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Eight Recommendations to Support Children's Poetry Writing

by Janine Certo



I am always amazed at what children can do with language. In a recent project, I had the opportunity to work with a class of fifth grade poets. Take fifth grader Owen's poem, *Mother*.

Mother

Your long yellow hair
and blue eyes.
Ready for work.

Watching me
walk to school.

You pick me up
in a big brown truck.

-Owen DeMarcus

The poem begins with a quiet beauty where the mother's features are described. There is conservation of words. Where the inventive comes into play is with the shift in cadence to the monosyllabic last two lines. The subtle approximate rhyme (up/truck) draws even more attention to those closing lines. "You pick me up" does not end up being a picking up off the ground, but a surprise of the vehicle ("big brown truck"). The poem ends on image rather than overt expression, trusting that the reader gets it that the speaker has maternal affection. Adding to the sophistication of the poem is that the word "mother" is only seen once in the title.

Then take the poem, *DeMarcus*, a poem that was semi-scaffolded with William Carlos Williams's "This is Just to Say," a highly anthologized poem about a speaker half-apologizing for coveting and

biting into cold plums from the icebox. Colleen's poem begins at the end of a love interest with regret. The second stanza hints at insult, confirmed by the third stanza. Brilliantly, the poem concludes by circling back to its origin.

I'm sorry
that I fell in love
with you.

I'm sorry that the girl
that you love dosent
love you.

I'm sorry that
I tease you
behind your back and make
fun of you,

I'm sorry that I came to your
school and when I first
saw you I thought you
were cute and funny.

-Colleen



Janine Certo

Lastly, Silvio's poem, "Post" takes a moment from a child's everyday school life. There is an economy of words and a skillful placement of "look" at end of the line. The poem withholds information, letting the reader imagine what disapproving activity is witnessed.

Post

while on
bus duty
I look
sometimes
I see stuff
that gives me a frown.

-Silvio

Poems like the ones written by Owen, Colleen and Silvio allow children to express their feelings, interests, and lived experiences (e.g. Certo, 2015, Damico & Carpenter, 2005). Poetry's shorter form can help students learn about the power of language (Elster & Hanauer, 2002) and how they can use their own language to convey meaning (Certo, 2015). Poetry, with its playful nature and its lack of rigid rules, has the potential to tap unmotivated writers. In short, poetry can bring an incredible richness to children's lives even as it benefits their literacy learning. In this column, I share eight recommendations for supporting all children as poets.

1. Expose children to poetry as much as possible.

Poet Mary Oliver has written, "To write well, it is entirely necessary to read widely and deeply. Good poems are the best teachers" (1994; p. 10). I suggest sharing poetry regularly in print form. The poems should have diversity by poet—that is, poets with varying racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Poems should also vary by historical context, subject, form, theme, and mood. Poems shared can be by poets who write for children, poets who write primarily for adults, and poems written by children for children. After all, when children are exposed to a wide range of mentor

texts or literary models (Certo, 2015, McClure, 1990; Wilson, 2007), they successfully incorporate poetic features in their texts that they had not used previously.

On frequent occasions, distribute copies of poems for every child (or display poems in the classroom), as poets often have very particular reasons for the way the lines, stanzas, and overall poems look on the page. Often, give out more than one poem at a time, so that children understand that poems can look quite different from one another (as well as be about any topic). When you read poetry as a teacher, follow the rhythm of the poem, reading it in a natural voice. You may want to do two readings of the poem so students might further understand the poem and grasp its physicality. Be silent for a period after reading, not feeling pressured to ask students if they liked it. Children should be given opportunities to do a reading of the poem themselves. As students become more skilled in reading the poems, they can be invited to mark their favorite words, images, or lines.

I also suggest inviting guest poets in the classroom, as they have been found to influence the richness in children's poetic language use (Certo, 2015, Wolf, 2006). This might be a poet from the local community, a poet from a nearby college or university, a college student, or a high school student poet. Carefully-selected guest poets can give students a broader exposure to a range of poets who, in turn, might help children see expanded possibilities for their poems. If guest poets are not possible, make regular time to show children YouTube poetry readings or videos such as *Poetry Slam Safe for Students* (2008). Be sure to expose children to poets who differ by age, gender, race, and performance style, helping children see that poetry can be shaped by individual's interests and concerns, lived cultural experiences, and social languages.

Your class or school might also consider participating in Poem in Your Pocket Day, a national celebration in April where people carry a poem

with them and share it with others throughout the day. See <https://www.poets.org/national-poetry-month/about-celebration> for ways to participate.

