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## Poetry teachers: teachers who read and readers who teach poetry

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## **Exploring Poetry Teachers: Teachers Who Read and Readers Who Teach Poetry**

Teresa Cremin

Drawing upon data from the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) project *Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers: Phase II*, this chapter focuses on the synergies between teachers' and children's engagement in poetry at the primary phase. It highlights the importance of widening teachers' knowledge and pleasure in poetry and reveals the advantages that can accrue when teachers share a developing love of poetry with younger learners. This research confirms US studies which show that 'Reading Teachers; teachers who read and readers who teach' (Commeyras, Bisplingoff and Olson, 2003:161) offer active and strategic support to child readers. It also reveals that teachers who read poetry for their own pleasure and who teach poetry – Poetry Teachers – can make a marked difference to children's knowledge, experience and delight in poetry and poetic language.

International evidence suggests that children in England continue to read less independently and find less pleasure in reading than most of their peers in other countries. (Twist et al, 2003; 2006) In relation to poetry, whilst small-scale interview data indicates that children enjoy poetry (Lambirth, 2007; Ofsted, 2007), in a large-scale survey of 4-16 year olds in the UK, the majority chose not to respond to the question about poetry. Of those who did respond, most did not identify a favourite poet or book of poems, commenting that they did not have a favourite or did not read poetry. (Maynard et al., 2007: 60) This lack of enthusiasm may in part be a product of their teachers' knowledge and use of poetry. In a UKLA survey of 1200 primary phase professionals, *Teachers as Readers: Phase I* (2006-7), it was evident that they had extremely weak subject knowledge in relation to poetry: 22% did not name a single poet, 58% named only two, one or no poets, and only 10% named six. (Cremin et al, 2008a,b) Very few women poets were mentioned and there was reliance upon the work of poets or named poems that the teachers knew from childhood. In relation to their own reading, whilst three-quarters of the sample had read a book in the last three months, less than 2% had read any poetry over this period and only 1.5% noted poetry as their favourite childhood reading. (Cremin et al, 2008b) Despite this paucity

of knowledge, 85% noted that they relied upon their own repertoire of children's texts to select literature for the classroom.

Ofsted (2007) also observe that teachers are arguably neither keen nor regular readers of poetry, suggesting that they may have a narrow definition of poetry and tend to lean upon a limited range of poets and poems in school, relying upon those presented in publishers' resources or known from their childhood. In the UKLA survey, the highest number of mentions was for Michael Rosen (452) with five others gaining over a hundred mentions, namely: Allan Ahlberg (207), Roger McGough (197), Roald Dahl (165), Spike Milligan (159) and Benjamin Zephaniah (131). After these, only three poets were mentioned more than fifty times: Edward Lear (85), Ted Hughes (58) and AA Milne (57). In the Ofsted report, a not dissimilar *canon* of children's poetry was revealed in the list of the most well used *primary poems* – poems regularly used for study in literacy lessons. This included popular works by Alfred Noyes, Spike Milligan, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, RL Stevenson, Walter de la Mare, Kit Wright, Roger McGough, Roald Dahl and Alan Ahlberg. Disproportionately utilised, it is possible that these poets and poems comprise the principal school diet for many primary children.

In relation to teaching poetry, in recent years an emphasis on the study of poems in response to prescribed literacy requirements (DfEE, 1998; DfES, 2006) has been in evidence. Research also suggests that examinations of poetic form and feature are prevalent and that leaning upon and imitating particular poems has significantly reduced opportunities for the young to compose free verse about subjects of their own choosing. (Frater, 2000; Wilson, 2005; Grainger et al, 2005; Ofsted, 2007)

Arguably, the culture of accountability in schools has also constrained both teachers' and pupils' engagement in and response to poetry; in the UKLA survey fewer than 2% of those teachers who had read aloud to their classes for pleasure in the preceding six months mentioned reading any poetry.

In the light of these concerns, Medway Local Authority, one of the five authorities and 43 teachers involved in the Phase II project (Cremin et al, 2009) chose to focus on poetry within the overall study's aims. In order to develop children's reading for pleasure, the study aimed to develop teachers':

- knowledge of children's literature
- confident use of literature in the classroom
- relationships with parents, carers, librarians and families
- as 'Reading Teachers': teachers who read and readers who teach.

