



Title: Developing Children's Critical Response to Poetry

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## Developing Children's Critical Response to Poetry

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### **Synopsis**

This account of an action research project describes how children in two schools became inspired to read poetry by developing their abilities to make critical response by offering them greater freedom of choice and providing opportunities to share ideas with each other. The children who participated in the study were mixed groups of years 4, 5 and 6.

As a classroom practitioner I have always enjoyed sharing poetry with children and encouraging children to read and enjoy poetry for pleasure. I know, from personal experience, how much children enjoy the varied experiences of poetry but my own observations and NLT research indicate that reading poetry for pleasure has been falling steadily, from 30% of readers choosing this genre in 2005 to just below 15% in 2012. (Clark 2012)

### **Poetry – the neglected genre?**

As teachers we know the importance that poetry and phonological awareness plays in the early stages of reading. We have seen children enjoy the rhythms, sounds, patterns and layers of meaning within poetry and we can all recall poems that children ask to hear again and again! However when it comes to choosing texts to read, poetry is one of the least selected genres.

One reason may be how children perceive poetry, especially as they develop as readers. Poetry is often presented to them by an adult and it is common for poetry to be used to examine 'literary language'. Michael Rosen discusses the fact that we have a 'mini- syllabus in how to wreck poetry for five to eight year olds,' and his own experiences indicate how much children value being able to use poetry to help them to 'open up conversations about our lives' ( Rosen 2015). The intention with this project was to provide children with an opportunity to enjoy poetry for its own sake deriving whatever meaning they wish for themselves. Children engage in original thoughts when reading, making an emotional response to the text that they read. This response can be personal and varied depending on their previous experiences with the meaning of the text lying in the activity of the reader. However children can also develop their own understanding by making critical response to texts. By examining meaning and entering discussion with others, children demonstrate a range of viewpoints, sometimes about their own identities, or what is valued in society ( Janks 2014).

I worked with small groups of KS2 children in two differently located primary schools. All the participants volunteered to take part and were selected for their enthusiasm and willingness to take part in discussion rather than by any academic ability. The project began with 105 children anonymously volunteering to complete a questionnaire about poetry reading. This provided background information and ascertained interest levels. Then over a course of 6 weeks I worked

with 3 groups of 6 children, reading and discussing poetry and developing skills of collaborative discussion and critical analysis.

### **Initial Responses**

A simple questionnaire was given to 105 children to provide background information for the collaborative groups. The questions were designed to gauge children's attitudes to reading poetry and whether they choose to read. The resulting pattern was that half the children in the survey did like reading poetry but only 30% chose to read it. Further questions asked about whether they were used to discussing poetry and engaged in discussions with each other. This raised the interesting indication that very few children discussed poetry without teacher intervention.

One of the questionnaire statements asked: ***Tell me something that you know about poetry***

These are some of the key responses.

*It settles the mind*

*Poetry doesn't have to be real*

*When I feel angry or sad I normally read a poem and it makes me calm*

*It helps you put energy in your body*

This reassured me that children were making an emotional response to what they read.

Another question/ statement was: ***The advice I would give my teacher who wants to teach me about poetry is...***

*Let us read it ourselves*

*Give us freedom*

*Let us choose a poem*

*Do not tell me what to do or think but give me a theme*

*Only read it out loud after you have given us time to read it.*

*Get lots of poetry books*

These statements were useful in our first discussion groups as we could discuss the desire for freedom and time to read. The children did acknowledge that they enjoyed hearing poetry and it did come alive when read aloud.

