Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)
Issue: Vol. 3; No. 6; June 2022(pp. 8-14)
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)
Website: www.jlahnet.com
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com
Doi:10.48150/jlah.v3no6.2022.a2

Poetry and Elementary Aged Children: The History and Use in Pre-20th Century Language Arts Curriculum

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Poetry has long played an important role in the language arts curriculum. Traditionally, though the early 20th century, poetry was integral to the overall scope of the language arts program, especially in the early grades and up through high school. Children often were taught the fundamental elements of language arts (reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary) through the memorization, dictation, and recitation of poetry. Considered once to be foundational to the development of language skill and application, the study and reading of poetry was highly valued; and, memory and knowledge of poetic works was considered the mark of a well-educated person. Since the turn of the 20th century, however, poetry and its consistent use and application as tools for memory development and language acquisitionhave been removed from the center of the curriculum, and have been relegated to a position no more significant than that of other extra-curricular literary forms (such as drama.) The resulting stress upon mechanical usage and the change toa more utilitarian focus towards education as a whole has caused educators to center their methodology and approachuponliterary style and poetic forms; rather than upon the beautiful articulation of poetry, and its intrinsic value asa cultural and linguistic denominator.

While both style and form are important to the overall scope of teaching language arts – poetry – and its usage as literature –almost has been all but forgotten. The intention of this essay, therefore, is todiscuss the value of poetry in the development of language skill as it pertains to preschool and elementary aged children. Furthermore, the goal of this thesiswill be to demonstrate the validity of returning poetry to its traditional position as a core element within language arts, while maintaining the emergent emphasis critical for success in a 21st century elementaryclassroom.

As we tender our attention towards the needs of 21st century students, it is important to reflect upon the role poetry played as part of historical curricula. Poetry has been long given the elevated status of predating literature, and as such,has been considered a vital component of the language, cultural, and historical tradition of vast numbers of people groups. Beginning as early as the 4th century B.C., examples of poetry exist demonstrating the common use as a means of conveying oral history. These songs or stories often were told to recount heroic deeds or to establish tales of epic battles or political victories. Fragments such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, or later, the Homeric poems are classical examples of the kind of oral history that categorized and formed the basis of what we now call poetry.

The focus upon forms, with its emphasis on structure, and rules for both the reading and writing of poetry, developed during the time of Aristotle. In his classic work, *Poetics*, Aristotle set forth much of what we now understand as critical evaluation and theory pertaining to the development of poetic style.Yet despite this evolution in poetic verse, and the importance of a system for evaluation and judgment, poetry in and of itself, was often used simply as a means to tell a story or to serve as way to recite prayers for religious worship.

Poetry, in its most simplistic form,served as a way for people to express their history, to pass down the stories and the recollections of one generation to another. Poetry became part of the national culture of a people group, and often characterized that group by the surviving quantity of poetic works.While poetry was critical to the diversity of a national culture, over the course of time, the movement away from storytelling to a more complex process to express lingual and contextual meaning became foremost.

Writers and poets, determined to push the boundaries of poetic form began to develop methods of using language and words to create new meaning, envisioning ways to utilize the figurative language as a means to engage cognitive power (Bloom 5).

Aristotle first theorized the initial idea of harnessing cognitive power as a means to engage the mind and to link our memory with understanding (Aristotle). Writers and Literary Critics such as Harold Bloom suggested that the "fusing of thinking" and "remembering" were key characteristics that enabled the mind of an individual to recollect, to rekindle, and to reconnect the elemental forms and poetic beauty of the written and spoken language. Memory and its role in one's ability to think and to understand underscore the value of memorizing and reciting poetry. Furthermore, this idea of connecting what we think to what we recall demonstrates the value of linking memorization with understanding.

