WHICH IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO TEACH POETRY?

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The primary school in Warwickshire where my research was carried out

Poet and former Children’s Laureate Michael Rosen

Poet, writer and former headteacher Pie Corbett
PERSPECTIVES ON POETRY TEACHING

‘All poetry is magic. It is a spell against insensitivity, failure of imagination, ignorance and barbarism.’ - **Charles Causley (1990)**

‘You cannot assess poetry because it is so subjective. It does not tell you anything about the child apart from their creative side. In terms of how they are progressing in their literacy skills, it does not give you the information you need.’ - **English co-ordinator, primary school in Warwickshire**

‘Anyone who thinks that we should only teach what is tested in a primary school is bonkers...that attitude demonstrates a total lack of understanding about the purpose of education...I suspect too that they do not understand how poetry can enhance other forms of writing.’ - **Poet and educator Pie Corbett**

‘Poetry sucks.’ - **My son, a Year 6 pupil**
ABSTRACT

Poetry often struggles to find space in primary schools despite being given a key role in the National Curriculum. Teachers seem reluctant to commit much time to poetry because they are under pressure to deliver the best possible test results, and do not see poetry as a way of improving children’s literacy. They are also often uncomfortable in teaching poetry because of their own lack of knowledge and are too often reliant on the same few poems. This dissertation uses classroom observation, a survey and semi-structured interviews to find out how a Year 6 poetry unit is taught and how this can change children’s attitudes towards poetry. It also looks at recent literature, and interviews with poets Michael Rosen and Pie Corbett, to discover the most effective ways to teach poetry. It concludes that teaching can be transformed by using simple and effective techniques which can help to immerse children in poetry and benefit children’s overall learning in literacy.
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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 This dissertation will focus on comparing different methods of teaching poetry and the effect this can have on children. I have chosen this theme because I am interested in poetry and I believe it can have a beneficial effect on children of all abilities. I am also concerned that it is being sidelined in primary schools because of the pressure to produce results in SATs tests.

1.2 I hope that this dissertation will be of practical use to me in my teaching career – and also of help to other teachers who may be wary of teaching poetry. As I will show, there is a worrying lack of variety in poetry teaching, with teachers concentrating on the same few poems. I also hope to dispel the myths that poetry is ‘elitist’, that it is mainly for girls, and that poems written by children have to rhyme and be accompanied by illustrations.

1.3 I am a mature student in the final year of a teaching degree at the University of Northampton where I am specialising in English. I have always been interested in poetry which is accessible and thought-provoking. I have found that students and teachers are often uncomfortable when faced with teaching a poetry or drama unit.

1.4 My research is going to take place in a Year 6 class at a primary school in Warwickshire. The school has been rated ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted and I am excited at the prospect of observing a week of poetry lessons with the lower ability class. I will also be asking the children to complete a questionnaire about attitudes to poetry before and after the teaching unit. After presenting my findings, I will evaluate the lessons, look at what has been effective and suggest other strategies which the teacher could have used. I will analyse the results of the survey and gauge the effectiveness of the unit on the children’s view of poetry.
1.5 In the Appendices, I will include the text of interviews I carried out with the English co-ordinator at the school, and with two leading poets and educators – Michael Rosen, the former Children’s Poet Laureate, and Pie Corbett, the well-known poet and former headteacher. I will also include lists of poems and websites which I recommend for use in the classroom, plus a check-list of my suggestions of different approaches teachers could take with a poem.

1.6 It is important to note that poetry is not optional for schools. It is specifically mentioned 12 times in the National Curriculum (DfEE, 1999), as follows:

Table i: Poetry in the National Curriculum (1999, p.44-58)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Stage 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>En2 Reading</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge, skills and understanding – Literature</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Learn, recite and act out stories and poems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Identify patterns of rhythm, rhyme and sounds in poems and their effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) Respond imaginatively in different ways to what they read (for example...writing poems based on ones they read)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Breadth of study - Literature</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Stories and poems with familiar settings and those based on imaginary or fantasy worlds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Stories, plays and poems by significant children’s authors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Stories and poems from a range of cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Stories, plays and poems with patterned and predictable language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) Stories and poems that are challenging in terms of length or vocabulary</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Stage 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>En2 Reading</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge, skills and understanding – Literature</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) Consider poetic forms and their effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i) Read stories, poems and plays aloud</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Breadth of study – Literature

- c) A range of good quality modern poetry
- d) Classic poetry

1.7 Within the National Literacy Strategy, poetry appears at least once per term, with content ranging from riddles and tongue twisters to poetry from different cultures.

Table ii: Poetry in the National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Stage 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 1 – Rhymes with predictable and repetitive patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 2 – Traditional rhymes; poems in familiar, predictable and patterned language from a range of cultures, including playground chants, action verses and rhymes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 3 – Poems with patterned and predictable structures; a variety of poems on similar themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 1 – Poems with familiar settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 2 – Poems from other cultures; poems with predictable and patterned language; poems by significant children’s poets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 3 – Texts with language play, eg riddles, tongue twisters, humorous verse</td>
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<tr>
<th>Key Stage 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 1 – Poems based on observation and the senses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 2 – Oral and performance poetry from different cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 3 – Humorous poetry, poetry that plays with language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Year 4** |
| Term 1 – Poems based on common themes |
| Term 2 – Classic and modern poetry, including poems from different cultures |
cultures and times
Term 3 – A range of poems in different forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 5</th>
<th>Term 1 – Concrete poetry</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Term 2 – Longer classic poetry including narrative poetry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Term 3 – Choral and performance poetry</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 6 Poetry</th>
<th>Unit 1 – The Power of Imagery (2 weeks)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Unit 2 – Finding a Voice (1 week)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Revision</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unit 3 – Reading Poetry (2 weeks)</td>
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1.8 My focus will be on Year 6. This illustration from the National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 2003) shows how teaching units are organised, with three featuring poetry, and covering a potential five weeks of the year. My observation school, and my final year placement school, both struggled to allocate the necessary time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative, plays and scripts 10–11 weeks</th>
<th>UNIT 1 Fiction genres (4–6 weeks) Y6NF1</th>
<th>UNIT 2 Extending narrative (2 weeks) Y6NF2</th>
<th>UNIT 3 Authors and texts (2 weeks) Y6NF3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Non-fiction 12 weeks</td>
<td>UNIT 1 Biography and autobiography (3 weeks) Y6NF1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poetry 3 weeks</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Revision 6 weeks</td>
<td>UNIT 1 Reading and writing narrative (and plays) (3 weeks) Y6Rev1</td>
<td>UNIT 2 Reading and writing non-fiction (3 weeks) Y6Rev2</td>
<td>UNIT 3 Reading poetry (2 weeks) Y6Rev3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.9 The main question I wish to address is how teachers can most effectively fulfill the requirements of the National Curriculum as they relate to poetry. How can this subject be taught so that it excites teachers and children, and brings benefits to those of all abilities? I have
summarised this approach in the question: 'Which is the most effective way to teach poetry?'
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of poetry

2.1 Poetry is ‘not the new rock’n’roll, it was the first rock’n’roll’ (Wilson, 1998, p.3). It helps us understand ourselves and others better, to grow as people, and teaches us how to live (Dunn, Styles and Warburton, 1987, p.134). Poetry ‘lends shape and meaning to our experiences’, (DfES, 1987 cited in Ofsted, 2007, p.6). It gives children an opportunity to move from everyday, familiar language to ‘an engagement with compressed ideas, connotation and ambiguity’, and demands that children draw on their wider knowledge and experience. (Catt, cited in Fisher and Williams, 2000, p.29). This will develop their skills in the four language modes of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

2.2 All poetry is magic; it is a ‘spell against insensitivity, failure of imagination, ignorance and barbarism (Causley, 1990, cited in Phinn, 2000, p.92). Poetry is uniquely placed to allow children to say what they really want to say in the way they want to say it. Wilson (1998, p.4), describes a scenario when there is six minutes to go before lunch and the teacher opens a book the children haven’t seen before and begins reading: ‘By the end of the poem, the class is completely silent’ (p.3). Similarly, teacher Fred Sedgwick explains how he clapped his hands and magically changed the classroom into a silent study where 30 poets were writing (2003, p.52).

