the creative process of teaching poetry to children in tejas & guatemala:
a collection of poetry, artwork & photography

alysha nicole hernández
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¡Venga!
Growing up, my younger brother and I were sown together by parents rife with idiosyncrasy. Both love dancing in mornings, in kitchens, with brooms and as the morning tide rises. Oftimes, my mother walked the inside of our small house reading the poetry of Sylvia Plath and women’s history books. She’d stop reading to chide us with her loud voice that often cascaded off the walls, which were wallpapered with fading vegetables. My father read the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca aloud, while he paced in and out of rooms. His favorite poem by Lorca was the ‘Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejía.’ He’d say the introductory verse of this poem repeatedly, “A las cinco en la tarde...” or “At five in the afternoon. It was exactly five in the afternoon.”

Meanwhile, my brother and I blushed relentlessly in front of company. As a result of these experiences, I became a proponent of reading and imagination at a very young age.

I believe that poetry is the opening of the mind and heart to the infinite possibilities of the world. Therefore, in my teaching of poetry at three elementary schools in San Marcos, I hoped to give back to students what my parents gave to me. I aimed to inspire the students to believe in themselves. I also hoped they would begin to inquire about the world around them as much as possible.

At every poetry lesson’s beginning I told the students, “Let’s be writers and poets and artists now. Don’t worry about spelling or grammar. Poets worry about feelings and emotions first and spelling later.” This baffled them at first, especially when their day-to-day schooling revolved around TAKS preparation.

It was a gradual process, but once the children got into the flow of things, their minds were often set a-flutter. The spark poetry provided usually meant the children pressed me for synonyms of words, spelling corrections, grammar lessons and word definitions. Students who had been marked as problem children or children with learning impairments, often were able to produce art, if not poetry.

Although the classes and students in Texas and Guatemala will remain anonymous for my project, I thank them all from the bottom of my heart.

§
Kenneth Koch was an especially reputable poet who taught poetry to children in New York for decades.

In the introductory chapter of his book “Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry,” he discusses some of his first experiences with children and poetry at a school in Manhattan.

Through experiments, trial and error, and a forced digression from the ideas/methods/ways of teaching poetry to adults, he eventually embarks on a lifelong journey, and finds a very rewarding career. Koch discusses ideas for poetry, how to teach poetry, and the differences between the age groups. This chapter discusses the basics in what to do, and what not to do when teaching poetry to children.

Primarily, Koch saw that adults wrote poetry because they had the talent to express and define what they had already discovered about themselves and enjoyed the experience. At such young ages, Koch writes that kids have a lack of writing skills, age, and different motivations.

Children, didn’t have much experience with poetry, and had not yet discovered much about themselves, so in order to teach them to write it, he would have to inspire them, and identify with them.

He writes, “One thing that encouraged me was how playful and inventive children’s talk sometimes was…how much they enjoyed making works of art. I had seen how my daughter and other children profited from the new ways of helping them discover and use their natural talents. That hadn’t happened yet in poetry. I wanted to find...a way for children to get as much from poetry as they did from painting.”

In his adult classes he discussed different writers and assigned the adult poets to write their own works imitating the styles of selected authors.

Simply stated, young children could not grasp or be turned on by such a task. Instead of authoritatively stating to the children that they would write a poem about a specific thing or in a specific way, he would get their minds turning by asking innumerable rhetorical questions like “How about writing a poem about planes…”

“What would the sky taste like…” “What does the color red smell or sound like…” etc.

Deleted from his vocab-

Who is Kenneth Koch & where’d this idea begin?

“I was curious to see what could be done for children’s poetry...”
ulary were the adult words ‘assignment’ and ‘homework,’ so that the children would not place the subject of poetry alongside math as something they had to do. He continually encouraged them to get as wild and crazy with their ideas as they wanted so poetry was something fun, something they wanted to do.

Koch noticed the children often enjoyed thematic poetry. Koch discusses some of the difficulty he had in his first experiences teaching the children at New York’s P.S. 61, which include anxiety on whether the children would catch on, reading material too difficult, and coming up with things for the kids to write about.

He eventually realized that rather than reading all of a poem by Whitman, maybe an excerpt with an idea associated with something the children do daily or will be writing about is better.

His first in class poem was a collaborative effort, by himself and the class titled “I Wish.” He said this activity lowered the children’s inhibitions with speaking out, and was interactive rather than competitive, as each young poet saw their lines in the poem. This poem unified the class, bonded the teacher to his students, and showed them that poetry could be fun, and vivid.

Koch describes other successful attempts in themed lessons, including Color Poems, Noise Poems, and Dream Poems. He then moved on to harder poem ideas like the Metaphor Poem and the Swan of Bees Poem, which pushed for strange word and sound combinations.