Bloom explains the critical necessity of the process when he writes, "Our definition of poetic power is that is so fuses thinking and remembering that we cannot separate the two processes" (5). This view lends itself to the understanding of the power of poetic verse, and on the rationale of using poetry as a device to build mental power. Again, Bloom suggests, "Memory is crucial for all thought" (5) and as such, the importance in developing keen mental thinking relies upon the development and engagement of the mental processes. Poetry, it seems, has always been one of the few sources adaptable for this purpose.

The question, therefore, must be asked: how exactly did poetry become the primary vehicle used for memory building. It is unknown, really, whether there was a particular date when poetry was given this position of importance or whether anyone sat down to critically evaluate the necessity of poetry as a memory tool. History recalls that for generations of children, poetry was indeed considered a valuable component of the curriculum. It was included and given preeminence in the scope and sequence of grammar school programs, and it was treated as an integral part of the overall language arts program.

In 1914, Educational Advisor, Lewis Atherton, critically evaluated the memorization materials used in 125 city and state schools. The purpose of the study was to determine the value and usage of poetry as a memorization tool. Atherton found that "one out of four courses provided sufficient [poetic] material" (208) for memorization.He stated:

"The course of study for the elementary schools of New York City provides that 'at least four lines of poetry per week, or an equivalent amount of prose, should be memorized by every pupil' during the first four grades. For the fifth and sixth grades, the amount is placed at six lines per week; and for the seventh and eighth grades, at eight lines per week. The total thus prescribed for the entire elementary school course is the quite considerable amount of 1,720 lines. This is more than 100 poems of sixteen lines each" (208).

As Atherton observed,these memory verse assignments were typical of the grammar school curricula of the period. In the journal, *The Elementary Schoolteacher*, the curriculum suggested for grades K-8, circa 1907-08, shows us that English included literature (poetry and stories), reading (phonics), and writing. Kindergarten through second grade, the emphasis was on poetry memorization of lines from poets such as William Blake, Robert Louis Stevenson, and John Keats. In the upper grades, from third through sixth, poetry memorization includes works such as *The Iliad*, excerpts from Thoreau, and the poems of John Greenleaf Whittier. The reading and recitation of poetry as well as the writing of poetry was essential to the English lesson:

"The heroic in history and literature and the beauty of nature often appeal to the poetic in the children, and the result is simple verse. The aim is to foster a desire to express and to gain the power to express, interestingly and beautifully what one has to tell" (631).

By the end of the eighth grade, students read poetry in class and at home. Longer selections and major works were assigned as well as significant passages from dramatic works such as Shakespeare (soliloquies and other monologues). Students were immersed in the study and recitation of fine literature, with memorization and copywork (copying well-written poems and prose) forming the key components necessary to provide a depth and breadth of critical reading and understanding.

Professor George Harris lectured on the criticalprocess of reading with insight duringthe thirteenth annual meeting of the New England Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools in 1898. Harris, an advocate of reading literature for the preparation of training the imagination, was a man who strongly believed in the power of cognitive learning. Harris wrote,"Reception in order to production is the law of intellectual, aesthetic, moral, andreligious culture" (Harris 709).

Sharply critical of the trend towards producing mechanical results ordered from an approach that replaced imagination and creativity with manual training, Harris believed thata curriculum focused purely upon mechanics restrained the love of learning. He wrote,

“In the common and large meaning of the words understanding and imagination are clearly distinguished from each other, signifying, respectively, the technical, the accurate, the logical on the one hand, and the aesthetic, the poetic, the prophetic on the other hand” (692).

The training of the imagination was something Professor Harris believed necessary to produce well-educated adults. He theorized that the process of education, as it was in his day, was to replace the natural inclination of children to play (to imagine) with the mechanical application of knowledge (693). Though arguably considerate of the place of knowledge, specifically mechanical training such as mathematics or engineering, Professor Harris, stressed the importance of not losing the imagination to the demand for utilitarian or practical education.

