

A POETRY READINESS PROGRAM FOR GRADES ONE AND TWO

by 1264

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INTRODUCTION

There is surprisingly little information dealing with the area of poetry instruction in the primary grades. Most of the information available concerns teaching the intermediate grades and high school students. However, these are the students who are generally apathetic about poetry instruction. By the time the child reaches the intermediate grade he shares the dissatisfaction and disinterest in poetry of many adults. It seems evident that poetry instruction and lessons in appreciation must begin on the early primary level if any change in the prevailing negativeness is to occur.

Many primary grade teachers have genuinely tried to stimulate an appreciation for poetry in their young pupils, but these attempts have met with little success. Some have even fostered the negative feelings which prevail among the older students.

It would seem foolhardy and boastful to state that this problem has one true panacea. Teachers and educators can nonetheless strive to improve the existing methods and techniques, and they can use the findings of research to aid in their presentations. Although little research has been done regarding poetry

instruction, much has been found to indicate that readiness in this subject field, as in all other subject fields, is most desirable.

Because information is rather scarce regarding poetry instruction on the primary level and because little of this information deals with the subject from a readiness point of view, the writer of this paper has attempted to provide interested readers with a readiness program in poetry for the early primary grades. A teacher's guidebook is presented including methods of motivation and presentation, poetry readiness activities, available materials and an appendix listing appropriate poems which can be used.

It is hoped that this guidebook will add to the somewhat limited quantity of material written to aid the early primary grade teacher in instilling within his students a love and appreciation for poetry.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a noticeable lack of interest or attraction associated with the field of poetry. One author explains that there is a great mass of Americans "who love music and would find the world a dull place if all music were removed by a major operation, but who wouldn't even know that poetry had disappeared under a similar surgical cutting."¹ Poetry is too often considered pointless, ponderous, jejune and exceptionally dull. Coleridge's explanation of poetry as "the best words in their best order,"² is merely an empty definition for most people. Poetry is indeed "the old man's step child."³

The causes for this apparent disinterest are not easily determined. Little or no exposure, incorrect teaching or lack of readiness when taught at school, or simply exposure to the wrong poetry at the wrong time could all be contributing factors. This

¹Ray Immel and Helen Ogg, Poetry Least Popular of the Arts. Who is to Blame?, Oklahoma: Cooperative Books, 1939, p. 5.

²Samuel Coleridge, from Table Talk, July 12, 1827.

³Immel and Ogg, op. cit., p. 4.

negativeness might also stem from a lack of understanding or a misunderstanding concerning the nature of poetry. Indeed few people would even venture to give a definition of poetry with any greater depth than perhaps the fallacious statement -- "It's something that rhymes." Enthusiastic readers of poetry, as well as poets themselves, find great difficulty in defining that which, perhaps due to its diversity and personal nature, cannot be reduced to an accurate definition. However, a somewhat adequate definition for the purpose of this paper is that of Mr. M. Friend who states, "It is first of all, a way of writing that is different from prose. It is a more subjective and more personal form of expression. The poet strives to convey to his reader a vivid idea, image, or emotion. He sifts his words carefully, distilling the essence of an impression to its clearest and purest form."⁴ Here then is a definition of what the poet tries to accomplish in the form of a poem. A child who responded to the question "What are poems?" gives a concise and perhaps even more exact definition by saying, "They're words that sing without music."⁵

⁴M. Friend, "Developing a Unit in Writing Poetry," Elementary English, vol. 37, February, 1960, p. 102.

⁵M. Bailey, E. Horrocks and E. Torreson, Language Learnings, New York: American Book Co., 1965, p. 138.

If a change in the prevalent negative attitudes about poetry is to take place the change must be initiated in the schools. Experience has shown, however, that teachers have become, perhaps unintentionally, the perpetrators of these very ideas which they strive to eradicate. Poetry is sometimes badly mistreated by the persons who endeavor to "teach" it. On the high school level it has often become a heavy intellectual exercise which has scared away all but a chosen few. Careful dissection of a poem, which is so often used in poetry classes today, noting the various figures of speech or the different forms of punctuation used, often serves to make the true meaning or feeling of a poem less clear. How can Tennyson's immortal poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" be enjoyed if it is remembered thusly --

Half a league comma half a league comma
 Half a league onward comma
 All in the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred period
 Quotation marks Forward the Light Brigade
 exclamation point
 Charge for the guns exclamation point,
 Quotation marks he said period

Often the English professors have made out a list of "masterpieces" which they present to their students whether the students like them or not.⁶ An analogy has been made that, the many teachers of poetry appear to be like persons

⁶Immel and Ogg, op. cit. p. 24.

