalize on the natural connection between the language of children and the language of poetry.

In considering poems to share with children, teachers may want to look toward child poets themselves: "It is often the poems written when a poet is young that are closest to a student's experience" (KOCH, 1982, p. 5). Heard, in her many years as a poet in the schools, has

come to the following conclusion: “If poets are people who look at the world as if it were newly created, and try to tell the truth about it in voices uniquely their own, then the finest poets I’ve met are children” (as cited in CULLINAN, 1996, p. 11). When a child hears a poem written by another child, it is as if they are issued a personal invitation into the world of poetry by one of their own. Teachers need look no further than their own classrooms to find poems written by child poets.

HOW CAN READING POETRY LEAD TO WRITING POETRY?

Alice Schertle, a poet for children, has two words for people who desire to write poetry: “Read Poetry!” (SLOAN, 2003b, p. 47). Reading and writing poetry are intricately related; reading poetry can help children learn how to write poetry (GEORGE, 2002; JANECKO, 1999; KOCH, 1982; PERRY, 1997). Poet Mary Oliver claims: “[T]o write well it is entirely necessary to read widely and deeply. Good poems are the best teachers. Perhaps they are the only teachers” (1994, p. 10). When students read and listen to a great deal of poetry, they are often inspired to begin experimenting with writing poetry of their own (BARTON; BOOTH, 2004; HERMSEN, 2009; KOCH, 1996; WORMSER; CAPPELLA, 2000). Poet J. Patrick Lewis gives this advice to young poets: “Read poetry until your eyes turn blue” (WARD; YOUNG, 2011, p. 451). One of the many benefits of reading poetry to and with students is that it supports the development of young poets.

It is my sincere hope that readers of this article have found support in learning how to share the joy of poetry with children. Inviting students into the magic of poetry can transform classroom communities. When teachers immerse children in the world of poetry through the reading and sharing of poems, they foster a love of poetry in children.

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