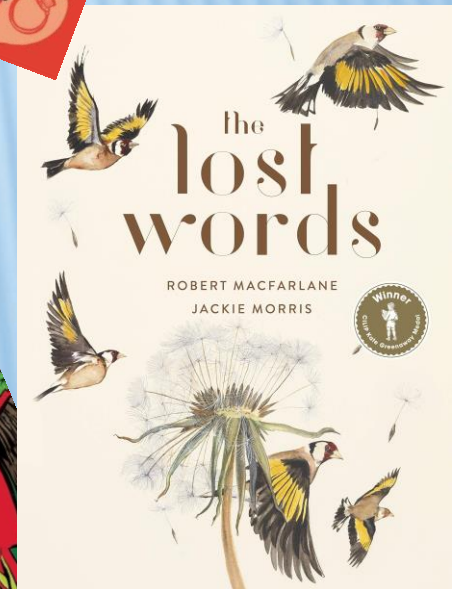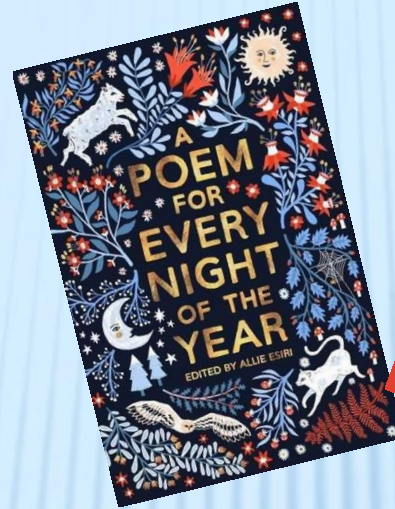# THE PAUCITY OF POETRY IN PRIMARY CLASSES

JANET HOLDEN

@clas_eal

MY CONTEXT

I work as a Leading Teacher of English as an Additional Language (EAL) for a local authority in the North West of England.   My role involves working in partnership with the class teacher. The partnership focus is on how to support students with EAL in accessing and succeeding in all areas of the curriculum with plans, resources and strategies that are supportive of all pupils.

Invariably, teachers are mainly concerned with how to support students with EAL who are new to English and struggling to develop their use and understanding of English within the curriculum. This deficit view of having EAL usually results in these pupils being placed in the lower sets or groups.   Sadly, this usually reduces their opportunities to progress, as they are then working with students with low attainment, often a diagnosed or undiagnosed learning need and frequently poor models of behaviour.
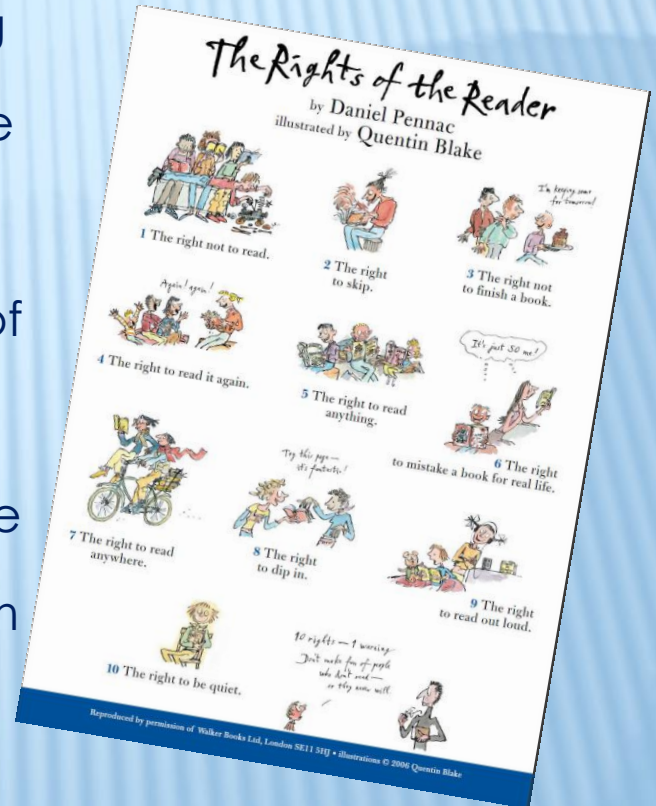
THE STUDENTS' CONTEXT

The group of students I ran the project with came from a combined year 5/6 class.   Their school had recently been judged as *Requires Improvement* by Ofsted and end of KS2 SATs results were habitually below the national average.

