



## **Motivating Reluctant Readers through Poetry**

Curriculum Unit 11.03.01  
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### **Introduction**

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As an educator, it is my responsibility to spark the imaginations of children and guide them in the direction to become lifelong learners. I have come to find that the use of poetry in the classroom is the best way to reach out to learners of different academic levels by activating the imagination of each individual student. Poetry itself should be its own subject taught in school and explored at every grade level. While we have not yet reached that point within the curriculum of New Haven Public Schools in the early primary grades, we manage to utilize poetry across academic disciplines in the classroom throughout the school year. My goal is to identify and utilize poetry with a focus on rhyme, rhythm and the sound of sense and nonsense in the first grade classroom. Poetry may be used to aid in student comprehension and the implementation of new skills across all academic disciplines. I have found that it can also be especially useful in teaching and motivating reluctant learners in the primary grades.

The city of New Haven already integrates small pieces of poetry into the literacy curriculum of our public schools. As part of the district curriculum, my kindergarten and first grade students are introduced to many literary devices, most of which can be explored through children's poetry. My students are also provided the opportunity to explore Nursery Rhymes through whole and small group instruction, classroom activities and independent reading. Until recently, I had not given much thought about the breakdown of the curriculum and my classroom activities to identify poetry, as I had always thought it was something to be specifically taught. Upon reflection, I have realized that poetry in itself is more than simply a subject to be "taught" to students. Poetry is a powerful tool of literacy that should be utilized as a means to achieve mastery of individual skills and the application of strategies in the classroom. Every teacher has a range of student learning needs and goals in their classroom. Using poetry is a great way to reach out to learners of all different levels. More importantly, it is an incredible device that can get reluctant readers more actively involved through participation in small and whole group instruction.

## Focus on Reluctant Readers

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As a teacher of a Tier III academic and behavioral intervention classroom, I currently instruct a group of kindergarten and first grade students in a small group setting. My students struggle with assimilating appropriate and positive behavior in school alongside their peers. The display of "negative behavior" is typically the reason for a referral to my intervention classroom. However, after working with several cohorts of students, I have come to recognize the negative behaviors are usually a warning sign that a particular student is either academically behind or simply not challenged enough through daily academic instruction. These are the students who otherwise may quickly fall through the cracks during our everyday instruction solely based on our district grade level curriculum.

As one can imagine, I receive many students who have become reluctant readers and writers as a result of their low academic achievement in school. In addition to displaying inappropriate behaviors, students accepted into the behavior support center intervention usually have developed a strong dislike for school, come from a broken family, and struggle with social interactions among peers. My ambition is to find a way to intrinsically motivate my students to do well and achieve great success in school and in life. I'm sure that most elementary teachers have come across a reluctant reader in their regular classroom. My hope is that this unit will shine some light on these students and help teachers recognize the genuine need of quality instruction and thinking outside the box to help these reluctant readers succeed in school.

The use of poetry in my instruction and literacy center activities has made it possible to spark the interest and motivation of the reluctant students, many of whom have since had great success in the areas of reading and writing. While the district continues to implement research based methods of reading instruction, poetry is certainly a great motivational tool to get students interested in reading. The beauty of my classroom is that I work with multiple grade levels and a wide variety of students. With this in mind, my unit will focus on first grade students, with the idea that each strategy and class activity may be differentiated to meet the needs of all students in the classroom.

## Rationale

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Students should be exposed to multiple forms of text both in and out of the classroom. As educators, we cannot always control what happens when our students walk out the door, which is why it is so important to use our precious time in school to get students engaged in reading all different types of materials. Poems are just one form of text that students need to be exposed to, one of which becomes of high interest to many young learners. A reluctant or low reader may be highly interested in reading nursery rhymes, as they are poems that have most likely been heard or read to them before. This can prove to be a huge ego boost with some students at a low reading level. The confidence they can get from being able to "read" and identify words in a poem is priceless. Even if the student cannot decode each word, the self reliance and independence helps set students up for success in other academic areas. In this unit, I will point out several ways in which familiar poetry can be worked into the reading and writing routine.

When poetry is used as a part of independent reading and literacy centers, students can develop a better

sense of fluency along with using their voices to play with tone and inflection. The sound of words creates meaning, which can vary from reader to reader. Teachers can also use poetry in the classroom to develop author, or poet, studies. This unit will explore several themes found within children's poetry, and suggest ideas for classroom use.

