

A STEPPING STONE OF LANGUAGE: TEACHING POETRY IN THE FOURTH
GRADE CLASSROOM

By

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A STEPPING STONE OF LANGUAGE: TEACHING POETRY IN THE FOURTH GRADE CLASSROOM

Abstract

by Jessica Friedman

This thesis explores how poetry can change children's view of themselves as readers and writers, as well as enhance students' literacy development in a fourth grade classroom. This project argues that despite pressure from the No Child Left Behind Act, poetry can be a central theme of an elementary teacher's best practices in creating multiple opportunities for literacy. Based upon the work of teacher and poet, Kenneth Koch, and others, I show that in a non-judgmental and comfortable environment, poetry can inspire children to become better reader and writers. By teaching poetry, the elementary classroom teacher can help children write about feelings and emotions, while at the same time accessing new vocabulary. And, as a result of exposure to many different poems, children who had not previously written poetry are able to do so, and are able to gain more confidence in themselves as writers

I believe that when fourth grade students are exposed to a variety of poems, they will gain confidence as poetry readers and writers, will be able to access new vocabulary which they discover in poems, and will develop literacy from a practice of arts instruction underutilized in elementary classrooms. This poetry movement can begin in any classroom, given there is a teacher who is

willing to take the time to choose strong poems, talk about the poems with the students, elicit students' responses, and give time for writing and revision.

In this study, students in a Title One, low achieving school, responded to opportunities to express thoughts and ideas after reading and writing poetry, without the constraints of a multiple choice test as the final determination of their success. With local district and school adherence to No Child Left Behind and federal expectations of school achievement, there is often little time or encouragement for teachers to offer poetry, but the because of the rich language poetry offers and the opportunity for learning new vocabulary as well as self-expression, a curriculum which includes poetry can an important role in any public school language arts program.

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DEDICATION

For my mother: Thank you for being my first and best teacher, for encouraging me and believing in me, and for your incredible generosity.

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Chapter 1

Framework

Poetry in the Era of No Child Left Behind

Enter any public elementary classroom in California and say the word “poetry”. Poetry means many things to many people: it could be Shakespeare, hip-hop music, or a song that children have heard on the schoolyard while jumping rope. In many primary classrooms, poetry is a tool, which teachers often use to help students learn rhyming sounds. One of the responsibilities of a California teacher is to teach poetry in the kindergarten classroom. This is stipulated by the standard from the California Department of Education which requires that children shall “Identify and produce rhyming words in response to an oral prompt”, (www.cde.ca.gov, 2011). By high school students who take the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) are “asked to read and understand stories, poems, plays, and essays. You should also be familiar with common literary devices and figurative language, especially the types found in poetry”, (www.cde.ca.gov, 2011).

While poetry is certainly a part of the California State Standards, the constraints of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and a culture of teaching focused on memorizing discreet facts, daily opportunities for teaching poetry might seem limited. NCLB has emphasized core standards such as math, reading and writing; therefore, the teaching of arts curriculum is lagging behind. A recent article from the National Endowment of the Arts states,

Yet, at the same time we celebrate the arts for the value they add to learning and to life, study of the arts is quietly disappearing from our schools. In schools across the country, opportunities for students to participate in high-quality arts instruction and activities are diminishing, the result of shifting priorities and budget cuts. Poor, inner city and rural schools bear a disproportionate share of the losses. Studies show children from low-income families are less likely to be consistently involved in arts activities or instruction than children from high-income families. (Ruppert, 2004)

Teachers' Attitudes about Teaching Poetry

At a standards and curriculum meeting in 2010, when I spoke to a group of my fourth grade colleagues about the notion that they could and should teach poetry, I was met with disbelief on their part. These teachers were incredulous that I could even make time for poetry, and could not believe that I had would

choose what poems the children would read without district guidance (Action Committee, personal conversation April, 2011). Several teachers have called me to discuss how and why I teach poetry, given the climate of testing in today's schools. Research supports the belief that poetry can positively impact learning. Clark and Fifer (2000), authors of *Poetry in Six Dimensions: 20th Century Voices*, reported that, "The teacher who combines poetry reading with both analytical and creative writing assignments will find that students make a natural bridge between cognitive learning and personal expression; each activity reinforces the other" (p xv). Research by Rachel Cumming (2007), suggested that, "From a very early age children have an intuitive knowledge of poetic genre, though the meta language for demonstrating that knowledge is not fully developed" (p. 93). For many teachers with whom I have spoken, poetry fits into a distant memory of high school when long, confusing poems were memorized and forgotten as quickly as possible. For other teachers, poetry is pulled out of a file drawer for the month of April (April is Poetry Month), and tacked on to the required standards that they struggle to meet before state testing. In her article *Rhyme and Reason: Poetry for the Head and Heart*, Kathy Perfect (1999), argues that several issues came up over and over again as to why teachers do not teach more poetry: "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" (p. 728).

The fact is, poetry does not have to be used to teach phonics, it does not have to rhyme, and it does not have to be saved until April. Based upon research, in today's schools, poetry has taken a back seat in terms of valuable curriculum for elementary children. For example, in the state mandated language arts curriculum in the Terra Nova District (Houghton Mifflin), there are approximately 705 pages; nine of these are poems.

What is it that has happened in schools that has given teachers and administrators a fear of assigning poetry as a meaningful tool for language arts instruction? It may not be what happens, but what does not happen: poetry is simply not taught as a means of self-expression in daily language arts curriculum. Across the US, April is "Poetry Month." That means that in April, if teachers can find their way through the standardized tests and report cards they must finish, they need to go into their filing cabinets and pull out the age old poems they used to teach. In her essay *Essential Poetry: Activating the Imagination in the Elementary Classroom*, Sue Cronmiller (2007) stated,

Although reading and writing poetry is not recommended directly by the authors of the California content standards, elementary students who study poetry in writing workshops demonstrate an active ability to employ language in the construction of their own understanding of the world. (p. 1)

Unfortunately, a lack of access to poetry curriculum gives the message that poetry is not a part of their learning; that is, it is not as important as writing

an essay or reading an expository article. I believe that poetry can be a stepping-stone of a strong literacy program. Poetry is a medium that can allow children access to new vocabulary, great themes in literature, and most importantly, poetry is a vehicle for children's expression of their deepest thoughts and feelings.

The Work of Kenneth Koch

Kenneth Koch (1925 –2002), an American poet, playwright, professor and essayist, has had the most profound impact on the way I choose to teach poetry to children. Several years ago, a visiting teacher came to my school as part of an after school enrichment program for low achieving students. I observed him as children ran around the school looking for found objects to write about, and I was amazed at how his poetry lessons inspired the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students. When I asked him where he got his ideas, he told me about the work of Kenneth Koch.

Koch has had the greatest impact on teaching poetry for me because he simplifies classic and modern poetry and makes it accessible to both elementary students and their teachers. Koch's thought process around reading and writing poetry allows teachers to effectively and meaningfully introduce poetry in the classroom. Koch believed in a connection between great poems and what children feel about their own lives. Discussing his work in New York City schools, he wrote,

When I talked about the poems, I tried to make the children feel as close to them in every way that I could. The fact that they were going to write a poem connected to one that we had already studied was a start. Beyond that, I wanted to make the poem as understandable as possible, and also as real, tangible, and dramatic as I could. I wanted to create excitement

about it there in the classroom. When I could judge from what the children said and from their mood in general that that they had understood the poem and its connections to themselves and things they wanted to say themselves, I would have them write. (Koch, 1990, p. xliii)

In his article, *Kenneth Koch Revisited*, Robert DiYanni (1984) noted that Koch “demonstrated how to make reading and writing come alive for children. Aside from the optimism and the inventiveness of these books, perhaps their most important achievement was the integration of reading and writing in teaching poetry to children” (p. 38). DiYanni explained how Koch created a set of essays to walk teachers through teaching poetry. Koch created “invitations” to compose poems. “Specific, lucid and imaginative, these assignments encourage students and challenge them, without rigidly proscribing how to proceed or what to say. Moreover, they direct students back to a rereading of the poems...suggesting that students ought to encounter the poems directly” (DiYanni, 1984, p. 38). DiYanni explains how Koch successfully taught the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Here he recounts how Koch would teach a lesson to inner-city fifth graders in New York City:

Stevens’ idea was that even simple plain things, like a blackbird or plowed field, are exotic and amazing. Think for example of the rain. You look out the window and it is raining. You think ‘I need an umbrella today.’ You’re used to the rain. You look at it; but in a way you don’t really see it. But

what if it were the first rain you ever saw? If you didn't know what it was?
If you could forget, for a minute, everything but the rain? (DiYanni, 1984,
pp. 38-39)

Rose Where Did You Get That Red, Kenneth Koch's (1990) seminal work on teaching poetry in the urban classroom, provides a springboard for teachers unfamiliar with teaching poetry to school children. Koch believed that the children's poetry in reading anthologies is babyish; his philosophy was that children should be exposed to poetry that touches deep feelings, emotions and senses. He used poetry by Blake, Donne, Whitman, Williams, and other classical writers to expose children to bigger ideas, vocabulary and feelings.

