

Poetry as a Pathway to Reading Success in the Primary Grades

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Abstract. *The purpose of this article is to integrate poetry into the kindergarten classroom in order to strengthen early reading skills, stimulate playful and meaningful interactions with language, and nurture deeper relationships among peers and within families. Bringing poetry into the primary grades is essential because these early years form the foundation for children's attitudes toward reading and communication. Unfortunately, poetry is often not introduced until the middle grades, and when it is, the instruction tends to focus mainly on analyzing poems for cognitive skills such as identifying figurative language or understanding structure. By this stage, many students have missed the opportunity to experience poetry as something joyful, engaging, and emotionally expressive, making it harder for them to develop a genuine appreciation for it. This article will examine in greater depth why poetry is an ideal and versatile tool for teaching foundational reading skills, fostering creative language play, and building stronger, more meaningful relationships among children and between children and their families.*

Key words: *poetry, key components, communication, critical goal.*

Introducing poetry at the kindergarten level, however, allows children to encounter language in a playful, musical, and memorable way. Poetry naturally supports phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and fluency, all of which are key components of early literacy. At the same time, poems—through rhythm, repetition, and relatable themes—invite children to laugh, imagine, and express themselves freely. Sharing poetry also provides rich opportunities for social connection: children can recite poems together, create simple group poems, or share poems with family members, strengthening bonds both in the classroom and at home.

In contrast, incorporating poetry into the **primary grades** allows children to interact with language in ways that feel playful, musical, and emotionally engaging. Poetry naturally supports key components of early literacy, including **phonemic awareness**, **vocabulary development**, **fluency**, and oral expression. Its rhythm and repetition help young learners develop sound-letter recognition, while its imagery and creative structure encourage imagination and **creative thinking**. Poetry activities such as choral reading, shared reading, and simple memorization also build confidence and strengthen children's reading foundations.

In addition to supporting literacy growth, poetry promotes meaningful social connections. Reciting poems together, creating class poems, and sharing poetry with family members encourage **collaboration**, communication, and emotional bonding. These experiences help children form friendships, develop empathy, and strengthen relationships both at school and at home.

Poetry offers a wide range of benefits for young children. Engaging with poems can significantly support the development of both pre-reading and early reading skills. Because poetry is rich in vocabulary, it naturally exposes children to new words and language structures. It also reinforces grammar, strengthens various linguistic abilities, and can greatly enhance reading fluency.

One of the most valuable features of poetry for early literacy instruction is its frequent use of rhyme. Understanding how rhyme works is a foundational skill for young readers. When kindergarten children learn to recognize and produce rhyming words, they are practicing an essential component of phonics and building an important pre-reading skill. Activities such as identifying, reading, or creating lists of rhyming words help children become more aware of phonetic patterns. These phonetic sounds form the basic building blocks of reading.

Poetry is also a useful tool for teaching syllables. Syllables—natural divisions within words—support children’s listening, reading, and spelling development (Build a Solid Foundation: Learning Abilities Books). Teachers can make syllable practice interactive by having students clap out the syllables in words as they follow the rhythmic patterns of a poem. This multisensory approach helps learners internalize the structure of spoken and written language.

Another concept that can be introduced through poetry is alliteration. Children are naturally drawn to the repetition of initial sounds in words, and poetry provides many opportunities to highlight this feature. Teachers can encourage students to create their own alliterative sentences, such as “Megan made messy mudpies.” Younger children can share their ideas while the teacher records them, while older students can write their own examples independently. This playful approach helps build phonological awareness.

Poetry also makes it easy to teach assonance, the repetition of vowel sounds within or at the end of words. When teaching assonance, the emphasis should remain on exploring and enjoying the sound patterns rather than focusing on spelling conventions (Build a Solid Foundation: Learning Abilities Books). This allows children to experiment with the musical qualities of language without feeling restricted by rules.

Finally, poetry provides a strong foundation for teaching phonemes, the individual sounds that make up words. Short poems give students manageable, engaging texts that allow teachers to highlight specific phonemic skills. Whether taught through quick mini-lessons or during longer, more structured reading sessions, poetry serves as an effective and enjoyable medium for reinforcing these essential literacy concepts.

