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# Martina Diehl

## Hope for Poetry

*An Exploratory and poetic approach to students' creative and critical engagement with and through poetry lessons in England and The Netherlands (ages 14-17)*

### Abstract

Poetry in education at its best is a vehicle for exploration and meaning making through analysis, dialogue, discussion and creative and critical thought. However, in the current educational format in the upper secondary years, it is often perceived as 'dull' and 'boring' (Gregory, 2013, p. 129). This exploratory study considers the current English curriculum, specifically the National Curriculum or English at Key Stage 4, and inquires the student and teacher voices on their experiences of poetry teaching and learning in their educational contexts. To develop an understanding of the influence the curriculum has on these teachers and students, I have drawn comparisons with a country that has a less prescribed curriculum: The Netherlands. I have looked at the teachers' and students' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning through thematic poetic inquiry, and conducted observations to gain an in-depth exploration into the teaching and learning of poetry in the participants' contexts. To understand the teacher and student attitudes and perspectives on poetry in the classroom, I conducted a survey for 145 student participants (58.6% English students and 41.4% Dutch students) as it was currently taught at Key Stage 4 between 2019-2022 (with a COVID-19 gap). Furthermore, 6 interviews (50% English teachers and 50% Dutch teachers) were carried out with teachers. To offer a holistic approach, 15 observations took place, 3 of which in The Netherlands with teacher participant 1, and 12 in two English schools with teacher participants 2, 3, and 4, as well as another set of observations in the same school as teacher participants 2 and 3. This allowed for concrete examples to understand what was happening in the classroom. The voices from students and teachers particularly conveyed themes of a need for relatability, variety, freedom to express, and an increase in group work, discussion and dialogue. These needs were clearly expressed by both students and teachers in this study. The survey and interview data presentation aims to convey the crucial role of 'sentiment' in the responses and is best represented in a poetic style. Poetic reporting empowers the voice of the participants who are living the system and leads away from the 'culture of silence' (Freire, 1985; Gibson, 2006, p. 315).

**The point of poetry** *by Martina Diehl*

Discovering the world through poetry  
Imagination taking hold of me;  
Opening doors to language and imagery  
Exploring realms of creativity.  
A whirlwind of assessment breaks the words –  
In silence meanings shatter – nothing left.  
The boring, dull and hollow: good grades assured  
Between learning and joy is now a cleft.  
Borders crossed: understand humanity  
Through words we see democracy and heart.  
Ourselves engaged in criticality  
Language play leads to non-binary art.  
Communication creates open minds;  
A hope to get away from what makes blind.

# Hope for Poetry

*An exploratory and poetic approach to students' creative and critical engagement with and through poetry in England and The Netherlands (ages 14-17)*

Martina Bonnie Diehl

## **There is no Frigate like a Book**

*There is no Frigate like a Book  
To take us Lands away  
Nor any Coursers like a Page  
Of prancing Poetry –  
This Traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of Toll –  
How frugal is the Chariot  
That bears the Human Soul –  
- Emily Dickinson*

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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University of Durham

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research aims and questions

Society is constantly changing, and students are adapting to the world they live in on a daily basis. Fifty years ago, there was no internet, no TikTok or Snapchat poetry, no Instagram duet reels, nor Twitter poetry slams. There is a lot of poetry out there on social media and in public spaces, written by an ever-growing community of artists, writers, and most of all, by people who are living and breathing in this world. Consider Maya Angelou's 'Still I Rise' and how often it is quoted on social media, or Joe Biden's Inaugural poem by Amanda Gorman 'The Hill We Climb', or Benjamin Zephaniah's poem 'We Refugees' or Kae Tempest's Spoken Word lyrics that have led to Brit Award nominations, have entered the Costa Shortlists and have been in various top 10 pop charts. Poetry allows us to relate to others, it offers connection between people, according to Kae Tempest (2020). Poetry makes history come to life through understanding how people felt in these times, and has the ability to cause extreme emotions to shine through, like the first time I performed Warsan Shire's poem 'Home' at an open mic night, and felt a wave of rage and sadness overwhelm me as I was learning to truly understand the emotions attached to the words in this poem only once standing in a room full of privileged academics (including myself) who were also not home, but with a big difference: we were all here by choice.

However, when we look at how poetry is taught at Key Stage 4, there is no Twitter poetry and no poetry reels on Instagram. Sue Dymoke (2017), poet and educationalist, noted the contrast between students' perceptions of poetry with the support of Benton (1984), and suggested poetry could be taught and learnt in a way that is 'irrelevant to young people's lives' (p. 227). Furthermore, Dymoke (2017), with support of Hennessy & McNamara (2011, p. 217), shared that poetry as taught and learnt in schools is limited, and students are often introduced to poetry as a 'packaged commodity' solely for assessment purposes (Dymoke, 2017, p. 227). This view contrasts that of the Twitter poetry, the Poetry Slams and encounters students might have with poetry outside of their GCSE learning materials. In this thesis, I aim to explore what the potential challenges are when teaching and learning poetry in upper secondary school education for both teachers and students, such as the limited poetic texts students are exposed to in the classroom, the contexts in

which the poems are analysed in (in some cases texts to be ‘beaten for meaning’ (Snapper, 2013 in Dymoke, 2017, p. 227)), and the focus on performativity. I also aim to understand how students and teachers conceptualise poetry in the classroom, and to explore examples of engaging and enjoyable practice of poetry teaching and learning.

Through the lens of relatability (conceptualised as cultural relevance and representation within the literature for the students) for learners and poetry as a ‘packaged commodity’ (Hennessey and McNamara, 2011, p. 217), I pose that the choice of poems is perhaps part of the problem with the lack of engagement in poetry lessons in upper secondary school education. However, there are further challenges in schools, such as the focus on high stakes testing, which I argue can result in students not being able to relate to the poems because they are not given the space to engage with the text in a way that is accessible for them. Many of the GCSE anthology poems<sup>1</sup> were written before the students were born, and although this does not mean that these poems should be erased from the students’ experience, it may suggest a change in how we teach these poems, and alternative ways of reading, performing and analysing the poetry students are introduced to. Is this ‘knowledge-rich curriculum’, as Michael Gove, former Conservative Secretary of State for Education (2010-2014) suggests, really knowledge-rich for the students who are learning it? And if it is not perceived as engaging, but as ‘dull, boring and irrelevant’ (Gregory, 2013, p. 129) and ‘pointless’ (Lockney and Proudfoot, 2013, p. 31), then what is the purpose of teaching these poems in the way they are taught? This exploration does not aim to find one right answer, as this is an issue that may have many right answers, and the results from the data aim to be applicable, rather than generalisable. This thesis aims to explore teachers’ and students’ perceptions of poetry teaching and learning through a creative and critical lens.

The aim of this thesis is to explore and develop a deeper understanding in some English teachers’ and students’ perceptions and experiences of poetry teaching and learning in the current curriculum, and to make inquiries into teachers’ and students’ experiences to develop an understanding of what teachers are doing to engage learners in poetry and what challenges they are facing to engage these students. I particularly wanted to include the

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<sup>1</sup> When GCSE anthology / anthologies are mentioned, I refer to the collection of the anthology clusters of poetry featured in AQA and Edexcel GCSE. The focus in this thesis is predominantly on the AQA anthology cluster ‘power and conflict’, as this is the one used by the schools in which the data was collected.

voices of the students, to understand their perceptions of poetry as it is currently taught in their school environment. Although I could find answers on how researchers perceived student engagement and on teachers' views on poetry teaching and learning, as well as responses of students to different ways of learning poetry, there appeared to be few studies that included input from students: *what do they enjoy about poetry? What do they not enjoy? What do they think the purpose is of poetry teaching and learning? And how do they experience their lessons?* These were questions I asked of students to learn about the student experience and their attitudes towards poetry as it is taught in the classroom. In addition, I wanted to understand how they viewed the concepts that are often found to be the essence of poetry and making meaning from poetry: creative and critical thought. Moreover, I wanted to understand in more depth how these concepts lend themselves to participating in a democratic society with dialogue and communication - to make and shape meaning - at its heart.

This thesis explores the research questions below, conveying an emphasis on the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 and poetry teaching and learning at Key Stage 4, with The Netherlands as a comparative country in which the curriculum is less prescribed, has no set texts and has a focus on English language to benefit the learners' understandings of language and culture. In practice, the participating teachers have similar experiences to the English teachers in this study, although for different reasons, such as time constraints.

1. What are some teachers' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education in England and The Netherlands?
2. What are some students' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education in England and The Netherlands?
3. To what extent, if any, do creativity and criticality feature in teachers' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in the participating schools?
4. To what extent, if any, do creativity and criticality feature in students' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in the participating schools?
5. Are creativity and criticality put into practice in the participating poetry classrooms in England and The Netherlands. If so, how?

To find answers to these questions, I needed to first understand poetry's place in the English curriculum, particularly the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4, and how it has developed to be included the way it is in the current curriculum, which I explore in Chapter 2 on English in the Secondary Curriculum: In England and the Netherlands.

## 1.2 Researcher motivation

As a teenager I was an avid poetry writer and enjoyed putting my thoughts and feelings into words. This led to a passion for playing with language and structuring words to rhyme or to fit into rhythms. I progressed to writing my own songs at the age of seventeen and thoroughly enjoyed the process of writing with feeling. Rather than seeing the words on a page, I was allowing them to come to life through melody. As Peter Abbs (1989) notes, poems require 'an internalization of sounding the words and hearing them in the auditory imagination', whether this is performed poetry or silently read (p. 73). Abbs (1989) further notes that 'as a work of music can have many different renderings so can poetry' (p. 73), showing the connection between poetry and music, and develops the idea that poetry is an aspect of education that develops interpretive skills, and is a vehicle for communicating emotions and meanings. My friends and I would perform during poetry nights at school, and I later found that poetry really helped me make sense of my thoughts and emotions. Playing with words allowed me to become better at communicating, listening and allowing others to understand me through the creation of lyrics and texts that others could connect with. Writing also enabled me to write my feelings without needing real-world examples, creating a connection yet simultaneously a safe space between emotions and reality, through the use of language techniques such as metaphors. I performed my songs at open mic nights and even auditioned at the Conservatorium of Amsterdam's Pop Academy, where I was admissible. I have first-hand experience of the value poetry can have to students from my decade of experience as an English tutor, especially those in secondary school in both The Netherlands and England. Students are ebbing and flowing constantly and irregularly as their minds mature and their thought processes and emotional cognition become muddled beneath the waves. Art, and especially language art, has the ability to help students process these thoughts and feelings, and allows for these to come to the surface. I suppose this is

where poetry can differ from other texts, such as novels, which are often more descriptive and take us on a journey of someone else's story, as opposed to intertwining a story with our own through metaphor, intonation and interpretation, and through the sharing of words through performance to communicate meaning, but also to create new meanings together.

When I began to learn more about the English education system, I learnt there were very few opportunities for poetry writing in the upper key stages and how out of touch the GCSE anthology clusters and their accompanying lesson plans and exam questions I saw often were with regards to the students' lives, thoughts, and emotions. John Yandell (2014) comments on the distance between what is taught and the students' lives as Michael Gove's new National Curriculum was introduced in 2014, and Yandell argues that,

*'English becomes reconfigured as canonical literature, learning poems by heart and public speaking: any attempt to engage with the reality of a culturally plural population is marginalised, while there is a steadfast refusal to recognise either the existence of new, web-based literacies or the involvement of young people, through the availability of new media technologies, in ever more sophisticated acts of cultural making. This is, truly, an exclusive curriculum, not only because it is designed to exclude the mass of young people, their lives and experiences, but also because it represents an escape from modernity, an exclusion of contemporary, lived reality'* (Yandell, 2014, p. 152).

I wanted to understand better what students' thoughts were on poetry in the current curriculum, and to digest this distance between the learners' lives and the subject content through learners' experiences, teachers' experiences and through observations. To capture the voices and experiences of students and teachers, and to see how poetry teaching and learning appeared in the classroom, I designed a qualitative study that concerned in-depth analyses of poetry's place in the classroom as experienced by a small number of teachers (3 English and 3 Dutch teachers) and a survey with a wide range of questions concerning poetry, creativity and criticality was conducted for a small group.. The arguments and close encounters with the experiences of these participants were not aimed to be generalisable, but to understand their experiences and be able to share applicable experiences and

adaptable scenarios, that may be different from how other teachers and learners experience poetry.

During the development of my own thoughts on teachers' and students' experiences of teaching and learning poetry in English, I discovered similarities between the potential of poetry and critical pedagogy and social semiotics, and decided to investigate the connections between them. This led me to considering the benefits of poetry in a dialogic education setting, where poetry can be used as a vehicle for talk, writing, presenting and other modes of meaning making. Poetry is a form of art, and therefore lends itself to playful interpretations.

Much like novels, poetry can be read and interpreted in many ways, depending on the reader's experience, knowledge, and their relationship with the self and the world, as Freire notes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996(1970)). Social semiotics and Critical Pedagogy became the roots for considering a poetry education setting that promotes dialogue in all its forms and uses language as a means to express and reflect on the self and the surrounding world. Poetry, once regarded by Kant as the highest form of art as it 'expands the mind' and 'sets the imagination at liberty' (Kant, 1914, p. 216), has the potential to enable students to broaden their horizons in countless ways as it considers the beauty of language, the connection between language and the imagination, and the permission to push language to its limits and free language 'from conceptual constraints' (Fumagalli, 2018, p. 4). However, in poetry teaching and learning, there is a focus on the transmissive, and on a highly structured approach (Dymoke, 2012; Snapper, 2006). This leads to students finding it 'dull' and 'pointless', as evidenced in Sir Andrew Motion's Booktrust Report (Booktrust, 2010 in Lockney & Proudfoot, 2013, p. 149) and in the response from Lockney and Proudfoot's 2013 study where they quote Ofsted's (2012) report that notes the 'weaknesses in the teaching of poetry include an emphasis on analytic approaches at the expense of creative ones (p. 44). In the Findings chapters, some of these thoughts are challenged, as in practice there were occasions where creative thought, interpretation and language play were welcomed from the students.

My approach as a researcher is to explore the multitude of ways in which poetry can benefit classroom experiences and abilities to learn, and not only from my own point of view. With an interpretative and critical-realist approach I have interviewed teachers, observed poetry lessons and conducted surveys amongst students to understand what

happens in the classroom and what their likes and dislikes are of the current system. The aim is to explore, with a bottom-up approach, the attitudes towards poetry, to understand how poetry can and does provide space for developing skills in playful, creative thought and discovering the benefits of dialogue.

My study is fundamentally inspired by Stevens and McGuinn's (2004) focus on fostering dialogic, creative and critical thinking in the English classroom, as well as Kress et al.'s (2004) work on the benefits of (playful) multimodal teaching strategies. I have seen first-hand in my job as an English tutor what the positive effects can be of engaging with poetry through dialogue, criticality and creativity and hope to provide teachers with inspiration on how to make poetry 'lift off the page' (Steele, 2015, p. 17) in Key Stage 4. A creative approach to teaching language offers an engaging environment for both teachers and students to learn how to play with language and to effectively communicate their thoughts, feelings and understandings of their place in and with the world.

### 1.3 Thesis structure

This thesis has eight chapters. The first two chapters report on the literature concerning English in the Secondary Curriculum in England and The Netherlands in Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 provides a literature review on creativity and criticality towards engagement in poetry lessons. They provide a critical account of poetry's place in the curriculum in both countries and an in-depth exploration into what creativity and criticality mean in the context of society and, in particular, how they could benefit poetry education and education in general. This provides the foundation for the research. Chapter 3 addresses the relationship between creativity and criticality and engagement in poetry lessons. Chapter 4 discusses the methodology and methods used. In the findings chapters (Ch. 5, 6 and 7) these concepts are viewed from the students' and teachers' perspectives, and my own reflections through poetic inquiry and thematic analysis. These findings chapters are divided into three overarching themes, which all relate to the purpose and intentionality of poetry teaching and learning.

#### 1. Findings Chapter 5: English 'because we have to':

2. Findings Chapter 6: 'How to English': Language and culture with and through poetry
3. Findings Chapter 7: 'Flights of Fantasy'

Each of these findings chapters includes subthemes in which students' and teachers' views on poetry are explored in the traditional sense of quotations and explanations, but also partially through poetic presentation and analysis, to emphasise poetry as a vehicle for meaning making. Each findings chapter contains its own discussion section. The connections and underpinning values and challenges of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education in England and The Netherlands are brought together in Chapter 8: Towards a Synthesis, and discussed at the end of each Findings chapter. This chapter further outlines the contribution that this theoretical and applied study might make to education policy and teaching practice, to encourage creative learning in secondary schools. I also aim to create awareness of the extra benefits of poetry teaching, beyond the historic cultural and linguistic aspects of English. The results of the study and the comparison with a less structured system in The Netherlands provide good reasons to appreciate the meta-benefits of creative and critical learning as a social skill, which can be fostered with and through poetry.

### 1.3.1 Chapter summaries

#### 1.3.1.1 *English in the secondary curriculum: In England and the Netherlands*

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature concerning poetry's place in the English curriculum, more specifically the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4, and the views on how poetry is taught and learnt. The GCSE anthology clusters, which are part of the assessments set by exam boards and awarding organisations, are considered in conjunction with the policy documents, The National Curriculum and Ofsted. It is then compared with views from current research, as well as studies and systematic reviews from the past thirty years, to understand the changes that have taken place with regards to curriculum (particularly the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4) and assessment, and to observe the changes and critiques of the poetry curriculum in schools, considering Cox (1993), Dymoke (2001; 2002; 2003; 2009; 2012), a variety of journal articles from *Changing*

*English*, key texts *Making Poetry Happen* (2015) and *Making Poetry Matter* (2014). The literature explores the GCSE anthology clusters' place in English education at Key Stage 4.

Furthermore, historical and political values of poetry's place in the education system are explored to learn why it is taught as it is in the current education system in England. The education system in The Netherlands was explored to offer a comparative example of poetry in a curriculum that does not have set texts nor a clear curriculum structure. The teaching of poetry in The Netherlands seemed largely dependent on the teachers' and school's values with regards to English teaching and learning. In the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 (2014), there is some mention of reading more generally allowing students to 'develop culturally' (p. 3), and it is further noted that students should 'understand and critically evaluate texts through [...] drawing on knowledge of the purpose, audience for and context of the writing, including its social, historical and cultural context and the literary tradition to which it belongs, to inform evaluation' (p. 5). However, it is not made clear whether all these contexts should be considered simultaneously nor what is meant by 'literary tradition'. With this lack of clarity in mind, a thought arises that more could be done to enhance the clarity in these areas and to ensure poetry can be read, for example, in different cultural contexts as well as in the poem's original cultural context, providing more opportunity to make the poem culturally relevant to the student. Providing more clarity to what is meant by literary tradition and the other contexts mentioned, may also improve the purpose of teaching and learning poetry at Key Stage 4 as not only a tool for learning about poetic techniques, critical analyses and historical context, but also a vehicle for making connections between (historical) poems and the students' worlds and lives.

### **Two nonets: Boundaries**

**English** is bound by the curriculum

Is there room to express voice?

Students don't understand why:

Dead, white, middle-class men

Relevant to whom?

Do they get it?

You could argue,

They don't

Thrive.

**Dutch** schools appear to have more freedom

Teachers do not have much time

How much poetry is taught?

Why is it taught at all?

What is the purpose-

Is it the test?

Or learning

Language

play.

### *1.3.1.2 Creativity and Criticality Towards Engagement in Poetry Lessons*

During the data collection, analysis and the reading of the literature, five concepts emerged throughout the different means of understanding poetry's place in the classroom. These are: *creativity, critical thinking (also criticality or evaluative thinking), dialogue, knowledge and engagement*. These concepts have strong connections with critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996 (1970); Giroux, 2011; bell hooks, 1994), collaborative learning (Mercer et al., 2019, p. 188; Vygotsky, 1978), and social semiotics (Kress, 2011; Kress & Bezemer, 2015). In principle, the critical education approach holds that through collaborative thought and dialogue, students are able to express themselves and to reflect on their understandings of the world they live in. Additionally, through voicing and listening to each other students are able to expand their knowledge and engage curiously with the learning materials. Subsequently, the two major paradigms in this study are creativity and criticality:

#### **A sonnet to curiosity in education**

Creativity, criticality

The purpose to engage in dialogue

Embracing a sense of community

The meaning poetry carries, lost in fog

Relevant poems in more inclusive times

Are poems found in rap, hiphop - maybe songs?

Their focus is to annotate the lines

They raise questions of what is right and wrong

Engagement relies on words that relate,

Connections are not often found in schools,

Poetry seems distant and out of date,

What students find intriguing? Bending rules.

There is a possibility to stir their creativity:

Curious thoughts improve ability.

### *1.3.1.3 Methods*

The methodology and methods chapter (Chapter 4) explores the researcher's positionality as well as the theoretical underpinnings of the research in its contemporary context. The data collection process was a triangular, qualitative approach, consisting of teacher interviews, student surveys and researcher observations. This allowed for a holistic overview of each of the cases that was studied and feeds into a rigorous and transparent approach through poetic inquiry. In this method of inquiry, I looked primarily at the student and teacher voices to understand how they compared to each other and where they differed in focus. In the same vein, I have used an academic writing style to create comprehensive and poetic texts that allow myself and the reader to engage in this study in a way that provokes thought by conveying meaning through poetic structures, showing that poetry does not have to die in the classroom, but can be utilised in various aspects of life, including in academic writing, as a reflective and expressive activity.

Choosing tools is quite a form of art

Creating language that makes meaning from the start

Collating data, creating connections

To allow for real and meaningful reflections

Thematic analysis linking voices

Both teachers and students, I had to make big choices

To keep language clear, simple and coherent

Without losing musicality of the participant  
Poetic inquiry honouring the words of student and teacher

Their responses portrayed as a key feature  
To understanding what improvements could be made  
Interpreting the data was sometimes a tirade,  
But from the mess and chaos participants helped me create  
An understanding of the fragility of poetry's current state.

#### 1.3.1.4 Poetry "*Because We Have to*"

Chapter 5 explores students' and teachers' perceptions on poetry in The Netherlands as part of the GCSE exam on poetry to ensure students are ready for their assessment. These results link back to the initial literature review (Chapter 1) and explore how teachers and students experience the curricula in England and The Netherlands. Chapter 5 offers an exploration of why poetry may be found 'boring and dull' (Gregory, 2013, p. 129) and how teachers and students feel confined due to the curriculum or the teaching and learning outcomes. Some students note they study poetry '*because the government tells me to*', on the other hand, others note they enjoy poetry learning as it helps them understand new language techniques and it encourages deeper thinking. In this chapter the way the schools implement poetry in their classrooms is related to the effect this may have on students' attitudes on poetry learning.

#### 1.3.1.5 '*How to English*': Language and culture with and through poetry

Chapter 6 analyses the benefits of poetry for English language and culture. Students note they enjoy poetry or find it useful when they are learning about language techniques, expanding their vocabulary, and learning English as 'English is a world language'. Not only is poetry useful as a vehicle to expand on language, but also to understand other people and reflect on, express and share emotions through language. Some students note that poetry allows them to explore making meaning through words and helps them understand their place in and with the world.

#### *1.3.1.6 'Flights of fantasy'*

With poetry being in its essence a creative tool to communicate, it was important to explore how students understand and think they apply creativity and critical thinking in the classroom. Chapter 7 links strongly to the second literature review chapter (Chapter 3), but also considers the critical perspectives on the curriculum, and how students and teachers embed creative and critical teaching and learning in practice. This chapter further looks at whether, and, if so, how poetry fosters a creative and critical attitude towards learning and how it embodies curiosity through imagination and a sense of 'freedom'. For the interpretation of the results, this chapter discusses learners' and teachers' appreciation of poetry and their awareness of the possible benefits.

#### *1.3.1.7 Towards a synthesis*

Chapter 8 offers a space for discussion of applications and implications of poetry teaching and learning in schools. Based on the literature and the findings of my research, the contribution to knowledge is shown, not only through understanding how students and teachers perceive poetry teaching and learning and its purpose, but also how students and teachers have a hope that within the National Curriculum - or, as in the Netherlands, alongside textbooks – there is space for poetry to be engaging, to provoke curiosity and creative thinking. This can be achieved with poetry from the western classic canon when explored through the eyes of current students and by providing opportunities for students to connect to these poems through interpretation and discussion. Some of the findings show that in a performative environment with a focus on the assessment, there is still room to learn with purpose and enjoyment that goes beyond teaching and learning to the test. Although the curriculum is restrictive, there are activities or ways of including poetry in classroom teaching that avoid the culture of "spoon-feeding": a term used by Marsh (2017) in the context of the dangers of closed-book exams (p. 282), by Dymoke (2012) when voicing teachers' concerns on line-by-line study for assessment (p. 404) and by Snapper (2006), when mentioning lecturers' responses to bringing more emphasis to set texts (p. 30). In light of the potential danger on the focus on set texts, and the value of including poetry

students can connect to their world, this chapter highlights the value of learning poetry in the classroom, and that although engagement with poetry in the classroom is low, it most certainly has great potential to thrive in the English and Dutch classrooms.

## 2 English in the secondary school curriculum: In England and The Netherlands

### 2.1 Introduction

Poetry has long been part of the English curriculum and has been a part of Western societies' education systems since at least 300 BC. Poetry has always played an important role in the creative development of learners (Collom & Noethe, 2005). In the current curriculum (DfE, 2014b) poetry is a valuable component of the literature GCSE and in the AQA Exam and Edexcel Exam the assessment consists of two parts: the GCSE anthology cluster poems and unseen poetry. The other components of English literature at GCSE level include a Shakespeare play, a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel and a modern text. The poetry and other literature included by the AQA exam board and the Edexcel Awarding Organisation is done in alignment with the curriculum, to give students a 'chance to develop culturally and acquire knowledge of the best that has been thought and written' (DfE, 2013 p. 3). The DfE (2013) further notes that literature is taught to 'appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage', which is reflected in these GCSE anthology poems (cf. pp. 27-32 and in Appendix 1 of this thesis). These GCSE anthology poems form part of the final examination in combination with an unseen poetry question (DfE, 2014b). The anthology is divided into anthology clusters, which currently include fifteen poems in each theme by a range of poets from 1789 – 21<sup>st</sup> century. The range of poems across the GCSE anthology clusters covers romantic poetry, war poems and contemporary poetry, and allows for historical reference as well as for comparison to 'make connections across their reading' (DfE, 2013, p. 3).

The subject English is constructed as a 'rigid compartmentalised curriculum' (May & Wright, 2007, p. 372), in which language and literature are seen as separate entities and there is no cross-curricular engagement to stimulate inclusive intentions of teaching and

learning. All components in the GCSE exams include language analysis and the purpose of language and structural devices as well as how the authors use these to present particular themes (DfE, 2014b; AQA, 2017; Edexcel, 2017). The main aims of the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4, which were last updated in 2014, are as follows (DfE, 2014a):

- *To promote high standards of language and literacy by equipping pupils with a strong command of the spoken and written word, and to develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment.*
- *Reading with fluency and good understanding;*
- *Developing the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information;*
- *Acquiring a wide vocabulary, an understanding of grammar and knowledge of linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language;*
- *Appreciating our rich and varied literary heritage;*
- *Writing clearly, accurately and coherently, adapting their language and style in and for a range of contexts, purposes and audiences;*
- *Using discussion in order to learn; they should be able to elaborate and explain clearly;*
- *Their understanding and ideas are competent in the arts of speaking and listening, making formal presentations, demonstrating to others and participating in debate.* (DfE, 2014a, p. 3)

The primary aims are to develop all aspects of language focused communication (DfE, 2014a). Poetry is mentioned in the modes of reading and spoken language. Students are expected to be able to perform poems in order to *'generate language and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact'* (DfE, 2014a, p.7). Although performance in poetry is mentioned in the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 (2014), when it states that *'pupils should be taught to [...] speak confidently, audibly and effectively, including through [...] improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts and poetry'* (p.7) this is not an assessed aspect of poetry. Gordon (2009) notes that poetry is primarily perceived as a 'print-based medium' (p. 161). Reading out loud and listening was not included in the poetry curriculum until 2000

(Dymoke, 2002; Gordon, 2009). Although speaking and listening are now included in the curriculum, the assessment focus is still on the print-based components. Some schools do include poetry slams and other means of performing poetry, such as poetry slams (Pieper, 2014), and *Poetry by Heart* (Blake et al., 2014). However, most schools still adopt the notion of poetry as a written text rather than also spoken word (Blake, 2020; Gordon, 2009).

In the mode of reading, students should read poetry to ‘read and appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage’ in poetry from 1789 onwards including representative romantic poetry (DfE, 2014, p. 5). Furthermore, it notes that students should be ‘reading a wide range of high-quality, challenging, classic literature’ (DfE, 2014, p. 5), which seems at odds with the GCSE AQA anthology clusters ‘love and relationships’ and ‘Power and Conflict’ and the Edexcel anthology clusters ‘conflict’ and ‘relationships’, as the majority of these texts are, as previously shown, written by white, middle-class<sup>2</sup> men, most of whom are not alive (Nelson-Addy et al., 2019; Perry, 2022). When discussing English literature as a whole, Elliott (2017) reflects on the lack of gender diversity, stating that ‘the curriculum across the UK is actually very far from being gender balanced’ (p. 46). Some more contemporary poems are included, such as Benjamin Zephaniah in the Edexcel Conflict anthology cluster, John Agard in the Power and Conflict AQA anthology, and Imtiaz Dharker in both anthology clusters (AQA, 2017; Edexcel, 2017). Nevertheless, the most-frequently used GCSE anthology clusters (AQA power and conflict and AQA love and relationships) are still lacking the rich cultural and gender diversity that exists in Britain.

Poetry has the potential to steer clear of being a ‘packaged commodity’ (Hennesey & McNamara, 2011, p. 217) or a ‘text to be beaten for meaning’ (Snapper, 2013 in Dymoke, 2017, p. 227). In the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 the learning and assessment objectives for the reading component of English, which includes poetry, have been presented as follows by the Department for Education (DfE, 2014):

*Understand and critically evaluate texts through:*

*§ reading in different ways for different purposes, summarising and synthesising*

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<sup>2</sup> Middle-class is used here, as the predominant text choices in educational spaces are middle-class (Vicinus, 2024). Vicinus notes, ‘Our definition of literature and our canons of taste re class bound, we currently exclude street literature, songs, hymns, dialect and oral story telling, but they were the most popular forms used by the working class’ (p. 6). – note: Although there is some dialect included in the current GCSE anthologies, the middle-class literature remains the focus of the current curriculum.

*ideas and information, and evaluating their usefulness for particular purposes*

*§ drawing on knowledge of the purpose, audience for and context of the writing, including its social, historical and cultural context and the literary tradition to which it belongs, to inform evaluation*

*§ identifying and interpreting themes, ideas and information*

*§ exploring aspects of plot, characterisation, events and settings, the relationships between them and their effects*

*§ seeking evidence in the text to support a point of view, including justifying inferences with evidence*

*§ distinguishing between statements that are supported by evidence and those that are not, and identifying bias and misuse of evidence*

*§ analysing a writer's choice of vocabulary, form, grammatical and structural features, and evaluating their effectiveness and impact*

*§ making critical comparisons, referring to the contexts, themes, characterisation, style and literary quality of texts, and drawing on knowledge and skills from wider reading*

*§ make an informed personal response, recognising that other responses to a text are possible and evaluating these (DfE, 2014a, p. 5)*

Although this represents the many ways in which to look at literature, and poetry in particular, it could be argued that analysing the writer's choice and seeking evidence relate more to a puzzle to be solved as Dymoke (2003) notes when she states 'The notion of poetry as a puzzle is, sadly in my experience, a common perception among students (and their teachers) who engage in a hunt for the missing clue which will help them solve the problem' (p. 15), or a code that needs to be cracked (Stratta et al., 1973, p. 42, in Xerri, 2017), rather than engaging with an exploratory approach. Elliott (2020), Xerri (2017), Snapper (2013) and Pasquin (2010) also recognise that poetry is often seen as a puzzle 'to be solved' (Pasquin, 2010, p. 256) in a way that examiners and teachers will approve of. Elliott (2020) alludes to the poem 'Introduction to Poetry' by Billy Collins, in which poetry is tortured to 'beat' the meaning out of it, as opposed to offering an exploratory way of creating argument structures to communicate understanding.

Viewing poetry as a ‘cryptic crossword puzzle with a meaning to be uncovered using the right tool’ (Elliott, 2020, p. 81) arguably leads to poetry being seen as a component of English that is ‘dull’ and ‘boring’ (Gregory, 2013, p. 129), but also as complex (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988). This low engagement with poetry may have led to a recent and temporary change to the curriculum due to COVID-19, when exam boards and exam organisations changed the mandatory poetry component in the curriculum. Poetry was the first part of English to become optional. This led the AQA exam board (2020) to decide that it would only assess Unseen Poetry during the pandemic, whereas the Edexcel awarding organisation (BBC, 2020) allowed schools to make a choice between including either poetry or the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel in the assessment. According to the Scottish poet and educator Kate Clanchy, this shows poetry to be a ‘dispensable’ part of English (Clanchy, in Lawrence, 2020, p. 15). In 2022, the poetry components were reintroduced fully, with AQA bringing in a more contemporary poetry anthology in 2023 and Edexcel having added two anthology clusters with an increase in contemporary poetry in 2022. Although the exam board (AQA) and awarding organisation (Edexcel) are adding new anthology clusters, it is unclear to what extent these will be used for assessment in 2024 and onwards.

## 2.2 Poetry in the English curriculum

### 2.2.1 The Poetry Curriculum

#### 2.2.1.1 GCSE Exam boards and Awarding organisations

Poetry at Key Stage 4 is taught in alignment with an exam board or awarding organisation chosen by the school. Not all countries in the UK adopt the Key Stage and GCSE structure. To provide an overview of the most-used exam boards and awarding organisations before focusing on those most commonly used in England, the following exam boards in the UK are shown in the Table 1 below: AQA, Edexcel, Eduqas, and OCR. There are other exam boards, such as IGCSE (International certificate for Cambridge English) and SQA (Scotland), which do not make up part of this study due to the focus of this study on education in England, rather than the UK. Nevertheless, I did want to include Eduqas and OCR in the table below to provide a more holistic overview of the different exam boards in the UK. Furthermore, Eduqas and OCR are occasionally used in Further Education (FE).

Table 1 shows that the AQA exam board was by far the most popular, followed by Edexcel in England. The Eduqas numbers seem higher as they include the exams done in Wales (WJEC). The focus in this study is mostly focused on the AQA exam board specifications, although the awarding organisation, Edexcel, will be mentioned too, to offer a comparison in poems taught at Key Stage 4. The AQA exam boards as this is the exam board the students' and teachers' in this study used at the time of data collection. It is important to note that there are no results shown for 2020 and 2021, as the summer exams were cancelled due to COVID-19. Hence, although there are overall results for these years, they are not based on examination. For this purpose, the results from 2019 are shown here, as final grades were awarded by teachers rather than through closed-book examinations (Ofqual, 2021; BBC 2021).