2. As a class, co-construct language for what makes poetry poetry.

As children are exposed to poetry, facilitate a brief discussion of what children noticed about the poems, including what poetic features were used to honor the topic and mood of the poem. Record them in some fashion at the front of the room. Ask open-ended questions such as, "What do you notice?" or "How does this poem make you feel?" or "What questions do you have about this poem?" Vary up the paths of discussion, sometimes pairing students up, sometimes putting them in small groups to ask and answer these questions themselves. Be attentive to using both your own and the students' language in describing poetry. The class's cumulative language can then be incorporated into a tool for helping children write poetry (For an example, see "Suggestions for Writing Poems" in Appendix A). When children begin writing, encourage them to draw on what they are learning about poetic language to craft a poem that most honors the subject and mood of their poem. This is what I refer to as a *poetic-functional approach* (Certo, 2015), an approach that emphasizes understanding of the relationship between the content children want to write about and the form it will take.

3. Support children with a balance of semi-scaffolded writing and open-composing time.

Reimagine poetry-writing pedagogy as a hybrid between inviting students to write from a very broad prompt or offering students an open composing session where they can write on any topic. For example, you might distribute several poems about family members, friends, and relatives, then invite students to write a poem about someone. As further example, in a recent project, I distributed individual copies of the book, *Heart to Heart* (Greenberg, 2001), a collection of diverse

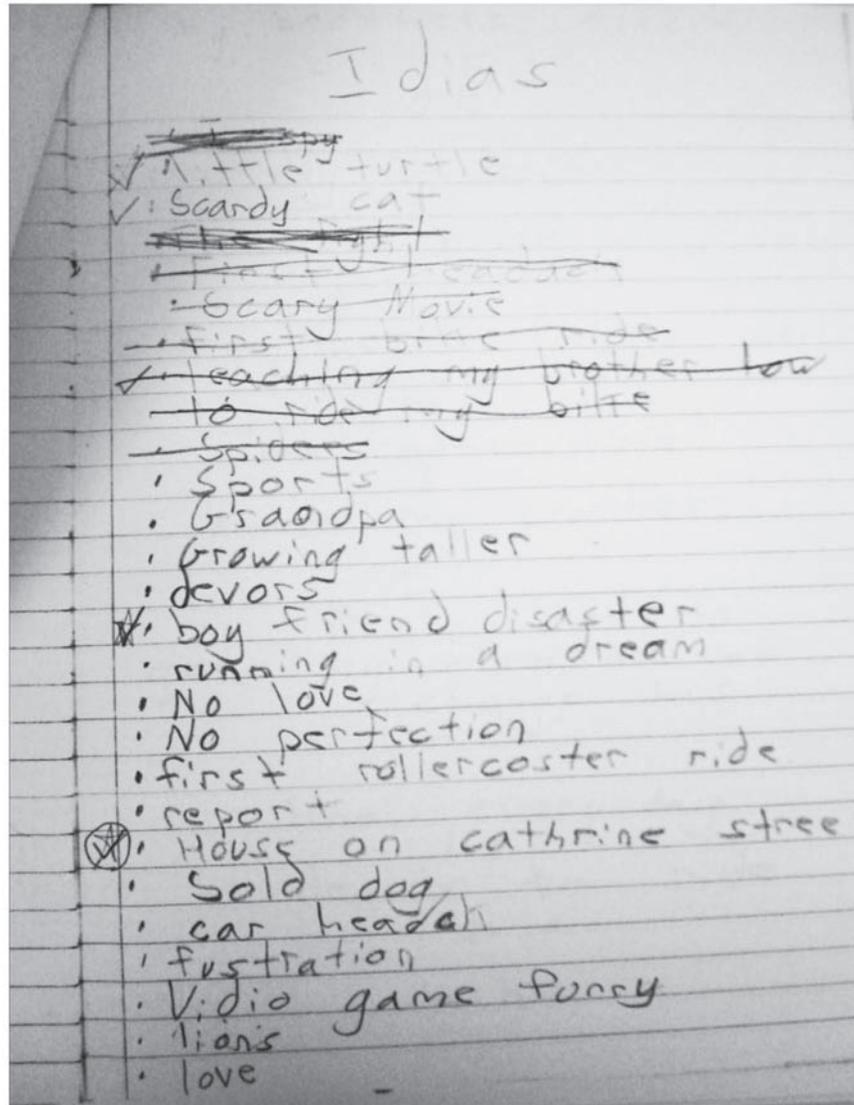
poems paired with twentieth-century art. I invited children, if they were so inspired, to write from one of the works in the text. I also often share handouts of three or so poems by a single poet, such as Langston Hughes, Lucille Clifton, or Billy Collins. Naturally, when children have poems at their desks, they will draw on the topics and language in those poems as scaffolds for their own poetry. William Carlos Williams is a poet I tend to share at the beginning of our time together. This is because Williams focuses on the image, and his characteristic short poems are accessible to children. At the same time, the lack of rhyme in his poems creates a cognitive dissonance. In summary, poems and prompts, when seen as broad invitations, can become essential scaffolds for children's writing, as was the case for Colleen's poem, *DeMarcus*.

