The Power of Poetry

My early poetic experiences were not 'poetic' at all. They were, in the main, not connected to books, and were largely to do with what I now recognise as oral forms of literature. These included my father's after-Sunday-lunch stories, my grandfather's jokes, riddles and puns, lullabies sung by my grandmother, playground and nursery rhymes, and hymns sung in church. Up to the age of thirteen, I cannot remember being asked to read poetry at school, except as a way of practising what my school called 'correct pronunciation'. My early experiences of what Auden termed 'memorable speech', were largely spontaneous, therefore, nearly always spoken, and frequently contained a mixture of simple rhyme, rhythm and humour.

Mostly this comprised what Michael Rosen calls 'stuff': adverts ('Opal Fruits, made to make your mouth water!'); my father's *Max Boyce Live* and Simon and Garfunkel tapes in the car; and playground rhymes ('Georgie Best / Superstar /He looks like a woman / And he wears a bra'). I loved the recitation of the football scores each Saturday evening on *Grandstand*, their gorgeous unpredictive text simultaneously an exotic litany (with phrases like 'Queen of the South' and 'Inverness Caledonian Thistle') and prayer. They were to me what the shipping forecast was to Seamus Heaney, perfectly structured and endlessly variable, joy and disappointment hiding in their cadences and inflexions: 'Arsenal 0, Chelsea…6!'. But more often, as this was the Seventies, disappointment.

My 'linguistic hardcore' (Heaney again) did not find a counterpart in the literature of books until I encountered the teaching of Tim Borton, when I was thirteen, who showed us John Logan's 'The Picnic'. It is not underestimating the case to say it changed me forever. Because of it, I still think of reading poems as like falling in love.

*

The Picnic

It is the picnic with Ruth in the spring.
Ruth was third on my list of seven girls

But the first two were gone (Betty) or else
Had someone (Ellen had accepted Doug).
Indian Gully the last day of school;
Girls make the lunches for the boys too.
I wrote a note to Ruth in algebra class
Day before the test. She smiled, and nodded.
We left the cars and walked through the young corn
The shoots green as paint and the leaves like tongues
Trembling. Beyond the fence where we stood
Some wild strawberry flowered by an elm tree
And Jack in the pulpit was olive ripe.
A blackbird fled as I crossed, and showed
A spot of gold or red under its quick wing.
I held the wire for Ruth and watched the whip
Of her long, striped skirt as she followed.
Three freckles blossomed on her thin, white back
Underneath the loop where the blouse buttoned.
We went for our lunch away from the rest,
Stretched in the new grass, our heads close
Over unknown things wrapped up in wax papers.
Ruth tried for the same, I forget what it was,
And our hands were together. She laughed,
And a breeze caught the edge of her little
Collar and the edge of her brown close hair
That touched my cheek. I turned my face in-
to the gentle fall. I saw how sweet it smelled.
She didn't move her head or take her hand.
I felt a soft caving in my stomach
As at the top of the highest slide,
When I had been a child, but was not afraid,
And did not know why my eyes moved with wet
As I brushed her cheek with my lips and brushed
Her lips with my own lips. She said to me
Jack, Jack, different than I had ever heard,
Because she wasn't calling me, I think,
Or telling me. She used my name to
Talk in another way I wanted to know.
She laughed again and then she took her hand;
I gave her what we both had touched; can't
Remember what it was, and we ate the lunch.
Afterwards we walked in the small, cool creek
Our shoes off, her skirt hitched, and she smiling,
My pants rolled, and then we climbed up the high
Side of Indian Gully and looked
Where we had been, our hands together again.
It was then some bright thing came in my eyes,
Starting at the back of them and flowing
Suddenly through my head and down my arms
And stomach and my bare legs that seemed not
To stop in feet, not to feel the red earth

Of the Gully, as though we hung in a
Touch of birds. There was a word in my throat
With the feeling and I said, It's beautiful.
Yes, she said, and I felt the sound and word
In my hand join the sound and word in hers
As in one name said, or in one cupped hand.
We put back on our shoes and socks and we
Sat in the grass awhile, crosslegged, under
A blowing tree, not saying anything.
And Ruth played with shells she found in the creek,
As I watched. Her small wrist which was so sweet
To me turned by her breast and the shells dropped
Green, white, blue, easily into her lap,
Passing light through themselves. She gave the pale
Shells to me, and got up and touched her hips
With her light hands, and we walked down slowly
To play the school games with the others.