As far as writing is concerned in the first grade, poetry is particularly useful to be utilized as a classroom tool to help develop sentence structure, syllabification, spelling strategies, and proper use of punctuation. For example, in reading and writing a haiku, students have to recognize the number of syllables per line. This skill relates directly to phonemic awareness in the primary grades and is an important skill for students to develop with time. Being able to read and write words by recognizing word families is another important skill we focus on in the first grade. By developing the ability to read, recognize and write word families, students can develop a better sense of spelling as they create their own words within poetry. This unit will identify the links between children's poetry and the basic phonemic awareness instruction within our city curriculum in addition to providing skill building activities for classroom use.

The use of descriptive language in writing becomes an essential part of writing in our first grade curriculum. Reading and writing Cinquain poems help students to utilize descriptive language in a basic and fun way. While getting young students to use descriptive language in a narrative can be a daunting task for many teachers, this particular style of a poem focuses on the use of descriptive language in a very primary sense. As a part of small and whole group instruction, I hope to provide a variety of poetic structure that will support student mastery of writing skills in the first grade.

This unit will incorporate strategies utilizing poetry to support the implementation of district objectives along with state and national standards in the first grade. My goal is to tie in the aforementioned skills and strategies into one unit to help develop confident readers and writers in the classroom. I plan to research and develop literacy strategies to engage learners of different academic levels in the classroom through the use of poetry. A main focus of the unit will be on the sound of sense and nonsense in the first grade classroom through literacy strategies using poetry. Through the unit I will develop and explain strategies that may be used in morning meeting messages, team building activities, literacy centers, independent reading, along with guided and whole group reading that build upon the New Haven Literacy Curriculum in the first grade.

## **Alignment with Academic Standards**

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CT English Language Arts Curriculum Standards - Grade 1

### 1. Reading and Responding

1.3 Students select and apply strategies to facilitate word recognition and develop vocabulary in order to comprehend text

### 2. Exploring and Responding to Literature

2.4 Students recognize that readers and authors are influenced by individual, social, cultural and historical contexts.

## Common Core State Standards

### Reading Standards for Literature – First Grade

4. Identify words and phrases in stories or poems that suggest feelings or appeal to the senses.
10. With prompting and support, read prose and poetry of appropriate complexity for grade 1.

### Foundational Skills – First Grade

2. Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds
3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.

## Content Objectives:

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The purpose of this unit is to develop confident readers in the first grade. The following objectives, as previously mentioned, will be covered throughout the unit:

1. Students will identify pairs of rhyming words.
2. Students will build fluency in reading familiar poetry in the classroom.
3. Students will identify words with the same ending sound. (i.e.; -ing, -ed, etc.)
4. Students will identify words with the same beginning sound.

## How to Share Poetry

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As a teacher it is important to take note in how you read and share poetry with children. This unit allows room for flexibility and choice of poetry to utilize in your own classroom. If you do not like a particular poem, why would you share it with your class? I am not suggesting that there is a right or wrong way to read poetry. I am merely advising that you try not to convey a negative vibe or attitude about a poem, or collection of poetry. Children are very bright and pickup on cues such as body language and always notice your tone and inflection as a reader. "A poem must interest you as well as be one that you feel is right for your audience." (Hopkins 1988, 22). For some, it may be easy to put on a show and pretend that you absolutely love reading every book within your school curriculum. However, if you do not possess this magical talent, I would advise you choose and utilize poetry in your classroom that you actually like.

## Nursery Rhymes as Motivation

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Using simple nursery rhymes is appropriate throughout the primary grades in elementary school. Nursery rhymes are known to be "... short, fun-filled, dramatic, pleasing to the ear, easy to remember – and oh, so hard to forget" (Hopkins 1998, 206). These qualities are what make them particularly useful in motivating beginning and emergent readers in the classroom. I have found that my students, who at first were reluctant to even pick up a book, love to "read" nursery rhymes when incorporated into our center activity time and skills practice in the classroom. "Children are in love with the easy rhymes, the alliteration, the quick action, and the humor that Mother Goose conveys." (Hopkins 1998, 20). Whether a teacher utilizes a poem in its entirety or just a few lines of a familiar rhyme, students become confident in reciting the simple lines. Nursery rhymes are also great to have available in book form, for children to utilize during independent reading time in the classroom. While reluctant readers may not be able to master a text full of sight words, they can confidently "read" a few familiar nursery rhymes and not feel defeated as a reader.

