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Zoon, Zoon, Cuddle and Croon: Poetry in the Elementary Classroom

Sheila Fitzgerald

"Zoon, zoon, cuddle and croon," the first line of the refrain in Mildred Plew Meigs' poem "Moon Song," rocks the listener/reader over the "crinkling sea" as the moon man fishes with his "silvered net fashioned of moonbeams three" for "some old song that fell from a sailor's pipe." This poem, first published in 1923, was released in picture book format in 1990 with tantalizing illustrations by Cris Conover. No child will fail to respond to the soothing sounds, the longing for love and peace, and the fantastic sea-bottom happenings that emerge from the imaginations of the poet and the artist.

Karla Kuskin, the third winner of the National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children, has said, "Make poetry accessible to children and they will have a form of self-expression as satisfying as singing or shouting" (6) and "encourage children to read and write poetry and they will be encouraged to reach into themselves and articulate feelings and dreams"(5).

The Qualities of Quality Poetry

The imaginations of many children today are starving for wholesome images, feelings, and dreams. I recently saw a Dennis the Menace cartoon showing Dennis leaning against a footstool in front of a television set, his remote control firmly in hand. A few books are around, but his

eyes are glued to the TV screen. "I'm giving my imagination a break," he says. For many children, their breaks from imagination-building at home are indeed long and dry. They must count on the school to inflame their imaginations with rich experiences in literature. Poetry is especially powerful for creating imagination because it entices listeners with rich images, vigorous words, and inviting rhythms.

It is probably the rhythm of lullabies, chants, and nursery rhymes that first attracts children to poetry, not the meaning or the sounds. For that reason, school children — and probably most of us who are much older — should come to poetry through our ears, as listeners. The stylized rhythm patterns of much of the poetry for young children, and the carefully orchestrated exceptions to the patterns, give children's poems lilt, verve, emotion, and dance-like qualities that invite participation —but only if the poem is presented by a competent reader. Mary Krogness states, "I count on the rhythm of words, their music and sound effects, to tingle the spine of even the most wary student"(48). Teachers need to practice reading poetry orally, even tape recording and critiquing themselves to see if the voice is capturing the rhythm of the poem and the mood of the poem that is conveyed by the rhythm.

The flames of imagination aren't apt to be enkindled in one hearing of any poem, however.

Often it is best to read a new poem twice to children, and soon come back to it, perhaps later in the day or the next morning, especially if you sense enthusiasm for it during those first readings. But don't give up on a poem that doesn't seem to capture the children right away. It may take two to four readings over a brief time span to light a fire. Yet, if a children's poem is a favorite of yours, you are apt to invite children to that same love. Build a repertoire of favorite poems, favorite poets, favorite genres of poetry, always rereading but also including new poems that stretch the imaginations of children in new directions and guide them to new depths of appreciation. There are so many wonderful poetry anthologies available for elementary teachers today, as well as collections by individual poets. Keep your own personal copy of at least one special anthology in your classroom so that you can pick it up for any free moment as well as for longer listening sessions, an anthology that has many, many poems you like to share with children.

Young children find meaning in poems that speak to their immediate experience and to experiences they can envision having . . .

"Zoon, Zoon, Cuddle and Croon." Delight in the sounds of poetry possibly follows rhythm for attracting children. Rhythm itself is sound, but so are the consonants and vowels, the stressed and unstressed syllables, that also form enticing patterns, sometimes in fabricated words but more often in everyday words carefully selected for their sounds and length as well as for precise meaning. Such is the case in "Macavity's a mystery cat, he's called the hidden paw": the smooth, elongated "m" sounds subtly add sneakiness to T. S. Eliot's description of his criminal cat, and the hard "c" sounds capture the crafty cats's rough edges. By contrast, the "m" sounds in the "moon man" poem that introduced this article serve that poem in another way; the smooth, elongated "m"

sounds in this poem contribute to the dreamlike qualities the poet wants to create.

Of course, the meaning of the poem, or the meanings the children make out of the meaning of the poem, are central also to children's enjoyment. Here again, the reader has a major impact on the listeners. Marilyn Hanf Buckley said recently:

Take any complicated text which challenges you and ask a professional reader to read it to you. The results: You "get" it; you are emotionally and intellectually involved in the text, and you comprehend. Why? Because the professional reader used all his or her techniques of phrasing, emphasis, speed, intonation, and so forth to reveal the meanings in the written text....The reader was not reading words; he or she was reading meaning. (44)

Although as teachers we don't have the training of professional readers, we can recognize the significance of our reading for listeners who are constructing meaning, and we can work to be as effective as possible.