The class was very small (less than 20 students) and had been created to provide more intensive support for students who were working significantly below the expected level.

The school also had separate, exclusively year 5 and year 6 classes. The students in the combined class were conscious of not being as 'good' as these students.

The barriers to learning for my students were diverse but included: specified and unspecified learning difficulties; very low attainment; being an international new arrival (INA) with very little English as well as social and emotional difficulties. In addition to facing one or more of these barriers, a significant proportion of students also had behavioral issues.   They were the sort of children that, if you were to tell them of the 'Rights of the Reader' (Daniel Pennac), would probably opt for the right not to read!

The Rights of the Reader
by Daniel Pennac
illustrated by Quentin Blake

1 The right not to read.

2 The right to skip.

3 The right not to finish a book.

4 The right to read it again.

5 The right to read anything.

6 The right to mistake a book for real life.

7 The right to read anywhere.

8 The right to dip in.

9 The right to read out loud.

10 The right to be quiet.

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It will therefore come as no surprise to learn that a significant proportion of the class were not competent, independent readers and therefore were particularly reluctant to read aloud: they did not want to look stupid in front of their peers. This did not mean, however, that they did not enjoy reading or being read to. Indeed, if what was read to them was interesting and engaging, they would listen attentively and were largely uninhibited about sharing their opinions and views about the text!   They would also be very curious about who wrote it and why.

Books the students enjoyed listening to in class
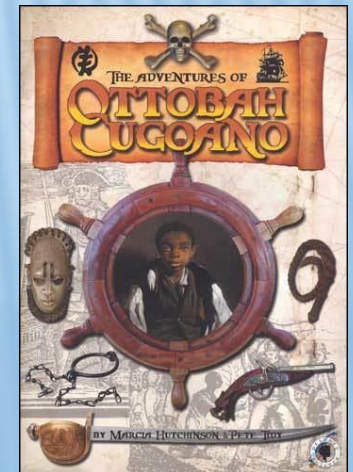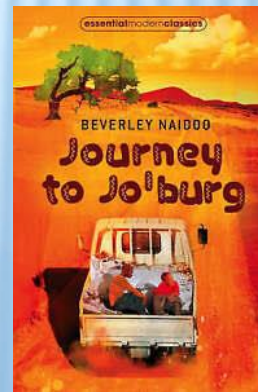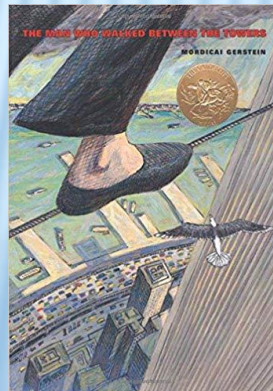
AIMS OF THE PROJECT

- ✖ To widen the students' poetry reading repertoire

- ✖ To develop the students' enjoyment of reading; their interest in what they read and explore what the intention of the writer was

- ✖ To develop their confidence and ability to talk about what they have read and what it might mean

Ultimately, the aim would be to create '*engaged communities of poetry readers'* where teachers would be '*positioned as fellow readers, have the confidence to teach both effectively and affectively and draw in reluctant readers,'* (Cremin 2010).

The first aim of the project was to expand the group's knowledge of poets and poetry as this would provide them with the opportunity to exchange their opinions and views of what a text meant. Since the poems were going to be read aloud by me or share read by the group, the students would also be able to practise and improve their reading in a non-judgmental environment where their peers would be able to support them. Repeated reading and 'performing' of the same text would also help to improve their reading fluency (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; National Reading Panel, 2000; Taguchi et al., 2016). Since they would also be required to work collaboratively, I was hoping that an additional by-product would be that the students' self-esteem and view of themselves as readers would be raised.

