Embracing Poetry

My journey towards learning to understand, appreciate and teach poetry

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TE 848: Methods of Writing Instruction

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April 26, 2009
Beginning the Journey: Reasons and Goals for Project

I began this project by searching for benefits of teaching poetry. I have never taught poetry because it has never been required of me, and it is something that I never really enjoyed. I wanted to challenge myself through this project to learn effective ways of teaching poetry to young children, and how to make it meaningful for them. But first of all, I had to find reasons for wanting to teach it. Parr and Campbell (2006) state that, “In order for children to enjoy and value the language of poetry, teachers must demonstrate and model their appreciation for this literary form” (p. 38). My feelings will surely influence my students, so if I don’t find poetry interesting and meaningful, it will be difficult to hope that they could do so.

Through reading articles on the subject, I have learned that I am not alone in my fear of teaching poetry. “Poetry is often neglected in many classroom programs, except when mandated by standardized curricula or board initiatives. Many teachers and students recall experiences with poetry that led them to dislike or dread it…” (Parr & Campbell, 2006, p. 37). Betsy Bryan Miguez (2005) also notes that poetry is often ignored due to teachers’ negative feelings about poetry and also because of a lack of time due to preparing for standardized tests (p. 26-7). The fact that poetry is a neglected genre makes it more important to me to learn how to understand and revive it. Like the teachers mentioned by Parr and Campbell (2006) I had negative experiences with learning poetry in school, and I hope to end the dreaded poetry cycle by learning to find poetry meaningful, and to help my students learn the joys of poetry.

In this paper, I describe my own process of learning to write and understand poetry and I explore the benefits of teaching poetry to students. I examine which types of poems I would use with students, how I would teach poetry and how I would create an environment conductive to learning poetry. I began this project with almost no knowledge of poetry, and I attempt to illustrate my own growth as a poet while writing about how I would like to teach poetry to students.

Learning to write poetry:

Soon after decided on the theme of poetry for my project, I decided to write a poem of my own. Mara Linaberger (2005) recommends to, “Begin by making time to write poetry yourself so that you can better prepare to teach the writing of poetry to students” (p. 371). In addition to writing poems, we can share our work with students. “Reading, writing, and sharing
your own poems with students will help to spark their lifelong love of poetry” (Linaberger, 2005, p. 372). The first poem I wrote is not one that I would share with young students, but it is one that helped me delve into the world of poetry.

**Heartbeat**

Upon the beach I search  
For the perfect stones  
white  
shades of brown  
green  
Stones which fit in the palm of my hand  
Smooth, well acquainted with the rhythms of the lake

Days earlier,  
Sitting in the doctor’s office  
Waiting to hear our baby’s heartbeat  
for the first time

We hear…  
Silence

Now as I walk along the beach  
My feet  
pounding against the sand with each anguished step  
I hear the waves  
beating against the shore  
I feel the wind  
pulsing against my cheek  
Reminding me that life goes on.

I rub the smooth stones with my fingers  
cool and calm against my face  
Envision them resting upon a newly disrupted piece of earth

Lending the heartbeat of the lake  
To our child who never had one.

This is the first poem I have ever written since learning about poetry in elementary school. However, I was not even sure if what I wrote was technically a poem. What I remember of my lessons in poetry is counting syllables, rhyming, and making our words fit into a pattern.
I was reassured that I had actually written a poem when I came across this quote by Octavio Pez; “Each poem is a unique object, created by a ‘technique’ that dies at the very moment of creation. The so-called ‘poetic technique is not transmissible, because it is not made of formulas but of inventions that serve only their creator” (as cited in Cariello, 1990, p. 834). This statement made me feel that poetry did not have to follow set formulas, but could be of my own creation. It is a poem because I made it a poem. When teaching poetry to students, I hope to also encourage them to find their own unique style of writing poems.

Another truth I discovered while writing my poem was stated by Kalli Dakos (2001), “You don’t need to know what you are going to say when you begin to write. You write to discover what is inside of you, just waiting to be said” (p. 35). This was exactly what happened with me as I wrote my poem; I began with an idea of what I wanted to say, but most of it just came to me as I wrote and I was able to discover a deeper meaning to the event I was writing about.