After reciting a familiar nursery rhyme, you can have students practice one to one correspondence by pointing to each word as they read. This may be done as part of small group instruction or set up as a center activity during literacy instruction. In New Haven we monitor student progress on Concepts About Print, where our familiar nursery rhymes can aid in the practice of the basic skill of one to one correspondence, or matching. Students love to practice this skill, especially when a few added "tools" are thrown in to use as pointers. Many young students would love to decorate and use a craft stick or use a magic wand to point to words as they read and recite. These simple modifications to regular reading are what make learning fun and engaging.

A familiar nursery rhyme is also a great device to utilize when introducing rhyming pairs. While students are adept at identifying rhymes when listening to the teacher recite a poem, they can use a familiar nursery rhyme to identify a pair of rhyming words on their own. Providing a reluctant reader with a familiar nursery rhyme to work with is as much an ego boost as it is a fantastic teaching tool. There are endless possibilities when it comes to using nursery rhymes in the first grade. While I would not limit poetry exposure to only nursery rhymes, I most definitely recommend utilizing them, especially with a reluctant individual or group of readers.

### Whole group instruction

*Objectives:* Students will utilize their five senses to illustrate a poem.

Students will build fluency by independently reading the poem.

After a shared reading with the whole class provide each student with a copy of a relevant nursery rhyme. Allow students time to illustrate their copy of the poem based on how the poem made them feel or what they imagined happening in the poem. You may focus on having students use one (or all) of their five senses to describe the poem. Have students practice re-reading the poem in the journal to help build fluency.

*For example: Little Boy Blue*

First, the teacher will read and share a copy of *Little Boy Blue*. Before you read, ask students to close their eyes. Tell the students to focus on their senses and to think about how the poem makes them feel. Read the

poem to the class two times. The first time you read have students keep their eyes shut.

After reading the poem twice have students turn and talk to a buddy for two minutes and discuss what they imagined when they listened to the poem. You may prompt students with questions such as: what did you see, what did you hear, what did you taste and smell when you heard the words? After two minutes, ask for pairs of students to share what they imagined in the poem. As students share their thoughts, the teacher may follow along and quickly illustrate her copy of the poem with what students describe.

Next, provide each student with a copy of *Little Boy Blue* to illustrate and paste into their poetry journal at their seat. After students have illustrated the poem, they may practice reading the poem out loud at their seat (this may be done independently or buddy reading with a neighbor).

#### *Small group instruction:*

For small group instruction you can utilize poems that have been previously introduced to students and are already a part of their poetry journal. Your focus within small groups will be more specific and targeted to meet the needs of individual learners.

Once the students have been exposed to the poem as part of whole group instruction, you can continue to utilize the poem to help develop literacy skills at any level. Since my goal is to facilitate instruction focused on reluctant readers, most of my suggestions will be geared more towards lower level readers.

#### Literacy Skill Development using *Little Boy Blue*

##### *Beginning Sounds*

Utilize the poem *Little Boy Blue* to have students identify words in the poem that begin with the letter B. Have students practice saying the /b/ sound and then use a colored pencil or crayon to identify words that begin with the /b/ sound. Then, take turns reading and writing words on paper or a white board.

##### *Sight Words*

You can also have students read familiar sight words within the poem (ie: the, in, little). This would also be a good opportunity to introduce students to a new sight word (ie: that, under) and have them find the word in the poem. You may want to utilize crayons, colored pencils, markers or highlighting tape to have students identify familiar or new sight words on their copy of the poem.

##### *Rhyming Words*

You can work with students to reinforce their ability to rhyme by identifying the rhyming pairs in the poem (ie: horn & corn). You can discuss the placement of rhyming words (in this poem, at the end of a line). You may also extend the lesson by creating a list of words that rhyme with other words in the poem (ie: add on to sheep & asleep).

##### *Punctuation*

##### *Objectives:*

1. Students will identify three types of punctuation within the poem: periods, questions marks and

exclamation points.

2. Students will change their vocal tone and inflection in reading the poem aloud to correlate with proper punctuation.

You may have students practice reading different lines of the poem with proper tone and inflection by taking notice of the punctuation at the end of the line. This would be a great introduction for lower level students to play with tone and inflection with a familiar text since the lines of the poem include a period, question mark and exclamation points. While I have suggested this activity as part of small group instruction, it is also great to use with the whole class.

## Nursery Rhymes in Center Activities:

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### Sentence Segmentation

*Objectives:*

1. Students will isolate and identify how many words are found within two lines of a poem.
2. Students will use snap cubes to represent correct number of words on a given card.