John Logan

*

All we had to do was read the poem and then talk about it, but it changed me completely.

The poem is a narrative of two adolescent children walking across fields one school lunchtime to eat their packed lunches ‘away from the rest’. The poem evokes perfectly the ‘soft caving in [the] stomach/as at the top of the highest slide’, of giving and receiving a first kiss; and the physical reactions to unexpected and barely articulated intimacy:

> There was a word in my throat
> with the feeling and I knew the first time
> what it meant and I said, it's beautiful.
> Yes, she said, and I felt the sound and word
> in my hand join the sound and word in hers
> as in one name said, or in one cupped hand.

While the poem did not describe experiences I had actually had, it conjured palpably a world with which I was entirely familiar: that of school, lunch hours, fields, streams,

games and a vague but undeniably real sense of longing for ‘something else’, of not wanting to conform, perhaps.

Other important questions about this poem arose during the course of the lesson. One was to do with the poem’s form, or what I would have then called the way it looked on the page. Oddly, the poem was laid out in one continuous stanza. Also, it did not rhyme, nor appear to have any regular rhythm. Indeed, if anything, it sounded more like someone talking. These were puzzling for several reasons. While the ‘poetry’ I had experienced as a young child had largely been oral, I had not been made aware that printed poetry in books could attempt to replicate the rhythms of speech and appear to sound natural. On one level, therefore, the poem did not conform to my early expectations of what a poem could look or sound like at all: I felt it was more of a story than a poem.

On another level, however, I was more than intrigued because the poem was about experience I knew little about but was keen to discover. Furthermore, while I felt that the poem was ‘like someone talking to me’ I also knew that lines like those quoted above were not the way that people spoke. There was a sense that this was language which was both real and artificial at the same time.

I now identify these feelings as being to do with the interplay of concepts such as ‘form’ with ‘content’, or, ‘voice and feeling’ with ‘structure’. But at the time I felt a combination of intrigue and puzzlement. To borrow another phrase from the poem, I now see that the poem enacted ‘talk in another way I wanted to know’.

Whenever I read or hear a poem I like for the first time I still feel that same caving as at the top of the highest slide. It is a kind of joyous nervousness. I want the poem to talk to me in a way I know and yet have no knowledge of. I want to be surprised. I want to be seduced. I am already falling in love with the words taking shape in my throat and under my breath.

*

Why I am I telling you all this? To show you what can happen when the *social* world of the child, made up as it was, in my case, with decidedly lower case poetry (songs, hymns, adverts, jokes, banter, football scores) somehow prepares a seedbed into which ‘that other way of talking’ is also planted. And how that social world, coming into contact with natural sounding representations of life, is transformed by them, including the transformation of wanting to hear more of the same. And how that desire creates awareness and enjoyment of an *inner* world. Or, as Seamus Heaney put it: ‘In the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.’

This, for me, is one of the great descriptions of the power of poetry, even when 'faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught'. It describes the free and untrammelled entering of a space where anything can happen, but where nothing is forced. It is, paradoxically, a space of communion and solitude, of longing and completion. At the same time I also happen to think it is one of the great descriptions of good teaching, a pedagogy where the boundary between teacher and pupil is blurred for a moment, at once separately 'summoned and released' into self and co-reflection.

‘In the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.’

I am only here, talking about my favourite thing in the world, because, In Yeats’s words, ‘a fire was in my head’. And the people who put it there were teachers and loved ones, their means of doing it social and mostly informal.

*

At this point I would like to say a word about the Roman poet and philosopher, and acolyte of Homer: Bart Simpson.