READING FOR PLEASURE (RFP) PEDAGOGY RATIONALE

The Teachers as Readers (TaRs) research project (*Cremin et al , 2014*) revealed that a robust reading for pleasure pedagogy encompassed *four specific practices*:

1. social reading environments;

2. reading aloud;

3. informal book talk and recommendations;

4. independent reading time within a highly social reading environment.
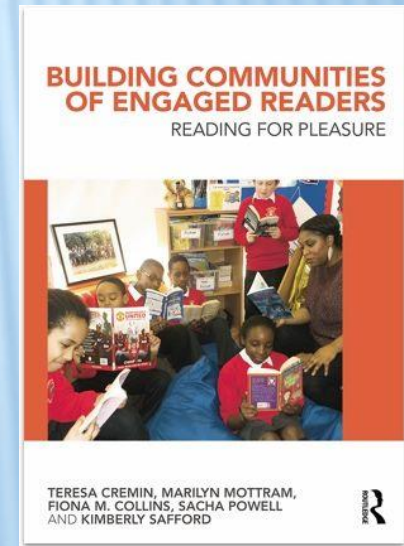
My poetry project would focus on 3 of these factors, namely: **reading aloud**, **talking about texts** and **independent reading time**.

READING FOR PLEASURE (RFP) PEDAGOGY RATIONALE

In the TaRs research project these factors had impact:

Reading aloud and discussing the text was a crucial strand of the RfP pedagogy identified in the TaRs research. It enabled students to access rich and challenging texts, offered a model for silent independent reading, prompted the students' affective engagement and created a class repertoire of 'texts in common' to discuss.

Talking about texts and talking about reading was at the heart of the RfP pedagogy identified in the TaRs research. This book talk was informal and highly reciprocal; it was often spontaneous and involved two way teacher-child/child-teacher and child-child recommendations and was found in many other un-assessed reading focused activities.

Offer support during **independent reading time** while ensuring that students retain ownership of the reading process.

Engaging in the RfP pedagogy would enable me to:

- plan to develop the students' RfP alongside other reading they would do in school and at home;

- make use of my knowledge of children's poetry to enrich the students' experience and pleasure in reading poems. Teachers who read poetry for pleasure and teach poetry can make a noticeable difference to their students' knowledge, experience and enjoyment of poetry and poetic language (*Commeyras, Bisplinghoff and Olson, 2003);*

- provide a forum where students could control more of their own reading and exercise their rights as readers;

- introduce time and space for students to explore texts in greater depth, share favourites and talk spontaneously about the poems;

- start to build a reciprocal and interactive community of readers.

OUTLINE OF THE SESSIONS

The plan was to run the project over the summer term of 2019 with all of the students in the class but in groups of no more than 6. Groups would be mixed and aim to have a balance of weaker and stronger readers; quieter and more vocal students. I started the project off by asking all of the students in the class to complete a questionnaire about their reading habits and then an additional questionnaire about their knowledge of poems and poets, poetry likes and dislikes.

On reflection, semi-structured interviews with the students might have been more reliable as some of the answers clearly indicated that they had not read the question accurately!

Reading Questionnaire 2019

Do you have any favourite authors?
Yes ☐ No ☐
If yes please say which your favourite authors are:

Do you have any favourite books?
Yes ☐ No ☐
If yes, please say what they are

Do you read any of the following? Please tick:
Information books ☐ Websites ☐ Newspapers ☐ Magazines ☐ Novels (stories with chapters) ☐
Comics ☐ Picture books ☐ Poetry ☐

Do you have a computer or other electronic devices at home? What are they?
Yes ☐ No ☐

Do you read on the computer, laptop, iPad, tablet or phone at home?
Yes ☐ No ☐

What kind of texts do you read? (Tick as many as you like)
stories ☐ poems ☐ song lyrics ☐ blogs ☐ recipes ☐ instructions for making things ☐ website info about _____
website information about celebrities ☐ website info about football and sport ☐

Do you like to talk about what you are reading with?
friends ☐ your teacher ☐ your family ☐ nobody ☐

Do you have talking time or discussions about books at school? Yes ☐ No ☐
If you don't have discussion time about books- would you like it?