2.3 Poetry is an entitlement (Phinn, 2000, p.77), embedded in the National Curriculum. From the very earliest age, children should be able to hear and study a range of rich and varied material which is ‘funny, exciting, spooky, vigorous, fresh, playful and reflective’.

2.4 There are many benefits to poetry. It can enhance all forms of writing. Corbett (Appendix vii) says children need it so they can
‘understand themselves and their world’ - to have sufficient language at their fingertips to craft their talk and their writing. It is not always the most able children who write the best poetry (Brownjohn (1994, p.5). Any child is potentially able to produce poetry, provided there is ‘inspired teaching’ (Mole, cited in Wilson (ed), 1998, p.49).

2.5 Those who benefit include children with English as an additional language. Horner and Ryf (2007, p.194) say poetry is ‘particularly suitable’ for children at different stages of learning English. It can also benefit boys who have been found to respond well to poetry, possibly because of the shorter form and immediacy of ideas (Maynard, 2002 in Horner and Ryf, 2007, p.194).

The current situation

2.6 Some writers are optimistic about the role of poetry in 21st century schools. Poet Valerie Bloom believes there is a changing perception. She says that when she first started, ‘you’d hear a big groan go up’ when poetry was mentioned. Nowadays, she says, the children actually say ‘Yes!’ (Hoyles and Hoyles, 2002, p.84) However, for many people, poetry is still seen as ‘elitist’ and irrelevant to their daily lives (Horner and Ryf, 2007, p.187). Ofsted’s 2007 report (p.6) found that poetry teaching is weaker than other aspects of English inspected and ‘underdeveloped’ in many schools, though still good in two-thirds of primary schools. Its success depends on teachers using active approaches (p.3). This is supported by Corbett (Appendix vii) who says if the teacher loves poetry, the children will love poetry.

2.7 Poetry is a ‘core experience’ for children (Ofsted, 2007, p.4), and most enjoy it. However, poetry features less in the English curriculum in Year 6 because too many teachers focus on preparing pupils for SATS. The test for 11-year-olds rarely includes poetry-related questions, and then usually on the reading paper. In some primary classrooms, the result has been ‘catastrophic’; poetry has ‘disappeared from the curriculum altogether’ (Wilson, 2010, p.54). He says this is a direct result
of pressure on teachers in Year 6. Consequently, teachers have lost confidence in teaching poetry when measuring standards is to the fore. Rosen (Appendix vi) describes this as ‘a tragic example of how teachers, under pressure from the testing regime, turn their backs on something that is important in education’.

2.8 Many teachers also do not know enough poetry. This was reflected in worksheets which listed dull questions such as ‘which lines rhyme’ and ‘how many syllables are there in each line’. (Ofsted, 2007, p.8). The same few poems are studied across most schools. Children have limited experience of classic poems and poems from other cultures and traditions. The reason for this is provided by a survey in 2007 which showed that over half the teachers questioned could name only two, or fewer, poets (UKLA, 2007, cited in Ofsted, 2007, p.13). The effect of this is that teachers rely on the same few poems they were taught at school - humorous poems, strong story poems, or those easy to imitate - but neglect good quality classic poems and those from different cultures. The result is that too few poems are chosen which are genuinely challenging.

2.9 Ofsted also found it was common for pupils to write poetry in imitation of specific genres, but there were insufficient opportunities for children to find their own voices. Used this way, poetry becomes a teaching tool for language development rather than a medium for exploring experience. There is often a reliance on verse which is ‘immediately accessible’ but which offers few opportunities for reflection and discussion (Catt, cited in Fisher and Williams, 2000, p.28).

2.10 Marking is often of poor quality, offering inadequate feedback to children, because of the teacher’s lack of knowledge. Ofsted (2007, p.12) found comments such as ‘lovely poem’ and ‘I like the rhyme’ were common, offering little guidance how to improve. Too many first drafts become final drafts, with potentially outstanding writing undeveloped. Teachers have particular difficulty responding to free verse; as a result, many pupils cannot write poems unless they rhyme.
Examples of good practice

2.11 One inspector found (Ofsted, 2007, p.17), poetry was ‘threaded through the culture of the school’ from assemblies to publications to plasma screens throughout the building. Poetry is considered by teachers no matter what they are teaching. It can be incorporated into every day, with teachers using poetry in spare moments such as when children are waiting to go into the dining hall (Horner and Ryf, 2007, p.194). A study at Roehampton University saw every English seminar for student teachers begin with a poem – a policy recommended for use in schools, (Kelly and Collins, 2009, p.28). They recommend that student teachers be conversant with imaginative, active strategies to bring poems to life.

2.12 Effective subject leaders are crucial. As poet Benjamin Zephaniah said: ‘We want more teachers who are passionate about poetry, not just teachers who do poetry as an add-on to English’ (1992, cited in Hoyles and Hoyles, 2002). Teachers should be widely read in poetry themselves (Horner and Ryf, 2007, p.254), and use a range of strategies including mini-whiteboards for ideas, discussion with partners, drama and role play, sequencing, deconstructing poems, setting poems to music, and finding images to match poems.

2.13 Teachers need to make a shift towards an increasing variety of more demanding verse which promotes exploratory talk. Catt (cited in Fisher and Williams, 2000, p.29) says the response and enjoyment can be ‘sometimes limitless’. Children should be encouraged to choose and read poems during independent reading. Teachers should routinely read poems with pupils (Ofsted, 2007, p.9). The most effective schools offer a ‘wider and richer’ selection of poems.

2.14 Schools should also ensure there is a wide range of poetry books available. Poems can be learned by heart and performed. By-heart learning is not rote learning according to Sedgwick, (cited in Wilson, 1998, p.23), who says it means learning with joy and emotional involvement. Poems such as ‘O what is that sound’ by W H Auden can be
turned into dialogue and acted out. One school found the best way to encourage children to use them was a poetry speaking competition where children learn a poem by heart and perform it, an idea dismissed as ‘very public school’ by a teacher at my observation school, (Appendix iii). The starting point for helping children to become enthusiastic about poetry is for teachers to read to them – frequently. Collins (cited in Graham and Kelly, 1998, p.55) says teachers should read ‘a great deal’ of poetry to children and let the poems and poets do the work for them. Cope (cited in Wilson, 1998, p.17) suggests forming a poetry club. Children should be encouraged to respond to poetry, not just to interpret poetic devices, according to Horner and Ryf, (2007, p.193), who say: ‘It is about personal response... not about spotting metaphors or naming of parts’. They say the enjoyment must come first.

2.15 Rosen (1989, p.43) says better poetry is produced if children write from their own experiences and use actual words that people speak, their own responses and feelings. This is using knowledge they already possess, he says. An accomplished literacy co-ordinator told Ofsted (2007, p.16): ‘I ... believe it is vital to give children the freedom to make their own discoveries and compose their own poems from scratch.’ The co-ordinator incorporates poetry into every year group once a term, with specific pupil targets and a planned sequence of lessons to help teachers who are less confident with poetry. Children must be encouraged to find their ‘unique’ voice (Dunn, Styles, Warburton, 1987, p.32). Poor writing is often a second rate attempt to mimic the writing of others. They suggest using the ‘ordinary stuff of everyday life’ rather than fantasy or imagination to begin with.

2.16 Teachers should give feedback which helps children to re-draft and improve their poems, (Osted, 2007, p.12) Marking should not be a chore and carefully crafted comments can stimulate writing of higher quality. An example is: ‘You have tried hard to use interesting verbs like gleaming and chattering. To make the structure of the poem clearer, leave a space between verses.’
Conclusion

2.17 The most effective teaching of poetry is accomplished through often simple means within the grasp of most educators – but all too rarely used. There is good practice in many schools, often linked to an individual, inspirational teacher. If more schools took steps to immerse children in poetry, there could be improvements to many different types of writing.
3.1 Consideration was first given to what information was needed, as recommended by Bell (2005, p.115). The aim was to find out about children’s attitudes towards poetry, and how that might change after being taught a poetry unit in the National Literacy Strategy. The school’s approach to poetry would also be explored.

