“What rough beast?” Conceptualising the poetry teacher in Ireland through the eyes of the pupil

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Pupils have a significant contribution to make in the construction of knowledge about teaching and learning in schools. Therefore, consultation with pupils should play a significant role in the pursuit of pedagogical advancement. This study explores pupils’ conceptions of effective poetry teachers at Leaving Certificate level in Ireland. Taking a phenomenographic approach, this study draws on interviews conducted with 23 senior cycle pupils. Set against a transcontextual backdrop of pupil apathy and disengagement in the poetry classroom, this study identifies five significant categories of learning for pre-service teachers aiming to optimise student engagement within the poetry classroom. The imperative for action, specifically at pre-service level, is outlined and recommendations in the pursuit of pedagogical advancement in the poetry classroom are proposed.

Keywords: agency; creativity; pedagogy; poetry; pupil voice; teacher education

Introduction

Borrowing from Yeats, Scholes (1999) poses the question, “What rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward graduate school to become an English teacher?” (p. 69). From a transcontextual perspective, Wright (2005) contends that whether in service or in training, the desire to improve performance is “a condition” of being an English teacher (p. 1). Scholes (1999) argues:

We stand, I believe, for something far deeper than our particular curricular or institutional settings. We stand for whatever dignity this language can afford the human beings who find expression in and through it. We stand, above all, for sharing the powers and pleasures of this language with one another and with all those who seek our guidance in attaining those powers and pleasures. (p. 71)

Here Scholes identifies the potential of the poetry teacher to encourage students to transcend pragmatic encounters with language in the classroom, moving instead towards the facilitation of more critical encounters and, in so doing, serve to develop not only cognition but also emotion and sensibility. The role of the poetry teacher is thus a complex one. Eisner (2002) argues that the role of the teacher is critical in “refining the senses and enlarging the imagination” (p. 14). Much has been written on desirable competencies
of English teachers, with many highlighting teacher competency in teaching poetry as an artistic endeavour necessitating both critical and emotional engagement (Stevens, 2008). The translation of such potential from rhetoric to reality in the classroom is, however, quite a challenge. Hanratty (2008) encourages teachers to view poems for their overall aesthetic unity and posits that “critical evaluation of that unity should transcend a mere inventory of its component parts, both formal and thematic” (p. 152). It is to be noted, however, that what constitutes “good practice” in English teaching is not fixed, and never has been (Davison & Dowson, 2003, p. xviii). Benson (2010) suggests that “system wide curriculum guidelines” and individual syllabuses hold most significance concerning teachers’ decision making processes with many teachers adhering “rigidly” to these documents (p. 266). It is argued that such conformity on the part of the teacher to mandated doctrine is manifest in learning contexts driven by high stakes examinations (Ryan & Weinstein, 2009, p. 229). Of concern, however, is the growing trend of content distillation driven by pressures of performativity.

The National Curriculum in England stresses that teachers should develop pupils’ competence, creativity, cultural understanding, and critical understanding within the English classroom (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, 2011). In Ireland, the aims of the Leaving Certificate English syllabus highlight the necessity for teachers to develop in pupils a mature and critical literacy, a respect and appreciation for language and an awareness of the value of literature (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999). Similarly, within the New Zealand curriculum, it is emphasised that teachers of English should strive to develop their students’ competencies in using and responding to the English language through reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and presenting; responding personally to, and thinking critically about, a range of texts; and understanding and appreciating the heritages of New Zealand through experiencing a broad range of texts (Ministry of Education, 2007). However, current research in each country reflects poorly on the effective implementation of the aforementioned aims (Fuller, 2010; Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2010; O’Neill, 2006). There exists a patent transcontextual “gap between espoused policy – that value the arts within education – and the actual ‘in school’ practices, that tend to fall significantly below the lofty aims existing in policy” (Bamford, 2006, p. 24). This is perhaps unsurprising given that teachers are often “held accountable for results but not for the methods employed unless the results are unsatisfactory” (Bennett, 1995, p. 48). Accordingly, it appears that exam performance rather than student-centred pedagogy now dominates within poetry classrooms (Fuller, 2010, p. 157). The consequences of this dissonance are significant. As anxiety surrounding test performance increases, teachers often become less sensitive to student needs, resulting in enhanced exam performance coinciding with diminished student commitment to learning (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 11). This notable “gap” between educational theory and practice is an issue of significant concern for teacher education, particularly if teacher education is to inspire teachers to become autonomous professionals and agents of change within schools (Cheng, Cheng, & Tang, 2010).