*Table 1. Number of students who sat GCSE exams with different exam boards*

Exam Board	Number of students 2019	Number of students 2022	Percentage increase between 2019 and 2022
AQA	429,383	463,502	+7.4%
Edexcel	50,823	52,365	+3%
Eduqas (part of WJEC)	53,754	53,889	+0.25%
OCR	11,816	7,213	-49%
Total GCSE school students who sat exams	492,022	576,969	+14.7%

The poetry assessment is divided into two components: the GCSE anthology poems and unseen poetry (AQA, 2017; EDEXCEL, 2017). Both components consist of a comparative assessment. In the GCSE anthology component of the assessment, the students compare an anthology poem provided by the exam board to another poem from the anthology they have studied. In the unseen poetry component, students compare two unseen poems. The AQA model (2017) includes an additional question which asks students to analyse how the poet presents an idea or theme in the first poem of the unseen component. The GCSE anthology question and the comparative question for the unseen poems are both on

comparing how certain themes are presented in the poem. Dymoke (2017) notes that these are 'difficult analytical skills that need to be mastered at this level' (p. 227). Furthermore, Dymoke (2017) argues that poetry writing is equally valuable and could consolidate the unseen poetry component, as it would make poetry more relatable for the learner.

In recent years, Pearson Edexcel has focused on increasing the diversity through including a wider variety of socio-cultural and contemporary texts, in novels, drama and poetry by working together with Penguin Random House (Edexcel, 2021). In 2021 Edexcel piloted Lit in Colour, a project that was initiated in 2020 by Penguin and the Runnymede Trust (Elliott et al., 2021, p.2). Edexcel called this 'English literature 2.0' (Edexcel, 2021). The second version of this programme is currently being introduced into a hundred classrooms throughout the UK (ibid). The National Literacy Trust has been quoted by Edexcel, providing statistics that suggest the need and provide arguments for an increase in texts that are relatable to young learners (ibid). The National Literacy Trust survey shows that 32.7% of children and young people in the UK aged 9 to 18 do not relate to what they read. Furthermore, 39.8% of students noted that they would 'like more books with characters similar to them' (Best et al., 2020, p. 1). This suggests that there is a need and a demand for a more varied selection of poems that students are introduced to students, with more relatable components, including an updated poetry anthology that relates more closely to the students' lives (Benton, 2000). Although new anthology clusters have been included in both Edexcel and the AQA GCSE texts, it is unknown how frequently these will be taught due to time constraints and low funding, which is discussed on pages 50-51 of this thesis. Furthermore, Farber (2015) notes that autonomy in students should be granted because "genuine engagement with an art is more likely to arise out of autonomy than out of coercion" (Farber, 2015, p. 219). This recurs in the findings of this thesis too, where both teachers and students comment on the value of autonomy and freedom to choose poems they would like to read and analyse.

Although the AQA exam board is the most popular, they have only recently implemented some changes to the curriculum for more progressive and relatable changes (AQA, 2022). Their new poetry cluster *Worlds and Lives* includes nine female poets, six poems written after 2010, and ten contemporary poems (2000-2020) by poets of international cultural heritage. This is a substantial change from their initial AQA anthology clusters, Power and Conflict and Love and Relationships, which has been criticised for its lack

of cultural diversity (Elliott & Courtney, 2023). Between 2014 and September 2022, there have been no changes to the AQA GCSE poetry anthology nor to the current literature and drama text selection (AQA, 2017). It will be intriguing to observe how many schools will adopt this new anthology cluster in their teaching of poetry for the GCSE exam. Additionally, AQA has included three new texts in the modern texts component: *Princess & The Hustler* by Chinonyerem Odimba; *Leave Taking* by Winsome Pinnock; *My Name is Leon* by Kit de Waal. This increase in text diversity adds to the potential of a fair curriculum on culture and gender in the English literature exam.

The 'Lit in Colour' study by the Runnymede Trust (Elliott et al., 2021), shows that a society that is becoming increasingly diverse would benefit from an increase in relatable literary texts. However, where the selection for the modern text component of the exam has been updated, in the past twenty years, neither Edexcel nor AQA poetry anthology clusters have updated the list to accommodate the currently most popularly taught anthology clusters: Power and Conflict and Love and Relationships. In 2018 and 2019, AQA note that the Power and Conflict exam question was the most popular (AQA, 2019; AQA, 2021). In parallel, in Edexcel's examiner reports (2018, p. 63; Edexcel, 2019, p. 69) state that by far the most popular question was Question 9, 'conflict'". However, it is clear that both AQA and Edexcel are making changes and research by the National Literacy Trust (Best et al., 2020) aims to improve the relevance of taught texts for learners as well as to close the gender gap.

### 2.2.1.2 Assessment structure

In 2015 the new closed-book exams were introduced, which led to the first assessment of these exams to take place in 2017. Elliott (2020) argues that these closed-book exams have led to 'deadening effects' (p.81), as it requires teaching poetry to become more exam-focused. To ensure that students know key quotations from poems, they are often taught these by rote (Elliott, 2020). For the exam, students are expected to remember all fifteen poems in the anthology cluster and to be able to compare the poem in the exam with another poem (Marsh, 2017). Marsh further argues that that teachers will have little choice but to prioritize helping students memorise quotations to gain good results for their schools' reputation and that closed book examinations enhance the exam-orientation of teaching poetry" (2017, p. 287). Subsequently, teachers and students focus more on the

'seen' poetry than on the unseen, as teachers attempt to provide students with all the information they need to do well in their exam (Marsh, 2017).

Farleigh (2018) argues in their thesis that 'while teachers promote the values of aesthetic response in their discourse, in their actual practice it is missing except at times of crisis in the lesson', and notes that there is 'the assumption that it is necessary to teach as single right reading', which, as Farleigh (2018) conveys, 'undermines the aesthetic within critical reading' (p. 139). This becomes problematic particularly when focusing on the unseen poetry, as here the student cannot rely on the teacher's correct reading. Farleigh argues this 'is an inefficient method of developing pupils' understanding because it relies on the teacher's reading', which does not support the independent critical reading that is required when reading and analysing unseen texts. Collyer (2022) notes that in GCSE anthology poems, there is an expectation that students will 'have the relevant knowledge', whereas in the unseen component 'there is no explicit retention of knowledge' (p. 389). To prepare students for the unseen poetry, Lockney and Proudfoot (2013) suggest that allowing students time to write their own unseen poems could support students with their unseen poetry analysis, as they have to actively consider the role language plays in creating meaning through language and structure in poems. Their claim is that this allows for discussions on poetry and the effects language has on meaning making processes (Lockney & Proudfoot, 2013).

To allow students to see what else constitutes a poem and to enable the inclusion of more contemporary works (Almond, 2021), the exam preparation is primarily focused on the GCSE anthology poetry. In contrast, unseen poetry cannot be prescriptive as students are required to explain their understanding of the poem and its themes in the present and will therefore not be able to prepare for these questions in the same way as they would for the GCSE anthology poems. Collyer (2022) argues that unseen poetry lends itself well to be taught and learnt in a liberating way, which, unlike the GCSE anthology poetry, should not be, as Dymoke (2012,) argues, 'restricted to the confines of the classroom and the pages of exam board anthologies' (p. 408).

Although writing is a proven need to enhance discussion and engagement with poetry (Elliott, 2020), Dymoke (2002) argues that assessment 'produces kids who can produce responses rather than kids who can write poems' (p. 88). In the current English assessment, the poetry component of the assessment consists of two to three questions,

depending on the exam board (AQA, 2017; EDEXCEL, 2017). Exam questions from June 2019 and June 2018 give an example of the way these questions are structured differently in the AQA exam:

*'Compare how poets present the ways that people are affected by war in 'War Photographer' and in one other poem from 'Power and conflict'' (AQA, 2019, p. 20)*

*'Compare how poets present ideas about power in 'Ozymandias' and in one other poem from 'Power and conflict.' (AQA, 2018, p. 21)*

Students would be shown the poem 'War Photographer'<sup>3</sup>, and were expected to be able to relate it to one other poem from the relevant anthology cluster. The Edexcel Exam question (2019a) is similar:

*Re-read War Photographer. Choose one other poem from the Conflict anthology.*

*Compare how powerful images are presented in the two poems.*

*In your answer, you should consider the:*

- *poets' use of language, form and structure*
- *influence of the contexts in which the poems were written. (Edexcel, 2019a, p. 21)*

Another example from the 2018 Edexcel poetry exam:

*Re-read A Poison Tree. Choose one other poem from the Conflict anthology. Compare how anger is presented in the two poems.*

*In your answer, you should consider the:*

- *poets' use of language, form and structure*
- *influence of the contexts in which the poems were written. (2018a, p. 21)*

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<sup>3</sup> <sup>1</sup> Although on the outset it looks as though both the AQA exam board and the Edexcel awarding organisation are using the same poem in June 2019, it is worth acknowledging that the AQA exam board are using Carol Ann Duffy's 'War Photographer' (1985), and Edexcel is using Carole Satyamurti's poem 'War Photographer' (1987).

In the GCSE anthology component in the exam, students are invited to name specific poetic techniques and their effects in the poem to show their understanding of the terminology and how to apply this to the interpretation of the poem, as well as to look into the context of two poems to show their ability to understand what the poem is about and to be able to compare two poems (AQA, 2017; Edexcel, 2017). In the AQA assessment (2019b) the following statement is made:

*'At the top of the level, a candidate's response is likely to be a critical, exploratory, well-structured comparison. It takes a conceptualised approach to the full task supported by a range of judicious references. There will be a fine-grained and insightful analysis of language and form and structure supported by judicious use of subject terminology. Convincing exploration of one or more ideas/perspectives/contextual factors/interpretations'* (2019b, p. 35)

The highest marks in the Edexcel exam (2019c) are rewarded for the inclusion of the following points:

- *The writing is informed by perceptive comparisons and contrasts, with a varied and comprehensive range of similarities and/or differences between the poems considered.*
- *There is perceptive grasp of form and structure and their effect.*
- *The response offers a cohesive evaluation of the poets' language and its effect on the reader.*
- *Relevant subject terminology is integrated and precise.*
- *There is excellent understanding of context, and convincing understanding of the relationship between poems and context is integrated into the response.* (2019b, p. 38)

Critical thinking is included in the AQA mark scheme (2019b), and similarly, in the Edexcel mark scheme (2019c). They both focus on understanding the poem in depth. However, these concepts are not explained in the mark schemes nor in the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014), which poses the question of how teachers and students are

supposed to interpret these terms and answer questions accordingly or mark them. Based on previous research by Dymoke (2012), Xerri (2015), McGuinn (2014) and Marsh (2017), it is shown that terms such as critical thinking and understanding are not always included in the classroom. Although teachers are aware of the concepts and often aim to include them in their teaching, time constraints and exam pressure due to - for example - closed-book examinations, prevent the inclusion of in-depth understanding, exploratory and critical learning (Perry, 2022; Marsh, 2017).

Teachers worry about the dangers of 'spoon-feeding' as a result of time and assessment pressure (Dymoke, 2012, p. 404) when students learn by rote and regurgitate notes (Marsh, 2017; McGuinn, 2014). Participants in Dymoke's study noted the acronyms used to provide structure for students in writing paragraphs (PEED: point, evidence, explain, develop) and content (LIPS: language, Ideas, Poetic Devices and Structure) (Dymoke, 2012, p. 404). New acronyms have appeared since, such as PETAL (Point, Evidence, Technique, Analysis, Link) (Mill Hill School, 2017). The concern is that these types of rules create formulaic answers and hinder students' creativity (Marsh, 2017; Goodwyn, 2012), which could promote a spoon-fed approach. Furthermore, the critical and explorative answers may be lost due to students copying and regurgitating notes from teachers (McGuinn, 2014), causing students to become 'passive, rather than active readers of poetry' (Marsh, 2017, p. 278).

Poetry carries negative preconceptions for students and, as previously mentioned, is often regarded as being 'dull', 'boring' and 'irrelevant' (Gregory, 2013), causing learners to be handed the information they need for the exam rather than exploring the poems in various contexts and analysing them accordingly (Dymoke, 2012). Unseen poetry involves a valuable assessment aspect as students cannot be 'spoon-fed' (Dymoke, 2012, p. 404) the themes, concepts, contexts and representations, but are required to include their own critical thought, which requires mastery of the subject (Dymoke, 2017). In the closed-book form, anthology poems require learning poems by heart and an understanding of how to compare poetry (Marsh, 2017).

The closed-book examination of the poetry anthology component is a recent change, initiated during Michael Gove's time as secretary of state for Education (2010-2014), and was introduced formally in 2017 (Marsh, 2017). Gove's intention was to make the poetry component more rigorous and ambitious (BBC News, 2013, in Marsh, 2017). However,

according to Marsh's study (2017) the focus on learning these poems by heart along with revision notes and comparative analyses could have detrimental effects, especially for lower ability students. Moreover, studies by Eilertesen and Vladermo (2000) and Theophilides and Koutselini (2000) convey that the pressure on learning poems to such an extent prior to the examination takes away from the critical and creative processes that lead to deeper thought.

### 2.2.1.3 *The GCSE Poetry Anthology*

#### 2.2.1.3.1 *The GCSE poetry anthologies, anthology clusters, and their place in the curriculum*

Poetry has been a compulsory component of English literature since 1988 (Blake, 2020), and in the current AQA exam board and Edexcel awarding organisation, schools are required to pick an anthology cluster<sup>4</sup>, which is one of two poetry components in the final assessment. Each anthology has themes or clusters: Edexcel has four clusters: *Relationships, Conflict, Time and Place* and *Belonging*, of which the last one is the most recent contribution (Edexcel, 2019). For AQA the clusters are *Love and Relationships* or *Power and Conflict*, and, since 2023 onwards, the new anthology cluster *Worlds and Lives* (AQA, 2022). The most popularly taught anthology clusters are *(Love and) relationships* and *(power and) conflict*. Before the instalment of these narrow thematic anthology clusters with fifteen poems per cluster, there was a wider variety of poems. Blake (2020) notes the difference was 'striking', as she shows that in 1988 the combined GCSE corpus included '6,903 poems by 1,039 poets', whereas in 2018 this had been reduced to '119 poems by 73 poets' (p. 3). In part, this reduction of variety in poetry may be due to the changes in the assessment, which in 1988 was based on coursework (QCA, 2004), and in the current format is a closed-book examination. Since 2018 the diversity of poems has increased with the introduction of new GCSE anthology clusters '*Belonging*' and '*Time and Place*' for the Edexcel awarding organisation and '*Words and Lives*' for the AQA exam board.

It appears that alongside the reductions of poems overall – though this has increased in recent years, with the inclusion of GCSE anthology clusters that are more diverse and

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<sup>4</sup> At times, the word 'anthology' is used in combination with a cluster theme, which is synonymous to the anthology cluster. Particularly in citations, this may be the case. Anthology Cluster was chosen as this is what the AQA exam board and Edexcel Awarding Organisation call it in their description. However, in their exam questions this is not the case and it is referred to as, for example, the '*conflict anthology*'.

inclusive – the way in which these poems are taught might impact student and teacher engagement and autonomy over how the teaching and learning of poetry might take place. McGuinn suggested in 2005 that in light of the danger of the number of poems students had to study two decades ago, it ‘would be unsurprising if GCSE teachers were tempted to opt for that fast-paced, target-driven approach to the teaching of literature’ (p. 243), which now with the closed-book examinations puts more strain on the students’ and teachers’ time.

If students are expected to teach poetry in this ‘fast-paced’ environment and with a ‘target-driven approach’ as McGuinn (2005) suggests (p. 243), then this creates a challenge to include an increased amount of variety, which is mentioned by Almond (2021), when they argue that there is a lack of variety in the AQA Love and relationships anthology cluster when noting that ‘the canonical poems in the ‘Love & relationships’ anthology do not provide students with sufficient variety’ (p. 254). McGuinn (2005) had already warned that ‘there is a danger that complex works of art may be reduced to servicing opportunities for Literacy Framework-style objectives’ (p. 243), which, due to the narrow view of poetry, can develop in classroom practice with regards to poetry teaching and learning (Almond, 2021), but may not always be the case.

The two most popular GCSE anthology clusters appear to differ in difficulty. The Power and Conflict theme is arguably more ‘diverse and engaging’ (Almond, 2021, p. 244), but also more challenging. The shorter texts in Love and Relationships, are thought to improve the chance of passing the exam, particularly for those with lower attainment (Almond, 2021). Subsequently, the more engaging, yet more challenging, anthology is not often touched upon in lower attaining schools (Almond, 2021). However, Almond (2021) notes that the Love and Relationship anthology cluster poems were often described by students in the school where she conducted her study as being ‘boring’, ‘too hard’ and ‘pretentious’ (p. 243). This aligns with Gregory’s (2013) and Lockney and Proudfoot (2013) suggestions of poetry in schools not inciting engagement from students.

While observing the change in poems taught in the GCSE anthology, it appears that there is still a limited review of cultural and gender development in society through the included poems, as can be seen in, for example, in AQA's anthology clusters: *The Power and Conflict* and *Love and Relationships* (p. 42 and p. 50 of this thesis), which include predominantly white male British poets. However, AQA has updated the literature and in 2022 included a statement of importance that allows for English Literature to be perceived

as ‘the study of how writers communicate their ideas about the world, and how readers might respond to these ideas. It aims to develop a critical understanding of the ways in which literary texts are a reflection or an exploration of, the human condition, the study of which develops empathetic understanding of human nature’ (AQA, 2022a, p. 4). This increased focus on the understanding of human nature allows for poetry to be lifted out of its historical literary context and invites learners to interpret poems based not only on existing information, but also on their own experience and through different lenses of socio-cultural contexts.

Although positive changes are being made to make poetry more inclusive, and in this sense more relevant to GCSE students, the most popular GCSE anthology clusters have only made small strides towards a more modernised selection and include many of the poems that have been taught since 1988. Elliott and Courtney (2023) note that in the anthology clusters used for GCSEs there a consistent preference for a male 'white gaze' (p. 5). Blake (2020) shows that Tennyson, Browning and Wordsworth appear in all six iterations of the GCSE anthologies since 1988. Barrett-Browning and Jennings are the only two women to be included consistently. Although other female poets have been included over the years, in the (power and) conflict and (love and) relationships clusters by Edexcel and AQA, there is still a lower representation of female poets than male poets, and no representation of transgender poets. While looking at the change in poets and poems through the years in Blake’s results (2020), I found that until 2018, 50% of the anthology poems had not changed in 35 years. More recent GCSE anthology clusters, such as AQA Power and Conflict or the Edexcel Conflict anthology cluster, continue to repeat poems, although do include more contemporary and diverse poets e.g. by Duffy, Agard and Dharker (cf. Blake, 2020). In past years, other poets such as Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott have also been included in the GCSE anthologies, although these are not present in the current GCSE anthologies (Blake, 2020). The recent additions to these long-standing GCSE anthology clusters by Edexcel and AQA on (power and) conflict and (love and) relationships, show an increase in diversity with a rise of female poets, poets from varied cultural heritages, poets using a variety of Englishes, and a wider range of poets with regards to time.

The more contemporary poems that are included in the GCSE anthology, include a broader cultural representation. However, of the poems written in the previous centuries (particularly the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), the majority is still white and, as evidenced in

the current AQA and Edexcel anthology clusters 'Power and Conflict' and 'Conflict', often still male-dominated.

The lack of diversity represents a narrow reading experience of learners and the lack of relatability (Nelson-Addy et al., 2019). Guillory (1993) described the canonical revision in Northern America, and the 'conservative backlash against revisions of the curriculum' (p. 3), thus making the curriculum choices political. The same goes for England where the National Curriculum is shaped by the government, and although the government does not dictate what 'the best of British Culture' is, there has been a strong leaning towards particular poets from particular times in the last decade. What is understood to be 'the best of British Culture' (DfE, 2013, p. 3) is related to the previously ruling party's ideology, and as such it could be argued that the GCSE poetry anthologies are due to the focus on the 'traditional literary fiction', as opposed to the 'diverse voices' and 'contemporary concerns' which are mentioned by Jennings et al. (2024, p. 310). Marshall (2023) notes that based on the specifications of the National Curriculum, 'again evidence suggests that the majority of texts chosen are by dead white men' (p. 7). Marshall's comment here suggests the influence that the National Curriculum holds over the text choices that appear in the GCSE exams, and cites Gove (2010), the former secretary of state for education, saying 'to reform English – the great tradition of our literature Dryden Pope, Swift, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Austen, Dickens and Hardy' (Marshall, 2023, p. 23), providing evidence of the 'white gaze' that Elliott and Courtney (2023, p. 5) and Jennings et al. (2024) point out too.

The poems students are introduced to are not the only challenge that teachers and students face, it is also the pedagogical practice of these poems and the (lack of) opportunities to discuss the poems' place in upper secondary school learning. The pedagogical experience in combination with the text choices students and teachers have will be explored in the next two sections and in the findings.

#### 2.2.1.3.2 Relatability of GCSE anthology poems

As previously mentioned, the poems in the GCSE anthology clusters are often found to be complex and less relatable for the learner and are often perceived as biased towards a particular national identity through the inclusion and exclusion of texts with particular ideas (Nelson-Addy, 2021; Perry, 2022). Additionally, cultural diversity as well as gender diversity

give cause to explore the current GCSE anthology clusters, and to explore how these GCSE anthology clusters could be made more inclusive to embrace present-day societies, and how alternative poems could play a role in this. One of the participants in Perry's study (2022) on the National Curriculum for English at KS4 argues that the curriculum is 'rooted in a romanticised version of society and dominated by an outdated view of a culture that does not exist' (p. 296). It is these thoughts about an outdated view that need to be explored, to understand in more depth which poetry is taught in schools, and how it is taught too.

Depending on the context in which poetry is taught, and which poems are introduced, the students may struggle to engage with the poems, as a distance between how the poems are presented and how the students perceive their world can differ strongly, creating a gap between the information the students received and their ability to understand this. This goes back to Freire's *Critical Pedagogy* (1996 (1970)), which emphasises that students learn more effectively when they understand the language that is used in their texts and by the teachers. Pike (2003) argues that experiences of the writers in the curriculum are vastly different to those experiences of current students. For example, Delaney (1972) points to the fear of hell, going to church and dying of love not necessarily being current emotions, and although Pike (2003) argues it is unnecessary for students to share the same experiences with the writers they study, it is important for students to be able to make connections between the (old) texts and their own experience and understanding (p. 357). Xerri (2014, p. 151) shares that Michael Rosen 'is convinced of the benefits that young people can derive from a creative and personal engagement with poetry,' alluding to the value of creating a classroom experience where poetry is creative and personal, which, in the current performative high-stakes assessment environment, is not always the case, as the focus is often on the language techniques and the historical context. Although, as the findings of this thesis suggest, there are examples of poetry being taught in secondary schools with an emphasis on including the students' creative and personal contexts.

Nelson-Addy et al. (2019, in Perry, 2022) argue for a curriculum that is 'successful and socially just' through introducing a more diverse and 'revitalised' curriculum (p. 296). They argue that this would allow for a socio-cultural representation of authors, which would not only lead to a more inclusive selection of literature that engages in representation for most (if not all) communities (Olive et al., 2024), but also provides 'a balanced

understanding of the people who make up the population’ (Nelson-Addy et al., 2019, p. 199). Currently, as Elliott (2021) argues, the insistence on the canonical (predominantly white) poets leads to a reproduction of the inequalities ‘produced through social conditions of one or two hundred years ago’ (p. 61). Subsequently, Nelson-Addy et al. (2019; 2021) as well as Elliott (2021) and Elliott et al. (2021) conclude that to form a cultural representation of society in English texts allows for understanding and relatability amongst students, which is necessary, according to Coard (1971), not only to increase cultural representation, but also for those from other heritages to explore their ‘identity, aspirations and attainment’ (Coard, 1971, in Nelson-Addy, 2021, p. 150).

English texts throughout the curriculum have been critiqued in education studies for their lack of cultural diversity. However, it is not only the lack of cultural diversity that Elliott (2014, 2021) argues is problematic within the curriculum. Elliott illuminates that the literary texts studied in secondary schools are not taught (and learnt) in a way students can relate to, even though they could convey, in part, the impact of the British Empire on society (2021), or provoke thought on current political, cultural and personal experiences and contexts, yet this is not necessarily what happens in the classroom. In part, the focus on specific English texts and the teachings from the perspective of the ‘white gaze’ (Elliott & Courtney, 2023, p. 5) is due, note Elliott and McLean Davies (2025), to a ‘continued and deliberate promotion of a set of narrowly national ‘English Literature’ in the name of a unified experience’ and the continuation of situating ‘the English curriculum firmly in its colonial heritage’ (p. 4). A connection can be made here to more recent poems by authors from other cultural heritages, as they are the voices of the aftermath of The British Empire. The most popularly taught poetry anthology clusters on the AQA exam board only includes three authors of other heritage: Daljit Nagra, John Agard and Imtiaz Dharker.

Subsequently, this is not representative of the country’s cultural diversity, but the focus on teaching the ‘white’ anthology poems, which fails to address or include an understanding of the diversity of British society, which would improve the representation and relevance for students across ethnic backgrounds (Elliott, 2020). The study for Lit in Colour, a report with Penguin and The Runnymede Trust (Elliott et al., 2021), shows that although 34.4% of students in the United Kingdom are black, only 7% of GCSE students in schools read a text by a black author, and only 0.1% read a text by a black female author. This illustrates a lack of cultural and gender representation, which appears to be problematic

in the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 as a whole, as well as in the GCSE poetry anthology. Below is the AQA poetry anthology cluster ‘Power and Conflict’ (Table 2).

Table 2. AQA Poetry Anthology: Power and Conflict

Poet	Poem	Year	Gender	Ethnicity
William Blake	London	1794	Male	White, British
William Wordsworth	Extract from <i>The Prelude</i>	1799-1805	Male	White, British
Percy Bysshe Shelley	Ozymandias	1818	Male	White, British
Robert Browning	My Last Duchess	1842	Male	White, British
Alfred Lord Tennyson	Charge of the light brigade	1854	Male	White, British
Wilfred Owen	Exposure	1918	Male	White, British
Ted Hughes	Bayonet Charge	1957	Male	White, British
Seamus Heaney	Storm on the Island	1966	Male	White, Irish (Northern Ireland)
Carol Ann Duffy	War Photographer	1985	Female	White, British (Scotland)
Carol Rumens	The Emigree	1993	Female	White, British
Jane Weir	Poppies	2005	Female	White, British (Ango-Italian)
Imtiaz Dharker	Tissue	2006	Female	Pakistani-born British <sup>5</sup>
Simon Armitage	Remains	2008	Male	White, British
John Agard	Checking out me History	2007	Male	Afro Guyanese (living in Britain) <sup>6</sup>
Beatrice Garland	Kamikaze	2013	Female	White, British

<sup>5</sup> Reference from Imtiaz Dharker’s biography on the Poetry Archive: <https://poetryarchive.org/poet/imtiaz-dharker/> last accessed 21<sup>st</sup> January 2025

<sup>6</sup> John Agard identifies as Afro-Guyanese, as stated below the table ‘Racial Composition of the population of British Guiana in December 1964 in the article “Checking Out Me History”: Medievalism in British Guiana Schools, c. 1950 – 1960 by Stephen Basdeo (2022): [https://reynolds-news.com/2022/06/15/british-guiana-guyana-medieval-history-john-agard-joseph-basdeo/#\\_ftn32](https://reynolds-news.com/2022/06/15/british-guiana-guyana-medieval-history-john-agard-joseph-basdeo/#_ftn32) last accessed 21<sup>st</sup> January 2025.

If culture is meant to be included in the curriculum through literary texts, Nelson-Addy et al. (2019) suggest that it would be purposeful to include a range of texts from a variety of backgrounds, to show the inclusivity of English cultural heritage. Although significant changes have been made to adding new literature texts that are more inclusive, the most-popularly taught anthology clusters remain largely male, white and middle-class. Nelson-Addy et al. (2019) address the complications with the whiteness of the curriculum and the problems caused by gender and cultural oppression in the heritage texts. They note that, due to lack in opportunity for black people and women to enjoy an education in which they would become as literate as the white men, such as Blake, Tennyson and Wordsworth, there are very few English poems from this time written by black authors and women. In Nelson-Addy et al. (2019), Nelson-Addy argues for the 'potential power of learning from exploring texts that have a strong resonance with young people's personal experiences', which can be 'just everyday common experiences that do not strive to highlight the differences or the efforts to be treated equally' (p. 198-199).

Elliott (2017) also calls for the curriculum to open up to more female writers. She argues that due to the focus on white (dead) men, there is no in-depth understanding of women's experiences throughout history, which creates a one-sided view of history, often unrelatable to women and BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) communities. Clarke (2024) considers the relationship between women's writing and the 'canon' and observes the focus in higher education on the content of the canon, rather than its construction. How the canon is constructed and what is included in anthologies taught in education, may lead to conversations on cultural relevance of texts. Furthermore, Clarke (2024) suggests 'it may be time to disconnect the syllabus from the canon, and to recognise the need to create syllabi that are local, partial, contingent – responsive to a given set of needs in a specific time and space' (p. 313). Although Clarke (2024) focuses on syllabi in higher education, his approach to consider construction of canonicity for curriculum and policy makers, and an increased focus on teaching and learning literature that students are able to connect to either through space or time, may increase the inclusivity of these texts with regards to writers who are traditionally not included in the literary canon in the same way as others. Additionally, it could facilitate classroom debate about the cultural relevance of the texts that are included, instead of analysing texts for historical and often factual context and language techniques.

Elliott (2017) argues the set texts need to change to allow for this inclusivity of more than half of the population. Elliott (2017) further notes that the small number of texts that is studied should 'represent a range of experience in order to widen their understanding of the world' (p. 48). Subsequently, Elliott (2017) argued for an increased diversity in text choice, Inclusivity within literatures in education is a long-standing debate, as in 1975 Lobban argued for new reading schemes that would be inclusive and show an equal representation of male and female authors. This issue remains almost fifty years after Lobban and thirty years after Cox (1993) who argued that students are taught a dead language. It may be that the focus should not only be on changing the content of the GCSE poetry anthologies, but a conversation about the purpose of the poems that are included. Clarke (2024) suggests that 'it may be time to disconnect the syllabus from the canon, and to recognise the need to create syllabi that are local, partial, contingent – responsive to a given set of needs in a specific time and place (p. 313). Furthermore, the women that are included are often contemporary poets, whereas the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century poems include a majority of white men (Nelson-Addy et al., 2019).

#### 2.2.1.3.3 Cultural relevance and relatability

Relatability and relevance are concepts that regularly occur when considering student engagement, enjoyability of reading and reading achievement. Therefore, it is important to develop an understanding of the concepts of relatability, and how it differs from, for example, representation more generally, and how this connects to relatability and representation in the poetry classroom. This can be explained through the example of the current anthology selection. Although this has the potential to offer relatability to students, it is not necessarily representative of the 'cultural repertoires' we see in schools (Nelson-Addy et al., 2019, p. 194). The current anthology selection, and particularly those anthology clusters on relationships and conflict, do not offer a representative sample of society in England as a whole, and as such offers very little representation for particularly marginalised communities (Olive et al., 2024). Stiles (2013) notes that 'our syllabi, unless we teach a course devoted to a particular subset of marginalised fiction, are literary grab bags with inclusions smacking of tokenism despite our best intentions' (p. 488). Stiles (2013) argues for a need to move from representation to relatability, to engage in inclusive practice that is not

tokenistic, but values equity, diversity and inclusion in the classroom. However, understandings of relatability vary, and as such I will consider the lenses through which relatability is often viewed:

- **Inward-looking relatability:** The ability to relate directly with characters' emotions and experiences in novels, which separates it from empathy although these two concepts can work together as 'stories and patterns can bridge the personal and the unfamiliar.' (Cleto & Warman, 2019, p. 112).
- **Ethical relatability:** moving from 'representativeness' to relatability, meaning 'the degree to which our students are ethically engaged with a particular work' (Stiles, 2019, p. 488). Engaging ethically means that the student is 'attuned to the moral implications of the text' (p. 488). Stiles further states that 'ethically engaged students are not simply judging work based on their own values; they are instead trying to discern the underlying ethos of a work, its entire ethical framework' (p. 490).

When relatability is mentioned and discussed in this thesis, I refer primarily to the ethical relatability, which goes beyond representation, inward relatability through experience, shared characteristics and emotions, and towards empathy through understanding morals (Stiles, 2019). This conception of relatability aligns with the notions from critical pedagogy where the student considers their place in the world and with the world through a continuous process of 'hopeful inquiry' that 'human beings pursue' (Freire, 1996, p. 72). Through questioning and engaging in learning about their own and others' experiences and through a variety of contexts, students are able to view a poem through different lenses. Through the critical inquiry and and through dialogue, students can explore similarities and differences between their lives, the texts, the different contexts texts can be read in and the experiences of the other. It is not only about having representative texts, but about making these texts come to life for students through pedagogical practice.

This is not to note that these white male poets should be deleted from the anthologies, as these poems tell us something about canon formation, history, class, and about gender too. It might be that rather than to eradicate, we may consider engaging in

discussions on what these texts tell us about society and education in England, which is what Clarke (2024) argues in her work on *pedagogies and decoloniality*. Clarke (2024) illuminates that it is not only what is taught in educational spaces, but it is also how this is taught. To completely dismiss poems by Shelley, Tennyson, Wordsworth, Blake, and Browning, would be to dismiss a valuable part of English cultural history. However, focusing on these poems without considering the students' accessibility to poetic language, cultural context, social context and experience, these poems often fall flat, and, as Dressman (2014) points out, these poems become boring.

In Olive et al (2024)'s study on literature in schools in Wales, an inclusive and equitable range of literary texts is vital for students to be introduced to texts that make them feel represented and teach students about a wide range of 'perspectives, cultures, religions, and ethnicities' (p. 121). Tan and Mante-Estacio (2021) point to culturally relevant texts helping students to negotiate their own identities. In their study, this is based on those who are bi- or multilingual and learning English. However, it can be argued that culturally relevant pedagogy helps students 'develop their cultural competence' (Tan & Mante-Estacio, 2021, p. 344; Ebe, 2012). Broaddus and Ivey (2001) report on Ivey's study in US middle schools from 2001, which conveys that reading materials that interested 'reluctant readers' made a significant difference to their reading motivation. This study also shows that school reading was 'narrow in scope' (Broaddus & Ivey, 2002, p. 7) and that exploring personal interests and increasing the range of materials in the classroom would likely make a positive impact on student motivation.