One thing they could learn from them all was the importance of feelings and one's secret imaginative life...they were learning what great poetry had to do with them. Feelings they may have thought were silly or too private to be understood by anyone were subjects that 'great authors' wrote about. (Koch, 1990, p. xxiv)

Rose, Where Did You Get That Red encapsulates the idea that even if young children cannot understand every word, the meaning that comes from seminal works of poetry can speak to children's emotions and inspire them to write. Koch's writing is an excellent resource for teachers who want to use poems to tap into new vocabulary and rich ideas. Koch's work brings to light the

idea that children can understand the classics and can tap into deeper feelings and emotions from great works. As Koch (1990) wrote,

In my teaching my aim was to surround my students with other fine poems...that were worthy of their attention and that could give them good experiences and help them in their own writing. I had discovered that my students were capable to enjoying and also learning from good poetry while I was teaching them writing. (p. xxv)

Poetry as a Means for Encouraging Literacy in the Classroom

In his paper, *Culturally Relevant Poetry: Creating Esperanza with Stanzas*, Fernando Rodriguez-Valls (2009) described his frustration with the “scripted anthologies” which “ignore the essence of education” (p. 10). He strove to implement lessons with books that incorporated the “lifeworld” and knowledge of the Latino community. Rodriguez-Valls (2009) introduced poetry to fourth grade students, beginning with the work of Sandra Cisneros. He assigned Sandra Cisneros’s poetry as homework for his students. Children and parents were asked to read the poems at home. By discussing poetry at home, the author discovered that his Latino students and their families could connect and engage with literacy, which tied into the author’s more academic expectations of the students. Poetry argues the author, is a way for students and their parents to have discussions and understand concepts taught in school together. This

thoughtful article touches on some of the core issues about how English Language Learners can access literacy outside the classroom, as well as the state of language arts instruction in California's schools. Its application is relevant to all grade levels. In particular, Rodriguez-Valls' response to teaching with a scripted anthology via reading poetry offers teachers other opportunities for accessing literacy in the California classroom. In her essay, *Rhyme and Reason: Poetry for the Heart and Head*, Kathy Perfect (1999) wrote that poetry "nurtures a love and appreciation for the sound and the power of language. Poetry can help us see differently, understand ourselves and others, and validate our human experience" (p. 728).

Poetry may provide a window to a world outside the classroom, but for many elementary students, reading and comprehending longer works of poetry might be challenging. In their article, *Responding and Comprehending: Reading with Delight and Understanding*, Liang and Galda (2009) described how students who might not be familiar with listening to poetry use prediction and visualization strategies to help enhance their experience understanding the poem. These academic strategies of visualization and prediction can help children comprehend language, which might not immediately be accessible. Through visualizing and "describing the pictures in their head" (p. 24), students are able to respond and even write their own poems in the context of what they have heard. "Visualizing is an important and highly effective strategy for improving student understanding

of both expository and narrative text” (p. 32). The authors explained how poetry uses sensory images to explain ideas and emotions. Using a series of questions with the students, such as “what do you notice” and “what do you see” after reading several lines of a poem, the authors conclude that visualizing while reading a poem makes that poem easier to understand. Visualizing allows students to create meaning and understanding through pictorial or visual representations of text. Gambrell and Bales (1986) found that visualizing is an important and highly effective strategy for improving student understanding of both expository and narrative text. The point is to help students make connections between ideas from text and to visually comprehend what the text is about or what events are going on in the text (Liang & Galda, 2009).

An example of a visualizing activity in the classroom is reading a book to students and then having students go back to their desk and draw a picture of what they thought the book was about. It is as easy as that. Another example is having students create a comic strip of the major events in a book that they read. This would assess student’s ability to sequence events and their comprehension of how events happened in the story. Students respond to the text by creating a visual of the text. If reading an expository text, a teacher may ask students to draw a graph or chart to detail the content of the text (Liang & Galda, 2009).

There is a practical application for the classroom teacher; rather than assuming the child understands what is happening, the teacher stops and goes

through the process of visualization. Thus, when students read poetry daily, and visualize what they are reading and hearing, the process of gathering images from poems impacts understanding.

Laura Reid's (2009) article, *Follow the Poet: Poetry in the Montessori Classroom*, argued that when poetry is incorporated across the curriculum, "students learn to make discoveries by looking at their environment in new ways" (p. 16). She defined poetry as a way to "entice" children into practicing and loving language. By sharing the writing that her students have created, Reid provided insight into how children process language. Reid suggested that each word has sound and meaning and is the pathway to sensory development. The author argued that a single poem might lead to thoughtful discussions amongst young children. "Like a poet, a child transforms his world into language. The way that children acquire language...is a form of poetry...weaving together rhythms, cadence and emotions with an inherent need for communication" (Reid, 2009, p. 17). This is a strong article with a great deal of research behind it. Reid discusses poetry as a way of having children access other curriculum, such as studying poetry of the Osage tribe to learn more about the ways of the Osage Tribe.

Much like Reid in her discussion of visualization, in his article, *Reaching the Heart: Quality Poetry Instruction for Young Children*, Michael Ford (1989) described the critical components of a poetry lesson for grades kindergarten

through third. He explained that poetry needs to be read in the classroom for aesthetic enjoyment. Further, "Poetry needs to be studied for poetry's sake" (p. 3). This immediately sends the message to students that poetry is pleasurable. Ford explained that forced memorization; strict assignments and interrogating questions could turn students away from poetry. By studying the types of poetry that early elementary students enjoy, Ford recognized that they enjoy poetry about familiar topics such as animals, childhood experiences and holidays. He also noted that children enjoyed humorous poems, or nonsense poems. Ford explained that it is the teacher's job to present poetry with "enthusiasm and expression," to help promote passion for poetry in his students (p. 5).

By reading poems with a variety of themes, students will get experience of getting to know themselves and their world better through reading and writing. Poetry can access the academic language that is a part of today's curriculum. Martin (2008) for example, wrote,

It seems likely that one of the main reasons many professional educators eschew the study of poetry in the classroom is that there is increasing pressure to meet standards in other subject: math, science, social studies and even physical education. Yet, it is entirely possible to use poetry in daily instruction while taking little time away from other subjects, and even plausible to emphasize certain aspects of other curricular areas that have previously gone unearthed. (p. 2)

School Context/Assessment Tools

Ranger Elementary is a small, public school of 510 students set in a traditional rural community. The school has a large population of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds; 86% receive free or reduced lunch. Ranger Elementary has a reputation for being a small, friendly school. Children come to Ranger because their cousins or aunts and uncles or parents attended the school and liked it. Other children come to Ranger because it has a more welcoming, less traditional reputation; children who have struggled socially at other schools in the Terra Nova District had a higher success rate at Ranger.

Ranger Elementary school students are a diverse group of learners from the core historic district of Terra Nova. Ranger has a total of 510 students. Of these, there are:

- English Language Learners- 251 (49%)
- Reclassified to English Only- 29 (6%)
- English Only- 230 (45%)

Terra Nova Joint Unified School District currently serves 10,657 students. The student population consists of 32.2 percent English Learners, 48.9 percent Reduced or Free Lunch, and 64.4 percent Hispanics (California Department of Education, 2010). In comparison to other districts that are the same size in California, TJUSD has the largest number of English Learners. TJUSD has three

infant-toddler schools, eight preschools, twelve Kindergarten through Sixth grade elementary schools, two middle schools for Grades 7 through 8, two high schools, one continuation high school and an adult school. The following are the ethnic breakdown: 57 % Hispanic; 31.5 percent White; 4.7 percent Asian; four percent no identity; the rest is either Filipino or American Indian.

Located in the historic downtown district, Ranger School is Terra Nova's oldest elementary school. The school receives funding from Federal Title One funds. Ranger School has 18 full time teachers and a Title One teacher who works with pullout groups to improve literacy. The classroom teachers provide instruction in all subjects: PE, Language Arts, Math, Social Studies and Science. Additionally, arts curriculum is provided with grants to subsidize an Art Coordinator.

Two tracks of study are available for incoming kindergartners. Children who speak Spanish at home may transition into English through the transitional Spanish program, from which they are exited in third grade. The other track is English only. All upper grades, fourth through sixth, are taught in English. One important aspect of Ranger school, though a Title One School, is a philosophical commitment to arts education. Twelve years ago, Ranger was a typical elementary school, which did not particularly stand out, academically. Through the work of an active PTA and several visionary principals, as well as a dedicated staff, the school has experienced a "renaissance" of sorts. A strong, established

art program has helped to bring in over 50 art scholars from UC Davis, and the school has an established garden and orchard open to all children. There continues to be a group of active and vocal parents who have encouraged and advocated for arts education for the students in the school. This has been a tremendous draw to getting many new families enrolled in the school, which might otherwise choose a local private school. Until recently, Ranger was one of the highest academically achieving elementary schools and was recognized with the prestigious "Title One Academic Achievement Award" from the Superintendent of California, Jack O'Connell. Unfortunately, things changed in 2009-2010. For no overtly clear reason, test scores plummeted. There are several factors that may have caused this change: many new children were bussed in from a school that closed, and there has been more staff turnover and shuffling. So, during the year 2010-2011, the staff feels tremendous pressure as test scores now put Ranger at the bottom quartile of the district. This is a constant worry and emphasis now: test scores need to rise so that Ranger can move out of Program Improvement status.