Type and print out two lines from familiar nursery rhymes on small cards (two lines per card). Have students read the two lines and identify how many words are in the lines. Utilize snap cubes (or any other manipulatives in your class that can link together) to represent how many words per card. For example, a card that has 12 words on it would be represented by a tower of twelve linking cubes.

Students can check to see if they are correct by using the tower of cubes to tap out the words when they reread the cards to check their work. (ie: if the students put together a tower of twelve cubes, then they should be able to tap twelve words on the card).

***Extension: This activity could be altered and used to show students patterns in poetry by identifying how many words (or syllables) are found per line of a poem.***

### The Sense and Nonsense of Seuss

In my first few years of teaching I utilized and referenced Dr. Seuss books on special occasions, conducted an author study to celebrate the birthday of Dr. Seuss and always had them available for independent reading in the classroom library. What I have come to realize is that Dr. Seuss books can be a magical teaching tool to utilize throughout the year in the classroom. For the purposes of this unit, I will focus on utilizing Dr. Seuss books that rhyme and can be decoded by early level readers. Lee Bennett Hopkins notes that, as adults, "We must do all we can to preserve and nurture the love of rhyme and rhythm, and the feeling for words, that young children have in them" (Hopkins 1998, 23). I firmly believe that sharing and utilizing texts authored by Dr. Seuss is a great way to connect with children and their natural love of rhyme and rhythm.

Robin Heald addresses how "... children have become readers hearing and then looking at Dr. Seuss books. Children who have stored memories for the sound and rhythm of language are better able to make predictions about words and phrases, as they emerge as readers" (Heald 2007, 230). The best part about Dr. Seuss books is that they essentially use nonsense to make sense in reading. By having fun with real and nonsense vocabulary in a predictable manner, the books are able to aid in the acquisition of beginning reading skills in the primary grades.

The words within the text certainly don't have to make sense to make learning fun. I have seen many of my students become more interested in reading and decoding words when they don't make sense. Once students are able to decode a CVC (consonant, vowel, consonant) word, part of our reading instruction in the primary grades includes having students be able to decide if a word is a real word (one that makes sense) or a nonsense word. Dr. Seuss provides ample opportunity for class wide discussion about words. While deciding if a word is a real or nonsense word, the more important focus for my students is to first be able to read the words - whether they make sense or not. Most of the books written by Dr. Seuss are entertaining and easily read by early level readers. They make a great addition to any classroom library not only for student use, but for instruction as well.

Dr. Seuss books are a good tool to utilize if you implement buddy reading (two students reading together) in your classroom. Students are able to help each other decode words if an individual is stuck. Buddy Reading also allows time for students to discuss the words they come across.

Rhyming is an obvious quality of many books authored by Dr. Seuss. Rhyming activities can be facilitated utilizing a Dr. Seuss book in small group instruction or in a whole group read aloud. After having students listen and identify rhyming pairs of words, they love to come up with another word that rhymes with the pair. This could be used with only real words, or also by having students create their own 'nonsense' words to rhyme.

Example: *Hop on Pop*

A good book to utilize with low level readers is *Hop on Pop* . Before sharing the book with the class, or small group, have the students brainstorm a list of rhyming words (if necessary, review what it means to rhyme). Introduce the title and cover page of the book to students and ask what students think the book is about.

As you read, have students identify the rhyming pairs you are reading. If you are working with a small group, you may be able to have students help you read as you share with the group.

Stop and ask students if particular pages make sense (ie: one page describes a house on a mouse - ask students if this could be possible). Have students explain why or why not.

After you read, have students compare both lists of rhyming pairs (the list from brainstorming and the list from reading) to see if any words were on both pages.

Next, choose two rhyming words (not in the book) to make your own sentence (to model for students). For example, you may use mail and snail as a rhyming pair. To facilitate sentence writing, make sure that students have access to appropriate sight words (ie: in, on, the, under, over, etc.). Your sentences may look like this: "The snail ate the mail."

Have students work independently or with a partner to create their own sentences using rhyming pairs and



appropriate sight words. Students may also be provided the opportunity to illustrate their rhyming sentence. The finished product may be compiled into a classroom rhyming book!

*Extension Activity* : Depending on student ability level, some students that may complete the activity quickly can create a different sentence using the same words. They could also use a different set of rhyming words to create a new sentence.

#### *Author's Purpose for Writing Hop on Pop*

In another shared reading of the story you can have students decide what the author's purpose was when he wrote *Hop on Pop* . Have students listen and look at pictures carefully to decide what the author's purpose in writing the book was (for this book, it appears to be to entertain the reader).