Alongside finding texts that improve reader motivation by connecting to personal interests, Clarke (2024) points to the importance of reading texts through a variety of lenses, to engage with not only the literary canon itself, but also to understand how it was constructed. Additionally, Dressman (2014) argues for a balance between contemporary poetry education and classical poetic forms. He finds that poetry is not popular in schools in part because on the one hand 'the 'rules' of classical poetic forms are arcane and dry and taught without reference to their aesthetic or rhetorical function' (p. 203); and on the other hand, 'efforts to contemporize poetry education through the use of popular songs or other genres such as hip-hop and poetry slams which typically sacrifice any trace of disciplinarity in their quest, and so gloss over what makes poetry a 'serious' topic worth sustained study across nearly every world language and culture' (p. 203). Dressman (2014) introduces two

ways of considering poetry. Firstly, as a theory of reading, where interpretations and meanings could 'only be generated by the interaction of a 'master' reader with a text' (p. 205), and secondly as 'public property available for multiple uses, according to the interests and needs of whoever chose them' (p. 206). Dressman further (2014) notes that to engage students with poetry, a variety of activities can be included in classroom practice, so that the focus is not only on the reading aspect, but also on the writing and performance aspects of poetry, which, he argues, can lead to a 'disciplined, critical approach to reading and writing popular forms that will translate to disciplined, critical reading and writing in more conventional academic style (p. 207). Similarly, Pieper (2015) argues that the focus on literacy in schools limits students' experiences through a lack of encounters with fiction, poems and drama, as well as drawing connections with 'cultural education'. Pieper notes that school has the potential as a place for 'social inclusion where students are offered a variety of cultural experiences' (p. 195) and moves beyond the confines of the classroom. As such, by introducing students to poems that are representative of their community, and poems they can engage with and shape their own understandings in varying cultural contexts. This gives students the opportunity to 'read for their personal development, identity formation' and for appreciating 'literary praxis as a form of participation in cultural life' (Pieper, 2014, p. 196). These connections between text, culture and personal development can come in many forms.

Students will be introduced to a variety of cultural aspects which may or may not be representative of their own personal background, but will offer a wider and more in-depth view of the different communities of people who live in England. Ebe (2012) shows that reading engagement and achievement improve (cf. also Tan & Mante-Estacio 2021). It is evidenced by Ebe (2012) and argued by Tan and Mante-Estacio (2021) that a wider diversity of texts improves reading engagement, and subsequently reading achievement. In learning more generally, this is often the case, and as such when these texts are not only provided by the teacher as the expert on poetic techniques and analyses, and the student as the receiver of information, then the student is able to identify connections between them and the text. The teacher can prompt this through questioning, through thematising poetry and not only seeing, teaching and learning a poem to unpick it and identify its correct meaning, but to observe the wide variety of meanings and interpretations a poem can carry, to then explore

the text in different contexts and create transparent and rigorous analyses that connect the student to the poem.

In summary, (cultural) relevance and relatability of poetry should not be limited to only choosing poems of the students' time, nor should it be limited to the poems from a poetry selection that includes predominantly white men (Clarke, 2024), but a range of poetry should be read in different contexts, and cater towards reading in diverse ways to stimulate reading motivation, reading engagement and cultural development, as well as language learning. Olive et al. (2024) argues Subsequently, poetry reading offers a rich variety of functions, as it can and should be read in a multitude of ways and then evaluated and discussed. Students will be able to 'engage' in and negotiate diverse ways of meaning making, stimulating critical reading. Furthermore, it may be intriguing to invite students to question not only what a poem means to them or in specific contexts, but also why they are reading it. Currently, students are introduced to a narrow set of poems in the GCSE anthology clusters, which are, particularly in the AQA Power & Conflict, AQA Love & Relationships, Edexcel Conflict and Edexcel Relationships anthology clusters, not representative of the students' worlds and lives. At the time of writing, there is no data to show to what extent the recently added anthology clusters are taught and learnt at Key Stage 4, and as such this information is based on what is known at the time of writing.

#### 2.2.1.3.4 Cultural representation in the anthologies

The Lit in Colour study by Elliott et al. (2021) shows the need for a more culturally diverse anthology that offers a wide range of cultural and gender representations. AQA and Edexcel have attempted this with their recent additions, but due to a lack available resources (Almond, 2021; Perry, 2021) it is not always feasible for schools to adopt these new anthology clusters, as teachers may face time and workload constraints to adopt new anthology clusters in their teaching practice. The limitation of social diversity shows throughout the entire literature sections set by the exam boards. Literary texts include Shakespeare, a Victorian text and a 'modern text' or 'post 19<sup>th</sup> century text', which is often a twentieth century play or novella. However, Cox (1993) observes that the 'great tradition' of those poets and novelists we find in the curriculum is 'growing further away' (p. 29). Conversely, Michael Gove applauded those literary classics written by people who have been

dead for, according to Olive (2013), an average of 206 years and has hardly changed in the past 50 years (Lobban, 1975). Blake (2020) notes the 'narrowing canvas of possibility' (p. 191) due to the 'licensed availability of just 119 poems by 73 poets' (p. 190) in the anthology clusters in 2018 (prior to the updated anthology clusters in 2022 and 2023 in AQA and Edexcel), which had been reduced from a 'combined GCSE corpus of '6,903 poems by 1,039 poets' in 1988 (2020, p. ii).

Cox (1993) argues that a narrow anthology, assumes that students of 'every social background' should conform to the language of these historical poems and understand it. In reality, there are many standards of English and a multiplicity of ways to express oneself using the English language (Cox, 1993). In conjunction, Freire (1996 (1970)) makes us aware of the need for reciprocity, so that the learner learns from the teacher and the texts and for the teacher to adapt to the learner to create a space for dialogue in the here and now. The focus should no longer be on the dead language, as posed by Cox (1993, p. 26), but on engaging in dialogue with texts from a variety of ages, cultures and genders, to allow for an understanding of the self in and with society (Freire, 2004, in Stevens & Lockney, 2017). Cox (1993) makes a strong statement that the texts in school are distanced from the 'present very fluid, Anglo-American language' (p. 29). The 'canon of literature' advocated by the centre-right policy thinktank, Centre for Policy Studies, would have suited the days of the British Empire and treats English as a dead language, ignoring all those creative experiments which have changed our view of what is "'correct" English' (p. 30).

Nelson-Addy (2019) draws attention to the fact that culture has a 'highly politicised and class-based dimension' (p 193), and discusses the implications of the current curriculum, questioning whether students should do more than 'deconstruct literary texts', and perhaps 'engage young people with the complex social, historical and cultural processes that shape literary reception and understanding', and in doing this not only focusing on 'correct' English or the current 'canonical texts' (Nelson-Addy, 2019, p. 196). Although more effort is made to include black history, they argue that it is not enough and leads to gaps in understanding the multicultural poems that are provided in the anthology and in the unseen poetry component. Nelson-Addy et al. (2019) argue English is a subject that 'is concerned with the understanding of language use in a wide variety of literary and linguistic forms as well as their cultural receptions', yet note the students read literary texts through 'decontextualised' lenses, and because of the distance created between the students'

contexts and the written text, students might struggle to understand the texts at all (p. 193). Elliott (2020) calls for a re-evaluation of why these poets should or should not be included in the curriculum in relation to what they contribute to the students' engagement in knowledge acquisition, which aligns with Nelson-Addy et al. (2019)'s argument that culture does not stand still, and as such the 'curriculum ought to embrace texts that appeal to this diversity rather than to the single projected voice of the typically white and predominantly male canon' (p. 193).

As illustrated in Table 4 and in the appendix, both AQA (2022) and Edexcel (2019) have introduced progressive changes, and include what Nelson-Addy et al. (2019) noted as 'texts that appeal to this diversity rather than to the single projected voice of the typically white and predominantly male canon' (p. 193). The exam board has added new texts for increased cultural and gender diversity to their English literature text list (2019). For example, the plays and novels added to the Edexcel awarding organisation include *The Empress* by Tanika Gupta, *Coram Boy* by Jamila Gavin, *Boys Don't Cry* by Malorie Blackman, and *Refugee Boy* by Benjamin Zephaniah. *Anita and Me* by Meera Syal is on the Edexcel list of post-1914 texts too. The Edexcel awarding organisation has also updated its poetry lists and included a new theme: Belonging (Table 6). This anthology includes a higher frequency of poems from a variety of ethnic minority backgrounds. Argument. Table 2 (above) and Table 3 (below) show the Love and Relationships and the Worlds and Lives poems from the AQA curriculum.

Table 3. AQA Anthology cluster: Love and Relationships

Poet	Poem	Year	Gender	Ethnicity
Lord Byron	When We Two Parted	1817	Male	White British
Percy Bysshe Shelley	Love's Philosophy	1819	Male	White British
Robert Browning	Porphyria's Lover	1836	Male	White British
Elizabeth Barrett-Browning	Sonnet 29: I think of thee!	1846-1850	Female	White British
Thomas Hardy	Neutral Tones	1867	Male	White British

Charlotte Mew	The Farmer's Bride	1912	Female	White British
Cecil Day-Lewis	Walking Away	1962	Male	Anglo Irish <sup>7</sup>
Seamus Heaney	Follower	1966	Male	White Irish
Charles Causley	Eden Rock	1988	Male	White British
Carol Ann Duffy	Before You Were Mine	1993	Female	White British (Scotland)
Andrew Waterhouse	Climbing My Grandfather	2000	Male	White British
Simon Armitage	Mother Any Distance	2001	Male	White British
Maura Dooley	Letters from Yorkshire	2002	Female	White British (Irish descent)
Owen Sheers	Winter Swans	2005	Male	White British (Wales)
Daljit Nagra	Singh song!	2007	Male	British-born, Indian parents <sup>8</sup>

Table 4. AQA anthology cluster: Worlds and Lives

Poet	Poem	Year	Gender	Ethnicity
William Wordsworth	Lines Written in Early Spring	1798	Male	White British
Percy Bysshe Shelley	England in 1819	1839	Male	White British
Emily Brontë	Shall earth no more inspire thee	1841	Female	White British
George Eliot	In a London Drawingroom	Posthumous 1959	Female	White British

<sup>7</sup> Anglo Irish is the term used on [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org) (last accessed 19<sup>th</sup> December 2024) and *The Irish Times* suggest too in '[Anglo-Irish poet Cecil Day-Lewis was third-choice UK poet laureate in 1968, archives show](#)' by Shane Hickey on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 2023 (last accessed 19<sup>th</sup> December 2024)

<sup>8</sup> <https://daljitnagra.com> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

James Berry	On an Afternoon Train	1990	Male	Jamaican born (1924), lived in England (from 1948) <sup>9</sup>
Raman Mundair	Name Journeys	2003	Female	Indian-born British Asian <sup>10</sup>
Shamshad Khan	Pot	2007	Female	British (Pakistani heritage)
Seni Seneviratne	A Wider View	2010	Female	English-born with Sri Lankan Heritage <sup>11</sup>
Liz Berry	Homing	2010	Female	White British
Imtiaz Dharker	A Century Later	2014	Female	Pakistani-born Scottish <sup>12</sup>
Grace Nichols	Like an Heiress	2015	Female	Guyanese-born (1959) living in UK (since 1977) <sup>13</sup>
Louisa Adjoa Parker	The Jewellery Maker	2018	Female	English-Ghanaian heritage <sup>14</sup>
Raymond Antrobus	With Birds You're Never Lonely	2019	Male	London-based poet of Jamaican descent <sup>15</sup>
Roger Robinson	A Portable Paradise	2019	Male	Trinidadian-British <sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/poets-corner/the-poet-james-berry/> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>10</sup> <https://rsliterature.org/fellows/raman-mundair/> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>11</sup> <https://seniseneviratne.com> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>12</sup> <https://indianwritinginenglish.uohyd.ac.in/imtiaz-dharker-shalini-srinivasan/> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>13</sup> <https://rsliterature.org/fellows/grace-nichols/> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.louisaadjoaparker.com> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.raymondantrobus.com/bio> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>16</sup> <https://globalvoices.org/2020/02/14/an-interview-with-roger-robinson-winner-of-the-2019-t-s-eliot-prize-in-poetry/> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

Caleb Femi	Thirteen	2020	Male	Nigerian-born poet living in England <sup>17</sup>
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The Edexcel anthology has four different themes, including ‘conflict’ and ‘relationships’, which are similar to the AQA anthology. The tables above show that in the more recent AQA *Worlds and Lives* GCSE anthology, there is greater diversity in gender, age and cultural heritage than in the AQA *Power and Conflict* and AQA *Love and Relationships* GCSE anthology. This is similar for the Edexcel anthology clusters, which can be found in Appendix 1. This illustrates that exam boards and awarding organisations are making changes to develop their GCSE anthology for a more diverse society.

#### 2.2.1.3.5 Preparing for GCSE assessment

To prepare for assessment, teachers traditionally use annotation techniques in their lessons. Kress et al. (2005) found that annotation can ‘be seen as a direct pedagogic link between the actualization of English in the classroom and its official (re)production via an examination’ (p. 131). They note that annotations are used in the classroom to ‘shape’ students’ answers. Although exams have since progressed to closed-book assessment, annotations are still prevalent in the English classroom. Evans et al. (2020) discuss their experiences of how the methods of annotation have changed throughout lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prior to lockdown the teacher and students would ‘work through the questions as a class and use the answers to annotate the poem together on an interactive whiteboard’, online this became more difficult and subsequently the students were initially asked to annotate texts by themselves and received the teacher’s annotations afterwards (Evans et al., 2020). However, this did not allow for a full explanation of the different interpretations, which, as Evans et al. (2020) argue, is a valuable aspect in understanding a text. Elliott (2020) illuminates this idea that understanding a text goes beyond factual knowledge and considers

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.ocr.org.uk/blog/ten-voices-of-black-british-literature/> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

reading texts in different contexts: ‘in history, in emotion, in curriculum, in geography, in society, in danger, in identity, in theory, in power, in constraints, in possibility’ (Elliott, 2020, p. 16).

There is, as Dymoke (2002) argues, a danger in the focus on annotation. Jewitt et al. note the dangers too and argue students ‘learn to concentrate and focus on annotation rather than on creative engagement’ (Jewitt et al., 2005, p. 132). Additionally, Jewitt et al. (2005) argue that through the use of annotations students ‘can become both fixed on and successful at attending to the task of examination rather than on the meaning of the literary texts’ (p. 132). When students receive ‘packaged interpretations’, such as annotations (Kress et al., 2005 p. 133), students do not have to explore the texts for meanings based on their own knowledge, but rather use existing knowledge, which causes them to not need to engage creatively or critically with the text to make meaning (Jewitt et al., 2005). Elliott (2020) notes that when English literature is taught, it should include at least ‘some aspect of written communication’ and knowledge is taught as a complex construction of language’ (p. 17). Subsequently, Elliott argues that in teaching English it does not only concern ‘facts’, but also ‘ways of thinking’ (Eaglestone, 2017, in Elliott, 2020, p. 18). Similarly, Kress (2005) explores these ways of thinking through making meaning through communication.

## 2.2.2 Government Policy and its effects on text diversity in England

### 2.2.2.1 *The problem with funding and resources*

As mentioned, new and increasingly diverse anthology clusters have been introduced to both the AQA and Edexcel anthologies recently (see Appendix 1). In Perry’s study (2022) on how Heads of English are responding to the policy changes, he notes that, although some of the Heads of English in this study attempt to “reculture” the curriculum, there is a desire for this ‘values-based approach to the teaching of literature’, most of the Heads of English in this study share that ‘the ability to buy new books is limited by budgets’, although this concern may currently be greater at Key Stage 3 and with regards to Unseen Poetry at Key Stage 4, due to the introduction of the new anthology clusters at Key Stage 4. This introduction of new anthology clusters has led to a more diverse set of poems for teachers to choose from and was introduced after the publication of Perry’s paper on policy impact. Perry (2022)

mentions that ‘the most pragmatic consideration’ is the ‘relationship between the curriculum and how well pupils and, by extension, English departments perform as measured by examination outcomes (p. 308), which represents the concern of the focus on performativity. This means schools often have no choice but to read and analyse the same texts even if the teachers, students and heads of department would prefer otherwise (Perry, 2021), due to pressure to perform in the exam, from a student, teacher, departmental and school perspective. Even though teachers and heads of departments are willing to incorporate more relevant literature and create an inclusive curriculum, the respondents in Perry’s (2021) survey show that the end goal of the exam becomes the main focus in Key Stage 4 and that the primary task for teachers is to provide students with the information necessary to pass the exams. In Key Stage 3 there seems to be more room for texts that have a greater relatability for learners (Perry, 2022). Subsequently, the increase in relatable and multicultural texts in the Edexcel and AQA curricula is a valuable development, but the next hurdle is funding the new resources and time for teachers to study and prepare the new materials for their teaching and learning practice.

Funding is a real problem. In 2022 it was expected that 90% of schools would run out of money in 2023 (Fazackerley, 2022 in *The Guardian*). This would mean that the exam boards’ and awarding organisations’ efforts to improve the syllabi with more contemporary and culturally diverse texts, it will not reach the intended audience. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (2015) predicted that ‘school spending per pupil is likely to fall by around 8% in real terms between 2014-15 and 2019-20’. This is on top of government spending cuts and an increase in staff costs (cf. Williams & Grayson, 2018). Although the government acknowledges funding issues and teacher pay, these are still below the real term rise in 2010, according to the latest assessment of the Institute of Fiscal Studies (Sibieta, 2022). They note that, ‘faster growth in school costs will reduce the purchasing power of school budgets. After accounting for growth in the specific costs faced by schools, we estimate that school spending per pupil will remain 3% below 2010 level in real terms (Sibieta, 2022, p.2).

Maguire et al. (2020) and Perry (2021), note that especially schools in deprived areas face issues beyond policy change due to the public funding cuts, which were initiated by the Conservative government in power from 2010-2024. Besides the lack of new materials, these schools have had to reduce the amount of Teaching Assistants from forty to fifteen, causing an increased workload for teachers (Maguire et al., 2020, p. 494). Braun et al. (2011)

also argue that other, external, factors are problematic for schools to enact policy and curriculum guidelines. These factors of lack of funding that uses up time and energy for teaching as well as external issues add up to the current state of the education system. The increased workload for teachers due to teaching assistant cuts also leads to less time to engage in preparing teaching materials, and for delivering content. For poetry classes in particular, this means there is less time for the teacher to introduce activities beyond the assessment focus.

#### *2.2.2.2 Pressure to perform for the exam*

Performativity, according to Ball (2003), concerns 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change' (p. 216). It applies both to teachers and students and is one of the factors leading to the decrease in literary diversity and creativity in school (Lumby, 2009; Appel, 2020). In 2010, the Conservative Coalition Government expressed that they would specify a 'tighter, more rigorous, model of the knowledge which every child should expect to master in core subjects at every stage' (DfE, 2010, p. 10), putting pressure on the teacher to focus on preparing students for the exam and comply with measures, which is evident in Neumann et al. (2020)'s study on the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), in which they argue that neoconservative ideology has led to a 'conceptual shift from choice to guidance', which changes 'how teaching and learning processes are understood and lived in schools, with an increase in structural choices that make learning less accessible for disadvantaged students (p. 710). Consequently, a rigid conformance to the provided information of the core subjects can be noted, which serve 'as measures of productivity or output' (Ball, p. 216). It also serves a particular view of the concept of knowledge in education (Neumann et al., 2020).

Bourne et al. (2005) consider English, and most other subjects, as a subject that is 'actualised' in the classroom. However, they observe that a marketisation of education takes place, in which measured performance is most valued. This marketisation, Kress et al. (2005) suggest, is 'scaffolded' by a number of 'powerful frameworks' (p. 4), such as The National Curriculum, examination boards and the National Literacy Framework (p. 15). These regulatory frameworks cause teachers to lose autonomy as they feel pressurised to adhere to into 'achievement measured against externally determined performance criteria' while

their professionalism is monitored, measured and assessed too (Bourne et al., 2005, p. 15). Consequently, teachers are encouraged to stick to the rules, whereas English as a means of communication includes multiple curricula joined in a curriculum of 'notions of sociality and of culture: what England is, what it is to be English' (Kress, 1995, p. 5).

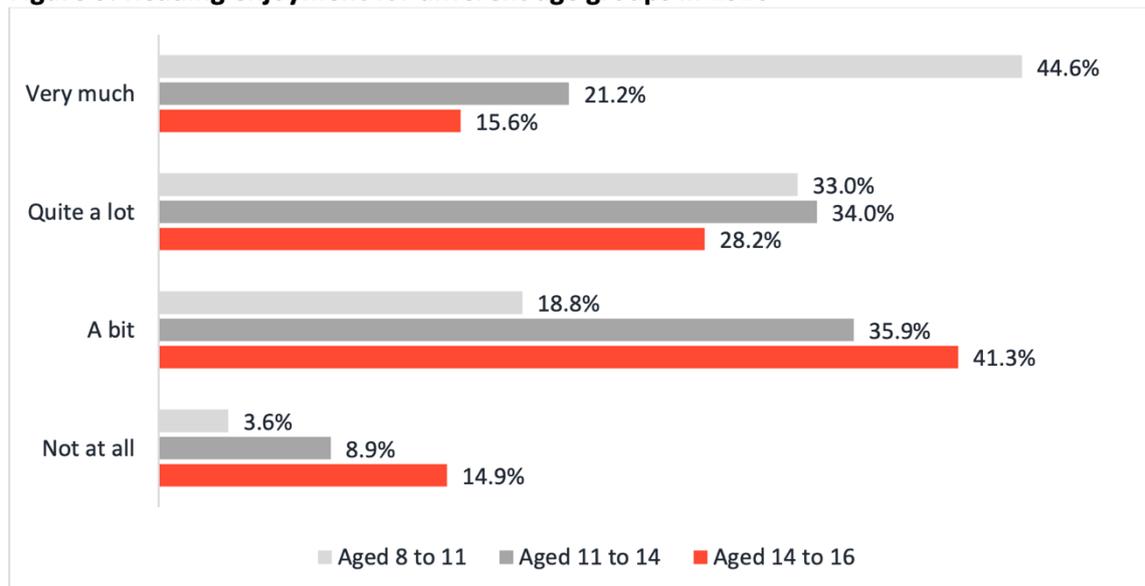
In 1992, Ball and Bowe expressed their concern about the increase of state control with the introduction of a National Curriculum and its political impact. They note that Thatcher (Prime Minister 1979-1990 and MP 1959 – 1992 for Finchley) at this time also expressed such a concern, acknowledging that a prescriptive curriculum would reduce teachers' enthusiasm (Ball & Bowe, 1992, p. 99). However, three decades later, the poetry anthology has become more prescribed and is reduced to a mere fifteen poems that are 'unpicked' for assessment purposes (Hodges & Rawlinson-Mills, 2019; Steele, 2015). This politicised agenda for a National Curriculum with set poetry anthologies by exam boards and awarding organisations, that include predominantly, as is mentioned by one of Benton's (2000) participants, 'dead white men' with a focus on 'cultured' classics denies the public of poetry that is recent, relatable and relevant (Benton, 2000, p. 85). Jennings et al. (2024) make the case that although good work has been done to 'promote reading for pleasure that includes diverse voices, contemporary concerns, and spaces where students see themselves represented', there is still a concern of the 'dominance of the writings of dead White men' becoming 'further entrenched', as 'schools may feel that they should be recommending students read older literary texts instead of encouraging freedom of choice' (p. 310). Although AQA and Edexcel are making attempts to update their anthologies and to cater for a less prescriptive approach, in practice classrooms are largely still dominated by predominantly white English poets, and seemingly engaging in the teaching and learning of these poems in a prescriptive way with annotations that relate the poems to existing contexts and understandings of the poems.

### *2.2.2.3 Reading enjoyment*

Coles (2013) argues that culture should be included in education as something that is 'central to our everyday lives, providing a critical tool which might help us to question and explore social practices both of the past and the present day' (p. 52). Consequently, developing a culture of reading for pleasure and exploration appears invaluable for

secondary school students to develop their cognitive skills. The benefits of reading for pleasure correlates with an increase in reading ability and an increased interest in reading (Clarke & Teravainen, 2017). It is intriguing that The National Literacy Trust conducted a survey amongst 42,406 pupils aged 8 to 18 in 2016 and found that nearly twice as many students aged 8-11 enjoyed reading more than 14-16 year-olds (ibid.). The survey shows that the reading enjoyment gradually reduces over the years (Figure 2, from Findings of the Annual Literacy Survey 2016, Clark & Teravainen, 2017). Elliott et al. (2021)'s survey response showed that 37.7% of young students did not enjoy reading the set texts in school and 41.2% of young students had not read any books for pleasure in the previous 12 months (p. 33), which correlates with Clark and Teravainen's (2017) survey.

**Figure 5: Reading enjoyment for different age groups in 2016**



*Figure 1 Reading enjoyment for different age groups in 2016 (Clark & Teravainen, 2017)*

Elliott et al. (2021)'s survey response showed that 37.7% of young students did not enjoy reading the set texts in school and 41.2% of young students had not read any books for pleasure in the previous 12 months (p. 33), which correlates with Clark and Teravainen's (2017) survey.

Both Rosenblatt (1993) and Yandell (2013) argue that to increase enjoyment in reading the emphasis should not be on the quality of the literature, but on the interaction with the literature (in Chapman, 2020). In that light, there appears to be a conceptual

contradiction between the experience of the enjoyment of reading as one of the objectives of the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014; 2017) and the notion of a knowledge-rich curriculum where the value lies in the quality of the text, rather than on the interpretation of the reader. A curriculum that is strict in its text choices allows for little flexibility for both teacher and learner to explore relatable texts that intrigue. Conversely, Almond (2021) notes the value of flexibility in the curriculum and mentions Kress's (2011) notion that rather than 'educating for a society which relies on restrictive 'fixed and stable' practices', it is important that creativity, change and innovation are embraced (Kress, 2011, p. 215; Almond, 2021, p. 254). Kress and Almond both argue that diversity should be valued as it adds 'to the store of available resources' (Kress, 2011, p. 215). In an educational setting where there is a lack of funding and time (Perry, 2021), diversity for cultural inclusion is often not deemed possible, as teachers and schools do not have the resources available to engage students with more highly relatable content (Perry, 2021). Elliott et al.'s (2021) findings suggest that there are fewer online resources available on texts that are not commonly taught in schools, and with the addition of time pressure, teachers feel it is easier to stick to the texts they know with the rich availability of resources to use in classroom practice. Neumann et al. (2020) suggest that the curriculum reforms from Gove's time have led to a knowledge-based curriculum that, although it does not exclude creativity and problem-solving entirely, it focuses more on teaching students 'a fundamental basis of knowledge' (Gibb, 2016 in Neumann et al., 2020, p. 704).

### 2.2.3 Ofsted's view on poetry

The last survey of practice on poetry teaching and learning conducted by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), was done in 2006-2007, prior to the changes Gove made to the curriculum (DfE, 2017). In the Ofsted survey (2007) it was noted that students' attitudes to poetry were sometimes negatively affected by the amount of poetry they had to learn and the 'overly didactic teaching methods' (p. 3). This was prior to the closed-book examinations, over which some teachers raised concerns and argued that closed-book examination impacts teacher autonomy and students' creativity (Marsh, 2017). Ofsted (2007) further mentions that to improve the quality of poetry teaching and learning, poems should be from a culturally diverse pool of poets. In the 2007 Ofsted report a positive

example of teaching poetry is given as one where the teacher shares 'some visual images reflecting the poems from other cultures that pupils were currently studying as part of their GCSE course (p. 9). Although the literature from other cultures has been addressed to some extent in new poetry anthology clusters, Elliott et al. (2021) shows that what is actually taught in the classroom is often not representative of society, and it is not known yet how many schools have replaced the AQA anthology clusters on 'power and conflict' and 'love and relationships' or the Edexcel anthology clusters on 'conflict' and 'relationships', with their updated and more contemporary anthology clusters. It would be intriguing to note any data on the use of these new and more culturally and gender diverse poetry anthology clusters.

Ofsted (2022) notes that poetry can 'convey heartfelt emotions and epiphanies' (p.40), and literature more generally 'contributes to the big debates in society and to political and social discourse' (p. 40). Similarly, Rosenblatt (1938) states that reading literature 'may provide us the opportunity to feel more profoundly and more generously, to perceive more fully the implications of experience, than the hurried and fragmentary conditions of life permit' (p.45). More recently, Didau (2021) suggests that 'English is in danger of becoming a clockwork version of itself with children learning lists of quotations and tables of techniques but with little sense of how to use these facts to create meaning' (p. 3), which poses a threat to that sense of emotion and exploration that can be found in and through literature (Cushing, 2018). This contrasts how Rosenblatt (1938) and Ofsted (2022) perceive how literature is taught and learnt at its best, with the narrow space students might have in the current climate on how to engage more profoundly with the literature to aid self-reflection and self-expression. In addition, Cushing (2018) mentions that in the classroom there is very little room for this exploration and opportunities for 'authentic, idiosyncratic and immersive readings' (p.8) are neglected due to what Goodwyn (2012) called the 'assessment regime' in schools (p. 212).

Another subject Ofsted considers in their survey alongside reading poetry, is writing. Ofsted (2007) found that, 'very few pupils wrote poetry in English lessons during their GCSE course' (p. 5) and that poetry at GCSE level did not prepare students for their literature A-levels due to the lack of poetry writing. Poetry writing -- as a means of self-expression and understanding 'heartfelt emotions' (Ofsted 2022, p. 40) -- is not assessed and subsequently rarely taught in schools (Dymoke, 2001). However, at least in the AQA A-level literature

specifications, poetry is one of the possible ways in which students can approach *telling stories*:

*Drawing both on their every day experiences of storytelling in different modes, and on published texts, students learn how language choices help to shape the representations of different worlds and perspectives. They apply their knowledge to the following:*

- *narratives that construct different views of a particular place*
- *prose fiction that constructs imaginary worlds*
- *poetry that constructs a strong sense of personal perspective.*

AQA, English literature specification (last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025)<sup>18</sup>

Although poetry writing is not enforced at A-level, it is an optional aspect of the students' assessment, and as such Ofsted's (2007) argument on the value of poetry writing not only as a way to express the self, but also to prepare students for A-level literature. Alongside the valuable aspects of poetry writing in relation to self-expression and A-level writing preparation, Lockney and Proudfoot (2013) argue that poetry writing can contribute to engagement in reading poetry too and might prove useful for improving the quality of poetry analyses by students. With Dymoke (2001) and Ofsted (2007), Lockney and Proudfoot (2013) conclude that there are very few opportunities for students to write.

Although poetry is raised in the 2022 research review series (Ofsted, July 2022), there is no mention of poetry's place in the classroom at GCSE level. However, it does specify in its handbook that literature should 'develop and deepen students' understanding of the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of liberty, the rule of law and mutual respect and tolerance' (p. 70-71). Rosenblatt (1938) describes the value of validating student response to literary texts, public discussion and diversity, as well as the students' place in and with the community, which Davis (1992) describes as 'interdependence' (p.74). Furthermore, Davis (1992) argues that it is ultimately the reader who makes meaning from the text, and emphasises the democratic value to the community that results from the

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/a-level/english-7707/specification/subject-content/telling-stories>

meaning-making process. This suggests that it is through a variation of responses that meanings are constructed. Through teaching and practicing this evaluative process, ultimately, students are prepared to 'carry out their democratic responsibilities' (Davis, 1992, p. 74).

Ofsted (2022) adds that reading creates a sense of interdependence, suggesting that education should include 'equality of opportunity so that students can thrive together' and that educational settings ensure 'an inclusive environment that meets the needs of all pupils' (p. 71). However, with the current poetry AQA anthology clusters 'Love and Relationships' and 'Power and Conflict', and Edexcel anthology clusters 'Conflict' and 'Relationships', there is little actual representation of social diversity, as they are limited in both the inclusion of poems from a range of cultural perspectives and gender perspectives (Elliott et al., 2021).

#### 2.2.4 Poetry in the classroom

Teaching poetry in blocks is a method that often leads to poetry becoming a pedestrian subject, with little or no links to understanding the craftsmanship that goes into writing such a poem. Snapper (2015) argues that this type of study can be 'reductive' (p. 31) and can lead to a lack of engagement and enjoyment regarding poetry. Due to this lack of exploration of poetry it is often seen as being a 'dull' and 'pointless' component of English (Lockney & Proudfoot, 2017, p. 149). Similarly, In 2007, the Ofsted Report on *Poetry in Schools*, raised concerns of pupils considering 'the study of poetry at GCSE level to be dull and pointless', which, according to Ofsted (2007) was 'largely formed by the didactic approaches used by some teachers to prepare pupils for examinations' (p. 7). Rather than a vehicle or tool for exploring language as a puzzle to discover how language creates a variety of meanings and interpretations (Abbs, 2003; Dymoke, 2003), poetry is reduced to an object from which to 'extract' data (Snapper, 2015, p. 31). It is no great surprise then that students learn to dislike poetry because they are unable to relate to the words on paper and are expected to analyse each poem they get in front of them (Snapper, 2015).

As mentioned, time constraints are another cause of teaching to the test. Benton (2000), Dymoke (2001;2002;2003) and Xerri (2013; 2016) discuss the pressure on the exams, which is felt by both teachers and students and leads to prescriptive poetry teaching and

learning (Benton, 2000). Xerri (2013) argues that this prescriptive focus on annotations ‘stifles creativity’ in the classroom (p. 137), which leads to a narrow understanding of what a poem might be about. These narrow understandings, which are often based on existing meanings, have a negative impact on the perception and understanding of poetry teaching and learning, and reduce the value poetry could have in the classroom as a subject that is: “open to group discussion, performance and creative activities” (Xerri, 2016b, p. 2). Similarly, Snapper (2015) observes that there are few opportunities for students to explore poems in more detail, so although students are exploring what lies on the surface – language techniques, original context and poetic devices – they rarely have the opportunity to develop their own ideas and interpretations. Benton (1999) argues this reduction in creativity leads to spoon-feeding, rather than exploring ways in which language can be used to convey varieties of meanings and interpretations (p. 530).

Due to the distance between the poems and the lives of the students, poetry is often presented as something that students receive rather than create. Pieper (2014) argues that the subject *literature* is, in general, often focused on ‘the reception (mainly reading) rather than production (mainly writing)’ of narratives, poems and other creative writings (p. 194). Pieper (2014) further argues that there is a distinction between learning literature in school as a skill or as a way to express the self. In students’ literature exams, it could be suggested that the focus lies largely with literature reading as a skill, as opposed to literature reading and writing as a way to express the self and the environment: Poems are analysed in great depth as learners aim to find meanings through the poetic devices that are used, but poetry is seldom created in lessons at Key Stage 4. Although reading poetry holds great value in the poetry classroom, Hanauer (2001) and Hofweber and Graham (2017) hold that the innovative linguistic forms of poetry allow for a deeper understanding of how language works, and poetry reading is shown to foster divergent thinking and cultural awareness. However, Rodrigues-Valls (2009) concludes that analysing poetry in a way that does not allow imaginative and innovative exploration of, for example, cultural awareness, leads to low in engagement with poetry in the classroom.

