Children's Poetic Voices

April R. Mandrona, Concordia University

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the creation of found poetry using the narratives of children. The author proposes that poetic inquiry offers a place of understanding where the words of children speak volumes. Through this process, she explores how one may connect not only with young people, but also with the often forgotten aspects of the self.

Poetry is an anchor in the present, in the moment where everything unfolds. It reaches to places deep within the psyche to shake free our emotions, memories and alternate levels of awareness. Inherently ambiguous, poetry begs interpretation, while at the same time rejecting such analysis. It is a place of communion between the world, each other and ourselves. In the past few decades, poetic inquiry, or the use of poetry to produce, collect, analyze or explore data, has gained prominence as a powerful tool of discovery capable of revealing the connections and subtleties often overlooked by conventional research approaches. As an effective reflexive or self-study technique, poetic form articulates the tensions and complexities of lived experience. It challenges our engrained modes of thinking and expression as it breaks from the confines of linear ways of knowing. "Found poetry," also called "participant-voiced poetry" (Prendergast, 2003), utilizes the original words and phrases from participant transcripts, reorganizing the text into stanzas and playing with line, meter, repetition and pauses (Richardson, 1992). Writing found poetry is an immersive process: as we ruminate on the words of others we are momentarily engulfed, catching glimpses of a different subjectivity.

A short time ago, I began to use poetic inquiry in my own professional practice in an effort to better understand the children I work and research with. While pursuing a PhD in Art Education and teaching art to elementary students, I identified a need to shed light on the often disregarded insights and perceptive abilities of these young children. My standard reductionist methods of representation and analysis no longer seemed tenable, as the original luster and intensity of the children's experiences was often obscured. I was unsure of how to move beyond this obstacle until in the Spring of 2010, as part of a found poetry exercise for Lynn Butler-Kisber's qualitative inquiry class at McGill University, I revisited the video-taped data from my Master's thesis. The research focused on young children's drawn and sculpted representations of people, but I had not examined in depth the discussions they had with me while creating their artworks. Previously, I glossed over their accounts as they appeared impulsive, tangential and often unrelated to the task at hand. Upon re-examination of the video footage however, I was immediately struck by what had eluded me before: the rich, poetic quality of their utterances. The children recounted their experiences; although often short and fragmented, their narratives revealed a playful poignancy. Something stirred within me, I was re-awakened—a true "eureka moment" (Butler-Kisber, 2010). From this data I produced several "untreated" poems, "conserving virtually the same order, syntax and meaning as the original" text (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 84). This first poem was taken from the narrative of a young boy who told me about an experience using clay and the resulting objects that now adorn his home. The second was created using the words spoken by a five-year-old boy as he constructed an environment from clay complete with people, a car, and a garage. Although both poems are rather simple in their message, they each possess a mysterious resonance. There is a movement beyond purely analytic thinking to a form of intuitive-associative understanding.

A ship in a jar

I made a ship in a jar,
a pirate ship in a jar,
a ship made with clay.

With blue all around.

I made a small ship,
with straws for posts,
that hold paper sails.

With blue all around.
(By a young boy, age 6)

Garage

Garage, like a car
trying to get out of a cage
and then it opens.
(By a young boy, age 5)

Creating the poems involved the application of a modified version of the "Stonebanks method" (as cited in Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 87). The process is as follows:

- After listening to the recordings several times and transcribing the data, conduct a close reading of the transcript allowing themes to surface.

- Pull out phrases and words that "breathe life into the poem," highlighting any words that might help to shape the poem (see Figure 1)

- Immerse oneself in the world and words of experience and successful attempts of writing poetry. (In this instance I read Adrienne Rich, Carl Leggo, Christian Bok, Margaret Atwood, William Carlos Williams, and Leonard Cohen)

- Combine phrases from the transcript, experimenting with line breaks, rhythm, etcetera.

- Use key words from the transcript in the title to help give meaning to the poem.

17: I'm not making a person yet. I'm making a car. It has a **garage** (begins to squish clay with his

18: fists). Yeah, a **garage**! You know, a **garage, like a car trying to get out of a cage. And then it**

19: **opens** (motions with outstretched palms).

