

‘Signs of progress’: reconceptualising response to children’s poetry writing

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Poetry writing is felt by many primary teachers to be an important part of children’s early language and literary development. It is also considered by many teachers to be very difficult to assess, due in part to the subjective nature of much poetry. Therefore poetry writing in schools enjoys both high and low status. If practice of teaching this genre is to develop it is necessary for teachers to have a clear view of what children are able to achieve within it. By looking at examples of children’s poetry writing, my aim in this paper is to demonstrate how it is possible for primary school teachers to identify features of children’s poetry writing which they consider to be of value. I shall argue, from the basis of an empirical research study, that teachers can, therefore, promote and encourage progression in poetry writing by their classes; but that to do so is to challenge views of poetry writing by children promoted in current orders and recommendations.

Once, in secondary school, a teacher said, ‘O.K. homework tonight—write a Robin Hood ballad’. At the time we weren’t doing anything to do with Robin Hood and none of us knew what a ballad was.

So I went home and I said, ‘Mum, homework tonight is to write a Robin Hood ballad.’ Mum said, ‘Oh, that sounds nice.’

So we sat down, me and Mum, and wrote a Robin Hood ballad. It was full of stuff like:

Here comes Friar Tuck
tripping o’er the lea
There’s Robin Hood
swallowing a cup of wine with glee

Anyway we had a great laugh and I thought it was really good. I was proud of myself. Next day at school, the teacher’s there and he says, ‘O.K., who’s done their homework?’ I said, ‘Me,’ and I’m the only one who’s done it. I come up front, hand it to him and wait. He goes through it, and then he puts a tick on it and hands it back to me. That’s all he does. A TICK! What is a tick? What’s it supposed to mean? I ask you? What a let down! (Rosen, in Styles & Cook, 1988, p. 81)

The context of this paper is an ESRC-funded doctoral study on teaching poetry writing at Key Stage 2 (KS2), based on an 18-month period of teaching a class of

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Year 5 and latterly Year 6 children in a large combined school in Exeter. The lessons, which lasted for one and a half hours, took place outside of, and did not seek to replicate, the literacy hour. However, a variety of pedagogical strategies promoted by the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) were used, such as modelling, demonstration and oral rehearsal.

My reasons for writing this paper stem from my own experience as a published poet (Wilson, 1996, 1999, 2002) and visiting writer in schools, as well as primary school teacher. As a teacher and researcher I am also interested in how children and teachers come to develop their understanding of progression within the poems they write and teach. The Rosen quotation, above, indicates that assessment is not always taken into account by teachers teaching poetry writing. This contrasts with the following: 'With Seamus Heaney ... an already achieved, uniquely precocious maturity is being deepened into a tragic voice. He has already left the point at which his contemporaries are now arriving' (Clive James, quotation from *The Observer* on a book blurb). This is an excerpt from a review, and is written in a language which takes for granted that a critical apparatus for discussing poetry by adults in terms of 'excellence' is already well established. Clive James, without being specific, shares with his reader an implicit understanding that to have reached 'maturity' is a sign of progress, based, in part, on a comparison with contemporaries. Benefiting from the tools of practical criticism (Leavis, 1932; Eliot, 1957) this is accepted as the vocabulary of book reviewing. The problem for educators of young writers is that, in spite of recent suggestions by Dymoke (2003) and Carter (1998), no such agreed vocabulary for discussing poetry by children exists in this country, thus making it hard to describe progress. At worst children receive well-intentioned but ultimately misguided comments which talk about 'poetic features' or give comments on spelling (SCAA, 1995).

This paper argues that it is not only possible but fruitful to assess children's poetry writing at KS2. The paper does not argue for this in the summative sense. By devising a set of criteria, which, looked at together, give teachers a picture of signs of progress in a piece of poetry writing, this paper promotes a notion of progression in children's poetry writing. This seeks to empower children by communicating to them about areas of development, as opposed to expecting them to write excellent poems without any idea of development. In practice this means that the vocabulary about poetry by children needs to change; not so that we begin to doubt, with Scannell (1987), that children's attempts at poetry writing are in some way inferior; but so that we can stop looking for perfection, and concentrate instead on extending children's knowledge and skills in areas where they show signs that they need extra support to grasp new concepts.