Other educators of the time were concerned by this trend and wrote passionately about the rigidity of the curriculum, and the influence of the industrial age upon the nature of children’s education. What we might call a “dumbing down” of education (something educational activists protest today), actually occurred sometime between the end of the Civil War and the broach of the turn of the century. Teachers began to deemphasize the traditional practice of teaching children through poetic expression, and turned away from classical works in favor of the new genre of simplified Children’s literature (Hughes 494).

Helen Sard Hughes, Professor of English at Wellesley College wrote a protest against using literature for children as a staple in the elementary curriculum. Hughes’ specific target was teacher training schools or Normal Schools, where the apparent lack of training was emphasized. Her point was that students exiting Normal Schools were ill prepared to teach children English. She suggested grounds on two points – a lack of well-rounded and well-read teachers as well as a weak and unsophisticated curriculum.

The trend towards mechanical education seems to have gained momentum during the latter part of the Industrial Revolution (roughly from 1799-1900). In 1902, Bertha Payne, in her essay entitled, “A Philosophy of Education” wrote “The first business of the teacher is to fit the boy and girl for earning a livelihood. This means for the children, first of all, an accurate and rapid acquisition of the processes of reading, writing, and arithmetic" (498).Arguments for the creation of a more streamlined curriculum, focused upon the “three R’s” certainly gain acceptance during this period. The insurgence of workers, the dependency of those workers upon a functional education, and the general lack of skill in teachers trained during this era, does give rise to the idea that utilitarian education was the education best suited towards a mechanical and revolutionized/industrialized world.

In an awkward disconnect, it seems that lines were formed between the proponents of modern education, an education focused on producing good workers versus those educators who still believed strongly in the traditional benefits of poetry and literature for producing well-educated adults. On the one hand, a need for skilled workers was paramount; yet, would a lack of education and a weak mind eventually profit a nation? Educators like Harris and Hughes found companionship with like-minded individuals – psychologists and educationalists – who firmly remained attached to the past. J. Howard Stoutemeyer, Professor at Kearney State Normal School, wrote about the importance of memory work in grade school curriculum in 1917. As WWI overtook the nation, and the world, the importance of memory work seemed pallid. However, Stoutemeyer and many 20th century scholars like himposited a way of “keeping the old while embracing the new” (31). In reviewing the past practice of memory work and the present inclination to disavow the practice, Stoutemeyer eloquently argued,

“In the days of our fathers, copy-book mottoes and memory gems in spellers and readers were memorized because they seemed valuable to the compiler of the text, and not because the child understood them or appreciated their worth. Later educational opinion asserted that this memoriter process was wrong, and that nothing should be memorized that was not thoroughly understood. At any rate, rational processes superseded the old memoriter practice, now fallen into disrepute, and relatively little memory work has been done in the grades. Present-day opinion is painfully conscious that an irreparable loss has resulted from the failure to store the mind with carefully selected memory materials as a standard of reference for thought and expression of thought (31).”

It seemed like educational approach suffered in the transition from classical education (where the student was educated for the purpose of greater citizenry) to the post-industrialized education (where the student was educated to perform a specific task or job). Clearly, studies on the value of teaching children to memorize had not been thoroughly conducted, though it appears that there was a general interest in further research. Stoutemeyer suggests, “The work in memorizing, and the declamation that goes with it, has much value also as a means of confirming the child in correct ways of speaking. But its greatest service is in storing the mind with the priceless treasure of the noblest thoughts and feelings that have been uttered by the race.”

Memory work, therefore, it seems was predicated upon the idea that Bloom postulated in our opening discourse: the fusing of thinking with understanding. Our mind uses a method of connectivity to aid in our ability to recall facts, figures, and details. Memory work, and the process of memorization, builds connectivity between linked items thus allowing us to remember and to make connections. This ability to connect linked items is what measures meaning and develops understanding. "The art of remembering," writes Stoutemeyer, "is the art of thinking . . . . when we wish to fix a new thing in either our own mind or a pupil's, our conscious effort should be not so much to impress and retain it as to connect it with something else already there. The connection is the thinking; and if we attend clearly to the connection, the connected thing will certainly be likely to remain within recall" (I, p. 143).