Benefits of teaching poetry:

In my research, I found both emotional and practical reasons for teaching poetry. In “The Power of Poems,” Margriet Ruurs (2001) writes, “Poetry is one of the earliest forms of literature to which children are exposed and they love its natural rhythm and rhyme. Through nursery rhymes, lap games, and songs, children develop language” (p. 1). I had never thought of nursery rhymes as a type of poetry, but I came across this reference several times during my research. Amy Walters (2006) writes in “Happy Poems: Children’s Awareness of Audience,” that students in first grade have had “…many experiences singing playground chants, jump rope songs, and nursery rhymes” (p. 524). It therefore seems that when children are young and already immersed in poetic literature and play, it is the perfect time to introduce the genre of poetry to them.

In response to the question “Why poetry?,” Ruurs (2001) responds:

Because poetry can be so satisfying and support a wide range of learning. Because the rhythm of poetry comes naturally to children. Because the potential of poetry lies within the minds of all children... Because the use of poetic language in the classroom brings along a certain energy, a joy that is hard to capture in prose... Writing poetry opens up a way of
expressing oneself and allows the student to see the world through different eyes. (p. 2) These are persuasive arguments for poetry and helped me to see some of the benefits that could come from its use in my classroom.

One of the most “poetic” arguments I found for teaching poetry was by Harrison and Holderith:

In our fast passed, “instant everything” world, we need poetry. It helps children and adults to ponder, to observe, to ask questions, to discover sights, sounds, and feelings that otherwise might remain untapped. It brings balance and beauty to our increasingly complex world. Poetry can awaken our senses or bring the element of surprise into our lives. It makes us laugh, teaches us powerful lessons, and renews our souls. (as cited in Parr & Campbell, 2006, p. 38)

I found additional support for teaching poetry through Kalli Dakos (2001) who wrote, “…children need healthy places, like poems and stories, to put their feelings of sadness, pain, and loss” (p. 35). She has found that writing poetry has helped her students to work through their emotions over events like death or their parents’ divorce. I also found this to be true for myself through the process of writing my first poem; I was able to work through emotions I had suppressed over my miscarriage.

Nile Stanley (2004) encourages students to “perform poetry.” Students can dress up to act out a poem and/or perform movements that relate to the poem. He believes that:

Reading and performing poetry provide numerous opportunities for children to practice-with pleasure- the essential skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Additionally, children who perform poetry aloud learn to write poetry in a certain ‘voice.’ Other benefits of performing poetry include increased self-esteem and connectedness to community and culture. (p. 56)

I found this idea particularly interesting for young children who for the most part, are eager for an opportunity to dress up and perform. This is a great way of making poetry come alive for students. Stanley’s (2004) description of the benefits of performance poetry inspired me to want to use this idea in my poetry unit. I would like to have students experience the joy of performing poems, and I also use this idea as part of our poetry party at the end of the unit.

An interesting study by Stange and Wyant (2008) examines the results of a second grade teacher who attempted to use poetry to not only improve literacy, but also to improve the
behavior of her students. The students in her class really enjoyed poetry and she used this genre to introduce concepts such as “compassion, fairness, citizenship, honesty, self-discipline, respect, and integrity” (p. 204). In addition, this teacher taught issues of cooperation, risk-taking, and trustworthiness through the reading and writing of poetry (Stange & Wyant, 2008, p. 205). The results of this project were that “All students in this classroom improved in reading and writing fluency by reading and composing poetry…Poetry fostered a supportive learning environment with less lying, cheating, tattling, making fun of others, bullying, and other behavioral problems” (Stange & Wyant, 2008, p. 211). Students in this class actually enjoyed poetry so much that the teacher was able to use it as a motivator to improve students’ behavior as well as to teach literacy skills.

All of these arguments in support of teaching poetry, and descriptions of its benefits, are substantial enough for me to now understand the importance of making poetry a part of my curriculum. In fact, I now look forward to teaching poetry in the future, which is a big change from my previous fear of the thought of poetry. I can now relate and agree with Ted DeMille’s (2004) statement that, “Poems reach people in meaningful ways. Exceptional poems make us think differently, feel deeply, and connect with each other. Offering that opportunity to some of the youngest members of the writing community is the right thing to do” (p. 17).

