

# Happy Poems: Children's Awareness of Audience

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*A teacher explores why the criteria that children use for selecting poetry to share with an audience differ from her expectations.*

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Children's Awareness of Audience



Tamara is deep in thought as she sifts through the poems in her Poetry Folder. Quietly, she mutters “No way” as she puts poems in one pile, and “Yes, yes” as she places poems she wants to publish in our class poetry magazine in a different pile. A thoughtful poem about her beloved cat that recently died sits in the “No way” pile, as does a serious poem about her relationship with her grandmother. A poem about springtime sits alone in the “Yes,

yes” pile. Intrigued, I ask Tamara about her criteria for selecting a poem to share with an audience.

**Amy:** *Hey, Tamara. I notice that you've been thinking carefully about which poem you want to share. Tell me why you decided on the springtime poem.*

**Tamara:** *Well, some of my other poems are sad or kind of serious sounding. I think the spring poem is fun and everyone would like to hear it. It would*

*make them think about all the happy things in spring. Kids like to hear about happy things. And so do grown-ups.*

After similar interactions with other children in my first-grade class that week, I found myself wondering why children were rejecting poems with serious subject matter in favor of “happy” poems. I became intrigued about children's selection criteria when choosing poems to share with an audience. I was curious about

why the criteria used by the children often seemed different from mine. The children seemed to consciously think about their audiences' preferences and wonder, "Would this poem make their audience (peers/parents) happy? Would it make them smile? Would it make them sad?" I decided to interview them about their criteria for choosing a poem to go in our poetry magazine. I wanted to find out more about children's perceptions of audience needs, and how this affected their choice of a poem to share.

### CHILDREN'S AWARENESS OF AUDIENCE

Despite arguments that young children don't have the sociocognitive capacity to imagine or anticipate readers' beliefs and expectations, research on children's awareness of audience indicates that children as young as six do indeed have a developing sense of audience (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001). Britton (1975) found, however, that the audience students most frequently address in their writing is their teacher. In my opinion, an audience of one person is not enough and is not representative of audiences for writing beyond the classroom. Kroll (1978) argues, "When children realize that peers, instead of a teacher, will read their compositions, an audience of 'significant others' is created, making audience sensitivity more meaningful. Powerful learning occurs when children experience the failure or success of their words to communicate to peers" (p. 831). Some theorists argue that the very creation of a text is shrouded in thoughts about the potential audience's reaction. "Children want to try out texts on each other because texts are social, and because the response of an audience is essential to the creation of a text"

(Swaim, 2002, p. 339). Given that the purpose of writing is to communicate with an audience (Strange, 1988), I believe that children should be afforded regular forums for sharing their writing with peers and the wider community, through regular in-class shares, writing celebrations with parents, magazines, and school gatherings. Calkins and Parsons (2003) point out, "As teachers, we need to move heaven and earth to be sure every child knows what it is to be a published author. Help children make their poems public by posting them in the community and reading them to various audiences" (p. 131).

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Hubbard (1985) found that publishing had beneficial results for second graders' perceptions of audience. In her study, students who published their writing viewed the readers' reactions as important and helpful. Interestingly, Wollman-Bonilla (2001) found that first-grade children could demonstrate audience awareness when they were writing for a real purpose and for an authentic and familiar audience (peers, parents) (p. 188). This makes sense to me. My first graders were showing me that they were consciously thinking about what their audience would make of their poem. Indeed, Wollman-Bonilla argued that "first graders addressed their audience directly, drawing on

their understandings of their reader's experiences, expectations, and beliefs" (p. 188).

### LAUNCHING OUR POETRY STUDY

The decision to embark on a poetry study with first graders made sense from many perspectives. The children had had many experiences singing playground chants, jump rope songs, and nursery rhymes in kindergarten and first grade. They had used alliteration and tongue twisters and gained much experience manipulating language as part of our work with phonemic awareness. By the time January came around, they were ready for a more formal and specific genre study. Having been surrounded by words as music, as well as having fun playing with language, a poetry study would build on their experiences with language play.