## Utilizing a Poetry Journal

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The primary role of the poetry journal in my classroom is to build a collection of poems that students can read and utilize to practice identifying parts of text. Differentiation may be evident in journals, depending on how you choose to use them in the classroom. Since not all students are on the same reading level, it doesn't really make sense for each individual poetry journal to look the same. This poetry journal may be used as part of a small unit or incorporated into daily reading and/or writing instruction. I will reference the use of a poetry journal in several parts of this unit.

### **Whole group instruction:**

You may use a simple poem to instruct your entire class as a whole group. Make sure that you model what you want students to be able to do. This can be done with a projector, Smartboard, or by utilizing an enlarged copy of the poem to guide students throughout the lesson. This is a great way to get all levels of readers excited about reading and engaged in the same lesson. You can use whole group instruction to introduce and reinforce students' identification of the following within a poem:

- punctuation (periods, commas, and exclamation points)
- rhyming words (may identify words that rhyme using colored pencils, crayons, etc.)
- word families ( -at, -it, -ig, etc.)
- word endings (-ed, -ing, etc.)
- words with the same beginning sound
- identify words with long vowel sounds (one vowel at a time)
- identify words with short vowel sounds (one vowel at a time)
- students may cut a poem up into separate lines and then assemble the poem by gluing it into their notebook (the teacher may show students how the poem should be put together or have them decide which order it

should go in)

### **Small group instruction:**

Poetry is a fun way to get students involved in dissecting text on their own level. It is great for developing reading comprehension, identifying parts of a text and excellent for building fluency and one to one correspondence. You may use a focus from above to hone in on during small group instruction or choose a poem that links to a specific reading skill that your group is working on. The possibilities are endless when you break it down to small group, for both low and high level readers.

## **Classroom Activities**

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The following is a list of additional activities that may be incorporated as whole group activities or small group center time. Most of these are basic activities and centers found within many primary grade level classrooms and are directly related to aforementioned objectives and standards within this unit.

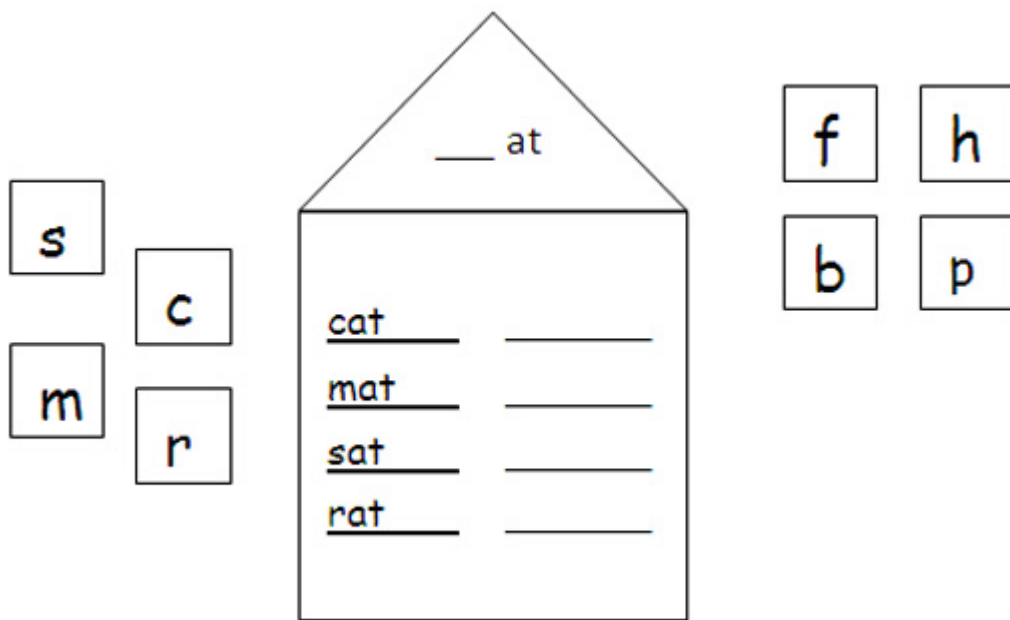
### **Center Activities:**

#### *Word Family Houses*

Students will focus on a particular word family to write and read rhyming words.

Students are provided with a black line master of a 'house' with an identified word family on top and lines within the house for students to write on (I would recommend laminating originals and utilizing a dry erase marker for student practice). Students are also provided an envelope with consonant letters to make the beginning sound of words within the word family. Students pull out one letter at a time and place the letter at the top of the house to create a word. The student will read the word first, write the letters of the word on the line, and then place the used letter to the side. Once the student has used every letter in the envelope, he or she may read words out loud, to a partner or a teacher.