3.2 The focus would be on one class of Year 6 children. Research would be carried out at a local school, to be referred to as a ‘primary school in Warwickshire’. The research would take the form of:

- A survey form for pupils to fill in at the beginning of their Year 6 poetry unit, and again at the end (see Appendix i).
- Observation of a sequence of literacy lessons delivered over a week.
- A study of a sample of the work produced by children.
- A semi-structured interview with the English co-ordinator.

A written approach was made to the school outlining the research and permission was given by the headteacher. Identification, permission to conduct research, and a CRB form were shown to the school.

3.3 The school was told that the results of the research might be made public for the benefit of educational professionals, policy makers and a wider public understanding of educational policy and practice.

3.4 The survey contained two opening sentences explaining who I was and the reason for the research. A verbal explanation was given stating what the information would be used for, and what would happen to the surveys once the project was complete (as recommended by Bell, 2005, p.149). All surveys would be anonymous and the research recognised the right of any pupil who wished to withdraw. The survey would comply with the Data Protection Act (1998) in terms of the purpose of my research.
and what it would be used for. Most of the questions had simple tick boxes for answers, bearing in mind that the more structured a question is, the easier it would be to analyse (Bell, 2005, p.137). Likert scales were chosen to discover the pupils’ strength of feeling and to make it easy to analyse. The scale was adapted to four boxes to avoid a middle box which is often too tempting for respondents and elicits limited information. Open-ended questions were kept to a minimum; a box was provided for children to write the names of any poets they liked. Expectations were low for this, although it was hoped they might have recalled some names from units studied in previous years. Vocabulary was kept simple because the effectiveness of questions depends on the reading ability of the child (Walker, 1985, p.49). I would ensure that I would be ‘scrupulously honest’ in presenting the findings, even if they contradicted the main arguments of my dissertation (Walliman and Buckler, 2008, p.41).

3.5 A sequence of literacy lessons would be observed. This would run from Monday to Thursday in a week in October 2011. A simple form was devised (see Appendix ii) including the lesson objective, previous learning and resources. The main part of the observation would be detailing the structure of the lesson and how children interacted with the topic. The aim would be for the student to be as unobtrusive as possible, as suggested by Bell (2005, p.189), though note would be taken of the pupils’ reactions to the observer (Croll, 1986, p.90).

3.6 Questions were submitted in advance to the English co-ordinator who would be interviewed, as suggested by Bell (2005, p.156). The identity of the teacher would not be disclosed. It was explained that this would be a semi-structured interview, giving the opportunity for follow-up questions, and to allow the respondent freedom to talk about what is of ‘central significance’ to them (Bell, 2005, p.161).
CHAPTER 4 – RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 The poetry lessons observed took place in an ‘outstanding’ school in Warwickshire. Year 6 was divided into two ability groups. I observed the lower ability group of 28 children, comprising 17 boys and 11 girls. The class teacher was an enthusiast of teaching poetry. However, I had already discovered that the school as a whole was not so keen: the English co-ordinator was sceptical of the value of children writing poetry and said it was not given any importance in the school. Her view was:

‘You cannot assess poetry because it is so subjective. It does not tell you anything about the child apart from their creative side.’ (see Appendix iii).

4.2 Before observing the lessons, I carried out a survey of attitudes towards poetry (see Appendix i). This showed that 20 pupils enjoyed poetry only a little or not at all. Half thought it boring or hard to understand, and 19 of them ‘hardly ever’ read poetry outside of English lessons. The survey showed that 18 of the 28 felt nervous about writing a poem themselves, and a remarkable 22 pupils would not consider writing a poem for their own pleasure. I surveyed the children again at the end of the unit, and those results are shown in Chapter 6.

4.3 The classroom was arranged with two pupils seated at each of the desks, set out in formal rows facing the teacher and the board. There were two bookshelves, though these contained mainly fiction novels. The school had quite a large collection of poetry books located in the library on a different floor and the teacher drew from these for use in class. Authors included Roger McGough, Valerie Bloom, Brian Moses and Sandy Brownjohn. There were also collections edited by Paul Cookson, James Berry and Gaby Morgan.
4.4 Lessons were based on the Year 6 unit of the National Literacy Strategy (1998) looking at the ‘Power of Imagery’ in poetry. A week in October was to be spent studying the unit, (intended for two weeks), with the follow-up on ‘Finding a Voice’ to be introduced after SATs tests in May. The teaching sequence began with an exploration of personification.

The first lesson

4.5 The teacher introduced the lesson by describing how he had woken in the night and seen the moon. He then read an extract from ‘Silver’ by Walter de la Mare, beginning:

‘Slowly, silently, now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon…’

He challenged children to explain ‘personification’. The children came up with answers such as ‘a poem that doesn’t rhyme’ and ‘someone who speaks’. Eventually, the teacher gave them the definition and a child showed her understanding by saying: ‘The moon moves. That’s like walking!’

4.6 At this stage, the children were struggling with an understanding of personification. A different approach might have helped the children. For instance, a striking and thought-provoking image, such as this (left), could have been displayed on the whiteboard with the children asked: ‘How is the moon feeling tonight?’ Alternatively, the teacher could have challenged the children to think about how an object in the school felt; the photocopier might have been fed up or the school bell could not wait until lunchtime. Children could have chosen an object, written a short poem and then asked the rest of the class to guess the object.

4.7 The teacher explained the task of writing a poem about Jack Frost. A poem by Brian Patten, ‘Jack Frost playing cards at the roadside’ from The Works (Cookson, 2010) was then displayed and read. Initially, their ideas about Jack Frost were limited – one child guessed he was ‘a bit like Santa
Claus’. However, once the teacher asked for descriptions of snow, the ideas started to flow:

‘When the frosty snow falls to the ground’

‘When the fluffy snowflakes fall elegantly from the sky’

‘When the snowflakes sway gently through the air’

The teacher wrote some of the ideas on the board in verse form to model it for the children. This aspect of shared writing was effective in showing children how to lay out a poem. The children were then set an independent task of writing a poem beginning ‘Jack Frost decides when...’

4.8 After about 15 minutes, children read out their favourite lines. Child A had Jack Frost layering the road, breathing on the window and turning the water into ‘shiny ice’.

Illustration 1 – A picture of the moon such as this could have inspired children.
Illustration 2 – Child A’s poem

Child B thought about the decisions Jack Frost takes, but has been less creative in the choice of verbs:

```
Jack Frost decides when it is winter,
he puts the crystal clean ice on the slippery floor.
Jack Frost decides when the smooth snowflakes drift to the ground.
He decides to put the fresh blanket of snow on the rooftops.
Jack decides when the glittering night sky goes away.
Jack decides when the naked looking trees grow back again.
```

Illustration 3 – Child B’s poem

Overall, the lesson objective that ‘children can write a poem that begins to use personification effectively’ had been achieved for a majority of the class. However, at this stage it has to be questioned whether pupils were excited about poetry.

The second lesson

4.9 Children were asked to pick out the best descriptions of winter from yesterday’s written work and to share them in pairs. One child read out: ‘The frost spreads around the car’ and, after paired discussion, this was changed to ‘the frost wraps itself around the car’. Another example,
'snowflakes glide across the sky’ became the much more impressive ‘snowflakes blanket the car with deep moonlight’. This was the first opportunity the children had of reviewing and improving their work – an important skill for the poet. This was done orally, though it would have been good practice for the children to re-write their own first attempts at poetry. The teacher told me children like to move on after having written a poem down, but the idea of improvement is recommended by Dunn, Styles and Warburton (1987, p.106) who say most good poems are created through drafting and editing.