I immersed children in the reading and writing of different forms of poetry for three months. Minilessons centered around writing techniques and discussions of poems I read aloud from mentor poets and my former students. Calkins and Parsons (2003) discuss the importance of creating a context for poetry that invites children to pay attention to the details of their lives in fresh ways. I set up my classroom as a museum with objects such as leaves, flowers, rocks, and gems. I encouraged children to observe the world through a poet's eyes and to go beyond scientific observation (Calkins, 2001). I told children that rather than writing "I see a round, broken rock with lots of lines across it," which sounds like a scientific observation, they could write something like "the rock perches on the table. Cut up into too many pieces, it looks cracked like Humpty Dumpty." The children observed objects at their tables and through a *poetry window*

in one corner of the classroom. Next to a window, I placed a small table and an assortment of paper and writing materials. Children could choose to sit at the table and look out of the poetry window to find inspiration from the view. I encouraged the children to write from their observations. Children also took notes in poetry notebooks that were carried home as homework, and voluntarily took their observations onto the playground. They practiced looking at ordinary objects through fresh eyes, and I shared poetry with them in which poets commented on common everyday objects. Karla Kuskin, a well-known children's poet, discusses this kind of observation:

*If you are going to draw, you have to look at that leaf and see the way the lines come down. You have to see the way the leaf is shaped and the way each plant grows differently. When you're drawing, you're drawing details and that's what you're writing about too.* (Kuskin, cited in Heard, 1999, p. 94)

Our study of the craft of poetry took place daily. Each session began with a minilesson focusing on an area that I felt would benefit the children, including seeing the world through a poet's eyes, listening for line breaks, showing not telling, looking for precise words, contrasting ordinary and poetic language, contrasting poems with prose, and revising and editing poems (Calkins & Parsons, 2003). During the minilesson, we listened to and looked at a variety of different types of poems. These included poems by mentor poets such as Shel Silverstein, Dr. Seuss, Valerie Worth, Zoe Ryder White, and Naomi Shihab Nye. We also looked closely at poems written by other children. Routman

(2000) states that children do not see themselves as poets until they read poetry written by other children. After reading any poem, I always asked the children, whom I referred to as "poets," what they noticed about the poem and what the writer was doing, including what they thought of the topic, word choice, punctuation, line breaks, rhythm, and ending lines.

### I interviewed children about why they were excluding certain poems from consideration for sharing.

We usually had a share time at the end of each poetry session. Opportunities for sharing poems written with friends, teachers, and parents, as well as the larger community, were integral to this unit. I had a sign-up sheet for those who wanted to share a poem, because there were too many to hear in one session. The poems were quite short, so we always listened to poems throughout the day, even if we ran out of time during our poetry session. I made sure there were opportunities available for every child who wanted to share a poem. In this way, their poetry had an audience who was encouraged to respond with positive comments. The sharing of poems orally was a celebratory and affirming experience for the poets in my class. Routman (2000) states that, "Sharing a poem congratulates the writer, affirms the effort, serves as a possible role model for other students, and encourages the student to continue writing" (p. 21).

There were other avenues for children to share their poetry as well. Twice during our poetry study, children selected one poem from their poetry folders to be typed for

inclusion in our class poetry anthology. Typing a poem with the child who wrote it sitting beside me provided an opportunity to confer about the poem. In the words of Ray (2004), "Interaction around typing up a poem on the computer is a good teaching opportunity if the teacher is there when it happens. Children like to play with options for line breaks, white space, and

also with capitalization, punctuation, and font as their poems are being typed up. We can help them think through this decision making as they do this" (p. 218).

The anthology was kept in our classroom library and was a popular reading selection. In addition, towards the end of the unit, each child chose one poem to illustrate and type for the first-grade poetry magazine we would distribute to parents and other classes, as well as to community members. We even organized a special poetry celebration, where parents came to hear children read from their poetry folders and each received a copy of the magazine.

Interestingly, when sharing poetry during a poetry share or for our class magazine or poetry anthology, the poems that some children selected were not the ones that I had expected. Intrigued, I interviewed children about why they were excluding certain poems from consideration for sharing. Their responses seemed to fall into three distinct categories, all of which indicated an awareness of audience as the major criteria for poetry selection.

