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Poetry, pleasure and play

As the sun comes out and the pressure in school lessens, let's take the time to play with words and develop approaches that connect to children's early oral experiences of poetry when they engaged physically, socially and emotionally with language. If we build on the sounds and savours found in nursery rhythms and playground rhymes and popular songs, it is affectively engaging - a place to play.

Why not invite young people to brainstorm such rhymes and then take skipping ropes, hoops and balls onto the playground or to the park? As the ropes hit the tarmac and two balls bounce against the wall, their bodily memories of poems, songs, chants and dance routines will return.

Taking time to revisit these might include identifying patterns and features of such word play, perhaps classifying them into collections of two ball poems, skipping games, counting rhymes, nonsense verse and so forth? This will expand children's repertoires and foster experimentation and playful performance. Older classes might offer 'teach-ins' to younger ones with staff and parents sharing their favourite playground games and songs too.

Using active approaches to poetry in the classroom also nurtures young people's affinity with rhythm, rhyme and beat and capitalises upon their pleasurable engagement with language. It is not enough that teachers read poetry to children, (although this is of course crucial), it is also important that poetry is voiced by the learners themselves; they need to bring it to life by tasting the word textures, feeling the rhythms and discerning the colour, movement and drama in the text.

Opportunities need to be made available for the young to release the words from the page, and read, chant, move and sing verses into existence. The marriage of poetry and music is centuries old, so percussion and song and even something as simple as a repeating ostinato of a line can help demarcate the rhythm and point up the meaning. Copies of poems also need to be in *their* hands, preferably in book form so they can explore the rest of the anthology later.

The physical embodiment of verse is also important and can trigger alternative ways of responding to poetry. Children's performance readings and explorations may include dance and drama, mime and movement which energise their engagement and provoke multiple interpretations of the sense, taste and texture of the words. In choosing their own poems to perform, small groups can select one which has resonance for them and may want to use multiple media as well as their bodies to help them re-present it.

We know from the recent [National Literacy Trust survey](#) that almost half the children and young people from the 27 schools involved, engage with poetry in their free time: they read, listened to or watched poetry performances on-line (47%). This is good news. But far fewer, just 10% create it (write or perform it) or do both. Most of those who engaged in poetry said their teachers, parents and carers had encouraged them. Again, more good news. But poetry is felt in the blood and along the bones (as Margaret Meek seminally taught us), so I

would argue we should pay more attention in school to children's physical engagement in poetry, their visceral embodied response.

Collaborating with others to bring the black print on the page to life is a powerful form of responding. children will be playing with language, interpretation and meaning, and supported by their teacher's creative engagement, new insights about a poem's meaning, rhythm and structure will emerge.

Let's make time to play with poetry!

Teresa Cremin

Teresa is Professor of Education (Literacy) at the Open University. An advocate of developing teachers' creative artistry, Teresa researches teachers' and children's literate identities and practices. Her recent books include *Writer Identity and the Teaching and Learning of Writing; Storytelling in Early Childhood: Enriching Language, Literacy and Culture*, (Routledge, 2017, edited collections); *Teaching English Creatively* (2015); *Researching Literacy Lives* (2015); and *Building Communities of Engaged Readers* (2014). Teresa is passionate about developing readers for life and leads a professional user-community website: Research Rich Pedagogies based on her research into volitional reading. The site supports over 80 OU/UKLA Teachers' Reading Groups and 24 HEI partnerships across the country in order to enable the development of children's (and teachers') reading for pleasure. <https://researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure>

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