"chasing butterflies with sledgehammers."⁷

There are also some teachers who feel that poetry only has value as an exercise in memorization. The rhyme schemes in many poems easily adapt to memorization more readily than a similar prose counterpart. However, the mere memorization of drab, adult poems, with vocabulary far above the child's comprehension will not help the child to form positive attitudes toward poetry. Memorization, especially when handled as a large group assignment, can cause a serious dislike of poetry. This distaste can be kindled by those who either don't care for the specific poem chosen for memorization, who dislike the idea of memorization, or who find memorization difficult. A writer in the field of children's literature agrees that "to try to force all children to learn the same poems would be to dull the edge of interest for many children and make some actually dislike poetry."⁸

And then there are the teachers who feel the only way to truly "understand" poetry is to "put it in your own words." However, most writers in the field of poetry condemn this as a "vicious practice." "To say a poem in

⁷L.H. Conrad, "Stimulate Don't Mutilate," Education Digest, vol. 32, November, 1966, p. 54

⁸Ruth Strickland, The Language Arts in the Elementary School, Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1957, p. 402

your own words is to destroy it utterly. . ."⁹

Too often teachers have forever alienated their students from the world of poetry through these harmful methods of presenting, dissecting or mass memorizing of poems. But at the other extreme are the teachers who, through lack of understanding, dislike for the subject or perhaps through oversight, fail to expose their students to poetry of any kind. Several studies have been made concerning the amount of literature and poetry handled in the elementary school. These have consistently shown that there is a definite deficiency in this field. A study made by Pooley and Williams indicates that "at the elementary school level little classroom time is given to literature of any kind, and although children are encouraged to read books, many schools, especially those in rural areas, have poor book collections."¹⁰ In another study, Farmer and Freeman have found that in several schools in Georgia only 4% of class time was devoted to literature or poetry. "This is not surprising" one author writes, "since it (poetry) is accorded so little recognition in the adult world."¹¹ This lack of exposure is often the cause of misunderstandings about poetry and these

⁹Flora Arnstein, Adventure into Poetry, California: Stanford University Press, 1948, p. 13.

¹⁰Pooley and Williams, Teaching English in Wisconsin, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1948, p. 13

¹¹Flora Arnstein, Poetry in the Elementary Classroom, New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1962, p. 103.

misunderstandings breed negative attitudes. It is hard to say which is the more harmful, total neglect or mistreatment. However, neither need be the case.

Although the schools have been considerably lax in improving the attitudes of their students concerning poetry it is evident that the formation of positive attitudes lies with our educational system. More specifically this change will have to take place in the early primary grades, before the child has formulated any definite attitude toward the subject. It is at this age (five to eight years of age) that the child shows a fascination with words -- especially those which rhyme. One writer feels that psychologically these rhymes and recurring rhythms help compensate for the disorderliness of everyday language. As the child responds to the sounds around him he especially selects those that repeat themselves, causing a close identification with rhythm and rhyme.¹² Hutchett and Hughes have made a comparison between children and poets. They are both sensitive to rhythm and to their surroundings, they explain. Experience for each is intense and vivid. And if the primary grade teacher has developed a "sensitivity to the beauty in life, if she loves poetry, and if she is alert to the timeliness of relating poetry to the activities of the day, she can help children to continue

¹²Patrick Groff, "Take Time to Rhyme", Elementary English, vol. 40, November, 1963, p. 762.

to have much in common with poets."¹³ What the teacher does with poetry can make the difference between delight and dreariness.

The enjoyment of poetry should play a large part in the young student's association with literature. It should be an integral part of any language arts program in the primary as well as the intermediate grades. The National Council of Teachers in English has maintained that the literature curriculum should consist of "experiences with and through stories, poems, plays, essays and books of information. . ."¹⁴ The importance of poetry in the language arts program has been reiterated by several writers in the field of literature and the language arts. R. Endres has stated that "children and youth who do not have rich and varied experiences with poetry lose contact with a most edifying and important segment of their heritage."¹⁵ Poetry has been endowed with the ability to "make the common sights, sounds, sensations and happenings vitally uncommon. It can give boys and girls a feeling of vibrancy and sensuousness of being alive. It can create precise moods and pictures in the mind, tell wonderful stories, delineate fanciful characters and happenings. In can

¹³Hutchett and Hughes, Teaching Language Arts in the Elementary Schools, New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1956, p. 304.

¹⁴National Council of Teachers in English, An Experience Curriculum in English, New York: Appleton, Century, 1935, p. 990.

