Picture Books That Pop: Building Emergent Literacy through Alliteration, Onomatopoeia, Rhyme, and Meter

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Access to poetic picture books is critical for children's early cognitive development. Children who do not have language-rich environments and resources to nurture their language acquisition development from birth to age eight will significantly lag behind their peers in school readiness and emergent literacy skills. Language-rich environments and daily reading activities that utilize poetic picture books help all children thrive. As this article proves, poetic picture books are not merely decorative, "fun", or "cute," they provide rich language immersion experiences that, in turn, prepare children for language fluency and school success. From a language acquisition perspective, picture books that incorporate poetic devices are valuable in teaching speech, language, and reading skills.

Different from the concept of "reading readiness" taught in American schools in the past, the term *emergent literacy* came about in studies by New Zealand researcher Marie M. Clay in the mid-1960s. According to Dawn Ramsburg, Clay chose it to "describe behaviors seen in young children when they use books and writing materials to imitate reading and writing activities, even though the children cannot actually read and write in the conventional sense" (Johnson and Sulzby 3). Elizabeth Sulzby, expanding on Clay's seminal work, defines emergent literacy as "the reading and writing behaviors and concepts of young children that precede and develop into conventional literacy" (26). Emergent literacy argues with the step-by-step continuum that culminates in the final stage of "fluency." Marjorie V. Fields, Lois A. Groth, and Katherine L. Spangler in *Let's Begin Reading Right: A Developmental Approach to Emergent Literacy* point out "there is not one point in a child's life when literacy begins; it is a continuous process of becoming" (7). Therefore, emergent literacy appears on a developmental continuum and is not standardized for all.[1]

Children learn oral and written language in tandem (7). Literacy is not a formalized process that officially begins when a child enters preschool and works within a standardized curriculum. Emergent literacy and language skills begin to develop in infancy. Janice J. Beatty and Linda Pratt in *Early Literacy in Preschool and Kindergarten* also find that "Literacy begins at birth. Right from the start infants try to communicate with those around them through crying and cooing, smiling and babbling" (4). Language acquisition skills see rapid measures of growth when children are between two and five years of age. Beatty and Pratt find that during these crucial years a young child's vocabulary grows from two hundred words to approximately two thousand words (28). Such growth is largely due to caregivers who frequently speak, read, and sing to them. In *Teaching Reading: From Process to Practice*, Suzanne Barchers cites William E. Nagy and Patricia A. Herman, who "believe that a major source of vocabulary development is the incidental learning of words from reading and oral context." (150). Nagy and Herman state, "We know that children acquire thousands of words orally before attending school, most without direct instruction." (150). In *Teaching Early Reading and Phonics: Creative Approaches to Early Literacy,* Kathy Goouch and Andrew Lambirth mention the 1975 Bullock Report, "which set out so clearly its recommendations that children should learn to read in context, that 'language should be learned in the course of using it in, and about, the daily experiences of the classroom and the home' and not through the use of formal exercises and drilling" (2). In the 1970s, there was debate about two creative teaching approaches in schools: one group pushed for standardized curriculum and assessments while another pulled for creative techniques (3). By 1988, in *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*, researchers determined that "it is not teachers alone or programmes that make a difference, but the human connection between reader and text and teacher that consistently provides the reading lesson" (8). Phonics instruction "is not an end in itself" (8). Effective language acquisition and eventual fluency in literacy require varied approaches to teaching reading, including phonics and whole language. Researchers have determined the importance of reading aloud to young children in all facets of daily home life and school settings. If they have a language- and story-rich home life before they enter kindergarten, they will have "received 6,000 stories" (8). Reading picture books to them develops their background

knowledge about various topics, expands their vocabulary, teaches them "what written language sounds like," and that the act of reading is a pleasurable experience (Johnson and Sulzy 7).

