



Nature through Poetry

by Ruth A. Wilson

It was October and the wind was blowing leaves across the street outside the classroom window. Christina, the early childhood teacher, capitalized on the moment by inviting the children to move closer to the window and asked them to look closely at what they could see outside. Many of the children volunteered simple one-word responses: trees, leaves, cars, and sky. Christina encouraged further discussion by asking: What do you notice about the leaves and the trees? What would you hear if we were standing outside? What would you feel? What would it feel like to be a tree when the wind is blowing? How would it feel to be a leaf? The children's responses to these questions were far more descriptive than their previous answers: I see yellow leaves flying in the air. I see the tree bending over. I would feel the wind pushing me. If I was a leaf, I would feel like a kite.

Christina then invited the children to move like the wind, and they were soon engaged in a wonderfully expressive dance, using their arms and legs, their hands and feet, and their entire bodies to express their ideas about the wind and how it moves. There were smiles on the children's faces and expressions of wonder in their eyes. After this magical wind-inspired dance, Christina asked the children to find a space and lie down on the floor. She had them close their eyes and hold the image of the wind in their minds. She then encouraged the children to share more ideas about the wind and how it might make them feel. The children eagerly talked about how the wind was strong and how it liked to blow leaves across the road. One child said the wind once wrapped itself around her and gave her a hug. Another child said the wind once chased him down a hill.



Dr. Ruth Wilson has been a teacher, teacher educator, and consultant in early childhood education for over 30 years. She currently devotes most of her time to writing and developing curriculum in the area of environmental education for young children. Most recently, Dr. Wilson worked as a curriculum writer for California's Education and Environment Initiative and as a consultant with Sesame Street in planning environmental programs for young children. Dr. Wilson has published several books and numerous articles. Her most recent book is *Nature and Young Children: Encouraging Creative Play and Learning in Natural Environments*. Dr. Wilson can be contacted at wilson.rutha@gmail.com.

Christina then shared the poem:

"Who Has Seen the Wind?"

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I, nor you.
But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you, nor I.
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.

— Christina Rossetti

The children sat quietly during the reading of the poem, their faces showing intense concentration. Christina read the poem a second time and then asked, "Who has seen the wind?" Most of the children remained silent, but one child responded, "Not me and not you."

"If we can't see the wind," Christina asked, "How do we know it's there?" By now, a number of children were ready to volunteer answers: It blows the leaves. It bends the trees. We can feel it. We can hear it.

Benefits of Nature-Focused Poetry

The poem, "Who Has Seen the Wind?" is an excellent example of a nature-focused poem that can be used with young children. Nature-focused poetry includes some aspect of nature as its theme and often invites philosophical reflection, as nature is something we wonder about.

While we might not be able to assess precisely what the children gained from Rossetti's poem and the follow-up discussion, we can surmise the benefits to include a deeper appreciation of wind, an inclination to become more observant of natural phenomenon, an interest in philosophical thinking, an appreciation of poetic expression, and develop-

ment of language and early literacy skills.

Sharing poetry with children helps them fall in love with words; and we know that loving words and the stories they tell is one of the strongest predictors of learning to read (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). While most early childhood educators appreciate the value of sharing books with young children, they may overlook the special qualities of poetry and its unique contribution to early literacy. Nature-focused poetry offers the additional benefit of fostering a love of the natural world.

Great poems are often rich in sensory descriptions. They help us hear the honking of geese, feel the force of ocean waves or the freshness of an early morning, taste the sweetness of freshly-picked strawberries, and help us identify with the baby cub cozy in its den. Children readily relate to what they can see, feel, hear, and taste in their imaginations. Poetry is a form of language that brings these images to life.

Many poems convey a story or message in a way that is richer and more succinct than other forms of language; and for comprehension, poetry has an almost magical way of introducing new vocabulary and concepts. In “Who Has Seen the Wind?” the idea of trembling leaves and trees that bow their heads are likely to be new concepts for young children.

“Who Has Seen the Wind?” also introduces the philosophical idea that there are some things we can’t see, yet they’re real. The children in Christina’s class offered some examples: happiness, the buzz of a bee, and the air around us. Nature-focused poetry can be used to initiate philosophical discussions with young children on such topics as fragility, injury, and the nature of living things — topics within the intellectual reach of young children (Schleifer, Daniel, Peyronnet & Lecomte, 2003).