What kinds of things do you discuss?

Reading Poetry Questionnaire

Do you enjoy reading poetry?
not at all ☐ a little ☐ a lot ☐

Do you enjoy listening to poems?
not at all ☐ a little ☐ a lot ☐

What kind of poems do you like to read or listen to? (Tick as many as you like!)
funny poems ☐ poems that tell a story (narrative) ☐ poems that are like songs (choruses) ☐
poems that make me think and feel ☐ poems that rhyme ☐ poems that have a strong rhythm ☐
shape poems ☐ riddles ☐ haikus ☐ limericks ☐ other _____

Do you have a favourite poem? What is it?

Do you know the names of any famous poets? Who?

Do you have a favourite poet?

What do you like about reading poetry?

What is challenging about reading poetry?

Do you enjoy having poems read aloud to you at school?

Do you enjoy reading poems aloud to other people?

Have you learnt any poems by heart?

Have you ever performed poems in a group to other people?

Would you like to perform poems in a group to other people?

After completing the questionnaires, we share read a booklet of poems which each student was then given to take home, read and share.

What did responses to the reading questionnaires reveal? (14 students)

❖   Very few authors or books were actually named by the students. Where they were named, they were not commensurate with the complexity of text a year 5 or 6 student should be reading.   (Apart from '*The Diary of a Wimpy Kid'* and '*Harry Potter')*, the only books named were ones studied by the students in their English lessons.)

❖   The authors named were: JK Rowling, Dr Seuss, Jeff Kinney, Roald Dahl and Roderick Hunt (co-creator of the ORT series).

❖   Despite responses to the contrary, the students **did** discuss what they read in class but even where the responses had acknowledged this, they could not verbalise what they had discussed.

❖   Over 50% of the students declared that they enjoyed being read to.

Overall, a picture emerged of students who enjoyed being read to and wanted to have authors and books they could talk about but lacked the knowledge and experiences to do this.

What did responses to the poetry questionnaires reveal? (11 students)

❖ Only 2 poets and 2 poems were named: Dr Seuss and Roald Dahl; '*Cat in a Hat'* and '*Fox in Sox'*

❖ Overwhelmingly, the students liked funny poems. Poems with rhythm and rhyme were also popular.

❖ The majority of students did not perceive any challenges in reading poetry but where they did, they mentioned rhyme again.

❖ One of the students was very adamant that they did not like anything at all about reading poetry.

**These findings mirrored the results of a large-scale 2007 survey of 4-16 year olds in the UK, '*Of those who did respond, most did not identify a favourite poet or book of poems, commenting that they did not have a favourite or did not read poetry*.' *(Lambirth, 2007; Ofsted 2007, cited in Cremin, T. (2010))*

My initial plan had been to allow the group free reign of a box of specially selected poetry books that I brought into school. (In my role as an advisory teacher I was lucky to have access to and experience of reading 'new' poetry for children.) However, after the first session, it was clear that the students were not able self-regulate themselves adequately enough to be able to select, read and understand a poem from one of the books.

Things were made even more difficult by the fact that some of the children were not able to read most of the poems independently. On the other hand, for the more skilled readers perhaps there was too much choice.

Therefore I decided to select the poems and gradually phase-in free choice.

In total we had 5 sessions of sharing poems, with sessions lasting between 20-30 minutes.

Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond my control, it was not possible to continue the project with the year 6 students and so the number of students was reduced to 6 year 5s. Nevertheless, this small sample provided interesting and enlightening insights into how reading poetry for pleasure can positively influence attitudes to reading.