In *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour*, Clay finds that before children enter kindergarten they need to develop language and auditory discrimination skills that, ideally, they would have heard and practiced in their home environment, such as discriminating word sounds and learning sentence structure. Students who come to kindergarten with limited language competency and poor auditory discrimination skills tend to learn to read slowly, have difficulty breaking language down into its parts along with combining phonetic sounds into words, and struggle with reading comprehension (15). Without a language-rich environment from birth to age eight, children are at risk for falling behind in reading acquisition and in school in general. Clay identifies key abilities that are required for reading success: good control of oral language, visual perception skills, a level of brain maturity and experience in coordinating what is heard to what is seen in print, and the flexibility and motor control skills (hand-eye coordination) needed to hold a book and move their fingers across the pages (16). The emergent literacy process is not a systematic, one-size-fits-all program: "no reading programme is foolproof and each produces some reading failure" (9). To prepare young children for reading success in elementary school, their home and preschool environments must be filled with language that is positive, pleasurable, and fun.

Goouch and Lambirth suggest that educators "entice" children with reading and "make reading a pleasurable experience, invite them into story worlds, create affective opportunities for children to participate in reading" and "provide space and resources for children to play with stories" (8). Likewise, Robyn Ewing, Jon Callow and Kathleen Rushton, in *Language and Literacy Development in Early Childhood*, advise that to support young children's language and literacy development, caregivers and educators should "immerse children in a playful and language-rich environment" that surrounds them "with talk, story, song, dance and interesting books to encourage them to develop a love of language" (16). Homes and classrooms should be filled with music, books, and areas for creative play—classrooms should have objects and supplies labeled so children can develop word recognition of everyday objects. They must have some understanding of letter-sound relationships, word units, and a sense

of text comprehension (Sulzby 27). Specifically, Sulzby has found that with storybooks, younger children use "characteristics of conventional language" in their reading attempts. As they "gain experience, they gradually adjust their speech toward the form of a written monologue" (29). Storybooks, she maintains, help them in all three aspects of reading readiness: "comprehension, letter-sound relationships, and word knowledge" (35).

Picture books that utilize poetic devices to delight and teach children make a tremendous impact on their language acquisition, emergent literacy skills, and overall school success. Robin Heald, in "Musicality in the Language of Picture Books," agrees with the important role that they play in early childhood education:

> The significance of picture books whose language is musical is enormous not only for the sensory pleasure they offer children but also for the multiplicity of intelligences they stimulate. The picture book whose language sings requires the brain not only to decode words and syntactical structures, but also to hear rhythmic patterns, durations of sounds and expressive contours. (234)

Poetic picture books that sound like music target a wide range of cognitive learning styles. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences identifies eight different intelligences, all of which lead to different pathways to learning: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. His theory maintains that if a student is having difficulty learning from one pathway, there are at least seven other pathways an educator may utilize to teach the student. Depending on the contents of individual picture books, all eight of Gardner's multiple intelligences might be activated during instruction, thereby reaching many different intelligences (or learning styles) and better educating all classroom children, thus rejecting the one-size-fits-all standardized curriculum model. Additional research has found that the music, or poetry, found in well-crafted volumes supports the cognitive development and language acquisition skills that young children need to set them on the path to literacy (Sulzby 29-38 and Heald 234-35).

Picture books are critical for developing young children's literacy at various stages of cognitive development. Gradually, they will progress from pre-literate stages, where caregivers must read the text aloud, to emergent, to independent readers, all with the aid of high

quality picture books and caregivers who nurture, yet challenge, their developing skill sets (Terrell and Watson 149).

Building from seminal educational theories on emergent literacy, picture books creatively foster foundational reading skills. With adult guidance and frequent opportunities for listening to picture books, young children reap large cognitive benefits and become successful in school. "Children in the emergent literacy stage enjoy interacting with print, listening to stories, imitating reading, and attempting to write . . . children who regularly listen to books participate in discussions, read more, and show gains in vocabulary and comprehension" (Barchers 84). Nagy and Herman add, "We know that children acquire thousands of words orally before attending school, most without direct instruction" (Barchers 150). Such language immersion is credited to caregivers who daily read, chant, sing, and speak to young children. Without access to picture books and a language-rich environment, children will significantly lag behind their peers upon reaching elementary school.