Experiencing poetry: England and Northern Ireland, New Zealand and Ireland

The experiences cultivated within the poetry classroom in England and Northern Ireland, New Zealand, and the Republic of Ireland are predicated upon a common structure. The use of high-stakes testing (in England and Northern Ireland in the form of the GCSE examinations, in New Zealand in the form of the NEAB examinations, and in Ireland in the form of the Leaving Certificate examination) holds enormous influence upon teacher pedagogy in
each context (Benton, 2000; Hennessy, Hinchion, & Mannix McNamara, 2011; O’Neill, 2006).

Reporting on the findings of an extensive examination of poetry teaching in schools in England from 2006–2007, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (2007) noted that poetry was notably weaker than other aspects of English inspected, suggesting that by comparison poetry was underdeveloped in many of the schools surveyed. The report highlighted a strong focus on imitation in pupils’ responses, which reduced pupils’ opportunities to write independently in response to poetry (p. 4). Owing to the “low priority” (Dymoke, 2003, p. 18) and status afforded to poetry within this context, Benton (2000) concludes that in England, “when poetry is introduced it is primarily with the examination in mind” (p. 86). Noting the perils of teacher prioritisation of exam performativity, Fuller (2010) cautions against the pressing danger of “mechanistic” response, and argues that teachers who encourage mechanistic response are in danger of “preventing children from saying what it is they want to say” (p. 157).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, recent research conducted by Hanratty (2011) reports that the vast majority of pupils, both male and female, studying GCSE English, dislike the study of poetry (p. 8). In New Zealand, too, it has been noted that “all is not well with poetry” (Locke, 2010, p. 367). The poor prioritisation of poetry in New Zealand schools poses cause for concern according to O’Neill (2006), who describes the place of poetry within the curriculum as “peripheral,” and notes the existence of a serious “cycle of deprivation” (p. 114) in teaching poetry. O’Neill found that the majority of teachers surveyed in New Zealand rated their pupils’ attitudes towards poetry as lying between hostile and uninterested. Cause for concern is also warranted in Irish post-primary schools. Similar to the case of schooling in England, tensions between teachers’ sense of performative purpose and professional purpose at post-primary level (secondary school) in Ireland are significant (Hennessy et al., 2011). In Ireland, such tensions have resulted in the constricting of pupil learning and the prevalence of a “traditional” approach to poetry pedagogy (O’Neill, 1998). As a result, for many pupils, achievement and meaningful engagement with poetry is often associated with the retention of knowledge over understanding (Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2011). In many cases, the repetitious use of teacher-centred methods within the poetry classroom in Ireland has led to widespread passivity and disengagement on the part of the student (Government of Ireland, 2007, p. 31).

Moreover, the current ability of teacher education programmes to counter trends of pupil apathy and passivity in these contexts appears limited. Hill (2004) posits that programmes of teacher education are becoming increasingly “detheroised, sanatised, technicised, and deintellectualised” and calls for the rejection of standardisation and the appropriation of agency in countering this trend.

The need for enhanced poetic engagement

In the current “era of left brain dominance,” the place and status of arts based subjects such as poetry are often relegated (Pink, 2006). As a result, there exists a growing perception amongst pupils that artistic, creative, and aesthetic skills are of less importance and thus less valued than the more “easily accessed” cognitive, linguistic, and mathematical skills (Pink, 2006). Current research into student disengagement within the poetry classroom suggests cause for concern for pre-service teachers who will need to challenge the disconnect between their own enthusiasm for poetry and the “lack of reciprocity” on the part of the pupil (Dias, 2010, p. 22). This also holds implications for teacher educators as they are challenged to develop pre-service teachers’ competence and agency.
in gaining and maintaining pupils’ interest, and in remaining true to their pedagogical values.