4.10. Some children were able to think up good examples of personification, such as Child D, but struggled with the conventions of poetry layout:

Illustration 4 – Child D’s poem

Child E had some interesting examples of the effects of Jack Frost but felt the need to repeat the key phrase at the start of every line:

Illustration 5 – Child E’s poem
4.11 The last ten minutes of the lesson saw the children sitting on the carpet, having chosen a poetry book from a selection supplied by the teacher. They were asked to sit in pairs and choose a poem to read to the class. There was some enthusiastic reading and much laughter. I wonder if this kind of activity might have been more effective at the beginning of the unit to underline the difference between prose and poetry, and to emphasise the importance of poetry being read aloud. This approach is recommended by Morgan (2001, p.6) who suggests:

‘Some children could learn their poem by heart. The heart is a good place to keep a poem’.

Poet Ruth Padel (2006) agrees, saying learning by heart is ‘the single most important thing about making a poem yours’ and Rosen (2008) says teachers should actively try to re-connect poetry with performance and pleasure, instead of ‘cold stuff which we have to dissect’.

The third lesson

4.12 The teacher showed children a picture of a snowy landscape on the interactive board. The teacher’s opening question: ‘how is the tree feeling?’ prompted responses such as:

‘it is angry because the snow is grabbing onto it’

‘I was scorching hot until the shining snow clambered on to my naked hands’.

The teacher perhaps could have modelled the writing of a personification poem about the tree, describing his thought processes as he wrote his ideas onto the whiteboard. This would have been a good springboard when he moved on to show a picture of a cloud which sparked some encouraging responses such as the cloud feeling ‘lonely’ in the sky and feeling ‘weightless because it just got rid of its rain’.

4.13 The use of illustrations by the teacher appeared to be the turning point for many of the children. Perhaps this strategy could have been used earlier in the week, accompanied by an emphasis on the five senses
with a scaffolded sheet. Pupils were then asked to write a sentence, using personification, about the sun, wind, flowers, fire, computer, rain, school and winter – with an extension of their own choice. Some pupils struggled, saying it ‘didn’t make sense’ but effective questioning by the teacher gave them confidence. There were excellent responses including ‘the angry computer struggles to find the website’ and ‘the book was getting ready to be written in’.

Child E wrote about the rain being sad because it dies when it touches the floor:

Illustration 6 – Child E’s poem.

Pupils were clearly more confident with personification though their concept still seemed to be a little limited to feelings. It was interesting to note the contrast between subjects chosen by the teacher (weather and flowers) and those by the children (football, school, friendships). The lesson might have been more effective if a topic of more popular interest to the children had been selected – so they could use prior knowledge and genuine opinions. This approach is supported by Catt (cited in Fisher and Williams, 2000, p.39) who says children bring their own knowledge to a text and it is up to the teacher to develop this starting point. Corbett (2012, p.20) also believes children write better poetry if they drawn on their own lived experiences:
Ensure that children write about real experiences – using observation and memory – both experiences that the teacher ‘sets up’ as well as remembered experiences that matter to the child.’

Lesson Four

4.14 The final lesson had a specific objective of writing a personification poem about a whole season or a whole festival. Ideas about Spring were put together in a mindmap including comments such as ‘birds singing’ and ‘leaves on trees’. Children were then asked to pick an idea and turn it into a ‘poetic sentence’. Suggestions included:

‘flowers decide to emerge under the glittering sunbeams’ and
‘colourful flowers bathe in the sun’.

4.15 The teacher then set a writing activity based on pictures shown to the children, each depicting one of the seasons. Each child was given a worksheet containing an example of a personification poem (Appendix iv). Because one of the options was Winter, many children chose Christmas as a theme leading to the inevitable listing of present ideas, as in this extract.

Illustration 7 – Child F’s poem.

However, it can be seen that Child F has grasped the idea of personification in her line ‘the present smiles in happiness’.

4.16 There is much debate about providing scaffolding for children to write poems. In this case, the ‘Spring’ poem was short and provided some
clear examples of personification (Appendix iv). It gave children a good springboard to their own writing and they still had a choice of subjects. Perhaps the justified lines at the bottom of the page confused some children who thought they still had to write in prose. Some commentators are strongly opposed to scaffolds for children to fill in. Wilson (2007, p.445) calls them a ‘straitjacket’ and suggests pupils should be guided but not forced. Kelly (2005, p.131) agrees, warning of the proliferation of writing frames which amount to ‘little more than restrictive worksheets’. Horner and Ryf (2007, p.265) admit writing frames have become more common because of the ‘prescriptive’ National Literacy Strategy but have led to ‘formulaic’ poetry writing by children. Instead, I favour an approach suggested by Dunn, Styles and Warburton (1987, p.77) who say the detailed teaching of technique – in this case, personification – should be done through word games, rather than in the ‘full-blooded struggle’ to create a poem. The techniques learned can then be applied by children given a freer rein to find their own voices.

4.17 From the final pieces of work, it is clear that pupils were able to use their imaginations to produce poems of clarity with varied vocabulary and interesting images. Child D, who had previously struggled with poetic form (see Illustration 4), had progressed with his layout of the poem. The sea swishes and the shells wait to be found – both good examples of personification.
Illustration 8 – Child D’s poem.

Child B, writing about ‘Winter’, has some excellent images and use of personification. This child has clearly understood the concept and applied it to the winter setting with enthusiasm. This is a significant improvement from the child’s repetitive Jack Frost poem (see Illustration 3).

Illustration 9 – Child B’s poem
Chapter 6 – THE SURVEY RESULTS

6.1 It is clear from the results of my survey that the week of poetry lessons had a beneficial effect on the children. Before the unit, only 8 of the class said they enjoyed poetry quite a lot or very much. This number had doubled by the end of the week. Similarly, the number of children who were either quite or very confident about writing their own poetry had risen from 10 to 17, with 11 of those feeling ‘very confident’ about their own abilities.

6.2 There were also interesting figures in the response of children when they heard the word ‘poetry’. Half the class – 14 – described their initial response as ‘it’s boring’ before the unit began. By the end, that number had dropped to 3, with a large increase in those finding it ‘really enjoyable’ from 6 to 13.

6.3 Although the timescale was only a week, the reading habits of the children appeared to have changed slightly. Of the 28 children who began the week, 17 said they only read poetry when they had to during English lessons. This number had fallen to 10 by the end of the week with more pupils saying they might choose a poetry book during independent reading at school.
6.4 There was progress, too, in recognition of well-known poets. At the beginning of the unit, the whole class had only been able to name two poets between them – Roald Dahl and John Foster. By the end of the week, the number of poets had risen to eight including Brian Moses, Roger Stevens and Ian Bland.

6.5 Most promising of all was the number of children who would consider writing a poem for their pleasure. A disappointing 5 children at the start of the week had risen to 16 by the end, including nine boys.

6.6 Overall, the survey results were very promising about the effect of the poetry teaching, especially considering it was over the short time period of a week, and that the poetry was isolated within the literacy curriculum and experience of the children. I think the questions posed were successful in probing the children’s attitudes and knowledge of poetry. Perhaps I could have asked about their previous experience of learning poetry at school, and included some examples of well-known poems to see if they recognised them. However, the information they provided was sufficient to indicate the effectiveness of the lessons.
Apart from English lessons, how often do you read a poem?

![Bar graph showing the number of pupils reading poems]

Illustrations 14 and 15 – Graphs showing whether children would consider writing poems for pleasure and how often they read poems.

Would you consider writing poems for your own pleasure?

![Bar graph showing responses to writing poems]

Chapter 7 – Putting It Into
PRACTICE

7.1 On my final year placement, I managed to negotiate a lesson to try to put into practice some of the approaches I had learnt about during my dissertation. I was teaching a mixed Year 5/6 class. In the end, I was left with one lesson for poetry so I decided to use one of my favourite poems, ‘Alone in the Grange’ by Gregory Harrison, about a mysterious old man who lives in an old shuttered house. It has a distinctive pattern beginning:

Strange,
Strange,
Is the little old man
Who lives in the Grange.
Old,
Old;
And they say that he keeps
A box full of gold.