Children learn to enjoy language and reading when adults read picture books to them. By listening to stories and poems, children develop listening comprehension skills, including "following sequence, distinguishing between fact and fancy, making inferences, visualizing settings and characters, predicting outcomes, and recognizing cause and effect" (Barchers 194). They hear and see print coded into sound as the grapheme/phoneme relationship. Young children process the picture book auditorily and construct meaning visually from the illustrations. As they learn and progress after repeated readings, they begin to recognize letter sounds (phonics), sentence syntax, rhyme and rhythm, and gain concepts of print. When children listen to picture books, they develop a sense of the alphabetic code and how language parts fit together to convey meaning. They become engaged in printed and oral language activities, the foundation of emergent literacy (16). Adults, as they read aloud, model how to use language and humor (Goouch and Lambirth 31). Learning becomes a pleasurable way for children and adults to form positive emotional bonds in a safe, nurturing environment.

Emergent reading skills take on more importance as children attempt to move from depending upon adult readers to decoding the picture books on their own. Latisha Hayes and Kevin Flanigan in *Developing Word Recognition* explore how children learn to read by recognizing words in two ways: "automatically or by decoding" (4).

Sight words are identified automatically; children do not need to "resort to any conscious attempt to figure them out" (4). However, if young readers cannot recognize a word by sight, they must resort to decoding it and to using "their knowledge of the spelling system, our alphabetic code, to identify the word" (4). They learn that letters represent speech sounds and that a sequence of letters "consistently" represents a sound. They also learn about syllables as "a unit of sound anchored on a vowel that may or may not be preceded or followed by a consonant" (4). The next level is the morpheme, "a unit of meaning . . . represented in the spelling of words" (5).

Poetic Techniques

Poetic techniques, including alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhyme, and meter (rhythm or beat), provide a scaffold system to support emergent readers. Picture books, especially those that include these poetic elements, help students hear tunes and patterns, and help them learn to read in print form (Goouch and Lambirth 8). The following analyses illustrate how bestselling authors have built poetic techniques into their works and how, in turn, these techniques encourage young children to develop language and emergent literacy skills.

Alliteration

Alliteration plays a large role in children's development as readers and writers. It draws them "towards the repeated initial sound" (Goouch and Lambirth 91). As adults read alliterative language aloud, their verbal intonation, syllabic stress, and pauses teach children about syntax. As they listen to these stories, they begin to understand basic grammar rules, such as word order and punctuation. Language awareness lays the foundation for their future success as independent readers. Charles A. Elster, in an article for *Young Children* titled "'Snow on My Eyelashes': Language Awareness through Age-Appropriate Poetry Experiences," maintains that "children learn to orchestrate and balance four systems related to language use": graphophonological, syntactical, semantic, and pragmatic (49). Alliteration is a poetic tool to help teach the graphophonological system and foster language awareness. This system is the sound-symbol relationship or the letter-sound relationship in language. It is the process of decoding that happens when children sound out the words that they encounter (phonics). Alliteration promotes this basic understanding of the English language (Goouch and Lambirth 42). Picture books provide a low-risk

opportunity to practice and experiment with developing literacy skills because alliteration encourages children to hear the graphophonological system, learn foundational decoding, and delightfully explore the English language. With illustrations that support semantics (context clues) and repetitive patterns of sounds, poetic picture books provide a playful way to facilitate language acquisition.