A Title I school will be identified for PI when, for each of two consecutive years, the Title I school does not make AYP in the same content area (English-language arts [ELA] or mathematics) school wide or for any numerically significant subgroup, or on the same indicator (Academic Performance Index [API] or high school graduation rate) school wide (California Department of

Education, 2010).

At Ranger Elementary all teachers are expected to use the state adopted curriculum (Houghton Mifflin for Language Arts, Scott-Foresman for math) and to avoid using “third party materials”, (e.g. materials that are not part of the districts’ adopted curriculum). A strong emphasis of Terra Nova District is that English Language Learners (ELL’s) are reaching their full potential and that teachers are appropriately trained to deliver the standards effectively. Teachers at the school attend bi-monthly meetings to learn strategies from videos and demonstrations, which targets best instructional methods to ELLs. A large part the staff development at Ranger Elementary is to learn more about best practices and collaboration between teachers to create successful lesson planning which will reach the lowest scoring learners. Central to this cycle is data collection. Looking at student work and examining test scores is central to the district’s model for guaranteeing success for all English Language Learners.

Teaching Poetry in the Fourth Grade Classroom

There is a great deal of pressure within the school to succeed at high stakes testing, but the principal at Ranger Elementary supports classroom activities, which encourage literacy. I am particularly fortunate to have the freedom to pursue classroom activities outside the core curriculum. Some of

these activities include writing poetry, putting on plays, making sculptures and working in the garden.

As part of my responsibilities for Terra Nova District, I sit on a committee that maps and refines curriculum. This year we are focusing on English Language Arts. Every eight weeks, ten teachers sit together and plan out what curriculum instruction will look like for all fourth grade teachers in the future. The district's goal is to see all teachers working on the same lessons out of the same books using the same resources for years to come. Most teachers I have encountered in the district do not teach poetry. So even though poetry is taught at Ranger Elementary, it is not generally taught at other schools in the same district.

So, a duality has emerged at Ranger. One aspect of the school is its commitment to the arts and the school's identity as a welcoming, kid-friendly environment, with many opportunities for self-expression. But, with plummeting test scores and a district, which is facing a crackdown from the state because of low academic performance, arts education may no longer be a priority.

Test Data

In order to assess the outcomes of this research project, I relied on the following data gathered prior to beginning this project. I analyzed students' standardized test scores, had discussions with other teachers about my students,

spoke with parents, and did classroom observations. The CELDT scores gave me a snapshot of the English Language Learners in my classroom, and helped me to develop a sense of their reading comprehension in English as well as level of vocabulary. Prior to the beginning of the poetry, I looked over testing data that would help me identify my students' reading levels. For this study, I gathered information about all 28 fourth grade students. Their reading levels ranged from second grade to sixth grade in terms of fluency and comprehension. This helped me to understand what level of vocabulary, reading level, and academic English the children brought to the classroom. Brief discussions with family members were effective snapshots at telling me a little bit about how each child felt about school; whether it is generally happy or negative experience to go to school each day. Teacher anecdotes in the lunch room or one on one in classrooms, particularly from teachers who meet with my children for reading or special education, were very important in giving me a snapshot of how my students are doing outside of my classroom, and how these students work in a different environment, such as a smaller group or one on one.

Three different formal assessments were used to give me a snapshot of the class. The first is the CELDT; a test that measures how well a student can listen, speak, read, and write in English. California state law requires that the CELDT be given each year to English Learners (students who do not speak

English fluently).

The CELDT Test

- To identify new students in kindergarten through grade 12 who are English Learners.
- To monitor student progress in learning English.
- To help decide when a student is fully proficient in academic English.

The Results test, which is given to every child at Ranger Elementary, determines what reading level my students have prior to beginning their poetry study. The Results test measures students reading level by assigning them a score for their ability to read grade level passages.

The CST measures “students' progress toward achieving California's state-adopted academic content standards in English–language arts (ELA), mathematics, science, and history–social science, which describe what students should know and be able to do in each grade and subject tested (California State Testing Website, 2011).

These scores: CELDT, Results, and CST, have helped paint a picture of the students in my classroom. But they only tell part of the story of who these learners really are.

Research Questions

How do fourth grade students define as readers and writers to a variety of classic poems, and how does reading and writing poetry define their view of themselves as creative writers?

The Sub Questions are:

- How does increased exposure to poetry affect students' attitudes about school?
- Does exposure to poetry increase their view of themselves as writers?
- Does reading and writing poetry excite children, and make them want to study more poems?

The class of fourth graders I worked with was exposed to a variety of classic poems to help ignite their interest in reading and writing. In her essay published in 2003, *Poetry's Pace and the Poet's Participation in Fields of Knowledge*, Rosemary Winslow argued, "If writing is seen as a process for discovering and developing thought, the processes of writing poetry activates engage both a fuller, more expansive discovery and development in which the individual actively learns something new" (p. 6). When these fourth graders could define themselves as readers and writers of poetry, their view of themselves as students would be more positive and would positively affect their outcomes as learners.

Chapter 2

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were 28 fourth graders. The students are of a very mixed ability, and range in age from eight to 11. Children in the class have a tested reading level from second to sixth grade. Many of the children have known each other since kindergarten, but due to a several school closures in Terranova, a large influx of new students entered the school last year. The children in my class range from upper middle class families to middle class to poverty level. There are two classroom volunteers who spend one hour per week working with the students.

The children in my fourth grade classroom are a microcosm of the city of Terranova as whole. Just as Terranova has a roughly 50% Latino population, of the 28 children in my room, 18 have a parent who speaks Spanish at home. All of the 28 children speak fluent English; 12 are ELLs or English Language Learners. Of the ELLs, all but one speaks Spanish; the remaining child speaks Punjabi.

Within the entire group there are five students receiving specific help from an RSP teacher; of these five, two are receiving instruction in RSP for over 40% of the day. One of these children is the Punjabi child; he is learning disabled.

The other child is identified as Severely Emotionally Disturbed and is receiving RSP instruction for the benefit of the small group setting.

About one-quarter of the class lives in a single parent family, or the parents are divorced. Of the Latino children, most of the families have two parent households. Of the 28 children, three bring lunch from home each day. The other 25 receive a free or reduced lunch.

The classroom is large and sunny. Outside the windows children can see huge oak trees, which change through the seasons. There is a class library of over 500 books, ranging in reading level from second to eighth grade level. The children constantly check out books and bring them home as needed. Encyclopedias, dictionaries, thesauruses, and atlases are readily available to the children.

Kenneth Koch

The time I spend in my class teaching poetry was modeled after the work that Kenneth Koch (1990) wrote about in *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* Kenneth Koch, a poet and Columbia professor, went into inner city schools of New York City in the 1970s with the intention of introducing great poetry to children who had had little or no instruction in reading or writing poems before. Koch worked with the students by reading poems with them and gathering their reactions. The students would work with Koch to create their own poems based

on what they had read with him. His methods were informal yet intense; his final product was the students' written work. Koch wrote,

I had used poetry ideas in teaching my students to write poetry before, to help them about wishes, dreams, colors, differences between the present and the past, poems which included a number of Spanish words, poems in which everything was a lie.... With the help of these poetry ideas, along with as free and inspiring a classroom atmosphere as I could create, and with a good deal of praise and encouragement from me and from each other, my students in grades one through six came to love writing poetry, as much as they liked drawing and painting and sometimes even more. (p. xxiii)

Koch held a strong belief that children could respond to great poetry, and that reading and writing poetry could help children access authentic feelings. He also believed that beautiful, meaningful poetry could be accessible to children, the way it is to adults. In *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red*, Koch talks about children reading Walt Whitman's (1855) *Song to Myself*.

Whitman could encourage children to trust their secret feelings about the world and how they were connected to it --- it told them these feelings were more important than what they found in books.... Feelings that they thought were silly or too private to be to be understood by anyone else were subjects that "great" authors wrote about. (Koch, 1990, p. xxiviii)

The development of my students' literacy during a poetry unit, which is how the children in my class respond to poetry and what growth they make as writers, was a key aspect of my research. I wanted to find out if reading and writing poetry helped to develop the students as better writers and readers, and as a result, made them want to read and to write more poetry.

Data Collection

Over a six-week period, four different methods were utilized here to find out about how students responded to reading and writing poetry in the classroom. The first method I utilized was observational. I observed students reading and writing poetry with one another in the classroom, and took notes on what I saw and heard them speak about. By observing them, I wanted to find out about their attitudes as they were exposed to poetry and opportunities to write. Discreet observations of the daily work of the students' during poetry time helped to give a snapshot of students' experience as poets. In his contribution to *Living the Questions*, Huband and Power (1999), educational ethnographer Harry Wolcott reminds us that observation is a "mysterious process." As teachers, we use observation all the time to monitor our students' progress. Throughout this project I captured small moments of student productivity, and made notes to give evidence of their experience reading and writing poetry. By writing down a short phrase of what I saw each child doing, I was able to get a picture of how the

poetry unit impacted their thinking, their interaction with one another, and their view of themselves as writers.