Advancing on traditional pedagogies which, at best, have paid “lip service” to creative teaching, English pedagogy guidelines, aiming to reconceptualise the notion of “good teaching” are now calling for energising, purposeful, and imaginative learning experiences (Cremin, 2009). A considerable body of literature exists on conceptions of being a “good” English teacher (Davison & Dowson, 2003; Evans, Midgley, Rigby, Warham, & Woolnough, 2009; Gill, 2001; Smoot, 2010; Wright, 2005). Less evident is the availability of research on pupils’ perceptions of effective poetry teaching. The significance of this apparent oversight is highlighted by Leren (2006), who notes that “students know which methods and models work for them, what they see as interesting, and what they do not profit from” (p. 367). Moreover, pupil commentaries on teaching and learning in school “can help us to ‘see’ things that we do not normally pay attention to but that matter to them” (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004, p. 29).

Wood (2010) also suggests that as pupils are “closer to the ground,” they have unique perspectives to offer when constructing knowledge about teaching and learning. Given that pupils’ perspectives of their teachers can also influence motivation and interest in schooling, as well as their approach to learning (Strikwerda-Brown, Oliver, Hodgson, Palmer, & Watts, 2008), the importance of listening to pupil voice in striving towards the reawakening of passion amongst pupils of poetry cannot be underestimated. It is in this context that this research explores pupils’ conceptions of effective poetry teachers at Leaving Certificate level (upper-secondary) in Ireland.

Methodology
Variations in pupils’ conceptions of effective poetry teachers were investigated using a phenomenographic approach. This research method, established by Marton (1981), was developed as a means of understanding learning from pupils’ point of view. Phenomenographic research focuses on individual’s subjective views of the world and their ways of creating meaning of the world around them (Sommer, Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010, p. 165). In so doing, it aims for a collective analysis of individual experiences (Äkerlind, 2005). This non-dualist ontology suggests a relationship between the person experiencing, that is, the pupil, and the phenomenon being experienced, that is, poetry at Leaving Certificate level. In employing this research approach it was necessary to apply methods for data collection that enabled pupils to think, reflect and, in different ways, share their “world of experience” (Sommer et al., 2010, p. 164).

The methodological approach taken for this study was based on that of Ballantyne, Thompson, and Taylor (1998), who sought to establish principals’ conceptions of competent beginning teachers in Central and South-East Queensland, Australia. For the purposes of this study, 23 Leaving Certificate students (12 male and 11 female), aged between 16 and 18 years, from four post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (one single-sex girls, one single sex boys and two mixed schools) were interviewed. Informed consent was obtained from each participant and parent/guardian. Ethical approval for the study was sought from and granted by the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee in the University of Limerick. Interviewee selection was carried out by the class teacher. Teachers were asked to select pupils who were representative of a range of academic abilities and interest levels in the field. Interviewees are referred to by gender (M/F), number and school pseudonym throughout the paper to ensure anonymity. Each interview was conducted individually and face-to-face, and extended...
to approximately 15 minutes per interviewee. Interviews took the form of “open” conversational partnerships in which the interviewer facilitated the process of reflection on conceptions of the effective poetry teacher through open-ended questioning and empathetic listening (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Booth, 1997). Of particular note was the depth of understanding demonstrated by pupils – and evidenced in this paper – concerning teaching and learning processes in the brief time allocated. The open-ended questions focused on four central areas: the pupil, the course, approaches to teaching poetry, and the exam. It is to be noted that while question structure was planned in advance, in order to approach the phenomenon in question from the four outlined perspectives, the interviews were conducted in an “open” manner following unexpected lines of reasoning that often lead to new reflections. In addition, the researchers considered the interviews to be “deep,” as all lines of discussion were followed until they were exhausted and both interviewee and researcher were assured of mutual understanding (Booth, 1997). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim to facilitate thorough examination of dialogue.

Data analysis

The researcher was cognisant of the need to “bracket” and to set aside subjective preconceptions in order to fully register the student’s point of view and, in doing so, actualise the phenomenographical goal of producing categories of description (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). Several steps were used to minimise researcher subjectivity, as advocated by Harris (2008). Analysis was conducted from the second-order perspective (Marton, 1981). The researcher was committed to recording and interpreting the data from the participants’ perspectives. While data were compared with other participant data, it was not judged against the researcher’s ideals or existing knowledge. Additionally, no codes, premises, or categories were generated prior to data analysis – all were developed from participants’ transcripts.