Young children find meaning in poems that speak to their immediate experience and to experiences they can envision having; that is just about anything if the climate for acceptance and method of presentation are supportive. Of course, humorous poems, nonsensical, familiar and imaginative experiences are attractive for children, as are poems about people, especially other children, and animals, seasons, and holidays. Yet children who have had happy experiences with lighter verse and lighter topics also will enjoy more serious topics, descriptive poetry, or more challenging meanings presented by teachers who are sensitive to the challenges these ideas and forms present, teachers who are committed to meaning-filled and language-rich experiences for children.

Classroom Activities with Poetry

Hearing and enjoying must be the primary poetry activity in the elementary school classroom. Soon the children are chiming in on a refrain or volunteering to recite a verse from memory. It is usually harmful to assign memori-

zation of poems, and it is unnecessary because children quickly learn poems they love and hear often.

Poetry reading sessions are followed naturally by the discussion that flows from a heartfelt hearing. Children sometimes are very quiet after listening to a poem, not because they didn't like it but because the experience needs time to meld into their thoughts and feelings. Later, there will be questions about the meaning of words and images, comparisons with other poems they know, relationships forged between the poem and their own similar experiences.

It is wise at the point of familiarity with a poem to be sure that copies are available for the children to own, or that the anthology is available to borrow in a spare moment. The children may want to make their own anthology of copies or take a copy home to read to parents or siblings. Even complicated words and phrasing in a favorite poem are not difficult for children to read when they have the poem half memorized from hearing it frequently and participating with the teacher in its performance.

With a rich listening acquaintance with poetry, many children as young as second grade are ready and eager to find poems themselves. Having many poetry anthologies in a special poetry reading center, and time to browse included in free time activity options, invites children to read broadly and to share the treasures they find with the class. Because they now have many of the rhythms of poetry in their bones, the children intuitively adjust some of their reading style to the expectations of poetry and take great pride in their abilities.

Choral reading is a delightful way to participate in poetry. Using a special favorite of the group, the teacher encourages the class to decide how the poem can be effectively performed — what solo parts they think they need, what total class or small group parts, what lines should be soft or strong, which verses need high or low voices, etc. After experimenting and reevaluating over several days, even listening to a tape recording of themselves, the children come up with their best effort. In the process they have studied the poem carefully, with teacher guidance, to deter-

mine the overt and subtle meanings intended by the poet. They have stated their opinions and learned to compromise with classmates to reach consensus. They have a poem in their hearts and minds that is very much a part of their being.

That intuitive sense of poetry and an appreciation for it also will find expression in children's writing. An elementary child may write from memory a verse he or she knows and claim it as original because it came out of his or her head. The wise teacher realizes this is not plagiarism but merely an immature concept of "ownership"; at an appropriate time the teacher will talk with this child, or perhaps the whole class, about the difference between memorizing someone else's work and creating original pieces. But all the poetry writing of the children is apt to reflect pieces of poems they enjoy. This kind of copying is honoring the poet and the influence of a rich poetic heritage.

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Not all children, however, will move easily into writing poetry after hearing and reading lots of poems. A significant way to build confidence in poetry writing is to write a class poem about something that has fascinated them. The teacher elicits ideas, words, and phrases from the children and jots them on the board so all can see, particularly picking up on unusual ideas and interesting words and phrases: Why is the weather so strange today? What does the sky remind you of? How do you feel about this weather? Have you ever felt this way before? What do you think will happen? After brainstorming ideas and seeing them listed, the children can suggest how they might start their poem about the weather. Note that the emphasis is on the meaning the class wants to convey in their richest language, not on a rhyming scheme with meaning forced into it. Although end rhyme and internal rhyme are

common features of much poetry written by adults for youngsters, children can't use it well in their own writing, and trying to cope with rhyme often interferes with the sincerity of their thoughts and the richness of their vocabulary choices.

Recognizing that the visual display of the class poem is important along with the concepts, images, words, and music of the poem, the teacher helps the children determine the lines of the poem, the format that seems to enhance the meaning. Through negotiation and compromise the poem becomes a reality, and the children take great pride in their accomplishment. After writing a class poem, the step is not so big to writing a poem by yourself about your own strongly felt experiences in your own carefully chosen words.

The children's collections of favorite poems by adults, their performances of those poems, and the poems the children write for themselves need to be celebrated. Poetry study is hard but pleasant work for children. Its contributions are extremely important but they are subtle, not the kind of goals that can be graded or tested. How can you measure a growing love of language, a vivid vocabulary poured out at just the right

moment, a burst of creative insight, a sensitivity to subtle meanings? A rich poetry environment is apt to be a major player in such accomplishments. What are all the possibilities influenced by a poetry-rich classroom environment?

"Only the moon man knows."

Thanks to Elizabeth Fagan for introducing me to *Moon Song*.

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