I take as my text that early episode of *The Simpsons*, where, in an effort to control the behaviour of their errant son, Homer and Marge Simpson agree to Bart trialling a ‘radical, untested and potentially dangerous’ drug called ‘Focusyn’. We see him morph in front of our eyes, moving from delinquent to angel to shivering paranoid wreck in double time. The episode closes with Homer and Marge deciding to take Bart off the drug trial, convinced that a mischievous Bart is better than a quiescent one.

At the midpoint of the episode’s story curve, Bart enjoys his short-lived zenith of manic politeness. He is sitting in class, listening to Mrs Krabappel talking about Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’, when Nelson points out two dogs fighting in the playground. Everyone except Bart rushes to the window to watch. At which point he yells to his classmates to return to the lesson: ‘C’mon people, this poetry isn’t going to appreciate itself!’

It’s a brilliant joke, not just because we see Bart behaving out of character. It is also absurd, ridiculous. But I happen to think it is true. A poem is a dead thing until a person reads it, then, hopefully, shares it with someone else. Poems do not appreciate themselves. For that we need someone, as Thomas Lux puts it, to love it ‘enough to make you love it’

*

How do we do this?

As Myra Barrs says we need to ‘find a way of teaching poetry which makes it leave its lonely tower and descend into the street, where it can be sung, danced, performed, conversed with and explored.’

In practice this means poems need to be *heard*. Out loud. Speaking and Listening. The first kind, round the camp fire. Where we encounter, as Frost said, what words were ‘before words were, living in the cave of the mouth’.

You may take in a piece of old doggerel, a lyric tour de force or something you think of as a classic. Shakespeare. Blake. Jackie Kay. It is not even necessary to know everything about it. Let's say you do this. Let's say you have a Year 1 class. Let's say it has been snowing. You think: Kit Wright. 'Red Boots On'. 'We're going to have a performance,' you say. 'In the playground. It'll just be us. Tomorrow. Bring your wellies.'

To prepare them you read them the poem.

Red Boots On

Way down Geneva,
All along Vine,
Deeper than the snowdrift
Love's eyes shine:

Mary Lou's walking
in the winter time.

She's got

Red boots on, she's got
red boots on,
kicking up the winter
till the winter's gone.

You notice that a child in row three has started to twitch, her shoulders invisibly flexing, her forearms and wrists following suit. She starts to nod her head, shyly at first, out of time, then vigorously bouncing, as though yanked by an invisible string. The boy next to her joins in, adding a handclap. You think: they seem to be enjoying it. You read the chorus again.

Red boots on, she's got
red boots on,
kicking up the winter
till the winter's gone.

Another three children, then another four. And a silent child, who never joins in with anything. She is even smiling.

So

Go by Ontario,
look down Main,
if you can't find Mary Lou
come back again:

sweet light burning
in winter's flame.

She's got

Snow in her eyes, got
a tingle in her toes
and new red boots on
wherever she goes.

So

All around Lake Street,
up by St. Paul,
quicker than the white wind
love takes all:

Mary Lou's walking
in the big snow fall.

Without being told to, the whole class has now become one moving mass of body parts. Or rather, *one body*, moving in time to the words, even saying them, even predicting them. You repeat the chorus more quietly, a finger to you lips. They follow you, not wanting to break the spell. You boom out the chorus again, then drop your voice to below whisper-level. They come with you, in the palm of your hand. No instructions have been given. No behavioural objectives. I nearly said: without a word being spoken.

She's got

Red boots on, she's got
red boots on,
kicking up the winter
till the winter's gone.

Since Ken Robinson's TED talk on creativity and schools we have got used to the idea of children 'needing to dance to think'. I have met countless children for whom poetry is the same. Jigging and twitching their bodies in time to the rhythm of a poem is not disruptive behaviour, it shows they are experiencing the poem. Not as 'correct

pronunciation', not as finding the metaphor in line 4, and not as a geography lesson. Not one of them has asked where Maine is, or Lake Street, or St Paul. They have heard the poem in their bodies, and their bodies have responded. It is the highest compliment they can pay you.