This process of mental stimulation directly supports the lingual development and provides for what Bloom calls cognitive power. By building up mental capacity, children are able to assert language first, rather than imagery (which is something adults are far more keenly able to do). In children, word recognition comes first, imagery and the power to connect words to images, second. Stoutemeyer says it best when he writes,

“The child thinks chiefly in concrete individual imagery, though he can use verbal imagery just as the adult does. The child thinks more slowly and discriminates fewer sense qualities, because his limited experiences have not developed his power to analyze and combine them into a well-organized whole. The adult thinks in terms of verbal images, because he has developed the ability to use class terms instead of particular terms” (37).

The key position here is that while language and thought are not synonymous, the two are a cohesive unity. The summation is that “languageis a necessary instrument in thinking as well as in the expression of thought” (37).

Like Stoutemeyer, Harris strongly advocated the power of imagination, and sought to encourage change from the mechanical to a more natural, fluid approach. Furthermore, Harris recognized the value in reading good books, in studying poetry, and in memorization of well-written prose. In his closing arguments for a more stringent classical education, Harris says, “The essentials of education, after all, are reading and writing; real reading of authors and not merely learning something about them, with much writing to form a style and to train the imagination” (704).Harris believes that change need not encompass a radical departure from the traditional:

“My meaning in these hints is that the existing curriculum need not be radically changed, for it embraces disciplines which train imagination, but that they should be studied in such ways that the mechanism of history, literature, and classics shall not crush the ideal” (704).

Time limits the scope of this paper, and while the author would prefer to spend significant effort to study more current practices, with the anticipated outcome being the revitalization of a method and/or approach to the teaching of poetry in the elementary grades, necessity dictates brevity and conclusion. With this in mind, it is important to diverge slightly to bring the topic full circle and to note that while public and private education has evolved, it has not singularly distinguished itself from the utilitarian dependency upon producing skilled workers. As Payne suggested in 1902, the effort today still suggests that the chief motivation of a teacher is to “fit” (educate) each boy and girl for the procurement of a successful livelihood. One only has to review popular curriculum, available now publicly, to note the emphasis upon structure, form and content. The power being to assimilatequickly the children into a worker, ready to leave school with the requisite skills necessary for procuring a livelihood. Little emphasis remains upon teaching children for the benefitof creating a love of learning (as Harris advocated).

A typical grade 3 English textbook (BJU for Schools) includes one chapter on writing poetry, and fifteen chapters on grammar and writing. Likewise, the grade 3 Reading textbook contains significant study in reading instruction (phonics), as well as vocabulary building. There is little inclusion of poetry reading or of literature reading outside of childish readers (simplified readers). There is little change in the grade 5 textbooks; the emphasis is clearly on mechanical reproduction and the ability to generate acceptable understanding of the writing process.

In a stark contrast, home education materials seemed to promote a more liberal approach to language arts education. Dr. Ruth Beechick, educationalist and author of the book, "You Can Teach Your Child to Read," believes that the best curriculum is what is most natural to the child. An advocate of using living materials and books, Beechick prefers parents to educate their children using materials that will inspire and engage their minds, and that will instill a life-long love of learning. Reading, writing, copy work, poetry memorization – form the foundation of the Beechick method.

Another classical home educator like Beechick, Andrew Pudewa, has written a comprehensive language arts curriculum that is solidly built upon classical teaching methods including memory work and poetry recitation. Pudewa, founder of The Institute for Excellence in Writing, believes "you cannot get something out of child's brain if it isn't there to begin with" (*Linguistic Development*). Pudewa author of "Linguistic Developmentthrough Poetry Memorization," stresses the need for children and students to be immersed in examples of excellent language. Given that the average student spends the majority of their day surrounded by peers, the media and media outlets, where poor language is the rule and not the exception, children need to listen to language spoken correctly as well as to read language written effectively.