The first guided session involved reading the Benjamin Zephaniah poem,

'Poetics', and at the end they had time to choose a poem from one of the

books in the box. The next time, the group read about the processes

Michael Rosen uses to write poems as an introduction to reading one of his.
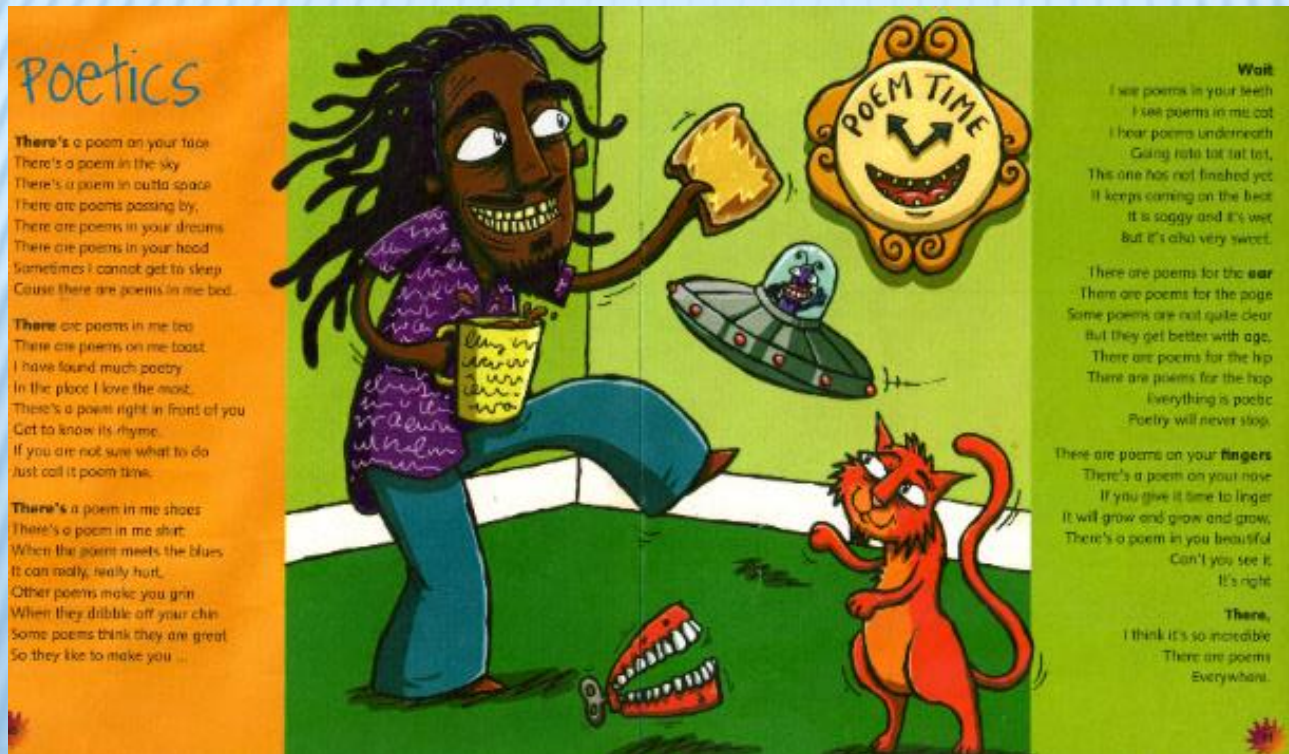
The students were fascinated with the image of Benjamin Zephaniah and had many questions about his hair and skin colour. I don't think he conformed to their idea of what a poet would look like.

We then went on to share read his poem, '*If you don't put your shoes on*'.

We discussed whether this poem had its origins in a remembered

experience from his childhood or its main purpose was to play with words.

This was just one example of child-initiated '*inside text talk*' (Cremin 2010).

After highlighting the different roles

in the poem, the students read

the poem aloud, taking on one of

the roles both chorally and in pairs.

The students moved on to talk about

events in their own lives that

could be made into a poem.

If you don't put your shoes on ...