*

I once heard Michael Rosen teach a theatre of weeping children and adults a poem which embodies this theory. It is a poem of great silliness, fun and profundity. He said: 'You take a word, say 'everybody'. And you say (one, two, three): 'Everybody'. But you can also say it like this:

EVERYBODY
VERYBODY
ERYBODY
RYBODY
YBODY
BODY
ODY
DY
Y.

The children will look at you. Blankly. You say the poem again:

EVERYBODY
VERYBODY
ERYBODY
RYBODY
YBODY
BODY
ODY
DY
Y.

One of them says: 'It's not a poem.'

Another replies: 'Yes, it is. It's got rhyme.

'And rhythm.'

'And repeating things.' You notice this last comment has been spoken by a child who hardly ever speaks. You notice he is smiling.

'Like sounds,' he says. 'Over and over.'

'And what was I doing?' you say.

'You were doing the words, making them change'

'How?'

There is another debate. Finally somebody says: 'You took off a letter each time.'

'That's it! I took a letter off each time. I'm playing with it, making it dance,

making the language do what I want. I am showing that I am in control, all through playing with words.'

It sounds like nonsense, but it is the most profound lesson of all.
Everybody, verybody, errybody, wrybody, whybody, body, oddie, die, why. You have said it twice and they seem to have learnt it. You have not even asked them to.

Language as play.

Language as social activity.

Language as power.

You teach them others: 'Calamity', 'Catastrophe'…and 'Shampoo'.

There isn't a classroom in the country who will not respond to this, from four and five-year-olds to 'A level students and beyond. Soon they are asking for it every day.

*
Secondly, therefore, when we teach poetry we need to focus on its potential for play. There is no better medium for experimenting, manipulating, juggling with and revelling in language. Through the language games that we play in poetry we come to recognise our capacity for and enjoyment in making language memorable.

The shaping of lips mouth and tongue around nursery, playground and counting rhymes quickly creates and then strengthens the neural pathways which are necessary for developing phonological awareness, the skill of prediction and recognition of patterns of language.

This mirrors Vygotsky's (1978) notion of learners internalising their own private monologues, which develop into inner speech and – becoming increasingly abbreviated, condensed and allusive – into thought itself. Thus the outer world becomes part of the inner world: or, now I have read about picnic lunches for two, I want to have my own! Now I have seen Mary Lou dancing with her red boots on, it's

time I had a go myself.

In this sense each poem we read is a tiny revolution: the playfulness we find exhibited at the heart of even the most simple sounding rhymes can literally take us out of ourselves.

We now have the science to ‘prove’ it: [I quote from the University of Exeter Website]:

‘Scientists at the University of Exeter used state-of-the-art functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology, which allows them to visualise which parts of the brain are activated to process various activities.

No one had previously looked specifically at the differing responses in the brain to poetry and prose.

In research published in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, the team found activity in a “reading network” of brain areas which was activated in response to any written material. But they also found that more emotionally charged writing aroused several of the regions in the brain which respond to music. These areas, predominantly on the right side of the brain, had previously been shown as to give rise to the “shivers down the spine” caused by an emotional reaction to music.

Volunteers’ brain activity was scanned and compared when reading literal prose such as an extract from a heating installation manual, evocative passages from novels, easy and difficult sonnets, as well as their favourite poetry. When they read one of their favourite passages of poetry, the team found that areas of the brain associated with memory were stimulated more strongly than ‘reading areas’, indicating that reading a favourite passage is a kind of recollection.

Isn’t great to see that twenty-first century science is starting to catch up with what Wordsworth and Keats proposed in the eighteen hundreds?

In a specific comparison between poetry and prose, the team found evidence that

poetry activates brain areas, such as the posterior cingulate cortex and medial temporal lobes, which have been linked to introspection.'

*

Looking for the Tyger

When I began my PhD study on teaching poetry writing to Primary age children, I was introduced to a class of Year 5 children I would go on to work with for another eighteen months. My hunch was that if we read and talked about and performed enough poems soon we would be writing them. And that soon we would be reading, talking about and performing these in the same way. That was the theory.