Interviews

The second method I utilized was the interview. I interviewed students about their attitudes before and after they read and wrote

The student interview was a one-on-one between the student and teacher to find out about attitudes around learning poetry. I used this interview to gather information about the children's responses to studying poetry after the six weeklong poetry units.

For the structured interview, I asked the students to respond to the following questions after our poetry unit was completed:

1. *Tell me about reading poetry in Ms. Friedman's class*
2. *Tell me about what you think about writing*
3. *What is the thing you remember most about reading and writing poetry?*
4. *What is the difference in your writing before and after you started writing poetry*

The final interviews of my students provided material on what the children thought about the poetry they read, what ideas they came up with for writing their own poetry, and feelings they experienced during the poetry lesson. I recorded these interviews by hand in a notebook and used their anecdotal answers as one

of my research tools. I was specifically interested in what their enjoyment or “ah-ha” moments were, so that in future meetings with colleagues I can share what I learned, and develop more opportunities like this. Word choice, which is what words “stick out” for the children, will give me data to decide whether studying poetry has an effect on how children use new vocabulary and whether reading and writing poetry allows children to access new vocabulary more easily.

The third method I utilized was an analysis of student work. I looked at student work and assessed the students’ ability to try new vocabulary, write poems on a topic, and organize poems modeled on what they had read. This included what they wrote in their journals about the entire poetry unit.

The final method I utilized was a pre and post survey. The survey helped to summarize students’ attitudes about reading and writing poetry before and after the six-week period.

Chapter 3

Results and Discussion

The Student Poetry Journal

The poetry journal served as a place of collection and reflection for the students' poetry writing. First, I bought spiral bound notebooks for each child. Each week the children glued a new poem into their journal. They collected six poems in their journals. Their journals include the copied poems. In each poem, the students would highlight the interesting words that they find. Also, the journal served as a place to write down questions and ideas. Finally, the journal became a place to write poetry before it was published on the computer. Giving the children choices about what how they would interact with the poems was an important aspect of this study. When the students were allowed to select something meaningful in the text, such as a line or a word that was interesting, it connected them with the activity far more than encountering the poem as a whole. This concept of "choice" helped to guide how the children wrote and talked about poetry. Keeping a poetry journal was a central part of this project. By keeping journals of various poems, students could use their poetry journals as a place to read poetry by others and collect poems of their own. The journal is a place for the students to write and reflect on what they have read. In fact, after

the poetry journals were passed out, students started bringing in poems they had found at home or in the library to copy into their journals.

After gluing our poem in the journal, we would begin reading. We would look at the title, author, and year the poem was written. I asked them to listen to the poem as I read it aloud. Then I would read it again and the children read along silently. Finally, we read it aloud together. After that the children were asked to underline a favorite word and write it down into the journal. Taking out the poetry journals created for them and gluing in a single poem came to be a very exciting moment for the class as we prepared to dissect, understand, discuss and analyze the poem. It became a class habit to read a poem, discuss unknown vocabulary words, and talk about what we interesting things we had found in the poem.

The students were very excited when they got to select a favorite word. Mining for images or ideas within a poem, children can more easily digest longer poems without feeling overwhelmed. Questions I asked during this early exploration were: Why did you choose that word? What did that word mean to you? Why did you choose that line? What does that line mean to you? Are there any other words or lines in the poem that are important to you? After jotting down notes in their poetry journals, students read the line or word out loud to the whole class, and could explain why they chose it.

Intervention

Simile Poems

I chose simile poems to begin our poetry unit because similes teach a basic element of poetry which students would access again and again. Similes are commonly found in the children's Houghton Mifflin literature book. With simile poems, children got an essential building block of how to write down feelings by comparing one thing to another. A simple way to introduce a simile poem was to start with the word "love." While this is a conventional word, as poets, children can use the word "love" to make some simple yet complex similes. The simile became the basis for four to five lines of poetry that the children constructed. This lesson began with a chart for writing similes.

Table 1

Chart for Simile Poems

LOVE IS AS	ADD ADJECTIVE	THING NOUN
Love is as	Mysterious	As a cloud
Love is as	Angry	As a storm
Love is as	Colorful	As a rainbow

Similes and The Poetry of Joyce Carol Thomas:

"I Am A Root"

I Am a Root

I am hewn from

the solid ledge of rock

the soaring songs of birds

the rocking motions of the ocean

the uplifted branches of the tree

I am a root

that will be free

After reading “I Am a Root” and gluing it into journals, students were invited to listen and respond to the work of contemporary Oakland poet Joyce Carol Thomas. Much of Thomas’s work focuses on how a child sees herself as an individual, regardless of skin color or hairstyle. In response to reading her poem “I Am a Root”, children wrote “I am” poems, which use metaphors and similes to paint a picture of each child’s life. Following the introduction to Thomas’s work, children received a template with which to write similes about their own lives...comparing themselves to dolphins, sunshine, mountains, trees, etc. The lesson provided an introduction to writing poems about themselves and was structured around simple similes: I am as fast as a dolphin; I am as strong as the wind, I am as gentle as cloud. These poems were a stepping-stone for students to loosen up around writing and to see poetry as a genre that they can master. After reading her poem, I discussed the idea that in these “I am poems”

the author is comparing herself to things in the natural world. I asked the students to what would you compare yourself? What similes would you use? We discussed clouds that we could see outside the window, a five hundred year old Oak tree on the school property, and a tiny ladybug. We analyzed why poets make certain word choices. We discussed how Thomas used “solid” ledge, “rocking” motions, and “uplifted” branches to amplify her ideas. What visual pictures could we see in her poems? I told the students that as writers, we could paint visual pictures that give the reader a feeling about who or what we are.

As a class, we discussed meaningful adjectives and nouns, used the thesaurus to find powerful words, and then shared our ideas and new uses for common words.

Some of the class similes included:

- I am as angry as a dog tied up to a fence
- I am as blue as the ocean
- I am as gentle as a cloud
- I am as cute as a ladybug
- My brother is as annoying as stuck gum
- My mom is as sweet as candy
- I am as sad as the winter snow
- My friend is as friendly as sunshine
- My homework is as hard as a rock

- The pavement was as hot as the sun
- My heart is as soft as a pillow
- Math is as annoying as a fly

Once the students had read the poems of Joyce Carol Thomas and begun to understand the simile as a figure of speech commonly found in poetry, there was an infectious desire to read more and more poems.

Odes

The genre of the “ode”, which is homage to an object or person was introduced to this class through the writing of Pablo Neruda and Gary Soto. I chose Neruda’s poem about fleas because it uses lyrical words and imagery to discuss the poet’s relationship with a most unusual subject: the common flea. I had decided that the first poem I would share with the children was an ode, and I wanted a poem that was playful but at the same time serious. I especially wanted an ode that was about something very common, but that would make the children think about the world immediately surrounding them. This was the first complete poem that the children read together. To get a careful read on the poem, I first read it aloud to them. They then repeated the lines after me. Next, I asked the students to underline their favorite word within the poem. We took turns going around the class talking about what image or feeling the chosen word gave them. Using the Neruda poem, I introduced “odes” and how writers use “odes” to honor something they care about. An ode can be to something very

important, like a loved one, or an everyday object, like shoes or an orange or a jacket. Working in pairs, children were then asked to pick the words they did not know but wanted to know more about. Some of the words they chose included: appeal, Sanskrit, celestial, sphere, acrobat, delicate, profound, divulge, rely. I have gotten the strongest and most positive response from my students during this step.

Pablo Neruda, "Fleas Interest Me So Much"

Fleas interest me so much
 that I let them bite me for hours.
 They are perfect, ancient, Sanskrit,
 machines that admit of no appeal.
 They do not bite to eat,
 they bite only to jump;
 they are the dancers of the celestial sphere,
 delicate acrobats
 in the softest and most profound circus;
 let them gallop on my skin,
 divulge their emotions,
 amuse themselves with my blood,
 but someone should introduce them to me.
 I want to know them closely.

Figure 1 Fleas Interest Me so Much

Fleas interest me so much

Fleas interest me so much
that I let them bite me for hours.
They are perfect, ancient, Sanskrit,
machines that admit of no appeal.
They do not bite to eat,
they bite only to jump;
they are the dancers of the celestial sphere,
delicate acrobats
in the softest and most profound circus;
let them gallop on my skin,
divulge their emotions,
amuse themselves with my blood,
but someone should introduce them to me.
I want to know them closely,
I want to know what to rely on.

Pablo Neruda

sanskrit

I chose this word because
it sounds interesting.

I think this poem is really about how
he feel about fleas. I also think that
he wants to be a flea because fleas
can jump really high.

If I wear an animal I would be
a giny pig because they can sit any
wear.

Figure 2 Fleas II

Fleas interest me so much

Fleas interest me so much
that I let them bite me for hours.
They are perfect, ancient, Sanskrit,
machines that admit of no appeal.
They do not bite to eat,
they bite only to jump;
they are the dancers of the celestial sphere
delicate acrobats
in the softest and most profound circus;
let them gallop on my skin,
divulge their emotions,
amuse themselves with my blood,
but someone should introduce them to me.
I want to know them closely,
I want to know what to rely on.

