

Poetry Matters

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Chapter 1

Introduction: poetry matters?

Poetry matters every day. The essence of poetry, its heart, its pulse seems to follow us around everywhere we go. We can be seen tapping out its rhythms with feet, fingers, pens and pencils everyday. When we play with words in jest, love or spite we use the tools and techniques that poets through the ages have utilised to make their “verbal music”.

It is in no way exclusive and in every way inclusive. We can hear it everywhere we go, including: the football terraces, the playground, the church, the mosque, the building site, the university and the primary school. It is there in many parts of our day: before bed, in bed, breakfast time, work time and play time. In truth, it is difficult to think of a time or a place when words are never used in special ways; when we do not play with words and their meanings, or create rhyme or verse, or carefully put words together in an order that sounds right and heightens our meaning making. We hear it in many guises including pop song, opera, joke, chant, jingle, sonnet, rap, nursery rhyme and so on. Some we love and are moved by in the deepest ways, others we want to curse and call shallow and dull, but always there is an effect. All of these forms belong to a family called poetry.

Poetry and playfulness

Playing with language to enhance our meaning making comes early. Children enjoy doing this whenever they are together. It prompts laughter and tears and is a powerful part of our communicating repertoires. The point here is that right from the start of our linguistic histories we understand how to enhance the meanings we wish to make. Young children appreciate this kind of language when they hear it. Primary school teachers soon become aware of the influential characters in their class by the power of their ludic use of language. Poetry, as it has been written through history, also ‘plays’ with words and structures and manipulates them to enhance meanings, sometimes, in the most profound ways. This is the pinnacle of

this early play with language and suggests that it is crucial to build on the early enjoyment of the manipulation of words for effect. David Crystal (1998) contends that it is healthy and 'normal to be (linguistically) abnormal by engaging in language play' (Crystal, 1998:58).

Children and Poetry

Children use rhyme and verse to skip, clap and dance to. Their movement to the beat of this verse is intrinsic to their play and their enjoyment of this form of language. They seem to share with some of the world's poets, past and present, the pleasure of the 'taste' and tingle of delicious and strange sensations of words on their tongues and the effect of rhythm on their bodies. With so much implicit understanding of this world of verse and rhyme, the potential to build upon these foundations looks limitless.

Poetry and rhyme is so inclusive that it seems that we sometimes fail to recognise it when we hear it and miss how fundamental it is to our every day experience of the world. It is important to remind ourselves of our understanding and ability to utilise its techniques.

Anxieties

If poetry and rhyme is part of our everyday experience it does seem strange that the area of literature called 'poetry' often causes so much uneasiness in adults when they are asked to read, write or discuss it. Poetry seems to be the most neglected form of literature in terms of adult readership. These days, primary school teachers will know the popularity in their classrooms of poetry written for children, but this enthusiasm for verse seems to be extinguished later in life. So, something must happen - could it be schools and the nature of the approach to poetry in these institutions?

This book invites teachers to reflect upon their own knowledge of poetry and rhyme and then ask children to do so as well. When we recognise its fundamental inclusion in our own experience, we can go on to examine the work of others who have learned how to explicitly utilise it for different purposes and audiences. It is hoped that building on these foundations, teachers and children will feel more confident to enjoy poetry and be convinced of its potential as one of the most important, profound and powerful means of communication between individuals.

Poetry for learning

The benefits of using poetry in the classroom are astounding. It may be useful here to remind us of some of them. Firstly, its ability to generate delight means it is a great motivator for encouraging reading. It has the capability of changing children's fundamental attitudes to reading by drawing on their interest in word play. The wealth of verse published by our modern poets seems to be able to tap into children's humour and experience of life at their level. Children adore the work of Michael Rosen, Brian Patten and Roger McGough, to name but three, and will want to hear it again and again. Secondly, research informs us (Bryant and Bradley, 1985) that children who are exposed to rhyme and alliteration from an early age develop a greater phonological awareness, contributing directly to the learning of strategies readers need to employ. In addition to this, we know that poetry encourages concentration and listening skills; it also helps develop literal and inferential comprehension and response. The writing of poetry, with its emphasis on vocabulary and heightened language use can only help develop the writer's ability to experiment with the potency of written forms. Children who are encouraged to write poetry also become involved in a process of self-discovery – it assists children in understanding their experiences of everyday life.

This book

The book will first of all tackle the question of 'what is poetry?' It will go on to discuss how to create a classroom ready to interest and excite children with this form of writing. It will look at ways to plan teaching to immerse children in poetry and encourage them to write it for themselves.

The aim of this book is to give primary school teachers the confidence and conviction to use and enjoy poetry in their classrooms. The book is written to provide the background and the ideas to do this successfully, while not forgetting that the teacher's personal pleasure in poetry, in whatever form s/he chooses to enjoy it, will energise the teaching within the classroom.