I began by asking the children simply to read it through. I then invited four children to the front to read a verse each. I wanted the children to become familiar with the text before they started to discuss its meaning, so I continued by asking them to come up with different ways of saying the key words such as strange, old and soft. I encouraged them to use different voices and emphases.

7.2 I then asked children to work in pairs to consider: If the poet were to walk in the room now, what would you ask him? The responses were written on post-it notes and I read these out to the whole class. Many children wanted to know whether the old man was real, who it was based on, and whether he was really a magician. Others wished to know why he was lonely. I collected the notes together and stuck them on the board – and later referred to them as possible answers to the questions emerged from the lesson. I then asked children to work in groups to come up with
a description of the old man using their own words. This produced some interesting and imaginative answers. One group thought the man looked like Gollum from ‘Lord of the Rings’, and another said he was more like Yoda from the ‘Star Wars’ films, so I asked one of the Year 6 pupils to find pictures on the internet and display them on the whiteboard.

7.3 We discussed the different ideas and I made a spidergram on the board of vocabulary to describe the old man. In literacy, I like to use children’s suggestions to make a visible wordbank. This particularly helps children of lower ability to get started, and I make a point of saying I do not mind anyone ‘stealing’ words from the board. I then modelled an opening to my poem, staying close to the structure used by Gregory Harrison. I wrote my own first verse, explaining my thought processes and making alterations and improvements as I progressed. I then asked the class to offer comments or suggestions to make it better, and made further changes. I wished to emphasise the importance of writing a first draft and then changing and improving it.

7.4 I then asked children to using their rough books to construct their own opening verses. Given the short time limit for the lesson, I suggested they keep to Harrison’s structure: in a longer series of lessons, I would have given children more freedom. I also made it clear I did not expect the poem to rhyme, although some still insisted on trying.

7.5 I was very impressed by many of the contributions. A very low ability girl, after a short one-to-one discussion with me, came up with:

   Grumpy
   Grumpy
   Is the worthless old man
   Who lives in the grey empty school house.

One of the most pleasing pieces of work was from a low ability Year 5 boy who began his poem:
Scary
Scary
Is the manky man
In the mysterious house.

His poem went on to talk about the man’s grumpy dog, and his mad wife ‘who he killed with a knife’. This boy rarely completes work in literacy, but he had finished four verses of his poem and gone on to illustrate the work.

A higher ability Year 6 came up began with some fairly deep characterisation which posed plenty of questions for the reader:

Homeless
Homeless
Is the troubled man
Who never stops to say hello.

One of my favourite poems came from a lower ability Year 5 boy who often struggled with writing but was often able to come up with unusual ideas and images. He called his poem ‘The Curse’:

Fat
Fat
Is the man
Who eats marshmallows.
Blood red,
Blood red,
Is the colour of his burning eyes.
Heartless,
Heartless,
Is his glare which haunts his victims.
Strange,
Strange,
Is his curse that comes when the moon is full.
Hairy,
Hairy,
Is his dark fur which is stained with blood.
Cure,
Cure,
Is what he’s been looking for, ever since it happened.

7.6 Considering there was only an hour for this topic, I was very impressed with the overall quality of the poems written. I was particularly pleased that many of the most interesting images came from lower ability children, not known for the quality of their writing, or for completing tasks in normal lesson time. I could have improved the lesson by giving more time to immersing children in poetry – perhaps sharing with them several poems on the same theme, before moving on to Harrison’s. I could also have begun the lesson with an arresting image of a strange old man and asked children to brainstorm ideas before introducing the poem. I did manage to find time later in the week for children to make final copies of their poems. By this stage, I had been able to give written feedback to them on their first drafts. The final versions were free from crossings out and would have been suitable to put into a class anthology.
Chapter 8 - CONCLUSION

8.1 I was pleased with the evidence I collected from my lesson observations. If I were to repeat the process, it would be useful to visit a second school, by way of comparison, to see how they delivered the same unit. It would also have been helpful to see how the teacher marked the poetry produced and how this feedback informed the children’s next piece of work.

8.2 Overall, I was disappointed with my observation school’s approach to teaching poetry. While the class teacher was very enthusiastic, the school as a whole was less so – almost tolerating poetry’s presence in the curriculum and certainly not promoting it within literacy or the general life of the school. Both the National Curriculum and the National Literacy Strategy (although archived) give a prominent role to poetry.

8.3 The school did not seem to be persuaded by the benefits of poetry, which, as poet Michael Rosen says:

‘offers children ways of using language that will help them with their acquisition of literacy but also with their emotional and intellectual development’. (See Appendix vi)

It was sad that this ‘outstanding’ school did not agree, especially as its own website promises ‘a rich, varied and stimulating, linguistic and literacy environment’ (School website, 2011). Poet Pie Corbett is critical of this approach which, he says, ‘demonstrates a total lack of understanding about the purpose of education’, ( Appendix vii). He says some teachers do not understand how poetry can enhance other forms of writing, and are ‘insecure’ about teaching poetry. He adds:

‘We educate for life, to pass on culture, to enrich, to nurture - to inform, to develop - and the view that states that we should only teach for exams and tests is short-termist.’

8.4 The unit I observed was clearly appreciated by pupils and the change in their attitudes, reflected by my survey, could be seen as proof that it
was effective. The main objectives were met for most pupils. However, the two-week unit was only allocated four lessons, meaning that the three days suggested for writing and improving their own poems were condensed into one lesson. Plans for a further three days writing poems using surreal and amusing imagery were not used. Neither was a suggested day for evaluation and performing poems created in the unit. I think that if I were the teacher, I would press for two weeks to be allowed to deliver this unit. This is a suggested sequence of how it could be done:

1. Read a variety of poems to the class. Some will include personification but do not draw the pupils’ attention to this.

2. Choose a poem that includes personification. Split it into parts. Divide the children into groups and give each a verse which they must learn, rehearse and perform to the class with actions and sound effects. Put all these together into a class performance.

3. Discuss the poem using open-ended questions, such as those suggested by Michael Rosen (Appendix vi).

4. Then allow the children to choose a favourite poem and read it to their partners. Then combine pairs into fours and have them read out their poems again, discussing why they chose them. Some could also read them out to the whole class.

5. Read out some short personification poems, asking the children to guess what they describe.

6. Challenge the children to write personification poems in pairs and to perform them to the rest of the class who must say what they are about.

7. Show the children a dramatic picture of, for instance, the sea, such as Turner’s *Snow Storm – Steamboat off a harbour’s mouth*, or show them a video.

*Illustration 16 – Snow Storm – Steamboat off a Harbour’s Mouth by J M W Turner*
clip of an angry sea, such as from the film *The Perfect Storm* or *Titanic*. Play them some sea sound effects or music inspired by the sea. Ask them to brainstorm how the sea is feeling, and then how a lone ship might be feeling. Make a list of key vocabulary.

8. The teacher models the writing of the first verse of a poem about the angry sea. This includes reading, correcting and improving. He/ she then acts as scribe to create a second verse through shared writing.

9. Children then move to independent writing of poetry. The teacher tells the children they will write a first draft today. Writing frames should be avoided except, perhaps, for lower ability children or those with special needs. The teacher could mention the five simple rules for writing a poem, suggested by Dunn, Styles and Warburton (1987, p.32) – it doesn’t have to rhyme, start a new line when you pause, say something fresh, ordinary things make good poetry, and every word must count. The first draft is then discussed in pairs. Some are read out. The teacher gives written feedback to each child. The class talks about how to improve their poems and pupils have a chance to write a second draft.

10. After further feedback, the children use ICT to type up a final version of their poems, locating dramatic sea pictures on the internet. The completed poems are placed in either a class poetry anthology or on a school website for parents to read. A selection of the poems is read out at assembly.

