



The Gift of Poetry

Using poetry as a tool for building foundational skills

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The Gift of Poetry

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“En todas las culturas, a los poetas se los ha considerado personas especiales, poseedoras de un don, capaces de expresar de forma memorable, es decir, fácil de recordar, ideas y sentimientos que se pueden reconocer como propios. Ya sea en la Grecia y Roma clásicas, en las culturas milenarias de Japón y de China, en las extraordinarias civilizaciones de América Central y del Sur, o en las islas de Micronesia, los poetas han sido admirados y reverenciados.”

Está linda la mar

Alma Flor Ada y F. Isabel Campoy

Throughout history, poets have been honored as prophets (Every Writer, 2015), crowned with laurel wreaths, and celebrated as creatures far above the masses. They have served as the voices of political movements and led their countries to freedom (poets.org, 2005). Poets then, can be regarded as the voices of our cultures, and their works as the expression of the best within all of us. Poetry exists in many forms, from the simplest of nursery rhymes to highly structured and stylized texts that express our most deeply felt emotions. Whether we consider ourselves poets or merely consumers of verse, poetry is a vast and varied genre that should be part of everyone's life.

For many of us, our experiences with literature began with poetry. We bonded with adult caregivers, learned our letters and numbers and gathered foundational cultural literacy through verse. Later, our experiences broadened to include songs, nursery rhymes, and playground chants. By the time we got to school, the sounds of language were firmly embedded, associated with home and family—and we were well on the road to independent reading.

“Pensemos que nuestros niños, desprovistos de abuelas tradicionales o nodrizas memoriosas, lo primero que oyen y aprenden son los jingles publicitarios. De lo que se deduce que una de las actuales nodrizas del niño es la televisión, y que de ella absorbe las más precarias formas de versificación, música y atropello de la sintaxis.”

Maria Elena Walsh

While this is the reality for children in the middle class, it is far from the reality for children of working class parents and children living in poverty. Hart & Risley (1995, 2003) identify a difference in the number of words heard by children of affluent parents vs. those living in poverty of thirty million words by age three. Coupled with a lack of quality childcare and a dependence on television, these poor children are less likely to have internalized the rhyme, rhythm, and cadence of literary language. Add

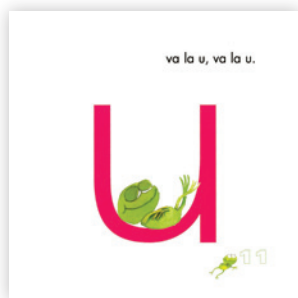
to that the increasingly rigorous demands of new college and career readiness standards (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Division for P-16 Initiatives & Texas Education Agency Division of Curriculum, 2009; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; Florida Department of Education, 2014), and it becomes clear that teachers will need every resource they can command to bridge the gap.

Poetry as a Tool for Developing Foundational Skills

The Common Core identifies a set of foundational skills that focus on developing students' understanding of the alphabetic principle and fundamental conventions of written language (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Poetry is the ideal medium for developing these skills, since its rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration foster phonemic awareness (Stange & Wyant, 2008).

Phonemic Awareness and the Alphabetic Principle

Whether the goal is to introduce children to the form of letters and their sounds, poetry can serve as both an engaging introduction and an in-depth instructional tool. The following two examples show how poetry can reinforce the sound of the letter u. Margarita Robleda's example emphasizes the appearance of the letter, while Edgar Allan García's poem provides repeated opportunities for students to identify the sound.