Early Elementary Students & Poetry: A Perfect Match

I am not currently teaching, but I am basing the intended classroom for this project upon my previous teaching position as a Kindergarten teacher in an international school in the Netherlands. My project is intended for students in Kindergarten or First Grade. Average class sizes were 12-13 students, allowing for a lot of individualization and personal attention for students. Students came from all over the world, therefore, multiculturalism is big factor guiding my lesson planning. There was no special education teacher at the school until my final year there; before that students with special needs would go to one of the other international schools in the country. I never worked with students with special needs in my classroom. Most students came from middle-upper class families. At least one of their parents, usually the mother, was a full-time parent and most were very eager to help out in any way they could both in the classroom and at home.
Before researching this project, I was concerned that writing good poetry was beyond the capabilities of children in Kindergarten, and possibly even in first grade. However, after reading the examples of poems written by Kindergartners and first grade students in *For the Good of the Earth and Sun* by Georgia Heard (1998), I was convinced that it was not only within their abilities, but the perfect time to begin teaching poetry. Heard (1998) writes, “At this age their heads are full of wonder and curiosity and questions, and this is reflected in what they say, the startling way they phrase ideas or capture what they feel” (p. 99). George Kamberelis (1998) also reported that the results of a study about children’s understandings of poetry showed that “…children as young as five years old are adept at writing poetry…” (p. 44). Heard (1998) includes a poem in her appendix written by Ellen Catch, a Kindergarten student:

**Untitled**

Tigers lay in flower beds,  
Dead until the sun rises.  
(p. 142)

I think this poem illustrates what she means by the startling way young children can phrase ideas. Another poem in the appendix illustrates for me a first grade student who is able to capture her feelings in a poem. It starts out just sounding like a simple list of Halloween references, but ends with a line that startles me with its simple honesty.

**Untitled** Jennifer Mascarinas

Frightened  
Dark  
Black  
Ghost  
Noises  
Squeaking  
doors  
Skeletons  
in Halloween  
and  
Vampires  
When am I gonna be brave?  
(p. 50)
Choosing poems: The Heart of the Journey

Before taking this class and doing this project, Shel Silverstein was the only poet I knew of for children, and I thought he was a perfect choice to use when teaching poetry because children enjoy his poems. I now see how limiting that perspective is. Children will probably read Silverstein on their own, and limiting my teaching of poetry to fun, simple rhymes does not allow children to experience all that poetry is or allow them to expand their minds and grow as poets. I found it important to spend some time exploring the possibilities of which poems to share with students, since the poems I read to them will influence their ideas of what poetry is and guide them as they create their own poetry.

In “Updating Poetry Preferences,” Kutiper and Wilson (1993) present studies which show that students prefer narrative poems, ones that contain rhyme, rhythm and sound, humorous poems, and poems that they can relate to. Free verse and haiku are rated as the least favorites, as well as poems with visual imagery or figurative language and poems about nature. The authors recommend using popular poetry which students prefer in order to “hook” them, then moving on to other poetry which challenges students to think and to grow.

Janine Certo (2004) also offers an opinion on which types of poetry to use with students in her article, “Cold plums and the old men in the water: Let children read and write ‘great’ poetry.” She states that, “The poetry that teachers use in the classroom greatly affects the long term impression poetry will have on children. Poetry that is too complex or too abstract can turn students off at an early age. But poetry that is too simple doesn’t leave any real kind of impression, particularly as children mature” (p. 267-8). It is important to choose poetry which will captivate and motivate students, but which also challenges them. Certo (2004) argues that students are capable of understanding and appreciating poetry which is written for adults, in addition to poetry which is intended for children. She writes, “I wanted students to experience the laughter in poetry as they did with Silverstein, but I wanted them to mature as readers and writers of poetry” (p. 267). In addition, Certo (2004) states that “I have come to believe that if a poem is not good enough for an adult, it is not a quality poem for a child” (p. 271). As I re-read Shel Silverstein, I found that many of his poems now seem silly and irrelevant to me. If I do not find any importance in a poem, I cannot justify using that poem in a lesson with my students.
Sharon Ruth Gill (2007) comments on “Cold Plums” by writing, “Certo recommended that teachers look to adult poetry anthologies and ‘classic’ poetry collections to find quality poems to share with their students. I would add, however, that poems by 20th-century children’s poets have all of these qualities as well” (p. 624). She encourages teachers to teach poetry through using poetry written for children and argues that high quality poetry which children can understand and relate to does exist, and names such poets as Aileen Fisher, Rhoda Bacmeister, Lilian Moore, Roger McGough, Lee Bennett Hopkins, Eloise Greenfield, and Jack Prelutsky.