Pablo Neruda

I Think this poem
IS about how Pablo
adores fleas. I think
he wants to be like
a flea and jump up.

Acrobats?

I wrote this word because it sounds
interesting.

Gallop?

I chose this word because it makes me
think of running horses.

If I were an animal I'll be a Zebra,
because I like its stripes



Animals in Poetry

Tyger by William Blake

“Tyger Tyger”: William Blake

Tyger Tyger burning bright

In the forests of the night

What immortal hand or eye

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies

Burnt the fire of thine eyes?

On what wings dare he aspire?

What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,

Could twist the sinews of thy heart?

And when thy heart began to beat,

What dread hand? & What dread feet?

The poetry journals became a place for the students to write and reflect on what they enjoyed about the poem Tyger Tyger. “Tyger Tyger” was used to show the children how a creative force could “design” an animal. Koch, 1990 wrote, “The idea of talking to an animal appeals to children a great deal.... The main question the poet asks is a question they often think about: How did something get the way it is? They asked this question about animals, about

apples, about the sky and clouds and about themselves”, (Koch, 1990, p. 5).

Taking Koch’s lead, I discussed with the class how certain things came to be: why are rainbows so colorful? Why do dogs howl at the moon? Why is a coyote so elusive? After reading Blake’s Tyger poem, we were able to use Blake’s poetry as a way of writing and answering our own questions. Blake’s poem centers on how the tiger got to be the way it is. To teach this poem, I first had the children cut out the poem and glue it into their poetry journals. After this first step, I read the poem over several times with the children, and we define the unknown words. In this case I defined the following words: immortal, symmetry, tine, aspire, seize, sinews, dread, furnace, and anvil. The children copied the words and definitions into their journals. Finally, we read the poem out loud, with different students taking turns, another two to three times. This entire process, the cutting, gluing, defining and reading aloud, takes about 25 minutes. The next 30 minutes of the lesson were spent with the children highlighting their favorite words in the poem and a rereading and discussion of the poem’s meaning. Working in table groups, the children were given 10 minutes to discuss and write about why they chose a particular word as a favorite. I believe that looking at strong words in a poem, and identifying the meaning of specific words makes harder poems more accessible to children, and develops vocabulary for English Language Learners and native English speakers alike. Favorite words that the

children chose included, fearful, symmetry, burnt, furnace, anvil, deadly, terrors, spears and burning.

Figure 3 Zebra Why?

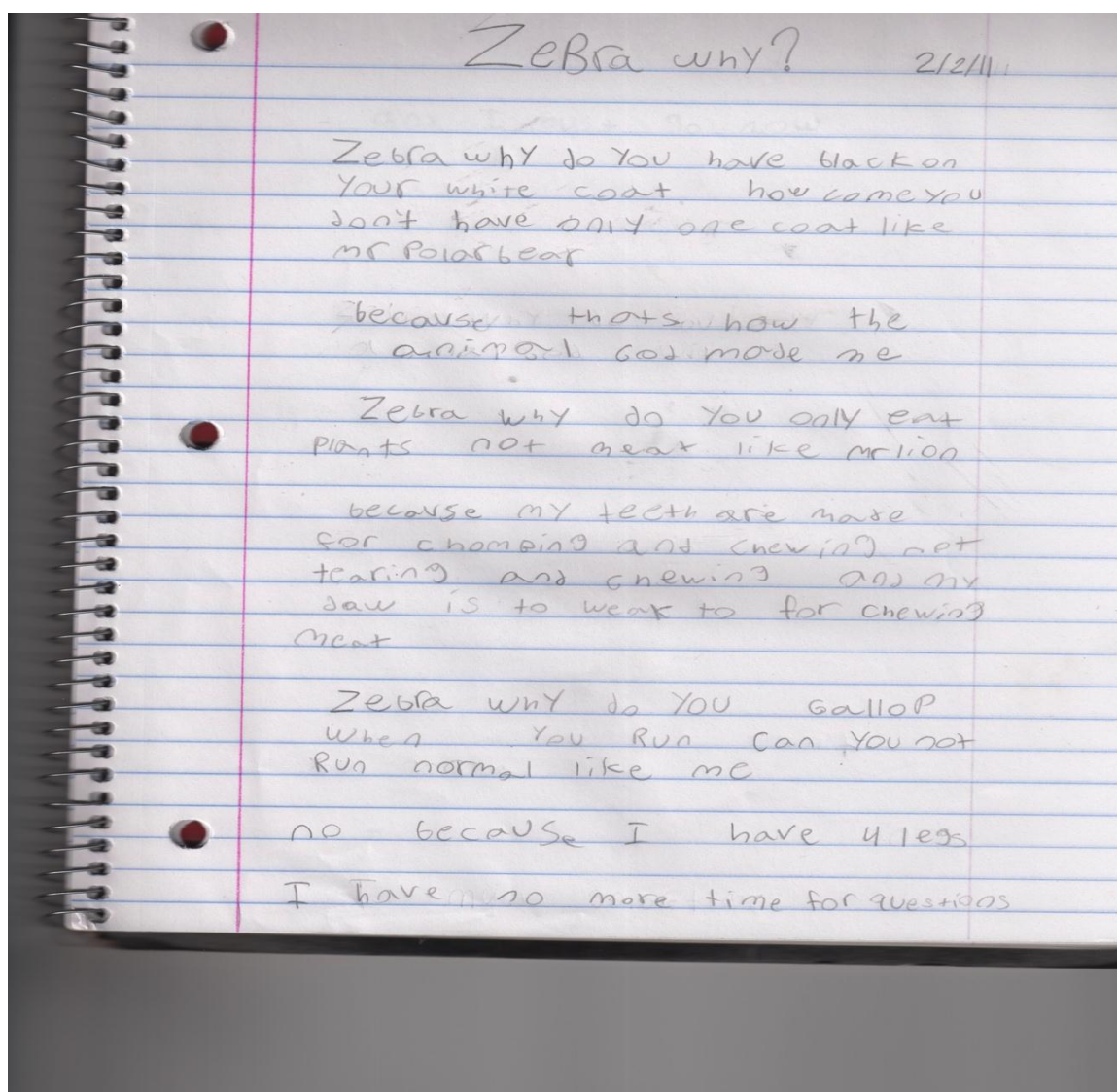
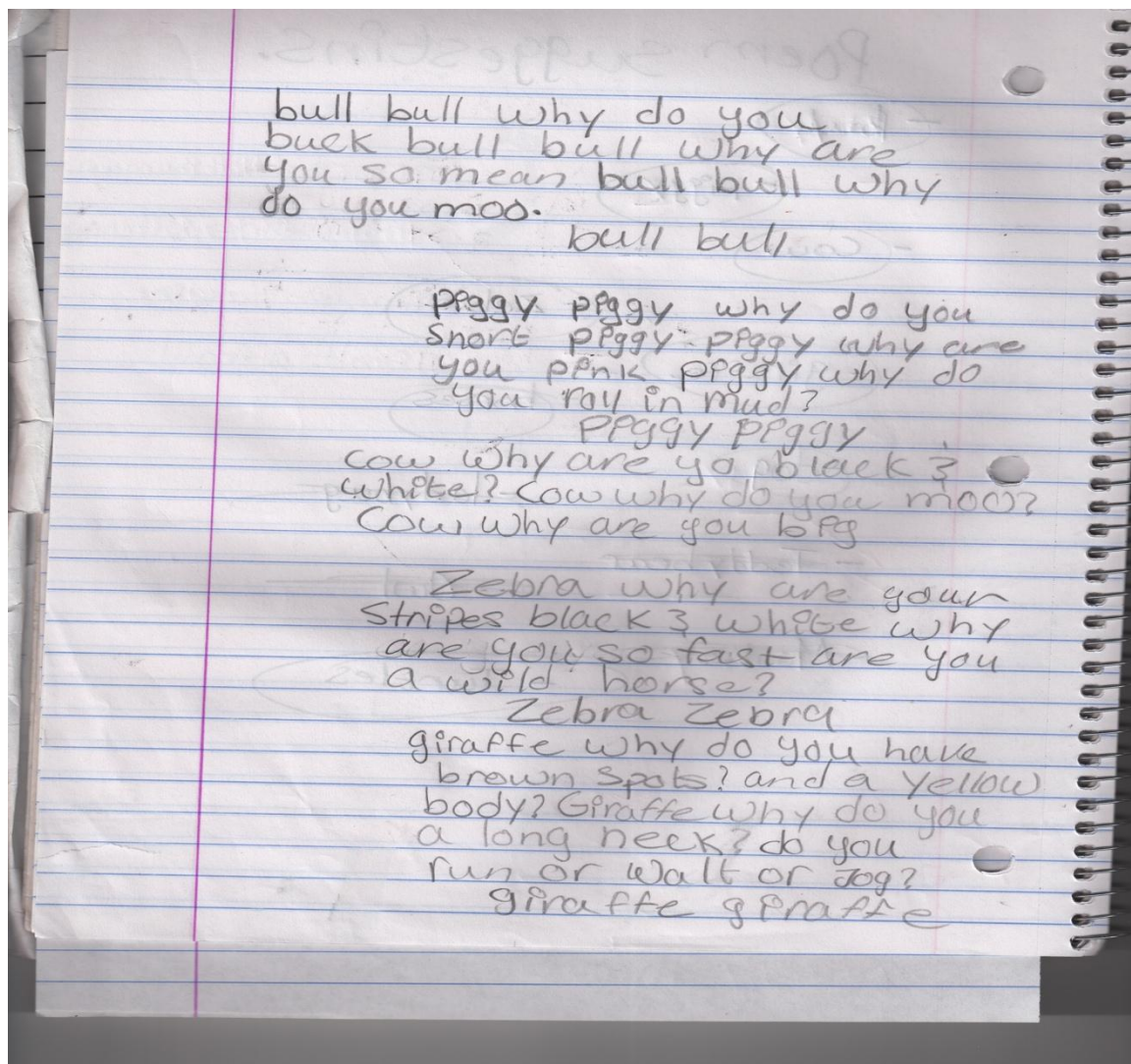


Figure 4 Bull, Bull



The Poetry of Rita Dove

I was delighted when reading and hearing my students' response to poet Rita Dove's "Testimonial." After reading the poem, students were asked to think about their dreams and their future. Eventually, they got a chance to practice reading their poems out loud.