### **Letting the Children Talk**

During the first session we read *The Colour of My Dreams* (Dixon). In this poem the author is a child who struggles to read aloud but describes having a vivid imagination. This immediately elicited an emotional response from the groups. Children commented on own experiences, social injustices, expectations, showing empathy and anger. It became apparent quite quickly that collaborative group discussions need careful management. Children's enthusiasm and desire to be heard did mean

that some viewpoints were overlooked and some characters dominated the discussions, so it was important to develop rather more of a structure for the sessions. This meant that as a facilitator I modelled the opening questions and the type of dialogue to keep a conversation focussed and relevant. As a group we had to consider and set our ground rules and we used this first session to practise how to develop discussion. We agreed to read and think before we spoke and this did take some practice as children were keen to talk before reading their poem carefully. We also agreed to listen and not interrupt each other and to value each other's viewpoints. From this point the discussion sessions had greater structure and the children had a better understanding of how to work together. The children were then developing the use of exploratory talk where they used their agreed ground rules and understood the potential techniques to generate interest and maintain ideas. It was also helpful to consider the work of Chambers (2011) on developing discussion through a 'Tell Me' approach. With greater freedom the children began to develop skills of collaborative discussion and also group management.

The sessions developed with children choosing poems for discussion. At the start I provided a selection (see reference list) and listened to both their reasons for choice and their independent responses to the poems. Enthusiasm and emotional response were apparent from the start. Each child read and considered their poem and then, in turn, introduced it to the group beginning to manage the group discussion. Some poems, such as *If You Go Down to the Woods Today* (Phinn), prompted very critical responses. The children identified issues of global warming, destruction of the countryside, comparisons with rainforest deforestation but also balanced these with arguments about the need for road and motorways. Another poem *Going Home* (Kenward) prompted discussion about bullying and feelings of insecurity. The children discussed who they would ask for help and what might happen if the bully found out they had told an adult. What was interesting was that the children then referred to aspects of the poetry that affected the moods within the poem. They picked out language that created the moods. As with any group discussion some children confidently had a lot to say and some children were quieter. However by giving each child the opportunity to lead the discussion they gained in confidence and also began to direct questions at each other ensuring that everyone gave an opinion.

### **Children Managing Their Own Discussion**

Six children are discussing 'The Seven Commandments According to Mum' (Brown)

| Child | Comment |
|-------|---------|
|       |         |

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Leader    | Tell me what you think about this poem.   |
| A         | It is about everyday things. Things that happen to the boy.   |
| B         | Boy or girl?  |
| All group | I think it's a boy.<br>Yes it is a boy.   |
| C         | He has all these problems.  |
| D         | You never hear him say anything.  |
| Leader    | What about the mum?   |
| All group | She is strict.<br>She is bossy.<br>Yes she is very strict.  |
| B         | Some mothers are loving and caring.   |
| E         | She is very strict.   |
| C         | Quotes from poem: 'Wash your ears and neck. Potatoes grow in muck.'<br>My mum doesn't mind if I am muddy.   |
| A         | My Dad does.  |
| E         | My mum makes me have a shower.  |
| D         | It is odd to say potatoes grow in muck.   |
| A         | That's exaggeration. My mum does that when I do this (he pulls a face). She says the wind will change and I will stay like this.                                  |
| All group | <i>Lots of laughter and face pulling!</i>   |
| Adult     | Are there any things here that your parents say to you?   |
| All group | Say thank you. Go to bed. Be nice to your brother. Wash your ears and neck. Eat fish.<br><i>Then as a group they start to notice other lines within the poem.</i> |
| B         | The mum says some funny things. ' I don't care if it's raining cats as well'.   |

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| Leader | Yeah raining cats and dogs                                  |
| C      | Do your socks go to sleep?                                  |
| E      | Yes they scrunch up in my wellies and I can't feel my feet. |
| A      | It says you can always leave the skin?                      |
| E      | Yes on the fish.  |
| A      | Oh I get it.  |

Here the children are managing their own discussion. The leader starts the group and prompts them part way through. Adult intervention is used once to bring the children back to the poem. The children are responding to the poem by making connections with their own lives. They are not afraid to make their comments and listen well to each other. At times they all respond at the same time but it is with enthusiasm and often agreement.