Certo (2004), however, does not recommend using only adult poetry for students as she also writes that in her classroom she has “expanded the use of poetry to include poems not only from the great poets but also from contemporary poets, quality adult poets in children’s anthologies, student poets from area elementary schools, and a wider variety of poetry to reflect different cultures and traditions” (p. 266). I agree that it is important to share poetry written by other students so that students can begin to see themselves as poets. In addition, it is important to share poems that I have written with my students so that they can see that we are together in the process of writing poetry.

At this point in my research, I decided I needed to collect my own anthology of poems. I had already discovered that I enjoyed writing poetry, but had not yet discovered which poets and poems I personally enjoyed reading. I read through hundreds of poems in books and on the internet looking for poems which I found some connection with. I chose some of my favorites for my anthology, and hope to continue adding to this as I encounter more poems. Right now my anthology is organized simply by where I found the poems. Incidentally, I did find a few poems by Silverstein which I enjoy and would share with students. Eventually, when teaching poetry to students, I would like to have a collection of poems organized by different topics so that I could easily find a poem to share with students when trying to illustrate a certain point.

What seems to be most important when choosing poetry, is that students are exposed to a wide variety of different poems. Kutiper and Wilson (1993) agree, “The larger the diversity of poems and poets encountered, the greater the opportunity for interests to develop and bloom” (p. 34). In my project, I would begin by reading poetry that students are probably familiar with, and moving towards poetry that would help them to expand and grow. I would also try to include poetry that was about many different topics to address students’ interests.
A Place to Write: Creating a Poetic Environment

In order to stimulate students to write poetry, I believe that creating a poetic environment is very important. Some ways of doing this are to include a wide variety of poetry books in the classroom library, displaying posters of written poems by published authors, and by displaying students’ poetry on classroom walls and in the hallway for everyone to enjoy. Students should be able to see themselves as poets and feel proud of their attempts at writing poetry. Students should also have a special place in the classroom where they can write poems. This poetry center should be filled with a variety of writing materials—pencils, pens, markers, and paper in different shapes, colors, and sizes. Books of poetry and students’ poetry should also be included in the poetry center. I would like to have this center in a quiet corner of the classroom, and make it into a special place where students can work uninterrupted on their poems. However, students should always have the choice of working wherever they feel most comfortable, whether it is at the center, their desks, or on the floor.

Georgia Heard (1998) describes the importance of creating poetic “rituals” in the classroom. Some of these include a poetry listening center where students can listen to recorded poetry, a “writer’s quote chart” where students can write down ideas about poems or lines they have heard which make them think about poems, and photographs of poets so that students can relate better to the person behind the poem and begin to see poets as real people (p. 126-8).

Another idea I enjoyed was to create poetry centers such as those described in “Bring Back the Poetry.” Betsy Bryan Miguez (2005) explains how poetry centers could be created around themes such as an “Around the World” center which contains a globe and poems from different countries, a “Rock and Read” center where students sit in rocking chairs to read poems, or a “Sports Page” center where students read poems about sports while sitting on tumbling mats and could also include various sports items like baseball bats or footballs (Miquez, 2005, p. 28). This might be a good way to begin a poetry unit in order to encourage students to read and explore a variety of poetry.

Amy Walter (2006) discusses creating a “museum” in her classroom with items from nature and encouraging children to study the items with a “poet’s eyes” and to write about them in poetic ways, rather than just making scientific observations about the objects. She also created a “poetry window” in her classroom where students could gaze outside and look for...
inspiration for poems. She notes that she keeps paper and pencils next to the window so that students can immediately record their observations (Walter, 2006, p. 524-5). I think these are excellent ideas which I would like to include in my poetry unit. I believe the more opportunities students have for finding inspiration, the more likely they are to become excited about writing poetry and able to create meaningful poems.

Teaching Poetry

I would begin this project by reading poetry to students from the beginning of the year. My goal would be to introduce students to a wide variety of poems and help them move beyond a knowledge of only rhyming poems, if that is the case. I would then continue to read poetry to students daily for several months. Some opportunities for reading poetry would be during snack time or when we are waiting in line to go to a special such as computers or music class. These are usually empty minutes that could bevaluably filled by listening to poetry. We could also make reading a daily poem part of our morning meeting routine. I would like to find poems that relate to something going on in our class that day, or simply read poems that I enjoy or feel that students would enjoy.