Testimonial

By Rita Dove

Back when the earth was new
and heaven just a whisper,
back when the names of things
hadn't had time to stick;
back when the smallest breezes
melted summer into autumn,
when all the poplars quivered
sweetly in rank and file . . .

the world called, and I answered.

Each glance ignited to a gaze.

I caught my breath and called that life,
swooned between spoonfuls of lemon sorbet.

I was pirouette and flourish,
I was filigree and flame.
How could I count my blessings
when I didn't know their names?

Back when everything was still to come,
luck leaked out everywhere.
I gave my promise to the world,
and the world followed me here.

(Dove, 1999)

To begin this lesson, I introduced key vocabulary, which I thought would be challenging for my students, particularly my English Language Learners. I wrote and defined the words: poplar, quiver, rank and file, sorbet, pirouette, flourish and filigree. After the students and I discussed the meanings of these words, I asked students to choose their very favorite word from the poem. We shared out our favorite words in a class discussion. Some of the favorite words the children selected from Testimonial were: poplar, sorbet, pirouette, gaze, swoon, and ignite.

Finally, we talked about the idea of dreams, or of seeing the world just the way you want it to be. The poetry assignment was for students to imagine their

own dreams and to write about them in a poem. Students brainstormed in journals about their own dreams and aspirations, and eventually found a topic to respond to. During this lesson, I truly got to meet some young writers for the first time, even though I had been teaching them for six months. The students were passionate about their dreams: to be a pastor, an actress, a better son, or even to be a dog. One child went into great detail about why he will be an astronaut and what it will take to get there!

Figure 5 I Wish

I WISH

I wish I could have my own Island

I would make a hut out of wood

I would have fish tanks and cages

I would have fishes, frogs, birds and lizards in the cages

And I would make a dock, boat and a hammock

*The people that would live on the Island would be my d
and me*

I would make electricity out of fire and mango juice

*And on one part of the Island I would have a tree house
just for me*

*Finally, I would want tons of animals inhabiting my
Island*

THE END

Figure 6 Wish Poem II

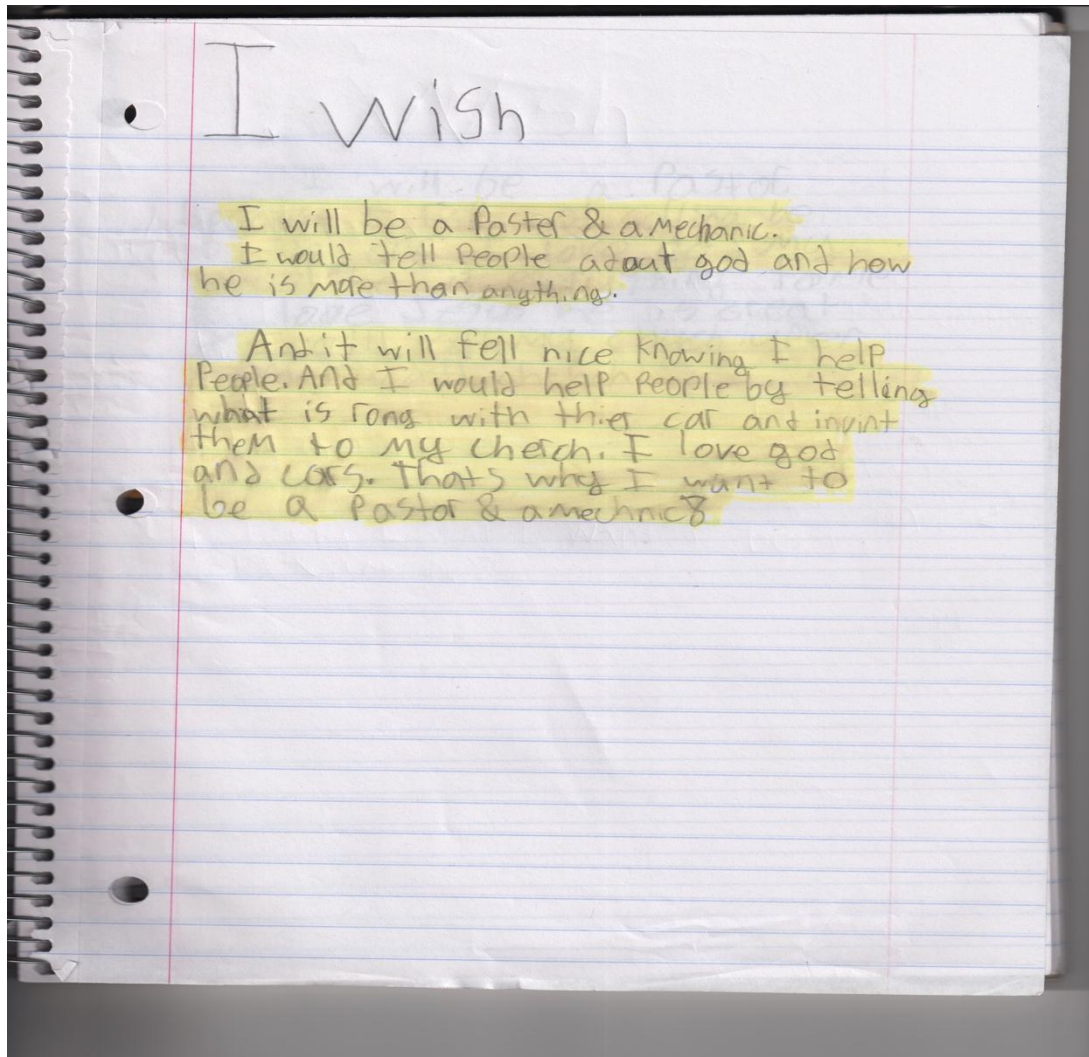
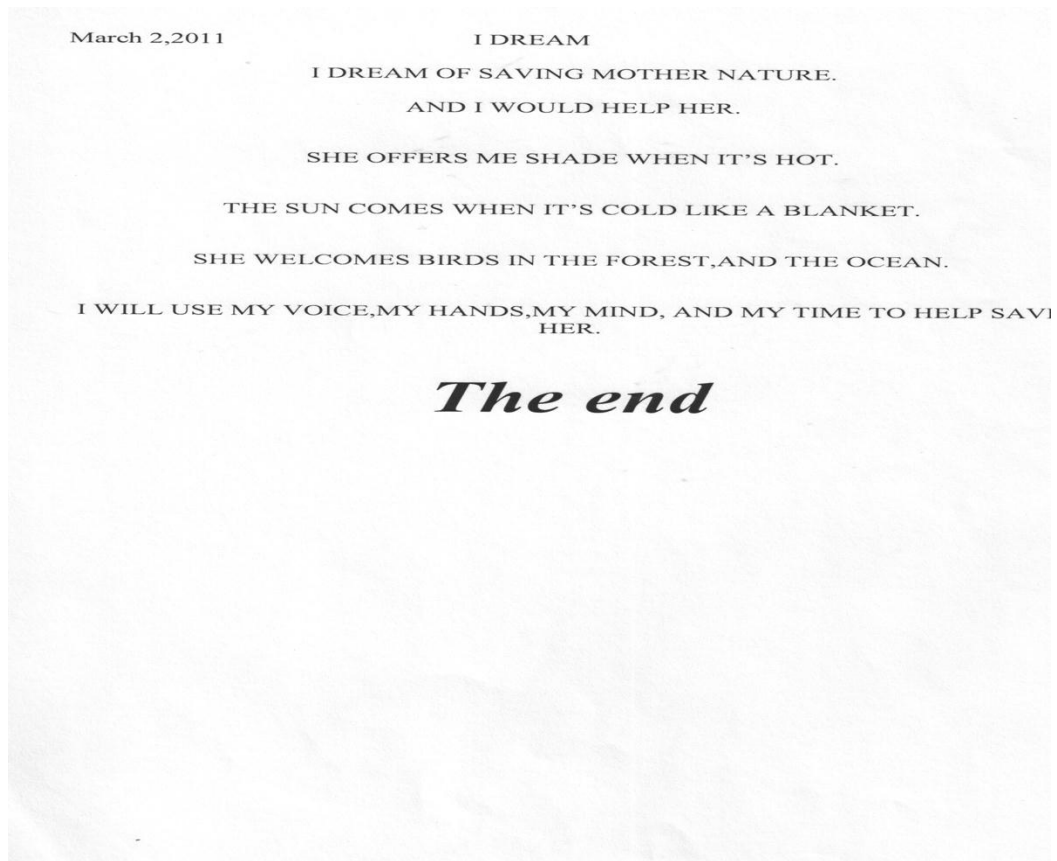