By definition I did not know them and they did not know me. I was influenced in my first sessions with the class by something Wendy Cope once told me about her teaching. After reading a poem to a class she would deliberately restrict herself to one question about the poem, and then let discussion about the poem emerge from there. She also tried never to use the same question twice.

On my second visit to the class I decided to read them, among other poems, William Blake's 'The Tyger'. I imagined that they would not understand all of it, that they might even find it a bit strange or difficult, but I was convinced they would respond to it. What happened that afternoon changed my whole view of teaching, and teaching literature in particular.

After reading 'The Tyger' to the class I chose to ask what pictures went through their minds as I was reading the poem. After a few slightly predictable answers about forests and tigers one boy put up his hand and said this: 'I think it is about a big forest and a little forest. The little forest is trapped inside the big forest and is struggling to escape from it. It is a real struggle. Eventually the little forest breaks free and makes its way to edge of the big forest. It looks out. What it can see on the other side is the First World War.' There was a silence. Nobody knew what to say

next. I thanked the boy for his comment and said that I found it interesting. Then I did something I had not done consciously in my teaching before. Instead of saying what I wanted to say, which was to debate with the boy's interpretation of the poem, or read another poem perhaps, I asked the class if the boy's answer had made anyone else think about the poem differently. All of their hands went up. Then I did something else I had not done before: I allowed the children to take control of the discussion. Instead of their comments going through me 'in the chair' they began talking and responding to each other, not always in agreement, but with a new energy and purpose.

Teaching poetry (teaching anything) in this way is necessarily disruptive and risky: disruptive because it foregrounds poetry's essence as a democratic and subjective art-form; and risky because it requires enough confidence not to take control and dominate the discussion, both in terms of subject and pedagogical knowledge. In this way poetry can help us enjoy the paradox of 'losing' power in order to gain new kinds of knowledge and confidence by asking questions about poems we do not know the answers to. Sometimes, and for good-sounding reasons, we can move too speedily from curriculum specifications to decisions about classroom practices without taking the time to engender the trust and the fun and the risk which we know teaching poetry can bring. We can catch glimpses of the Tyger, but these will not be memorable or long-lasting if we go hunting for it using only pre-planned routes.

*

This story, a true one, illustrates my third point: if we want to make poetry happen in our lives and in those of the children we teach we need to create space for and deliberately cultivate processes by which co-construction of learning can take place. Which is not to say we teach without objectives, but is to emphasise the importance of allowing learners to posit their own conclusions about a poem. As Andrew Lambirth has recently said, when we to teach poetry to children we need to cut the strings that would otherwise make our pedagogy the control of so many puppets.

Louise Rosenblatt has called this the cultivation of 'aesthetic reading' (1978), during which the reader is primarily concerned with 'what happens during the actual reading event' (24). A teacher who introduces her class to the art of paying attention not only

to a poem's content, but also the means by which that content is revealed in the reader's mind, implicitly acknowledges the danger of implying that there is only one meaning in the room. Rosenblatt's ideas about reader-response theory were themselves influenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom she quotes thus: 'The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but *by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself*" (1978: 28; Rosenblatt's italics). With John Keats we need to train ourselves, and by implication the minds of those we teach, to accept the state of being happy to be in 'uncertainties'.

This is not to say that no right answers exist, or that all poems are equally successful; it is to encourage what creativity theorists (Cropley, 2001) call a flexible, 'over-inclusive' practice of thinking.

I suggest that within the current context – socially, economically and culturally – these untestable but vital skills appear as counter-cultural. In truth they have never been more important. If we say we want a culture where empathy and divergent views can flourish, we will need young people, trained in the art of listening to each other to sustain it.

*

A pedagogy of permission

Anecdotally I can report that I have lost count of the times teachers have wearily asked me what the point of teaching poetry in school is, exactly: 'It's not as if we're training them to become poets. The economy couldn't take it.' The anxiety at the root of this problem has been neatly summarised by the American poet Stephen Dunn as the 'capitalist privileging of acquisition over contemplation' (2001:18).

