

Phonics and the literacy journey, part 3: A compelling case for poetry every day

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Use poetry, song, literature, drama and the visual arts every day in your classroom to help students' oral language development, lecturer in the Sydney School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney, Dr Kathy Rushton says.

She presented a session at a recent Centre for Professional Learning course for K-6 teachers, focused on helping EAL/D learners, asserting that explaining, speaking and listening is the basis for all literacy learning (such as spelling, grammar, punctuation and vocabulary).

"Rhyme and rhythm help to develop fluency in reading and prediction," Kathy said.

"Pitch, pause, emphasis, intonation and pronunciation help to make links to the patterns of word groups and clauses.

"We can teach a lot ... if we read it, write it, listen, say it," she said, promoting "abundance of message" — a term coined by Pauline Gibbons.

"Don't teach the poem and not write it up. It needs to be in a book they can read, on the wall ... they've got to have access to the written text," Kathy said. "That's one of the secrets of this."

Poems can help with teaching spelling.

"Why is telephone spelt with 'ph' and fat frog with 'f'? ... We need to teach all of this in context ... So, here's a context — it's called a poem (*Catch a little rhyme* by Eve Merriam). The poem includes time/rhyme, tail/whale, kite/sight. "There's no way you're going to learn those words with look, say, cover, write, check."

The importance of using quality text was emphasised. Kathy used the example of Brian Patten's *Squeezes* — a four-line rhyming poem — that can be recited by a class, with actions.

She said there was a lot that could be taught from the poem:

- subject/verb/object pattern
- plurals
- dependent clause concept
- pronunciation
- punctuation
- rhyme.



“[A] quality text is one that you would wrap up, put a bow around, and give it to a child you love, and I don’t think anything other than that should be in your classroom. Would you wrap up a reader and give it to a kid for Christmas?” she said.

Kathy also advocated for singing and acting out poems. She suggested poems and rhymes like *Chook, Chook, Chook* and *Five little pussy cats*, which can be used to teach concepts such as those in maths, at the same time learning about rhyme, pronunciation and punctuation.

“When we use these little poems we’re not wasting an opportunity.”

— Kerri Carr

- [Phonics and the literacy journey, part 1: Start with quality, literary texts](#)
- [Phonics and the literacy journey, part 2: Go from the meaningful to the abstract](#)