8.5 So, which is the most effective way to teach poetry? Most importantly, I think it is crucial to immerse children in poetry, just as they are immersed in prose. For instance, as Horner and Ryf suggest, (2001, p.235), the teacher could read a poem every day to the children purely for enjoyment. Children could choose their favourite poems and read them to the class; teachers could introduce rhymes during transition periods in the classroom, implement a ‘poetry browse time’ in the timetable, and show videos and play tapes of poets reading their own
work. There could be poetry displays and posters including poems chosen by the children themselves, and a poetry trolley of resources available to be shared between classes. I should like to start a lunchtime poetry club for children, and have poetry reading competitions. ‘Golden time’ could be replaced by poetry thinking time, as recommended by Robert Fisher (1997, p.5).

8.6 All this is aimed at developing independence in children’s poetry writing, and for children to find their own ‘real and distinctive voice’ (Wilson, 2007, p.448). According to Phinn (cited in Evans, 2001, p.38), any school committed to promoting this has to do three things – offer positive influences from teachers, provide a wide range of material and give children the opportunity to ‘have a go’. With a little effort, and not very much money, it should be possible for all schools to offer children this exciting opportunity.

8.7 This project has given me a fascinating insight into the different techniques used by professionals to teach poetry. It has shown me the pressure which teachers face to find timetable space for topics which are not seen as important for SATs examinations. I have also gained an insight into just what can be achieved in a few short lessons, and the potential of what could be achieved if poetry is championed in a school and actively promoted. I will be able to use all this experience in planning my own poetry lessons and immersing children in poetry. I hope, too, that the content of this dissertation may be helpful to other students and teachers looking for inspiration in how to enthuse their pupils about poetry. (7,878 words)
REFERENCES


http://www.teachersmedia.co.uk/videos/ruth-padel


Rosen, M., (2008), Poetry in Motion [accessed online December 2011].
www.teachersmedia.co.uk/videos/poetry-in-motion.


APPENDIX I – DISSERTATION LOG

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON
School of Education

BA (Hons) Dissertation Log

Student: John Howes
Specialism: English
Tutor: Ian Addis

Proposal Title

What is the value of teaching poetry?

How is the most effective way to teach poetry?

Broad Area of Study

What kind of benefits do children derive from learning poetry? Berkeley at emotional and social benefits.

What will this study inform my own teaching of poetry?

Key Features (Interviews, Questionnaires, Classroom Study etc)

1) Interview with classroom teacher or English Coordinator
2) Questionnaires for children before and after the unit
3) Observation of poetry lessons

Main Literature Sources

Ofsted (2007) Report into poetry teaching
Sedgwick (Brownjohn / Fiske & William)
Horner & Ray (Creative Teaching)
Norgaen - How to teach poetry writing

Journals - Literacy (Kelly), Classroom (Kelly & Collin),
Cambridge Journal of Education (Wilson)
English Teaching (Wilson)

Ethical Issues

Please confirm the following:

☑ I have completed 2 copies of the School of Education approval form and have given one copy to my supervisor.
First Tutorial
Questions and Issues
how to present results (including)
Can I use examples A & B
What should be put in appendix? How should use interview
transcripts? Can I use party written by children on previous
placement?
Title is new. What is most effective way to teach party?

Outcomes (Include revisions which arise from the tutorial)
Decided on pie chart or graphs instead of text. Rather than
appendices. List items to be included as appendices but referred to in text.
Example: A children’s party, Pemium to be included where
appropriate to illustrate a point.

Timetable (for revisions etc to be in place)
Next week (8th) placement (in April) after draft has been
written.

Second Tutorial – Progress Report 22/4/11
Questions and Issues
Problems with word count, too many appendices.
How is it best to manage reducing this amount without effecting the
quality of the work?
Are we enough journals (A)?
Are contents of appendices OK?
Is chapter ‘Putting it into practice’ acceptable?

Outcomes (Include revisions which arise from the tutorial)
Reduce two chapters on research findings to one and include these
examples of writing.
Call refer from Appendices interviews back to text to show their
relevance.
Change reference to ‘porty climate’ which is not clear.

Timetable (for revisions etc to be in place)
April 23-27 Make final changes, and print
May 3 hand in dissertation.
### APPENDIX II – LESSON OBSERVATION PRO-FORMA

**Lesson Observations**

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<table>
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<th>Structure of lesson</th>
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<th>Evaluation</th>
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| Mon   | Use the techniques of dialogic talk to explore ideas, topics or issues. Understand underlying themes, causes and points of view. Select and read several poems that exemplify inanimate objects, scenes or events being imaginatively personified. These could include from “The Works” p.167 “A poem to be spoken silently”, p.183 “It’s Spring”. Write the words there, these and they’re on the whiteboard. T reads out a sentence and the chn hold up 1, 2 or 3 fingers to show which homophone it should be. Homophone worksheet. Chn pick out examples of personification. Using these, can they come up with any others? Using an image stimulus, chn begin to write personification statements about it e.g. how would it move? what would it be feeling? T. Chn pick out examples of personification. Using these, can they come up with any others? Using an image stimulus, chn begin to write personification statements about it e.g. how would it move? what would it be feeling? T.
| Tue   | Select and read several more poems that exemplify inanimate objects, scenes or events being imaginatively personified e.g. “The Works” p.167 “Jack Frost playing cards” p.371 “Hedgehog Idling”. Give out large sheets with incorrect homophones on. In pairs, chn correct passage. Homophone worksheet. Homophone worksheet. Chn read out a piece of description they are pleased with. T explains why it’s good(!).
| Wed   | Using an image stimulus, chn come up with ideas for personification. Take the best ideas and begin to adapt them into poetic form, using the poems they have read already as a guide. Chn select from a range of visual stimuli in order to write a personification poem. TA with upper, T with lower. Homophone worksheet. Homophone worksheet. Selected chn read out their personification poems.
| Thurs | Hand out a selection of visual stimuli. In groups, chn write a personification poem for performance to the class. Homophone worksheet. Chn select from a range of visual stimuli in order to write a personification poem. TA. Chn select from a range of visual stimuli in order to write a personification poem. T. Selected chn read out their personification poems.
| Fri   | Big Write games. | Short writing test (My hero) and spellings from 2010 SATS in order to level children. |
APPENDIX IV – WORKSHEET FOR CHILDREN USED BY TEACHER IN OBSERVATION CLASS

Personification Poetry

Try to write your own season poem using personification. Think about the weather, plants, animals and celebrations or anything else that fits in with your chosen season.

Spring

Rain gently falls,
and tulips decide to bloom.
Birds sing songs of welcoming,
and Easter brings happiness into our homes.
We know that Spring is here!

Winter

The snow sleeping on the slate rooftops and the trees taking off their clothes while the snowflakes jumping on the snowy ground. As the snow and snowflakes dancing around the garden, the snowmen and ladies were playing snap on the happy table while the humans searching around the house, the turkey and Christmas cake were sipping. As the Christmas were getting closer, the humans were finding something else to put in the tree of dreams.
APPENDIX V – INTERVIEW WITH ENGLISH CO-ORDINATOR AT PRIMARY SCHOOL IN WARWICKSHIRE (quoted on pages 3 and 21 of dissertation).

How is poetry promoted in the classroom?
There are books on the shelves in the classroom, units of work for teachers, and incidental writing of poetry in the curriculum.

How often do you buy new poetry books for class libraries?
Books are purchased when money is available. Collections of poetry are available in classrooms and in the school library.

Do you use the National Framework Units for poetry throughout the school?
Teachers can take what they want from the National Framework units. Some teachers do teach the poetry units. Whatever topic is being done, teachers will be working with that and some include poetry. For instance, Key Stage 1 have been looking at rabbits. We are working towards topics for the whole school. It is up to the individual teacher to look at the topics being taught and to dip into the National Literacy Strategy as a guide.

What range of poetry is studied? Does it include classic poems and those from other cultures and traditions?
It does include classic poems and those from other cultures.

Is there time for poetry in Year 6?
In my previous Year 6 class, we did no poetry except in afternoon lessons. You cannot assess poetry because it is so subjective. It does not tell you anything about the child apart from their creative side. In terms of how they are progressing in their literacy skills, it does not give you the information you need. It sometimes appears in SATS on reading, but not in writing. It does not tell you if the child is able to write in sentences, but it can tell you lots of other things about them.