¹⁵Raymond Endres, "Children and Poetry", Elementary English, vol. 40, December, 1963, p. 838.

sensitively describe the earth and its creatures, and epitomize the essence and spirit of the man-made world. It can enthrall children with its melody and movement winging its way into their minds and memories."¹⁶ It has also been known to enrich sensory experiences which should be "a basic responsibility of the early childhood teacher."¹⁷ As well as deriving satisfaction and pleasure from poetry, S. Baker feels that poetry can "serve as a factor in maintaining a higher mental health status for the world as a whole."¹⁸ Poetry adds much to the language arts program of the school. This is because the children enjoy it, it stimulates creative expression and it promotes personal growth. Poetry adds a certain richness, beauty and sparkle to life and the inclusion of it in the curriculum can help to develop children who thoroughly enjoy poetry and who can and do interpret it for themselves.

However, even though the study of poetry should be a part of the elementary curriculum, as stated earlier, too often the subject is badly mistreated and children develop negative attitudes instead of positive ones. Poetry cannot be handled as mere memorization, or as an

¹⁶Leland Jacobs, "Shortchanging Poetry in Your Reading Program", Grade Teacher, vol. 78, April, 1961, p. 101.

¹⁷Winton and Fleiss, "You're Asking Us: Ideas for Introducing Poetry to Young Children", Instructor, April, 1966 p. 25.

¹⁸Zelma Baker, The Language Arts, the Child and the Teacher, San Francisco: Fearon Publishers, 1955, p. 64.

intellectual exercise, it must be carefully introduced and thoughtfully handled. It seems strange that although much has been said regarding reading readiness, mathematics readiness and readiness in other fields that little has been mentioned regarding a readiness program in poetry. Truly the first and second graders come to school with a certain love for rhyme and a degree of readiness toward the subject. However this readiness must be nurtured and the teacher must proceed cautiously, endeavoring not to create any negative feelings. This is a big order. And it is an especially difficult job when it is realized that the generation that is coming to our schools is one "with less experience in, and less knowledge of poetry than ever before."¹⁹ The task is also made more difficult in that information including methods which can be used to teach children to enjoy and appreciate poetry are very scarce indeed. Few curriculum guides or books which include practical suggestions regarding poetry instruction have been written for teachers teaching below the fourth grade level. It is with this in mind that the writer of this paper has included a general guidebook for the first and second grade teacher who feels the need to include poetry study and appreciation in the language arts program.

¹⁹P. McVickar, "About Poetry and Children", Grade Teacher, vol. 79, April, 1962, p. 75.

A note of caution however, must be made regarding the use of this curriculum guidebook, as well as any attempts to include poetry in the regular school program. It is important that the teacher who endeavors to instill a love and appreciation of poetry in his students must be a lover of poetry himself. Feelings of apathy as well as feelings of appreciation are contagious and the child can easily sense the teacher's true feelings toward the subject. R. Endres, a writer in the field of language arts, has noted that "every elementary teacher is not a teacher of poetry." The poetry teacher must be sensitive to the "nuances, the history, the beauty of language."²⁰ Therefore, if the primary teacher seeks to handle the subject of poetry without doing damage to the child's natural feeling for rhythm and rhyme and without causing negative feelings on the part of the students, he must genuinely appreciate the beauty of poetry himself.

The following guidebook then is written for those who love poetry and wish to include the study and appreciation of it in their curriculum. It will include methods of introduction, motivation and presentation of a poetry lesson, student activities, a synopsis of skills to be gained and a listing of materials which will be useful in initiating such a program.

²⁰R. Endres, op. cit., p. 838.

A POETRY READINESS GUIDEBOOK

Introduction, Motivation and Presentation of Poetry

Before any discussion can take place regarding the method of teaching poetry to primary grade children it is important to establish the kinds of poems best suited for these grade levels. (It should be noted here that the last section of this report lists, according to subject, appropriate poems for this level.) The poetry the teacher chooses to present to the class must not be above the child's level of understanding. The vocabulary, syntax and topics involved must be simple and fully understandable to the child. Each poem should deal simply and directly with life. Although there might be one or two new words introduced in the poem, the teacher must be careful not to use poetry as an introduction to a long or perhaps complex vocabulary lesson. The child should, as a rule, be able to comprehend the meaning of an unfamiliar word through the context of the poem. Trying to make children appreciate poetry beyond their level of understanding creates a distaste for it.²¹

Once poems have been selected which the child can comprehend without great difficulty, it is necessary to

²¹E.W. Schofield, "Creative Writing of Poetry in the Elementary Grades", Elementary English, January, 1967, p. 68.