Author, artist, and educator Anna Dewdney's bestseller, *Llama Mad at Mama*, treats two topics that most caregivers and young children can relate to: going shopping and throwing temper tantrums. Dewdney teaches the importance of cooperation and patience, using alliteration and rhyme to make language bouncy and fun. For example, the alliterated "b" and "l" sounds in "Great big building, /great big signs. / Lots of aisles, / lots of lines" (6) add an element of dramatic tension. The hard "b" sound in "big" and "building" hits a dull thudding note. The "l" sound has a long, drawn out tone. Such alliteration contributes to the growing tension that the baby llama is experiencing. The buildings are big and intimidating; the lines are long and boring. The baby llama is clearly not finding any joy in doing shopping errands with Mama. The verbal stresses placed on the alliteration signal the emotional nuances of the unfolding drama.

After the baby llama's climatic temper tantrum (throwing groceries to the floor, crashing the shopping cart, and smashing signs), Dewdney uses softer alliterative words. Mama Llama teaches him how to clean up his mess with the gentle "p" and "s" sounds: "Pick up puffs and find the socks. / Put the shoes back in the box" (26). The longer sentence length signals readers to slow down. This slowing down marks the shift in the story's emotional state. Mama and the baby llama are calming down. The soft "p" and "s" sounds, along with the ending "x" that has a soft "s" sound, are relaxing and gentle, contributing to the emotional tone during the denouement. The sounds of the final line's soft "l" and short "a" conclude on a happy, gentle note. Readers linger in the love between the llamas: "Llama Llama loves his mama" (32). The repetition of the initial consonant sounds in different words subtly teaches about graphophonological awareness, as they also carry the story's emotional timbre, not only helping children comprehend the plot, but also teaching them how to handle frustration and emotional outbursts as they develop phonics awareness.

Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia recreates the sound of a person, animal, or thing, adds drama or play, and engages listeners. Words like "Meow"

or "Moo" replicate animal emissions. Children's graphophonological systems are developed when they hear onomatopoetic words that strengthen their knowledge of letters and sounds.

Sandra Boynton writes poetry-infused books for young readers. She began her career illustrating greeting cards and was then inspired to turn those drawings into children's books. Having written over sixty songs for children (many paired with her books), Boynton incorporates onomatopoeia in *Moo Baa La La La*. For example, "A cow says MOO" (2). The next animal, the sheep, says, "BAA" (3). The cow and the sheep are common farm animals with recognizable sounds. However, Boynton quickly integrates a humorous twist into her pattern: "Three singing pigs say LA LA LA" (4). This unexpected shift captures young readers' attention and signals that this book will be silly. The narrative begs the questions: Singing pigs? Who has ever heard of such a thing? The perspective shifts to the imagined response: "No, no!" you say, "that isn't right. The pigs say OINK all day and night" (5-6). This shift draws readers directly into the action, as if they had a voice in the narrative. The structure confirms what children know to be true (the sounds pigs make) and it serves as a scaffolding technique, continuing to use onomatopoeia for the animal sounds, from OINK, BOW WOW WOW, SNUFF, RUFF, RUFF, to MEOW. It is an auditory delight, perfect for reading aloud.

Boynton's *Barnyard Dance* also employs onomatopoetic animal sounds. "Cheep, cheep, cheep," "neigh," "moo," and "cockadoodledoo" are built into the rhyme and incorporate alliteration within the stanzas: "Stand with the donkey. Slide with the sheep. Scramble with the little chicks—cheep, cheep, cheep" (11-12). The combination of poetic techniques, including rhythm, moves the story along at a bouncy pace, encouraging movement and laughter. Onomatopoeia effectively immerses children in language since it supports graphophonological development by teaching the sounds of long "e," short "a," short "u," and the diphthongs "oi," "eo," and "oo." Children play with vowel sounds and patterns--hearing the vowel sounds, seeing the sound-symbol relationship in print, learning various vowel sound patterns—and then memorize and internalize another piece of the graphophonological system. They add these foundational vowel sound patterns to their developing knowledge of the language—patterns that will serve them well as they attempt to decode more complex words.

Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault's alphabet book, *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, also includes onomatopoeia. To mimic human

sound, the personified alphabet letters say, "Whee!" as they playfully make their way up the coconut tree (4). As the letters climb, they say "Chicka chicka boom boom" (5), which signifies the sound of the physical movement of the letters and acts as a musical refrain in the poetic structure. For example, after D, E, F, and G race to the top of the tree, the verse queries "Chicka chicka boom boom! Will there be enough room?" (5). This refrain reappears on page seven with the next cluster of alphabet letters. When readers arrive at the climax and all letters of the alphabet are at the top of the coconut tree, the letters fall with a "Chicka chicka…BOOM! BOOM!" (12). Educators, including myself, who have used this book in the classroom report that students relish repeating the phrase "chicka chicka boom boom," eagerly waiting for the phrase to reappear. It is rhythmic and feels good to say it aloud. Students love to read along and want to stand up and dance, shake, or stomp their feet, mimicking the physical movement of the letters. The authors introduce a musical jazz riff after the climatic fall from the coconut tree,

> Skit skat skoodle doot.
> Flip flop flee.
> Everybody running to the coconut tree. (14)

Children love to sing out "skit skat skoodle doot." It is, literally, jazz riffing that sounds like people walking, strutting, or running. The onomatopoeia reinforces letter sound knowledge. After repeated readings of *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, listeners will have learned short "a," short "i," and long "e" sounds as well as the digraph of "oo" in the words doot, room, boom, moon, looped, stooped, and tooth. The playful onomatopoeia helps them acquire skills in decoding and in categorizing word families.

Rhyme

Rhyme patterns encourage young children to pay attention to sounds. Goouch and Lambirth find "this sensitivity to sounds is often supported by the use of 'motherese'," colloquially referred to as "baby talk"—the shortened sentences, higher pitches and intonations, repetition, and exaggerated melodies used often by caretakers—along with songs, lullabies and nursery rhymes. Motherese, songs, nursery rhymes, and lullabies do more than comfort young children, these educational precursors also lay the foundation for language acquisition (91) and prepare them for picture books.

Moving from lullabies and nursery rhymes, the poetic technique of rhyme is perhaps one of the most effective ways to nurture emergent

literacy skills because "the repetition, predictable rhymes, patterns and refrains will provide a structure on which children learn to depend" (Goouch and Lambirth 42). Studies have shown "anything that helps a child predict what comes next helps with reading" (Fields, Groth, Spangler 120). Illustrations provide context clues for comprehension and vocabulary development. Yet, rhyme patterns help beginning readers as well because, as Fields, Groth, and Spangler point out, "Patterns, picture clues, and remembered stories offer temporary assistance to beginning readers in much the same way that training wheels help the novice bike rider—providing support during practice that leads to more independent performance" (120). Specifically, rhyming instills early phonological awareness (Terrell and Watson 152). *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* presents the alphabet as the letters race up a coconut tree. Not only an alphabet book, it also teaches word families (such as free, tree, flee, knee) that reinforce beginning phonics acquisition.

At the beginning of *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, Martin and Archambault craft a four- line stanza in AABA rhyme, beginning with A. Then the second stanza continues the rhyme scheme:

> A told B,
> and B told C,
> "I'll meet you at the top
> of the coconut tree."
> "Whee! said D
> to E F G,
> "I'll beat you to the top
> of the coconut tree." (2-4)

Not only do Martin and Archambault use end rhymes throughout, but they also weave in internal rhymes such as "beat" and "whee" that rhyme with B, C, D, G, and "tree," thereby reinforcing many of the end rhymes. The structure repeats the long "e" vowel sound, one of the common foundational vowel sounds in English that emergent readers will repeatedly encounter.

As the climax nears, the illustrations show a coconut tree bending frightfully to the right. The rhyme breaks at this point, at "And Q R S!" (8), and continues with "And T U V!" (9). At the page turn, the "V" from page nine rhymes with the next page: "Still more—W!/And X Y Z" (10). Here is the climax: all the letters have climbed the tree and now it looks like it is ready to fall to the ground. After the letters fall, more complex rhymes are introduced: "aunts," "pants," "cry,"

"tie," "looped," "stooped" (14-22). The letters untangle themselves, and a new word family (long i as in I, cry, tie) emerges in the rhyme and repeats the long "e" vowel rhyme as well, allowing young children to practice the rhyming word family they learned at the beginning, as well as to experiment with a new one.