The nine teachers involved in Medway – working with five to eleven year olds – were challenged and supported to read outside their comfort zone and to widen their working repertoires of adult and children's poetry. In local sessions, poetry was read extensively to the group who had access to a large lending library of poetry anthologies. The teachers also regularly shared their personal forays into the work of self-selected poets and were involved in responding to and re-presenting poetry through art, drama, dance and writing. Nationally, they were supported to develop a reading for pleasure pedagogy, encompassing significantly more reading aloud, time for free choice reading – in which poetry collections were available – read and response sessions, and a profile on the environment – poetry corners and displays. Medway also organised an end-of-year poetry festival for all the teachers and children involved.

Significantly, the co-participant teacher researchers were invited to document their learning journeys – both as readers of poetry and as teachers of poetry – and to explore the new opportunities which emerged as a result of either stance influencing the other. They also tracked the responses of three 'disaffected and reluctant' child readers to their changing pedagogic practice – Moss's (2000) category of 'can but don't' readers was employed for this purpose. In addition to meta-analysis of the teachers' portfolios, data about teachers' and children's attitudes and practices were gathered through initial and summative audits, semi-structured interviews and ongoing observations of classroom practice.

Across the period of the project, an increase in the teachers' personal pleasure in and breadth of knowledge of poetry was noted, alongside shifts in pedagogy and new relationships with children, particularly for those who more fully adopted a Poetry Teacher's stance. It is to an examination of these themes which this chapter now

turns, seeking to illuminate their impact upon the children's knowledge, experience and attitudes towards poetry.

At the outset of the project, the group's familiarity with children's poetry was very narrow; 'the teachers described themselves as "clutching at straws" as they strove to name 5 poets' (Wells and Swain, 2008: 7) and appeared to rely upon a very small range of poems to teach literacy. Only one teacher read aloud poetry daily. Further affirming the Phase I findings (Cremin et al, 2008a, b), several also noted that they had encountered little poetry during their teacher training. Only three recalled memories of poetry in school with pleasure; the rest recounted dull de-contextualised analytical experiences. The children in these teachers' classes also knew a limited range; in response to a request to name an author, none of the 93 five to seven year old learners named a poet and when asked to name some poets or poems, only listed nursery rhymes, suggesting that perhaps they were unaware of any other forms or actual poets. The 157 pupils aged eight to eleven collectively named only 12 poets.

Notwithstanding this challenging start, across the year the teachers significantly widened their repertoires, deepened their knowledge of particular poets and expressed considerable surprise and delight at the satisfaction this afforded. It is possible that for some the opportunity, support and expectation to read children's poetry created what Britton (1993) described as a potent legacy of past satisfactions. As one observed, 'I've got more depth and experience of poetry now. I've really enjoyed reading more myself, I love Valerie Bloom's work and Jackie Kay's too'. Their reading was influenced by self-set reading challenges, local sessions and suggestions by peers and children, many of whom, experiencing more poetry in school and increasingly aware of their teachers' newfound interest, began to share their favourites.

Whilst the nine teachers' enthusiasm for children's poetry grew, it should be acknowledged that most of the group did not develop the same depth of interest in adult poetry. However, three did describe shifting dispositions in this regard, one of whom noted: 'I don't find poems such hard work now...Recently I had to search for a poem for a funeral service and I felt I approached the task more positively than before.' These readers found different ways in: one enjoyed listening to the Poetry Archive, one re-acquainted herself with childhood favourites and another started by

reading verse written by ‘poets from my homeland – that was when I got really hooked.’

In finding satisfaction in children’s verse, the Medway teachers, like others in the project, began to seek ways to share their new knowledge and emerging passion in school. Prior to this, their poetry teaching had centred on literacy units which profiled comprehension, mining the poem’s meaning and/or structure, noticing literary features and writing imitative verse. These practices were not displaced or abandoned, but were extensively enriched by almost all of the teachers who actively sought to foreground pleasure in poetry, particularly through increased oral practices. By the end of the project, five teachers were reading poetry aloud daily, the remaining four more than once a week. In addition there were more informal reading and response sessions, dedicated poetry displays and opportunities for children to read poetry, both privately and with friends, in the newly instituted free-choice recreational reading time. Prompted by their reflections upon reading poetry, teachers also wove more drama, dance, art and free choice writing into their units of work to help children inhabit, explore and perform poetry. As one typically observed:

I often find myself re-reading poems several times – to hear the music again I guess or kind of unravel it. I think children need to do this too and bring them to life like we’re doing together, to get poems off the page so to speak. Before I think my teaching of poetry was too studious if you know what I mean, there wasn’t enough active investigation, it was like a quiz with me asking the questions! Now it’s different, they own the poems more and choose which ones they want to work with.