*Como cuerda de
brincar
o sonrisa de papa...
va la u, va la u.*

Jugando con las vocales
Margarita Robleda

*La bruja Maruja
Lapretuja las palabras,
palabrejas, palabrujas,
mientras soba y resoba
la escoba embrujada,
pero al menor descuido
¡abracadabra!,
se escapan volando,
volando...
¡una por una bajo la luna
anaranjada!*

Edgar Allan García



Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary development is a complex process. Nagy and Scott (in Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr 2000, p. 270) have identified five aspects of vocabulary development: "(a) incrementality—knowing a word is a matter of degrees, not all or nothing; (b) multidimensionality—word knowledge consists of several qualitatively different types of knowledge; (c) polysemy—words often have multiple meanings; (d) interrelatedness—one's knowledge of any given word is not independent of one's knowledge of other words; and (e) heterogeneity—what it means to know a word differs substantially depending on the kind of word." Blachowitz, Fisher, and Watts-Taffe (in Rasinski, 2011), in their review of the research on effective vocabulary instruction, found that its core elements include a language-rich environment filled with reading, writing, and deep discussion, explicit instruction in individual words and word-learning strategies, and an interest in words. Poetry is the ideal medium for developing vocabulary; its unique characteristics—use of figures of speech, multiple layers of meaning, and playful use of language—clearly demonstrate the aspects that Nagy and Scott describe and can serve as the basis for effective and engaging instruction.

This excerpt from Maria Elena Walsh's classic poem, *Manuelita la tortuga*, provides children with opportunities to hear familiar words in a new context and to become acquainted with new ones as they delight in Manuelita's attempts to remove her wrinkles.

*En la tintorería de
Paris
la pintaron con barniz,
la plancharon en francés
del derecho y del revés,
le pusieron peluquita
y botines en los pies.*

**Fragmento de
Manuelita la tortuga**
María Elena Walsh





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Fluency

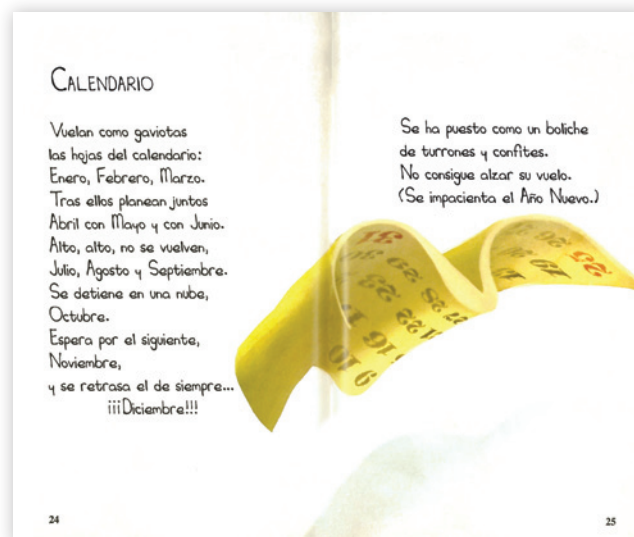
Reading fluency is one of the hallmarks of a skilled reader. It consists of the ability to read accurately, expressively, and at an appropriate rate, and serves as a bridge between word calling and comprehension. In addition, fluent readers are better able to make connections both with ideas in the text and their own background knowledge, thus enhancing their comprehension (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Poetry is an excellent genre for fluency practice. Its short length, rhyme, rhythm and repetition make it an ideal way for readers to capture the cadence of oral expression and engage in repeated readings (Wilfong, 2008). Imagine the delight that students will take in reading Ana Maria Shua's *Odio especial, solo de lunes a viernes* (1998).

*Peor que una pesadilla,
más molesto que mi hermana,
más feo que usar horquillas,
o comer comida sana.
Más ácido que pastilla
de aspirina atragantada
y más triste que una ardilla
con la patita quebrada,
más molesto que una astilla
que se te queda clavada,
es esa tonta manía
que no sirve para nada.
Es lo que hago cada día
menos el fin de semana,
con lo linda que es la cama:
¡levantarme temprano a la mañana!*

Odio especial, solo de lunes a viernes
Ana María Shua

Concept Development

The primary years are a crucial period in a child's education. Not only are they learning the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy, they are also developing the cross-disciplinary skills of sequencing, classification, and recognizing and finding patterns. Poetry, when carefully chosen, can assist conceptual development in a number of ways. First of all, as in the case with *El calendario* (Sánchez, 2005), it can be a presentation of the concept in verse. Just as poetry's rhyme, rhythm, and meter support the development of fluency, they can also help children commit important information to memory. What may be the most important reason to use poetry stems from a recent finding from the University of Exeter (2013), in which researchers examined the brain activity of people who read both poetry and prose. Reading is typically a left-brained activity, typically associated with logic and linear thinking. Poetry, like music, activates the right brain or the more emotional, nonverbal side of the brain. This emotional response gives children's brains two avenues for information retrieval and reinforces positive attitudes toward learning.



