

Context

Over the course of three academic years since completing my PGCE at Cambridge I endeavoured to read at least one poem during every school day to the children in my classes in two different schools in Cambridgeshire.



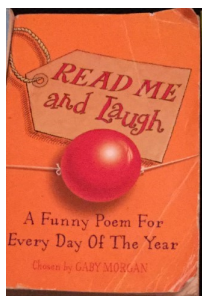
Research inspiration and rationale

I will be the first to admit that, despite studying English and Comparative Literature for my undergraduate degree, which necessitated the in-depth, studying of poetry, I had not always been a keen reader of poetry myself. It is certainly not something that I can remember doing as a child voluntarily, nor can I remember it being part of my own primary school experience. I certainly couldn't recite a poem off by heart before I became a teacher.

When I was undertaking my PGCE training, and reading the TaRs research I realised that my own knowledge of children's poetry, like many of the teachers in the survey, was woefully inadequate, despite being an 'English specialist'. Indeed, in my NQT year I wasn't confident when teaching poetry units of work, and going into my second year I felt that my subject knowledge and pedagogical strategies surrounding poetry teaching were something I needed to develop further.

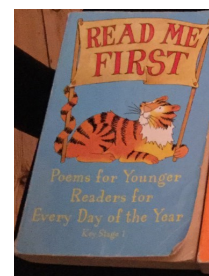
Luckily at the beginning of my second year of teaching I attended an INSET session where the guest speaker ran a short poetry workshop offering practical ideas for poetry lessons. At the end of the session she jokingly said that "reading a poem a day keeps the SENCO away" and when browsing the shelves in Waterstones the following weekend I came across an anthology chosen by Gaby Morgan which sparked an idea and fostered my determination to widen my knowledge.

Aims



With my newfound copy of *Read Me and Laugh* in hand, I resolved that on our return to school in January that I would read one poem a day to my Year 1 class until the end of the academic year. The poems for the weekend days would also be read – either on a Friday or the following Monday so that by the end of term in July they heard over 200 poems.

Following the success I had with my first class, I used the same anthology with a class of Year 3s and when I had another Year 1 class, I also introduced *Read Me First* for KS1 so that two poems a day were read.



Outline

Consequently, I read at least one poem daily to the children in my class. I tried to do this after registration in the morning before the day got going, or after lunchtime as some poems instigated more conversation than others. Unless the poem was a calligram or had particular textual features which needed to be shared with the children to aid understanding, I simply performed the poem to them (I have never had access to a visualizer in my classrooms). As a result, the children became used to listening attentively to a variety of poetry styles.

I would generally finish the reading by asking the children if they had any thoughts they wished to share or if there were any likes/dislikes, patterns or puzzling things they had noticed (using Aiden Chambers' "Tell me" framework). Depending on the length of the poem and content this would generally last five minutes.

Gradually the poetry reading became such an integral part of our classroom routine that children would remind me to read the poem if I forgot!

Impact on the children

Over the year all the children's listening stamina developed and their attitudes and responses towards poetry became increasingly positive and more sophisticated.

Initially I was surprised when I first read poetry to my Year 1 children as many of them laughed manically at the poems, even if they were not especially funny. I realised that although they knew how to react to a story when it was read aloud, some children had not heard poetry before and their unfamiliarity led to nervous laughter. However, it did not take long for this laughter to stop as they became more used to listening to poems and starting to recognise that they were all different. The children might not have always 'got' what the poems were about, but they benefitted from discussion, which explained that poetry is not always understood, even by adults!

Some children took a while to distinguish between the speaker in the poem and the person 'performing' the poem to them (me). This was a complex idea for Year 1 children to understand but thanks to the breadth of poetry in the anthologies there was ample opportunity to explore this concept with the children.

Crucially, the children realised that not every poem had to rhyme, not every poem was funny and that there many styles of poems. Watching and listening to 'real' poets online perform their own poems was invaluable and made the poetry come alive for the children. We all enjoyed watching Michael Rosen's videos on his website, and other poets on YouTube. There was such a buzz about poetry that I even set homework weeks to learn a poem which culminated in thoroughly enjoyable whole class performances. Parents even commented on how much they had enjoyed sharing poems with their children at home as a result of this activity.

I was personally thrilled when one boy asked his parents for the same poetry book as we read in class as one of his birthday presents. He explained that he liked to read the poem with his dad before school when we would then read it as a class. At times he even acted as the 'expert' as he had already taken part in a fulsome discussion at home.

It became a running joke that at least one child would borrow a copy of the book to take home every week so they could revisit familiar and favourite poems. By the end of the year, nearly every child had taken a copy home at least once!

Reflections on impact the TaRs research has on practice

As the TaRs research highlights, in-depth teacher subject knowledge is crucial in order to provide children with a range of opportunities to encounter new poets and poetry. Once I acknowledged that I needed to improve my own subject knowledge and began reading more poetry written for children, I discovered multiple opportunities to share this knowledge and found that this did not require copious amounts of study or advance preparation on my behalf.

In doing so I removed whatever worry I personally had about sharing this text type fully with children. Reading poetry from carefully chosen anthologies ensured that a variety of poetic styles and indeed poets were introduced to children as a matter of course, and that this reading complimented the work done on poetry in English units..

Doing this impacted on the children and on my practice and when I return to the classroom this year I will not only continue with my daily poetry reading, but I intend to extend this to also focus on a specific poet for an entire week in order to further enhance my own and the children's knowledge and pleasure in poets and their poetry.