Latterly, poetry writing has changed from being a 'Cinderella' subject (Benton, 1978, p. 114), taught *ad hoc* according to primary teachers' enthusiasms and/or anxieties, to a compulsory element in the National Curriculum (NC) (DES, 1990; DfE, 1995, DfEE, 1999) orders, and NLS recommendations (DfEE, 1998). While some have welcomed this move, in that the Strategy helps children access 'sophisticated formal aspects of language' (Coulson, 1999, p. 8; Kerr, 2002,

p. 25), others see the prescribed material of recent orders as anathema to the very qualities poetry teaching should promote (Carter, 1998). It is in the arguments over what these qualities are, or should be, that much of the debate around this subject has been generated in the post-war period.

The current version of the NC (DfEE, 1999) was published after the NLS. It is surprising, therefore, that the content found in the latter is not repeated in the current orders. Poetry does appear in the current orders (DfEE, 1999, p. 30), as one genre among many that children are expected to write.

As with the NLS, one can view the current orders as being true to the tradition of Cox (DES, 1989; Cox, 1991) in that they try to strike a balance between different modes of writing. Though there is a detectable shift towards the concern for technical competence in NC 1999, for example, in the way experimentation with language is partly decontextualised from writing into an analytical activity, there is also an attempt to place 'creative uses of language' (DfEE, 1999, p. 29) in the same category as informing, explaining, reviewing and persuading. There is an emphasis throughout on the needs of the reader, implicitly requiring teachers to teach a model of writing which has metacognitive processes at its centre. Furthermore, the descriptions of writing offered are very open: 'focusing on the subject matter' and conveying it 'in sufficient detail for the reader' could equally apply to a poetic description of an object, experience or emotion, as it could to creating the setting in a story, or giving the background facts to a case in order to set up a debate. The current orders, therefore, place poetry writing on an equal footing with other modes of writing, within the context of using English for learning across other curriculum areas, and functional competence across a wide range of skills. This should be seen by teachers as a sign of strength, and should act as a spur to giving equal weight in the classroom to both 'the main rules and conventions of written English' (DfEE, 1999, p. 29) without ignoring 'creative uses of language' (p. 29) and imagining and exploring feelings and ideas.

The first thing to say about the content of poetry being read and written by children at KS2 is that the programme the Strategy provides is very thorough and covers a lot of ground. Children currently in Year 6, and who will have been taught from the Strategy since 1999–2000, will have encountered a wide range of verse forms, both in their reading and in terms of forms they will have been expected to write themselves. As such, the range of poetry proposed by the Strategy might be the making of poetry teaching, in that the activities and reading material proposed are no longer *ad hoc*, yet are open enough for teachers to develop and administer according to their own tastes and reading and their understanding of children's needs.

One is also struck by the way the Strategy requires children to write progressively more demanding poetry writing activities as they get older, starting in Year 3 Term 1 with writing short descriptions and simple patterns; or Year 3 Term 2 with writing 'new or extended verses for performance based on models of performance poetry' (DfEE, 1998, p. 34); and ending in Year 6 Term 3 with writing a 'sequence of poems linked by theme or form' (DfEE, 1998, p. 54). This is the first time that

an attempt to map progression in poetry writing by children has been made in this country. As such, it is valuable, for it confers a secure status upon poetry that has been, until now, mixed, taught with a mixture of caution and enthusiasm (Benton, 1986).

This view is bolstered by the list of poetic forms which children are to compose across KS2, which is certainly wide, both in terms of 'product', and the process of poetic writing. There is a real attempt throughout the recommendations for poetry composition to strike a balance between four aspects of writing which run through the Strategy as a whole. I have identified these as: writing from models/established forms; practising the process of writing (including performance); learning about techniques; and experimentation with language. Taken together, and taught in a balanced, effective way, these aspects fulfil Cox's desire to see children learning the craft of writing and beginning to behave like real writers (1991, p. 24).