According to Koch, opposing the use of common colloquisms allowed more pleasure and imagery to take hold of the poet’s mind. To keep the kids interested he insisted that each idea should be easy to understand, and new. Koch valued self-expression, being crazy, and no singling out of students to praise or chide. He maintained that there should never be a best poem or a winning poem.

The child’s ideas or wording should not be changed. Spelling and correct grammar should not be worried about, but he stated that the nature or children was to learn by hands on experience and getting spelling and grammar right was important to the kids.

Music and homeroom noises seemed to be great catalyst to the poetry of the small geniuses. Also, repetition and easy speech helps the children think quicker and divide their poetry into lines.

Through poetry, children identify with each other, learn about their emotions, and gain the skills to deal and communicate them. The necessity an outlet such as poetry becomes evident to Koch as the children he sees get older. Once they reach a certain age, around 5th grade, they become more self-conscious and have begun to choose their likes and dislikes, which makes implementing poetry harder.

Also, in the so-called deprived or disadvantaged children, poetry tends to inspire students to want to write, and it inspires them to do so with correct spelling, English, and grammar. This means they must study harder.

Finally and most importantly, one must excite, and be passionate when it comes to teaching children.

These are the ideas I utilized in my lessons and teaching. They were all introduced, practiced and acted on in Diann McCabe’s class, ‘Teaching Poetry to Children.’

I stumbled on McCabe’s class one jaded semester and I signed up for it.

I thought that perhaps I could inspire children, like my younger cousins and brother, to love poetry and to think reading was and writing was fun. All-the-while, they’d be reading and writing better.
How is this book organized?

In a nutshell...
The students who worked with me on this project will remain anonymous. I used pseudonyms for all the students whose illustrations, photography and poetry is found within the boundaries of this collection.

Choosing pseudonyms was easy. I took the first letter of the student’s real name and chose another name that began with that letter.

The artwork that is placed with each poem goes with the student who wrote the poem. I digitally scanned the artwork using Adobe Photoshop.

Many times, I re-typed the poetry because the writing was hard to read. However, I never corrected for grammar or spelling.

Secondly, aside from the photography at the front of this book, which I took, there are some photographs within the poetry sections. These are not photos I took...

Rather, the photographs were taken by a group of San Marcos middle school students, who were considered “at-risk.”

These 13 students were part of an afterschool photo club, which worked with me on my thesis.

I made each student a pamphlet made of poetry from this collection and they wrote about it by taking photos of the world around them. Often, the poetry of students their age within the pamphlets served as a spark or inspiration to the students.

Also, some of the children went beyond just taking the photos. Many added layers and special effects using design programs.

The goal of my two semesters of teaching poetry and collecting artwork was to present these third-graders with what I have termed “true poetry,” not the overly obvious and rhyming poetry elementary students are often presented with. The “true poetry” the children were presented with is that of Federico García Lorca, William Carlos Williams, William Shakespeare and William Blake.

The key for each lesson was in the way I respected the students as true poets, capable of writing true poetry and because of this respectable exchange they always did. And, during the creative process of poetry, some who were dyslexic, shy or depressed often escaped from their shells, if only for 40 minutes.

I truly believe each student was set free on paper to write and draw and through this process they were excited about learning. The children even asked about spelling, grammar, etc. even though they didn’t have to spell and punctuate correctly.

These lessons were an escape from the testing nature of the schools.

And, finally, how Guatemala fits into all of this...

During the summer of 2007, I was one of eight students placed in Guatemala as part of anthropology program, spearheaded by Texas State University and funded by the National Science Foundation. While in Guatemala I studied the creative pedagogical methods used, or not used in the schools.

I also chronicled the implementation of free-writing sessions. Many of the prompts I used were those from Koch’s book and my “Teaching Poetry to Children” class. I also took photos, one which is included.

I did not translate or correct for grammar. The writing in Spanish allows the child’s voices to stay true. I also felt it added a cross-cultural effect. I also did not use pseudonyms or any names for that matter. §
lesson one:

‘i wish...’ & a class collaboration

**objective:** to begin the poetry/ free-writing experience with an icebreaker to allow the students free thinking with a minimum of producing three wishes but with no maximum to get the children excited about poetry to allow them to see there are no correct or true wishes to lessen shyness by my writing of a final class collaboration on the front board.

**mood:** light-hearted energetic cordial.

**core method:** enter the classroom with a smile and introduce yourself. give them a story about yourself and your childhood if you expect them to give you a story back. begin by citing wishes of your own, no matter how crazy. remember that there mustn’t be any favoritism. the final class collaboration requires one wish chosen from each student’s individual work a final reading. give much praise to lift spirits.