Research has identified fluency as a critical goal in reading (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Linan-Thompson, 2011). A proven way to improve fluency is through repeated readings of relatively brief texts. In many commercial manifestations of fluency programs, students are asked to do repeated readings of informational texts for the primary purpose of reading it faster. We view this as a corruption of the concept of fluency. As a result, a recent survey of reading experts indicated that fluency instruction is no longer a “hot topic” in reading (Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2011). We view poetry as a near perfect text for fluency instruction. Poems are meant to be performed for an audience. In order to be performed in a way that is enjoyable and satisfying to a listener, the poem needs to be rehearsed by the performer. Rehearsal is an authentic form of repeated reading. Readers practice not for speed, but to be able to read the poem in a way that a listener will find meaningful. Moreover, the rhythmical nature of poems makes them ideal for developing prosody or expression, a key component of fluency that is often overlooked in fluency programs.

Reading poetry is an area in which children often experience quick success. The rhythmic patterns and predictable rhyme found in children’s poetry provide a natural scaffold that supports early reading development. These elements help young readers anticipate sounds and words, making poems easier to decode and understand. In addition, children’s poems are typically short, which allows students to learn and remember them with ease.

For young or struggling readers, this brevity is especially beneficial. When students are able to read and master short texts—such as poems—they experience a sense of accomplishment. These frequent moments of success help build **self-efficacy**, the confidence in one’s ability to perform a task successfully. As students develop stronger self-efficacy, they are more willing to approach longer and more complex texts with confidence rather than fear or frustration.

In classrooms that support early readers, the goal is often for children to leave each day having successfully read a new piece of text. Poetry is particularly well suited for this purpose. Because poems are short, engaging, and structured with rhythm and rhyme, they provide the perfect opportunity for students to practice reading fluently and confidently every day.

Using and performing poetry is a highly effective method for supporting struggling readers as they build stronger reading abilities and develop a deeper appreciation for literature (Walther & Fuhler, 2010). Through repeated reading—whether silent, oral, or performance-based—children improve not only their reading fluency but also their social skills, self-confidence, and clarity of speech. Poetry also bridges naturally into content-area learning. Numerous poems are written about mathematics, social studies topics, and scientific concepts, making poetry an engaging and accessible tool across the curriculum.

Nile Stanley, a respected reading specialist and literacy scholar, argues that exposing children to poetry consistently can increase their enjoyment of reading and enhance their performance on high-stakes assessments. He explains that poetry gives children's minds an "exhilarating workout," inspiring them to "read more, imagine more, think more, discuss more, and write more" (as cited in Wagner, 2005). The development of these habits—curiosity, critical thought, discussion, and creativity—contributes significantly to improved test performance and overall academic growth.

Children who face difficulties with reading often struggle equally with writing. This is particularly concerning because writing is essential for building higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. For this reason, writing has become a major focus within the Common Core State Standards. When teachers purposefully incorporate poetry into literacy instruction, it not only increases students' enthusiasm for language but also provides a clear model or scaffold that helps them structure their own writing. Poetry becomes an additional doorway to reading and writing success for students who may lack confidence or skill.

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Philip Schultz (2011) reflects on his own challenges learning to read and describes how poetry became his pathway to literacy as well as a lifelong passion for language. His experience illustrates the powerful role poetry can play in transforming the learning journeys of students who struggle with traditional literacy approaches.

Used literature:

1. **Walther, M. P., & Fuhler, C. J.** (2010). *Teaching reading with poetry: Strategies for reading success in the primary grades*. Scholastic.
2. **Wagner, J.** (2005). *Poetry as a tool for literacy development*. (Cites work by Nile Stanley).
3. **Schultz, P.** (2011). *My dyslexia*. W. W. Norton & Company.
4. **Build a Solid Foundation: Learning Abilities Books.** (year varies; educational series on phonics, syllables, and early literacy).