## FIRST GRADER'S CRITERIA FOR SELECTING A POEM TO SHARE

### Criterion #1: Funny, silly, happy

The first criteria that children used to select their poems for sharing was that the poem be funny, fun, happy, or humorous. Children said things such as:

*"I chose a poem that is funny and makes people laugh."*

*"I like to read a poem that makes funny sounds."*

*"I like to read poems about my friends so they will smile."*

*"It's just a really funny poem. People would like to hear it."*

*"It's not a good idea to read really sad poems all the time. You should read happy ones, too."*

The idea of children enjoying happy, silly poems is not new. Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein, and joke books are all popular reading choices and sources of inspiration for first graders. Andrea Perry (Bagert, Wayland, Koertge, & Perry, 2003), a children's poet, argues that poetry is more fun than prose, stating, "Poetry can be so entertaining when it is done well. From the first time I ever heard a rhymed story told Seuss style, I have loved the playfulness of it."

Choosing poems to share that make other people smile or laugh is not unique to first graders; the desire to make others happy is surely part of the human condition. When children break into uproarious laughter as a classmate reads aloud a newly written poem, they seem to share the perspective of a renowned adult poet: "Nothing makes me happier than performing a poem for an audience and feeling the room swell with emotion" (Bagert et al., 2003).

This criterion of happy poems led children to choose poems for sharing such as this one:

#### Cathryn

Makes me laugh  
She tells funny joke  
And when she starts laughing  
Her cheeks turn red  
And I start laughing too  
Then my cheeks are red  
I am happy  
—Sara

This same desire led them to overlook what they considered sad poems to share with others. Take, for example, this poem:

#### Inside My Heart

Inside my heart  
When I am happy  
There is a tsunami  
That never happened.  
—Avi

Avi wrote this poem in January, in response to my invitation that children try writing a poem beginning with, "Inside my heart there is . . ." When I asked Avi to tell me about his poem, he said, "I wish that the tsunami had never happened because lots of people died and lost their homes." I doubt that we would have had this conversation without an invitation for writing, a blank piece of paper, and the knowledge that it is okay to write about whatever is on your mind. Naomi Shihab Nye states that, "Sometimes there is no one to listen to what you might really want to say at a certain moment. The paper will always listen" (cited in Moyers, 1999, p. 8).

Avi was proud of his poem. However, when asked which poem he would like to submit to our class poetry magazine, he chose a poem about a vacation in Amaganset. I asked him why he chose that one over the tsunami poem and he replied that the vacation poem was "really fun."

Jada's poem about Iraq was written on the same day as Avi's. Jada told me that she wrote this poem because she "thinks about the war every day, and I know that it is making a lot of people lose their lives." She said that she has "seen lots of banners and pins around New York City" and that she "wanted to use that idea to make up a poem about how much I hate war." Some weeks later, when Jada had to select one poem for our class poetry magazine, she skipped right over the Iraq poem. When I asked her why, she said, "It's a really depressing poem. I think poems that go in magazines should be happy."

#### Iraq

Bullets blasting  
Funerals come  
People, do what's right  
So, war no more!  
—Jada

I agree with Alice Walker, who states that poetry breaks through "the skin of suffering in which children are often imprisoned; silent, confused, scared. A child's poetry is an intimate, trusting gift to anyone who wishes to 'read' her heart" (cited in Heard, 1999, p. 3). What I noticed, however, is that while some children were willing to share personal and tender, often sad, poems with a teacher, they did not choose to share these poems with peers. They saw their peers as an audience who found a different kind of poem appealing. I am glad that Avi and Jada felt the freedom and comfort to write poems from the heart, but I was baffled as to why they chose not to share these poems. I wondered if their peers had made fun of a sad or serious poem, and thought hard about the kind of environment I had created for sharing poetry. I worried that maybe my classroom environment was sending a message that I did not intend. I wanted the message to be that "all of

our students' lives matter, that every voice is worth listening to, and that students can take risks in writing poems about whatever their heart urges them to write" (Heard, 1999, p. 3).

After reflecting on our classroom climate, I came to believe that their decision was a personal one made on the basis of their own criteria for the kind of poems that they believe their peers valued. I did talk to Avi, Jada, and other children who were embracing the "happy, fun poem" criteria and pointed out that we had read aloud many sad poems from published books and that those poems are just as valid for sharing with others. I tried to carefully select poems to read aloud that represented a wide spectrum of moods, emotions, and subject matter. In this way, I was hoping that children would find something to identify with from this poetry that would influence what they chose to write and share, including poems that were happy, silly, funny, sad, melancholy, and perhaps somewhere in between.