Some people think of philosophy and poetry as being ‘too abstract’ for young children. If introduced appropriately, however, both can bring delight to children and be of interest to them. Philosophy and poetry often focus on the questions we all ask: What is good? How should we live on Earth? What makes something living? Pondering such questions helps to nurture children’s holistic development and may even be critical to fulfilling their human potential (Christie, 2000).

We know that young children learn by interacting with the world around them. Such interactions — or manipulations — while physical in nature, are also mental. Speculating, guessing, predicting, doubting, and questioning are all forms of mental manipulation (also called critical thinking skills). While some of the questions children ask reflect scien-

tific thinking (e.g. Why is a bucket of water heavier than a bucket of straw? Do all birds sing? How can I move this big rock?); others are more philosophical in nature (Why is a ladybug alive and a stone is not alive? Why should we care about bugs and bees? How does a seed really grow?). As soon as children begin asking questions about caring, responsibility, and the nature of living things, they’re moving into the realm of philosophy — a realm that often shows up in poetry.

Poetry and Ecological Perspective Taking

Poetry often introduces ideas that help us see or imagine the world from another’s perspective. “Prairie-Dog Town” by Mary Austin is one such poem that young children can enjoy (see Resource). “Prairie-Dog Town” talks about an old prairie dog that lives underground where he can be safe and sound. This particular poem — along with many other nature-focused poems for children — promotes ecological perspective taking (that is, taking the perspective of other living things). According to Chaille and Britain (2002), ecological perspective taking is an important step in developing a sense of respect and caring for the natural world. Ecological perspective taking is also a critical component in the development of a positive ecological identity (Wilson, 2011; 2012).

Engaging Young Children in Poetry

Most young children will love poetry if it’s introduced to them in a developmentally appropriate way. Choosing poetry with themes familiar to children is a good place to start. Thus, poems about animals and other elements of nature tend to work well with children. Poems also should be chosen based on what children enjoy in poetry: brevity, humor, and rhyme. All three of these elements need not be present in every poem you choose, but including at least one will increase the probability of children enjoying the poem.

“Who Has Seen the Wind?” has several elements of what to look for in poetry for children. It’s short, includes rhyme, and focuses on a topic familiar to the children. While this poem doesn’t include humor, it does introduce an element of surprise or something the children may not have considered — that is, the idea of not being able to see the wind.

In sharing poetry — as with any form of literature — how you present it to the children can make all the difference in how they understand and respond to it. It’s always a good idea to choose carefully, become familiar with the text before reading it, read with expression, and find interesting ways to actively involve the children. With some poems,

Examples of Nature-Focused Poetry

(Available online through a search by title and author)

Title	Author
<i>Winter Moon</i>	Langston Hughes
<i>April Rain Song</i>	Langston Hughes
<i>Who Has Seen the Wind?</i>	Christina Rossetti
<i>Snow Toward Evening</i>	Melville Cane
<i>The Woodpecker</i>	Elizabeth Madox Roberts
<i>Rain</i>	Robert Louis Stevenson
<i>I Heard a Bird Sing</i>	Oliver Herford
<i>Prairie Dog Town</i>	Mary Austin

children can join in the recitation. Other ways to get children actively engaged include having them:

- Act it out
- Illustrate the poem
- Identify rhyming words
- Discuss the meaning of selected words and/or passages
- Use the first line or title as a writing (or thinking) prompt.

Some of Douglas Florian's poems work well for prompts based on title or theme, including "What I Love About Summer" and "What I Hate About Summer" (Florian, 2002).

Christina did an excellent job of introducing "Who Has Seen the Wind?" to the children in her classroom. Prior to reading the poem, Christina had the children observe the effects of blowing wind, talk about what wind can do and how it feels, and pretend to be the wind. After reading the poem, she engaged the children in a meaningful philosophical discussion based on other things that are real but can't be seen.

Picture books can be used, as well as actual poems, to foster poetic thinking in young children. Some excellent examples of books you might use include *The Other Way to Listen* (Baylor & Parnall, 1978), *Frederick* (Lionni, 1988), and *All the Colors of the Earth* (Hamanaka, 1999). The poetic images and philosophical ideas presented in these books will encourage children to look at the world in new and creative ways. This new way of seeing the world is one of the special benefits of using nature-focused poetry with young children.

References

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Resource

"Prairie-Dog Town" by Mary Austin:
www.familyfriendpoems.com/famous/poem/prairie-dog-town-by-mary-austin



For more information on Nature and Children, be sure to check out the Wonder Newsletter archive:

WorldForumFoundation.org/working-groups/nature/newsletter/