## 2.3 The Dutch Curriculum

### 2.3.1 English in the Dutch Education System

As shown in the previous section, English schools have a curriculum that is often deemed narrow because it is a very limited selection of poems for teachers to pick from. The question is whether a different approach would also make a difference in students' engagement and understanding of poetry. What happens in a curriculum with very few rules and no set texts? For this purpose, I chose to compare the English system with the Dutch system, where there are very few boundaries and plenty of opportunity for teachers and students to choose the literature for classroom purposes.

English is taught as a second language alongside other modern languages such as German and French. In the curriculum these three languages are in the same section of 'modern languages' (SLO, 2006). The SLO (Stichting Leerplan Ontwikkeling) is a national expertise centre for planning the learning process and developing the curriculum, commissioned by the Ministry of Education (OCW). Their main aim is to advise on learning developments in schools by conducting research, following on from existing research and trialling new methods in schools to improve learning. Additionally, the SLO advises on assessment and pedagogical aims and goals for schools throughout The Netherlands. However, it is an independent body, that considers not only the government's educational goals, but also the voices of teachers, specialists and the examination board. Furthermore, the SLO then connects goals to possibilities in practice, government and research to continuously enable the development of the curriculum in a way that benefits all those involved (SLO, 2021b).

English is the lingua franca and a language that most Dutch speakers have experience with outside of their educational setting too. Due to this, it is one of the core subjects from the upper years in primary school to the final year in secondary school (Van Dijk, 2019). French and German are expected to be learnt up to level A2/B1, but are not mandatory subjects in the upper years of secondary school ('*bovenbouw*') (Van Dijk, 2019). This means students are able to understand the language and to make themselves understood at a basic level and exchange simple information (Tracktest, accessed 14/10/2021). Van Dijk (2019) argues that language learning is often seen as a pragmatic subject to improve

communication, but there is little focus on the benefits of English literature within the teaching. However, Van Dijk (2019) describes it as providing an in-depth understanding of the culture of the language and a more comprehensive ability to understand the language. Van Dijk (2019), as well as Appel and Vermeer (1994), distinguish language production from language reception. To improve foreign-language reception they suggest literature as one of the key components.

For their exams, Dutch students engage in a variety of assessment components. Throughout the upper years (years 4, 5, and/or 6), students are required to undertake assessments which are designed by their teachers. These are called 'PTA exams', which stands for a programme of testing and finalising (*Programma van Toetsing en Afsluiting*) and includes summative tests for students. These exams usually include a viewing and a listening exam, an oral exam and a written exam in the form of a letter or an essay. The end-of-year assessment consists of a multiple-choice test focusing on vocabulary, grammatical rules and language structures and an oral component in which the student discusses the books they have read. These are compulsory components (SLO, 2006; van Dijk, 2019). In all the aforementioned assessment components, language production is a primary aim, apart from the watching-and-listening exam, which is multiple choice. This shows that for the greatest part the focus is on language production (speaking and writing), as opposed to language reception, where an understanding of the language and its relations to culture are explored (van Dijk, 2019).

Van Dijk (2019) suggests that to increase the focus on literature to motivate learners the learner should take part in the decision-making process for text choice and including that literature as part of the oral examination process. Pre-2007, it was often the case that the oral examination focused on literature, and that there would be a dialogue between teacher(s) and student on a specific literary work (SLO, 2007). However, in 2007 this changed and the dialogue has become more open-ended in its approach. Topics can still include literature, but students should also be able to make themselves understood on daily topics (SLO, 2007). At HAVO/VWO<sup>19</sup> level, these topics include political, economic and cultural themes and should also take into account personal interests so the student can relate to and

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<sup>19</sup> HAVO stands for higher general further education, which is a 5-year secondary school programme geared towards theoretical education. VWO stands for further academic education, which is a 6-year secondary school programme designed to prepare students for university / academia.

communicate the topic in their own words (SLO, 2007). Although communicating about themes that interest the learner allows for important components such as relatability and a connection with culture and society, this assessment increases the focus on language as a tool for communication and production, rather than only as a tool to enhance cultural understanding, empathy and the art of the written word.

The curriculum is open to interpretation by the teachers and the schools, and although there is guidance, teachers are able to choose which topics and to an extent the assessment methods in schools as long as the European Framework of Reference is adhered to (SLO, 2007). This has led to a variety of English streams for schools and teachers to apply (SLO, 2018). The general method for VMBO (4 year pre-vocational education) and HAVO (5 year senior general education) is for the teacher to use textbooks (Schaap, 2017; Fasoglio et al., 2015). In an SLO publication on speaking skill levels of English attained in Dutch secondary education, Fasoglio and Tuin (2018) note that there is often a focus on grammar and spelling in these textbooks, and little time or space for the study of literature and language play (through communication and creative writing). The student is expected to reach the minimum of B2 and a preferred C1 level by the end of their secondary school career (Fasoglio & Tuin 2018). In VWO (6-year pre-university education) there is an increasing popularity in Dutch schools to teach bilingually. Currently, over 130 schools in The Netherlands have adopted bilingual education, in which English is the second language (<https://www.nuffic.nl/onderwerpen/tweetalig-onderwijs/alle-tto-scholen-in-nederland> accessed 25 April, 2023). The textbooks used for bilingual education are solely in English, and the language in the classroom for English lessons is also only English. The various English methods allow students to be proficient in English at B1, B2 or C1 level by the end of their secondary school period (SLO, 2007).

In theory, bilingual education or including 'fast lane' or Cambridge English in schools is beneficial as it improves the fluency in English speaking, writing and reading qualities of the student and allows them to be better prepared for further or higher education. However, in practice, there is much variety in the level at which the students start their secondary school journey, depending on their exposure to it at home (Van Dijk, 2019) and their prior experience with English in primary school, which is variable (Fasoglio & Tuin, 2018). This leads to difficulties for teachers as they try to find a balance in their teaching to

accommodate all students and often causes them to focus on grammar and vocabulary rather than creative writing and communicative language ability (Fasoglio & Tuin, 2018).

The levels B1, B2 and C1 are part of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). B1 level is preparatory for improving communication in the English language. Schaap (2017) advocates that Global English, global citizenship and intercultural understanding could be promoted in the English language from B1 level, as these themes allow for a deeper understanding of communicating in English. English B1 level stands for intermediate test, and at B1 level the student should:

*... understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans (Tracktest, 2021).*

B2 level English is the upper-intermediate level and prepares learners for higher education and a deeper understanding of the British culture and language use. Learners are expected to be able to engage in in-depth discussions and be fluent in conversation:

*an understanding of the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. (Tracktest, 2021).*

At C1 level (Advanced English), which is the desired level of English speaking, reading and writing for those teaching English along the guidelines for English as an other (or second) language. This is the desired outcome for students who study at TTO level (Dual

Language Education) and ‘fast-lane English’, which includes schools that use Cambridge English textbooks and schools that apply dual language education. In dual language education 15% of classes should be given in the other language, in this case in English. This is the preferred route as preparation for students going into higher education, as it prepares students for reading longer and more complex texts than at B1 or B2 level. Students are at C1 level when:

*Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing a controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices. (Tracktest, 2021).*

In The Netherlands all children learn English to some extent in primary school. It depends on the school in which year the students start their English learning journey, causing students to start at different levels in secondary school (Schaap, 2017; Beeker et al., 2015). This makes it difficult for teachers to bring all learners up to the same level and it is one of the causes of learners falling behind in their English (Fasoglio & Tuin, 2018). This could be a reason why teachers tend to stick to the textbooks even though the curriculum is open to interpretation. A better organised curriculum in primary school would allow for secondary school learners to start at a more even level. This would make it more attractive to include texts beyond the textbook content, such as poetry and other literature, as more time could be spent exploring these other texts rather than focusing on the basic grammatic structures and increasing vocabulary. Van Dijk’s (2019) notion of increasing literature in the classroom not only for a productive communicative approach to English learning, but also for an increase in language reception and understanding. If learners start at similar levels, they can include texts from beyond the textbook that are pitched at the right level for the learners.

Variation in levels of English speaking continues throughout secondary education. 75% of HAVO students receive the minimum requirements of English (B1), which means that only a small percentage reach beyond these requirements and are more proficient speakers,

readers and writers of English. At VWO merely 50% of students receive B2 status, which is the minimum required at this level (Fasoglio & Tuin, 2018, p. 5). In further education, such as in colleges and universities, this becomes a bigger problem as the learners are expected to read complex texts, often in English. This reflects particularly on universities (which VWO-students should be prepared for when they have graduated) where students are expected to understand texts at C1 level, which is, according to these percentages, not always the case.

The Dutch curriculum has not changed much since 2006-2007 and currently a new plan is being designed (Rijksoverheid, 2021). This future-oriented plan proposes to reduce the focus on grammar (Fasoglio & Tuin, 2017) and aims to increase activities that apply creativity in language. The SLO created a concept document for a revised curriculum, which will be effective as of 2025. This curriculum as explained in '*concept core goals: modern languages*' by the SLO (2024a) focuses on effective strategies for improving English particularly in the earlier years of secondary school, including a focus on language diversity and a move away from the focus on grammar (p. 58), and includes a move towards using English for enhancing global citizenship, as well as promoting a move away from text books and towards a range of different communication styles that enhance language-learning skills and creative expression in another language. The upper secondary school curriculum (exam preparation programme), has recently been updated too (2024) and focuses on effective communication and reflection on cultural diversity (p. 6).

Additionally, the SLO (2024b) note that the learning of a second language needs a creative approach to allow for students to play with the language to develop creative language use, and notes learners should experiment with different creative language forms (p. 5). Learning grammatical rules and analysing texts offers little space to explore and apply language, and therefore these changes to the curriculum are able to foster creativity and application of language for learners to become more confident in speaking, reading and writing English for intercultural and communicative purposes as well as to prepare learners effectively for their further education (Fasoglio, 2015).

### 2.3.2 Poetry in English in Dutch schools

The Dutch and the English school systems are substantially different, although the pressure to perform in assessments and the lack of time to explore different ways of

teaching and learning is limited for both. There is no 'National Curriculum' in the Dutch school system as such, although there is a national assessment system, so each school eventually does work towards the same end goal. However, what they teach in preparation for these exams and how they teach it varies. For example, the use of textbooks throughout secondary school is common, which reduces the flexibility not only in the upper years, as in England, but also in the early years of secondary school.

In The Netherlands, teachers can decide whether they want to include poetry and, if so, which poetry they would like to include in their classroom teaching. Furthermore, there are no set texts in the Dutch curriculum (Beeker et al., 2015). Teachers can select poems, novels and plays of their choice, and are free to decide only to teach novels rather than a combination of these three literary components. On the one hand, this could lead to a more explorative approach as teachers have the opportunity to select poems they think are appropriate for their classes and to encourage students to explore them. On the other hand, the teacher may choose for a less explorative approach to poetry or not to include poetry at all and focus on other forms of literature. This gives teachers and learners the freedom to explore poems that they enjoy, potentially leading to higher engagement in the classroom (Dymoke, 2012).

In the revised curriculum in The Netherlands, there is room for a theme-based curriculum (Schaap, 2017), which could provide guidelines for teachers with regards to which poems to choose. Casteleyn and Vandervieren (2018) also promote the notion of a themed curriculum in which students initially focus on how poetry relates to the self, then the self and the world and eventually the self, the world and poetics (including language analysis). Dymoke (2012) conducted a study to observe poetry teaching and learning in New Zealand, where poetry is an assessed part of the curriculum, but like in The Netherlands, there is no set syllabus. She notes that although some teachers appreciated the freedom to choose poems, others felt there was a lack of clarity as to which poems were regarded as good quality (2012).

In Dutch higher education many courses are now given in English to allow for students from abroad to follow the classes as well as to prepare students for the global world in which people largely communicate in English. Beeker (2009) notes that there is a general criticism in higher education of the level at which Dutch students enter all forms of further and higher education. Beeker (2009) observes that there is a wish for students to be

more experienced in reading, writing and presenting in English. Until this day, students entering higher education often struggle with reading comprehension of academic articles and in Further Education students' communication skills are not at B1 or B2 level, which is the required level for the final exams in secondary school (SLO, 2018; CVTE, 2020).

Fosaglio et al. (2015) analyse the trends within modern language teaching in The Netherlands and consider the role of English as the lingua franca. They argue that learning English goes beyond the learning of the language alone, and they emphasise the value of learning language as a social construct to communicate and engage with others. Furthermore, Fosaglio et al. (2015) mention that attention to language education for communication has increased over the years. In this approach language is not only learnt passively through the rules of grammar, but also actively through communication and using language as a social construct. The main purpose of teaching English in Dutch secondary schools is to communicate and to engage in culture and society. It is intriguing to note that on the one hand the teaching of English in The Netherlands has not changed much since 2006, while, on the other hand, the stated purpose of English is to engage in society, to communicate and for intercultural understanding. The curriculum has been stagnant while communication, societies and cultures have progressed, as well as educational views on language teaching.

A criticism of the curriculum is that it is not detailed enough (SLO, 2018). The result is that teachers focus on the content of textbooks due to the lack of structure in the curriculum (Schaap, 2017). Schaap (2017) argues that although there are benefits for the teacher to having a curriculum that is open-ended, it causes unclarity and increases teachers' dependency on textbooks, or it increases their workload. The textbooks are often outdated, and as teachers face time pressure and need to focus on assessment there is little time to explore contemporary texts in the context of current societal, historical and cultural questions. The themes in the texts become irrelevant to learners, which causes lower classroom engagement (Schaap, 2017). The updated 2024 curriculum outline (SLO, 2024b) shows a potential for a more structured curriculum that still allows freedom of text types, but is also geared towards keeping up to date with historical, cultural and societal aspects of language use. That should give space for an increase in introducing relevant texts and themes, including poetry. It is expected that that would result in more adequate reading and

writing abilities and better preparation for higher and further education, as well as an understanding of the value of Global Englishes (Fasoglio et al, 2015; SLO, 2024b).

Dutch students are often introduced to some poetry from the Dutch literary canon in secondary schools. Although poetry reading has the ability to take students on journeys through emotions, the poetry students are often introduced to can be seen as outdated and understanding the language is a complex task, especially for second language learners (Lehrner te Lindert, 2013). The more opportunity there is for reading that stimulates learners to engage with the texts, the better they will develop their reading skills (Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). Lehrner te Lindert (2013) argue that when students start with texts that they can relate to, the texts can gradually be made more complex, which allows students time to adjust to the language that is used as well as allowing them to find relevance in poetry. Some experimental studies provide evidence for these assumptions. For example, Simons et al. (2015) suggest that a focus on emotion through the mode of electronic media in poetry lessons could be applied with a successful trial outcome. In an experiment, students were given a variation of poems that included audio and visual modes. The learners were then invited to explore the emotions of the narrator. All students had positive responses to this media-integrated way of reading poems, followed by writing and talking about these poems. Simons et al. (2015) note that the modes of electronics and emotions can be included in multiple subjects and can go beyond the context of language, and also connect learners to history and geography.

The building blocks for improving reading skills towards reading more complex literature often begins with finding relatability between the students' emotions and the poems, making them relevant to the student (Van Dijk, 2019; SLO, 2021). By using relatable poetry, pitched at the right reading level for students, at the start of the students' secondary education, students will be better equipped to read more complex poems by the time they are required to do so in the upper years. Similarly, Van Dijk (2019) notes that by allowing literary text choice by students in school at a level that is right for each individual student, there is an increase in motivation to read and subsequently the enjoyability and quality of reading improves too. Casteleyn (2018) proposes a way to stimulate the students' intrinsic motivation and to allow learners time to develop the skills to read the complex poetry included in a historical, predominantly white, cluster of poets.

Casteleyn (2018) suggests a 3-stage process. In the first stage, learners look at how poems relate to the self. In the second stage students look at how poems relate to the self and the world. The third and final stage brings these two perspectives together by looking at the relation between poems, the self, the world, and poetry. According to Casteleyn (2018), these three stages of poetry learning can then be divided into contextual themes, such as growth, longing, amazement, remembrance, and protest. The process of learning about how poems relate to the self and gradually creating awareness of the bigger picture is an intriguing method to explore because it allows space for creativity and criticality. Students are able to be creative in connecting the poem to emotions and experiences relevant to them. This is different from the creative process as it was traditionally coined by Graham Wallas (1926): “preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification” (p. 10). In Casteleyn’s (2018) argument, it is more about embodiment of creative processes and the act of reflection and expression, whereas in the traditional sense the order of the stages tends to be focused more on the product than the person’s journey.

The SLO (2018) argues for an increased focus on creativity as part of modern language learning. As such, playing with the combination of language, emotion and interpretation allows for creativity to happen. Furthermore, as the students develop deeper understandings of the poems in relation not only to the self but also to the world around them, it allows for the learner to become more critical in their interpretations and to reflect on how these interpretations relate to the bigger picture of their society and ‘the world’ (McGuinn & Stevens, 2004; Freire, 1974; Giroux, 2011). Rezai (2001) notes that in writing poetry, the focus is not only on communicating through words, but also concerns other senses through figures of speech, imagery, and sound.

Creative writing and being able to put emotions into words, both written and verbal, are constituted in the Common European Framework, as does understanding aesthetic forms of language use, which includes ‘the production, reception and delivery of literary texts’, which ‘includes reading and writing of short stories, novels, poetry etc.’ (Meijer and Fasoglio, 2007, p. 55). Through literature, learners are able to explore how language enables ‘intellectual, moral and aesthetic reflection’, which are seen as important educational components by the Common European Framework (Meijer and Fasoglio, 2007, p. 56). The value of literature, and in the case of this study, is made clear in the guidelines (Meijer and Fasoglio, 2007) set out for teaching and examination. In reality, there are very few examples

of effective use of literature for language learning and citizenship in Dutch research literature. Nevertheless, the inclusion of poetry contributes to understanding language and society and has a potential to add great value to the English lessons in The Netherlands (SLO, 2018; Fasoglio et al., 2015; Schaap, 2017).

#### 2.4 Concluding thoughts on the literature review

Recent studies, by the National Literacy Trust and the Runnymede Trust illuminate that students in English schools do not always find literature relatable, with 32.7% of children and young people in the National Literacy Trust study (Best et al., 2020) noting they do not relate to what they read, and The Runnymede Trust finding that as society is becoming increasingly diverse, it would benefit from a wider variety of literary texts. Only 0.1% of students in this study noted they had read a literary text by a black woman author, showing a narrow frame of literature (Elliott et al., 2021). Similarly, Perry (2022) notes the UK curriculum is ‘shallow’ and ‘dominated by an outdated view of a culture that does not exist’ (p. 296). These voices from the literature give rise to the notion that students cannot relate to the literature. However, due to lack of funding and cutting down spaces for teaching assistants by the Conservative Government, there is very little motivation or room in the workload of the teacher to create a more inclusive and equitable curriculum (Maguire et al., 2020, p. 494). The lack of freedom, which was already introduced in the 90s when Cox (1993) argues that ‘the freedom of teachers to choose their own texts for their pupils to enjoy was taken away’ and that teachers noted that ‘the best way to obtain high marks in these new arrangements for assessment would be by rote learning’ (p. 22). Although there is some agency in the assessment preparation for teachers to choose poetry as part of the Unseen Poetry exam question, there is a perceived lack of agency and freedom in teachers’ text choice, as is shown in Matthews et al.’s (2023) participant, Laura, whose response resonates with the findings in this thesis too, particularly those from Teacher Participant 4. In Laura’s found poem she says that,

*When I first started, quite a lot of  
my English lessons were creative;  
we basically*

*had  
freedom  
of*

*choice. (p. 744)*

Other participants in Matthew et al.'s (2023) study who had been in the teaching profession for a longer period of time, also noted their 'creative freedom was restricted by assessment' (p. 749). Matthews et al. (2023) further argue that the 'performative processes and the pressures and the pressures of conformity reduced chances for the English to be creative, deviate or display difference' (p. 749). This goes beyond text choices, and considers not only what the teachers are able to teach, but also how they are teaching this (Pike, 2003).

By allowing students to make connections between texts and relating them to their experience, reading poetry has the potential to become more engaging. Elliott (2020) proposes reading texts in different contexts to establish relatability: 'in history, in emotion, in curriculum, in geography, in society, in danger, in identity, in theory, in power, in constraints, in possibility' (p. 16). Although it is not only the text itself that may be problematic, the poetic texts are also often perceived as something 'difficult, irrelevant, boring and out of date' (Hanauer, 2004, p. 7). Hanauer (2004) indicates that by focusing on the relatability students became more engaged.

Relatability means being adaptable to a changing society, and Kress (2011) argues that creativity, change and innovation should be embraced in society, allowing for an increase in creative and critical thinking in schools, and less focus on the annotations, which Dymoke (2002) contrasts with 'creative engagement' (Kress, 2005, p. 132). By exploring innovative thought, poetry can become a useful tool for empowerment, as learners are not required to give up their 'cultural strengths' (Rosenhan & Galloway, 2019, p. 1), nor are they required to conform to a language that is not their own (Cox, 1993). Poetry is shown to foster divergent thinking and cultural awareness (Scott & Huntington, 2002), and Rodrigues-Valls (2009) argues that poetry analysis should allow for imaginative and innovative exploration of cultural awareness, as when this does not happen this leads to a decrease in engagement. In conclusion, for poetry to gain a stronger and more engaging position in the classroom, the literature argues for a more inclusive and relatable approach to poetry teaching and learning, that fosters creative and critical thinking.

In the Dutch curriculum, poetry is not a compulsory part in secondary education. However, it has been shown that poetry can be a useful tool for learning vocabulary and learning to construct meaning in a variety of ways (Rosenhan & Galloway, 2019). Language

production appears to be the primary aim of English education in the Netherlands, which relates to Kress et al.'s (2005) view of the two primary components of English: English as vehicle for communication and English 'as a curriculum of notions of sociality and of culture' (p. 5). In this respect, the Dutch curriculum, contrasts with the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 as it is less restricted, where the Dutch secondary curriculum only has one mandatory component, which is that it adheres to the European Framework of Reference (EFR). In order to apply this and to decrease workload, teachers often seek textbooks, which provide teachers with a structure and lesson plans, which may be similar to the exam boards and awarding organisations in England. Intriguingly, this leads to similar problems as found in England: a closed system that takes both students and teachers by the hand, leaving less room for creativity due to time constraints (Dymoke, 2001).

Casteleyn (in Casteleyn & Vandervieren (2018) argues for a 3-stage process of poetry learning in Dutch schools where students are able to embody the creative process and act of reflection and expression. The themes of growth, longing, amazement, remembrance and protest, are quite different to Elliott's contextual themes on the outset, but both embody that ideal of a creative approach to poetry education that embraces self-expression and reflection. SLO (2018) holds that a change in the curriculum is necessary to allow for more creativity in the classroom and for learners to become more confident speaking in the *lingua franca*, which emphasises the value of English not only as a tool for communication, but also as a vehicle for learning from each other through interculturality, which connects to Kress's (2005) 'curriculum of notions of sociality and of culture' (p. 5).

It is noted that teaching English in Dutch secondary schools can be challenging due to primary school English being unregulated. This means that students come to secondary schools with very different levels of English. By creating relevance for learners through an explorative and creative approach where they have room to express themselves and reflect on their place in and with society, this should give them space to play with language and to develop creative language use and critical thinking skills (SLO, 2018).

SLO (2018) argues that being inclusive of the variety of Englishes that are spoken and creating these intercultural connections can lead to improvements in learners' interpretation and expression of implied meanings in the *lingua franca*, which will benefit learners in the long run. Poetry can contribute to students' language, societal and cultural understandings and could offer great value to English lessons in The Netherlands (SLO, 2018; Fasoglio et al.,

2015; Schaap, 2017). In conclusion, both the Dutch and English education systems would benefit from a focus on relatability not only to texts, but also to how these texts are taught, which is expanded on in the findings chapters, particularly in chapter 5, and in the discussion at the end of these chapters. In the studies in the findings chapters, a diversity of poetic texts and an inclusive way of teaching that provided the students with some sense of autonomy felt to enable a higher engagement in learners and a more concrete purpose to learning poetry while thinking in more depth and allowing learners to explore language and culture in a variety of ways to enhance creative, critical and innovative thought.

### 3 Creativity & criticality towards engagement in poetry lessons

#### 3.1 Introduction

##### 3.1.1 A Nonet: Engaging the learner

*Creative and critical thinking*

*A prerequisite for learning*

*Uncover novel meanings*

*By listening and talking*

*Exploring new ways*

*Of seeing worlds*

*With the word*

*Write, read*

*Voice.*

##### 3.1.2 Creativity and criticality in poetry as a way of making meaning

During the data collection, analysis and the reading of the literature, I identified five recurring and connecting themes in the different means of understanding poetry's place in the classroom. These are:

1. *Creativity*
2. *critical thinking (used synonymously criticality or evaluative thinking)*
3. *dialogue*
4. *knowledge*
5. *engagement*

These concepts have strong connections with critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996 (1978); Giroux, 2011; bell hooks, 1994), collaborative learning (Mercer et al., 2019, p. 188; Vygotsky, 1978), and social semiotics (Kress, 2011; Kress & Bezemer, 2015). Through collaborative thought and dialogue, students are able to express themselves and reflect on their understandings of

the world they live in. Additionally, through voicing and listening to each other students are able to expand their knowledge and engage curiously with the learning materials.

By developing curiosity through dialogue, meanings are created and shaped according to the learner's experience and their understanding of their place in and with the world (Freire & Macedo, 2005). With poetry teaching and learning in mind, students can learn to do this through the word (Stevens & McGuinn, 2004; Stevens, 2012). As is observed in the previous chapter, there is not always space to explore curiously through dialogue in the upper-secondary poetry classroom. Consequently, the main aim of this chapter is to explore why connecting creativity with criticality is key to enhancing the learners' knowledge and their ability to make meaning as a collaborative process, as well as improving their engagement in the poetry classroom.

*Creativity* lies at the heart of artful subjects, which include music and painting, but also poetry. However, creativity seems to be an ambiguous concept that relates not only to the arts, but also to the essence of humanity. In this thesis we look at what Craft et al. (2001) call 'little c creativity' (p. 49) and Boden (2004) regards as 'psychological creativity' (p. 2). This is not the kind of creativity that is linked to inventing lightbulbs and curing cancer but considers the mental process of innovative thought and originality. Creativity then, is not mindless copying, but always involves a novel thought process, which relates to Kress and Bezemer's (2015) understanding of creativity, which they argue is an innovation, and includes thoughts, signs and gestures and words. Furthermore, creative thought is often purposeful, which relates creativity to criticality as the purpose, and use can change depending on the boundaries that are given (Mumford et al., 2010). Newton (2014) describes critical thinking as quality control of creativity, providing boundaries for a seemingly unceasing stream of creative thought.

*Criticality* is a reflective practice, in which learners can evaluate their own understanding of the world around them, and develop a sense of their place within that world (Freire and Macedo, 2005). Furthermore, it enhances their ability to make meaning from existing text-based material. Subsequently, the student must be encouraged to engage in conversation and questioning through a mode (Kress, 2005), such as text, another person (dialogue), video or photograph, to explore various interpretations and meanings. For the purpose of poetry teaching and learning the focus *is* on written and verbal text. Kress (2005) argues that it is not the text that has the knowledge, but the text carries information that

helps the learner shape their own understanding and knowledge through engaging with it and questioning the text.

AQA and Edexcel have different understandings of criticality, focusing on 'critical understanding' and 'critical style'. Text as a carrier of information to gain critical understanding is mentioned in the AQA (2019) exam mark scheme as follows:

*[GCSE English Literature] aims to develop a critical understanding of the ways in which literary texts are a reflection of, and exploration of, the human condition, the study of which develops empathic understanding of human nature. (2019, p.3)*

Additionally, AQA (2019, p. 41) states that: "At the top of the level, a candidate's response is likely to be a critical, exploratory, well-structured argument". Edexcel mention 'critical style' in each aspect of the marking scheme as having either little evidence for it (low grade) or "A critical style is developed with maturity, perceptive understanding and interpretation with discerning choice of references to the text." (p. 46) However, in neither AQA or Edexcel is it clarified how criticality is applied to classroom practice (AQA, 2019; Edexcel, 2019), nor does the National Curriculum focus on providing guidelines on how critical thinking and critical understanding is applied in a classroom context (DfE, 2014). This creates ambiguity on the concept in classroom practice and that can lead to critical understanding not being taught or fully understood in the poetry classroom.

*Dialogue* concerns the communication between people, and in the poetry classroom it takes on many forms depending on the group dynamic. For example, dialogue could be verbal between two people, in a group setting of 4, or in a large group setting where the teacher will discuss analyses with the group, rather than offer them the information. Through dialogue students show how engaged they are with subject material, and, as Bakhtin (1981) notes, for students to learn how to ensure a 'maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life' (p. 271). Bakhtin (1981) argues that dialogue in this sense allows us to see language not as 'a system of abstract, grammatical categories', but instead 'language as a world view' (p. 271), showing the connection and value between talking of and through experience to make sense of the world, as opposed to focusing on, what in the Newbolt report (BoE, 1921) was depicted as a 'field of mental exercise remote from ordinary life (p. 9). On the contrary, language use is culture bound. Freire and Shor (1987) argue that it is through this dialogue that we learn to listen to and understand others' points of view, which makes it a valuable asset to classroom learning. Through dialogue,

knowledge expands beyond the personal worldview, and students learn to express, but also to reflect on their place in the world, and with the people around them (Freire and Macedo, 2005; Freire and Shor, 1987). In the case of dialogue, the conductor of the process is the word (Stevens & McGuinn, 2004; Stevens, 2012). The three aforementioned concepts, - creativity, criticality and dialogue - when used from a critical pedagogical perspective, allow for an enrichment of knowledge and engagement for both learner and teacher (or educator).

### 3.2 Creativity: what is it and how do we apply it?

#### *Creativity*

#### *An Explosive waterfall*

#### *Between the margins*

Creativity lies at the heart of poetry, and poetry was once seen as the purest form of creativity as it did not mimic landscapes like in paintings but uses words to create an image in the mind (Kant, in Penny, 2008). Newton (2012) reiterates this when she writes, 'Historically, poets were the ones who were considered to be creative. Artists, popularly seen today as the archetypes of creative people, were thought of as artisans who copied or mimicked what they saw; they did not bring something into the world that had not existed before in some form. But, by the nineteenth century, notions of creativity widened and it was accepted that artists could do much more than replicate the world' (p. 7). Although poetry outside of the classroom is seen as a creative form of expression, in the classroom it is often a subject of linguistic unpicking and historic positioning, rather than being understood as art that is open to exploration and interpretation (Snapper, 2014; Sprackland, 2014).

Traditionally, creativity is seen as having two primary components: innovation and purpose or usefulness (Patston et al., 2021). Kress & Bezemer (2015), Boden (1996), Newton (2014) and Craft et al. (2001) all agree that creativity is an act of innovation: the making of or thinking of something novel or original. According to the psychologist, Csikszentmihalyi (1997), we are creative within a cultural frame and a social field. Creativity then, is not an

individual phenomenon, but is achieved through curiosity-driven thoughts that are set within a culture, experience or a social domain. However, if a poem is read in the context of the original poet by millions of students for the purpose of passing an exam, reading and analysing poetry loses that sense of innovation as students are not stimulated to explore their own relationship with the words and images as their goal is to 'please the teacher and the examiner' (Pasquin, 2010, p. 256). Xerri (2013) argues that this way of considering the poem as a problem to be solved focuses on letting students 'unravel' the poem's meaning through a 'highly analytical approach' (p. 137), which leaves little to no room for students to come up with their own interpretations and meanings.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) argues that the process of problem finding is made easier through questioning and curiosity, which is what connects creative and critical thought in the sense that innovative thoughts are bound by the curiosity and quality control of the learner. Although creative thought appears to be instrumental to curiosity and problem finding, it is not mentioned once in the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 (DfE, 2014). Although, problem solving, and critical style and reading are mentioned, they are not connected with criticality and creativity (DfE, 2013). Creativity can be proactive and reactive (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and it seems that in the current education system, the focus is on the reactive. Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) research suggests that reactive creativity 'does not solicit or stimulate novelty' (p. 3). This relates to Benton's (2000) notion of the 'conveyor belt creativity' (p.81), in which students and teachers are so focused on the end-result of the final GCSE examination, that the students are not making any innovative meaning, but are responding to a prescriptive model which denies 'opportunities to explore a wide range of poetry' (Benton, 2000, p. 84). Furthermore, Benton notes that the decrease in 'creative writing' is 'matching increase in critical analysis' (p. 89) in a 'narrow', yet 'crowded' curriculum (p. 84). Some teachers argue that this causes poetry to become a matter of 'technique' rather than 'enjoyment' (p. 84). Dymoke's (2017) addresses the issue of motivation when neither teachers nor students need to engage with poetry writing proactively for assessment purposes, while they are not asked to read poetry in a way that relates the existing word to the current world (Abbs, 2003).

One component all definitions and explorations of 'creativity' have in common is that it includes innovative thought processes. However, different types of creativity can be distinguished. Creativity is a continuous semiotic stream of thoughts, signs, actions and

gestures that can lead to meaning making (Kress & Bezemer, 2015). Boden (1996) and Craft et al. (2001) distinguish between creativity with a global impact and creativity with a personal or small-scale impact. There are many streams of thought with regards to a working definition of creativity. For the purpose of this thesis, creativity is conceptualised as a component of meaning making (Kress & Bezemer, 2015) and productive thought (Newton, 2014) and considers in more depth the process than an end-result.

Craft et al. (2001), observe creativity in a similar way. She calls the two components 'big C' and 'little c' creativity. Big C Creativity has strong links with Boden's (2004) H Creativity, and 'little c creativity' relates to Boden's P Creativity. Little c creativity (Craft et al., 2001) is what Merrotsoy (2013) calls the 'everyday' or 'garden variety' type of creativity (p. 474). This is the type of creativity that humans are all engaged with, especially so in an ever-changing society in which people have to constantly adapt to new situations. Craft et al. (2001) argue that little c creativity is a concept that is used in a variety of situations, such as social structures, the economy and technology. Students find themselves in classroom environments with people who they may not have otherwise met in their own social circles, and thus, they must be creative in their communication and play with language to express and reflect on the self, which would be perceived as engaging in 'garden variety creativity' (Merrotsoy, 2013).

This garden variety type of creativity relates to Kress et al.'s (2021) definition of creativity as 'the ongoing, and unceasing process of *transformative engagement*' (p. 85), as it does not always involve conscious acts of creativity in the sense of making something, but it is an ongoing process within the learner (Kress et al., 2021). All humans are creative in adapting to changes and all humans can transform through the act of being creative. However, the difference between the definitions of Craft and Boden on the one hand, and Kress on the other, is that Craft et al. (2001) and Boden (1996) view creativity as something we 'do', which leads to a product (such as a piece of writing, an artwork, the creation of economic structures, etcetera), whereas Kress and Bezemer (2015) argue that creativity is an inner processing of external information. The act of creativity shapes not only the actions of the learner, but also the thought process and subsequently the character of the learner, hereby shaping their place *in and with the world* (Freire & Macedo, 2005; Stevens & McGuinn, 2004).