### Criterion #2: Long, or at least not too short

Not by intention, but by accident, poems I read aloud to the children were usually at least five or six lines long, and often even longer. The children grew to associate a poem that was shorter than six lines as a "short poem." Many first graders have a conception that the more you write, the better your piece is. I tried to challenge the misconception by focusing on the writing devices used within a poem, rather than its length. Many of the poems that I read to children incorporated similes and metaphors to convey their points. Although I didn't use the words *simile* or *metaphor*, we spent time looking at mentor poems and discussing how poets use comparisons to get their points across more clearly and

in an interesting way. Lewis Thomas, a scientist, sees children as strong users of language for whom metaphors are natural, saying, "We become specialized for this uniquely human function in the early years of childhood, perhaps losing this mechanism as we mature" (cited by Heard, 1999, p. 74).

I was impressed with children's use of metaphor and simile in their poetry as reflected in this poem:

#### Computer

A computer is like  
A small square monster  
That likes to  
Help people.  
—Danny

Danny is a methodical student who loves to use the computer at any opportunity. His decision to write a poem about a computer made sense because I tell children to write about what they care about, what they love. When I asked Danny to tell me about his poem, he told me that "most of the time computers are very helpful but they are like a monster because they sometimes make you lose your work or don't really help you. Sometimes they can make you angry." Danny was very pleased with his poem and seemed to enjoy taking this leap to see the likeness between things (Heard, 1999). However, Danny did not want to submit this poem for publication, saying that it was "just a little poem; I want to publish a bigger poem."

The idea of wanting to publish a "big, or bigger poem" was also expressed by Anna, who wrote this poem that uses comparison to make a point.

#### Rock

A rock is like a sculpture  
That  
Doesn't know where it's going.  
—Anna

When I asked Anna if she would like to put "Rock" in our class poetry magazine, she said that she felt "this poem is too little. I should put something bigger in there." I asked her why and she replied, "Because it's too short; I have done longer things which are probably better."

This idea of length as a factor in selecting a poem was a criterion that I noticed many children mentioning to me. In response, I read a quote to the children from the poet Ron Koertge (Bagert et al., 2003), "I like to write poems because they are short and I usually get a good idea of what one is about in a single sitting." I also emphasized to Anna, Danny, and others that many of their favorite poems in class were short, and that one of the great things about writing poetry is not having to write a long piece.

Explaining to the poets in my class that poetry is about concentration, not superfluous text, did lead to less reluctance to share the briefer poems. I emphasized that poetry is about concentration, which often forces the poet to zoom in on one feeling, thing, or emotion, to concentrate on one taste or smell or moment. I also found some short, sharp poems to read to the class; they demonstrated that a poem's length does not necessarily correlate to its strength and allowed me to praise the short poems that children had written, thus raising the status of short poems in their eyes.

### Criterion #3: Shows off a skill or teaches something

The third criterion that was prevalent in children's decisions about which poems to share seemed to be whether or not they felt that their poem either offered an example of a writing skill used in poetry we had studied or imparted ideas or information of use to others. On the

day that Harry wrote a poem about a plant, he had been carefully studying one that had been placed in the middle of his worktable. Harry told me he liked “being able to compare the plant to a building; it makes me feel like I’m making a movie in my mind.” Harry chose the poem to share with the class during a poetry share and also wanted to submit it to our poetry magazine. He said that “it’s a good one to share because they can almost see it in their minds, like a picture, just like you showed us.” Harry was referring to a minilesson at the start of the unit where I asked the children to close their eyes and take a picture in their minds of what they were writing about. In this way, they could hold onto its appearance for as long as they needed or wanted to. They could look at it and study it to help them with their writing.

#### Plant

A plant is like  
A building in the  
Future.  
The leaves are platforms.  
The dirt is the lobby.  
—Harry

Nellie chose the following poem for submission to a class anthology of poems because she told me that, “it’s an important poem about something happening. A lot of kids don’t really know what the ozone layer is and I think that this poem could teach them.” Her choice reflected my encouragement to the class to write poems about what they feel is true:

#### Ozone Layer

Cars polluting up and  
Trains, boats, airplanes  
Fire trucks, motorcycles  
Up, up and up breaking  
The ozone layer  
Never seen again.  
—Nellie

Since February was Black History month, we read a lot of Civil Rights books at the same time as our poetry study. When I asked Becca if she would like to share her poem with the class, she said she would, because it was “relevant, and the kids can learn about Martin Luther King and what he did. It’s kind of an educational poem.”