However, one could also say that despite its attempt to hold in equilibrium aspects of composition which are common to writing of all kinds (drafting, polishing and editing), the view the NLS takes of poetry writing is very much form-driven. In other words, the progress in poetry writing which the NLS describes is centred on children progressing through a series of adult-made forms or 'types' of poetry, not on the demands which these forms make on children's learning. For example, in Year 4 Term 3 the range of forms to be studied includes: haiku, cinquain, couplets, list, thin poems, alphabets, conversations, monologues, syllabics, prayers, epitaphs, songs, rhyming forms and free verse. This, by any standard, is a huge range for children and their teachers to cover. Leaving aside arguments about the desirability and possibility of covering such a range in so short a time, one is left asking how these forms actually relate to each other in terms of learning. The haiku and cinquain forms, for example, with their concentration of precision and forging of image and feeling, are part of the same family as syllabics, but could not be more different in purpose and style from list poems and monologues, with their emphasis on accumulation of detail and the spoken voice. This creates the impression that the forms of poetry to be studied appear in a somewhat arbitrary order in the Strategy. For example, why children have to wait until Year 6 to study Shakespeare is not explained; nor is the large amount of content to be covered in Year 4 Term 3 compared with other years.

Another criticism one could make of these recommendations is that there is not enough mention of writing poems from personal experience, or from personal feelings (Y4, T1 and Y5, T1 only), both of which one would expect to see featured more in this genre of writing especially. These are the only hints in the Strategy regarding poetry composition which suggest that the point of teaching poetry might be about something other than form and structure, the preservation of feelings or experience, for example. At its worst this could ensure that children have a wide experience of different forms of poetry, but with no real sense of what makes poetry poetry. We might say, therefore, that if the poetic forms in the NLS do indeed grow harder they still tell us very little about the kind of learning involved in writing them.

One can speculate that the concentration upon form in the Strategy might be because it is deemed easier to quantify progress in that way. For example, 'to study

in depth one genre and produce an extended piece of similar writing, e.g. for inclusion in a class anthology' (Y6, T2) might be deemed 'harder' to achieve than '[using] the structures of poems read to write extensions based on these' (Y5, T2) because it involves writing more, not because the learning is significantly different. While the notion of 'progress' is made implicit in its recommendations, therefore, the order of the work recommended does not relate to the explicit demands on thinking and learning involved in writing poems as unique ways of writing and communicating meaning.

As Cox has stressed (DES, 1989; Cox, 1991), the writing of poetry does not appear in levels of attainment because he did not feel poetry could be successfully mapped on to levels. While the English orders for KS2 are open enough in their descriptions of writing to include poetry alongside other genres, what do the Attainment Targets (ATs) for writing (DfEE, 1999, pp. 58–59) tell us about the way writing is to be assessed currently; and what can we speculate from this about current practice in poetry writing?

I concentrate this discussion on Levels 3, 4 and 5 of the ATs, as those are the levels of writing most commonly associated with children at KS2. Common to each level descriptor is an opening statement describing the kind of writing about to be described. There is a problem with these, because there is no qualitative difference between the statements. Level 3 writing is 'often organised, imaginative and clear'. Level 4 writing is in a 'range of forms' and 'is lively and thoughtful'. Level 5 writing is 'varied and interesting, conveying meaning clearly in a range of forms for different readers' (DfEE, 1999, pp. 58–59). As in the NLS the range of forms used by children, not the learning taking place within them, seems a decisive factor in work receiving a higher level. One might argue from this that the NC also privileges form more highly than engagement with it, to use Jones and Mulford's phrase (1971).