Figure 7 Wish Poem III



Found Poetry and Playing with Language

This lesson piggybacked on the reading of poems by Joyce Carol Thomas. The lesson centered upon children using “found language” to create lines of poetry. Prior to the lesson we discussed what nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives are. We discussed how emotion such as happiness, sadness, fear and anger are nouns, too. Children were given a variety of magazines, which they searched through to find and cut out powerful words. Again, the key to this lesson is choice. Children could choose any words that interested them, with a goal of 50 words being cut out and put into an envelope for saving. Eventually, working in small groups, each child glued down words into self-selected lines of poetry. Following are examples of the students “found” poetry.

Figure 8: Found Poetry



Figure 9

Found Poetry II



Findings

The biggest impact of this project was that by teaching poetry I was able to “trust the process” of student writing. Until I had actually devoted real time and energy to the poetry unit, I was not sure what to expect from my fourth grade students. Cronmiller (2007) wrote,

Writing activities invite the child to participate in the world of writing as a contributor, a maker of art, not as a consumer of published goods....As a result, time after time, the child takes greater pains to express him or herself by using advanced vocabulary to explore and reconcile complicated individual, scientific and philosophical conflicts and processes. (p. 18)

By providing a safe, and natural environment where children were able to express ideas, were able to ask questions, learn new vocabulary in context, and share their thoughts without being graded or tested, poetry became an integral part of my fourth graders lives in school.

I found that poetry allows students to express their ideas and utilize language in a new way. For example, whereas, writing traditional five paragraph essays requires a great deal of modeling from me, poetry writing is freer and expressive with less of a traditional outcome expected. Also, students show more confidence in writing poetry and it did not feel as structured or stressful as

more traditional assignments. Children asked me when we would be writing poetry again, and were often excited when we had a scheduled poetry lesson for the day.

Ultimately, my view is that poetry lessons offer children a different avenue for self-expression within the language arts curriculum, especially when the children get a choice about what to write about and what vocabulary to choose. Students gain confidence in their work and gain tools to read and break apart difficult topics, one word at a time. Like the stepping stones across a stream, reading poetry takes the children from one powerful idea to the next, allowing them time and room to experience language fully.