Sternberg and Williams (1996) present 'creative ideas' as being 'both novel and valuable' (p. 2). Although this definition is phrased differently from Bezemer and Kress's (2015) notion of creativity --who state that 'every sign made is new; it is an innovation, and therefore its making is an act of creativity' (p.7) -- both present creativity as including something novel or innovative, whether that is something new to the self or to a wider group in society. From a social-semiotic point of view, dialogue (i.e., making meaning through communication) is important to voice and negotiate social and cultural views. social and cultural views. Furthermore, these views are 'preserved' through the oral and written forms of communication that are integrated in lessons (Muhonen et al., 2017, p. 26.). Jones (2009) argues that creativity is situated 'in the context of ... remaking', and that creativity 'refers to a capacity for meaning making' (p. 8). Similarly to Bezemer and Kress, Jones (2009) clearly distinguishes the act of creativity from meaning-making. In both these works the connection between creativity and the potential for meaning-making is essential to allow for learning to happen. From a semiotic perspective, Kress et al. (2021) suggest that 'when a sign has been made inwardly in the process of engagement, selection, interpretation and transformation', 'It has led to learning whether or not this learning and the inner sign have been materialized in a new sign made outwardly' (p. 85), which relates the act of creativity to learning.

These strong connections between creativity and learning are not made explicit in the current National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4, in which the concept of creativity is not mentioned at all (DfE, 2014; DfE, 2017), yet the concept is 'a desirable attribute within education', and has been developed throughout the years (Patston et al., 2021, p. 207). In the National Curriculum in England for Key Stage 3 and 4 (DfE, 2014), creativity is once mentioned as the purpose of education to help 'engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement'. However, the aim to engender appreciation suggests that creativity is already there whereas actively student creativity can be stimulated in education (p. 5). Furthermore, creativity is not an explicit part of the assessment, and according to Didau (2021) the GCSE English exam can be passed by following the provided paragraph structures 'without saying anything of any interest or originality' (p. 56). Although teachers understand the value of creativity, they are often unsure how to incorporate creativity effectively in their practice (Patston et al., 2021). Patston et al. (2021) argue this is in partly due to the 'lack of clarity concerning the distinction between teaching *with* and teaching *for*

creativity' (p. 209). Furthermore, Patston et al. (2021) note that although teachers know that creativity can be 'taught, learnt, and developed', it is not always clear 'which knowledge, skills and attributes are involved' for it to be implemented in the practice of teaching and learning (p. 209). Banaji and Burn (2007) note that creativity is a term that is 'often used in a vague, ill-defined way, either because users consider it to be self-explanatory or because it is invoked to add lustre and a 'feel-good factor' (p. 64). Banaji and Burn (2007) explore the concern of the way in which creative play is 'being squeezed out of the school curriculum to be replaced by the learning of rules and appropriate roles, rote literacy tasks and an approximation of 'adult'-type problem-solving tasks' and note that the increasing focus on standardisation and 'rubber stamp' testing' reduce the 'space for creative pedagogy, playful exploration and creative work in the classroom' (p. 64). The exclusion of the word 'creativity' from the current National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 and the increase in standardisation of education supports this concern. To consider (re-)introducing classroom creativity, careful consideration needs to be given to its interpretation, to ensure productive and constructive creativity, which will be discussed in the following section (3.2.1).

### 3.2.1 Avoiding the dark side of creativity

*Darkness, destruction*

*Unwise knowledge production*

*Is it creative?*

The philosopher Bregman (2020), in his book *Humankind: A hopeful history*, argues that a lack of creativity in classroom practice leads to a decline in curiosity, which is damaging to the learning process and reduces the intrinsic motivation to learn. However, this depends on how creativity is conceptualised in classroom practice, as, although creativity is often perceived as being constructive and positive, it can also have a dark side (Sternberg, 2021). Kress and Bezemer (2015) and Bregman (2020) refer to the transformative process of the learner as the key to engagement in learning. Kress (2013) states that creativity, as part of transformative engagement, leads to constantly adapting states of being. It is the learner, rather than the teacher, who guarantees that learning has happened. Similarly, Freire (1996 (1978)) sees learning happening through dialogue with

learners and he recognises the importance of the teacher as a facilitator and guide as opposed to an authoritative figure who primarily sends information (Kress, 2013; Freire, 1996 (1978)). The audience 'guarantees that communication has happened' (Kress & Bezemer, 2015, p.158). Creativity is the ability to take information and to allow it to transform ways of thinking but it is not guaranteed that this transformation is positive (Craft, 2005; Cropley, 2017; and Kamylyis and Valtanen, 2010).

Craft (2005) mentions that imagination is 'capable of immense destruction' (p. xxi). Cropley (2017) notes that novelty 'characterises the ability of the product to surprise, regardless of whether that surprise is nice or nasty' (p. 307). Cropley (2017) further suggests that creative thought can be purposeful, but this does not mean it is automatically 'benevolent'; innovative and purposeful ideas could be 'malevolent' too (p. 308). Kamylyis and Valtanen (2010) consider constructive/positive creativity and destructive/negative creativity. Kamylyis and Valtanen (2010, p. 195-196) review how creativity was defined in key studies. Word collocations with creativity were: innovation, expressive, inventive, effective, unique to the self, novel, useful, relevant, original, unexpected. In some cases (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Kamylyis et al., 2009) they are associated with a social framework. For the purpose of this thesis *creativity* is considered a constructive concept that includes an innovative and purposeful thought process, which aids learning.

In a mood taxonomy of 120 collocations of creativity Kamylyis and Valtanen (2010) found that predominantly words associated with creativity were positive or neutral. They emphasise that creative thinking alone 'is not enough for personal growth and social progress' (p.209), suggesting more is needed to ensure creativity appears in combination with constructive thought. Newton (2014) considers critical or evaluative thinking as quality control for wise and constructive thought processes.

To understand creativity as a general concept and its meanings beyond education, we consider it in a business setting. Here, creativity can, on the one hand, be perceived as a pragmatic 'source of growth and performance' (Josefsson &Blomberg, 2020, p. 1). On the other hand, creativity can be political when it is 'persuasive', 'manipulative' or 'misleading' and 'dishonest' at its worst (ibid., p. 4). Josefsson and Blomberg (2020) also discuss this dark side of 'creativity' that is rarely acknowledged, namely, that creative organisations can also abuse the power of creativity. As an example of creative manipulation, they refer to the company Apple. Josefsson and Blomberg (2020) argue that people wanted to work for the

company because of Jobs's genius, even though Apple's work ethics were low. Steve Jobs was creative in coming up with an appealing product that people would want to work on and his creativity attracted personnel at low pay while he made huge profits. He was then personally regarded as successful, but his creativity did not consider the impact in the bigger picture. It can be argued that criticality (evaluating the quality of thought) and wise thinking (considering the impact of actions and 'constructing courses of action' (Newton, 2014, p. 12) is a significant component of creativity when considering its the democratic rhetorical style (Banaji & Burn, 2007). Newton (2014) explores a framework of productive and purposeful thought, in which he includes creative thinking, critical thinking and wise thinking as key components, alongside deductive reasoning and causal understanding (p. 11). Newton (2014) suggests creative thinking as 'constructing possible worlds which are more or less novel' (p. 11), followed by wise thinking, which 'aims to bring relevant understandings together in a coherent way, embedding them in a wide context' (p. 12), and lastly critical thinking, which evaluates 'the quality of thought in order to improve it or judge its credibility' (Mosely et al., 2005 in Newton, 2014, p. 12). Consequently, in order to engage in productive and purposeful thought in education, students must engage with various types of thought.

Considering the nature of curiosity, creativity and criticality from a psychological, social and educational point of view, a focus on creativity in the classroom should allow all students to become more conscious of innovative thoughts, signs and gestures, and their purpose. It is not until criticality and curiosity are applied to those thoughts that productive thought can take place (Newton, 2014). However, without creativity in the sense of innovation and problem finding, critical or evaluative thought becomes *reactive* rather than *proactive* (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2018; Kaufman, 2003). In that sense, critical thought is reduced to analysing existing meanings, often leaving students feeling 'bored' and 'dull' (Gregory, 2013, p. 129). Hence, to be most effective and constructive, the two concepts *creativity* and *criticality*, must always be seen as complementary: innovative thought and curiosity striving for quality and 'wise thinking' (Newton, 2014; Sternberg, 2001).

### 3.2.2 Shifting the focus towards a bright side of creativity

*Come with solutions*

*Make the world a better place*

*Through the word, listen.*

As Cropley et al. (2010) conclude, creativity is often seen as a positive but that the negative effects of creativity should not be neglected. For example, the 9/11 terrorist in the attack on the Twin Towers was in essence creative but evil in its outcome. Sternberg (2021) argues that for creativity to work positively, there needs to be an education that allows for creativity to be developed alongside wisdom and intelligence. He calls this WICS (wisdom-intelligence-creativity-synthesized) (Sternberg, 2005). According to Sternberg (2012), wisdom looks at the interpersonal, intrapersonal and extrapersonal perspectives, which, in combination with creativity, allows for people to come up with solutions that not only benefit themselves, but also considers others around them (interpersonal) and the wider society (extrapersonal). Freire's view of seeing in and with the world and the word (Freire & Macedo, 2005; Freire, 1997; Freire, 1992) is pointed out in Stevens (2012), bringing together these different ways of seeing as 'open to critical insight *and* a sense of wonder, to critical distance *and* informed engagement' (p. 125), connecting creativity to criticality and wise thought. Seeing and engaging in and with the world through dialogue is a fundamental part of education according to Freire. It resonates in Sternberg's (2021) idea that wisdom is doing what is good for the self and good in relation to the world around us too. Gardner (1993), Newton (2014). According to Newton (2014), wise thinking is part of productive and purposeful thought, which includes critical thinking and creative thinking and he adds to the art of deduction and understanding.

Deduction involves 'logical inferencing which produces a consequence or conclusion' (Newton, 2015, p. 60). Understanding is seen as a valuable part of the education process, as it shows that students do not merely copy information, but also use creative and critical thought to apply new information and to make sense of it. Newton (2011) points out that although this does not necessarily lead to higher grades, it does benefit the learner's cognitive ability of retention and the speed at which they make progress (Wearne and Hiebert, 1988; Newton, 2011). Connecting creativity with wisdom through deduction and understanding allows the learner to see the bigger picture, shows consequences of their creative actions as well as providing learners with an understanding of the impact of

innovative acts. Newton (2014) argues that when deductive thinking and creativity are combined, the thought process is at its most productive. In educational settings, some of these fundamental components are lacking.

Deduction is described by Harel and Weber (2020) in terms of a combination of deductive inference and deductive reasoning. Deductive inference leads to drawing a conclusion from the information provided. In this specific case, the information provided gives enough evidence for the learner to form an understanding and deduce a conclusion. On the other hand, deductive reasoning is where 'new information is derived from a set of premises via a chain of deductive reasoning' (p. 183). Newton (2015) regards deduction as being 'logical inferencing which produces a consequence or conclusion' (p. 60). Although 'deduction' is primarily used as a maths component, the concept provides room for the learner to use given information and to apply this to enhance their own logic and understanding. Consequently, creativity and criticality are valuable components that can lead to informed deduction.

### 3.2.3 Impactful creativity

Actively engaging with creativity in the classroom is shown to be beneficial for all learners as it stimulates their individual thinking process. However, Hennessey and Mcnamara's (2011) data analysis suggests 'limited potential for creative engagement within the poetry class.' (p. 217). Furthermore, they note that 'ownership of 'good notes' for rote learning purposes' was one of the most 'frequently cited factors amongst respondents for high levels of confidence in poetry' (Hennessey and Mcnamara, 2011, p. 214). Dymoke (2012) and Myhill and Wilson (2013) argue that the way in which students consume the information given by teachers and the focus on performativity and passing the exam causes students to think in binary terms of right and wrong, as opposed to creating space for empathetic and collaborative thinking.

Yandell (2008) expresses the worry of a standardised curriculum that is 'inattentive' to the students' identities and 'cultural resources' (p. 30). Yandell (2008) points to the restricted selection of poems that students are introduced to, and expresses worry at how students may be introduced to poems from 'different cultures'. Yandell (2008) gives an example of an Urban Classroom with students from various backgrounds, leading to intriguing conversations following a reading of Agard's poem 'Half Caste'. With this example

shows that when students have room to explore a poem from their own identity and are able to have conversations about the impact a topic or theme may have on them, they engage with the topic. In another study by Peskin (2007) on students' experience of poetry reading, 'poetry often tends to compress ideas, thus pushing the reader to look for more meaning than may be apparent in the mere lexical definitions of the words' (p. 25). This idea of pushing to look for more or different meanings, is practiced in TESOL, where poetry is used as a vehicle to learn language, and, as Newfield and D'Abdon suggest, as a site 'where sociocultural identities and discourses are formed and contested' (2015, p. 523). Such examples clearly show that poetry can stimulate meaning making through creative thought when learners are given the space to do so, which benefits student engagement and relatability. Relatability in this sense, is used as a term that suggests learners can make personal, cultural and societal connections with poetry, as opposed to only reading a poem in its original context.

Studies of teachers' and students' appreciation of poetry assessment confirms the need for change to foster creativity and criticality. In Dymoke's (2002) study on poetry and assessment in schools, one interview participant conveys a 'desire for greater creativity' (p. 88), whereas another notes that lessons were 'lacking in creativity' (p. 86). Another teacher notes that the restrictive anthology is a cause for a lack in creativity (p. 90). Although this study took place twenty years ago, in recent studies the results are no different. In Almond's study (2021) on providing space for students to create their own anthologies, it was observed that that the GCSE awarding bodies' anthology texts were at times perceived as boring and pretentious by the students. Additionally, Perry (2021) mentions the lack of change within the poetry anthology, and Blake (2020) provides evidence for the narrowing of the poetry anthology in education, with significantly fewer poems in the poetry anthology clusters in 2018 than there were previously<sup>20</sup>. With a focus on skillsets as opposed to self-expression and curiosity (Pieper, 2014), it becomes more difficult for teachers to inspire problem finding and creativity, with often the same poems in the school programme each year. Poetry can be taught and learnt in 'boring', 'dull' and 'irrelevant' (Gregory, 2013, p. 129) settings, as opposed to learning environments that focus on student-centred learning,

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<sup>20</sup> However, since then (2022-) there has been an increase in diversity with the emergence of the new anthology cluster, although it is not currently known how widely these new clusters are taught.

where there is 'scope for learning as an active, context-dependent process of meaning-making' ( p. 121).

### 3.2.4 Adaptability and creativity

Adaptability relies on creative thinking. Creative thinking allows for adjusting behaviour, signs and gestures to fit in a variety of situations. As creativity requires the act of innovation or the inclusion of something novel, motivation or a certain disposition is often necessary to becoming creative (Mumford et al., 2010). Arguably, problems cannot be found where there are no problems, and thus, there is no need for innovation. Newton (2014) mentions that problem finding plays an important role in creative thinking. Finding problems, rather than only solving them, is a key component to being adaptable in an ever-changing society. This also relates to classroom situations. If the answers to questions are prescribed, there is no need or disposition to find and assess the problems, which Didau (2021) argues leads students to a 'cargo cult' (Feynman in Didau, 2021, p. 57), where students 'imitate the form and structure of a good response', but the poem or other English text has had no effect on the reader: the learner has not responded from their own creative and curious thought, but rather imitated what they think this thought should look like in order to pass the exam (Didau, 2021, p. 57).

Prior to engaging in problem finding or innovative thought, students need some background information on the topic and the context. Whether this is information from experience or from previously acquired knowledge, these additional pieces to the puzzle allow for the learner to create their own picture. In poetry lessons, this can be practiced through analysis, in which students have previously acquired information on the historical context and poetic techniques, but are also able to analyse the poem using their own novel ideas. Dymoke (2003) argues that this notion of poetry as a puzzle is detrimental to poetry teaching and learning, as there is a sense of teachers giving away the clues for the students to find, which does not lend itself to a focus on the plurality of meanings, but rather to extracting existing meanings from the text (Dymoke, 2003, p. 15; Marsh, 1988).

Motivation is created for the learner through adding meaning their way, as opposed to extracting meaning, as this allows the learner to apply the knowledge they have to situations that are new to them. Applying knowledge from experience and previously

acquired information can be seen as the meaning making process, when this is done through talk or dialogue, it was what Kress (2011) calls social semiotics. Kress (2011) argues that 'education is a social process', which allows for reflection on 'the society in which it exists – in all ways and with all its contradictions' (p. 205). Subsequently, texts and information are part of the social construct in education. However, for students to make meaning of these texts, social processes as reflected in discourse, as Kress (2011) argues, are essential. Additionally, Kress (2011) discusses text as an outcome 'of processes initiated and performed by social agents for social reasons' (p. 205). Problems need to be found before texts can exist, and finding these problems requires a social process.

Getzels and Csikzentmihalyi (1988) also address the value of problem finding and quote Einstein in saying that, 'To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science' (p. 4). This quote relates not only to science, but to all subjects. In 1997, Sapp argued that art educators felt guilty for not allowing their students the creative freedom that they felt was necessary. In English education, this is a similar struggle, as language is closely related to the arts in its communicative capacity (Abbs, 2003). For the assessment, problems are often handed to the learners, rather than allowing learners the creative space to find their own. Subsequently, the focus is not on making meaning from texts, but on recreating answers in a specific format (Dymoke, 2009; Xerri, 2013; 2016a). Students are not raising questions, but they are answering questions and required to produce the 'right' answer. Marsh (2017) argues that this promotes "attention to facts and information" and reduces the opportunity for "greater creativity and deeper learning" (p. 277), reducing the opportunity for constructive and proactive creativity and focusing rather on students' ability to memorise (Marsh, 2017).

Another issue raised in the literature is the impact of mood on creativity in the arts (Yefet & Glicksohn, 2021). They argue that both positive and negative moods allow for creativity to happen, although the creative thoughts produced may vary. According to Yefet and Glicksohn (2021), positive moods link to ideational flexibility. This means that there is more flexibility and adaptability in the ideas of the learners when they take a positive stance. They are able to switch ideas and listen to other ideas more easily and take this into consideration in their work. This would facilitate a higher degree of creativity than those who are in a negative mood or feel negative about a situation. However, it will not be the

case by definition. Yefet and Glicksohn's (2021) study shows that engaging in only positive ideas does not yield more creativity than when students feel negative about a situation. Furthermore, Yefet and Glicksohn (2021) identify different categories of creativity, for example, a student with a negative mood may be creative through perseverance.

The learner may be set on one course of thought, but still creative within their range, whereas someone who is in a positive mood would be able to adapt to a range of ideas (idealation) (Yefet & Glicksohn, 2021). Although perseverance also allows for creativity, Yefet and Glicksohn (2021) argue that those in a negative mood can be interpreted as being 'deactivated' (p. 340). These learners work with what they know and formulate connections and are innovative within their range of knowledge. Those in a positive mood can be seen as being more activated and look for ideas beyond their own initial range of thought (ibid). Being creative is not always about gathering ideas; it can include being innovative with the ideas available and persevering and concentrating on these. In this sense, the negative mood can be used as a tool for creativity in problem solving, rather than only problem finding (Newton, 2014).

### 3.3 Connecting creativity to criticality

#### *Criticality*

#### *Discovering boundaries*

#### *Investigate drops*

Kress and Bezemer (2015, p. 7) claim that 'every sign made is new; it is an innovation and therefore its making is an act of creativity'. Subsequently, a focus on creativity in the classroom allows students to become more conscious of innovative thoughts, signs and gestures. Kress and Bezemer, further argue that 'the on-going, unceasing process of transformative engagement, of integration in 'inner' transformation, with a constantly new resultant state, constitutes learning' (p. 7). Through the act of creativity, learners are constantly (re)discovering, exploring and gaining a deeper understanding of their place in and with the world (Freire, 1996 (1978)). Creativity allows for growth and change to happen

in all learners of all abilities and should be seen as part of a learning process rather than a component to assess (Craft, 2008; OECD, 2013).

These are clear arguments for creating space for creativity. However, there are institutional obstacles. The OECD (2013) notes that the challenge for schools in England is that the 'reduced professional freedom', the 'school accountability grades', and 'the assessment systems' compete with 'fostering creativity' (p.9). Craft (2008, in OECD, 2013) report argues that 'the powerful drive to raise standards' is in tension with 'an almost equally powerful commitment to nurturing ingenuity, flexibility and capability' (OECD, p. 9). Creative teaching and learning can improve achievement (OECD, 2013), but it is arguably best placed as a process that enhances the measurable outcome, as opposed to an outcome of learning in itself (Caniels et al., 2014). Furthermore, creativity is part of the process to becoming curious and engaging with innovative and purposeful thought. The evaluated outcome of this process could be assessed, and this is part of the critical thought process. Mosey et al. (2005) hold that critical thinking can be assessed, but it should be done with caution and with understanding of the implications. They note that, 'it needs to take into account not just whether a student shows such thinking, but that it is appropriate in the context or meets particular requirements to ensure its quality, needing some judgment on the part of an assessor' (p. Mosely et al., 2005, p. 23).

Newton (2014) describes critical thinking as 'evaluating thought for the purpose of improving its quality or for judging its trustworthiness' (p. 85). However, criticality or critical thinking can be interpreted in different ways, and are therefore difficult to define. Hence, the purpose and components of criticality will be identified in relation to teaching and learning, rather than defined as an individual concept. Newton (2014) notes that some see critical thinking as a synonym of 'good' thinking (Pithers & Soden, 2000 in Newton, 2014), which Newton argues is a 'vigilant, careful, sceptical frame of mind routinely applied to products of thought to judge and respond to their quality' (p. 85).

Others may see criticality as the continuous interrogating or questioning to come closer to the truth, thus avoiding manipulation and enabling empowerment (Simpson and Dervin, 2020; Giroux, 2011). Freire's (1996 (1978)) notion of criticality is similar to this, as he notes that critical pedagogy allows learners to steer away from oppression towards empowerment through questioning and dialogue. Paul (1987 in Moseley et al., 2005) complements the idea of empowerment through talk, by adding that critical thinking is 'to

develop learners' perspectives' and suggests that the 'dialectical experience' is an 'essential ingredient to develop judgment about how and where particular skills can best be used' (p. 22). Further to the value of dialogue, Lipman (in Moseley et al., 2005) argues for a 'community of enquiry' as an essential part of the critical thinking process (p. 23). Critical or evaluative thinking is often connected with the reflective thought process: a process in which dialogue has added value, as talking or writing about thoughts allows for multiple perspectives to arise (Moseley et al., 2005).

### 3.3.1 Criticality: An Acrostic Poem

Curiosity allows for  
Reflexivity that's  
Innovative; it engages  
Thought processes and  
Intrigue  
Creativity sparks connection so we  
Ask questions  
Listening is valuable in dialogue, it  
Illuminates new meanings of  
Texts and inspires  
You.

### 3.4 Poetry for a democratic society

*Talking and listening  
to all voices is an art  
It's democracy*

The relevance of Britain's historical and political past with regard to education is discussed in Cuthbert (2019). They argue that democratic impulses must be strong within society for people to stand up to the way education is taught. Although there is policy within the education system, there is a distinct absence of politics in education (Cuthbert, 2019). This

leads to a lesser likelihood of democracies being present in the classroom. In contrast, as Cuthbert (2019) argues, through the inclusion of democracies in the classroom, students become more aware of the politics of communication. When students are able to see language as 'a living, not a dead language' (Cox, 1993 p. 26), which allows them to participate in society (Freire & Macedo, 2005; Giroux, 2011), Cuthbert (2019) assumes that learners will be more prone to internalising their learning, leading to higher classroom engagement and increased productivity. Cuthbert (2019) also claims that many problems arise from this sense of externalising current political issues. For example, learners are led to believe issues occur due to 'immigration, populism, austerity or fundamentalist religious groups' (ibid, p. 202). In doing this, there is little alignment between the internal dimension of the political class's own moral authority or legitimacy and education's intellectual, imaginative and ethical principles making and education less useful (Cuthbert, 2019).

Furthermore, education becomes less democratic as information is being provided with objectivity and not in a direct relation to the real-world context of the present. This brings us to Nussbaum (1997) who argues for literature as a means to teach 'world citizenship'<sup>21</sup> (p. 85), considering literature as a way to develop the imagination and to become curious about emotions as well as the contexts surrounding literature (Alsup, 2003). Subsequently, through reading literature, students may become more caring towards their peers and more understanding (Alsup, 2003) and poetry lends itself as a vehicle to connect the emotional and the subjective, to its historical and cultural context. As Faulkner and Nicole (2016) note, the 'political power of poetry creates a space for marginalised discourses' (p. 81), and similarly Parini (2008) shares that writing poetry can realise different ways to consider the world through language play and developing a deep understanding. This vivifies past events and allows learners to have an understanding of the language of poetry from an empathetic perspective. Rather than the students seeing dates and names and, as Alsup (2003) argues, analysing the symbols and language techniques, they can engage curiously and creatively with the life in the past and bring these texts into the present through 'narrative imagination' (p. 159). Alsup (2003) further notes that this allows students to become 'more caring people' (p. 159) as their understanding of others improves.

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<sup>21</sup> World Citizenship is defined by Nussbaum (1997) as 'creating the 'capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us' (p. 85).

According to Ovens and Lynch (2019), democratic pedagogy seeks to ‘embrace diversity, participation, inquiry, connectivity, and voice’ (p. 1). By inviting learners to consider and share what poetry is and why they might be learning it, before studying the set anthology texts, the students are engaging proactively with the subject material and sharing their voice, connecting their thoughts with others’. Meanwhile, within that process they are making their own knowledge from a combination of their own experience, the experience of others, historical understandings and existing information. This, according to Giroux (2011), constitutes knowledge. Through the democratic process of learning about poetry, poems can become more meaningful and relevant to the learner as the students engage with the poem by talking about it. Reyes (2006) argues that: ‘if you don’t know what’s going on, you have nothing to say’ (p. 13). Reyes (2006) then argues that students need to find a connection with the poems to add something to the conversation. Subsequently, without this connection, students are not able to participate in creative and critical thought about the poems they are trying to make sense of and are subject to copying existing meanings as they do not understand the language, the history or the purpose of the anthology poems the curriculum provides. In Snapper’s article on *Developing Literary Awareness at A level* (2006), in which some of the ‘tensions underlying the teaching of A level English’ are discussed (p. 27), the point is made that students ‘know little of wider contexts or of the process of interpretation’ due to the transmissive approaches and focus on set texts (p. 30). It appears that, although there is extensive research on a liberatory approach to teaching and learning, and its benefits for education learners to participate in a democratic society while fostering dialogic, expressive and reflective skills, this has had little effect on the development of educational policies. However, as is represented in the Findings chapters, amongst the teachers in this study there is evidence for participation in a democratic society, dialogic and reflective skills. Nevertheless, the focus on high stakes testing and performativity and the high workload and time constraints for teachers may prevent them from using a more liberatory approach to the extent they would like to.

### 3.4.1 Criticality and democracy in education

Critical thinking is often linked to the evaluation process of learning, such as the GCSE assessment, as it shows that through questioning existing texts and reflecting on language

and structural techniques used, the student has increased their understanding of the text: definitions of critical thinking are broad and usually involve general cognitive skills such as analysing, synthesising and reasoning skills (Edexcel, 2019d, p. 25). The Department for Education regards critical reading as part of the curriculum, and explains it as follows:

*“identifying the theme and distinguishing between themes; supporting a point of view by referring to evidence in the text; recognising the possibility of and evaluating different responses to a text; using understanding of writers’ social, historical and cultural contexts to inform evaluation; making an informed personal response that derives from analysis and evaluation of the text”* (DfE, 2013, p. 5)

Although in theory this looks promising, it focuses on the students’ understanding of the writer’s historical contexts, rather than on their own criticality. Subsequently, students may not engage in their own criticality but reflect more closely on what the author might have experienced. This becomes problematic when the authors are predominantly one cultural subset that most students cannot easily relate to and no attention is given to the dynamics of cultures (Nelson-Addy et al., 2018; Elliott, 2017; 2020). However, Blake (2020) shows that the GCSE poetry anthologies in England now consist of one anthology book with a set of poems provided by the exam board or awarding organisation, as opposed to pre-1996, when teachers chose poems from a variety of poetry books, by both single poets and themed anthologies. This shows that, at least in the GCSE anthology, there is less diversity than before. In the Unseen Poetry component there may be more scope for diversifying the poems if the teachers have the time, materials and skills to do so. NATE’s Annual Survey, conducted in 2019 with a report on ‘The State of English and the Teaching of English’ (Goodwin, 2020) shows that although English teachers still ‘love their subject’ and ‘teaching young people’ (p. 32), three of the key components that came out of this survey include the comment that ‘the curriculum is narrowing’, ‘the workload is heavy and teacher retention is poor’, and that ‘there is a lack of quality time for teachers’ (p. 32), which may impact the time and space teachers have to diversify the unseen poetry component to increase the relevance for students. Benton (1999) suggests ways to stop students from ‘thinking poetry is only written by dead white males in frilly shirts’ through writing poetry and expressing themselves and having an emotional outlet through writing (p. 528). Through practice,

students increase their awareness of poetry as a means of expression and reflection, connecting their own emotions to the word (Faulkner & Nicole, 2016).

The benefits of such critical pedagogy are diverse. Poetry reading and writing are a means to connect to emotions and the understanding the learner has of the world they are in and the world that surrounds them. The reading of poetry allows for a better understanding of variation in cultural and historical contexts, potentially on a global level. This allows students to express and discuss their own interpretations and fosters a sense of social interaction and respect for other perspectives. Democracy is, according to Giroux (2011), a concept that is constantly changing and adapting and the public needs to have ways to deal with that change. Feinberg and Torres (2001) regard this as the evolving character of democracy. It is never stagnant and always progressing, just as the rest of humanity. According to Giroux (2011) there is no one type of democracy because of the constant change and the ways in which democracies alter depending on the society. For example, democracy can exist in a neoliberal construct, is a different democracy to that in a socialist construct. Politics, language and education are deeply connected, as they are involved with social constructs, community, society and communication (Dewey, 2011).

Here may be some disagreement between scholars of the politics of education but generally they agree on the emancipatory and empowering benefits. Feinberg and Torres (2001) discuss the disagreements between Paulo Freire and John Dewey on democracy. However, these two do have in common that they both see that communication through education has great value, and that communication is vital for communities. Freire (1996) and Freire and Macedo (2005) see this in educational institutions, where there is opportunity to engage in (critical) dialogue and to pose questions about the individual's place in and with the world. Dewey (2011) sees schooling as 'one important method of the transmission which forms the dispositions of the immature', and adds that school, 'compared with other agencies' is 'a relatively superficial means' (p. 6). Whereas Freire (1996) argues that the only effective way to steer away from becoming machines (Dewey, 2011) or 'automatons' (Freire, 1996, p. 68), is with a humanising pedagogy. Furthermore, Giroux (2011) states the importance of pedagogy for society and for the inclusion of politics within pedagogy:

*'Pedagogy is a moral and political practice that is always implicated in power relations and must be understood as a cultural politics that offers both a particular version and vision of civic life, the future and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others and our physical and social environment.'* (p. 71)

Freire (1996) argues that in order to steer clear of oppression, the learner should not allow themselves to become reduced to objects and remain engaged critically in knowledge making processes. He notes that objects cannot fight oppression, and hence, there is a need for communication and a community sense that empowers people. When the teacher becomes the primary sender of information, rather than a guide and facilitator, the teacher is inclined to provide the student with a static narrative, which Freire (1996) refers to as banking model (1996, p. 12), in which students 'bank' information given by the teacher. The learner has less time and space to engage in curiosity as they become disconnected from 'the totality that engendered them and could give them significance' (Freire, 1996, p.71). Words become meaningless and, as Freire (1996) writes 'are emptied of their concreteness, and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity' (p. 71). Similarly, Bezemer and Kress (2015), argue that 'assessment regimes encourage those responsible for the learning of others to measure the outcome of learners' engagement against metrics pre-defined by those in power', in this way pre-empting what students have learnt, as opposed to understanding what they learnt through their 'engagement with the (socially made) world' (p. 37), and hereby creating a gap between the students' learning towards their assessment and their experienced learning through engagement with the social world around them.

Secondary schools students are given information they need to pass the test, as opposed to, what Bezemer and Kress (2015) argue is an *interpretive* framework, where students do not just 'receive' information, but interpret this information through questioning (p. 38). Due to the focus on assessment, students are left with less time to explore and interpret their own creativity and criticality through dialogue and communication within their community (Dymoke, 2009; 2012; Xerri, 2013). This increase in a focus on set texts and, as Dymoke mentioned in 2012, the increase in focus on 'line-by-line' learning (p. 404), leads to, as lecturers in Snapper's study (2006) mention, 'transmissive approaches' that do not 'effectively develop independent, transferable reading skills' (p. 30).

Furthermore, these lecturers, voiced in Snapper's article (2006), add that 'the focus on detailed reading of the set text means that students know little of wider contexts or of the processes of interpretation' (p. 30). Although teachers attempt to engage learners through group work and activities, the teacher is still recognised as the authoritative person who is the primary sender of information (Freire, 1996; Bezemer and Kress, 2015, p. 38) to ensure the set texts are learnt in the structure that allows the students to pass the test. Due to time limits and assessment pressure, the teacher has little to no opportunity to pay attention to developing creativity and criticality in the classroom. Consequently, the students become more similar to Freire's (1996) automatons: objects to put information into, linking to the model of communication Bezemer and Kress (2015) refer to: sender-message-receiver (p. 38), which allows little room for interpretation, curiosity and creative thought, and invokes the idea that the teacher knows everything the student should learn, as opposed to the student shaping their learning through the various signs and pieces of information they gather in (and with) their world.

The notion of authoritarianism reduces learning to the passing on of information, rather than exploring knowledge as a combination of experience, information and history (Giroux, 2011). Bell hooks (2014) notes, from her experience as a black teacher, that 'knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved' (p. 3). Further, she states that, 'we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to [white] authority' (p. 3). Bell hooks' (2014) experience here can be seen in many communities. For example, in schools now many students have low engagement in lessons because the subject material does not bear direct relevance to their lives. Consequently, they only learn what is necessary for the exam. Their curiosity switched off, reducing them to 'automatons', as Freire (1996, p. 68) notes, rather than curious beings that are active in their community.

For Giroux (2011) knowledge consists of information, history and experience. Subsequently, he argues that for students 'to learn that the relationship between knowledge and power can be emancipatory' (p.100) and open up questions on citizenship and social freedom. Furthermore, he connects artistic culture and intellect, arguing that to reclaim education the focus must shift from self-interest of corporate powers towards a critical and democratic education system (Giroux, 2011). Similarly to Cox's notion that English is taught

as a 'dead language' (1993, p. 26), Giroux (2011) notes that the education system ignores the need for democratic thought and relevance to the changes in society but focuses rather on historical contexts without relating them to the present-day.