Another problem with these level descriptors is the way vocabulary is discussed. In Level 3 'words are chosen for variety and interest'; in Level 4 'vocabulary choices are often adventurous and words are used for effect'; and in Level 5 'vocabulary choices are imaginative and words are used precisely' (DfEE, 1999, pp. 58–59). As with the opening statements at each level, there is no discernable qualitative difference between these. The difficulty for teachers wanting to use these descriptors to look at poetry by children is that words which show variety, interest, adventurousness, imagination and precision, and which are used for effect, are arguably all important for poetry writing, to the point where it is difficult to say which is more important. Because they are hard to separate qualitatively, they are difficult to use to show progression. Another criticism, in terms of poetry writing, is that this does not take into account the way that children can also show engagement with form in the way they lay out their poems in lines and stanzas, not just in the 'content space' (Sharples, 1999, p. 23) of vocabulary.

One can speculate, therefore, that the most detailed aspect of these descriptors are those aspects of writing which are most easy to define, those which are most technical. It is possible to speculate further, therefore, that the descriptors say more

about how teachers can tell what is ‘wrong’ with children’s writing, than they can about what is ‘right’. Furthermore, as with the NLS, they do not add to teachers’ understanding of what ‘good writing’ is; and offer very little in the way of understanding what progress in poetry writing might look like.

While these ATs do not preclude poetry, or any other genre of writing, at KS2, they make it harder to assess. Teachers wanting to grasp how they might look for progression in poetry written by their classes might well find these ATs less than helpful, therefore. This is a problem for teachers when it comes to poetry because, as Cox recognised (1991), the non-technical aspects of writing are very hard to assess via levels. Since assessment via levels is at the centre of pressure on teachers, it is therefore probable that teachers will be influenced to avoid areas of development in writing which are hardest to assess. This would include poetry.

Therefore, in approaching my research, working with children writing poetry in school, I was interested not just in exploring effective strategies for generating poetry, but also in exploring the notion of progression in the children I was working with. Underpinning my practice was the assumption that children can write poetry, that they engage with form readily in both reading and writing, and that they can use their own poems to make meaning in a unique way. Part of the meaning children make in their poems lies in their handling of language; and partly in their handling of form. One of the best descriptions of this is (Styles, 1992, p. 74; author’s italics):

I call [children] *poets* because the type of writing I am about to discuss uses economic language, is memorable, has a strong sense of rhythm (though sometimes it is the natural rhythms of speech), is shaped into lines and provokes an emotional response in the reader.

I found this definition useful because it led me to think about certain details in children’s poems which are observable and therefore, hopefully, teachable. This gave me a base from which to work as I tried to define for myself the ways in which children make meaning in poems; and how far those things constituted ‘progress’.

Another influence on my thinking was Baldwin’s suggestion that responses to poems are finally personal: ‘The real test of a poem is *is it alive?*’ (Baldwin, 1982, p. 27) (author’s italics). The question for teachers is: according to whom, and using which criteria? When I began teaching the lessons on which my data are based I hoped the children would be able to show ‘signs of progress’ in their writing, although I was not sure what these would look like in practice. The influence for this was Sedgwick’s idea (1997, p. 50) of looking for progress in children’s poems in general terms, and not for adult-centred notions of ‘excellence’. This directed me to concentrating on looking for several signs of progress (or Baldwin’s ‘aliveness’) in the poems, which, grouped together, might show evidence of growing confidence and independence. This seemed a more coherent and less restrictive approach than looking for individual examples of progress in each poem.

One idea I had was that this progress might be demonstrable by an increase in the risk and playfulness of the children’s writing. This is in part prompted by my own experience as a poet; and partly by poets as diverse as the following, in the literature

on the subject (Heaney, 1988; Koch, 1991; Ash in Crawford *et al.*, 1995; Gunn in Herbert & Hollis, 2000; O'Hara, 2003). I realised, however, that these virtues are more easily recognised subjectively in children's poems than they are to account for rationally. As I say at the beginning of this paper, there is a long-established vocabulary of identifying aspects such as 'maturity' and 'risk' (above) in writing by adults, but not in that of children. With this in mind, teachers might ask the following questions of their pupils' work: what kind of factors constitute risk in poems by children; and how do we know we are observing it, and not what we hope to see?

