

<b>Institution:</b> University of Greenwich
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> (UoA 25) - Education
<b>Title of case study:</b> Strengthening poetry teaching in primary schools
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>This research has revealed obstacles to effective teaching of poetry in primary schools including isolating poetry in the curriculum; the mystique that poetry must be a teacher's hobby before they can teach; and lack of teachers' development opportunities. <i>Leading Poetry</i> has changed the practice of primary teachers and teacher trainers locally, nationally and internationally by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Influencing teachers' practice on a further professional development project: they were assigned to influence the practice of colleagues in their schools, and in schools and teacher training provider centres nationally and internationally.</li> <li>2. Enriching the practice of teachers in 17 schools in Kent.</li> </ol>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The teaching of poetry in school is a generally under-researched area. Recognition of poetry's importance in giving children the words to explore and understand their world is evident from its place in the statutory curriculum. However, the 2007 Ofsted report, <i>Poetry in Schools: A survey of Practice 2006/7</i> described the teaching of poetry as 'weaker than the other aspects of English inspected, suggesting that poetry was underdeveloped in many of the schools surveyed'. For many years research has indicated (Benton, 1986, 2000, Cremin et al 2008) that the volume and quality of poetry teaching in primary schools has been affected, first by dwindling curriculum time for poetry, due in part to pressure from high-stakes tests at the end of Key Stage 2 and that poetry is very rarely tested, and secondly by poor knowledge of poems and poets by teachers. The Ofsted report echoed this and added that literacy subject leaders were highly influential on quality of poetry teaching in primary schools, where many teachers were not English specialists.</p> <p>The <i>Leading Poetry</i> project (2010/11) was designed to explore these issues in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support primary school teachers to improve their teaching of poetry;</li> <li>• raise awareness of the contemporary state of poetry teaching in primary schools.</li> </ul> <p>The research, led by Professor Andrew Lambirth with Susannah Steele and Sarah Smith, was funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund.</p> <p>It was also stimulated by an issue that has been explored in debates around teacher subject knowledge and the teaching of literacy. Research from the USA (Applegate and Applegate 2004, Bisplinghoff 2003, Commeyras et al 2003) and more recently the UK (Cremin et al 2008), equates the quality of teachers' literacy teaching with their personal interest in aspects of the literacy curriculum, ie reading literature and poetry. The research team was keen to learn from subject leaders whether they thought a personal love of poetry was necessary to good teaching and what the experience was in their schools.</p> <p><i>Leading Poetry</i> was a qualitative study that drew on in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore perceptions of ten experienced literacy subject leaders on poetry teaching in their schools. The research probed, as deeply and intensively as possible, their perspectives on the rewards, tensions and challenges of teaching poetry. Further, the project sought their practice-informed views of how poetry teaching can be improved in primary schools.</p>

## Impact case study (REF3b)

The research findings became recommendations for the next stage, which was to pilot a different approach to poetry teaching:

1. The importance of teachers embedding poetry into other aspects of the literacy curriculum rather than teaching poetry only within a discrete planned unit.
2. The need to provide time in school, and professional development, for teachers to choose poems for their pupils and discuss them with other teachers.
3. Sharing teachers' self-recognition that a personal interest in poetry written in books is not necessary for good quality teaching of poetry. Knowledge and appreciation can be developed in school.
4. The importance of building confidence in teaching poetry, through professional discussion of poems and poets.

### 3. References to the research (REF1 submitted staff in **bold**, \*\*REF2 Output)

- (i) **Lambirth, A.**, Smith, S., & Steele, S. (2012). "Poetry is happening but I don't exactly know how": Literacy Subject Leaders' perceptions of poetry in their primary schools. *Literacy*, 46(2), 73–80. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4369.2011.00654.x>
- (ii) **Lambirth, A.**, Smith, S. & Steele, S. (2011, 15-17 July). *Leading Poetry: 10 Subject Leaders talk about Poetry teaching in their Schools*. Paper presented at the 47th United Kingdom Literacy Association International Conference, University of Chester.
- (iii) **Lambirth, A.** (2012, 11-13 July). *Teachers' Personal and Professional Interests in Poetry: Exploring the Distinction*. Paper presented at The 13th International Conference of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI) Special Interest Group on Writing, University of Porto.
- (iv) **Lambirth, A.**, Smith, S., & Steele, S. (2013) Responding to Children's Poetry, in Dymoke, S., Lambirth A., & Wilson, A. (Eds.) (2013) *Making Poetry Matter: International Research on Poetry Pedagogy* (pp. 84-95). London/New York: Bloomsbury.