Giroux (2011) mentions that 'complex ideas' need to be 'lifted into the public space', to discuss and to come up with solutions (p. 100). This would lead to a greater emphasis on communication and make education more relevant for engaging critically in society. However, Giroux (2011) argues that when this happens, there is a possibility that learners become too critical and would no longer benefit the corporate system. Subsequently, it is favourable for corporate societies to engage in a culture of what Rossatto (2004) calls 'domestication and indoctrination' (p.6). In that situation, the learner is not encouraged to find or solve living problems (Rossatto, 2004; Giroux, 2011). Rossatto (2004) further argues that this type of learning fosters conformity as opposed to an education system that focuses on 'critical thinking, creativity and real-life problem solving', which fosters 'transformation and hope for better possibilities' (p.6). Allowing for dialogue on themes that matter to students and drawing them into the conversation provides space for students to find relatability and relevance in their learning, opening up a place for a democratic and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011).

### 3.4.2 Criticality and poetry

Poetry can be seen as a vehicle for a variety of personal development factors and can 'offer useful ways of thinking about the world through language use and deep understanding' (Faulkner & Nicole, 2016, p. 81) Callaghan et al. (2018) hold that poetry makes contributions to enhancing 'personal reflection, critical thinking, self-expression' and the demonstration of knowledge 'through action' (p. 90). Furthermore, Callaghan et al. (2018) suggest that poetry can have a positive effect on exploring various political issues too, such as issues of gender and race. Through creating and reading poetry, the learner is more able to empathise and understand their place in and with the world (Callaghan et al., 2018). In that spirit, Callaghan et al.'s study (2018) focuses on the inclusion of LGBTI students through the creation of political poetry, using the method of Erasure Poetry, formerly known as black-out poetry. This was renamed in order to offer more inclusivity (Callaghan et al., 2018).

### 3.5 Connecting Productive Thought to Poetry learning

*A bird flies and lands*

*It is wise to gravity*

*Freedom with limits*

If the learner sees a subject only in terms of exams and mark schemes, they will often prefer to engage in reproductive thought as it does not require deeper-thinking methods. When learners do not engage in much productive thought, Newton (2014) expresses the concern that this will have ‘a significant effect on the kinds of thinking other students engage in’ (p.13). To encourage productive thought, talk and voicing thoughts and understanding can be included as a primary and vital part of the teaching and learning process. The mode of talk and dialogue allows for learners to express themselves, but also to listen to others’ experiences in order to increase their understanding of their place in and with the world (Freire & Macedo, 2005).

Productive thought allows the learner to form their own understandings through various thinking types and with existing knowledge and experience. Furthermore, through problem finding and problem-solving learners may find novel information and with that contribute to their direct environment as well as potentially to a wider society. Newton (2014) points out that ‘inferential knowledge cannot be transmitted to others’ (p.14). Conversely, learners can use information to create stronger connections within their own understanding of their place in and with the world.

Newton (2014) argues that productive thought is a valuable asset to learning as well as to life in general due to its potential to inspire better understanding of learners’ place in and with the world and with it, confidence and a sense of well-being. Productive thought inspires confidence as the learners take control of the information at hand and are able to include their own understandings and experiences, rather than basing it all on preformed information handed to them by the teacher (sender of information – Kress). By improving the sense of self in relation to the surrounding environment, it can inspire positive well-being, as this productive thought process allows for dialogue without the pressure of being right or wrong (Jaques & Whitley, 2019).

Productive thought, in combination with language, allows the learner to express themselves, to gain empathy in their environment and to reflect on connections between understanding, experience and novel information. For example, poetry writing allows for the learner to connect words to experiment with language techniques and their effects. Furthermore, it allows for conveying meaningful language as well as to express the self emotionally and cognitively. Poetry writing includes all aspects of productive thought organically and should play an important role throughout formal education as a creative, critical, and productive outlet. Poetry writing is achieved through the medium of language as a tool for communication with the self as well as the direct environment.

Another aspect of productive thought is reasoning. This, according to Newton (2014), is the act of inferencing. Reasoning can appear in the school environment in a variety of ways. The most prominent method for reasoning is deduction. Deductive reasoning involves a cause-and-effect method, which is commonly applied to science-based subjects. For instance, maths is not often seen as a subject in which passion and interpretation is applied (Newton, 2014), when there is some focus on interpretation it allows learners to feel empowered rather than following rules that look more like a 'mathematical equation' (Xerri, 2016b, p. 1). Newton (2014) adds that history is another subject where cause-and-effect can be deduced, but often it stirs up emotions and allows for the learner to interpret the information based on their own experiences and understandings.

Learners are able to reflect on and evaluate connections between various understandings, experiences, and novel information. For example, writing poetry allows for the learner to connect words to experiment with meaning making and using language techniques. This allows the learner to better express the self emotionally and convey their thoughts too without them becoming too literal, providing others with a chance to read the poem and interpret it using their knowledge and understanding. Poetry writing includes all aspects of productive thought organically, and should play an important role in the subject of English as a creative, critical and productive outlet through the medium of language as a tool for communication.

### 3.6 Poetry's potential for increased classroom engagement

*Engagement is low*

*Grey faces staring blankly*

*Into nothingness*

*Engagement is high*

*Buzzing sounds in sunny crowds*

*Connecting, learning*

The primary purpose of learning poetry becomes the exam or the 'end-goal' due to the value given to the final assessment (Marsh, 2017; Snapper, 2013; Xerri, 2016), rather than poetry as an informal vehicle for exploring knowledge through the learner's own experiences and that of those around them (Freire & Macedo, 2005; Abbs, 2003). Dewey (2011) notes the danger of a focus on a more formal instruction, which isolates the 'subject matter of the schools' from 'the subject matter of life experience' (p.9). Cox (1993) shares the view that the approach to literature in the 1990s, which is similar to the current approach, includes a literary cluster of poems which 'would have suited the days of the British Empire', and 'treats English as a dead language' students cannot directly relate to and ignores the students' creativity with language (p. 30).

Poetry has the potential to connect people's thoughts and ideas, and in that sense to build on each other's knowledge to allow for deeper understanding of the self and the world around us (Freire & Macedo, 2005). Although gaining awareness of language techniques is a valuable part of poetry learning, Dewey's (2011) notion that there should be a focus on the value of learning skills to engage in and with society would allow for poetry to become more purposeful and relevant. The primary means of allowing subject matter to become more socially active is through playful communication (Dewey, 2011). Poetry has the potential to be used as a vehicle to connect thoughts and ideas of personal knowledge. It is a way of stimulating dialogue and to express the self in a different way. Clark and Barrs (2015) note that students need 'many forms of expression' (p. 73). They add that poetry is a way to develop 'empathy and sensitivity to other people and their feelings' (p. 74), hence not only becoming aware of how we express ourselves, but also how this expression might come across to the others and its consequences. Consequently, poetry has the potential for a rich

engagement through talk between people, where understanding the self and the other is central.

Poetry has the potential to act as a vehicle for sharing and expressing thoughts, ideas and emotions, which may lead to a deeper understanding of people's place in and with the world. But it does not stop at written words alone. In their book *On Connection*, the poet Kae Tempest notes the value of connecting not only through written text, but also through performance, as a way of reflecting on and expressing the self (2020). In the current education system, emotions are rarely discussed, and students and teachers feel bound by the constant pressure of assessment (Thomas, 2015). Thomas (2015) argues that especially teenagers need more emotion in the classroom, as 'feeling comes first' in teenagers as humans (p. 91). Their main priority is not to gain knowledge and intellect; it is to become more aware of their feelings (Thomas, 2015). As John Hegley (in Steele, 2015) says in his poem *What a Poem's not: 'a poem is not a prison / and it shouldn't feel like one either'*, poetry should allow the learner to read beyond the mechanical workings of a poem, towards making meaning. Understanding the words in a poem from a perspective of reflection and expression creates order out of chaos, and 'meaning out of the meaningless' (Thomas, 2015, p. 90).

Connecting to words and enabling creative thought and expression is a valuable potential of poetry. However, as Seale (2015) argues, the connection between learner and poem often goes unrecognised, as analysis gets priority over 'creative expression' (p. 12). Thomas (2015) and Seale (2015) both expect that poetry must include passion, as merely being proficient in analysing poems reduces the power that poetry can have. In an education system that often finds students struggling to voice their feelings, poetry could be offered as a vehicle for expression, as the learner connects their own meanings to the words they write (Seale, 2015). This offers a freedom of expression which is not often found in other creative writing tasks. Additionally, poetry not only functions as a vehicle of self-expression, but through writing, reading, and performing poems, the learner can stretch beyond their own understanding of the world and experience a wide variety of social and cultural perspectives. Seale (2015) mentions that poetry can act as a tool to understand other cultures and, more generally, to experience other lives.

In the context of understanding other cultures and experiencing other lives, and in the process creating empathy, poetry cannot only be read on the page, but must be seen in

various multimodal contexts (Newfield & D'Abdon, 2015). In current educational settings, poetry is often presented as being 'narrow and restricted' (Newfield and D'Abdon, 2015, p. 511). Poetry is not used as a tool or vehicle for exploring and making meaning, but it is analysed and 'unpicked' (Hodges & Rawlinson-Mills, 2019). Newfield and D'Abdon (2015) argue that to 'lift poetry off the page', other modes, such as performance, need to be included in the teaching and learning of poetry. Multimodal poetry, they argue, includes not only the written word, but also the visual, gestural, bodily, sonic, spatial and spoken aspects of poetry (Newfield & D'Abdon, 2015). Kress has done extensive studies on the benefits of including various ways of seeing through multimodality in literacy (1997, 2000, 2010). To allow for an understanding of other cultures and experiences, the multimodal potential of poetry needs to be explored.

Art from performance poetry, another particularly useful mode for teaching and learning poetry is the visual mode. Creating images around poems allows the learner to see the poem rather than focus on the meaning of the words (Datta, 2000). Datta (2000) notes that there is a shift from meaning making through words, to meaning making through images: from 'word-centred meaning' to 'image-centred meaning', for example by using metaphors and frames (p. 146). This shift enables students to interpret poems in ways that go beyond the textual meaning, and in doing so it can create a bridge between the text and the learner, offering new ways of seeing (Locke, 2010). An awareness of the presence of semiotic devices in a poem will enable students to construct their own interpretation of the words and the images they create. However, in the secondary school classroom, the dominant form of teaching poetry is with and through the mode of text. Performance in the form of memorisation is a method applied in primary schools (Jaques and Whitley, 2019) and was reintroduced by the former Conservative minister for education, Michael Gove (2010-2014). However, according to Jaques and Whitley (2019), this method refers to recitation rather than learning poetry by heart, which does not consider voicing opinions. Instead, it seems to turn poetry into a pedestrian way to increase vocabulary and is often not enjoyed in the classroom. A similar movement towards recitation occurred in the 1980s and could be seen as the 'death of poetry' (Myhill & Wilson, 2012). Jaques and Whitley (2019) further argue that learning poetry by rote had little purpose for students and was often perceived as aimless. According to Jaques and Whitley (2019), this does not mean that

there is no purpose to memorising poetry, but it should be done considering factors such as the learners' personal poetic preferences and enjoyment of poems.

Memorising these types of poems could have the effect of 'opening of the soul and imagination' (Jaques & Whitley, 2019, p.2). Learning by heart goes beyond the requirements of assessment, as it explores learners' active experience of poetry as opposed to talking about the poem. Robson (2012) argues that these two ways of looking at poetry have been divided unnecessarily. Moreover, Robson (2012) notes that this loss of recitation and active engagement with poems is 'a loss to the richness of poetry, but it is also a loss to the lifelong enjoyment of poetry' (Robson, 2012 in Blake 2013, p. 189). Due to the lack of active experience of learning poetry by heart, the poems become a purely analytical exercise aimed at deciphering the poem's language techniques and its meaning in historical context and in doing so a distance arises while the creative and critical learning of poetry is ignored.

### 3.7 Poetry as a vehicle for meaning making

According to Snapper (2006), the heavy focus on assessment allows for very little room for development of the learners' responses as they, in a sense, stagnate when relying predominantly on information given by the teacher. To lift poetry off the page through performance, discussion and exploration increases the purpose for learning (Steele, 2014). The purpose of poetry is not to be able to unpick language techniques or to be able to recite phrases (McGuinn, 2014). The purpose of art is to increase the understanding of our place in and with the world (Abbs, 2003). Consequently, without a purpose that provokes thought in the learners, there is little understanding to learners of the purpose of poetry is at all, and this lack of understanding causes there to be little reward in learning poetry, as the way in which they learn does not generally incite intrigue (Eisner, 2002).

Snapper (2015) argues that there is resistance to poetry, not only among the students, but also the teachers. The tick-box style assessment of English provides the teacher with little scope for exploring students' own creativity (Marshall, 2012). This pressure to perform well - for schools, teachers and learners – causes stress, and forces teachers into the funnel of a narrowing curriculum (Hennesey & McNamara, 2011). Furthermore, this curriculum depends increasingly on outcomes rather than the creative

process of an arts-based subject such as poetry. Hennesey and McNamara (2011) mention that the 'standardisation and reductionist patterns' (p. 207) are increasing in poetry teaching and learning and are leaving less room for poetry as a subject that inspires independent thought. With less room to explore language through poetry in an innovative, dialogic and creative way, poetry is becoming reduced to a part in education that focuses on the students' objective intellectual performance, rather than a focus on the creative and social journey towards making meaning (Dymoke, 2002; Hennesey & McNamara, 2011). Kress's framework on social semiotics was applied successfully to poetry teaching and learning in schools in South Africa by Newfield (2023), which illustrates poetry as a 'literary and community practice' (p. 561). Through first providing students the space to connect poetry to their own and their cultural experiences, and then looking at the language, two students from the course noted that 'this course is not only a course, but a power to my mind' (Newfield, 2023, p. 562).

It has been suggested that encouraging students to make meaning through dialogue in groups or as a whole class stimulates students' 'power of talk' and helps develop students' 'thinking, learning and understanding' (Muhonen et al., 2017, p. 26). Through learning with others, a sense of curiosity often arises when students are not prescribed answers but are invited to seek their own thoughts and listen to those of others (Muhonen et al., 2017). This curiosity leads to further questions, which creates a flow of questions, thoughts and solutions as Schutte and Malouff (2020) point out. They show that although there may not be a direct connection between a rise in curiosity and a rise in creativity, there are clear links between the two. Their earlier meta-analytic study (2019) on the connection between curiosity and creativity shows a significant association. This shows that when poems are 'lifted from the page' more questions arise and there is more room for creative ideas than if students are taught in a prescriptive or didactic way.

### 3.8 Conclusion

Poetry is arguably one of the least well-taught subjects of the National Curriculum for English (Dymoke and Hughes, 2009, p. 92 in Nobles, 2016, p. 126). Curriculum and policy are part of the issue, yet this chapter shows that it is not only the curriculum and policy, but also

teachers' and students' perspectives on how poetry should be taught and learnt, which does not always appear to be the same as how they would like to teach and learn poetry, or which texts they may want to use. The lack of facilitating creativity and the focus on critical style and reading without awareness of criticality's connection to creativity might be in part to blame for this. To increase engagement, students must be able to develop confidence in reading poetry by talking about it and poems should be relatable for students. By adopting a creative and simultaneously critical approach to teaching poetry it can become a valuable, rich component of English that engages students in social processes to make meaning, not by 'unpicking' the poem for meanings others have already explored, but by considering the relatability of the poem to the self and wider society; hereby lending itself to a creative, critical and wise approach to poetry analysis as opposed to regurgitating existing meaning.

Allowing students a sense of ownership, allows democracy into the classroom through dialogue, and engages students with poetry through social semiotics. This social meaning-making process allows for a deeper engagement with poetry and for poetry to be 'lifted off the page' by sharing and relating it to the students' experienced world. By considering dialogue 'as a process of learning and knowing', students are encouraged to be curious, and with that they are able to develop that curiosity, their knowledge and their confidence (Macedo 1978, p.18 in Freire, 1996). Macedo in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996 (1978)) encourages to see dialogue not as 'an end to itself but as a means to develop a better comprehension about the object of knowledge' (p. 18). Kress (2011) considers it similarly from a discourse point of view: how discourse is part of the process for understanding the positionality of the student with regards to a text in context (2011). Additionally, discourse goes beyond the context of poetry, as these skills are useful as practice for other aspects of evaluative thinking in all areas of learning.

Creativity, and thus innovative thoughts, combined with dialogue, enable learners to uncover meanings that are new to them and their peers, and potentially novel to the teacher too. Through this model of social semiotics in the classroom, learners are able to create 'relationships with other people that are relevant in the context in which they occur' (Eggins, 1994 in Muhonen et al., 2017, p. 26). In relation to poetry in the classroom, the learners create relationships between those around them, the text, and the language used to discuss the text in their own experienced context. Subsequently, learners feel that the

sharing of their knowledge and understanding of the text is of value and contributes to the knowledge of the classroom, allowing for more purposeful learning to happen.

Poetry has the intriguing potential to foster critical thinking by introducing dialogue about poetry analyses and thus to offer a wide range of understandings in which learners can find their place in and with the world they live in. Poetry lends itself well to this, as it is a non-binary subject, which is an art form as well as part of one of the main forms of communication: the word. By allowing poetry to be 'lifted off the page' and away from 'right and wrong' answers (Dymoke, 2012; Myhill & Wilson, 2013; Jaques & Whitley, 2019), poetry can be used in the classroom as a vehicle to engage students creatively with language, thereby moving students away from seeing poetry as a 'dead language' (Cox, 1993, p. 26) and making it come to life. It is an intriguing possibility that poetry can offer potential through the analysis of existing poems through dialogue, to offer a wide range of understandings of a poem, which can be evaluated so the student finds their place in and with the world they live in (Freire & Macedo, 2005; Freire, 1996).

As the literature discussed here indicates, poetry can be more effective when it is not restricted to learning 'what it is', but rather how it creates worlds and choices for how the world can be understood. Poetry can then be read in multiple contexts to consider a multitude of meanings that makes poems more accessible, whether these are contemporary or classic poems. However, there is also a call for more relatable poems, as is found in the literature and in the data, to inspire and engage students in and with language. Furthermore, by considering knowledge as an accumulation of history, experience and information, students can adapt their meanings and deepen their understanding of history, emotion, experience, the self with the other, as well as imaginary spaces through engaging creatively, critically and productively with texts and with each other. To get the best out of poetry in English education, the policy and the GCSE anthologies will need to accommodate an open approach to English Literature.

## 4 Methodology and Methods

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter concerns the reasoning for choosing data collection and analytic methods, which were chosen with careful consideration with respect for the voices of the participants in this study and to introduce a critical realist approach combining the ontological and epistemological underpinning. The aim was to take a critical-realist approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The data collection process happened in three phases to explore the multiple voices within this research and to interpret and understand these voices in a holistic way:

- observations took place in three schools: one in The Netherlands, and two in Northeast England.
- Interviews were conducted with English teachers from each school, both in England and in The Netherlands. Interviews were conducted with two Dutch teachers for an equal distribution of English and Dutch teachers (three in each country).
- student surveys, in which students were able to answer open questions on what they thought creativity and criticality meant, but also on their enjoyability and understanding of purpose of poetry lessons in schools.

The first school in England, on the outskirts of a city in Northeast England, was a medium-sized state school (>500 pupils), but has since become an Academy. This school has a 'lasting commitment to the arts' and include artful subjects and extra-curricular programmes specifically focusing on arts. The other school in Northeast England is a larger (>1000) community school on the outskirts of a city. The first school in The Netherlands, with Interview Participant 1, operates with an alternative schooling system, which is common in The Netherlands, and is based on the Finnish Education system. This is a small school (<500 pupils) in one of the bigger cities in Holland. The second school in the Netherlands, which teacher participants 5 and 6, is a medium-sized school near a small city The Netherlands.

Interview data was transcribed, analysed and thematised after which the survey data was analysed thematically. Then the data that resulted from the themes was evaluated using poetic inquiry. The observation data was included as a last addition, to understand how interactions happened in the classroom. A critical- realist approach seemed appropriate to this study as I was seeking the participants' truths while simultaneously questioning how these truths compared with each other and with the literature. The poetry in the data presentation explores a more interpretivist stance, yet these poems are used to collate and

compare the truths expressed by the survey respondents and interview participants. The data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and poetic inquiry (McKenzie, 2021; Prendergast, 2009), which allowed for reflection on the dataset as a whole as well as the individual voices of the participants within the data. These methods are explorative and reflective in nature, which relates to the research aims and questions:

1. What are some teachers' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education in England and The Netherlands?
2. What are some students' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education in England and The Netherlands?
3. To what extent if any, do creativity and criticality feature in teachers' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in the participating schools?
4. To what extent, if any, do creativity and criticality feature in students' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in the participating schools?
5. Are creativity and criticality put into practice in the participating poetry classrooms in England and The Netherlands. If so, how?

#### 4.2 The researcher's place in and with the world

My own assumption about the world considers a critical pedagogical underpinning, in which we learn to understand each other through dialogue and communication. Paulo Freire (1996), bell hooks (2014) and Henry Giroux (2020) are three educationalists whose philosophical approaches resonate with this research as they follow notions of critical and interrogative dialogue to understand how people conceptualise their place in and with the world (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 2011). The principle is the reciprocity in understanding the other to also better understand the self (Freire, 1996; Freire & Macedo, 2005). I opted to learn about the way some teachers and students understood the purpose and intent of poetry in and with the world as they perceived it, which is why I chose to pose the question with regards to their 'conceptions of poetry teaching and learning'. Newton and Newton (2009),

Kokotsaki (2012) and Newton and Donkin (2011) adopt a similar approach concerning the notion of conceptions of teachers.

From the point of view of engaging in dialogue, opening the dialogic nature of poetry in the classroom, I searched for research approaches that would work well with the data I gathered and the theoretical underpinnings. This resulted on choosing the thematic analysis as a suitable way to approach my data, as it allows freedom to reflect on themes and connects the various voices (Braun & Clarke, 2022). However, I felt that using thematic analysis would focus primarily on the connecting themes, rather than also on the experience of the research participants. In light of this, I wanted to find a complementary approach to thematic analysis that would provide anonymity for the participants, while allowing their voice to come to the forefront (cf. Chapters 5, 6 and 7). I considered narrative analysis (Riesmann, 1993; Earthy & Cronin, 2008), which intrigued and provoked some thoughts on storytelling in the research. It was much later that I came across poetic inquiry as an approach for reflecting on, presenting, and analysing the dataset (Faulkner, 2017; Prendergast, 2009; Prendergast et al., 2009). It adds another perspective to the ways in which poetry can be used as a vehicle to interpret and understand our place in and with the world and relates to Stevens and McGuinn's (2004) notion as well as Freire and Macedo's (2005) thoughts on being in and with the world, with each other and through the word, and from Freire's earlier work, where he notes 'knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.' (p. 70).

#### 4.3 The Critical Realist

Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that epistemology is 'deeply connected to ontology' (p. 175), and although this research is primarily placed on an ontological perspective, it also includes the epistemological notion that is relevant to education, namely 'how we should go about trying to know' (ibid, p. 175) about engagement in poetry teaching and learning. As teachers and students are involved in the data set of this study as well as the structure within which they learn, it was important to register their thoughts and opinions to understand their place in education and their perspective on poetry teaching and learning. To offer a third perspective alongside the student and teacher experience, observations

were included to allow myself as the researcher an insight into the practicalities of teaching and learning within the structures of the school and the curriculum.

I have approached poetry in this thesis through multiple lenses.

1. I offer an alternative abstract in the form of a sonnet
2. Teaching and learning of poetry in the content of this thesis
3. Poetry as ways to introduce chapters and concepts
4. Poetry as a way to present teacher interview data
5. Poetry as a way to present the thematic analysis of the survey data.

In applying these diverse ways of working with poetry as a vehicle for communication, I aim to show the versatile nature of poetry, and how the world can be conceptualised not only through the research narrative, but with and through poetic writing too. Through poetry I seek criticality, and the ways (or truths) in which the world can be perceived. As such, I place this thesis in the paradigm of critical realism, which ‘can be understood as combining ontological realism (the truth is out there) with epistemological relativism (it’s impossible to access the truth directly)’ as all ‘human practices can be said to give rise to perspectival and contextual truths’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 169). Connecting the different perspectives, enhances understanding of what happens in the classroom based on what is both observed and experienced (a truth).

Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) use the analogy of looking at a flower from above to describe what we see and know to be real and can then imagine and interpret what is not visible or known. To understand the flower as a whole requires a critical-realist view. If we apply this logic to poetry and how it is taught in the classroom, the curriculum and the anthology are what we see and know, and we can see some of the people who are involved. We can observe what happens when those involved interact around poetry and observe challenges through the literature with student engagement in poetry classrooms. To understand what happens beneath the surface we must consider that what makes that metaphoric flower grow are the minds of engaged teachers and learners of the art of poetry. Subsequently, alongside observations and understanding the literature, the voices of the teachers and students should be included to understand, from a holistic perspective, what happens in the classroom. Although the researcher interprets these acts to some extent and stories that tell us what the teacher and students thought, felt and knew in the moment of

speaking and writing (Doecke & Yandell, 2019), we can question the 'truth' that they experienced at that time. Such investigation can give insight into the level of engagement in specific environments, and how the 'flowers' (or poetry classrooms) may show their colours and shapes.

However, interpretations on how successfully poems are interpreted and experienced is to some extent subjective, as it includes the thoughts and opinions of the participants and myself, and the views of reality that exist within these voices at the time of data collection. A critical realism approach allows for a focus 'on participants' experiences and perspectives' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 171). In that way, I relate the interview and survey dataset, as I analyse their truths, through semi-structured interview questions and open questions in surveys, allowing space for these experiences and perspectives to be voiced. To ensure rigour of the interpretation of the data, the results were analysed four times, I shared the process of thematising the data with a peer and two colleagues to understand whether they agreed, and if not, why this was. Following these discussions, I developed my understanding of the data and was able to clearly identify the relevant themes in the Findings chapters.

#### 4.4 Positionality and reflexivity of the researcher

I admit that my own assumptions make up part of this methodology. I am passionate about language and about communicating through language. Grammatically, it may not always be correct, but meaning is created beyond correct language use. This shows a subjectivity, I suppose, towards artful language, in which function and form complement each other to make and shape meaning (Jewitt & Kress, 2010). This is a cognitive process which is influenced by language conventions and facilitates reflection and expression of thought (Carruthers, 2002). However, Carruthers argues that this process is 'opportunistic' rather than hardwired (p. 717). It follows that communication can happen in a multitude of ways, not just through language, and not just through grammatically correct language. Poetry is inherently a form of art that allows the writer and the reader or listener to make meaning through 'flexible' and 'creative' human cognitive processes that Carruthers mentions (2002, p. 718). With my bilingual upbringing, I am often considering in which order to put words to make clear and precise meaning, which in itself is a creative and interpretive process in

which I make and remake meaning with the aim to develop understanding through language communication. Through writing my own poetry, reading and teaching it, I have found that poetry offers alternative ways to looking at language, embracing my flexible and creative human cognition. It is no longer from the perspective of 'correctness', but of interpretation and social semiotics that go beyond metrics of correctness.

In a society that focuses so heavily on measurement and assessment, there has never been a greater need for looking at poetry, not through the eye of the teacher, the awarding body or the curriculum, but through the eyes of the learners, who are the ones doing the analyses and meaning making, and also the ones who are taking the exams. In my own experience as a learner, I was often provided with information to copy or rote learn, and this was incredibly hard to remember. I now know that I needed to experience it or shown its purpose for me to understand it and become an active participant in the process. In my decade-long experience as an English tutor, I found a key component for lack in student engagement with poetry was due to the lack of purpose provided to the students. In fact, poetry has been losing status. It was the first component to be made optional or to disappear in its entirety when COVID-19 prevented teachers and students from working through all the exam components. Poetry became an optional part of the Edexcel exam, and the poetry anthology question has become optional for AQA, which led to poets speaking out and describing it as a 'dangerous first step' (Simon Armitage in *The Guardian*, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2020) and poetry should be 'central, not an option' (Kate Clanchy in *The Guardian*, 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2020). Shakespeare, pre-19<sup>th</sup> century texts and early 20<sup>th</sup> century texts remained. So what is it about poetry that allows it to be taken out of the assessment first?

To answer this question, I thought it was important to begin by questioning the purpose of poetry in the classroom for both teachers and students, and then to develop an understanding of *if* and how some students and teachers conceptualise poetry in combination with creative and critical thinking. I did not just want to look at what was happening through short surveys and assessment results. I wanted to understand what students think of poetry teaching and learning, and how they would like to see it improved to provide a clear and prominent space for poetry in the curriculum. Furthermore, their English teachers must have views on the value of and engagement with the teaching and learning of poetry too. Questions that arose for teachers were, 'Did they find poetry valuable? Did they find it purposeful? How do they relate poetry to education in general and

what are the changes that they would like to see in practice?' These questions cannot be answered with simple surveys and required in-depth semi-structured interviews and open-ended surveys. Although my responses are of a small-scale, I was able to explore and inquire the participants' conceptions of poetry's place in (and with) the classroom.

#### 4.5 Grounding the researcher in the research

Words can carry such weight and ignite feelings and emotions in a wide range of ways (Mercier, 2020). Words are, of course, our main vehicle for communication and interaction, and I have always felt a need to communicate to my best ability. In my work, I consider presentation skills and how our voice and the words we use allow for audience engagement. I consider playing with language to shape academic texts and in writing my own texts and presenting my own talks, I take into consideration how I can convey what I want to say in the most meaningful way to my audience. Previously, in my job as an English tutor, I noticed the lack of discussion amongst students. They were unable to voice themselves and became fidgety, wanted to 'go to the toilet' or would predominantly respond with 'I don't know' when I asked questions. I found this frustrating and disheartening that these young children had never learnt to communicate their needs to an educator in terms that would be helpful to them.

Further to my experience as an English tutor I have noticed a lack in understanding of the craft of poetry in students. The focus is often on the historical context and on how the poet might have meant their poem to be read, rather than on how the student perceives this. Although students can engage critically, there appears to be a lack of creativity in the classroom. I therefore wanted to explore why this is, and what teachers' and students' perceptions and expectations are of poetry in the classroom. In the literature, teachers' voices appeared regularly when literature and poetry was studied. However, the student voice seemed more of a rarity. Although exercises and activities were applied in the poetry classroom, and students' engagement may have been explored, there was very little about how students actually felt about how they were taught poetry. I felt poetry deserved a more prominent space in the curriculum, due to its ability to engage with language play, to consider structures without the constraints of grammatical rules and to engage with

meaning making processes in analyses and writing. It offers so much more: a space for reflection, evaluation, creative thought and cognitive training. This is how I had always experienced poetry, as a way to put my emotions on paper without being too literal, and as a journey to explore what my emotions might be on topics, and then to analyse why that might be. Poetry has, for me, always been a way to make, shape and process meaning in a way that made it less daunting. In my tuition, I adopt an approach that includes poetry writing and connecting poetry to the students' lived experience, or at least to the present-day. I have refined this over the years and been successful in engaging students with poetry by looking at a text first from their own understanding of the world and their experience, and then relating this to other contexts. Relatability within education, as mentioned in Chapter 2, offers a valuable way of making poetry purposeful.

My MA in Education dissertation focused on dialogue in the poetry classroom. It was here that I began to understand the value of group work and talk in classroom interactions to understand poems. I was hooked on this and decided that for my current study I wanted to observe these interactions between students and teachers in Key Stage 4. I did a comparative study with a Year 9 group, to see how dialogue and verbal interactions took place in comparison with those classrooms that were preparing for the GCSE exam. I was intrigued by the amount of freedom in Year 9, and the limited freedom in years 10 and 11. All the poems taught in year 10 and 11 concerned anthology poetry. Although other poems were sometimes used as comparison, the main aim was for students to understand the impact of language and structure on the poem in its historical context. Through the different data collection methods, I was able to observe and understand the restrictions in the classrooms, as well as the freedom students and teachers may have, and ultimately this led to an exploratory critical-realist data analytic framework.

#### 4.6 Data collection

The concepts that make up the focus of this work are creativity and critical thinking, dialogue and engagement, as explained in Chapter 2. These keywords are also the basis of the dataset, with the addition of relatability. Throughout the observations the dialogue between students and between students and teachers was noted as well as some of the

content of this dialogue. I was unable to record the observations for privacy reasons. All collected data took place as hand-written notes which were colour-coded for teacher and student interactions, as well as the time spent on teacher-led, student-led and individual work. In the interviews the focus was on the concepts of creativity and criticality and what these meant to the teachers. In the surveys I asked the students questions on creativity and critical thinking as well as whether they understood the purpose of learning poetry. Furthermore, all participants were asked about different settings for learning and learning focus, such as group work, individual work and assessment-focused learning.

For the purpose of this research I explored a variety of methods. The triangular approach of the research study aims to offer a holistic view on what is happening in the classroom, applying a combination of ontological and epistemological positioning. Triangulation, in this case, refers to the triangulation of data, which ‘combines data drawn from different sources and at different times, in different places or from different people’ (Flick et al., 2004, p. 178). This approach allows for different perspectives to come together in the research, including that of the student (surveys), the teacher (interviews) and the researcher (observations) (Figure 1), as well as allowing for the data collection to be carried out in different places and at different times, providing a substantial amount of data that will allow depth to the explorative nature of the research questions and aims. As Flick (2004) and Denzin (1989) suggest triangulation allows for ‘a deeper understanding of the issue under investigation, and thereby as a step on the road to greater knowledge, and less towards validity and objectivity of interpretation’ (Flick, 2004, p. 179).

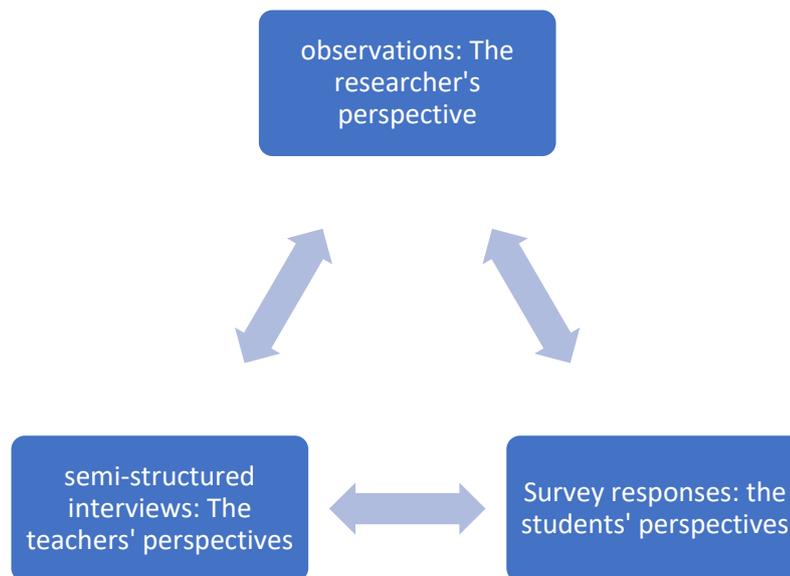


Figure 2. Triangulation of the data

Subsequently, triangulation is utilised in this instance as a 'strategy for justifying and underpinning' (ibid, p. 179) a deeper understanding of what the attitudes are towards poetry teaching and learning by those who are active participants in the process, as well as an understanding of what interactions happen in the classroom from the outsider's perspective (the researcher), rather than creating an objective and generalisable overview. Hence, the aim of this triangular approach is to allow for adaptable and applicable results, which provoke thought for further (critical) questioning and discussion, hereby embracing a transparent and holistic view of how poetry teaching and learning is experienced in these different settings and by the different stakeholders, as opposed to offering generalisable results.