Fig. 1: Excerpt from transcript with words and phrases highlighted

Through this exercise, I was carried back to a frame of mind that I had for-gotten, to a time when I was a young child who would often tell stories filled with imaginative musings intertwined with observations from my surroundings. For the

first several years of my life my mother kept a journal documenting my newly acquired behaviours and language abilities. Before I learned to write myself and in the time that followed, she acted as my transcriber, noting each discovery, developmental milestone and addition to my vocabulary. Wanting to be heard, at times, I would request that my words be written down, so that others and myself could examine this tangible trace (see Figure 2C). Figure 2A constitutes what my mother calls my first haiku, which I uttered upon realizing that wild animals, unlike humans, wore no clothes. Figure 2B describes my amazement at seeing tiny particles of dust catch the sunlight as they floated through the air. I created the typewritten poem using the family's large, authoritarian manual typewriter to express my alarm that hardly anyone around me believed in fairies any more.
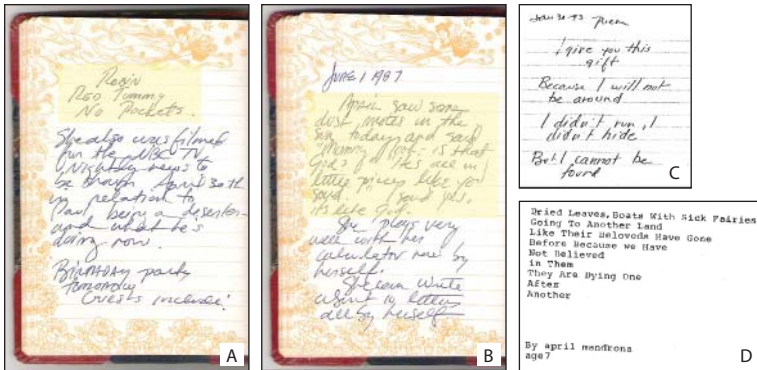

Fig. 2: Preserved journal entries and documents. Panel A shows a "haiku" or a description of a robin: "Robin red tummy no pockets." Panel B shows observations of dust in the sunlight: "April saw some dust motes in the sun today and said, 'Mom, look—is that god? He's all in little pieces like you said'. I said 'Yes, it's like god'". Panel C shows a poem on the subject of death. Panel D shows a typewritten poem on the existence of fairies.

In rediscovering these entries and poems, I was witness to a part of myself, the part that views the world as miraculous, that is surprised at the chances of existence. I could see the delight I had experienced as a young learner, and the delight of my mother as she watched this unfold. While I place great value in a well-trained mind, I also believe that to reach a state of deepened understanding requires a freeing from the rigidity of engrained patterns of thinking. One must once again be open to fresh input and see the world anew. My own reflexive process represents the spiralling and recursive nature of learning and experience. We continually move outward, gathering knowledge and skills, moving away from the self, but must circle back to call upon the prime planes of the self.

But how quickly we may dismiss from mind these childlike meditations and enter into a realm where we are expected to think rationally, sensibly. The words of children, the language we once used is outgrown, often deemed trivial, empty or fanciful. In becoming adults we position ourselves outside the worlds of childhood, and there is a tendency to speak for children or about them rather than with them. In our state of disconnect, all too often we become patronizing and overly didactic. As asserted by Wareing (2003), "language actually creates power, as well as being the site where power is performed" (p. 11). Applying this concept to the construction of children, Peccei (2003) states that children "are differentiated within society not only by their special social, economic and legal status but also by the language that is used to describe and categorize them" (p. 117). This system of representation reflects the societal status of children and subsequently determines their level of participation within the various spheres of knowledge production. It is only recently that the experiences of children have been viewed from outside the parameters of traditional knowledge, revealing the power systems embedded within the dominant research constructs. More critical and diverse approaches, such as art-informed methods, have helped to bring attention to the marginalization and silencing of children. The concept of "voice" or "voicing experiences, claiming the right not only to speak but also to be listened to—has become a metaphor for political recognition, self determination, and full presence in knowledge" (Thorne, 2002, p. 251). However, as maintained by Punch (2002), one of the problems with involving children in research is that "[I]t is difficult for an adult researcher to totally understand the world from the child's point of view ... As adults we were once children but we soon forget, unlearn and abandon elements of our childhood culture" (p. 235). Adults are separated from children by a perennial distance, which stems in part from the rapidly changing social and cultural contexts of childhood, and the diverse experiences of individual children (Dockett & Perry, 2007). This presents a difficult dilemma for those who work with children, however, I believe that it may be possible to significantly reduce this "adultist" bias by becoming more in touch with the realities of the child.