The set of categories that resulted from the analysis were not determined in advance, but “emerged” instead from the data (Åkerlind, 2005). In the initial screening of the transcripts, meaningful data segments were identified and isolated from the source data to form what Marton (1986) terms pools of meaning. The data in these pools of meaning were then analysed a second time, along with other data in the pool, to compare meanings, and thus criteria were formed in association with each pool. Following this, pools with several related criteria were combined, while others were divided as finer distinctions between the data became apparent. The quotes were then given preliminarily labels and placed back in their original contexts with their associated labels to ascertain whether the established labels matched the overall meanings. At the same time they were compared to other transcripts, until the key aspects that differentiated the various ways of experiencing poetry at this level were identified (Pang & Marton, 2005). Once criteria were established for each pool and the meanings stabilised, the collective meaning of the pool was abstracted to form a category of description (Marton, 1981). These categories of description were organised in order of emerging frequency into what Marton (1981) terms an outcome space, representing all the possible ways the population under study experienced the phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2002). The whole process was a strongly iterative and comparative one, involving the continual sorting and resorting of data, in addition to continuous comparisons between the data and the developing categories of description, as well as between the categories themselves (Åkerlind, 2005).
Findings

Five distinct yet interconnected hierarchical categories emerged from the data. As the research was concerned with understanding pupils’ conceptions of effective teaching, the categories established are presented as statements of competency here:

1. An effective poetry teacher reflects a mature epistemological position.
2. An effective poetry teacher encourages critical thinking and understanding.
3. An effective poetry teacher holds a positive attitude towards poetry.
4. An effective poetry teacher encourages poetic composition.
5. An effective poetry teacher reflects and promotes creativity.

Table 1 presents a graphic representation of the development of the outcome space for this study. It provides a structured summary of pupils’ beliefs concerning the nature of the effective poetry teacher. Aligned with each established belief set is the corresponding conception premise (or label – as noted previously) as constructed by the authors. Each conception (or category of description) is aligned with the pool of meaning (containing the labels for each beliefs set) from which it developed.

An effective poetry teacher reflects a mature epistemological position

Conception overview

A “mature” or complex epistemological disposition implies engaging critical thinking and upholding a willingness to take a stance and defend it with reasoned argument (Elen & Verburgh, 2008; Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). This conception was advanced by interviewees in a number of ways. First, the importance of encouraging a variety of responses to works of poetry emerged strongly from interviews. Pupils remarked also on the enhanced enjoyment and learning fostered within a class where group discussion was facilitated, and multiple perspectives were not only heard, but acknowledged by peers and the class teacher. In addition, rote learning was viewed as counterproductive as it failed to generate views on poetry outside those provided by the textbook or teacher. Pupils who experienced this approach to learning noted the lack of personal and class engagement to be detrimental to their learning. In the case of this study, the data revealed that pupils placed considerable emphasis on the importance of the teacher practicing and advocating a mature epistemological stance.

Pupils’ beliefs and conception premise

Pupils identified the importance of the teacher allowing space for varied interpretation of poems. Those teachers who reflected epistemological positions of multiplicity or relativism in their teaching were commended:

She usually tells us poetry is subjective and just because I think one thing it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s right or wrong. (M2, St. Brigid’s)

I like that you can have your own opinion and there’s no right or wrong answer. If you feel the poet is trying to say something and the person beside you doesn’t find that in it, it’s alright because you can write what you feel he/she is trying to tell you. (F1, Glenmead)