There was evidence that the teachers’ increased knowledge, pleasure and use of poetry widened the children’s repertoires and experience of poetry, positively influencing their understanding and attitudes. As the year progressed children were observed poring over anthologies, reading aloud to one another, choosing to perform poetry in *golden time*, writing poetry from choice and swapping collections. In the post-project questionnaire, when asked to name their favourite author, 50% of the five and six year olds named a poet and 85% of the six and seven year olds named a poem that was not a nursery rhyme. The older children’s knowledge of poetry expanded

considerably and 41 poets were named, alongside a much wider range of poems, the majority of which had *not* been introduced by their teachers. This suggests that the children had engaged with poetry for themselves and were reading it personally for pleasure. The observational and interview data confirms this: many previously reluctant readers talked about poetry with enthusiasm and detail. In a final interview three such seven year olds, whose teacher had made her love of poetry very explicit, offered a list of their favourites which included poems, not all well-known, by John Agard, Richard Edwards, Eleanor Farjeon, Edward Lear, Wes Magee, Tony Mitton, Gareth Owen, Gervase Phinn, Christina Rossetti, Robert Louis Stevenson and others.

First lines were frequently provided alongside titles and in an interview packed with evidence of their pleasure in language-play and poetry, this trio of once disaffected readers spontaneously recited extended extracts and three complete poems. Whilst their teacher had read several of those listed aloud, and two had recently been performed by the class, the children had found others for themselves. What is significant is that the list is almost entirely comprised of texts in common – texts they shared, could all quote from and had begun to know well; texts which in some cases had been unconsciously committed in their entirety to memory.

During the final interviews there were multiple occasions when, quite unprompted, a case-study child would offer a first line of a poem and one or both of their peers, recognising the textual reference would join in, voicing the poem or part of it in delighted unison. Afterwards, they would often talk about it in a fluid and motivated manner, referring perhaps to when they first heard it, other poems by the same poet, the friend who had read it to them, whether their teacher liked it or the way it was written. This informal child-initiated *inside text talk* was noted across the project, particularly in classes where the teachers regularly and explicitly shared their own reading preferences and interests and positioned themselves as Reading/Poetry Teachers – readers who teach and teachers who read poetry. The children's perception of their teachers as fellow readers shifted considerably in several of the classes over the year. In the autumn, none of the children were able to offer information about their teachers' reading habits or preferences, but as teachers shared their reading lives and growing interest in the sense, sounds and savour in children's poetry, reciprocal child-teacher recommendations developed and their teachers' motivated and informed

stance was mirrored by the children. In these classes, animated talk about poetic texts, based on repertoires in common, demonstrated that the children knew each other and their teachers as readers and offered evidence of engaged communities of poetry readers.

In relation to reading poetry for pleasure, this study highlights the crucial role not just of subject and pedagogical content knowledge, but personal passion and teachers' positioning. Poetry was afforded a high profile in all the Medway classrooms, but in those where the teachers adopted the stance of Poetry Teachers and explicitly shared their delight in children's poetry in diverse ways, a higher degree of continuity developed between teachers and children as keen readers of poetry. The stance of these teachers strongly influenced the children's knowledge about and pleasure in poetry, which, it has been argued for the project overall, contributed to the children's development as motivated, engaged and able readers (Cremin et al, 2009). It is clear not only that 'the will influences the skill' (OECD, 2002), but that teachers, positioned as fellow readers, have the confidence to teach both effectively and affectively and draw in reluctant readers. As Martin observes, 'the best teachers of literature are those for whom reading is important in their own lives, and who read more than the texts they teach.' (2003: 16) Children deserve such teachers to expand and enrich their knowledge and pleasure in poetry.

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