I do not wish to suggest that the categories of "child" and "adult" are fixed, dichotomous entities, but agree with Thomson (2007) who drawing on the work of scholars such as Paolo Freire, suggests that we are all human "becomings" as opposed to human "beings," that is we are inherently incomplete, continually learning, growing and expanding. Thomson further contends that "the competent adult is a myth, that all individuals are human becomings, regardless of age, and that identities are multiple, fluid in nature and continually negotiated within and through space (including research space)" (p. 214). Learning does not follow a pre-described, linear path but is meandering and lifelong. Identity is layered and dynamic and individual

realities are constantly shifting and overlapping. For me, the poetic space offers a form of distillation, a stripping down to the core of being and as such represents a possible point of convergence or place we may share with children. Poetry can expand the boundaries of language, thus challenging and subverting the dominant reality. Leggo (2004) proposes that:

> Truth is composed in the open places broken open by art ... art calls forth the unfamiliar. And so this is why I recommend that writing poetry is crucial to sustaining a creative flexibility in language and discourse, and hence the composing of truth in our living. (para. 23)

I would hasten add that to put oneself in a state of poetry, does not require the learning of a new language but a return to one deeply lodged in memory, a lesser known, once familiar, basic form of communication. Poet John Steffer (1995) posits that, "poetry approximates, through the powerful use of language, our fundamental, original sense of life's miraculousness, its profound and mysterious meaning" (p. 47), something which is known intimately by children. Sullivan (2009) suggests that:

> poems must be concrete. There must be things to see, hear, smell, taste touch ... Concreteness is about embodiment. We experience life in all its grittiness and pleasure through the sensory mechanisms of the body ... The human voice, authentic and resonant with experience, has its own concreteness. (pp. 112–114)

There is something retained in the talk of children. Children offer a freshness, unpretentiousness, an un-mediated whimsy that we as adults might struggle to emulate. Their stories are anchored in the world of the concrete and the immediate, while simultaneously pointing toward the prophetic and the profound.

I returned to my split grade one and two art class at a local elementary school with a renewed curiosity and direction. I felt a need to pay closer attention to what the children were telling me. However, with the large number of students, it was difficult to balance the normal teacherly duties of classroom management and assisting with cutting, assembling and designing. Breaking the class up into smaller sessions allowed me to concentrate on individual children and talk with them at length about their ideas and experiences. I transcribed the recorded discussions, then transformed the text into several poems, arranging the narratives into stanzas to emphasize the rhythmic quality of speech and the children's unique ways of speaking.

Poetry "clusters" or a series of poems around a given theme blend the general together with the particular. As stated by Butler-Kisber,

> Poetry clusters help to show the tentativeness of individual interpretations, that is, how each understanding of a theme, topic, or concept is limited by the time, place, context, and stance of the researcher at the time it is written. A poetry cluster that represents different events, moods, topics, etcetera, can acknowledge the 'truth' of each poem in the series while simultaneously uncovering something more. The 'something more' is the revelation that often occurs in the unveiling of a poetry cluster. The reader, and/or author(s) herself, can see for the first time dimensions of a theme that might otherwise not be revealed. (2009, p. 4)

Many of the children created and discussed art that focused on animals and their knowledge of these creatures. I chose to present the poems that resulted from these experiences in the form of a poetry cluster as a means of representing the mosaic of specific viewpoints. Read together, however, this cluster appears to express the children's special relationship to animals and their understanding of the subtle, yet surprising aspects of the natural world. The words of the children are accompanied by their artworks on the same topic.

Huntin dog

Mine's a special dog.
He likes to eat dog food and biscuits.

He howls when he's scared.
Someday he's gonna be a huntin' dog.

