

The Power of Poetry: Key points from the original project research

Introduction:

The Power of Poetry is a project funded by the Arts Council Grants for the Arts and run by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education.

The Power of Poetry was a year-long programme of workshops, co-delivered by CLPE, four poets and an anthologist as expert tutors. The project was independently evaluated by Professor Andrew Lambirth from the University of Greenwich. The project was designed to highlight the importance of poetry as a vehicle for improving children's engagement in and enjoyment of reading and creative writing in schools.

Summary of key findings from the project:

It is important to provide time and opportunity to hear poetry read aloud.

- Through repeated experience of this throughout course days, teachers felt that a deeper level of response was gained by listening to poems read – particularly when read by the poets themselves.
- They built on this by sharing audio and video resources in their classrooms to ensure a similar experience for their children. This helped both the teachers and children hear and take in the poet's voice and therefore start to pay attention to their own when writing their own poetry. This also highlighted the importance of hearing poetry read and performed in different ways and in different dialects to broaden children's perceptions of poetry and poets.

It is important to give the time and opportunity for children to enjoy reading poetry for pleasure without the need for a concrete response.

- The frequent exposure to poetry throughout the project enabled teachers to realise the importance of allowing children to bask in poetry as a regular part of the school day to provide a wide exposure to poets, styles and forms and increase their enjoyment of poetry.
- The poets dropping poems into the days 'simply to share' demonstrated the power of reading poems at any point without a pre-conceived agenda on engaging them and, in turn, their children with the enjoyment of poetry when this was replicated in the classroom.
- Simple techniques demonstrated on the course like papering a room with different kinds of poems and giving time and space to read and reflect on poems of their choice enabled teachers to see the importance of allowing themselves and their children a wider degree of choice in what they read.
- The range and breadth of poetry covered and displayed on course days and highlighted through booklists compiled by CLPE was not reflected in most school's stock of poetry. Teachers worked to ensure a wider range of poetry stock is available for teachers and children to draw on (see below).

Teachers benefit from being readers of poetry and having opportunities to share responses to poems read.

- The course and associated readings allowed teachers to explore and expand their knowledge of adult poets that they may enjoy and could reflect on at their own level.
- Through a wider exposure to a range of poetry, teachers understood what types of poetry appealed to them and which did not and used this to think about how different children may enjoy different kinds of poetry and the need to expose them to a wide range so that they can develop their own individual tastes and preferences.
- Important lessons were learned in terms of teachers allowing themselves to read poetry for pleasure rather than ‘seeking lessons’ from poems.
- Exposure to reading and responding to a wide range of poetry through their own reading experiences enabled the teachers to understand that ambiguity is ok – there is no need to understand every word or concept and it is not a quest to work out or find the answer to a poem.
- The teachers left the project appreciating poetry as an art form.

Teachers have limited knowledge of poets, poems and forms and need access to training and resources that help them expand this.

- Many teachers, even those who were confident in teaching poetry or professed to being ‘well-read’, commented on how little knowledge they had of poets and the vulnerable position that this put them in as educators.
- The course demonstrated many forms that teachers were not previously aware of or had experience of using in their classrooms. Verse novels were a new genre to many. Lots of the teachers highlighted the importance of free verse and, in turn, poetry not being bound by rhyme and how to recognise the rhythms that occur in free verse. Blackout poetry was a form lots of the teachers had not experienced but were keen to try out in class. It provided a good way in for lots of children and was new form for some of the teachers to teach.
- Teachers learned a great deal about using form to enhance meaning or for effect on the reader. For example, making a distinct decision to use concrete poems, growing from the subject matter, not for the sake of building ‘shape poems’.
- Many teachers learned much more about the origins of certain forms. For example, the story of haiku and how it makes most impact when used in the way it was intended, not just to fit the 5,7,5 syllable pattern.
- The inclusion of spoken word poetry throughout the days legitimised this as an important form and encouraged teachers to share examples back in their classrooms. Many of the children were engaged by the lyricism of the form and were keen to replicate this in their own writing.
- Through examples shared, teachers were able to investigate the benefits and limitations of rhyming verse and, in turn, pass these on to their children: ‘The children could clearly articulate why they had chosen to use certain structures (e.g. syllable patterns); most chose not to rhyme and their poems were more successful as a result; and they identified what helped them create rhythm in their writing’.

Poetry is an important vehicle to explore individual identity and the identity of others.

- Teachers understood the importance of picking poems and poets that reflect the lives and experiences of their children. Using video performances back in the classroom helped children identify with poets more deeply: 'I didn't know poets can be black people too. I thought Valerie Bloom was white.'
- Teachers realised that giving ample time for children to explore and make personal choices, exploring what resonated with them personally through activities like the poetry papering was an important investment and heightened engagement with and response to poetry.
- Teachers realised that rather than looking at a poem as a puzzle that needed to be solved, or to be mined for specific language and technique, they needed to encourage a personal and emotional response as a way in to looking at what it was about the writing that garnered the response following this.
- Through activities shared on the course, teachers realised that poetry was an important vehicle for enabling empathy, with teachers and children back in their classroom being able to recognise and respond more deeply to emotion in poems read and being able to use poetry as a vehicle for expression, often as cathartic writing.

Personal reflection and personal response are the most effective starting points when studying poetry and this enhances more traditional analysis.

- Before the course, many teachers reflected on over analysing poems too early on and recognised the importance of starting from the impact on the reader.
- Through doing this themselves on course days and in gap tasks, teachers understood the importance of personal engagement and reflection from their own perspective, allowing time and space for many readings of poems; with the eyes, ears and heart before discussing with others to consolidate and broaden these perspectives.
- Through such activity, teachers and children were uncovering deeper layers of meaning through repeated readings, discussion and creative responses like art and movement. 'I also noticed that their understanding of poetry improved – we completed some practice SATs papers which included sections where the children had to read and answer questions about poetry. They all scored more highly than they had in previous tests of a similar nature, in particular on the poetry sections and when we discussed the tests, many said they felt like they 'got' poetry now.'