What efforts are made to enhance the poetry curriculum, eg with visiting poets, competitions or cross-curricular work?
Poetry is brought into cross-curricular work. For instance, next half term Year 5 and 6 will be studying World War One and we will bring in the war poets – those that are suitable, anyway.

**What efforts are made for children to hear poetry?**
None, other than in class.

**What efforts are made for children to read poetry aloud – including their own compositions?**
There is no time for it. There is no recitation competition- that seems very public school to me.

**Which poets are most popular with the children?**
Children do not know enough about them. They would not be able to name many poets. Authors – fine, but poets not. We do not suggest they read them. It’s not the best thing they need to think of.

**How important is poetry teaching in this school?**
It is not given any importance if you are thinking in terms of literacy results. If you are meaning in terms of a sense of the English language, knowledge of worldwide poets and clever use of language, then it is.

**How and when are children introduced to poetry?**
They are introduced to it in reception through rhyme and alliteration, and counting rhymes and tongue twisters. They will encounter it in every year, though not specifically through all the units.

**Are there opportunities for pupils to write independently and find their own voices?**
There are some opportunities in cross-curricular work, when a topic is being taught. They are usually asked to write in the style of a particular poet, or using as particular structure.

**Are children encouraged to write about subjects that matter to them?**
Whatever it is they are doing, that is what they are writing about. We are going to give them the topics generally, otherwise they find it difficult. The less able need a structure.

**Do the children enjoy writing poetry? How do you know?**
It is hard to say. They seem to enjoy rhyme. They always want poems to rhyme.

**What training is there on poetry for teachers?**
None in the school. There is too much else to do.

**What active teaching methods are used to teach poetry?**
None.

**How do you mark poetry and give feedback to children?**
We are in the process of creating a new marking policy. There is nothing specific for poetry. The policy will include some spellings and a target on how to improve and what needs to be done.

**What could be done to improve your pupils’ experience of poetry in this school?**
Some language play, giving help with creativity, more cross-curricular poetry, perhaps a day of poetry within the year, making something of World Poetry Day.
APPENDIX VI – EMAIL INTERVIEW WITH FORMER CHILDREN’S LAUREATE MICHAEL ROSEN, DECEMBER 11TH 2011, quoted on pages 14, 40 and 41 of dissertation.

**Question:** Some teachers have told me that they do not think poetry should be taught in schools because it is difficult to assess or rarely appears in tests (for primary schools). What do you think about this?

**Answer:** This is a tragic example of how teachers, under pressure from the testing regime, turn their backs on something that is important in education.

**Question:** Why is it important to teach children about poetry in primary schools?

**Answer:** Poetry offers children ways of using language that will help them with their acquisition of literacy but also with their emotional and intellectual development. However, it is possible to teach poetry in ways that don't do this at all - especially if the poetry is taught in ways that suggest that poetry is hard, or that what you do with it is quiz children in order to extract right and wrong answers from them, or that you make it seem as if poetry 'belongs' to people other than the children in your class at that very moment.

Poetry offers children a chance to hear what written language can sound like. It does this by being made up of infectious, catchy sounds and intriguing and surprising ways of expressing things. It's been said the job of poetry is to make familiar things appear unfamiliar and, on occasions, make unfamiliar things familiar. These are vital educational matters: they both invite the children to ask questions, to make them more curious.

Poetry works in a variety of ways, it's often 'suggestive' rather than 'explicit'. That's to say, it suggests what might be going on rather than states it baldly with explanations. This too is vital educationally because it invites the reader or listener to do some explaining themselves. And before the explaining there is likely to be some speculating or wondering.
This is precisely what we want children to be doing - whether that's in relation to things that poetry is 'about' or the way that poetry is expressed (its use of language).

**Question:** Which do you think are the best methods to excite children about poetry?

**Answer:** The simplest and most valuable way is to banish quizzing children about poems. Instead, just invent different ways of sharing poems - put them up on the walls, read them out yourself, get children to read poems to each other in pairs or small groups. Invite children to invent different ways of presenting poems. Do other artistic activities in relation to poems - drawing, model-making, dance, music. Take a book of poems, treat it as a playscript that needs to be added to. Get the children to make a play out of the book by performing the poems, writing their own linking script and new poems in the style of the book or inspired by the book. Make powerpoint shows of poems and pictures. etc etc

If you're going to ask children questions about poems, make sure they're questions you don't know the answers to:

1. Is there anything about this poem that reminds you of anything that has ever happened to you or anyone you know? How does it remind you? Why?

2. Is there anything about this poem that reminds you of anything you've ever read before or seen on tv or in a film? How? Why?

3. Are there any questions you would like to ask about this poem? What? What if you could ask the writer of the poem some questions? What would they be? What if you could ask anyone or anything in the poem some questions what would they be? (The teacher collects the questions; the class try to answer the questions).

4. The teacher explains that poetry is a special way of sticking words together. It does this by making something the same eg rhyme, alliteration. But sometimes it does it by making things that are opposites.
It sometimes does it by making pictures (images) that are similar or the same. These are what I call 'secret strings'. There are secret strings linking these similarities and differences. You tell the children that they are poetry detectives and they have special powers of being able to spot the secret strings. No one can be wrong. All you have to do is give a reason for the secret string.
APPENDIX VII – EMAIL INTERVIEW WITH POET AND EDUCATOR PIE CORBETT. FEBRUARY 2012, quoted on pages 3,12,13 and 40 of dissertation.

Question: Why is it important to teach children about poetry in primary schools?

Answer: Creativity matters. Children should come to school and make something positive out of the chaos of their lives. They should paint, draw, dance, make music, improvise, perform plays, make films, tell stories…. and write poetry. Without words, experiences and feelings cannot be captured. Without the template of language to label life, to explain ourselves to the world and the world to ourselves, we cannot create and communicate. And the opposite of creation – is destruction. Illiteracy is the fist of frustration.

Much of the poetry writing in primary schools lacks the intensity of language that is possible because the children’s reading of poetry is slight. An overdose of slapstick poetry that ends with an exclamation mark as if to ram home the joke has led to many children’s experience of poetry as something glib and not worthy of much attention. Poorly written poetry does not develop the child’s inner world and as a result makes no real connection with the child. The reading has to be deep, rich and memorable and not always instantly understood.

In brief, I believe that we need the use of poetic language in order to communicate the essence of experience, things that matter. Sometimes, when we experience something that moves us, talking about it in an ordinary way just does not work. You have to reach for heightened language, the image to communicate what it felt like. If you take a walk late at night and stare up at the moon for a while then go back indoors. Perhaps, saying 'there's a big moon out tonight' just doesn't quite capture the vastness, the awe, the magic and what you felt - the words do not capture the moon, let alone what you felt about it…. and in that case, you have to start reaching for images…. So poetic language helps us capture
human experience - what happened and how we felt about it - in a special way. That is poetry.

Children need this form of language so that they can understand themselves and their world - to have sufficient language at their fingertips to craft their talk and their writing. Here is a good example, written independently about a boy in the class who was in hospital, when the class was visiting Canterbury cathedral:

Richard
still as a rock
at this moment,
he hasn't moved
for a week or two.
Still, quiet
and as bald as a baby.
He's on a life support machine.
We lit a candle
for this boy.
It flickered up
against the wall.
It even made
my eye site blurred.

So for me - poetry is about capturing experience, preserving it, helping us deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world. It is also about playing with language and ideas - it can be a form of entertainment.

**Question:** Some teachers have told me that they do not think poetry should be taught in schools because it is difficult to assess or rarely appears in tests (for primary schools). What do you think about this?

**Answer:** Is it difficult to assess poetry? I think if you look at the poem above, most of us would agree that it is very powerful and successful as a poem. I suppose the teachers mean that it cannot be 'levelled' - however, we do NOT teach writing and reading in order to get a level. The purpose
of 'levelling' children's writing is to provide a summative assessment that reflects what the child can do. Whilst they probably will never be asked to write poetry in a test, now that we are moving towards 'teacher assessment' rather than levelling by test, the ability to write poetry should be part of the teacher's overview of that child as a writer. However, poetry has appeared a number of times in the 'reading' paper.