If you don't put your shoes on before I count fifteen
then we won't go to the woods to climb the chestnut tree
one
    But I can't find them
Two
    I can't
They're under the sofa three
    No
    O yes
Four five six
    Stop – they've got knots they've got knots
You should untie the laces when you take your shoes
  off seven
    Will you do one shoe while I do the other
      then?
Eight but that would be cheating
    Please
All right
    It always ...
Nine
    It always sticks – I'll use my teeth
Ten
    It won't it won't
    It has – look.
Eleven
    I'm not wearing any socks
Twelve
    Stop counting stop counting. Mum where
    are my socks Mum
They're in your shoes. Where you left them.
    I didn't

The student who was at the early stages of acquiring English was very chatty at this point. Other notable comments were: '*This is my favourite poem so far,*' '*Yes, because it's something that is in your own experience.*'

Admittedly, the two poets I chose were very mainstream (Ofsted 2007) but bearing in mind that none of the students named either of them in their responses on the questionnaire, I felt they would be 'new' to them. In addition, should they wish to continue their poetry reading in school or at home, these would be authors whose works would be readily available either in their own publications , anthologies or publishers' resources.

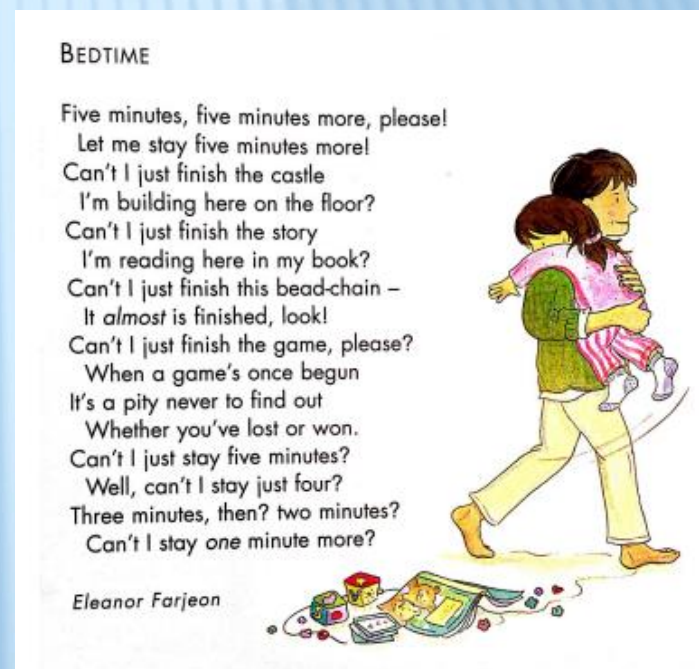For the next session I decided to focus on rhyme.

The rationale for this was that I wanted to make the session more active and hands on.   We therefore started with the students working in pairs to match rhyming word cards, where the words had been taken from poems we subsequently read.

I then chose poems for the following session that used rhyme ('*Bedtime' by Eleanor Farjeon and 'Adventures of Isobel' by Ogden Nash*).

I also used post-it to indicate poems in books in the box that the students could read independently after the shared reading.

Students were then asked to chose which poem they liked the most from this selection. They found this very hard and, apart from 2 of the students, were unable to decide.

BEDTIME

Five minutes, five minutes more, please!
  Let me stay five minutes more!
Can't I just finish the castle
  I'm building here on the floor?
Can't I just finish the story
  I'm reading here in my book?
Can't I just finish this bead-chain –
  It *almost* is finished, look!
Can't I just finish the game, please?
  When a game's once begun
It's a pity never to find out
  Whether you've lost or won.
Can't I just stay five minutes?
  Well, can't I stay just four?
Three minutes, then? two minutes?
  Can't I stay *one* minute more?

Eleanor Farjeon

IMPACT

During the course of the reading sessions, individual students made pertinent comments about the poems : relating the events in the poems to their own experiences; expressing what they liked or disliked about a poem. They were always curious about the poet.