Dewdney's *Llama Llama Mad at Mama* also employs rhyme throughout, usually in alternating couplets. The rhyme pattern is clear and consistent from the very first pages, opening with full rhymes: "Llama Llama / having fun. / Blocks and puzzles / in the sun" (2). The next page continues the pattern: "Time to shop! / It's Saturday! / Llama Llama / wants to play" (3). When the rhyming couplets do not alternate, the pattern returns to classic couplet formation. The rhyme is predictable, much like a traditional nursery rhyme, thus providing a fixed aural pattern to follow.

As children learn a rhyme pattern, they become more familiar with ending sounds in words; this auditory skill helps them gradually distinguish between word families as they learn to read. They may begin to recognize repetitive words or sounds, such as "mama" and "llama," and those words become automatic. Fields, Groth, and Spangler define sight words as "those instantly recognizable words that no longer require effort from a child" (128). Sight words are critical for emergent readers since they "provide children success in their reading efforts, and they provide a starting point for learning graphophonemic strategies." (128). When children can recognize words without struggling, it leads to developing their confidence; they begin to form positive self-images and positive relationships with reading. They realize that reading can be fun, not a constant struggle. Researchers have found that "such books will quickly become familiar to children and will be the kinds of books that children will want to come back to, will find comfort in and, as developing readers, will feel safe in their company" (Goouch and Lambirth 42).

Dr. Seuss, one of the most popular writers for young children, deliberately incorporates poetic devices to teach reading and the pleasure of learning how to read. In "Following Reading Primers the Wrong Way: Pedagogical Nonsense in Dr. Seuss," Lichung Yang writes, "It is commonly known that when the 'why-Johnny-can't-read' crisis swept American public schools, Seuss responded by writing *The Cat in the Hat*, a primer-style book intended to replace the plodding Dick and Jane series that left a good deal to be desired" (328). Challenged by William Spaulding, the director of Houghton Mifflin's education

division, to use only high frequency sight words, Seuss composed *The Cat in The Hat* using 225 sight words in rhyming verse (qtd from Morgan and Morgan by Yang 334).

Edward Dolch developed his sight word list in the 1930s and 1940s based on words frequently found in children's books. Educators still employ the Dolch list to teach reading and spelling. Most of *The Cat in the Hat* is comprised of Dolch sight words (*Sight Words*).[2] The words in *The Cat in the Hat* that are not Dolch sight words tend to be from the same phonetic word families as other sight words in the book. For example, "bit" is not a Dolch sight word, but "it" is. This makes for relatively smooth decoding for emergent readers and introduces them to phonetic word families. Dolch sight words also appear throughout *Green Eggs and Ham*. Dr. Seuss prefers rhyming couplets, as in this example of a stanza with a rhyming couplet and the sight words "you," "them," and "are":

Would you? Could you?
In a car?
Eat them! Eat them!
Here they are. (26)

Rhyme builds the pacing of the stories and reflects the drama that unfolds in *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham*, two titles that focus on repetitive sight words and develop recognition through rhyming patterns that strengthen understanding of word families.

Rhyme encourages playfulness and keeps young children actively listening as they process language. It is a consistent poetic technique in Boynton's picture books. *Barnyard Dance* is masterful in its use of end rhymes from page to page: "Bow to the horse. Bow to the cow. Twirl with the pig if you know how" (3-4). In addition to rhyming "cow" with "how," she also slides in internal rhymes with "bow," "cow," "know," "how." In *Moo Baa La La La,* Boynton prefers alternating end rhymes. The last word on the left page rhymes with the last word on the right page of the spread. For example, "right" rhymes with "night" (3-4); "snuff" with "ruff" (5-6) and "wow" with "meow" (7-8). The onomatopoeia even has the same end sounds from page to page, but the pattern breaks with "quack" and "neigh" and resumes the pattern at the end of the book with "say" that rhymes with "neigh" from the previous page spread. This end rhyme quickly signals a predictable sound pattern that contributes to the story's short, punchy playfulness. Rhyming picture books are a perennial favorite with young readers. Generations of young readers continue to turn

to Sandra Boynton, Bill Martin, Jr., and Dr. Seuss to delight in their entertaining rhyme.