decide which type of poem is best to use as an introduction. Many children have had positive experiences at home with childhood rhymes and the traditional Mother Goose rhymes. However, some have already had the negative influence of older brothers and sisters who dislike poetry. The resulting suspicions concerning poetry have often, in the past, been broken down by the use of humorous poems. The light, humorous or "fun" poems are often the most quickly accepted poems. "The more children laugh, the less apprehensive they will become."²² Poetry will often immediately lose the titles of "ponderous", "dull" or "pointless". It will become more of a treat than a threat. If some boys still have the idea that poetry is for "sissies", which was probably suggested by older schoolmates, a humorous poem about pirates will easily dispel it. Mother Goose rhymes, humorous verse and limericks are good stepping stones to a variety of delightful lyrical and narrative poems.²³ The poems the teacher chooses should be humorous and they should deal directly with the child's world -- real or unreal.

Now that the poems have been selected how must the teacher begin his introduction into the world of poetry?

²²G.G. Duffy, "Children Do Enjoy Poetry", Elementary English, vol. 38, October, 1961, p. 422.

²³Hutchett and Hughes, op. cit., pp. 173, 174.

Lois Untermeyer questioned poets regarding their views on the teaching of this subject. One poet responded, "If I were introducing poetry to children, I would read all kinds of poetry to them and have them read poetry to me. With young children I wouldn't worry about teaching the structure or mechanics of poetry. In teaching I would never force. I would try to help children get at the important feelings and emotions poetry can communicate. I would try to impart my enthusiasm for poetry to them. This is the best way of building enthusiasm in them."²⁴ In order to develop a sensitivity to the world about them children need to be given many delightful experiences with poetry.

This sensitivity which the teacher strives to stimulate will not come however, from the analysis or "dissection" of a poem. Children of this age are not ready for any deep delving into meaning or syntax. This does not mean, however, that they should not be exposed to poetry. One point of view regarding poetry instruction is this "hands off" philosophy. Proponents of this point of view contend that "the best way to develop understanding of, appreciation of, and sensitivity to poetry is not to study or analyze it.

²⁴Majorie Hovland, "A Year of Poetry", Elementary English, vol. 45, March, 1968, p. 377.

They view children as "naturally" poetic and therefore needful of "little direct instruction in poetry."²⁵ Young primary grade children are "naturally fond of poetry. Most of them can be stirred by the words and swayed by the rhythm of a poem even when they are far from a full understanding of the deeper meanings".²⁶ The proponents of this philosophy are also generally agreed that poetry should result, for the most part, from an incident that takes place in the classroom or from something which has captured the imagination of most of their students. "Children will listen with appreciation to poems if those chosen are simple and narrative in form, contain humor and are presented at a time when they enrich a current happening".²⁷ This spontaneous delving into poetry often yields more fruitful results, especially in terms of attitude, than is created through a set schedule where poetry is studied according to the clock whether the mood is right or not. This does, however, require that the teacher have at his disposal a large number of poems to refer to if such an incident arises.

Since most first and second graders have limited

²⁵Dr. Patrick Groff, "Two Roads to Poetry". Readings in Language Arts, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964, p. 131.

²⁶M. Haliburton and A. Smith, Teaching Poetry in the Grades, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1911, p. 1.

²⁷M. Dawson and M. Choate, How to Help a Child Appreciate Poetry, San Francisco: Fearon Publishers, 1960, p. 92.

reading ability most of their experiences with poetry will come from poems read orally by their teacher. This is a very fortunate limitation since poetry was originally composed for reciting and for enjoyment through the ear.²⁸ It has been said that "the only true poem is the spoken poem", and that "a poem is not a poem until it has been voiced".²⁹ Poetry has been classified as an auditory art for over 2,000 years.³⁰ By reading poems aloud to children the teacher can include voice inflection, pauses, the tempo, tone, color and the cadence of a poem which only the experienced reader of poetry can catch. He frees his students from wrestling with the complexities of the printed page and the frustrations resulting from lack of reading vocabulary. Listening is the natural approach to an enjoyment of poetry. It offers the delight of rhythm and pleasing sound patterns. "As children listen they begin to catch the mood of the poem, to appreciate rhythm and beauty of sound, and to gain new and deeper meanings of their everyday world".³¹ When the child hears poetry, especially if no illustrations are

²⁸R. Strickland, op. cit., p. 402.

²⁹M.H. Arbuthnot, Time For Poetry, Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1959, p. 10.

³⁰Immel and Ogg, op. cit., p. 9.

³¹Rosalind Hughes, Let's Enjoy Poetry, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958, p. 189.