As my critique of NLS recommendations for poetry makes clear, there is an emphasis in the current context on form to the detriment of expressing personal experience, meaning making, and the learning demands of poetry writing. We might sum this up as a concentration on the output of poems, not on the signs of progress within them. My study sought to tease out the questions, above, summed up in the research question thus: 'What are the signs of progress in children's poetry writing?'

Therefore, by careful reading of the poems written by the children and through drawing on ideas raised in the literature, I devised criteria which I felt were observable as signs of progress, or 'aliveness' in the children's writing. I collected these criteria together into two categories which I felt to be important: use of language and use of form. The criteria were used as the basis for developing a coding tool which was used to analyse all the poems qualitatively to identify patterns and areas of difficulty across the cohort: however, this article focuses upon the criteria themselves and how they can be used to identify and discuss progression in poetry writing.

The criteria used are outlined in Table 1 below. At all times a paramount consideration was to explore the relationship between language and form, and the construction of meaning in each poem. There is no intrinsic value per se in any of the features used below other than in how they contribute to the communicative power of the poem, or its 'aliveness'. Moreover, a key concern was to value risk-taking and experimentation as a sign of progress, hence the distinction in the language criteria

Table 1.

Use of language	Use of form
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary choices (commonplace; effective; ambitious) • Similes (commonplace; effective; inventive) • Metaphors (commonplace; effective; inventive) • Alliteration • Onomatopoeia • Assonance • Rhyme • Half rhyme • Metre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Layout: as prose or as a poem • Line breaks: (at sentence/page end; to structure or segment ideas; mid sentence; using line breaks as punctuation) • Variety in line lengths • Use of stanzas • Use of graphic forms or features (words being played with—letter/font size; layout features)

between 'effective' use and 'ambitious' or 'inventive' use: the latter two categories may not be wholly effective but they do demonstrate that the child is playing with language and pushing the boundaries of his or her writing.

I present below some examples of children's poems where experimentation with language can be seen to be developing over time. I also make comment, from these poems, on the way that progression in handling of form, while present, appears to take place at a much slower rate. As I say later on in my discussion, it is possible to speculate that this is because children feel they have more chance of success in the verbal sphere than they do in the formal sphere.

There are small signs of progress in the use of language evident in the work of Leanne, a writer in the sample it would be hard to describe as confident. Certain strategies, however, appeared to give her confidence, and extended the range of what she was able to do in her poems, while others appeared not to. Into that latter category we might place 'The Furniture Game' (Brownjohn, 1994), a word game where famous people are described in metaphorical terms.

Furniture Game

He is a gold four poster bed
He is a leather sofa
He is a

Leanne, Y5 (November)

This contains rather commonplace language, and is not developed very far. In Bereiter and Scardamalia's phrase (1987), the writer's 'knowledge transforming' appears to be stilted. The poem effectively ends at line 2; we can speculate that she was unable to think up new ideas to carry it on. There is a qualitative leap in Leanne's poetry when given a model to work with, however, both in terms of form and organisation, and use of language. The poem used as a model is a Nigerian poem in the Igbo dialect, in which the speaker uses inventive similes to describe an animal without naming it. I present Leanne's poem about a dolphin, stimulated by this model, to exemplify what I mean by a mixture of effective and ambitious language and use of simile.

You!

you
your eyes are like the sea
you
your face is like a bottle top
you
your skin is like sky on a sunny day
you
your teeth is like glass
you
your smile is like a bun with a
cut in it
you
your tail is like a fan

Leanne, Y5 (May)

This is a good example of a series of effective similes. Leanne's poem is also a good example of engagement with form (Jones & Mulford, 1971), in that it is playful with language, but within the constraint of a repeating pattern. In the words of Sharples (1999), the problem of the rhetorical space thinking (organisation, layout, structure) is solved by the model, enabling Leanne to concentrate on the content space thinking and arrive at arresting similes. Models were useful in this way to those children in the sample who struggled with writing in general. It gave them structures to work with, thus freeing them to attempt playfulness in their use of language.