My opinion is accepted so long as it has valid point referring to the poem. (M2, St Mary’s)
### Table 1. Effective poetry teachers – analysis of pupils’ conceptions.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conception</th>
<th>Pupils’ beliefs</th>
<th>Conception premise</th>
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| Mature epistemological position| Poetry is not about rote learning  
A good teacher listens to our opinions  
A good teacher asks everyone for their opinions  
All opinions should be accepted once “backed up” with reference to the poem  
Rote learning essays is “just being a parrot.” There is no learning in it  
If you write what someone else tells you, at times you don’t understand what you are writing about | Poetry is subjective  
Poems are representative of multiple meanings  
Discussion promotes learning  
Multiple perspectives can be legitimate  
A good teacher asks everyone for their opinions  
All opinions should be accepted once “backed up” with reference to the poem  
Rote learning essays is “just being a parrot.” There is no learning in it  
If you write what someone else tells you, at times you don’t understand what you are writing about |
| Critical thinking and understanding| A good teacher teaches us “what we need to know” but also focuses on understanding  
If you understand the poem you will have more to write about  
If I don’t understand a poem it’s like a brick wall  
We get so many notes and don’t know what to do with them. We don’t understand them  
Class discussion gets you thinking  
She explains where I went wrong so I understand | Understanding poetry transcends exam preparation and utilitarianism  
Clarity of interpretation leads to enhanced reflections  
Lack of understanding inhibits the potential engagement  
Reliance on the rote learning of notes inhibits understanding  
Facilitating alternate perspectives is a positive learning strategy  
Feedback promotes understanding |
| Positive attitude               | When the teacher is enthusiastic about a poem we are too  
They’re doing it not because it’s on the course, but because they want to | A positive attitude towards poetry engenders positive reactions  
A positive approach should transcend exam requirements |
| Poetic composition             | Poetry writing helps you express your feelings  
It gives you your own ways of looking at things  
It can help you learn techniques and structures  
Once you do things yourself you understand what other people are doing themselves | Poetry writing is cathartic  
Poetry writing encourages individualist self-expression  
Poetry writing provides insight into the process of composition  
A practical and engaged approach to learning is beneficial for understanding |
| Reflects and promotes creativity| Reading and writing alone is boring. We would like projects or group work  
Creativity in teaching would be nice  
A bland approach to poetry makes it difficult to express yourself and be creative | A variety of teaching strategies is necessary to maintain student motivation  
Creative teaching strategies stimulate student interest  
Creative approaches to poetry engender creative responses |
Learning environments that failed to recognise multiple and often variant poetic interpretations, relying instead on standardised and rote approaches to learning, were viewed negatively by pupils:

You learn off poems and throw out what you’ve learned off on the day. It’s not really showing your ability. All you have to do is memorise it. Anybody can do that. It should be more focused on the student. (M4, St. Brigid’s)

The other classes seem to rote learn essays in the hope it will come up. That’s not really learning it. It’s just being a parrot. That’s not what poetry is about. (M4, Middlefield)

They tell you what to do and you look at the poem and pick out what lines you want to learn, and then it’s like if you learn the notes from the teacher, you’ll just cough it back up and write it in the exam. Sometimes you don’t even know what you’re writing. (F1, Glenmead)

Teachers who fail to acknowledge the subjective nature of poetry by discouraging personal response were negatively highlighted:

I don’t like teachers who don’t listen to the students. Someone who comes in and just literally opens the book and reads out the notes from the book that you could have sitting in front of you anyway and makes you take it down and then corrects your tests as “well I told you to say this, so you should have said that rather than giving your own opinion”. (F1, Glenmead)

Discussing a sense of “fear” associated with contributing a personal response in class owing to standardised performative pressure, one student noted:

There was a cold feeling towards it in the upper class. A lot of people really don’t enjoy English there. You feel a lot more pressure to do well. Our class was quiet when it came to questions. I feel the higher the level the class you’re in the quieter things tend to be. You think there is a definite right or wrong and you’re frightened to put up your hand in case they say “ok you can go down to the lower class now”. There is a distinct difference in the feel and the atmosphere of the classes. (F3, St. Mary’s)

Interviewees noted the benefits of learning from a teacher who actively encourages genuine personal response, pointing towards enhanced enjoyment and engagement within an inclusive learning environment:

She’ll give her personal opinion but at the end of the day she doesn’t try to influence us. I think it’s easier for me to get into the poem because it’s easier for you to learn from someone like that. (M1, St Bigid’s)

I like teachers who understand students and get where you’re coming from and don’t try to push you into liking something when you don’t like it. If you try to push people into liking them it won’t work. You need to be able to listen to students and understand. (F1, Glenmead)

An effective poetry teacher encourages critical thinking and understanding

Conception overview

Willingham (2008) outlines critical thinking as seeing both sides of an issue, evidencing arguments, deducting and inferring conclusions from information, solving problems, and reasoning. Pupils’ conceptions of effective poetry teaching indicated a desire for such capacities. First, advocacy of deep engagement with poetry was
seen by pupils as central to the role of the poetry teacher. Practices that encouraged authentic exploration, through problem solving and reasoning, into poetry were commended. Understanding the poem was seen to align with the ability to provide effective written responses. The dissemination of study notes without adequate analysis, reasoning, or problem solving was noted to greatly impede understanding and learning.