So, while I quote science in a spirit of playfulness, I think it is dangerous, therefore, to talk in terms of 'proof' being needed or sought as to poetry's 'efficacy' (Heaney, 1988, 107). But were it to be so, the stories I am going to conclude with go some way towards demonstrating its 'power and scope' (Heaney, 1980: 221) in the classroom.

Janette Hughes's research with young adolescents in Canada merged poetry writing with social media such as Glogster and the networking site Ning. The poetry that they wrote provoked discussions of the biggest questions of all: 'Who am I?'; 'Where do I come from?'; 'What makes me, me?'; 'Why am I different in different situations?' Students created mash-ups of their 'home' and 'Canadian' experiences, a new-found playfulness recalling Weber and Mitchell's (2008) notion of identity as 'personal and social bricolage'. The researchers reported that their confidence 'blossomed', with even the quietest students forming identities previously unseen by both teachers and peers.

The 'blossoming confidence' reported in these classrooms brings to mind the experience of glimpsing oneself in a cabinet made of mirrors. The image of the viewer is altered, front and rear as it were. In part this shift occurs from the new perspectives afforded by the in-built capacity of the technology for transformation. In part this occurs through the interactive element of the same technology. The viewer, seeing herself transformed, is transformed again in the eyes of the observing other. In this sense she is changed twice. The story is not just 'This is my poem' but 'There is a different me in this poem'. No wonder teachers described the impact of the project as one of discovery.

A very similar pattern, moving from initial reluctance to joyful self-discovery, has been described by Vicky Macleroy of Goldsmiths, in her work with spoken word poets and EAL learners in London.

The metaphor of 'finding a voice' in this context becomes blurred with the actual struggle of learning, finding and owning words in another tongue for the first time. This is an effort of concentration that is demanding, both in terms of subject content knowledge and the emotions. As Cat, a spoken word poet and educator, notes when they enter the classroom many pupils are not only learning in and about a new language, they are also learning to 'bridge the gap between their experience of different languages and cultures.'

Implicit in this kind of dual nationality is a daily negotiation, often unseen, of what can

and cannot be admitted to. The struggle for what we so often call voice is, therefore, not just a search for accuracy and fluency; it is a quest for legitimacy, of subject matter, and, in the widest sense, of identity and culture.

Pete, a poet and spoken word educator, describes the process of working with these 11-14 year olds as helping students to 'write into the silence' and 'writing your insides out'. It was not easy. But the effect on students was transformative. 'Spoken word opens opportunities for young people to increase their cultural, social and linguistic capital, including for pupils for whom English is not a first language. It enriches their citizenship with skills of critical enquiry, communication and participation.'

The 'pedagogy of permission' developed by poets and students in the classroom Poetry Cafes of London and the social media networks of Toronto demonstrate that poetry is able to transform cultures of schooling, replacing silence with 'safe spaces'.

Emma Beynon, under the aegis of Bath Festivals, created The Write Team, placing creative writing practitioners in schools with high numbers of 'invisible' pupils, learners who are present in body but playing 'truant in the mind'.

Teachers on the project noticed that writers were very inclusive of pupils' ideas for poems in the classroom, but were direct in their responses to pupils' written work. In other words, they treated them as co-professionals, expecting them to rise to the challenge of the demanding (and always playful) exercises they had been given.

To borrow from Stephen Krashen's theory of second language acquisition (1982), it is was though the 'affective filter' of nervousness, and concomitant lack of confidence and knowledge had been lowered sufficiently for 'noticing, experimenting and playing with language' to flourish.

Emma reports that the biggest change reported by teachers' was their commitment to transforming their poetry pedagogy whilst undergoing a shift in power-relationships brought about by that change. As one of them said: *'I have learnt that it is not my job to change a pupil's thoughts. It is more to ask questions about their*

ideas, to allow them to go on their own journey of discovery and answer questions which then leads them to ask questions of their own and their writing. This seems to really foster a willingness to redraft, to tweak and improve their writing. I always tried to steer their writing too much, before. Now they own it rather than me.'