### **Making their own choices**

It became encouraging when children began to bring their own choices of poem for discussion. One child brought Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (Frost) and led the discussion. He developed questioning about atmosphere and a curiosity about what might be taking place. Another child brought Macavity the Mystery Cat (Elliott) and insisted on reading it aloud as he felt it was a poem that had 'rhythm and a story'. His group applauded his performance! During our discussion one child told me that he thought a reason he didn't read a lot of poetry was because there was little choice within the classroom. He said the books were quite 'tatty' and difficult to find. This was a relevant point and my own research, in branches of a well-known high street store, indicated that poetry books choices were limited and had low display priority.

The children were then provided with a range of new, colourful and varied poetry books. Their task was to choose a poem so that they could introduce it to a group of their peers in class, leading the

discussion. In this task they organised themselves independently. Once again the choices were interesting. Some children choose poems on the strength of illustrations that caught their eyes. Others looked more deeply for meanings and emotional connections. One child chose 'The Way I Am' (Phinn) and he explained to his group that this was how he sometimes felt in school, that because he was quiet he was not noticed very often.

### **Making emotional and critical responses**

Children were able to lead discussions on poetry. They initiated the discussion within their group and posed really thoughtful and focussed questions such as, 'How does this make you feel?', 'Do you like this poem?' or 'Does this remind you of anything?'. They kept the discussion flowing and showed that they valued each other's responses. The discussions were about the poetry and, although unprompted, the children used the language of poetry to consider why a writer used certain strategies. These were linked to the meaning and general sense of the poem rather than analysing techniques. For example, as a group, they decided that capital letters were used because the poet was shouting and that repetition was used to make you really understand the point. Interesting discussions developed in groups about the value of rhyme and also the impact of illustrations. As an observer it was really encouraging to note their confidence and enthusiasm in maintaining these discussions.

Children were making emotional responses to poetry. In the discussions they were bringing forward their own experiences and observations. One group, in a country village school, discussed their knowledge of 'hares' in relationship to the poem they were reading. When reading 'My Dad, Your Dad (Wright) and The Seven Commandments According to Mum (Brown) the discussions were quite extensive with the children comparing their experiences at home.

Children were able to make critical responses to the poems that they read. They discussed issues such as bullying or being undervalued as well as global warming and conservation. It was also very valuable for them to understand that they can have varying viewpoints and they enjoyed their opportunities to defend their own arguments whilst respecting each other's.

As an adult it was important to step back and allow the conversations to develop. The children were surprising in their insights and ideas.

Freedom of choice engaged the children. They do need time to look at poetry books and to explore some of the varied choices. To begin with images and illustrations dominated their choices but with time they began to read and reflect on the text. A good and colourful range of books generated this enthusiasm.

### **Conclusion**

Group discussion is a very powerful way of promoting reading for pleasure. Children are social beings and valued the autonomy of choice and the ability to share with each other. The preparatory sessions are key to the success as the process does need to be modelled and ground rules to be set. The children need time to read and think about the poetry and the groups that were most successful in their interaction were the ones who met regularly. I would like to continue to work with groups of

children to give them confidence to choose texts and lead groups, for example it would be very interesting for these children to lead a group of KS1 children.

It would be very positive if classrooms could extend their libraries to contain a wider and more up to date range of poetry books. A suggested selection is made here:

### **Some Suggested Poetry Books**

Aldana, P (ed) (2006) Under the Spell of the Moon

Coelho, J (2014) Werewolf Club Rules

Morpurgo, C and Morpurgo ,M (2012) Where My Wellies Take Me

Patrick Lewis, J (ed) (2015) National Geographic Book of Nature Poetry

Phinn, G (2001). It Takes One to Know One

Sidman, J ( 2010) Dark Emperor and other Poems of the Night

### **Poetry used in study**

The Seven Commandments According to Mum: Jacqueline Brown

Going Home : Jean Kenward

Ten Things Found in a Wizard's Pocket: Ian McMillan

My Dad, Your Dad : Kit Wright

If You Go Down to the Woods Today: Gervaise Phinn

The Way I Am: Gervaise Phinn

The Colour of My Dreams : Peter Dixon

Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening: Robert Frost

Macavity the Mystery Cat: TS Elliott

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