Frequent re-readings support language acquisition. Re-reading is practice and should be encouraged by caregivers. In "Alternative Text Types to Improve Reading Fluency for Competent to Struggling Readers," Timothy Rasinski, William Rupley, David Paige, and William Dee Nichols stress the importance of using rhyming poetry and repeated readings to facilitate fluency since

> poetry contains rhyming words. One approach for teaching phonics has been termed an analytical approach. Certain and relatively common spelling or orthographic patterns have consistent pronunciations. Readers who can perceive these spelling patterns in one word they decode can then apply that knowledge to analogous words – other words that contain the sound often have the same last spelling pattern. Word recognition is made more efficient as readers process these spelling-sound patterns that appear in many words and not as individual letters but as one unit. (167)

When children hear and see these patterns, they carry their knowledge of sound over to their own independent reading attempts (167).

Meter

Music educators believe that poetry and music go hand in hand, "Music is a natural 'language' that crosses cultural barriers for children and speaks to them in tones that they can quickly relate to" (Beatty and Pratt 60). Listeners respond to melodies and rhythm in music and music stimulates brain development (60). Whether it is called "rhythm," "beat," or "meter," I suggest that meter in poetry, from nursery rhymes to the contemporary works studied here, has much the same effect on young children as rhythm in traditional musical forms such as lullabies.

The meter or beat in *Moo Baa La La La*, is punchy and lively. Iambic dimeter bounces the story along: "A cow says Moo" (1). "A sheep says BAA" (2). There are four syllables per line and each line has two feet: "A cow / says Moo / A sheep / says BAA." The syllables are unstressed, stressed, unstressed, stressed ("Glossary of Poetic Terms"). Throughout the book, the rhythm is consistent with either four or eight syllabic beats. It is a straightforward, predictable yet quick beat, perfect for very young children who have short attention spans and who may not sit still for long periods.

In *The Cat in the Hat*, Dr. Seuss begins with a steady meter. Each of the first three stanzas has four lines with five to six beats per

line broken into three feet. The iambic trimeter consists of three feet of unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable ("Trimeter"):

I sat / there with / Sally.
We sat / there / we two.
And I / said, 'How / I wish
We had / something / to do!' (2)

Dr. Seuss interrupts this pattern on page three, then continues with the iambic pattern throughout. The iambic trimeter returns when the cat begins his dangerous game of "Up-Up-Up with a Fish" and the fish demands to be put down (11). Through the meter, readers bounce along with the dramatic and unpredictable behavior of the cat. The suspense builds as he juggles the fish in the bowl high in the air. Disaster seems inevitable. Then the iambic trimeter breaks again when there is a dramatic pause in the action as the cat says "That is not all! Oh, no. That is not all" (16). Readers wait expectantly for the page turn as Dr. Seuss leaves them with a real cliffhanger. What in the world will that unpredictable cat do next while Mother is away? Page twenty-two returns to the iambic trimeter that breaks by page twenty-seven when the cat tells the children and the fish that he does not wish to go and proposes to show them yet another good game. This is another climatic point. Dr. Seuss leaves readers curious and perhaps anxious about what the cat might do next. They must turn the page to find out. The shifts in meter support the unfolding drama and suspense, specifically, the cat's unfailing enthusiasm, the children's and the fish's anxiety, and the destruction that the cat causes. The syllabic stresses remain constant throughout the book regardless of the feet per line. The rhyme scheme in *The Cat in the Hat* tends to alternate in couplets, with at least one to two end rhymes per page. This couplet scheme complements the cat's jaunty, bouncing attitude and makes the book a dramatic pleasure to read aloud or to listen to.