The data collection took place in three parts: I began with (unobtrusive) observations, and conducted a semi-structured interview with each teacher following the observations (Table 5). Unobtrusive observations concern those observations where I do not interrupt, participate, but am located, preferably in the back of the room, where I can observe what is happening. Kellehear (2020) argues that 'much valuable insight can be gained about ourselves and the lives we lead by simply listening and watching both systematically and with care' (p. vii). Kellehear (2020) further notes that unobtrusive observations are those where 'this work can be conducted without either engaging with or disturbing the activity of other people' (p. vii). Prior to the interviews, I piloted a survey amongst two secondary school students. After some careful editing, these surveys were

distributed in the schools where the interviews took place following the interviews and observation. This gave students the opportunity to connect the survey to the face of the researcher and provided a more human element. The timeline of the data anticipation, collection and analysis is shown in Figure 2.

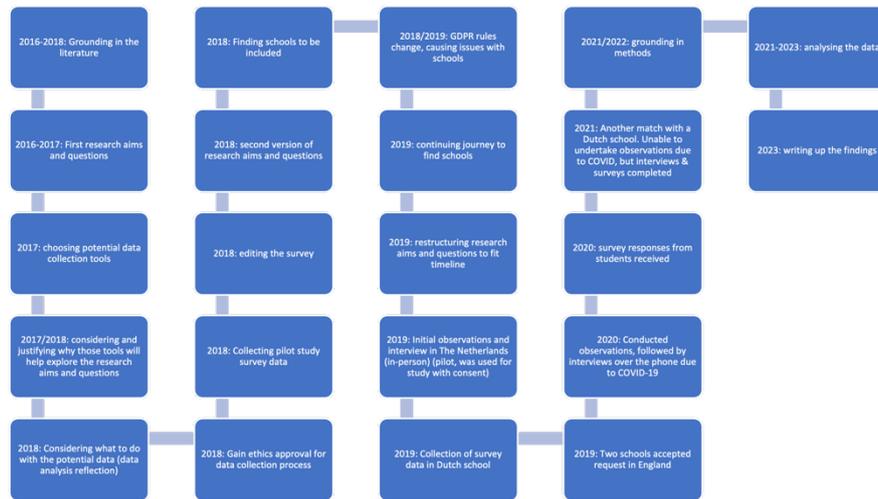


Figure 3 Timeline of data planning, collection, analysis and writing up (full-page view in the Appendix)

Table 5. Types of data collection

	<b>Classroom Observation</b>	<b>Teacher Interview</b>	<b>Student Survey</b>
<b>School 1</b>	Observation A1:1, A1:2, A1:3	Participant 1	Dutch School HAVO/VWO
<b>School 2</b>	Observation B1: B1:1, B1:2, B2:3 Observation B2: B2:1, B2:2, B2:3 Observation B3: B3:1, B3: 2, B3:3	Participant 2 and participant 3	English School Top set and lower set in KS4 and
<b>School 3</b>	Observation C1:1 C1:2, C1:3	Participant 4	English School Middle Set
<b>School 4</b>	None	Participant 5 and Participant 6	Dutch School HAVO/VWO

Alongside student surveys, interviews with teachers in the same schools as the students took place to understand how the teachers perceived student engagement, and how they felt students were able to engage creatively and critically in poetry lessons. These interviews were semi-structured to allow the teacher's voice to come through and to offer them a comfortable environment to engage in conversation. Due to the focus on specific topics with regards to poetry teaching and learning, I opted for semi-structured interviews as opposed to unstructured interviews, to guide the topic of conversation, while still allowing for the teacher to express their feelings and share their experiences. The interviews focused on the same topics as the student surveys to enable a thematic analysis approach to the data. These focus points were based around the following concepts, which emerged both from the literature and from conversations with my tutees (their parents and teachers not included in the interview) as well as informal conversations prior to interviews with the teachers who were included in the interviews:

- Creativity
- Critical Thinking
- Student Engagement
- Group work
- Assessment

The aim of these semi-structured interviews was for them to be conversational allowing teachers to express themselves in a space where their voice was valued and safe. Due to this, although the topics were clearly guided, the questions and the timings of the questions differed depending on when the topic came up naturally during the interview. This allowed me, as a researcher, to invite the teacher to share examples and to guide the teacher towards the next topic of conversation without the interview losing its conversational tone and narrative flow.

#### 4.6.1 Observations

In total there were fifteen observations, spread out over three schools. I made notes during the lessons by hand as to not interrupt the lesson with typing or to distract the students. I used an observation checklist so that I was able to gather the same information from each

observation (Appendix). The observations were unobtrusive in nature (Brill and Knauss, 2011), which allowed for the lessons to happen in a natural classroom environment. During some stages the teacher invited me to walk around the room to see what students were working on, but for the most part I sat in the back of the classroom. In one class I sat on the left-hand side (Appendix 3), as this offered me the best view of the students without being intrusive. During these observations I took notes on the interactions between students and teacher, teacher and students and between students amongst themselves, I took note of the classroom layout and of the materials used during the lesson. The order in which I undertook the observations is shown in Figure 3.

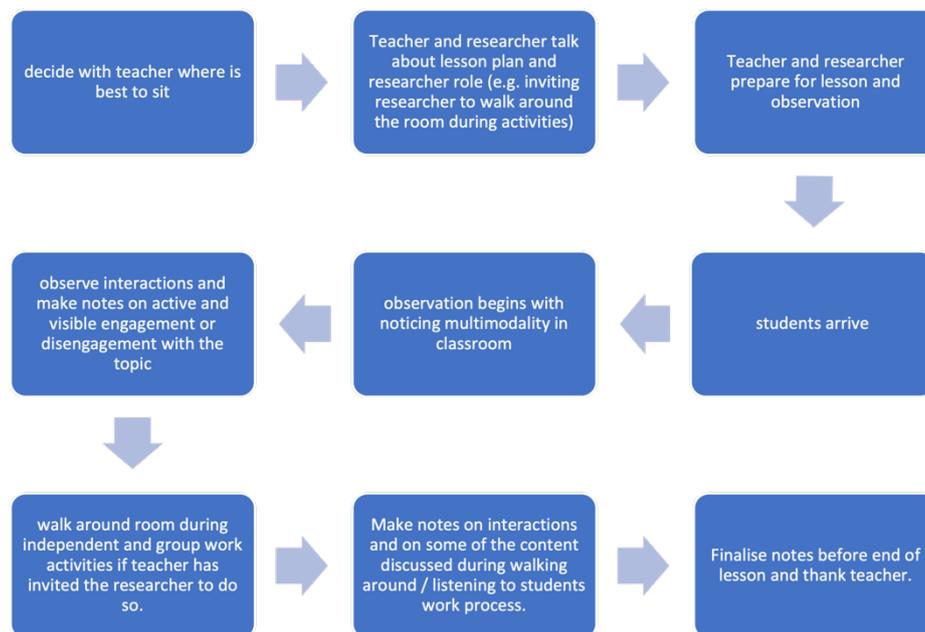


Figure 4. Order of observation process

The observations were initially based on Kress et al.'s model of observations from 'English in Urban Classrooms' (2005), as this offered a focus on the spoken interactions, but also the multimodal factors that were present which could aid classroom engagement (such as videoclips of poets reading their poems and interviews with subjects that came to light in the poetry), but could also be detrimental, for example when the layout of room may not facilitate ideal environment for discussion where groupwork is requested by teacher. Kress et al. (2005) show the layout of the room and include other aspects of the room, such as posters too (pp. 44 and 45-46). I have made note of posters and colours in the room, but as I

was unable to take photographs or videos of the classrooms as this would neglect the anonymity of the schools. It was not relevant for the interactions I observed and I did not focus on these in detail. I did focus on other multimodal aspects, such as the use of a projector, a visualiser, presentation slides and videoclips, and this focus was also inspired by Kress's work on multimodality in 'English in Urban Classrooms' (2005).

The layouts of the classroom varied per room, as shown in Appendix 3, and reflect the varied approaches to allowing space for collaboration or individual work. There could be a situation where the tables were set up in rows of two or long rows of up to eight tables, which are less inviting for group work as, for example, a cabaret style set-up, which is often perceived as a more successful set-up for this type of group work (Kress et al., 2005). Although this set-up invites discussion, it is not the most effective way to stimulate independent work. Hence, the set-up of the classroom can tell us something about the way the teaching and learning is designed within the space, although, as is noted in Kress et al. (2005), space is only one of the indications for what kind of teaching and learning might happen in the classroom. I included it in the data collection as space and the use of space is an indicator of what kind of teaching and learning might happen. It is intriguing to note that, in spaces that were not particularly set up for the teaching and learning that happened, it was able to happen in spite of the space (for example, a space with students set up in rows of two still included group work with 3-4 students). It also shows that some teachers have their own classroom space, whereas others teach in different spaces, as can be seen in the appendix. The multimodal factors taken into account when considering the space in which the teaching and learning of poetry happened are shown in the Figure 4, as well as the interactions that took place, as shown in figure 5.



Figure 5. Multimodal factors taken into account during observations.

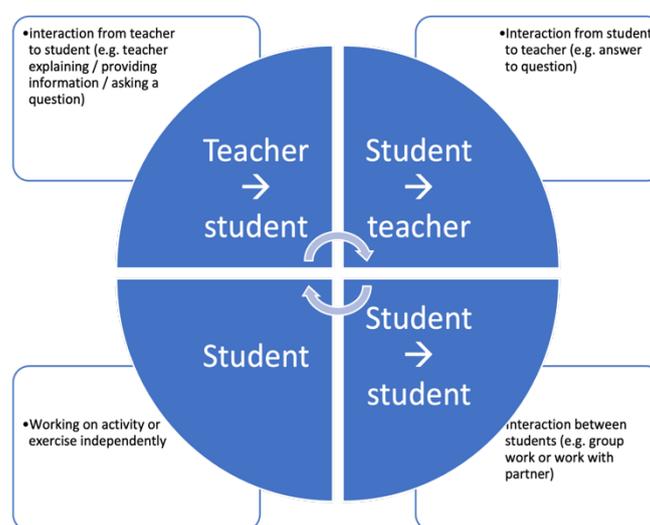


Figure 6. Observed types of interaction.

#### 4.6.2 Interviews

In the study I interviewed six participants, all of whom were secondary school teachers. Five of the interview participants had been in the role of a teacher for more than ten years at the time of the interview. One of the interview participants had been in the role for less than five years. Although the length of time the teachers were in the profession was not a particularly important question, their experience did show that all teachers in the English schools had been in the teaching profession at the time of the curriculum and policy changes in 2014, and in 2017. This was relevant to some extent, as the curriculum and assessment

came up in all the interviews. The interview questions were initially laid out in a semi-structured way. This provided me with the freedom to change the questions slightly depending on the participants' narrative, and to ask for examples where these were not made explicitly by the teachers themselves. As I became more grounded in the interview questions, I related more to the topic guide Kress et al. (2005) use to provide a structure for the interviews they conducted, which allowed freedom of dialogue and critical insight of the teachers, without losing sight of the key components to discuss.

All interviews were recorded and carried out during school-time. In four of the interviews, the teachers were on school property. In two of the interviews, the teachers were at home. In one case this was at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the teacher was working from home, in the other instance it concerned a recently retired teacher who was still active in providing support for teachers at their old school, but no longer actively teaching. One of the interviews was carried out in-person, whereas the others all took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and were therefore carried out over the phone and on Zoom.

The semi-structured approach to interviewing led to lengthy conversations, which allowed for teachers to reflect on their practice and the education system as a whole as well as on poetry teaching and learning in particular. Semi-structured interviews allow for non-leading questions, a safe environment for teachers to discuss their thoughts and feelings and a dialogic approach in which empathy and a productive thought process are encouraged. In a thesis that looks at productive thought and dialogue for engagement, it seemed that this approach would relate to my research and put into practice the findings from the literature review.

Initially, I opted for in-person interviews, as these are often seen as being the 'gold standard' of interviews (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006, p. 390) due to emotions of both participant and researcher being conveyed in the moment. However, in-person interviews were not feasible in five of the six interviews due to them having been arranged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic meant I was unable to travel to The Netherlands to conduct interviews face-to-face, nor to be able to visit teachers in their workplace. Three of the interviews were conducted at the start of COVID-19 and took place over the phone. These interviews were recorded as MP3 on the telephone after gaining consent from the participant. At this time, this was the most reliable way of talking to the participants, as the

connection speed in my home was not adequate for online meetings through Zoom or Skype. I had previously met the participants during observations prior to COVID-19, which meant that there was some familiarity between the teacher and myself. The final two interviews with participants in The Netherlands were conducted using Zoom with video, as the internet connection had by this point improved. Furthermore, the use of Zoom allowed for the teacher and researcher to see each other and to observe each other's body language to increase the quality of dialogue and to add an extra layer of understanding through facial expression and body language.

Each conversation started with various topics that were not directly related to the interview. This allowed the researcher and the interviewer to become familiar with each other and to build rapport (O'Connor et al., 2008). I felt this was important as discussing the participants' teaching methods and elaborating on teaching and learning examples can be quite personal, and I felt it important for the participants to feel able to discuss difficult matters within the education system. The semi-structured approach allowed for the interviews to be more conversational than asking questions directly. This resulted in a more informal setting in which both teacher and researcher felt comfortable to discuss experiences and feelings about the education system and poetry teaching and learning.

Although comfort and the provision of a safe space was felt to have a positive impact, it did mean that it was at times difficult to silence my own judgement. A Dutch teacher asked me about the school system in England and how poetry was taught there. To engage in the flow of the conversation I felt it necessary to include some information here, which did potentially carry some judgement. This allowed for the teacher to regard me as knowledgeable and speaking freely too, which in turn led them to open up and elaborate in more depth on their experiences (Booth & Booth, 1994). Consequently, it was deemed to be useful in rare instances to share my understanding of the education system as it allowed for more in-depth answers from the participants. The guidelines I stuck to for this semi-structured approach were inspired by the phenomenographic interview approach by Ashworth and Lucas (2000). This approach mentions that in interviews the researcher should:

*'make minimal use of questions prepared in advance; use open-ended questions; engage in empathic listening to hear meanings, interpretations and understandings; consciously silence*

*his or her concerns, preoccupations and judgements; use prompts to pursue/clarify the participant's own line of reflection and allow the participant to elaborate, provide incidents, clarifications, and, maybe, to discuss events at length.'* (pp. 302-303)

As I became more confident in my interview technique, I used fewer of my prepared questions and noted phenomena that I wished to discuss with the participants, followed by room for participants to share examples or elaborations of thoughts concerning these topics. The phenomena were creativity, criticality, engagement, dialogue and group work as well as assessment and the curriculum. These topics allowed for a clear overview of how poetry is taught in the upper secondary school classroom. As the interviews were set up to engage with teachers through dialogue, each interview differed in structure to some extent, although all interviews covered the same key themes:

- Creativity
- Critical thinking
- Engagement
- Assessment
- Poetry analysis and writing
- Purpose of poetry
- Motivation in teaching poetry.

Each interview had these themes arranged in different orders, depending on the flow of the conversation with the participant. Often, I would start with the question of how they perceived creativity, and how that creativity presented itself in the classroom. From this point we would continue until the participant and I exhausted all the topics of interest. I was not strict about the order of it to allow the teacher to feel at ease and for them to share their narrative without changing the direction of the conversation. In some instances, I would re-direct slightly as the teacher would focus on English more broadly, rather than on poetry specifically.

During the first two interviews I followed up with a more structured approach and had key starting questions to ensure the conversation would keep going. I would start with a question around what teachers thought the purpose of poetry was, and then move on to

creativity and critical thinking, asking teachers to relate these concepts and then asking for examples of how these concepts show in their teaching and in student-learning. As I grew more accustomed to the questions and the key concepts I wanted to discuss, the interviews became more natural in their flow, and the order in which I asked the questions was less important, as long as all aspects were covered. For example, in the second interview I asked a specific question about engagement: *‘Do you see your students as being engaged in poetry lessons? And how do you recognise them being engaged?’* Whereas in Interview 5, the participant and I were in dialogue:

*“What do you think the benefit, or the benefits- or maybe the top few biggest benefits are from having more dialogue in the classroom?”* and the participant answered that engagement came out of group work and dialogue, *“he’s teaching the other student so they get engaged in a conversation and I think both of them can really profit from that, because sometimes you don’t listen to what I say, but maybe listen from somebody else and that you know, that can happen, so I think that’s the – eh – really something they can profit from and I think they get more motivated when, when they are sitting in groups.”* This shows I did not ask the question on engagement specifically, but it was woven into the conversation.

The anonymity in combination with the conversational semi-structured interview allowed for the participants to feel at ease, which allowed for intriguing and thought-provoking talk. The essence of the interview was to hear participants speak freely on the value of poetry, creativity and critical thinking for engagement in secondary education and through using examples of cases when there was high or low engagement in poetry lessons. Although the Dutch curriculum does not include poetry in the curriculum, the interviewed teachers felt it was a valuable component of learning English for various reasons. Hence, many did include poetry projects, poetry components or other ways of introducing poetry into the classroom.

#### 4.6.3 Surveys

At the start of this research project, the aim was to invite students to participate in focus group interviews to hear multiple voices and for ideas to bounce off each other and create a conversation with a semi-structured interview approach. However, due to new GDPR legislation, this approach became complex and time consuming, with little reward as

both teachers and myself were unsure how to ensure the research was conducted with student integrity in mind. As a result, instead of speaking directly with students, I created a survey with open questions and multiple options to allow the student voice to come through, without students feeling potentially pressured to answer all questions and by allowing them the choice of whether they wanted to participate or not through either filling in the survey or not. Moreover, this approach ensured anonymity for the students too. This approach led to a total of 145 surveys being filled in by students in Northeast England and in The Netherlands, of which 143 were complete (Table 6).

*Table 6. Number of student surveys conducted*

<b>Where do you go to school?</b>	
England	85
Netherlands	60
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>145</b>

The survey had a variety of questions, including closed questions (yes/no, scale questions) to understand to what extent students enjoyed poetry and to offer some short answer questions that were purposeful and easy to fill in (Driscoll, 2011), multiple answer questions where the students were able to tick all that applied to them, and open questions with space for short, one-sentence answers on their views on poetry, creativity and critical thinking. This allowed for the survey to be completed within twenty minutes, although the Dutch students needed a little bit longer due to less fluency in English. The questions all related to their engagement with poetry, their understanding of the purpose of poetry and how they were taught and would like to be taught poetry in school. I asked some questions that were similar in nature, but written in different ways to ensure validity of the answers. As Fowler (1995) suggests ‘asking the same question twice and comparing the results, can provide useful information about the reliability and validity of answers’ (p. 6). An example of this was ‘When do you most enjoy poetry lessons?’ and then ‘What do you most enjoy about poetry lessons?’, although the phrasing is different, these questions could lead to similar outcomes, yet could also include different answers to give more depth to

understanding the connection between enjoyability and poetry. Another question that was posed in the same section, was ‘when you least enjoy poetry lessons?’

I chose the survey questions to explore students’ views on poetry in classroom learning in a way that allowed for their opinions and views to come across in a transparent way. Although I expected responses to be short, it was important to understand not only the students’ attitudes, but their perspective and understanding of poetry and how creativity and critical thinking apply to poetry teaching and learning in the upper secondary school classroom. Hence, I opted to include open questions where students were asked to provide examples, such as adding what they enjoyed or did not enjoy about poetry and why they thought poetry was useful or not useful in the classroom.

I wanted to know how they interpreted some of the key concepts of my study, such as creativity and critical thinking, and how they feel these concepts relate to poetry. I attempted to phrase it so students felt they could elaborate if they wanted to but could still convey meaning by using just a few words or a phrase to answer the questions.

Furthermore, I included a few Likert scale questions, to see to what extent the students valued poetry lessons as taught in schools now, and whether they enjoyed writing poetry. I felt writing poetry was an important aspect too as the act of writing one’s own poetry is a rare occurrence in upper secondary school years, unless it’s for personal interest. At the end of the survey there are a few questions regarding what students would like more of in the classroom, what kind of lessons they experience in the classroom and which parts they enjoy. I have included this to explore whether individual work and exam preparation are appreciated, or whether they would enjoy more poetry reading, performing, writing and group work than they are currently experiencing.

## 4.7 Data analysis

### 4.7.1 Methods of analysis

Figure 8 shows how I came to my decision to work with thematic analysis in combination with poetic inquiry, as opposed to phenomenology or phenomenography, which had been considered at the start of my research journey. Due to the philosophical

underpinning being grounded in critical realism, Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that thematic analysis complements this way of looking at the world and at the data. In critical realism the focus is on questioning what we see, rather than contextualising the data in-depth. The interviews primarily focus on participants' experiences and perspectives, and the data is interpreted in a way that shows it is 'grounded in, or anchored by the participants' accounts, that speak to their situated realities' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 171). They explain situated realities as capturing and understanding that realities are different for different people. Critical realism considers what is true to the participants at that moment in time, rather than a relativist view. Within a relativist view, Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest this primarily means looking at your data and what that says about the data: 'we cannot assume anything beyond, beneath or behind that which we're seeking to understand' (p. 174). Whereas I am showing connections to the literature and opening up an understanding that aims to be adaptable to different situations and to explore how the experiences of teachers and students relate to the understanding we have of poetry as it is taught in upper secondary school education. Hence, although I do look only at what I see, I aim to see what is happening as part of the bigger picture in the education system, to understand in more depth what teachers and students are finding causes a lower engagement in poetry in upper secondary school education.

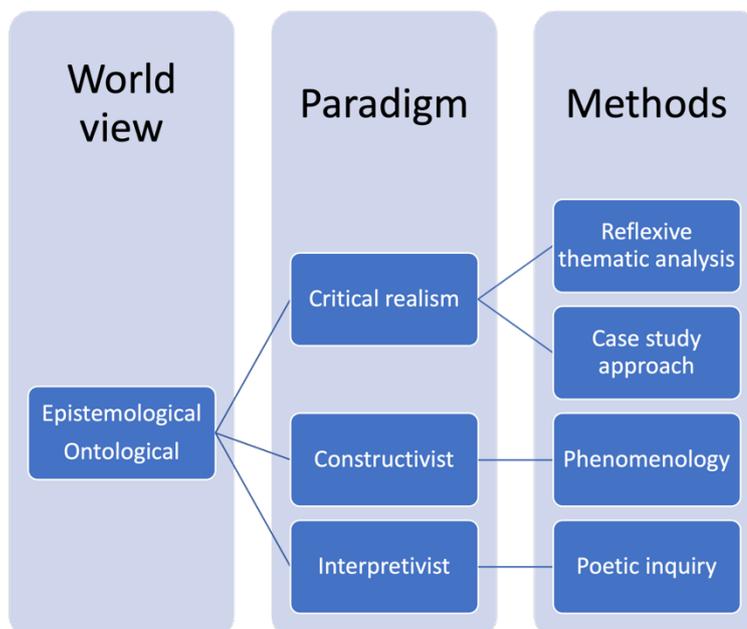


Figure 7". Philosophical underpinning leading to Thematic Analysis

#### 4.7.2 Poetic Inquiry

To engage in the participants' voices as individuals and in themes, I have opted to use poetic inquiry as a method to analyse and present my data in combination with thematic analysis. Although narrative inquiry and thematic analysis have been combined in the past, I have perceived no previous examples of the combination of Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis (2022) and Poetic Inquiry (Prendergast, 2009), and as such this is a contribution to knowledge. This method allows me to highlight some connections between participants, but also some specific views of individuals. This aims to clarify the themes and the way the students and teachers think and feel about poetry and the purpose of poetry in the English classroom without losing the student and teacher voice.

Poetic inquiry shows that poetry does not have to be 'dull' and 'boring' (Gregory, 2017), but that it can be 'lifted off the page' (Abbs, 1989), by using the voices of students who are often in an education system that was not built for them and does not feel relatable to them (Giroux, 2020). The use of poetic inquiry in this study emphasises poetry as a vehicle for communication and for showcasing not only the themes that arise from the data, but the voices who have given rise to the data too. The participants' voices are heard throughout the findings and discussion sections in a way that goes beyond thematic analysis, but listens to their understandings of creativity, critical thinking, and the purpose of poetry. Furthermore, I look into the students' wishes in the poetry classroom, to make it a space that is better suited to their wants and needs and a space that can allow poetry to become a purposeful and useful component of English literature.

Poetic inquiry exists in various forms, and shows the subjectivity of humans, while simultaneously showing a holistic view of human thought (van Rooyen and D'Abdon, 2020). Furthermore, it allows the researcher to present their findings in poetic form, which invites poetry to be a vehicle for making meaning. Students in the data noted the lack of relatability in classroom poetry, which made me want to present their voices in a relatable way. Davis (2021) argues that 'a culturally relevant methodology matters because methods are needed that can fully capture and amplify the lived experiences of minoritized persons' (p. 122). Although the participants have certain privileges, I think it is important to point out that secondary school students are rarely able to change the way they learn. This is, as the students themselves note, enforced by the government, the school and the teacher. This

makes them minoritized, and makes it highly important to hear their voices and to consider how they would like to be educated in poetry, and how they interpret how poetry is taught in schools.

Further to poetic inquiry, I have used 'i-poem analysis' (McKenzie, 2021) to show the teacher's voice and interpret the interviews through different lenses: by looking at what the teacher says as well as what the teacher emphasises when they discuss their personal views of poetry in education (Appendix 4). This helped develop an understanding of how poetry is taught in secondary schools, but also how poetry has shaped the participants' lives and how they interpret the value of poetry in schools. By taking all the 'I' sentences out of the poem, I came up with a list of values surrounding teaching and poetry in the lives of these secondary school teachers, which allowed their voice to come to the forefront of the interview (Edwards & Weller, 2015). I carefully took out the sentences that did not fit with the main research aims and came up with poems of no more than 1 page, which show how the teacher views poetry in the classroom, how they engage with poetry and how they feel the students engage with poetry. This process allowed me to understand poetry through different lenses, that of the teacher, how the teacher perceives the student's experience and the successes and constraints within their teaching. On a few occasions, the poetic inquiry element provided new insights into themes that I had not become aware of when analysing the data thematically. For example, in the teacher interviews, teachers connected poetry teaching and learning to better understanding of the students' place in the world, which is not something I had picked up on until writing the i-poem:

Teacher participant (1)

*The relevance*

*It can give them ideas*

*about the modern world*

Teacher participant (2)

*It gives them*

*I suppose,*

*A more worldly view*

Teacher participant (3)

Not from a book but from themselves

Look around you, see *what's going on in the world*

It was a reflexive exercise for me as a researcher that ensured multiple layers of considering the teacher and student voices, creating more depth to the primary data.

I created these i-poems by underlining every phrase in each interview that included the pronoun 'I'. Then I began to navigate how what followed related to the research questions, reduced the fillers, such as 'ehm' and 'you know', unless I interpreted them as beneficial as in some instances these fillers guided the teacher's thought process. By continuously returning to the research questions, I eliminated lines that were beyond the scope of this research, or where the teacher went off-topic. As I was going through this process of inquiring the data, I found that in some instances the 'you', or the 'we' was prominent as well, and often referred to the adults and teachers, whereas 'they' would refer to the students. In some of the interviews I played with this contrast too, as it allowed me to understand better the positionality of the teachers. The I-poems present the interview responses in chronological order, to prevent misrepresentation of the data and information taken out of its original context. Although in this thesis I focus on stanzas from the I-poems, the entire I-poems are attached in the appendix, to see my representation of the participants' stories as a whole, rather than in small sections. However, with the focus on certain themes, I have represented these interviews in stanzas and smaller sections throughout the findings chapters, to clearly identify how the teachers' voices presented the key themes from the thematic analysis.

#### 4.7.3 Thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke (2022) note that the goal of a critical realist in the realm of Thematic Analysis is to 'provide a coherent and compelling interpretation of the data, grounded in or anchored by, the participants' accounts, that speaks to situated realities' (p. 171). As this study engages in an explorative approach, it is important to interpret the participants' experiences and understandings in as much depth and with as much rigour as possible, whilst acknowledging that each participant has their own situated reality, as each experience of reality is different depending on the role they have within a school, the school

they are in, the environment the school is in and the curriculum that the study material is placed in.

I conducted 6 interviews in a semi-structured way. By allowing for a dialogue to take place, it is likely that the interviewees will feel more at ease and happier to share their positive and negative experiences with regards to the teaching and learning of poetry. The interviews allowed me to explore teachers' opinions on poetry in the education system as well as gaining a more in-depth understanding of the connection between student and teacher using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Using this method meant that there was flexibility in how I applied the interview framework, which, as a consequence, offered the possibility of an experiential perspective, looking at the subjective viewpoints of how teachers experienced English, and poetry in particular, in the classroom (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021).

Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview style, it was important to use an analytical method that would embrace the variation of the interview participants and was able to see them as individuals, as well as to investigate the combined interviews. To be able to do this, I applied Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis, using varied code labels to organise interview outcomes in themes without losing the individuality of each interview. Furthermore, this method allows for the dataset to be 'organised, interrogated and interpreted' (Braun & Clark, 2022, p. 4). Braun and Clarke note that thematic analysis offers a flexible way to analyse and gain insights to 'patterns of meaning' (p. 4) while being flexible with various data types. In this data analysis it was valuable to look at the data without predetermined thoughts on the themes that would come out, and instead look at patterns in an explorative way, which evolved throughout the interview process and the analysis, which led to specific and recurring themes within the interviews. Subsequently, it enabled me to make connections between the various themes across the interviews as similar themes arose, such as the curriculum and its assessment methods, student creativity and teacher methods used in the classroom. It was valuable to consider the varying ways in which they defined or explained creativity and the teacher's methods to embracing creativity in the classroom, as it added depth to how they understood the concepts that underpin critical pedagogy, poetry and learning within the context of English and how they felt these concepts were utilised (or not) in the classroom, as well as looking at the reasons for including or not including them.

With semi-structured interviews the researcher needs to look into how specific notions, thoughts and opinions can be interpreted. This happens through questioning the text itself and interrogating to reduce assumptions and provide validity to the interpretation of the data. Going beyond Braun and Clark's themes, Attride-Stirling (2001) uses thematic networks for each individual text, each network highlighting the key themes in a 3-tier system: a global tier, an organising tier and a basic tier. In analysing these thematic networks, Attride-Stirling (2001) considers the basic themes first. These are the themes that come directly from interpreting the text initially. These basic themes are then organised into clusters, which are called the 'organising themes'. For example, a basic theme would be *'there needs to be more freedom in poetry'*, which would fit into the organising theme of *'choosing applicable poems'*, which would go into the general theme of *'encouraging engagement in poetry lessons'*. This is the thematic method I used for initial classification of the themes. Subsequently, this shows the themes are layered in 4 parts: the overarching, general theme *'purpose of poetry'*, divided into three organising themes: 'because we have to', 'To English Better' and 'Flights of Fantasy, and each of these themes is again subdivided into their own organising themes, which are then related to the basic themes, which are often quotes from the data collection that convey a thought or idea that multiple participants and survey respondents had.

Attride-Stirling (2001) use the term organised codes, whereas Braun and Clarke (2022) mention they are 'central organising concepts' (p. 77). There seem to be no differences between these two terms. Within this organised or 'central organising concepts' code the 'shared or similar ideas or meanings' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 77) are combined, leading to 'conceptual pattern themes' (ibid., p. 78), in which it becomes clear how, in these interviews, the concepts are perceived by the participants. Attride-Stirling (2001) uses thematic analysis for thematic networks to summarise 'the main themes constituting a piece of text' (p. 385).

For each interview I created a network of themes using Attride-Stirling's method of a centred global theme with organising themes stemming from this, followed by basic themes that come from each of those in a cloud diagram (p. 388). This allowed me to understand the key points that were discussed in each interview, as well as to explore the commonalities and differences in themes and opinions in the six interviews. This was a clear way to distinguish the key concerns of the participants in both the interviews and surveys. The

figures presented in the introduction of each of the three Findings chapters, as well as in Appendix 2 show the final versions of the thematic analysis.

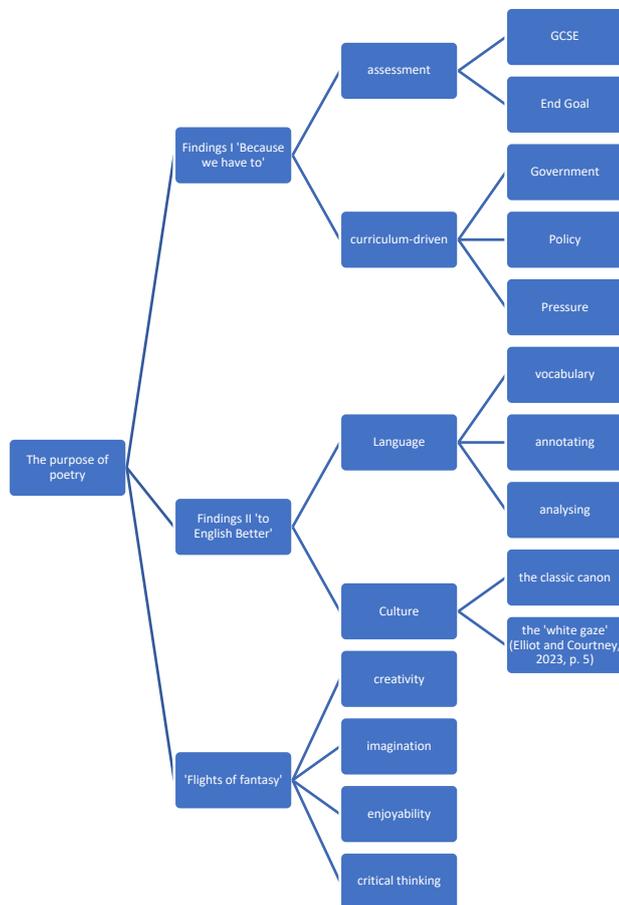


Figure 8 themes around the purpose of poetry: full-page image in Appendix 2

This thematization of the results provided me with a clear direction in each of the Findings chapters (5, 6 and 7), which presents similarities and differences between the interviews and shows the key issues and focus points that can be explored as a result of these interviews. For example, the curriculum was a recurring general theme and, in all interviews, a sense of pressure relating to the curriculum was discussed. This showed a link between the curriculum and the feeling of time pressure amongst the teachers, which relates to key issues within the current education system.

