

Lois@LoisLetchford.com

Twitter: @LetchfordLois

Website: LoisLetchford.com

Poetry Packs a Punch

Lois Letchford

In 1994, my six-year-old son Nicholas failed first grade. Standardized IQ testing showed he could only read ten words, displayed no strengths and had a low IQ. The prognosis was dire.

The following year, I had the opportunity to remove him from school for six short months as we followed my husband and his work overseas. The challenges Nicholas faced in the classroom appeared insurmountable, so I took this time to work with him one-on-one. Preparing to teach a low reader, I bought a series of phonic books titled: *Success for All*.

As I worked with him, I fell into the same trap as his first-grade teacher. Frustration overwhelmed me. Something had to change.

My mother-in-law was with me and reached out.

“Lois,” she said, “put away what is not working and make learning fun.”

Her words caused me to think and re-imagine teaching. Facing a blank slate, I thought of Nicholas strengths—he could rhyme words and see patterns. Poetry has both!

With limited options, I began to write simple poems. Silly poems. The effect was immediate, as I read the poems to him, before we talked about its meaning, found the rhyming words and finally created illustration. Every day, I had a new poem for Nicholas. Every day, he was giggling, and enthralled and as we recited every rhyme.

Through poetry, we discovered a new and exciting world of learning.

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I was aware Nicholas found the hearing of all consonant blend (sp,sl,pr etc.) sounds challenging, so I wrote a poem using as many *sp* words as possible– including spin, spot, spell, spit. My poem revolved around a main character of a “naughty little witch” spitting in a spell, causing her to spin on the spot. A crazy poem, to which Nicholas asked, “Can I write a witches spell?”

“Of course,” I replied as he dictated his list of ingredients:

My Witches Spell:

3 alien brains

1 poison snake

4 stinky rat’s tails

½ cauldron of boiling water

½ bottle of magic potion

blood of a dead lizard

Friends visited. I recall Nicholas running to our classroom, grabbing his book, and demanding “Read the ingredients to the Witches Spell!” as he jumped up and down, laughing. “Oh yuck! Oh, how gross!” my friend’s faces squirmed. The greater the squirms and discomfort, the more hilarity from Nicholas.

I didn’t write about this incident in my book *Reversed: A Memoir*, as I was embarrassed over this poem, and deemed it “terrible!” However, some twenty-five years later, I questioned him over his early learning.

Tears ran down his face as I asked about first grade. Refusing to dwell on failure, he changed the subject. “I remember learning with you.” His tears gone, replaced with a peaceful

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face and a wide smile, “I remember those poems: *Bug on a Rug*, and *Windmill on the Hill*. But the best one was about the *Witches Spell*. I remember we wrote the ingredients for the spell. That was so funny. I think the ingredients were like George’s *Marvelous Medicine*, but I just remember it being so good!” His face beamed as he laughed again, as recalled the joy of this early success. The transformation shocked me, as I underestimated the power of poetry and a child’s response.

Dr. Tim Rasinski also uses poetry: the strategies he uses includes having student perform their poems. By providing a real audience, a reason to perform, students think a little harder, put in additional effort as they want to showcase their learning, finding both value and meaning through poetry. I’m sure these students, too, will recall that performance for the rest of their lives.

Never underestimate the power of poetry, as students too, giggle and find meaning and above all, enjoy learning.

Poetry Packs a Punch in unimaginable ways.

Postscript by Timothy Rasinski

Nicholas Letchford learned to read, thanks to his mother Lois and many fine teachers. Indeed, learning to read was only the beginning of his journey. In 2018 Nicholas earned a doctorate in Applied Mathematics from Oxford University in the UK. Lois has since become a reading specialist. She has also written about her and Nicholas’s journey to literacy in her inspiring book “Reversed: A Memoir,” which can be ordered through any bookseller.

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