Pupils’ beliefs and conception premise

Pupils perceived an effective poetry teacher to be one who encourages in-depth understanding of poems through the promotion of critical thinking. Pupils were positively disposed to teachers who used alternate approaches to poetry teaching, such as the use of audio to enhance understanding. They also noted the necessity of understanding for writing personal responses to poetry:

My teacher seems to teach us what we need to know but also tries to help us understand it. She’s trying to teach us about poetry. (M4, Middlefield)

I like a poetry teacher who knows what they’re talking about and understands that it isn’t just writing an essay off notes. It has to be that we understand as well as she does. (M1, St. Brigid’s)

In addition, a sense of frustration was manifest amongst pupils discussing learning within an environment where understanding was not prioritised:

If you don’t understand what the poem is about or what the message is it’s like a brick wall. You can’t work it out. Then when you start the questions you can’t understand them. (F4, St. Mary’s)

I think she tries to cram it all in and when we go home were like, “ok she’s just given us all these notes, what are we to do with them”. You don’t understand the poem properly then. (F4, Glenmead)

Pupils noted enhanced enjoyment, interest and understanding in classes where teachers encouraged critical thinking around the poems being studied:

Miss X has made us more interested in it because we’re encouraged to know more about it rather than just knowing what we need to know. (M4 Middlefield)

She compares things to other things. She gets us to think actively about what’s going on in the poem. It makes it more enjoyable for the class. (M3, Middlefield)

An effective poetry teacher holds a positive attitude towards poetry

Conception overview

Passion and enthusiasm on the part of the teacher was seen by pupils as a fundamental aspect of being an effective poetry teacher. According to interviewees, teachers who displayed these qualities were more likely to foster positive attitudes towards poetry amongst their pupils. Conversely, pupils noted lack of enthusiasm on the part of the poetry teacher to be “absolutely awful” (F3, St. Mary’s), often serving to foster a sense of apathy within the respective class cohort.
Pupils’ beliefs and conception premise

Enthusiasm was seen as most desirable by pupils. Enthusiastic poetry teachers were perceived to generate enthusiasm amongst the class, and in so doing, to foster a “fun” learning environment for pupils, as noted in the following extracts:

I like poetry teachers who are really enthusiastic about the subject because then everyone gets enthusiastic and were not just sitting there bored. It’s actually fun to be in the class. (F2, Middlefield)

Someone who’s enthusiastic about it and not just doing it because it’s on the course and who does want to do it. You can see that coming through, whether they want to do it or whether it’s just for the sake of it. (M5, St. Mary’s)

In addition to the advocacy of enthusiasm, pupils noted the importance of teachers’ attitudes towards poetry. Teachers who are passionate about poetry and display their love for poetry were commended by pupils:

She’s really passionate about English. Our whole class is interested when she talks as opposed to a teacher who doesn’t care what they’re doing. Everyone listens and everyone understands when she talks. (F2, Middlefield)

You know she has a love for poetry the way she teaches it. It does impact on how I feel about poetry. If we had a teacher that didn’t like poetry then we wouldn’t like it. We wouldn’t be as interested and they wouldn’t try to persuade us to like it. Our teacher is great; she does her best to help us to enjoy it. (M3, St. Brigid’s)

Lack of enthusiasm on the part of the poetry teacher was noted in many instances to have a negative impact on pupils’ engagement with poetry. Additionally, in a number of cases, lack of enthusiasm was also noted to result in fatigue and stress for the pupil:

There’s nothing worse than having a teacher who hates what they do. If a person doesn’t enjoy what they’re doing it’s absolutely awful. (F3, St. Mary’s)

Generally if it’s a poet she doesn’t like she says, “we’ll get through this, it’s fine” and we’ll just go with it, but by the end of it everyone is getting tired. It does have a certain impact when you’re studying it. I think it affects your opinion. (F3, Glenmead)

She’s always complaining about the amount you need to know so it’s kind of just rushing through the course. It stresses you out even more because she’s like, “ok girls, we need to have this one done by Friday”. We’re not getting to enjoy learning poetry. (F5, Glenmead)