Sometime during the second semester, after students are very familiar with hearing poetry, I would begin to formally teach poetry to students and have them begin writing their own poems. My goals for students at this age would be for them to understand what a poem is and help them to put their thoughts down on paper and explore their feelings through poetry. I would like for them to understand that poems can be rhyming or non-rhyming, but I would not spend time yet in this age group trying to teach poems which follow patterns, because I think that would be too confusing for them. For the most part, I would just allow students to work on their poems and try to have individual conferences with them to find out how they are doing and what their needs are. During the poetry unit, I would have several mini-lessons to discuss things that a lot of students are struggling with, or things which I think they all would benefit from. Some topics might include the rhythm of poems, choosing words, editing and peer editing, shape of poems, rhyming, reading choral poetry, learning personal information about poets, or a discussion of how the poem looks on a page- where to end a line and where to leave white space. I would probably not have a lot of formal lessons because I would just like for students to be able to spend time during the poetry lessons to work on their own on-going
poems, whichever stage they may be at. Most lessons would probably begin with reading a poem to students, and then guiding them towards ideas for their own poems, or continuing on with writing or editing their poems.

Following is one example of a lesson that I could use to begin the poetry unit. Many of my ideas are adapted from chapter 7 of Heard’s (1998), *For the Good of the Earth and the Sun*, titled “‘The Sun is Like a Mommy’: Kindergarten and First Grade.”

Example Lesson Plan

“Introduction to Poetry”

**Objectives:**
1. Review poetry read during the year.
2. For students to begin forming an understanding of what a poem and poets are.
3. To help students “see” a poem and visualize poetry.
4. Students begin writing their own poems.

**Materials:**
1. Examples of poems from previous students
2. Poem by Lilian Moore written on large paper.
3. Paper and crayons or colored pencils for each student
4. Poetry center filled with variety of writing materials and papers, as well as books of poetry
5. Folders for each student to store work.

**Introduction:**
1. Gather students to the carpet and review some of the poetry we have read during the year. Ask students to name a favorite poem they have heard.
2. Ask students to define poetry. What do you think a poem is? What is a poet?

**Process:**
1. Show the class poems written and illustrated by students from previous years. Ask them to discuss what they think about the poems. Point out that all of the students wrote about things which were important to them, and that poems can be about anything they find important enough to write about.
2. Read “Night Creature” by Lilian Moore to students. Also show them the poem written on large posterboard so they can follow along if they are able to read. Read the poem a second time and ask students to close their eyes and think about what image the poem creates in their minds.

**NIGHT CREATURE**

I like
the quiet breathing
of the night,

the tree talk
the wind-swish
the star light.

Day is
glare-y
loud
scary.
Day bustles.

Night rustles.
I like
night.

*Lilian Moore*

3. Ask students to return to their seats and draw a picture of what they saw while I was reading. Re-read the poem while students are working, as often as they would like to hear it.
4. When all students are finished, return to the carpet and share the pictures. Later make a display of the poem with all of the students’ pictures around it.
5. Tell students to close their eyes again and begin thinking about what they might like to write a poem about. Ask students to share if they have an idea. Students can choose to return to their desks, the poetry center, or stay on the carpet to begin writing their poems. They can begin by drawing a picture if they choose.
6. Walk around the room, helping students as needed. Encourage students to use invented spelling to write down their poems.

**Closure:**
Pass out poetry folders to each student to store the poem they are working on. Tell them they can decorate the front of the folder during their free time if they would like. This is the folder they will keep all of the poems in, and they can continue working on their current poem during the next lesson or begin a new one. Tell students that during the next lesson we will continue writing and discuss how to edit our poems. We will also explore topics for poems and students will make lists of possible topics for future poems they write.

**A Celebration of Writers**

In order for poetry writing to be meaningful for students, they should have some sort of audience in mind as they write. Amy Walter (2006) believes that “…to support children’s growing sense of audience awareness, they should be given frequent opportunities to write for audiences and to have the audiences respond to what they have written” (p. 529). Usually the
audience for students’ written work is the teacher, but Walter argues that “Audiences should include parents, peers, and where possible, the wider community” (p. 529). Walter also had a sign-up sheet in her classroom for students who wanted to share their poems with the class, and made sure that everyone who wanted to had a chance to share their poem sometime during the day (Walter, 2006, p. 525).