Many educators, writers, and curriculum developers for home education are returning to classical teaching methods, and using educational philosophies common prior to the 20th century. Charlotte Mason, a 19th century British Educationalist, and Philosopher, whose "Suggestions towards a Curriculum" have become a standard model for hundreds of thousands of home schooling families. Her "*Original Homeschooling Series*," written between 1898 and 1920, and republished in the 1980's has gained mass popularity for 21st century parents and students. Mason's approach, like Beechick, is rich, varied, and solely immersed in fine literature and narrative history. Students are immersed in classical poetry as well as drama (primarily Shakespeare), and are taught from year 1 to memorize and recite lines of poetry. Although Mason never wrote a specific curriculum, she did introduce suggestions that were later used by private schools in England and Wales.

Ambleside Online, a free curriculum created in 2000, and based upon the methods of Charlotte Mason, offers parents access to a similar curriculum via the Internet. Based upon actual examples of Charlotte Mason's own programs developed for children, circa 1890,year one or ages 6-7, would include three terms of poetry reading (books by Robert Louis Stevenson, AA Milne, and Iona and Peter Opie) along with memorization and recitation weekly. By year three or ages 9-10, students would be studying the individual works of three poets (for example, William Blake, Sara Teasdale, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) per year. Poetry memorization, copy work, and recitation would continue throughout the years until the student had amassed a major mental collection of poetry, prose, and drama.

It seems, in conclusion, that the trend towards a purely utilitarian approach to education has remained entrenched in our modern educational system. Textbook publishers follow the curriculum suggestions made by educationalists and curriculum developers whose intent and purpose seems to deliver content to the student that is easily assimilated. Rather than develop a rich and varied, liberal arts curriculum – a curriculum that focuses more upon the linguistic development of language and memory acquisition, the scope and sequence of modern day public and private texts are eerily similar in purpose – they all stress mechanical and productive work rather than that which serves to develop the mind and encourages the imagination.

Independent writers, former teachers, and educationalists that are outside the public school arena often develop home education materials, on the other end of the spectrum. These individuals are far freer to utilize unpopular methods and approaches, to dive backwards into methods of the past, and to procure new ways to encourage the connection between thinking and understanding. This freedom provides the greatest expression of individual development, specifically in the area of language assessment and acquisition. The outcome is to stimulate and create a love of learning, to develop language, and to become well educated versus well productive.

The question then remains whether the last one hundred year's emphasis upon utilitarian education still has value as critical necessity or whether the approach and method has simply become so entrenched within our educational system that new ideas, innovative processes, and "outside the box thinking" are set aside in favor of that which is known. Clearly, curriculum exists with links back to the past, but with a modern approach connecting the old ways of learning with the needs of 21st century students. If this kind of curriculum exists, and is readily available, then why has it not replaced the mechanical and utilitarian focused texts found in the majority of public and private school programs?

This writer believes the answer lays simply in the desire by mega-publishers to control the content of education for the procurement of mass-producing qualified workers. Workers need not be expressive nor have well-developed and complex language skills to be able to produce entry to mid-level work. The demand for well-educated and well-articulated individuals is no longer of highest value. Students who are able to compute and who are well versed in mechanical application as well as the sciences or mathematics are in highest demand. The poet, the philosopher, the artist or the musician – even the linguist or writer – are no longer required as part of the functioning of a higher ordered and complex society. Therefore, students do not need to be versed in the works of Shakespeare, Blake, or Shelley. The rudiments of education, the "three Rs," and the ability to perform tasks with rapidity and full occlusion are all that are required by 21st century employers. Philosopher Bertha Payne was correct when she wrote back in 1902 that the aim of every teacher is to make sure that her students are ready and educated for a livelihood. Those students who are educated in the classics, taught poetry memorization from early childhood, and who learn to copy the works of classical writers will still bear the marks of the well-educated man or woman – however out of vogue and unemployable they may be to the competitive marketplace of the global economy we share.

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