'Your smile is like a bun with a/ cut in it' is highly effective and bordering on the unusual/ambitious, especially as it occurs broken over two lines. It also has the pleasing ring of originality about it; encountering it for the first time I felt as though language was being newly minted, the writer consciously striving to leave cliché behind. Whether or not the line break here was conscious, the slight pause it creates delays the satisfaction of the visual image in the next line. What is also of interest about this poem is that it contains images which range from the mundane ('your eyes are like the sea') to the effective ('your face is like a bottle top'; 'your tail is like a fan'). Furthermore, they are all highly visual.

A more confident writer was Greg. I present two of his poems below to show examples of playfulness with language, and also to demonstrate that progress in words and imagery appears to develop at a faster rate than that in the area of form. Greg was able to use metaphor in an effective and occasionally unusual way in his 'Kennings' poem.

Kennings

lined-ender
white-trasher
still-rectangle
trying-killer
white-flyer
smooth-line
light-runner
a frightening-white

Greg's effective experiments with metaphor in his riddle about a piece of paper, with its haunting and unconsoling last line, contains a mixture of effective images ('still-rectangle'; 'lined-ender') and ones that are more unusual ('white-trasher'; 'trying-killer'). The poem achieves a fairly consistent unity of tone and purpose, but it is these occasional glimpses, where the writer is striving to create fresh images, even if they do not 'work effectively', which demonstrate to me that experimentation with the possibility of poetic language is taking place. The poem, while linguistically arresting, does not make the same kind of attempt to 'play with form' (e.g. by placing more than one image on each line, creating stanzas, or breaking images over lines). This could relate to teaching strategies which emphasised experimentation with language, not line breaks. In this instance, the models offered to the class were perhaps too constraining for many kinds of progress to be shown.

To stay with Greg, for the moment, I present another poem by him, from the early part of the second half of the study. The following was written after a discussion and close reading of Wendy Cope's 'The Uncertainty of the Poet' (1986). Greg's poem displays, in my view, a willingness to experiment with language that goes beyond 'unusual' almost to the point of recklessness, and yet creates a topsy-turvy world which succeeds on its own terms.

Am I a Poet

I run around with rain
 I hunt thunder with night and day
 I sing why I have the chance with sadness
 and say my own world to the chicken himself
 AM I REALLY GUILTY.
 I'm sad rain
 with chicken blues
 with sad chicken
 with rain blues
 AM I REALLY GUILTY

I present it because it is one of the few examples from the study where the handling of language remains on an ambitious footing throughout. Whether or not the writer creates the oppressive atmosphere of the poem consciously is hard to say. What is evident is the assonantal musicality of phrases like 'I run around with rain/ I hunt thunder with night and day'; and the memorability of 'I sing why I have the chance with sadness', which is both a description of an action and a highly figurative encapsulation of a state of mind. The poem is an example of how children can be encouraged to take risks with language, even if in doing so they create poems which challenge one's idea of what 'poetic writing' should be.

While the poem is not as arresting formally as in terms of language, the poem nevertheless makes some attempt to engage the reader with its layout in a more playful way than the Kennings example. Most noticeable are the repeated lines in capitals. Also of interest is the way, in the first half of the poem, the 'I run/hunt/sing' phrases all begin on a new line, one running over to the next; while in the second half the line breaks are used to create a list effect, which slows the pace of the poem down and matches its increasingly sombre mood.

Many of the signs of progress I list above are present in the following poem, below, by Kelly, who achieved an overall 4* in her English National Tests. What I find remarkable about this poem is that it came very early on in the study (it was only the second piece the children wrote), long before any real input had been given to the children on layout, stanza formation and line breaks. It is therefore possible to read the poem as an example of children's willingness, their need even, to invent entirely new forms, which bear no resemblance to models used, or to other children's work. This is the kind of thing Rosen (1989) describes as emblematic of successful poetry writing pedagogy. Judging from the sample I collected, these pieces are rarer than those where children experiment with language.

