
Why Should We Share Poems with Young People?

*... you're back again where you began.
You're back with the mystery of hav-
ing been moved by words. The best
craftsmanship always leaves holes
and gaps in the works of the poem so
that something that is not in the poem
can creep, crawl, flash, or thunder in.*

Dylan Thomas

Opening Up to Poetry

Children come to poetry naturally, but often something happens to that linguistic emotional relationship. Is it the formality of teaching that takes away the appreciation? Is it the teacher's own attitudes that alter the child's enjoyment of this art form? For certain, something happens to many children, and their love of poetry begins to wane. In adulthood very, very few people choose to read poems.

To begin with, we must accept the position that the poems we share with children have a value on their own, not only to make them future poem-lovers, but, as in child play, an inherent developmental quality that helps children learn. Their poems from the nursery, the street, the playground, the school, and the family, are linguistic and conceptual treasures that will enrich and support their growth. As teachers, we can tap into this storehouse and use poems as powerful learning situations. In order to do this, we must examine our own biases and attitudes, and investigate how we can come back to poetry with insight and appreciation for its wonder and its potential. Poems must not be seen as icons or as intricate puzzles, but as part of childhood's rites of passage. If our students develop into adults who continue their relationship with poetry, then this is an added bonus. In this book, however, we will content ourselves with bringing poems to children, exploring both the process and the product as we engage children in reading, listening to, and writing poetry.

Teachers may have to work hard to overcome their own fears about poetry. Why is poetry so difficult for so many teachers? Why did they develop this distaste for poetry? They watch films, listen to music, admire paintings and prints, yet remain wary of poetry. It seems for many a bewildering subject. Teachers often feel ill at ease when called upon to teach a poem. Perhaps their own teachers felt this lack of motivation, preparation, or interest. It is a circle of sadness that must be broken. When poems are brought to children carefully, with joy and satisfaction, the children somehow find a deeper realization of life and fuller appreciation of the world. They seem to have a sensitive awareness of how to identify

with the feelings of others, and realize that we all have those universal, emotional connections.

Do any of these statements apply to you?

- I always used to hate poetry in school.
- I don't know what all those poets were talking about.
- I don't know why they didn't write in good, honest prose.
- All that memory work; learning stuff I didn't understand, and forgetting it immediately. Poetry and memory work are synonymous in my mind.
- Nobody ever suggested to me that poetry was like music and art, something you enjoy more if you had some degree of choice, and weren't always tested on it.
- All the poetry lessons I remember were Simile Safaris. We tore them all apart, and laid the similes out like trophies.
- Teachers said, "You don't understand or like it now, but later on you will thank me for this."
- Seems to me we always did poems about fairies and stuff like that.
- Nobody ever told me that writing my own was a wonderful way of learning to appreciate other poets' work.
- Nobody ever suggested to me that reading poetry aloud could be a dramatic experience, filled with pleasure.

I was "doing poetry" with a group of young children somewhere in the Canadian North. We had been talking about poetry and the way poets work. We read all sorts of poetry: funny poems, sad poems, nostalgic poems, and story poems. Then we tried to define poetry for ourselves. All kinds of definitions came up, but the one we all liked best came from a ten-year-old boy who said, "It's where the words mean more than the words mean." That seems to sum it all up very well.

The words mean more
The words mean
The words
Words
More than
More than words
Words mean
Mean words
Mean more
More than
More than the words mean
Words
Mean.

W. H. M.

How can we re-educate ourselves poetically?

- By teaching the poems we enjoy ourselves;
- By searching out poets, old and new, that speak to us as teachers and as humans;
- By reading poems aloud to children with energy, passion, and delight;
- By risking the reading of poems: long poems, short poems, poems that touch us and release our feelings;
- By joining in with children, clapping along, tasting the words, sitting inside the circle;
- By encouraging children to write in a poetic fashion, using all of the tools that poets use, from models, shapes, and patterns to ideas and concepts;
- By sharing with other teachers poems that draw children to them again and again;
- By using poems all of the time, in a quiet moment, as a lesson, as part of another subject's content;
- By scheduling times for poetry reading, by us, by groups of children, by individuals who are ready to share;
- By providing resources and dozens of poetry anthologies (by single poets, collections, picture book versions) for us as teachers to share, and for children to peruse on their own;
- By exploring poets as well as poems, letting the children come to know the writer of words, through meeting many poems by one poet, and perhaps by sharing information about the poet's life and work;

In choosing poems for pupils, I include the funny, the crude, and the short the poems most representative of the vulgar traditions I have urged. An eventual taste for the subtle and serious in poetry is more likely to be developed by enjoyment, experience, and knowledge of a mixture of poems in school, including unsubtle and unserious ones, than by an unrelieved diet of classics.

Andrew Stibbs

- By having records and tape recordings of poems for children at listening centres, so that they can experience the many interpretations of poetry;
- By inviting poets to share their poems with children in an artists-in-the-schools program;
- By making use of poems in big book formats, on overhead transparencies, on chart papers, on mobiles, incorporating them into visual arts, writing them large and small, in shapes of all kinds, with felt pens and chalk, and careful calligraphy;
- By not demanding a single response to a poem, but rather observing and listening to the responses of the children and building on them;
- By presenting many poems, going inside the ones they enjoy, letting the learning happen;
- By not being afraid to teach about poems, thus giving children knowledge and information to strengthen their poem power, but never teaching the technique without context, without the child wanting or needing to know;
- By asking consultants, librarians, authors, book store clerks, and websites to keep us posted on new releases, so that our own poetry repertoire of children's poems constantly grows and changes;
- By collecting poetic language to share with children from ads, stories, novels, songs, or magazines — letting the children learn from living language about the power of words;
- By letting children bring poetry to us, as they build their private anthologies, and write and share their own poems with the class.

Did no one ever suggest that poetry is the most compact, entertaining, brilliant, amusing, happy, sad, loving, angry way of using language, and that the resulting effect upon the user should be joy? Can we re-discover that joy?

Earle Birney summarizes our dreams of being teachers who honor poetry:

The wistful purpose of this book then, is to persuade anyone literate in the English language who thinks he does not like the poetry that he's missing a unique pleasure easily within his reach — and anyone who likes poetry a little, or only some kinds of poems, that he may extend his range and his pleasures.