**sample dialogue:** what is the one craziest thing you wish for? close your eyes! now give me two more! do you want a menagerie of animals? do you what to go to australia to run with ostriches? do you want all the candy ever? no worries about spelling!

I wish I had a dad
I wish I had 16,666 dollars
I wish that dogs could talk
I wish I had a chocolate bar that would never end
I wish I could have my own room with stars on the walls and
Good Charlotte written on the walls with black and green
I wish I could be a cop in Texas or Tennessee
I wish I was President of the United States
I wish I could live at Six Flags
I wish instead of rain it was French Fries
I wish I lived in a mall in NYC
I wish I was on the Spurs team
I wish I was buff
I wish Mario World was real
I wish I was a famous dancer in New York
I wish I lived in Troy
I wish I was Supercat
I wish I had a wild horse that was sweet, of course.
I wish I had a fancy house.
I wish I wish I was deep
Sea diving
With all
The colors
Of the
World to
See a
Mermaid
In blue
And purple
And to
Have a
Sea dragon
So purple and
green
And swim
with dolphins
in the deep
sea I wish
I was deep
Sea diving
You
Have
Seen me
Now
Let me see you!

Lola

I wish I was a dragon I would
Guard the skies of the United
States. My friends from other countries
Would guard their countries.
The humans would not know
Who the dragons were. The dragons
Would have to keep their secrets
From the humans.

Izzy
I wish
I was rich
And have a fancy
house
with 100 puppies
and a
giant blouse

Veronica
The Tyger

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water’d heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

William Blake

Lesson Two:

‘Being an Animal or Fantastical Being’

Objective: to make poetry an inquisitive experience about real things and to allow the children to explore the animal life around them, and to encourage them to imagine life as an animal.

Mood: dramatic.

Core Method: the night before, fasten a tiger mask together from a paper plate, orange marker and orange and yellow yarn. Enter the class the next day wearing the mask. Rather than greeting them, jump right into the lesson. Ask them to close their eyes while you read the selected poem, read dramatically, rhythmically and with pauses. Once done, ask them to open their eyes and read along with you. Afterward ask if there are any things they noticed about the poem or if there are any words they didn’t understand.

Sample Dialogue: what is one animal you wish you could speak with? what’s the one animal you would be if you could? what would you eat? how would you smell? what would you say? where would you live?!
Horse with your eyes bright.
You are like the spirited light.
And where will you go when there's a fire?
You will go where your heart desires.

Susie

Lily
I am the koala
tired
that sleeps
twenty hours a day.

Angel

Ogre, Ogre everywhere.
He likes to eat boogers.
He's so big and hairy.
His hands can't
Fit through your
door and so fat he cannot
walk.
He's green and
can't swim.

Dennie
I'm the longest snake I'll slither through the jungle & I feel cold & smooth. I Strike very very fast. I shall put my name in the dirt.

Craig

Cheetah cheetah
In the dark. Lets Play now before You cry in the Dark. Cheetah, where Did you get those nice sharp teeth? I'm hungry now Can I eat you before I starve to death? I run so fast Than any other Animal in the World. I also Can beat all The other animals In the entire World.

Jenny
Lesson three:

Music & Spanish Words & Colors

Objective: to provide the children with an interesting poem using abstract ideas & to allow the students to see that free writing is creative and anything goes. To get the children excited about poetry & to allow them to see that poetry can be written in any language or languages & to teach the students a bit about a different culture.

Mood: energetic & dramatic & open-minded.

Core Method: engage the students with 30-60 second snippets of flamenco. Take markers from my bag and rapidly draw swatches of color, saying the name in English, then in Spanish. Read the poem once in English then in Spanish, then mixed.

Sample Dialogue: What is your favorite color? Why is this your favorite color? What are the textures associated with this color? When you dream, what color do you dream with? What do the words ruby and emerald, blue and yellow remind you of? How do you say verde in English and green in Spanish? Which is more lively and descriptive? The use of verde or green?

Green, how I want you green. Green wind. Green branches. The ship out on the sea and the horse on the mountain. With the shade around her waist she dreams on her balcony, green flesh, her hair green, with eyes of cold silver.

Verde, how I want you verde. Verde viento. Verdes ramas. El barco sobre la mar y el caballo en la montaña. Con la sombra en la cintura ella sueña en su baranda, verde carne, pelo verde, con ojos de fría plata.

Green, how I want you green. Under the gypsy moon, all things are watching her and she cannot see them.

Verde, how I want you verde. Bajo la luna gitana, las cosas la están mirando y ella no puede mirarlas.

But who will come? And from where? She is still on her balcony, green flesh, her hair green, dreaming in the bitter sea.

¿Pero quién vendrá? ¿Y por dónde...? Ella sigue en su baranda, verde carne, pelo verde, soñando en la mar amarga.
My favorite color is blue & green & I like to mix them by myself.