He howls when he smells an animal.
And then the hunter shoots.
(By a young boy, age 7)

Fig. 3: Artwork depicting "Sniffy" the dog by a young boy, age 7. Panel A shows a print of "Sniffy." Panel B shows a drawing of "Sniffy."

I know

how
         frogs   jump

Sometimes
         very   far

They are
         green
            blue
               red
                 blackish

(By a young boy, age 7)

Fig. 4: Clay sculpture of a frog by young boy, age 7

Tadpoles

turn into frogs
when they are older
they will live
in green water

there's a difference
between us
we can't breath
inside water
they can't breath
outside

so we have to be
in different places
to be able
to live
together
(By a young girl, age 7)

Fig. 5: Clay sculpture of a tadpole by a young girl, age 7

Pig Poem

I dream about you,
I talk about you,
and I love you.
From the pig to you girl.

(By a young girl, age 7)

Fig. 6: Work by a young girl, age 7. Panel A shows a poem she wrote in her journal. Panel B shows the girl with the "pig" described in her poem.

The final poem in the cluster was written by one of my students. In my art classes, I encourage the students to write poems and stories if they wish. I also share poetry with them that I find interesting or compelling. Each of them is given their own journal where they can draw or record their thoughts, dreams and reflections.

The following collection of poems, while not a true poetry cluster, clearly shows the children's personal perceptions of the world. The children's words are bittersweet, as they demonstrate an attentiveness to life's wonders but also an acknowledgement of its limitations.

A country house

I had a country house
and I went to the water

My mother had it when she was tiny
She had it for such a long time

But now it's sold
And I got a condo in Florida
(By a young girl, age 7)

April R. Mandrona

Polkadots

I am drawing polkadots
around you
with different colours

I think it's special and unique
It kinda takes long time
but I'm being patient
(By a young girl, age 6)

Fig. 7: "April surrounded by hearts and polka-dots," drawing by a young girl, age 6

I am different

from the
other people
in my class.

I made
a kind of creature
a unicorn-jaguar.

It has
a horn
it's fast
and flies.
(By a young girl, age 6)

Running out of magic

We are running out
of magic.
This is crazy
science.

We are running out
of magic.
We got the wrong
one.

We are running out
of magic.
I want to go
back.
(By a young boy, age 7)

Through the distillation of the children's words that took place in writing these poems, it became possible to identify the before unrealized ambiguities, dualities and complexities that these children embody. The children and their worlds begin to be revealed to me. At once they appear both foreign and familiar. These little beings, so full of joy and woe. They are wise and naive, vibrant and latent. I borrow from them this flexible state of being and step into a space of fluctuating borders. I become both teacher and learner, straddling the worlds of reality and imagination. The creation of poetry has become a way for me to document and explore the multiple layers of the educational contexts that I share with children. When viewed in conjunction with their artworks, their words move beyond the purely descriptive and offer insight into their emotional and intellectual processes. I believe this has helped to develop my ability to understand the experiential and dialogical activities of my classroom. As a result, my teaching practice has been become even more delightful, more dimensional. I am more trusting and respectful of my students' decisions as the frequency and depth of exchange has increased.

On creating found poetry from interview transcripts Richardson (1992) writes:

I am better able to step into the shoes of the Other, as well as into the Other's body and psyche. I am more attuned to lived experiences as subjectively felt by the Other. This has affected my willingness to know myself and others in different ways ... In writing the Other we can (re)write the Self. (pp. 135–136)

Poetic inquiry with children offers an opening for conversation, questioning and learning. Children seem to speak from the subconscious, moving within a less

filtered way of knowing. Their perceptions appear closer to a form of "truth," as if they function as a kind of oracle speaking to the essential aspects of existence, evoking the imaginative and the creative. Transforming their words into poetry can create a shifting, shared and interactive space. The result is an attempted blurring of boundaries, not only between the external imposed constructs of "child" and "adult," but also those between the child and adult that exist simultaneously within the self. This form of exploration gives credence and voice to their stories and allows me to dwell, even temporarily, within a renewed, spontaneous state of understanding.

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April Mandrona is a PhD student at Concordia University in the Department of Art Education. Her research interests include arts-informed participatory methodologies, artistic development and elementary art education. She also teaches art part time to elementary students.