One way to share students’ accomplishments with a wider audience would be to create a class book of poetry. Each child could choose one or two poems that they would like to illustrate and put into a class book. A copy of the book could be given to each class in the school, and even placed in waiting rooms at local doctors’ or dentists’ offices. Also, students’ poems should be displayed in the classroom and in the hall so that the rest of the school and children’s parents are able to enjoy them. Another idea would be to have one student per day read a poem during the morning messages over the intercom if the school does this, and if students are willing to recite their poems.

It is also important to celebrate the work that students have accomplished. Having a poetry party can accomplish this and can help create positive feelings towards poetry with students. During the poetry party, students could recite poems which they have written and give their parents copies of the class poetry book. They can also show their parents their folders of poems which they have written during the course of the poetry unit. Students may also choose to have a poetry book made of their own poems.

A fun idea for the poetry party might be to create a “poetry café” as described by Kovalcik and Certo (2007), by covering desks with tablecloths, decorating with vases of flowers, and serving pastries and beverages to visitors (p. 92). Such an atmosphere would likely help students to feel like real poets and add to their pride of sharing poetry.

Other ideas for the party would be to use Nile Stanley’s (2004) idea of performing poetry as I described previously under “Benefits of Poetry.” Students could choose a poem and make up movements to go along with it; they could perform individually, in partners or in groups. Adding props and make-up or costumes would really help to bring a poem alive for students and visitors and be fun for the performers.

Finally, choral poetry could be performed during the poetry party. This is something that I would like to do with students during my poetry unit, and would be an entertaining addition to our performances. Paul Fleischmen’s (1988) Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices,
is a perfect source of choral poetry for children. The poems are brilliantly written and all are about insects which is often a favorite subject among children. The poems are designed for two or more readers to recite some lines alone and others together. One example begins:

**House Crickets, Paul Fleischman**

We don’t live in meadows  
crick-et  
or in groves  
  crick-et  
  We’re house crickets 
  living beneath 
  this gas stove  
  crick-et  
  Others may worry  
crick-et  
  about fall  
  crick-et  
  We’re scarcely aware  
  of the seasons at all  
  crick-et  

(p. 36-37)

Apol and Harris (1999) write in “Joyful Noises: Creating Poems for Voices and Ears,” “Poetry begins with our voices—speaking the form, creating the rhythm, shaping and tasting the words. Yet, as we progress through school, our encounters with poems are more and more often through print—words on a page that we read or we write in silence” (p. 315). Choral poetry is one way to revive the oral aspect of poetry in a fun and meaningful way for children.

To greet our visitors as they arrive for the poetry party, I would like to modify an idea I found in Mindy Hardwick’s (2008) article, “This kid could be a poet.” Students would choose a poem, either their own or a published poem, and write it with chalk on the playground for guests to read while entering the school.

**A World of Poetry: Multiculturalism**

Since the majority of my teaching experience has been in an international setting, it is important to me that my lessons and my curriculum are multicultural whenever possible. Within each unit I teach, I look for aspects of it which hold potential for a multicultural learning experience. In this unit, some things I could do would be to ask students to bring in poems written in their native countries to share with the class, either in their own language or
translated, and ask parents to come in as guest readers and share poetry from their countries with us. At the beginning of the unit, I would also like to learn through students and parents, how poetry is viewed in their native countries.

Matthew Cariello (1990) writes that, “Another great fault of the prevalent poetry curriculum is that children are asked far too often to write about things with which they have little real emotional or cultural contact…An approach that doesn’t recognize differences in culture won’t engage the mind of the writer for long and eventually becomes merely another formulaic response to the demands of a lesson” (p. 834). It would be important for me to try to find out about different cultural feelings and attitudes towards poetry and to make an effort to recognize different cultures as we are studying poetry.

In addition to making an overall effort for my poetry unit to be multicultural, I have included one example of a lesson with a multicultural theme. For this lesson, I have used the book Kinderen, which is a collection of amazing photographs put together by Blackwell (2003) of children from around the world.

Example of Multicultural lesson plan
“Poetry Photo Response”

Objectives:
1. To expose students to photographs of children from around the world.
2. For students to write a poem based on one of these photographs.
3. For students to make a connection with the photograph they choose.