In my view this simple, though odd, narrative, is made much more complex, and, therefore, interesting to read because of its layout. The first sentence ('This

The Lady's House is Yellow

1.

This lady's
house is
yellow.

She and on
put paint her
on face.
a
cardboard
suit

She paints her
house yellow
each day.

She
has an
apple every day.
Her cardboard
suit
is made out
of shapes.

2.

One day
she went
swimming

but she forgot
to take her
cardboard suit
off

Then she
got in
the pool

remember you only have 1 suit

shhhhh
hhhhh

hhhhh
hhhhh

don't tell her she'll go mad if you tell

Kelly, Y5 (November)

lady's house is yellow') is spread across three lines and reads down the page in a conventional manner. The following sentence ('She put on a cardboard suit and paint on her face') starts not below the first sentence but to the right of it, and proceeds to undulate across the page, the reader's eye scanning the stanzas as though they were columns. The poem deliberately seems to create pauses in its mode of telling, complementing the rather strange narrative as it shifts from one dream-like scene to the next. In this way the layout of the poem is part of the poem's meaning. Merely to tot up the instances where Kelly has created variety in line lengths, used line breaks mid-sentence, and used line breaks to segment ideas is to reduce, therefore, the very direct sense of play one senses at work in the poem. Reading it near the beginning of my practice was a seminal moment, because it made me realise for the first time that children were able to show they were able to take risks in their poetry writing in other ways apart from verbal dexterity. The poem shifted my notion of what I thought was possible by children of Year 5 age; and expanded my idea of what I had been happy to call 'word play'.

There were many children in the sample who found it difficult not to write their poems in prose, even towards the end of the 18-month project. One of these was Patrick, who seemed to need the security of drafting his poems in this way. Here is a poem from the final two or three lessons. It is based on ee cummings' poem 'in Just' (cummings, 1962):

in just the 13th of August it is my birthday and
 in the summer I am thirsty. I get lots of presents
 and I will be embarrassed. In front of my parents. It's
 my birthday with lots of cuddles and kisses from????????

Another example of poem-as-prose came from Edmund. What is useful here is to be able to compare his first draft with his second, after one-to-one instruction from me:

Metaphor

1.

A shark is a pair of scissors snapping at prey. No one stands a chance in the dark waters of the sea when a shark's in the sea. It fights its food ripping it to shreds.

2.

A shark is a pair of scissors
 snapping
 at paper prey.
 Nothing stands a chance
 on the desk.
 When a shark's on the desk.
 It tears its food ripping
 it to shreds.

The poem plays with the metaphorical idea of turning a pair of scissors into a shark threatening everything near it, as a shark would the seabed. Apart from the different verbal choices Edmund makes, through discussion and re-reading, the most striking aspect of this poem is that the first draft contains very little energy or life. The second draft, while improved verbally, largely through omitting repetitions, achieves much of its energy from the way the words are arranged on the page, with single words ('snapping') and alliterating phrases ('paper prey') given more emphasis, as well as phrases broken over lines. What is also striking is that a great deal of discussion went into making the second draft into a poem. For some children, detailed discussion, where individual words and phrases are read out, picked over and questioned, including teacher modelling of line breaks, is the only reliable way to ensure that poems and not prose is produced, such are the metacognitive demands of poetry composition.

As a poetry educator of many years experience, it was a surprise to me that those areas of poetry writing which I have broadly referred to as 'form' in my data analysis seem to require much more teacher input and demonstration than I had first thought. One can speculate that poetry is much harder for teachers to model than prose; that they may not be as confident with poetry; or are not as used to writing it, or are afraid of modelling it 'badly'. It is, nevertheless, as important for children to

see teachers modelling poetry writing as prose, with the same level of spoken metacognitive commentary which is a hallmark of good practice (Fisher, 2002).