Reference 3.1 was published in a peer-reviewed journal with an international editorial board, readership and authorship. This paper was judged to be 'good' 2\* research from Professor Anne Edwards from University of Oxford and Professor Gary McCulloch of the Institute of Education, University of London. It was described by these assessors as a 'very nice read - a good 2\*'

References 3.2 and 3.3 were both peer reviewed conferences. 3.3 has an international peer review panel. The paper was given at a European venue and convened by an international Educational organisation.

Reference 3.4 was published in a book that resulted from an ESRC seminar series (04/01/2011–03/07/2012) (RES-451-26-0830) *Poetry Matters* and contains papers from an international set of authors

### 4. Details of the impact

The *Leading Poetry* research started a chain of events leading, so far, to two main impacts: the *Poetry Champions* project and a further, externally funded project called *Ways with Words*. In these projects, teachers changed their practice in planning, preparing and teaching poetry, and reported greater confidence as a result.

#### Poetry Champions

The research team won more funding from the Higher Education Innovation Fund to follow up

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

*Leading Poetry* with a research and development project which would put its findings into practice and disseminate them widely. *Poetry Champions* aimed to:

- pilot changes to curriculum planning and teachers' professional development in primary schools;
- create a high profile group of enthusiastic poetry teachers by supporting them to feel confident in finding ways to ignite, or reignite, the love of poetry amongst their pupils;
- the teachers in the group would champion the new approach in their own schools, and spread the good practice through conference workshops.

The team disseminated its findings, including the four recommendations listed in section 2 above, to a group of five teachers. These five champions acted as a springboard for further dissemination of the findings, through two different workshops presented at two national conferences and one international conference, which influenced the practice of those teachers and teacher trainers present.

All four recommendations from the *Leading Poetry* project were introduced into the poetry champions' schools:

**Finding 1:** the teachers on the *Poetry Champions* project included poetry in their planning across the literacy curriculum and into other subject work. They also facilitated colleagues in their schools to do the same (evidenced in planning documentation). Teachers and teacher trainers attending the conferences at which the champions presented the findings, and how they integrated them into their own practice, can provide testimony of the impact on their own practice.

**Findings 2 and 4:** the five teachers on the *Poetry Champions* project organised staff meetings on poetry teaching and shared and discussed poems to choose with their colleagues in the five schools, in the way recommended by the findings from the *Leading Poetry* project (evidenced by personal testimony from teachers in the five schools).

**Finding 3:** during poetry staff meetings, teachers discussed the issue of confidence to teach poetry and the five champions relayed to their colleagues the importance of enjoying poetry as teachers in school. In addition, they informed the project team through interviews that they felt more confident to teach now they were aware that personal engagement in poetry at home did not guarantee good quality teaching in school (evidenced from personal testimony of teachers from the school and from interview data provided by the project teachers.)

The champions have further disseminated the new approach to teaching poetry through staff meetings in their schools and an article for a literacy association journal to be read by their peers. They are seen locally as poetry teaching experts and consulted by colleagues across South East London.

**Ways with Words**

Recommendations amongst head teachers in Kent led to their schools commissioning Professor Lambirth and the *Leading Poetry* team to work on a two year project, starting in April 2012, to improve the teaching of writing in 17 primary schools. The teaching of poetry was an important component in this work and the team passed on the four main research findings from *Leading Poetry*.

Personal testimony from individual teachers and head teachers at the 17 schools provides evidence of impact from the *Leading Poetry* project:

**Finding 1:** teacher planning documentation in schools involved in the *Ways with Words* project shows that teachers are embedding the use of poetry in their teaching across the curriculum.

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

**Findings 2 and 4:** staff from the 17 schools set up opportunities for colleagues to talk about poems and poets in staff meetings and reflect upon how they can be introduced with children appropriate to the year group.

**Finding 3:** during staff time organised to share poems, the teachers from the *Ways with Words* project facilitated discussion about personal and professional enjoyment of poetry and how this affects the teaching in the classroom.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

Evidence of impact can be evidenced from personal testimony in letters provided from three teachers on the *Poetry Champions Project*.

Evidence of national and international impact from presentations made by the *Poetry Champion* teachers can be sought from testimony from teacher/teacher trainer delegate contacts from the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) International Conference held in July 2012 University of Leicester; the UKLA Regional Conference, University Cambridge March 2013; Kent Local Authority teachers' conference September 2013.

*English 4-11* (UKLA/English Association) can provide testimony of the article written by a teacher from the *Poetry Champions* project.

Evidence of impact can be sourced from personal testimony and planning documents from the Lead Head teacher contact from the *Way with Words* project – Mrs Eileen Mumford.

Corroborative support letters provided by;

Teacher, Meridian Primary School

Headteacher, Kemsing Primary School

Teacher, Bannockburn Primary School