Poetry provides a means for children to find and develop their own voice.

- Before the project, many teachers were taking specific poems as direct models to imitate and 're-write'. The course activities and reading enabled the teachers to gain a wider view of the importance on sharing poems as widely as possible, engaging in rich discussion around the decisions made by the poet on form and structure in relation to the subject, sharing what poetry is and can do to influence teachers' and children's own writing.

- Through their own writing activity as part of the course, the teachers understood that poetry writing is a means of personal expression and were able to communicate this to children by replicating similar activities in their classrooms.
- The course activities enabled the teachers to think more about how they are actively encouraging young people to work as writers, giving them ownership of the writing process and genuinely allowing opportunities and experiences that encourage them access to their own voice. Effective ways into writing explored included starting from conversations, observations, stream of consciousness writing.
- There was significant impact in teachers and children having their own poetry journals to collect ideas, giving time and space for children to engage with and explore language and play with words prior to writing, write freely and work up poems for publication and for them to gain responses to writing they wanted to share.
- Teachers understood the importance of giving time to be able to play with and develop ideas for writing before making decisions about form and structure and were able to communicate this to the children: ‘His playing with cantering text let him see the shape as a tree, he played with line breaks and repeated the last line to make the trunk.’

Teachers benefit from the opportunity to see themselves as writers of poetry.

- Writing poetry in journals as part of and between the course days allowed the teachers to understand the tentativeness of exploring ideas as well as the anxieties, challenges, successes and euphoria of writing.
- This also provided lessons about an authentic writing process, for example knowing and understanding that some ideas are the right ones to develop and some can be abandoned without labouring or shame.
- Through writing alongside the poets, teachers understood the importance of them writing alongside the children – rethinking ‘shared writing’.
- The teachers gained a greater understanding of the process of writing and therefore the ability to model and teach this more effectively; in particular how to respond to and develop ideas and about redrafting and editing.
- Teachers realised that what was important in writing poetry was not always leading or directing the writing, but being engaged as reflective learners alongside the children, developing authentic communities of writers of poetry.

Working with professional poets provides important understanding of the inspiration and process of writing poetry.

- The course being co-developed and team taught by practising professional poets allowed a unique window for participants to understand why professional poets write and what inspires them. They could then use this to provide a window into the possibilities in and joy of writing for themselves and their children.
- Through looking at a professional poet’s process, and following this for themselves in the writing activities, teachers had an understanding of the stamina needed to build a poem from initial idea

through to publication and could appreciate this as a valid process for writing in the classroom and for the assessment of poetry produced by the children.

- The poet's insights into drafting were taken on by teachers in the classroom being confident to share what is meant by drafting, and how to make clear how and why drafts are reworked. Children could then communicate their own understanding of the process, e.g.: 'I like how the layout starts like this (he indicates a draft) ... it kind of looks like a story ... then this (he indicates 2nd draft) it starts to look like a poem ... then this ... (a third) this looks like a proper poem ... something I can type up ... something I can show my mum and other people.'
- Specific activities by the poets led to a greater understanding of how to work up ideas for publication including paring down language, finding and improving the rhythm by reading aloud and moving, considering how the poem looks on the page, the importance of line breaks and their impact on meaning.
- Poets reading their own poetry regularly as a core part of the course days cemented the importance of reading finished poems aloud, lifting the words from the page and hearing the tunes and patterns created by the writer.

Poetry is an important branch of literature in its own right and the reading and writing of poetry needs to be a wider part of the whole curriculum.

- Teachers understood the importance of the whole school community creating a shared culture and acceptance that poetry is important and is valuable and has a similar prominence to other forms of writing in the curriculum.
- Through self-reflection, teachers learned that they needed to guard against the over-analytical response that was a consistent part of the current practice in the schools.
- Through the activities provided teachers were clear that it was important to make sure that learning in the classroom doesn't move too quickly into discussion of technique, form or devices before children have had time to respond personally and emotionally.
- Teachers understood a need to make poetry a wider part of the whole curriculum, not just teaching it in discrete, isolated blocks. Ensuring time is given for the sharing of poetry as well as time and space for children to write poetry freely in journals (as had been given to the teachers in the sessions) were highlighted as particularly effective in engaging pupils' enthusiasm to read and write poetry.
- Making poetry present in the classroom, through displays, collections of poetry in book areas and libraries, poetry tables, displays and collections of children's own poetry was cited by many of the schools as a transformational activity, as had been modelled throughout the course days and in the related reading.

Opportunities to practise and perform poetry adds to the understanding and enjoyment of poetry.

- Poets regularly reading poetry, by themselves and by others, enabled participants to clearly understand how much this could add to the intensity of the meaning and, in some cases, how the reader could become the poem through performance.

- Specific exercises around language and wordplay delivered by the poets enabled the teachers to see the importance of giving time and space to encourage children to play with, learn and own language.
- Poets reading aloud published poets enabled an understanding that performance is an outcome to occur – ‘poetry is made to come off the page’.
- Having a specific performance goal, such as submitting an entry to the CLPE CLiPPA shadowing scheme competition to win a slot performing at the prize ceremony at the National Theatre was a real motivator and cause for celebration across a school: ‘Taking part in the CLPE Poetry Award shadowing competition also encouraged enthusiasm and whilst all classes had submitted entries, children across the school were delighted for the Reception children who won.’
- Hearing poems performed, both live and through audio and video recordings allowed participants to understand the importance of pace, tone, pauses, line length and to pass this knowledge on to their children.

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