If children at KS2 need more input in this area, it might be because of the way writing poems challenges them to unlearn skills learned in prose writing, that lines must be continuous, and that new paragraphs introduce new ideas. Poems disrupt that knowledge in their use of shorter lines; and in the way stanzas are sometimes used not because new information is being introduced but to make or follow a pattern. It is not surprising, therefore, if children's energy appears to go mostly into the verbal aspects of their writing. Another reason for children focusing on this aspect of poetic composition is perhaps because teachers construct poetry as about words and images and teach it as such: the inter-relationship of language and form as a meaning-making process in poetry is an area of less security for them. It is as though children feel they have more chance of success by experimenting verbally, which is why Kelly's early piece is so remarkable.

As I hint above, this has implications for pedagogy, particularly in relation to the NLS. One such implication might be that the NLS, with its emphasis on form and on using models would be better placed to promote a view of poetry which puts less emphasis on form *per se*, and more on the demands upon thinking which different poetic forms require. It is ironic that a framework for teaching should be so heavily weighted in favour of the aspect of poetic composition which children find hardest to show progress in, and which requires the most determined teacher modelling. It is debatable, however, whether there is any accompanying pedagogical idea of how these forms relate to children's learning about poetry, or if indeed they are just about the acquisition of different techniques. If this were to remain the case, we would have a situation where the very thing children notice as being different about poetry (Tarleton, 1983), its 'margin of silence' (Andrews, 1991, p. 129), is the one thing they receive least direct teaching on. It might be necessary, therefore, to think in future of forms being used not as ends in themselves, but in terms of being useful at different points of developmental need.

The pedagogical implications following from this would seem to be that in order for teachers to encourage their classes to use language *and* form in a wide variety of ways in their poetry writing they will need to cast a wide net in their own reading to find texts which will challenge both themselves and children to leave what Benton (2000) has called the 'conveyor belt' of predictable writing. They would also need subject-specific training on poetic composition, in order to be able to show children how to handle the demands of crafting poems.

Teachers have, in a sense, a double difficulty in this area of pedagogy. The current context now requires that teachers continually have to make assessments of, and set targets for, their classes. There is pressure from within to assess, therefore; and from the culture at large, which says that poetry is 'above and beyond' (Curtis, 1996, p. 7) other forms of writing, to leave it alone. As can be seen in the case of Cox (DES, 1989), poetry has long been exempted from summative assessments, and so seems to escape rigorous questioning on the one hand; and a deep probing of the kind of problems outlined above on the other.

It could be argued from this that children should have more experience of having their poems commented on, promoting them as forms in which it is most difficult to decontextualise audience, purpose and context from form, language and meaning. And yet it is possible to see the current context in which the teaching of poetry writing exists as one where, on paper, at least, it does not need to be justified. One can speculate that the suspicion Cox claimed (1991, p. 79) teachers felt towards creative writing and self-expression has probably not been eroded by a National Test programme heavily weighted towards other modes of writing, and a National Strategy which is very full of content.

Black *et al.*'s view of learning and thinking (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black *et al.*, 2002) is that formative comments directed to specific learning objectives have an effect on both the teacher and the receiver of teachers' comments. If implemented seriously their proposals would have a big impact on the teaching of poetry at KS2 in this country. Given the limitations of the NLS and NC which I have already pointed out, the implications of this view of assessing children's work, as well as of writing, would go against the stream of much current practice. Perhaps teachers should judge children's poems according to specific objectives, and not according to some mythical and unrealistic version of what poetic writing should be. This might include focussing on the use of a small range of qualities per piece of work assessed, or even one: the use of line breaks in free verse, for example; the quality of the revelation/perception of a haiku; the sense of audience participation in a performance poem; or the way feelings are described through concrete detail and not bald statement. Each of these things could be itemised by teachers as things worthy of comment in children's poems. That we so often remark, instead, on their spelling, as in recent exemplification papers (SCAA, 1995), or on presentation, reveals, perhaps, how much practice in this area needs to develop.

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