Craig

The grass is verde
A cucumber is green
A pickle verde
Apples are green.

Ingrid

Cafe-brown you make me think of cafe broons. You make me think of my barrette, my blouse, and mud. You make me think of dancing. You make me think of the way you sound.

Jessica
Azul, a word like no other.

a beauty.

For a blue if mixed with blanco,

a massive beauty.

Drums blue green
-
Bam-BOOM mixing.

Yellow Orange

Cafe Verde

ZZZZ    BANG Boom    rosa!

Heads bouncing.

Rosa blooming with a rojo 
splat

with all the colors of the rainbow.

Lupita

Cristian
Black white
green
Remind me
of mexico
Bald eagles
and horned
toads.
Adan

Violeta, Violeta you are
my eyes.
An orange tiger does the
cha-cha.
Wish me a red tune.
Lucy

Azul like the sky & like Sebastian’s
Eyes. My mom smells like rosa & rojo. My dad
Smells like negro & café my grandpa
Smells like café, negro & verde.
I love poetry!
Odalia
Yes...Everybody wants to live on the silver moon. Yes...the plata moon. But we are stuck on this blue world.

Yes...this azul world. The heavens are white. Yes they are. But the heavens are white. Yes they are. But the heavens are masters of dark black also. Red is a war color.

Yes, a horrible color of war. Green is mother nature’s favorite color.

Cory

Tasia
The color blue is what I see. What do you see?

Esteban

Purple is the color of the wind. Plata a word like no other is so beautiful it dances in the air. Yellow the color of the sun I jumped on one day.

Blue green black gold and red colors.

Maggie

Joseph
**Objective:**

to teach the children about onomatopoeias

to provide the children with an the imagination to travel to any place, near or far, taking a friend or family member along with them. using abstract ideas to allow the students to see that free writing is creative and anything goes to get the children excited about poetry to teach the students a bit about a famous poet and antiquated words.

**Mood:**

energetic adventurous whimsical.

**Core Method:**

generally done the week before spring break. walk in with a quick discussion of william shakespeare in my head. i go around the room asking each student where he or she is going for spring break and where they wish they were going. after this, i read shakespeare's poem. then i read it again, this time stopping and pausing at the odd and antiquated words. we act out the words "curtsied" and "hark!".

**Sample Dialogue:**

what is your favorite place, imaginary or real, near or far? why is this dream place? what is it like there? what are the smells and what can you do there? who will you take and what will you tell them to persuade them to go too?

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**Come Unto These Yellow Sands**

Come unto these yellow sands,
And then take hands
Curtsied when you have, and kissed
The wild waves whist
Foot it featly here and there,
And, sweet sprites, the burden bear.

Hark, hark! Bow-wow;
The watch dogs bark: bow-wow.
Hark, hark! I hear
The strain of strutting
Chanticleer cry

Cockadiddle-do!

*william shakespeare*
Come with me to a magical place we will see all the things you had in your dream. We will see all the stuff you wanted, and your dreams will come true. Magical stuff will come true, you'll see dragons, money, cars, anything you dream of this is the place where all your dreams come true.

Robert

Georgie
Come with me
to a wild rain forest
we can have a lot of
animals like birds
and jaguars.

Adan

Come with me to Vegas baby We will hear people saying Jackpot! We will go to a romantic dinner. It's gonna feel like home. Vegas baby!!

Odafia
Come with me to Wonka World

There's candy roller coasters and swirly whirls and big sounds like dropping water and taffy and tallys... and there are big fat donuts with black swirls.

Adrian

Come with me to a party with shining lights and lots of music. We can do lots of games and food. We can do lots of dancing together just me and you.

Minnie
El toro camino
El dise, el toro,
Bamos con mi mama
Dise mi mama,
Donde sta mi mijo,
Donde sta mi ijo
En mi pueblo se be muy linda, en la noche se ve las montañas verdes y las rosas amarillas y los lagos verdes que amoroso se ve las ramas verdes y el cielo azul.
El gallina come el maiz
el gallina tiene aua i come
El gallina el saltamos el aua
el gallina tiene muerte
La gallin e muy bueno

Yo jugar con pelota
yo quere saltar el grama
yo quere comer helado
yo quere comer manzana
yo quere jugar con perro
El volcan
colo seleste
Que vonita volcano
es muy vonita volcano
Que vuena volcano
Es muy guapo volcano
rosado que te quiero rosado
rosado viento rosado ramas
El barco sobre el mar
y el cabayo en la motaña
con la sombra con la sintura
ella sueña pelo rosado
Bajo el sol
Rojos son tus uñas
rojos son tus labios
rojos son tu corazón
rojos son tu sangre

Students of the Spring 2005 Teaching Poetry to Children Class