An effective poetry teacher encourages poetic composition

Conception overview

Encouraging and facilitating poetry composition was seen as integral to the role of an effective poetry teacher by many interviewees. A large number of pupils commented critically on the lack of space for poetry writing within their classes. Pupils noted poetry writing as important in developing awareness of poetic technique, and also acting as an outlet for cathartic reflection, self-exploration, and self-expression.
Pupils’ beliefs and conception premise:

Pupils outlined the benefits of poetry writing from both a personal and scholastic learning perspective. Focusing on the development of self, pupils noted the benefits of poetic composition in relation to self-discovery and self-expression:

We don’t do poetry writing and I personally would like to. It gets you to give your own ways of looking at things. (M4, St. Brigid’s)

I personally would love to write poetry in class. It would be great. It doesn’t matter that it’s not in the exam because I enjoy it. It would be a chance for me to share my poetry and see what other people think about it which you don’t normally get the opportunity to do. I think it would be nice. Poetry says an awful lot about a person and it would be pretty cool to see what people come up with. (F3, St. Mary’s)

From a scholastic perspective, pupils noted the process of poetry writing to be advantageous in developing enhanced understanding of poetic form and technique:

I think it’s beneficial because you’d learn poetic techniques more and you would understand how to write and how they would be writing it and you would understand the metaphorical aspect of it because you would be writing it thinking “yes there is something behind this”. Once you do things yourself you understand what other people are doing themselves. (F4, Glenmead)

The cathartic potential of poetry writing was also noted:

I think poetry writing is really important because it helps you see different ways of expressing your feelings. A lot of people don’t do that. They don’t know how to express their feelings. If people had an idea of how to put down feelings on paper, not even in very long poems or words, it could help a lot. (F3, St. Mary’s)

An effective poetry teacher reflects and promotes creativity

Conception overview

For the pupils in this research, creative poetry teaching was characterised by a move from more traditionalist and rote learning towards more pupil centred pedagogy. This was perceived to foster a sense of enjoyment and enthusiasm for poetry. Group work was frequently highly praised as a creative approach to teaching, as were class discussions and project work. Within this perspective, a “bland” approach to the teaching of poetry was strongly criticised and noted to be detrimental to the development of creativity.

Pupils’ beliefs and conception premise

The importance of engaging pupils in poetry through the use of creative pedagogy was identified by many pupils. This was predicated on the belief that creative approaches to teaching foster enhanced enjoyment and improved learning:

There should be a more enjoyable way of learning poetry. Maybe like group work or doing projects on poetry rather than it just being this kind of reading, writing thing. (F3, St. Mary’s)

I think it’s a bit bland, just because it’s all in the book and then she writes on the board and you’re either reading or writing the whole time during the class and there’s not even that much time for discussion so I think it’s hard to express yourself and be creative. (F4, St. Mary’s)
Discussion

The analysis of responses reveals that pupils in this study recognised and appreciated the complex nature of poetry as a genre. Many of the conception premises identified suggest that pupils were aware of the nature of teaching and learning and held clear ideas on the manner in which they wished to be taught poetry. Given the advanced nature of pupils’ understanding in relation to teaching and learning within the poetry class, listening to pupils’ perspectives is an important step in developing more responsive, student centred poetry teaching. Davison, Moss, and Daly (2011) advocate that “becoming an English teacher is to become a teacher who works with the subjectivities of students themselves” (p. 20). The perspectives of these pupils provide valuable feedback for teacher educators of poetry. In attempting to address the rising apathy, and in many cases, antipathy, of pupils towards poetry (Hanratty, 2011; Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2011; O’Neill, 2006), pupil voice provides an essential perspective for the pre-service teacher (Harrison et al., 1990). Pupils outlined a clear picture of how they like to be taught, how they learn best, and the type of teacher that best facilitates this learning.

The importance of understanding how pupils learn best should exist as a central theme in any teacher preparation course (Youens & Hall, 2006). Within this study pupils identified a desire for enhanced creativity, critical engagement, authentic analysis and personal response within the poetry class, in preference to the current pervasive culture of standardisation, conformity, and exam performativity (Ball, 2003; Hennessy et al., 2011; Smyth, 2006). In many cases, pupils’ aspirations for their poetry learning experiences were reflective of syllabus guidelines, displaying a strong desire for understanding, space for personal response, and the provision of a more holistic learning experience. The findings of this research do not exist in isolation, but instead serve to amplify a growing body of research demonstrating the need for radical pedagogical redress, particularly in learning contexts driven by high-stakes testing regimes (Benton, 2000; Dymoke, 2002; McNess, Broadfoot, & Osborn 2003; Moffett & Wagner, 1992).