Figure 10 Pre Survey

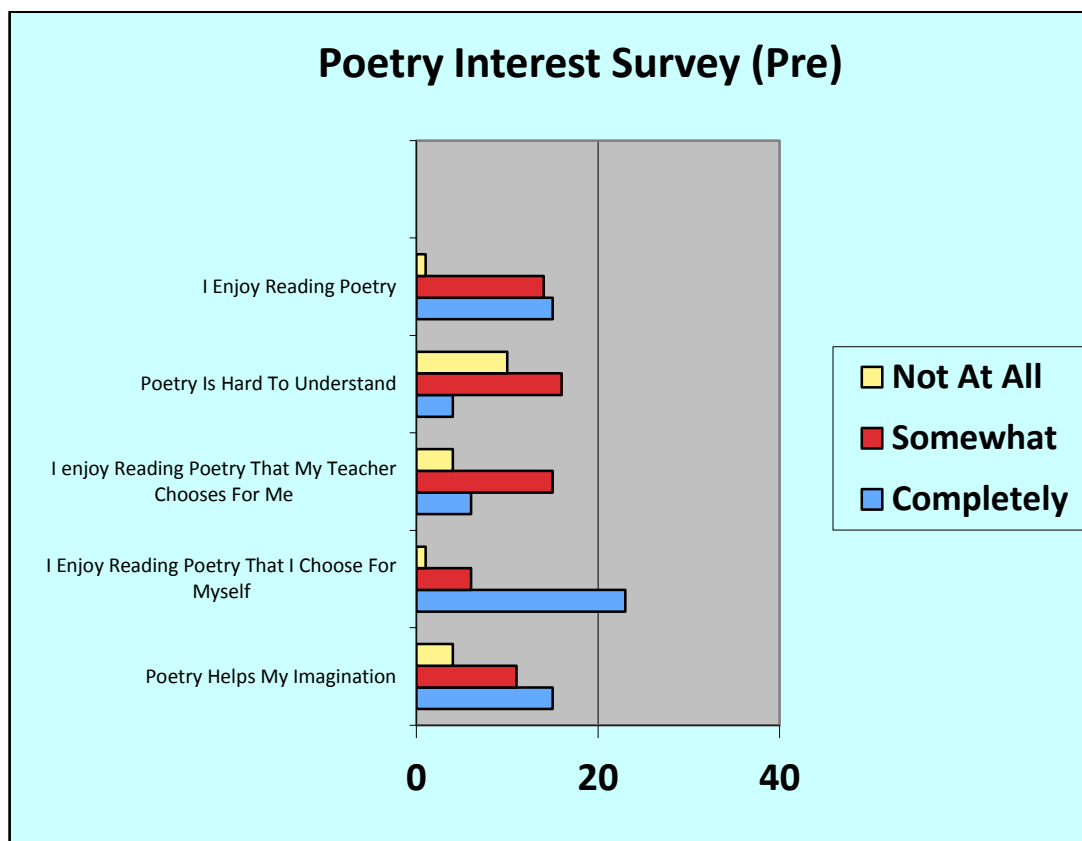


Figure 11 Post Survey

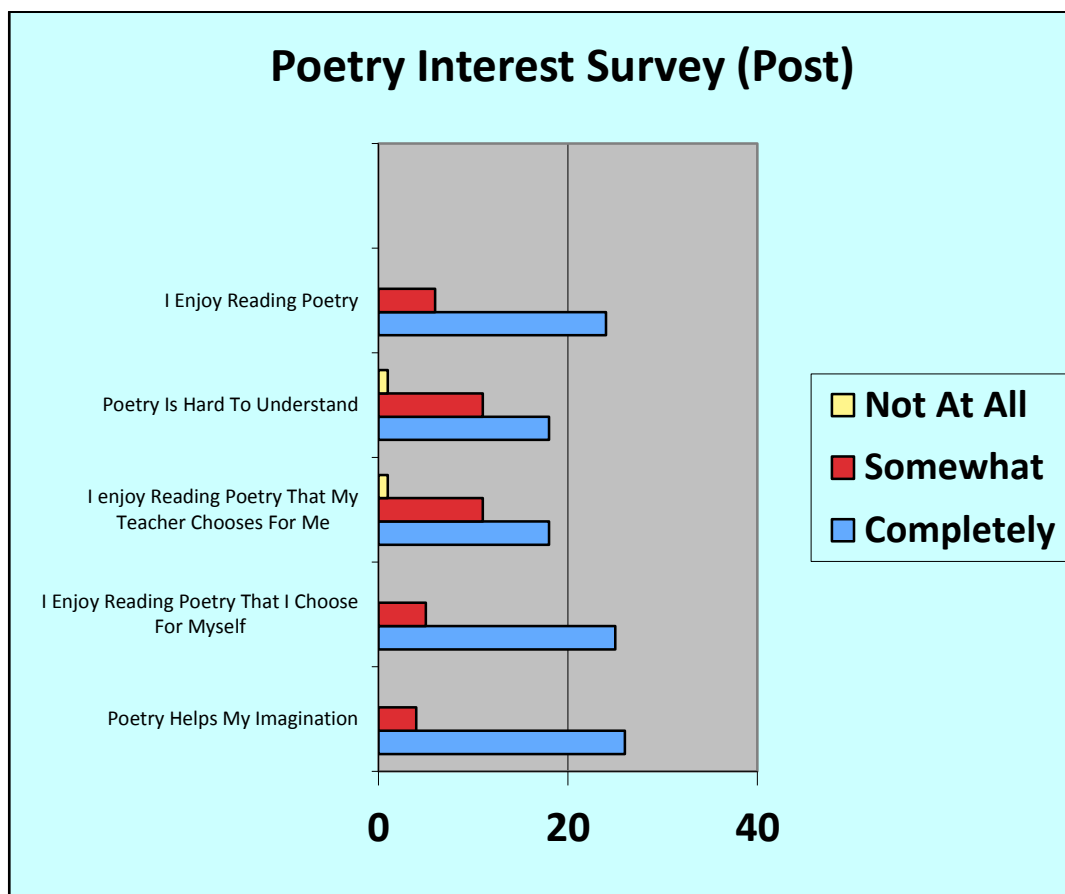


Figure 12 Survey Data Pre

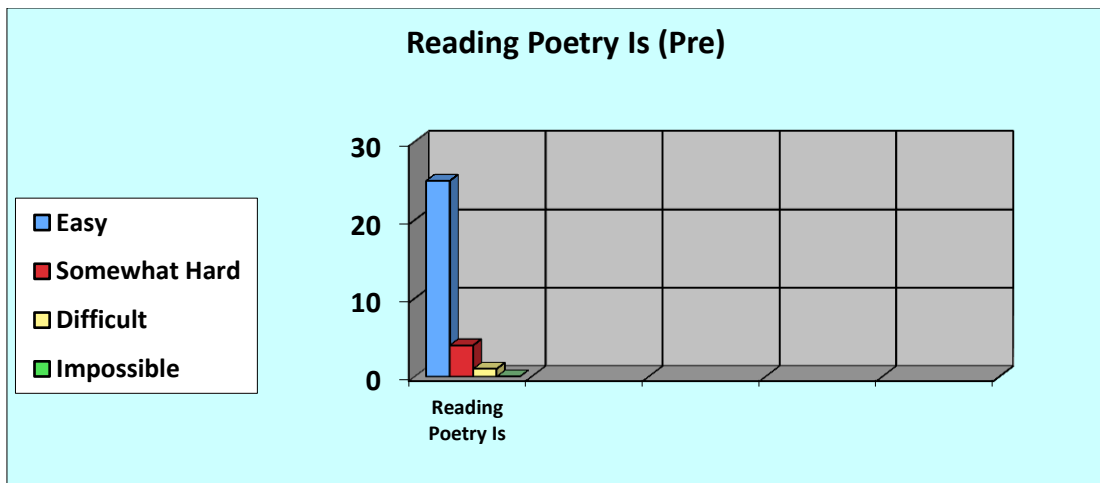
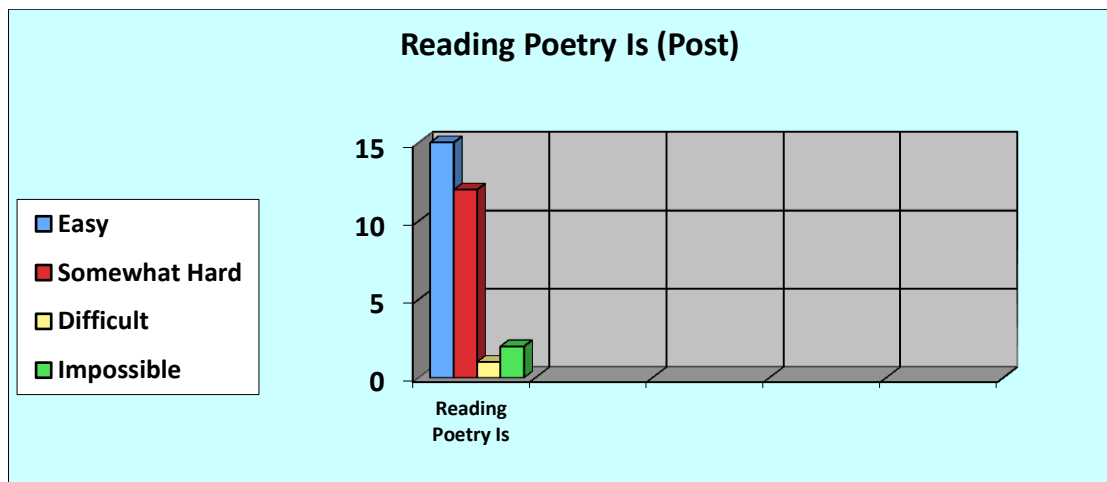


Figure 13 Survey Data Post



Data Analysis

The pre and post surveys revealed that students' interest in poetry grew over the six weeks that the students read and wrote poetry. Specifically, I determined that the exposure to different poems and writing their own poems positively impacted students and their views of school. Following are the results of the pre and post surveys.

Poetry Interest Survey

Survey Question 1 - I enjoy reading poetry.

During the pre-survey, approximately half of the class answered "Completely" to this question. After the poetry unit, that number jumped significantly to over 20 members of the class, or two-thirds who answered "Completely."

Survey Question 2 – Poetry is Hard to Understand.

There was not a significant change in whether reading poetry got easier or harder. I believe the lack of difference in these responses is because the poetry we read together was more challenging than what children had previously been exposed to.

Survey Question 3 - I enjoy reading poetry that my teacher chooses for me.

There was about a 30% gain in children's enjoyment of poetry that I chose for them. I interpret this as meaning that the poetry I chose was more interesting or more challenging in a positive way than what they had previously been exposed to.

Survey Question 4 - I enjoy reading poetry that I choose for myself.

I believe that choice was a central part of this unit. Once I let the children explore their own thoughts and feelings, they began to take ownership of not only what they wrote but also what they read. After the first few lessons I did with them, the children started bringing in poems of their own to share. Likewise, the fact that children were given choice about what words they liked or wanted to know more about reflected this theme of choice.

Survey Question 5 - Poetry helps my imagination.

In the post survey, the children overwhelmingly agreed that poetry helped develop their imagination, while in the pre-survey there was only about 50% agreement.

Survey Question 6 - Poetry is difficult to understand.

The weekly dissection of poems and discussion about specific words clearly helped the children understand what they were reading, thinking and writing about.

Finally, the interviews I conducted with all of my students revealed the pleasure and confidence they felt as writers. Over and over again, students stated that they felt more confident about their writing, better about reading their work out loud, and that writing poetry was fun. I set out to measure the joy that these students felt, and their responses to my discussions with me gave me evidence that poetry had become an important part of their lives. They stated that they loved writing poetry. They cheered when I put the schedule on my whiteboard that included “poetry.” Poetry had become a central part of our classroom learning, and the students embraced themselves as poets.

Student Interviews

Student interviews were the culmination of this project. After reading the poems of Blake, Neruda, Thomas, Dove and other poets, I sat down one to one with the students. Their responses to the instruction they received give a snapshot of how the poetry unit impacted their view of themselves as writers and

their school experience during the six-week period. I asked each student the following interview questions:

- *Tell me about reading poetry in Ms. Friedman's class.*
- *Tell me about what you think about writing.*
- *What is the thing you remember most about reading and writing poetry?*
- *What is the difference in your writing before and after you started writing poetry?*

Following is a summation of the answers received from the interview question; tell me about reading poetry in Ms. Friedman's class

- "I thought it was cool".
- "Poetry is great",
- "Some of the poems were awesome."
- "Reading poetry is really fun."
- "I like poems that rhyme better than poems that don't rhyme."
- "I learned new words."
- "I liked the animal poems"

Following is a summation of the answers received from the interview question; tell me what you think about writing:

- "Writing poetry in Ms. Friedman's class was awesome because I always thought everybody was in their own world."

- “We wrote about what we dreamed. We could write about wishes.”
- “Poetry can calm you down.”
- “My favorite thing was all the words you can write.”
- “We got to go to the computer to copy the poetry we wrote.”
- “We got to write our own stuff.”
- “I like writing poetry because you get to write about yourself.”
- “Writing makes my hand hurt. I don’t like it.”

Following is a summation of the answers received from the interview question, what is the thing you remember most about reading and writing poetry?

- “I liked when you filmed us reading.”
- “My favorite thing about writing poetry was that we got to read poetry that I never knew about and because we also made our own.”
- “I remember “Six Fools” by Joyce Carol Thomas because it is funny and not boring.”
- “I got to express how I feel.”
- “I liked a poem by Joyce about skin.”

Following is a summation of the answers received from the interview question, what is the difference in your writing before and after you started writing poetry?

- “I got smart.”
- “It is not hard. It is easy.”

- “I liked writing poetry sometimes. I didn’t like it all the time.”
- “I can tell people about me.”
- “I learned more...the next time someone asks me I know what a poem is.”
- “Before I never read a book on poetry.”
- “I did not know people would clap for me.”

Conclusion

This project was significant to me as a teacher/ researcher because it proved the power that poetry can have to instill a love of language in students. Evidence from my interviews with the students was that they enjoyed reading and writing poetry, even when there was challenging or new vocabulary. Reading and writing poetry helped instill confidence in them, as evidenced by their interviews, where several children commented that they “got smart” or “people clapped for them.” Based upon the work of researchers such as Ruppert (2004), who wrote for the National Endowment for the Arts, and Kathy Perfect, there is ample evidence that poetry sparks imagination and helps develop language and that there is place for poetry the elementary language arts curriculum? Given the tools, an elementary classroom teacher can help to establish a solid language arts program using poetry. For me, the next step is to share my planning and my students’ enthusiasm for their work with others.

When I first enrolled at UC Davis, I was drawn to the concept of Action Research: that the work I do in my classroom can be shared with other teachers and can positively impact students' lives. As an educator, this project became an entryway into accessing children's creativity as writers. Poetry in the classroom can plant the seed for teachers to reach beyond the state-adopted curriculum and try new practices that will impact students' love of language or life. The enthusiasm I have seen from my students as we read a new poem each week convinced me that these students are hungry for knowledge. They received joy and confidence as they wrote and shared poems of their own. These students went from exploring new poems to becoming authors who were eager to share what they had written.

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