#### Martin

Martin didn’t use hate  
Or fists  
He used words  
And now we’re all equal  
—Becca

Poetry provided a safe place for first graders to express feelings, understandings, and views within our classroom community. Some recurring topics were friendship, family, pets, war, pollution, global warming, tsunami, and 9/11. Naomi Shihab Nye states that poetry “makes us slow down and listen carefully to a few things we have really heard, deep inside. For me, poems usually begin with true things—people, places, experiences—but quickly ride off into that other territory of imagination, which lives alongside us as much as we will allow in a world that likes to pay too much attention to facts” (cited in Moyers, 1999, p. 8).

Pearl came to me asking if she could share her poem with the group. I asked her why she was eager to share and she told me, in almost hushed tones, that “the Grand Canyon is a really special place and people should really know about it, and what it’s like there. It’s actually one of the most beautiful places in the world.” She read the poem slowly and with emotion during our poetry share, evoking a sense of mystery and intrigue. Weeks later, I found out from her mother that Pearl had not

been to the Grand Canyon. She had heard many stories about her parents’ trip there, and had been asking her mother relentlessly every day if she could go. After seeing this poem in our class poetry magazine, Pearl’s mom told me, “We may have to take her there.”

#### Grand Canyon

I walked down the  
Grand Canyon  
It made  
Me feel special  
It made me feel special  
Why?  
because I was more than me.  
—Pearl

Writing this poem allowed Pearl to express her feelings in a new way, and the poem reinforced the message she had been trying to get across to her parents. This desire had become a poem inside of Pearl, waiting to be dug out. As Gallasi notes, “Our real poems are already in us, and all we can do is dig” (cited in Grossman, 1982, Intro). Heard (1999) agrees, noting that poetry helps children “reach into their well of feelings—their emotional, internal lives and thoughts, like no other form of writing can” (p. xvii).

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

I often read aloud the poem *Valentine for Earnest Mann* by Naomi Shihab Nye (1994) during our poetry study. Children particularly like her statement that “poems hide/in the bottoms of our shoes, they are sleeping. /They are the shadows drifting across our ceilings the moment we wake up” (p. 48). With their poet’s eyes, newfound writing techniques, and poetry observation notebooks, my first graders found poems to write, revise, share, and publish. Their voices were evident in the poetry that they crafted. First graders wrote with as

much voice as any adult, if not more. Just as children had personal and unique styles of writing, so they had personal and sometimes unique reasons for sharing their poetry with others. In my individual conferences with children, we discussed their criteria for sharing. Sometimes it was possible to encourage new ways of thinking about which poems would lend themselves to being shared with others. Mostly, these interviews helped me to understand each poet's reasons and justification for selections and exclusions.

The crucial part of the process for me, and hopefully for the children, was that I asked. I remained curious. Why this poem and not another? As we have seen, first graders can indeed demonstrate audience awareness. The selection criteria used by these first-grade students shows explicitly that they were thinking about how other people would perceive what they wrote, based on their ideas about their audience as people and as responders. With teacher guidance, their ideas about audience ("They won't want to hear a sad poem" or "This poem is too short") were challenged and expanded. My hope is that the next time they are considering sharing a poem with an audience, the questions "Why?" and "Why not?" will circle around in their heads.

Wollman-Bonilla (2001) points out that "even very young children and beginning writers can demonstrate audience awareness. Teacher instruction to consider audience, as well as writing for real purposes and for an authentic and responsive

audience, also help to develop audience awareness" (p. 198). It seems to me 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. Teachers should ensure that audiences are larger than just themselves. Audiences should include parents, peers, and, where possible, the wider community. In this way, children will learn from real experience about writing for an audience. Graves (1983) has long recognized children's awareness of audience, stating, "Publishing contributes to a sense of audience. Children envision the appearance of a piece in print, and the teacher, parents or friends turning the pages" (p. 54). Knowing this, it is not a surprise, then, to find that first graders have their own criteria for selecting poems to share with an audience.

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