I cannot stress enough, however, that children equally be given what Dyson (2003) referred to as "open composing time." Trust that the more children read poetry, the more they will realize that a poem can really be about anything, such as Silvio's observations on bus duty. After all, Ralph Fletcher, in *What a Writer Needs*, reminds us that the best things to write about are often everyday observations and favorite stories—"your brother's junk drawer, something weird your dog once did, your grandma's loose wiggly neck..." (1993, p.162). Have children compile a list of their own observations and stories for writing poetry. This list will expand considerably after children read further poetry and hear what their peers and other poets are writing about. From their list of ideas, children can select one they would like to explore by drafting a poem. Figure 1 is an example of a fifth-grader's list mid-way into a month-long poetry unit. The two poems with stars and checks are ones he had already written in the unit. His list demonstrates what all poets know. There are always poems just waiting to be written, and, invariably, poems that will never be written.

Whether children write with or without a proximal

scaffold, always encourage children to take creative risks as poets, whether through the topics they take up or the poetic language they employ.

Figure 1. A fifth grader's list of ideas for poems



Expect children to experiment and play with their poetry writing (just as adult poets do!). Specifically, when children write poetry, they appropriate (borrow) and recontextualize (“make new”) content for a single poem from a variety of resources in and out of school (Certo, 2015). The content for their poems might be traced to classroom books and individual poem handouts, peers, guest poets, family members, and the media and popular culture. Children will also write poetry based on conversations they have participated in or overheard. It is also not uncommon for children to borrow poetry fragments for a new poem from a previous poem they wrote. Children should have opportunities to read and to see each other’s poetry, as the poems of peers can also serve as valuable “mentor texts.”

4. *Be part of an audience who welcomes their topics and celebrates their language practices.*

A child's spirit can become deflated if someone dismisses their topic or language either overtly through word or gesture, or subtly through silence. A community of writers from different racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds can bring an educative richness to the texts created in classrooms. As educators, we have to be diligent about allowing children's own voices to be on the page and creating spaces for children to bring their own language practices to bear on their writing (e.g. Ball, 2006; Heath, 1983; Lee, 1992). Poetry, for its freeing and flexible mode, is especially well-suited to fulfill these realizations. When I work with children in schools, I am always unprepared for how much children teach me (about their lives, about language, about poetry, and about how they come to write poetry).

5. *Give children tools and experiences that fuel revision of their poems.*

Many novice writers fail to see their writing as clay, and children are no exception. Nonetheless, there are ways to motivate and encourage children's revision activity. The teacher-student writing conference is one way. When a student shares their poem, respond with empathy and interest. Praise what you liked in the poem. Children need encouragement for what they are doing well, and adults are one mirror for that. In the spirit of poet Georgia Heard (1989), you might try to find the center of the poem, the place with considerable weight. Ask students to really flesh out that part. Sometimes I simply ask questions that interest me as a reader, and students' subsequent answers make me respond, "That should be in your poem!" Students can also participate in peer writing groups or simply talk with peers to get revision suggestions. Students should be held gently accountable for explaining and defending their rhetorical choices. In the end, it is always up to the poet to make a revision.

Be creative with revision tools and experiences

based on what students need. For example, children's line breaks tend to be arbitrary, and, especially with younger elementary students, their poems may look more like prose than poetry (Kamberelis, 1999). If this is the case, have children fold over a third to a half of their paper to initially scaffold a sense of a line. Have gimmicky-colored pens on hand that children only use when they decide where it might be best to break a line (often, the line ends with a strong word, a natural pause, or a direct or approximate rhyming word). To have children understand the play and surprise of poetry, I often have them reorder their lines. How does the poem change when your best line is last? First? This can be done on a computer or with any scissors and tape on hand.