Materials:
1. Kinderen- photo book published in the Netherlands
2. My poems to share with students- included at bottom of lesson plan
3. copies of photographs posted for students to choose from
4. variety of paper and writing materials for students at poetry center
5. Globe

Introduction:
Show photos from Kinderen to students. Invite them to share how different photos make them feel or what they think is happening in the photos. As students are discussing, point out phrases they say that sound poetic.

Process:
1. Read students the poems I have written based on photographs of children from Bolivia and Pakistan (Included at end of lesson plan) Explain the process I went through to write the poems- why I chose these particular photos, the steps I took in writing and
editing, etc. Both of these poems are still works in progress; tell students which parts I am happy with and what I would still like to work on.

2. Ask students to choose a photograph which moves them in some way and write a poem about it. They can write about what they see or what they think the child is feeling, they can create a story about what they think is happening, or they can base their poem on another idea of their own.

3. Walk around the room as students are working, offering support as needed. Encourage students to think about the country the photograph was taken in. Show them on a globe where the country is if they are interested.

**Follow-up activity**

Invite students to bring in photos from home or to look for interesting pictures in books to base future poems on. This is an optional activity that students can do during future poetry periods if they choose to.

**Eyes**

Eyes of wonder
wide and innocent
grab me and
make me ponder
where does the power of your gaze
come from?

do you see a life before you
of laughter love and joy?
do you know that
you are beautiful?

or
is there sadness in your stare
A child who is old too young
have you seen loss?
have you suffered from hunger?

I long to know you
and say
please don’t lose your
eyes of wonder.

*Melanie Nieuwenhuis*
Brown faces
with dust for make-up.
Dust all around in
our eyes and on our tongues
Nestling on our clothes and
in our hair like
a lonely friend.

She holds the ball
as she tries not to cry
A perfect picture of the struggles
young children endure
Wishing she were older and
longing to play with her sister
who thinks
When will she ever grow up?

*Melanie Nieuwenhuis*

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**Evaluation**

Students in Kindergarten and first grade do not yet receive official grades. I would evaluate students’ understanding of poetry through daily observations and conversations as they are working, and through reading the poetry they create. Evaluation is an on-going process, and I would attempt to acknowledge students’ strengths throughout the unit as well as try to help them with areas in which they struggle, either individually or through whole class mini-lessons.

**Continuing the Journey: Cross-Curricular Connections**

The end of my poetry unit would not mean the end of poetry in my classroom. My plan would be to continue with daily reading of poetry as well as to use poetry as a support for all subjects. The National Commission on Writing (2003) encourages teachers in “The Neglected ‘R’: The Need For a Writing Revolution,” to increase the amount of time students spend on writing in school. One way they recommend to do this is by “writing across the curriculum.” They believe that “This change alone will do more to improve student performance than anything else states or local school leaders can do” (p. 31).
Poetry provides an excellent opportunity for cross-curricular learning. One way to do this would be to simply read a poem which relates to something we are studying such as ocean or zoo animals or the weather. Polly Collins (2008) writes, “Providing students with poetry as well as nonfiction reading on a topic deepens the students’ involvement with that topic” (p. 81). One of my favorite poems is about a tiger found in Eric Carle’s (1989) illustrated anthology of animal poems, *Animals, Animals*.

**Tiger**

The tiger
has swallowed
a black sun.

In his cold
cage he
carries it still.

Black flames
flicker through
his fur.

Black rays roar
from the centers
of his eyes.

*Valerie Worth*

Reading this poem to students would be a great way to engage them in a lesson about tigers as we are studying zoo animals. Another way to use poetry across the curriculum would be to have students write poems based on a subject we are studying. Collins (2008) explains that, “The creation of poems related to the readings from content areas such as science, mathematics, and social studies encourages students to process the information gained from those texts in meaningful ways” (p. 84). As students write poetry they are forced to look at things in new ways and will hopefully gain a new perspective on what they are learning and become more interested in the subject matter.
Final Thoughts

Parr and Campbell (2006) believe that when teaching poetry to students, “…we must first examine our own apprehensions, preconceived notions, and perceived abilities as poets…” (p. 45). This is what I have attempted to do throughout this project. I began with a fear of poetry and absolutely no idea of how I could teach poetry to students. Through this journey, I have come to not only a better understanding of poetry, but have also discovered personal joy in writing poems. I have learned what a narrow view I previously held of what poetry was, and have become aware of many of the possibilities that writing and teaching poetry holds. I no longer fear teaching poetry to students; instead I now feel capable and eager to begin teaching poetry.
References