This activity is great even for nonreaders who know beginning sounds and understand the concept of rhyme. A true sense of accomplishment is evident in those students who come to recognize they are able to "read" a whole list of words on a page!



Extension: For students who are comfortable reading and writing rhyming words, you may extend the center activity by having students make up sentences using at least two rhyming words and familiar sight words.  
 Extension Example: The fat cat sat on a mat.

A rat saw the cat on the mat. The rat is fat.

### Whole Class Activities

#### *Read, Write & Draw a Rhyme!*

This is a fun activity that could be used as a part of a rhyming lesson or when you have just a few minutes to spare and have access to simple classroom materials. First, the teacher will write a sentence with at least two rhyming words in it. Then, the students copy the sentence on their own paper and create an illustration that the sentence describes.

For example, the teacher may write: "The king with the ring can sing!"

Students will ideally produce an illustration of a king with a big ring singing.

This activity should be modeled by the teacher prior to letting students tackle it on their own.

Extension: Once students illustrate the teacher provided sentence, they may flip their paper over and write their own rhyme accompanied by a picture.

#### *Class Poems*

Writing poetry can be a daunting task for both teachers and students. Although my focus is more on the reading of poetry, this particular poetry activity creates a strong sense of community within the classroom. Each student will each create one line to have included in a class created poem.

For example: Each student completes the statement,

"I am \_\_\_\_\_".

This may be done as a whole class or in small groups. Once each student has a response in writing, the teacher will provide students with one sentence strip to copy their words on to display as part of the poem. The teacher may choose how to assemble the poem (whether it is alphabetical by name, chronological by age, or a random selection). At the end of the poem, the class may decide on a final line, with the prompt of

"We are \_\_\_\_\_ !"

(the teacher may also decide if appropriate).

## Bibliography

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Heald, Robin . "Musicality in the Language of Picture Books." *Children's Literature in Education* , October 12, 2007.

The author makes very clear connections between the musical sounding language in children's books with that of the melody of music. The author focuses on the science of organizing sound in specific examples of children's literature and music.

Hopkins, Lee Bennett. *Pass the Poetry Please* . 3rd Edition ed. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998.

Provides insight into how poetry can play an integral role in children's language development and provides ample suggestions on how to utilize poetry with children of all ages. Suggested activities are not developed with a specific age group in mind, rather they can be modified to use at just about any grade level. The author also introduced and discussed several different children's authors to reference within the classroom.

Schlosser, Kristin G., and Vicki L. Phillips. *Beginning in Whole Language, A Practical Guide* . New York: Scholastic Inc., 1991.

This is a practical guide that provides teachers with several ideas for classroom activities with a focus on the whole language approach to reading instruction in grades K through Two. Some activities specifically incorporate poetry into the classroom, while others may be modified to utilize in collaboration with poetry in the classroom.

## Teacher Resources

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Goldish, Meish. *Thematic Poems, Songs and Fingerplays* . New York: Scholastic Inc. 1993.

Harrison, David L. and Bernice E. Cullinan. *Easy Poetry Lessons That Dazzle and Delight*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1999.

Munson-Benson, Carolyn. *Playful Reading*. Minneapolis: Search Institute. 2005.

The author's purpose is to promote literacy development within the primary grades by sharing books, separated into categories, and offers a unique approach on how to read and share books with the class. There are many great suggestions for read aloud books and

activities provided throughout the text.

Schiller, Pam and Thomas Moore. *Where is Thumbkin?* Beltsville: Gryphon House Inc. 1993.

A great collection of familiar nursery rhymes and primary songs including a copy of each poem and activities related to literacy, numeracy, art and science.

## Appendix

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New Haven Public Schools Curriculum Standards

This unit was designed to address the following district objectives in the First Grade:

Phonological Awareness/Phonics Objectives/Indicators of Mastery

**Rhyming** : Students will recognize and produce rhyming words; hear and begin blending onsets and rimes.

*Sounds* : Students will identify initial, medial and final consonant sounds in words

*Segment/Blend* : Students will segment and blend words sound by sound .

**Spelling** : Students will use knowledge of letters and sounds to write words.

Fluency Objectives/Indicators of Mastery

Oral language/fluency: Students will read grade-appropriate poems and will repeat them aloud with classmates with appropriate phrasing, expression, volume, and speed.

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