Of course, anyone who thinks that we should only teach what is tested in a primary school is bonkers. If that was the case let's not bother with assemblies, RE, PE, art, drama, history, geography, design and technology, cooking, reading to children, outings, visitors, etc. Let's just do maths, reading, writing... no discussions about behaviour or morals or values... That attitude demonstrates a total lack of understanding about the purpose of education. It comes from teachers who lack a philosophy and have no genuine clue as to why they are teaching. I suspect too that they do not understand how poetry can enhance other forms of writing. They probably are insecure about teaching poetry and that is reflected in a somewhat defensive comment. We educate for life, to pass on culture, to enrich, to nurture - to inform, to develop - and the view that states that we should only teach for exams and tests is short-termist.

The real value of education may not be clear until a child is 50 years old and can reflect back on how teachers developed, encouraged and shaped their lives. Teachers who make a difference - often by seeing 'something special' in a child...

Poetry, song, playground rhymes - are all a vital aspects of human experience and culture.

**Question:** Which do you think are the best methods to excite children about poetry?

**Answer:** This would have to have an enormous and complicated answer - it is best to read what I have written as that may help. In brief though - to 'excite' children as readers, performers and writers of poetry would entail such things as:
The most important thing about all teaching is the teacher's enthusiastic. If the teacher loves poetry then the children will also love poetry. Enthusiasm/passion for a subject spreads.

* Reading lots of good poetry to children;

* Finding activities that help children to take to heart poems;

* Discussing poems as 'experiences' rather than trying to tease out a fixed meaning;

* Savouring and enjoying poems as experiences.

* Developing children's ability to perform poems, e.g. by varying voice, using instruments, etc.

* Teaching poetry writing regularly in the ways in which I describe in Jumpstart.
APPENDIX VIII – SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Here are some suggestions for resources I have encountered during school placements and research for this dissertation. It is by no means exhaustive. However, I believe all of the poems, websites and strategies mentioned may be of help to teachers looking for new ideas on how to teach poetry.

Poetry websites to help the teacher

www.poemhunter.com – classic and modern poems grouped by theme.
www.poetryzone.ndirect.co.uk – children can publish their own poems.
www.childrenspoetrybookshelf.co.uk – attractive child-friendly site with children’s own poems, often in their own handwriting.
www.nationalpoetryday.co.uk – official website of the national day with downloadable resources for teachers.
www.poetryarchive.org/childrensarchive/home.do - dedicated area for children’s poets, interviews with poets, lesson ideas.
www.applesandsnakes.org/page/73 - contemporary poets ‘with bite’.

Lesson ideas provided in section for teachers, including those linked to other areas of the curriculum.

www.poetryclass.net/kids.htm - good resource for teachers with links to other poetry websites.

Some good poetry collections for use by teachers in the classroom

- Benson, G (ed) (1990), *This poem doesn’t rhyme*. London: Penguin. A great way of showing children that poems do, indeed, not have to rhyme. I like *Desk* by Dave Calder and the powerful *The Shoes* by John Mole, very suitable for PSHE lessons. *The Alphabet Speaks Up* by David Horner is a great example of language play.

- Cookson, P (ed), (2004), *Disgusting Poems*. St Helen’s: Scholastic. Poems that live up to their ‘disgusting’ description, *Blowing Your Own Trumpet* is probably the funniest.

curriculum, and including lesson plans. Some content is a little predictable and over-used, but try *At the end of a school day* by Wes Magee, *Me and my brother* by Michael Rosen, or *Stopping by woods on a snowy evening* by Robert Frost. The extracts from Shakespeare plays are well chosen and a really good way to introduce children to the Bard.


from the past, one by a contemporary writers, but both on the same theme, good for comparisons.


**An example of themed poetry**

Try starting a lesson with a trio of animal poems: *I’m a Parrot* by Grace Nichols, *The Ballad of Red Fox* by Melvin Walker La Follette, *I Saw a Jolly Hunter* by Charles Causley. These can be developed by looking at *My Mother Saw a Dancing Bear* by Charles Causley and *The Gallows* by Edward Thomas.

**Things to do with a poem**

1. Start with a prose version.
2. Turn the poem into dialogue and act it out.
3. Turn written ballads into songs.
4. Watch videos of poet performing it or listen to a recording.
5. Add sound effects and instruments, movement or dance.
6. Turn it into a class performance – create a powerful, dramatic reading.
7. Find out if pop songs make good poetry. Try *When I Was A Youngster* by Rizzle Kicks.
8. Record a group reading of a poem.
9. Turn it into animation or create some art.
10. Make cross curricular links – such as history, science or ICT.
11. Research the poet’s life with ICT and present in groups.
12. Start with pictures or photos rather than the poem itself, eg a powerful picture of *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.
14. Read it aloud to the children with their eyes shut.
15. Read it once a day for a week, but only discuss it on Friday.
16. Imagine a photograph or film of the poem.
17. Cut it up and get the children to re-arrange it in order. Or cut three poems up, on a similar theme, and ask the children to find others in the class with parts of their poem.
18. Create illustrations – then add words to the pictures.
19. Start with a line drawing then create a calligram.
20. Give children lots of words and ask children to put them in a drawing.
21. Read it aloud – in pairs, in groups, with actions, with freezeframes or video stills where the film can move forward or back.
22. Write a class poem – with teacher as scribe. Use dictionaries and a thesaurus.
23. Continue the poem in the same style.
24. Tackle the punctuation by only stopping reading when punctuation is reached.
25. The teacher could start reading the poem in a whisper and invite children to join in with parts.

APPENDIX IX – ETHICAL APPROVAL DOCUMENT

School of Education

Name of Student: Timothy John Howes

Course and Module Code: BA (QT5) Primary Education

Proposed Research Area:
Teaching poetry in primary schools

The research involves field work [✓]

The research does not involve field work. [ ]

If the proposed research involves field work you must not collect data before you have ethical approval.

The ethics section of my research proposal has been approved by my dissertation supervisor. YES NO

If ethical problems arise during the collection of data you must discuss this with your supervisor. In cases of uncertainty your supervisor may consult the Research Leader for advice.

Supervisor’s name .................................................................
Signature ................................................................. Date: 26/1/2011

Second *(e.g. dissertation/subject module) tutor’s name: ...........................................
Signature ................................................................. Date: ...........................................

Student’s signature ................................................................. Date: ...........................................

* A second signature may be required by your dissertation tutor. One copy of this completed form should be attached to your dissertation. Another copy should be given to your supervisor. This will be lodged in your file.
Revised 17.3.06
APPENDIX X – SURVEY FORM USED WITH OBSERVATION CLASS

POETRY SURVEY

Hello. I am training to be a teacher. I am doing a project on how children learn about poetry. Would you help me by answering these questions? I do not need to know your name.

Are you a boy or a girl? (please tick)
- Boy
- Girl

How much do you enjoy poetry? (please tick)
- 1 – not at all
- 2 – a little
- 3 – quite a lot
- 4 – very much

When you hear the word ‘poetry’, which of these best describes your reaction? (please tick)
- It’s boring
- It’s hard to understand
- It makes me think
- It’s really enjoyable

Where do you read poems? (please tick)
- Only during English lessons
- During lessons and during independent reading
- During lessons, independent reading and at home

Which poets do you most enjoy reading? (please list any favourites you can think of)

Apart from English lessons, how often do you read a poem? (please tick)
- Everyday
- About once a week
- About once a term
- Hardly ever

How would you feel about writing your own poem? (please tick)
- 1 – very nervous
- 2 – slightly nervous
- 3 – quite confident
- 4 – very confident

Would you consider writing poems for your own pleasure? (please tick)
- Yes
- No

Thank you for helping me with my survey. John Howes, trainee teacher