The need for responsiveness within initial teacher education is great. In challenging practices characterised by pragmatism and standardisation, teacher education programmes need to provide opportunities for rich and meaningful encounters with theory, where complex questions around pedagogy and educational value are posed and grappled with, rather than avoided. While subject expertise is important for teacher education to achieve, so too is the development of teacher agency and critical competence. In striving to achieve this ambition, Hill (2002, 2003) suggests that the provision of critical education programmes at pre-service level may assist in the development of teachers as skilled, transformative intellectuals.

In addition, teacher education is perhaps best placed to offer critical challenge to the current dominance of exam-driven schooling and to call for radical change in terms of how teachers receive and implement curriculum, with a removal or reduction of current practices that hold practice and practicum largely as a means for grading. Teacher education can facilitate pre-service teachers to engage in pedagogical exploration that is informed by current literature in best practice and theory, therein reducing pre-service teachers’ perceived gap between pre-service theory and its application to practice (Cheng et al., 2010).

The rejection of technical rationalism and a performative attitude to knowledge must also begin at pre-service level. This has significant implications for both pedagogy and assessment. Recognition of multiple realities and the principles of knowledge co-construction are fundamental for the effective epistemological development of pre-service teachers and, in particular, poetry teachers. Engagement with poetry should be grounded
in experiences that encourage subjective input, discussion, and reflection, the types of activities that some would consider antithetical to performativity. Moreover, the construction of assessment structures must premise creative, engaged, critical practice, and move towards the crediting of process over product. Critical pedagogical strategies on the part of the teacher educator can assist in the accomplishment of these aims. Lortie (1975) suggests that pupils’ observations of their teachers generate powerful beliefs about teaching and learning from an early age. He argues that beliefs about teaching that are generated through an “apprenticeship of observation” often serve to perpetuate traditional teaching methods at the expense of more informed and critical pedagogies. Challenging the often problematic beliefs developed within an “apprenticeship of observation” amongst pre-service teachers requires the provision of alternative learning experiences at pre-service level. Cheng et al. (2010) argue that “most student teachers observe faculty who teach them, and see higher education as an important source of ideas and models for teaching” (p. 93). It follows, then, that the advancement of pre-service teachers’ ideology and pedagogy should be fostered through the promotion and practice of democratic and critical educational experiences by pre-service educators. Such an approach holds the potential to reveal the possibilities of new ways of constructing thought and action that transcend current reality (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). Active opposition of the charge that teacher education (and arguably post-primary education) now operates as a desiderata and a sine qua non of capitalism (Hill, 2007, p. 215) requires the collective appropriation of agency, and is promisingly within reach.

Conclusion

Enabling and supporting pre-service teachers, and, indeed, teacher educators, to transcend pragmatism in post-primary education and in so doing to embrace an active role in the counter-hegemonic struggle is now educational imperative. As noted by Owens (2008), “never before has the need been so great for classroom teachers to become agents of change” (p. 1). If poetry is to be taught in the way that best serves the needs of pupils, as conceptualised by participants in this study, then enhanced pedagogical practice, drawing from a renewed philosophical understanding of the value of poetry both at post-primary (secondary school) and pre-service level, is now called for. According to pupils in the research, the key characteristics defining an effective poetry teacher are the ability to reflect a mature epistemological position, to encourage critical thinking and understanding, to hold a positive attitude towards poetry, to encourage poetic composition, and to reflect and promote creativity. This is not an insurmountable challenge for teachers. Teacher education is uniquely positioned to promote reflexive critical pedagogy for pre-service teachers, an essential first step towards the accomplishment of the above goals. In so doing, it may contribute to enhanced teacher agency and serve to challenge the ontological ambivalence dominant in performance-based and exam-driven schooling. Facilitating the development of an empowering teacher agency at pre-service level can, in no small part, encourage teachers to provide the space required for pupils to engage critically and creatively with poetry, thus providing more creative and empowering classroom experiences for pupils.

Notes on contributors

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References