At the end of the project, the group completed the poetry questionnaire again, revealing the following:

❖ Funny poems were still one of the most popular type of poem for all the students.

❖ Apart form Michael Rosen, they had all forgotten the names of the poets whose work we had read!

❖ All the children specified a challenge in reading poetry:

They were hard to read

Rhyming

Reading the words

Reading hard words

What do you like about reading poetry?

everything

What is challenging about reading poetry?

ryming

What do you like about reading poetry? it rymes and funny.

What is challenging about reading poetry? hard to ryme

IMPACT

It did occur to me that children who have SPLD when reading often have difficulty with rhyming words (and this was borne out by one of the students who really struggled to find rhyming words in the poems). On reflection, even though they enjoyed finding rhymes, perhaps this should not have been a focus because it was an area of poetry they found challenging .
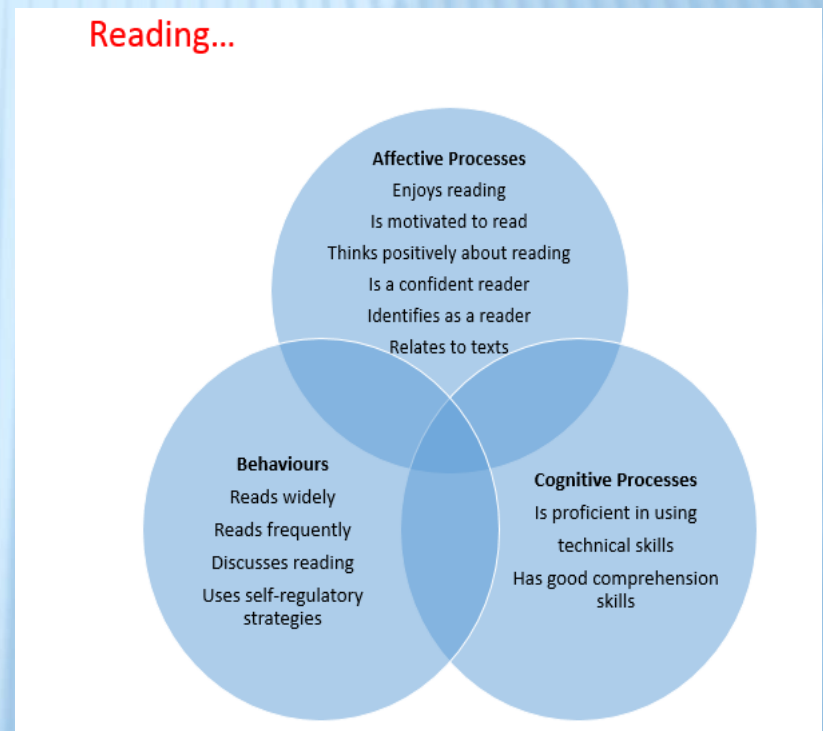
I do think that my own knowledge of and pleasure in reading children's poetry positively influenced the group's understanding and enjoyment of the poems we shared. In addition, children who were previously reluctant to contribute to discussions found their voices. Both of these observations echoed the finding of Cremin's (2010) research.

The students' lack of reference to poems and poets they had already encountered with their class in the questionnaire before we started the project highlighted the fact that they needed extensive, continual exposure to poems by specific poets. This was underlined by the evidence from the post-project questionnaires where only Michael Rosen was named.

The students were a long way from displaying the behaviours shown in this graphic- but it was a start.

For my group of 'can't and won't' readers, **reading aloud**, **talking about texts** and **supported independent reading time** needed to be practised very regularly over a sustained period of time with exciting, engaging texts in a social reading environment before their ability and desire to read could increase.

Reading...

Affective Processes
Enjoys reading
Is motivated to read
Thinks positively about reading
Is a confident reader
Identifies as a reader
Relates to texts

Behaviours
Reads widely
Reads frequently
Discusses reading
Uses self-regulatory strategies

Cognitive Processes
Is proficient in using technical skills
Has good comprehension skills

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