Different from *The Cat in the Hat*, Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* has many lines that have four beats with two feet in each line, iambic dimeter. Specifically:

Not in / a box.
Not with / a fox.
Not in / a house.
Not with / a mouse. (*Green Eggs and Ham* 24)

This structure creates a terse, to-the-point emphatic beat that supports the main character's equally solid and stubborn emphatic refusal to try the green eggs and ham. This particular meter adds dramatic intensity

and tension as the antagonist attempts to push the green eggs and ham on the protagonist.

Dr. Seuss does not retain the same meter on each page, but the iambic dimeter does recur throughout. By page fifty-nine, near the resolution, the meter lengthens and quickens as the main character finally tries the green eggs and ham and likes them. This new beat of four feet with two syllables in each (iambic tetrameter) has a more exuberant tone and pace:

So I / will eat /them in /a box.
And I / will eat / them with / a fox.
And I / will eat / them / in a / house. (61)

The beat reflects the exuberance, expansiveness, and delight that the main character feels at discovering a delicious new food. His culinary world has been enlarged and so has the meter of each line.

As lullabies and nursery rhymes, rhythmic picture books beg for active participation from the audience. The beat is perfect for incorporating movement, such as feet stomping, dancing, finger snapping, clapping, and musical instruments. This makes learning fun and helps young children. "Because music is patterns of sound just as language is, young children need to experience sounds in all their varieties to emerge into musical and language literacy" (Beatty and Pratt 72). Music helps put the puzzle pieces of language together. The beat and rhyme scheme foster phonic awareness, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, all foundational elements of emergent literacy.

Conclusion

Emergent literacy is the process of learning to "speak, read and write" as children actively participate "in social, cultural and historical contexts" (Goouch and Lambirth 16). Emergent literacy sees their development on a continuum since "children are working on all aspects of oral and written language at the same time" (Fields, Groth, Spangler 7). Children move along the continuum as they grapple with the complexities of learning language.

Alliteration**,** onomatopoeia, rhyme, and meter help emergent readers learn phonics, recognize word families, and see patterns in language. These are necessary skills for language and reading acquisition. More importantly, poetic picture books, with their popping language, foster a sense of play. Research shows that young children learn best when actively engaged in play. As Fields, Groth, and Spangler note, "Play provides a context for practice, content for reading and writing, and a mode of learning as well" (51). When caregivers and educators

utilize poetic picture books in conjunction with lullabies and nursery rhymes, they demonstrate that reading, speaking, and singing are fun and emphasize the value of play in a larger educational context:

> Play as a mode of learning is particularly important because it represents an attitude valuable to all intellectual development. The playful attitude encourages intellectual risk taking in formulating new hypothesis and experimenting with them. This attitude views experimentation as pleasurable and encourages further learning. (51)

Beyond the acquisition of language and literacy skills, reading picture books to children makes them feel loved. When adults take time to read a physical book to them, it demonstrates that they are important. Specifically, Marie Clay writes, "Every child must feel that he is important, that he is wanted, and that he can accomplish things . . . The children who start school having acquired positive views of self are fortunate, because they have been taught how to succeed." (17).

Notes

[1]For more information on the approximate age ranges and reading stages, see Debra Johnson and Elizabeth Sulzby, *Critical Issue: Addressing the Literacy Needs of Emergent and Early Readers*. North Central Regional Education Laboratory, 1999.

[2] The Dolch words in *The Cat and The Hat* are: "and, away, come, down, in, I, the, jump, my, not, play, red, fall, cat, sister, fish, toy, like, what, ball, box, mother, thing, one, two." The Dolch words in *Green Eggs and Ham* are: "I, will, eat, see, green, try, house, tree, a, the, could, would." For a list of Dolch words, see *Sight Words*.

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