The model to affect this change offered by these researcher is based on a question implicit in creative endeavour across all disciplines: 'What if'? It is reality twisted into a new shape, not by power but imagination. They say to us: What if…we renamed this classroom a 'Poetry Café'? What if…we merged poetry with social media? What if…this poem were a postcard? What if…I gave completely honest feedback to this poem?

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The poetry wall

I conclude this commentary with a story of my own. At a school I once worked in there was a language support teacher who happened to be passionate about poetry. The teachers she worked with did not share her enthusiasm, so were happy for her to take pupils deemed in need of extra support out of the classroom to conduct these lessons. She was good at finding spaces in the school where there was not too much disruption, where pupils' voices could be heard: a medical room that never seemed to get used; a vacant office; a music library.

She found that pupils began to look forward to these lessons; they, and their friends who had heard about them, would come up to her to ask to be taken out. Her teaching style was simple. She had heard about a book on a course whose main idea she tried out. She would pass round copies of a poem, read the poem out loud, then sit back: 'Tell me what you think about it…' she would say.

News of these lessons soon began to spread to her colleagues. They asked her for her lesson plans, which she gladly copied and handed round. Then they asked her for evidence of her pupils' learning. This puzzled her. She knew that the pupils were learning; she could see it in their eyes when they talked. That some of them had even started to talk seemed not to be what her colleagues were looking for, however.

With her pupils' permission, she decided to make tape recordings of the lessons. She explained she was going to use their voices, their actual speaking voices, for a display of poetry in the school. This made the children very excited. She taped an entire lesson of the children talking about one poem. The poem, about a spider, was by a Caribbean writer. The poem was short, but their talk was long. She could not believe how long it took to transcribe onto her computer.

One week later, she put up her display. This was also simple in format. She placed an enlarged copy of the poem in the middle of the display board. Around it, using brightly coloured threads, a different one for each child in the group, she attached the typed up comments made by the children. The effect reminded her of a star. She had not corrected the vocabulary the children had used; she wanted to be as faithful as possible to the direction the lesson had taken.

The effect was electrifying. Children crowded round the display board, jostling to see their names in print next to the poem. Calling their friends to come and see their work, they swapped high-fives, laughing to recall what they had said in the lesson, thrilled to see their own names. Watching them, the teacher thought she discerned a new language being spoken, one she had not heard in the school before. It sounded similar to how the children usually spoke in the school, but was different. It was not foreign. It was English, but not as she knew it. Playtime came and went. The corridor was still jammed with children. Each day for a week that corridor was never empty.

Months later she would hear children referring back to the time she put up 'the poetry wall', as they named it. She heard children saying back to each other the words they had seen on the display board, in the order she had typed them. They were word-perfect. (She checked.) Later still, in stairwells and on playground duty children still approached her and said: 'Remember that time with the poem, Miss? That was a *good* time.'

Conclusion

In a context of high-stakes accountability within education that shows no sign of abating (Sainsbury, 2009) it has never been more vital to maintain a broader cultural vision, a more creative, artistic and engaged approach to literature learning.

We should not worry, and indeed should celebrate, that poetry resists teaching to prescribed objectives and resists atomistic approaches to assessment.

Nevertheless, it is worth concluding by reminding ourselves of the ideals of education which poetry so readily promotes (and at such little cost): community; confidence; creativity; identity; empathy; permission; sharing.

To finish with the words with which I began: the power and scope of poetry are apprehended therefore not as hegemonic forces, but ones which, in the words of Seamus Heaney, hold 'attention for a space, function[ing] not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves' (Heaney, 1988: 108). This, surely, is one of the great aims of all education, not just of the verbal and literary arts. As the writers here at this conference pay witness, it is demanding, but never less than liberating. Poetry's capacity to thrive depends on a wide community. Its 'power and scope for transformation' (Heaney) depends on poets, and how they make it happen in their lives. But it also depends on teachers, pupils, schools and their communities, the connections they make with it, and the determination and joy with which they share it.

Thank you.

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