Sí, poesía
Gloria Sánchez

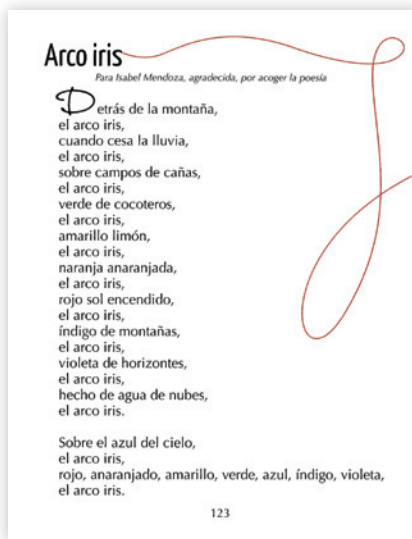
Reading Comprehension

College and career readiness standards across the nation specify a number of comprehension strategies that students must master, including identifying main ideas, making inferences and supporting them with text evidence, and analyzing and evaluating literal and figurative language, among others. In addition, students must use those strategies to compare multiple texts through close reading (Florida Department of Education, 2014; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Division for P-16 Initiatives & Texas Education Agency Division of Curriculum, 2009). Poetry, with its short length, rich language, and multiple layers of meaning, provides teachers the opportunity to teach comprehension strategies within the time constraints of a single class period.

Students who are taught through the gradual release model—seeing their teacher model a strategy and practicing it with their peers before trying it on their own—are more likely to be successful in applying the strategy to other reading tasks. The following three texts, *Yo soñé un día* (Campoy, 2015), *Caleidoscopio* (Torres Ruiz, 2012), and *El arco iris* (Ada, 2010) could be used to teach visualization. By modeling the strategy through Isabel Campoy's evocative text, teachers can show how words create mental images and explain the mental processes involved. Students can work in pairs using *Caleidoscopio*, identifying the more concrete images, and can complete the cycle by working alone to identify the very clear images in *El arco iris*.



Poesía eres tú:
antología poética
F. Isabel Campoy



Todo es canción:
antología poética
Alma Flor Ada



Caleidoscopio
Mariana Torres Ruiz



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Genre Studies

Poetry has a rich tradition, with forms that are as old as civilization, structures that define it, and the kind of metaphorical language that makes up much of our discourse and shapes how we experience the world (Pinker, 2005). Studying the genre provides insights into the authors and the craft behind it. Students can use the forms and structures of the poems they study as springboards to their own writing (Jones, 2014) as they study the works of master poets. By linking the genre of poetry to key concepts in other content areas, students can cement their learning through a rich literary experience. Imagine the poems that students could write following Alberto Blanco's model in *Dichos de bichos* (2007)!



Dichos de bichos
Alberto Blanco

Poetry clearly has great value in helping students develop literacy skills and key concepts, but the most important reason for teaching poetry is that it is both a literary genre and an art form. Poets give voice to our innermost feelings—when we read poetry, we laugh a little louder, cry a little harder, and step outside our boundaries to see the world through the poet's eyes. Poetry is truly more than the sum of its parts. By giving our students the gift of poetry, we give them the imagination to see the world as it can be, a voice to communicate that vision, and the power to create a better future.

“Poesía es mucho más que rima, ritmo y renglones cortos. La poesía es observar el mundo que nos rodea, el mundo que llevamos dentro de cada uno de nosotros y también el que imaginamos, de una manera atenta y desprejuiciada, como si estuviéramos viéndolos por primera vez. Escribir poesía es tratar de dibujar con palabras las emociones, sensaciones y reflexiones que despiertan en nosotros esas miradas.”

Antonio Orlando Rodriguez



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