Editing (by this I mean surface-level issues, such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization) can be modeled in a brief lesson. When a poem is being taken to publication, have students thoroughly edit once, then have a peer look over their work. Students should be invited to play with punctuation and capitalization, as long as it moves the meaning and mood of their poems forward and as long as students can defend their choices. Children's oral readings can also signal punctuation use, as children get a sense of where they pause in the poem.

6. *Encourage children to write outside of school.*

Former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins wrote his first poem at the age of 7 when he was in the car with his parents and looked out the window to see a sailboat on the East River. Encourage students to continually observe life around them at home and in the places they spend most of their time. Give them a special journal or notebook for out-of-school poetry writing. I have witnessed children writing poetry on bus duty, on the bus going home, in time out at recess, and during in-school suspension. Children have told me that they wrote poetry in all sorts of spaces: in their bedrooms, at a relative's house, on their porch, and even on their roof!

7. Invite children to read their poetry to audiences, if they so choose.

This recommendation relates to number 5, but another helpful way of getting students to buy into revision is for them to have multiple experiences with audience. I recommend that each writing session conclude with students volunteering to read one of their poems, either in small groups or for the entire classroom. Scaffold children's readings of original poetry throughout a unit—that is, in oral readings to each other, in front of the class, and rehearsed with a microphone. Repeated oral readings of their poems facilitate students' revision on the cusp of performance *and* their revision after performance. Performances also facilitate children's understandings of the kinds of texts valued by different audiences (Certo, 2015). Then, have a grand event such as a school-based poetry reading or a reading for parents, family, and community members. Work with children to plan, create, and advertise for the event, ensuring that it is at a time when at least one person who cares about each child will be able to attend. Though some teachers may disagree, I recommend that adults be patient with children's decisions to decline reading for an audience. As critical pedagogue Lensmire (1994) found, some children feel there are serious risks involved in writing for and speaking in front of their peers—risks to self, to their values and what they care about, and to their social positioning with audience members. Throughout, guide students in not only how to read or perform their poems, but in how to be a good audience member.

8. Be curious and enthusiastic about poetry yourself!

Understand that our own growing knowledge, confidence, and enthusiasm are all important when considering how to support children's poetry writing. As educators, we can remain open to exploring new poets and poems ourselves. We can even write a little poetry ourselves. When I visit classrooms to work with child poets, I invariably reveal my identity through my poems, many of which are about my European-American descent, being

raised in a middle class Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania neighborhood, and teaching elementary school for ten years in rural Virginia. I show my vulnerability by sharing poems I wrote—for example, a poem about my father being in the hospital or how quiet it is at the kitchen table when I'm eating barbeque with my husband. When we as educators embrace poetry as readers and writers, we model genuine curiosity and passion for this art form of the human experience. No matter what your past experiences or confidence levels are with teaching poetry, be encouraged that successful poetry teaching can be nourished by the collective enthusiasm of teachers and children experiencing poetry *together* (Lambirth, Smith, & Steele, 2012).

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and interpretive research methodologies. She coordinates the Master of Arts in Teaching and Curriculum program and teaches writing, literacy and poetry courses.

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Appendix A

Suggestions for Writing Poems

Do I use just-the-right words and make pictures with words?

- Do I use details only I would know? ("My mother smells like oranges and baby powder")
- Do I have names on my nouns?
- Do I use words in new ways? ("the wrinkled sea")
- Do I use words that draw on senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, sound?
- Do I use words that fit the meaning or topic of my poem, especially nouns and verbs?

If I use comparisons (metaphors), are they interesting? Unless I have a good reason, have I avoided common comparisons?

Where is the rhythm in my poem? Does it have a current of sound that matches the topic of my poem? Have I tried using **repetition**? I can repeat lines, phrases, or words.

Do I use word music? The rhyme should not be there *just* because it rhymes. Am I rhyming for the sound it produces, or to show off an element of my poem, or both? Maybe I can try a little echo of sound called half-rhyme. Have I used words with the same vowels or consonants to give a mood to my poem? Where have I used words with a musical sound? (alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia)

Do I have a reason for my line lengths and breaks? Do I use line length to enhance meaning? Do I make the reader pause to consider the line and my strongest words? Try putting the best words at the beginning or the end of the line.

Do I have a reason for the structure of poem (how it moves, including its stanzas)? Do I play with how the poem begins, travels, and ends? Do I use stanzas to enhance the meaning? Do I surprise the reader, if it makes sense for my poem to do so?

Do I take out any words that are not needed (conservation)? Have I removed any unnecessary words?

Is my title interesting? Does it make the reader excited to find out what the poem is about? Does my title give too much away?