The interviews were transcribed manually to allow me to read, understand and interpret the text as I transcribed. I then re-read each interview and made notes on the code labels used and on which labels returned. For the coding process, Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that it is important to code the text twice to ensure that code labels include the key

elements of the text. Consequently, all interviews were coded twice, after which the basic codes and organised codes were tweaked so that the codes combined created a narrative and included the key components of each interview. Then they were looked at with my supervisor and changed appropriately to ensure the themes were reliable and reproducible. The interviews were each coded and thematised three times before identifying the final themes that related to the research questions:

1. Coding was done manually first, by colour-coding verbs, adverbs and nouns that showed the positionality of the interviewee, and beginning to identify potential codes. Some of these codes did not relate strongly enough to the research questions, and other codes were not too broad, and others connected with different codes later on, which led to a change in code labels. Highlighting the nouns, adverbs and verbs provided a sense of positionality. Some interviewees used 'I', whereas others used 'we'. Some interviewees used 'you' when providing examples, whereas others used 'I' (I think, I do, I feel, or 'you know, you would). Most interviewees used 'they' when talking about their students 'get them to do something' or 'They survive it. They come through it'. Some interviewees used many negative adverbs 'I don't', 'they can't.' Again, these word classes helped me identify the positionality of the interviewees. This first reading provided an objective and neutral approach to the data before interpreting the meaning.
2. The second time I read through the interview data, I began making connections between the interviews to identify themes that complemented or contrasted the interviews. The connections drawn here provided me with the drafting up of overarching themes.
3. In the third read of the raw data I created I-poems. These poems were all based around the pronouns I highlighted in the first read, and then connected to the themes I found in the second read. During this time, new themes came out from the data and the relevant themes to the research questions became clearer.
4. With the codes, ipoems and highlighted phrases and words now in place, I began writing up my findings.

## 4.8 Presenting the data

The data is presented to shape a holistic view of the triangular approach that I have undertaken during the data collection process. The themes that arose from the thematic analysis are presented as subheadings and followed by the findings on that particular theme. The findings are partially presented in poetic form, and particularly the student survey responses lent themselves well to being conveyed through free verse and senryu/haiku style poetry as the responses were often short and had a clear direction. The observations are presented in narrative form, to ensure I was not omitting any key details in the information. The poems are either presented first - to convey the students' views on a theme connecting to poetry, after which it is analysed – or after a short explanation of the theme and how the students' voice relates to the theme. I have presented the teacher interviews either in poetic form, as stand-alone quotes to show the teachers' voices, or as embedded quotes to add meaning to a point that another survey respondent or teacher participant may have made or to justify an argument. This varied approach in presenting the data allows for a poetic and narrative flow throughout the findings chapters, which illuminates the voices of the teacher participants, the student respondents and the researcher to allow for a balanced sharing of voices, which creates space for understanding similarities and differences between the teachers and students. Where I have used poetic forms, these poems are always formed from the words of an individual teacher participant, and always in the order in which they were presented in the semi-structured interview to ensure the narrative of the teacher was captured.

The data is presented across the three following chapters on the basis of the three overarching themes that have been introduced in Chapter 1:

1. 'Because we have to': In chapter 5 we will consider the first two research questions and consider students' and teachers' attitudes to 'English because you have to', and the relationship between poetry, assessment and curriculum, as well as the purpose of poetry in the school context. This chapter offers an insight into how teachers and students view the current state of poetry in the classroom context.
2. In the second findings chapter (Chapter 6), 'To English Better', we consider best practice and look at how poetry is taught and learnt to inspire learning to play and improve language as well as understanding 'our place in and with the world' through

exploring poems in socio-cultural contexts. This chapter shows, through the data, the potential benefits poetry can have and how it can be taught with purpose, clarity and enjoyability in the classroom context too.

3. In the third and final findings chapter (Chapter 7) 'Flights of Fantasy', the potential poetry has to engage learners creatively and critically in language education is expressed. In each of these chapters the themes of relatability, creativity and curiosity/criticality occur. However, in this chapter I focus on these concepts to explore how engagement with poetry can be further improved by developing relatability, creativity and curiosity of poems by learners and teachers (Figure 9).

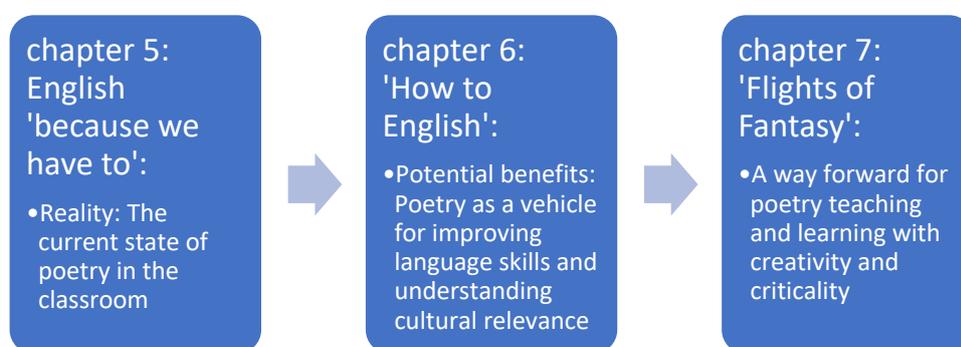


Figure 9. The order of the Findings chapters: Reality - Potential benefits - A way forward

## 4.9 Conclusion

The use of poetic inquiry in combination with reflexive thematic analysis is a unique approach that has not often been put into practice before, though it has been used to make connections, for example by Miller and Brockie (2015), Carroll et al. (2011) and Johnson et al. (2017). By using these two methods I was able to include the participant and the researcher voice, which has led to rich data that shows key themes which demonstrate challenges within the current education system with regards to poetry teaching and learning, without neglecting the passion and knowledge of the teacher, nor the wishes of the student. Rather than compartmentalising the themes, using poetic inquiry has allowed for the themes to be intertwined with the voices in a creative way, which contributes to the way in which meaning is made. Through the literature and through some of the data, poetry

is shown to be a vehicle for communication, and by analysing the data with poetic inquiry, I aim to express the participant voices as a vehicle to communicate and make meaning of the teachers' passion for their subject, and the students' overall need for enjoyable ways of learning poetry, that also connect with the end-goal: the exam. . This method led to themes arising that I had not considered in the initial thematic analysis of, in particular, the interview data. An example of this was the theme 'the modern world', which fit into the overarching theme of culture and showed the value of poems that relate to the students' worlds, creating a more diverse range of voices, although time constraints, as mentioned by Jennings et al. (2024) too, lead to a demand on exam, which negatively impacts the space teachers have to choose poems that are 'inspirational or enjoyable or thought provoking' (Jennings et al., 2024, p. 310). This will be discussed in detail in the Findings chapters.

#### 4.10 Ethical considerations

Gaining ethical approval from schools for this project was a long journey. The data collection period was set to begin shortly after the change in GDPR. This meant neither parties were always clear about what was possible. Initially, this project set out to be a longitudinal study, which would have looked at a few classrooms over a period of three years (from year 9-11). However, in light of the new regulations and the complexities of having the same class, this was changed to a shorter data collection period, in which more classrooms were observed and students would only participate in surveys, rather than the initial plan of including focus group interviews following the surveys. It was ethically easier to gain approval from the schools and easier for students to opt out by not completing the survey. The study still took three years to complete due to COVID-19, which meant that there was a 2-year gap before the final interviews took place as it became difficult to get in touch with schools and teachers.

Initially, all teacher interviews would have been completed in-person. However, due to COVID-19, only one interview ended up being in-person, the other 5 were conducted online or over the phone. For transcription purposes, all interviews were recorded with consent of the teachers. The interviews were recorded on my iPhone and then uploaded onto the University's OneDrive. All transcription was carried out manually to listen to and engage with the word and to engage with the participants' words in-depth.

The surveys were conducted with an opt-out system, where students who participated automatically opted in. The schools were made aware that they could withdraw at any moment, and the students participated in the interviews on a voluntary basis. This led to some students not completing the survey. During this research I have become more aware of the complexities of gaining ethical approval with under 18s, not only from the department and the ethics committee, but also from the teachers and schools. One school dropped out due to the ambiguity around the new GDPR, and one school would only allow observations (they accepted not long before COVID-19, which meant I was unable to collect data in this school).

#### 4.11 Limitations and Solutions

During the observations, the limitations concerned manual recording of the lessons. I was able to take notes, but as to not disrupt the lesson, I opted not to use a laptop and did not apply for ethics to either voice or video record to ensure students' and teachers' privacy and not to disrupt the flow of the lesson as little as possible. This means my notes were all initially handwritten, which may have led to missing some details of the dialogue during interactions and only allowed me to focus on one or two events at a time. However, due to the way in which I took notes and reflected on these after the lessons, the important aspects of the observations were covered. Namely, the multimodal signs in the classroom, and who was engaged in the interactions that took place.

The teacher interviews offered some limitations, as I was unable to carry out all interviews in-person due to COVID-19. Due to poor bandwidth at my house during this time, I opted for interviews over the telephone. Shortcomings due to the nature of the telephone calls were the body language, facial expression and subsequently some loss of words due to the speed of the speech. Nevertheless, the interviews included key information which covered the research aims and the topics in the guide I had with me to ensure all key components were discussed.

The survey data was an alternative to a focus group interview approach and worked effectively. It would have been thought-provoking to hear answers from students who would fill in follow-up questions, and this may still provide intriguing insights for future research to

understand whether thoughts on the purpose, and the creative and critical nature of poetry in education have progressed. Furthermore, some students would start the survey out in earnest, but they would stop filling in some of the open questions. However, the data was extremely useful and in line with the research aims, which are to explore the purpose of poetry and the student attitudes towards poetry as it's taught in the classroom. This method led to 145 survey results, whereas if I would have engaged only in focus group interviews, I would have heard fewer voices. Due to the number of survey responses, I was able to gain a wider variety of answers, which led to a more in-depth understanding of what the attitudes towards poetry learning are in the schools where the study was carried out.

## 5 Findings: “Because we have to”

### 5.1 Introduction

Research Question 1 focuses on what conceptions and experiences the English students’ and teachers’ have of English as it is taught and learnt in their setting. As part of this, I explored what the impact of policy, curriculum and assessment is on the teaching and learning of poetry, according to the literature, and students’ and teachers’ conceptions. In this Chapter I will explore poetry as something students and teachers learn and teach because they ‘have to’, but also considering how poetry teaching and learning is shaped by the curriculum and policy. The subthemes are

- ‘relatability and relevance’: One of the themes that came out of the data analysis was on relatability and relevance. Some English students perceived they wanted more fun poems and a wider range of poetry, yet others wanted more time to focus on one poem or felt there was not enough time. English teachers had similar experiences and one (Teacher participant 4, England) conveyed they found the GCSE anthology provided a ‘narrow view of what poetry really is’. I will look into these perceptions of poetry teaching and learning in the context of how students connect with these poems, and how they perceive how they would be able to connect more deeply with the poetry as set in the assessment by exam board and awarding organisations in alignment with the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4. I will also address the Dutch students’ ability to relate to poetry in their English lessons to better understand which opportunities and constraints there may be in this context in Dutch schools, which have a much broader and more autonomous curriculum than the English state schools.
- Time constraints lead to teaching for assessment: This second theme that I will explore here concerns the teacher workload and time for teaching beyond the test. In a system that is often focused on high-stakes testing and, as one teacher participant (4, England) mentioned ‘the end-goal’, it was intriguing to observe and explore as to how far the classroom poetry was perceived as taught for the assessment, or whether it was taught for the personal development of the student.

- “useful or not useful”: In this theme I explore students’ and teachers’ conceptions of the purpose of poetry in the classroom context. Some students find it ‘fun’, but not necessarily useful beyond the assessment, whereas others consider how it is useful for their creativity and their analytical skills. This theme will explore the differences between the Dutch and English students’ and teachers’ conceptions too, as it is intriguing understand why Dutch students might find poetry useful as they are not assessed on poetry in their final exam, although they might be in other exams set by the teachers.

In this chapter I will use poetic inquiry as a way to represent the data from the survey and interview responses. Furthermore, the observations will be explored in narrative style or reporting style, depending on whether it is a separate point that I am making, or whether it is part of an argument that evolved from the interview and survey data.

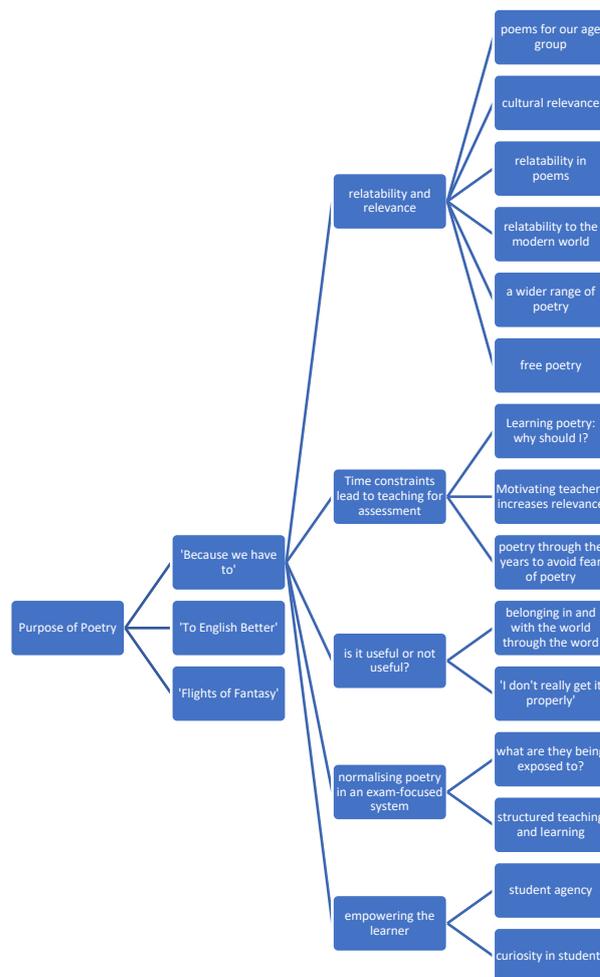


Figure 10. Thematic Analysis of 'Because we have to'. (A full page view of themes can be found in Appendix 2.)

Building on the literature history described in the literature review, this Chapter will focus particularly on the English students and teachers. However, I have added responses from the Dutch teachers and students, where it is relevant, such as in the 'useful or not useful' theme. This is done to understand the differences and to offer a comparative approach. Furthermore, I bring the Dutch participants in when considering what is positive or detrimental to engagement if this relates to policy, curriculum and assessment. This focus on the different voices and the way in which students and teachers perceive the impact of policy and curriculum on their teaching and learning aims to identify the engagement and impact of poetry teaching and learning in the schools that participated in this study, which aims to provide applicable ways to teach and learn poetry within the current educational settings. The collected data provided a wealth of information with regards to the students' and teachers' views and opinions, as well as what happened in the classroom. One of the key findings was that the students in this study felt they 'had to' do English for their exams and teachers felt compelled to teach the anthology poems in year 10 and 11, providing students with as much information on these poems as possible for them to be able to pass the exam. In this chapter, the following themes arose:

- *Student agency*
- *Relatability*
- *Normalising poetry (or reducing the fear of poetry)*
- *Creative approaches to poetry teaching and learning.*

All six teachers noted the value of poetry for learners, but not all appeared convinced about the way it was being taught in the classroom. Both the English and Dutch teachers agreed that teaching poetry throughout the years, rather than in short blocks near the end, could reduce the students' fear of poetry, and normalise poetry as part of the literature curriculum. One English teacher (teacher participant 2) managed to do this by using poetry as a vehicle to explore themes in other literary work and another was planning a way of introducing poetry from the first year in secondary school all the way through to the exam years, in order to provide a clear approach to embedding poetry in the classroom. In the

school where this teacher taught, they had begun to do this by not teaching poetry in blocks, but teaching it throughout the years, including in year 10, as part of language and literature themes. They found the students received extremely good marks for their GCSEs, especially with regards to the *unseen poetry* component compared to the previous years, and as a consequence, this was deemed a successful approach.

The voices of the students are presented in poetic form, and often those of the teachers too. This has been done to clearly present the voices that were included in this work, and to show either contrast or similarities in their answers. It is in some cases used to emphasise an emotion associated with learning or teaching poetry, and to bring together the voices to evidence and clarify a theme or result. This chapter will focus on the assessment aspect of poetry, and how students and teachers feel they are preparing for the exams. Additionally, I will consider how useful students and teachers find poetry. The findings show that in English education in particular, there is a trend towards teaching poetry to the test, and it appears both students and teachers often perceive this as having a negative impact on the experiences students have with poetry learning. Dutch teachers are impacted by time constraints, and often feel restricted by the textbooks that the school uses, which means that in order to teach poetry, they have to go beyond their standard workload.

Teacher participant 4 (England) notes there is a focus on the end-goal (the GCSE assessment) and students mentioned analysis and annotations when asked what the purpose is of poetry learning, whereas in the Dutch schools the focus was on exploring poetry through reading and writing as well as learning about English language and culture. In contrast, the English school students rarely mentioned poetry writing and there was a focus on the 'difficult' and 'hard to understand' poetry, which the students struggled to relate to. When asked whether there was anything that could be done to improve poetry lessons, this led to responses from both teachers and students on relatability.

## 5.2 Relatability and relevance

In this section, the themes *relevance and relatability* are explored with respect to the attitude 'Because we have to'. Relevance and relatability are here seen as what has direct

impact on the students' lives. For example, if a poem is 'relevant', why is that the case? Is it purposeful for the exam, or does it have purpose for the learner? Is it relatable or unrelatable because of the language, history or cultural context of the poem? Relevance can then be seen as a simile for purpose of poetry to the teacher and/or the learner, and relatability should be seen as to what extent the teachers and learners can connect their lives to the poem, and to what extent they have been able to make those connections. For instance, a poem that was written 300 years ago may not be relatable in its historical context, but may be relatable in a cultural or emotional context, or it could teach the learner something about a moment in history. As such, relatability and relevance are often connected, as when a poem is able to carry meaning for the student, or when a student is encouraged to analyse a poem based on their own perceptions of the world, it becomes purposeful to the student, as well as increases its relatability. When a poem is analysed primarily for the purpose of the exam, the individual relevance and relatability may not be clear, and as such the purpose of analysing becomes to pass the test, rather than to create a deeper understanding of cultural, historical or emotional values for the learner.

Four of the survey questions related directly to the relevance and relatability of poetry in school by looking at purpose, understanding and usefulness of poetry in the classroom:

- To what extent do you find poetry lessons useful?
- What are your reasons for finding it useful or not useful?
- To what extent do you understand the purpose of poetry?
- Please provide an example of what purpose poetry might have.

With regards to the question on the purpose of poetry was, the key responses included that it was for improving their language skills, analytical skills and for the exam. In addition, I asked the students what they most enjoyed about poetry lessons. Some of the responses were that they most enjoyed it when they could write poems they wanted, when the topic was 'interesting', 'easy to understand', when the lesson was 'engaging and you get involved with your input'. Yet another responded that, in contrast, they did not enjoy poetry lessons 'as they don't often tell a story that I can relate to'. It seems that students would enjoy more autonomy and relatability in their lessons, writing their own poetry and reading 'interesting'

poetry. Others mentioned there was ‘no point’ to poetry lessons or that poetry lessons were ‘boring’. Although they did not all relate their response to relatability, the theme of ‘relatable poetry’ kept emerging as students responded with answers that forged connections between the student and the poem, in the sense of poems being interesting to the student, poems being purposeful to the student, and poems being ‘fun’ and ‘exciting’.

Another point many responded with, was that they would like to see more group work, discussion and debate: 51% group work, 38.6% discussion, and 33.7% debate, which is in stark contrast with the 17.2% of students from the survey who responded they would like to see more individual work, and 9.6% responding they would like more poetry reading for exams. This shows a desire for sharing knowledge about the meanings they have come up with among themselves and a move away from the exam-focused curriculum for most of the respondents. This showed up in answers to the question ‘when do you most enjoy poetry lessons?’ too. Students noted they most enjoyed poetry lessons ‘when discussing it’, ‘when everyone is reading the poem together’, ‘when we read it as a class’. It was intriguing to see what kind of poems they would be more interested in learning about, rather than the set poems they were learning in the poetry classroom. This led me to write the poem below, ‘AQA poems are not relevant’, which was a direct quote from one of the survey responses to the question ‘what are your reasons for finding it useful or not useful?’. In this poem it starts with two senryu style stanzas, and builds up to longer stanzas, which reflects my experience as I went through the data. It started with a few responses that noted they wanted more contemporary poems ‘for our age’, and as I went through the dataset, I found many responses that were similar, and all focused on this aspect of relatability (or interest), enjoyability, and poems written in a language they could easily understand. This idea of relatability showed that not only do students want ‘more modern poetry’, but also to be able to connect the poems to their lives. The connection between the poem and the students’ place ‘in the world’ seems to play an important role in these students’ engagement and perceptions of what kind of poetry they might enjoy and find relatable and relevant.

### 5.2.1 Poems for our age group

#### **AQA poems are not relevant**

More modern poems  
a newer kind of poetry:  
Poems for our age

not picking hard poems  
More relatable funny poems  
Make the poems happier

Make it more free to thought  
Instead of exam spec.  
Adding a fun way of being able  
To remember them and  
Enjoy them.

Better and more enjoyable poems  
more exciting poems  
Reading poetry different from  
just those required for the course.  
More interesting poems from  
This changing era  
This generation  
More modern poems  
Newer kind of poetry like  
In nowadays music  
Reading poetry for fun.

I wrote this poem to show how it was a recurring theme that students wanted 'more' poems they could relate to, whether this was relating to time (this generation, our age, modern poems), or enjoyability (fun, enjoyable), and different poems (different from those required, more free to thought). Furthermore, the poem shows my process of looking through the results. First, I noticed responses particularly around their age and that they wanted to connect to the poems, then it continued to a few responses that concerned the difficulty of

the poetry they were introduced to. In the third stanza, which starts with 'more free to thought', I started to realise that students might want more autonomy. To emphasise this, I created two longer stanzas that are written in free verse, to be able to include multiple voices, which should read like a collaborative stream-of-consciousness between the various student voices and their thoughts on what kind of poetry is relevant to them. It ends back similarly to how it starts, as these three lines sum up the students' responses on wanting poetry to be enjoyable, relevant for their age, and more modern.

This poem is made up of predominantly survey responses from English school students. The Dutch students were triggered by nicer assignments and reading more fun poems, whereas the English students focused on the relatability in the sense of the poetry connecting to their personal experiences and moving away from the 'exam spec.' to read poems they might find more enjoyable. Teacher participant 3 from observation set B3 included *unseen poetry* throughout the year and combined this with other literary texts to allow students a wider variety of poetry, which I perceived as being successful during the observations with this teacher, as most of the students were responding actively and were connecting the poems to their own lives. In the Netherlands, there are no set texts, and subsequently the teacher has more freedom in choosing the poems, to aim for enjoyability and engagement for the learner with the content as well as the analysis of the text. Teacher participant 1 was from The Netherlands, and in this I-poem I created from their interviews, I aim to show that this teacher was able to play with different text types and through the variation of text types and poetry, find suitable literary texts for the learner:

### **Relevance remaining?**

I know I'm going to study at least  
Three works of literature, I don't have to  
tie down what they are, but personally,  
I think it's good to do a novel, a  
play and some poems to cover different  
genres I intend to use, recycle  
them, but I don't have to; could do other things.  
Try and pick up on things that are going  
on in that specific group or level

of maturity. [On the Beats Poems]:  
I don't know how successful this was, but  
about to get their poetry essays  
in, we'll see if there's any relevance  
remaining in what the beats were doing.

This poem is exclusively composed of the words from the interview with teacher participant 1 and is written in pentameter form with 14 lines, similar to the sonnet, but without rhyme and although some of it is in iambic pentameter, not all of it is. This structure of the poem emphasises that although the teacher does want to introduce their students to particular literary text types, they also feel there is a freedom in choosing texts they think the learner will relate to, and that they are open-minded to the thought that it might not work. Hence, the structure is clear, similarly to the sonnet structure of this poem, yet within that there is room for the teacher to play with the content and delivery of texts to develop their understanding of what engages their students. In this poem, I show that the teacher is seeking poems that students can relate to, and although they might re-use poems from a previous year, if they feel it does not work anymore, they are adaptable and feel free to look for other ways to include relatable content. The teachers I interviewed who were passionate and confident about poetry teaching and learning, and understand the purpose of poetry in the English classroom, were able to find playful ways to include poems and find relatable content for the students to explore. Teacher participant 1 further commented that, *'I think sometimes the choices of the curriculum and by the teacher are not particularly appropriate for pupils who are much younger'*, which shows a similar view to the students' responses on relatability in the above poem, 'AQA poems are not relevant', and the poems being accessible for *this generation*.

### 5.2.2 Cultural relevance

Another component of relatability for learners is cultural relevance, as teacher participant 3 (England) expressed they used poetry to help teach themes *'about society and some of the bigger ideas in society so for instance I'd use it for maybe good and evil or racism or something like that' [...]* *'to make pupils more culturally aware'*. Teacher participant 3 shows

they consider themes that apply to students and choose poems depending on what the theme is they might be looking at. The teacher then makes it relatable for the students by allowing them to explore the poem before being introduced to the original context the poem was written in. During the observations this led to intriguing discussions between students that looked at current shifts in the labour market due to technology when teaching *The Horse Whisperer* by Andrew Forster, and in *Vultures* it related to the theme of good and evil, which is one of the key themes in the novel *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, and in that sense allows students to learn to compare and contrast how themes are depicted in different ways within the literature, and gives them an introduction into intertextuality. Teacher participant 3 shows they find poems that are relevant to the learner and provides space for learners to analyse the poem based on a theme, as opposed to telling students how to analyse the poem and 'unpick' the text. While the students still moved within the boundaries of the curriculum and focused on themes that arose from the anthology cluster. The students were also able to interpret the poems in their own way, and as teacher participant 2 (England) noted '*give their own slant on it*'.

Not all teachers from the interview data were able to explore poetry to this extent in their classroom practice, although these teachers did express they would like to improve the relatability of poetry teaching and learning in the classroom, for example teacher participant 4 shares:

*"I would love to look at more, poetry probably more relevant to our kids, like I feel that the anthology is so limited. A lot of those ideas are just not... I think they find it very difficult to relate to those poets and that poetry and I think it's a shame because actually there is a lot of stuff out there which is more appropriate."*

Teacher participant 4 indicated that it was often due to the focus on the '*end-goal*' that they were not as flexible in their choices of poetry to find relevant poems for the students as they would like to be, and there was

*'very little room in the curriculum to just do things that you think are important for the sake of it. It's quite frustrating to be honest, because I feel like poetry is such a rich thing to get into, and I think a lot of our kids don't enjoy it because we teach it in a very structured way*

*and there's no room to kind of explore things, and I think a lot of them have kind of ideas that it's quite boring.'*

The curriculum felt limited for this teacher, and noted that there was not much time to explore poetry in ways that would be more valuable for the students: *'They don't enjoy it and I feel like we're really missing out on something that's really quite valuable to them just because there's no time to do it.'*

This teacher's responses show an understanding for the value of poetry, but this value does not seem to reappear in the classroom due to time constraints and the focus on assessment.

### 5.2.3 Relatability in poetry

Relatability in poetry came forward in the literature and was mentioned in the interviews and the survey responses several times. During the observations I noted that students engaged with poems more strongly when these poems were discussed beyond the original, historical context. For example, when *The Horse Whisperer* by Andrew Foster was discussed in one of the lessons by interview participant 3 (England), the interactions the students had amongst each other with regards to this poem showed the students were relating it to their world and envisaging the poem beyond the historical context it was written in. The poem (Appendix) lent itself well to interpreting it in a present day context. When the teacher provided space to discuss the poem in different contexts, one of the students mentioned MG Motors, and how they used to employ a vast amount of people and make fewer cars, whereas now they make more cars than ever but they employ the least amount of people. This comparison brought up other conversations and allowed for the discussion to go beyond the poetry and into sharing of experiences and understandings of the world from the students' perspectives.

In another observation, the students were asked to consider the poem in its original context, when looking at the poem *Kamikaze* by Beatrice Garland. A multimodal approach was taken to engage with the text, which meant that multiple ways of approaching the poem were used to engage the learner with the poem. In this instance, a presentation was shared on a projector, and then an interview with the family of a Kamikaze pilot. Allowing

students to see those who lived the context of the poem allowed for an approach that enticed learners through seeing the real-world impact on people's lives. Although asking students to come up with their own examples was effective in *The Horse Whisperer* poem, *Kamikaze* seemed to lend itself to coming to life through the lived experiences of others who had a family member who was a Kamikaze, and who talked about it. Subsequently, the learner was learning to understand the poem by connecting it to someone else's life. In contrast, in the *Horse Whisperer* lesson, the students were invited to be active participants by considering how the poem related to their world and their own lived experience. Both these methods seemed effective in terms of student engagement. However, In the lesson on *The Horse Whisperer*, all students were writing their analyses and annotations following from the discussion on the relevance of the poem, whereas with *Kamikaze*, the learners did get the opportunity to write down their thoughts but often waited for the teacher to provide prompts. This could be due to the way the task was set out, or due to the different classroom environments. Both ways are effective and showed engagement and would be worth exploring in other contexts to develop an understanding of their effectiveness.

Relating back to the literature, and Freire's (1996) and Freire and Macedo's (2005) understanding of creative and critical thought, learners in the one instance are building on their knowledge through their experience and understanding of the world, and in the other example they are retrieving information from someone's lived experience, creating a distance between the material and the learner. It could be argued that both types of teaching and learning are relevant and should be applied to poetry teaching and learning in the classroom, as on the one hand the students are able to explore their own place in the world, whereas on the other they are also seeing themselves as being with the world and with each other. Creating space for relevance and relatability in classroom poetry lessons was found one of the points students wanted to see more of.

Through poetic inquiry, I realised 4 out of the 6 teacher interview participants mentioned '*the world*', '*the modern world*' in combination with relevance and relatability, and 20% of students commented on relatability when asked what could be done to make poetry lessons better. This connects to the poem on p. 141 '*AQA poems are not relevant*', where I presented the responses where students said they wanted more poems for '*their own age*' and '*more modern poems*', yet it was not only the reading of poems that students commented on.

Especially the Dutch students commented on poetry writing, but within this poem below are three more responses from English students:

**Write our own**

More freedom in what we write

Making a poem about whatever you want

Let kids write their own poetry

*Being able to write our own poetry*

*Make our own poetry about things we like*

Letting children make their own poems will be fun for them

The responses in the poem “Write our own”, would not have been a surprise from the Dutch students, as they had engaged with writing poetry recently, although this concerned a structured approach, such as cut-up poetry, which was shown in the observations and interviews. Due to poetry writing not being part of the KS4 curriculum, and with poetry being removed as a possibility for the creative writing section of the language papers, writing poetry happens rarely in the upper years in English secondary schools. Subsequently, it was intriguing to find that there were two students from English schools who commented they would like to write poetry themselves. I have marked these in italics in the poem above. Poetry writing could be incorporated in classroom practice as a way to improve creative writing skills, but also to improve understanding of choices that are made in poems. It considers poetry as a craft and form of art, rather than as a piece of text to be analysed for existing meanings. By writing poetry, students are able to consider the choices in rhythm, metre and rhyme and become active in their approach to finding why certain choices allow for meanings to come out of a poem. The author may not always be aware of the effect a structural technique has on the meaning, but these structural choices might still add meaning or emphasise the meaning of a poem. Similarly, when writing the poems using the students’ responses, there were instances where I did not decide on the structure of the poem, yet when analysing the poem I wrote, using their words, the structure often added meaning to their words or to the theme. By primarily considering poems in a passive way, learners are unable to play with language and meaning making themselves, providing them with less agency in their learning and understanding of what value poetry might have to

them and to society. One of the students said they wanted ‘a newer kind of poetry’, which I used as the title for the poem below, in which I focus on what kind of poetry students said they would like to read in the poetry classroom:

### **A newer kind of poetry**

Pour some more examples of inspiring poems

Read more fun poems about present subjects

Find better and more exciting poems;

To get people further inspired

By not picking hard poems.

Poems that are funny

More interesting

More enjoyable...

Better.

I arranged this poem, ‘a newer kind of poetry’, in a similar way to a nonet,<sup>22</sup> although here starting with a long quote from a student, and ending with one word, to emphasise what students would prefer to see in poetry lessons: poetry to be more enjoyable and better. Furthermore, in this poem I aim to show the connection between contemporary poetry and students’ attitudes to poetry learning. The students responded that if the poems were more interesting, fun and enjoyable, then they would be more inspired and excited about studying poetry. This is what I aimed to convey in this poem, in the year 9 observations, allowing students agency in their response to poems before analysing and annotating to the exam speculations, showed students becoming more excited, curious and inspired as they shared their own experiences and knowledge in relation to the poem.

#### 5.2.4 Relatability to the modern world

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<sup>22</sup> A nonet is a French poetic style that is formed with 9 lines. The first line starts with 9 syllables, and each line has one fewer syllable, ending with one single syllable: <https://poetscollective.org/poetryforms/nonnet/> (accessed November 2023)

In the following extract from the I-poem I wrote using teacher participant 3's interview answers (Appendix 4:3), teacher participant 3 voices the connection between the text, the student and the relevance to the modern world, illustrating that when students have an interest in a text, they begin to enjoy the poem, moving way from the thought that they read poetry only 'because they have to' for the exam:

### **Relatability**

I enjoy the aspect as well

I mean

I've got like

You haven't seen

I think it even brings out the best in people

who are down the scale

I think when you see

The *relevance*

*It can give them ideas*

*about the modern world*

Similarly, students expressed what they 'would like to see more of' in the student survey:

Students and teachers in this study appear to both appreciate poetry when it is made relevant and feels accessible to them and when it gives them components to explore that relate to their current world. Other teacher participants showed the connection between the context and the worldly view too, linking poetry to relatable topics for learners. With the following poems I aim to show how teachers explore the purpose of poetry, which goes beyond what students 'have to do' in order to pass the exam, and allows students to consider the connection between their lives, the world they live in and the context of the poem. These connections between the student, text, and the world relate to Freire and Macedo's (2005) work on being in and with the world, through the word, and as such show that there are examples of critical pedagogy being included, at least to some extent, through the words of the teacher:

Teacher participant 2

**Hook the context**

I think that they do quite like the poetry lessons:

they're not looking at long pieces of text

I think they quite like the break

I think they quite like analysing

you can *hook the context* and sort of

hang that in the background: it opens it up

I suppose, and it *makes it more of a worldly view*.

Teacher participant 6

**From themselves**

you can show them that *the sky is the limit*

I think that's what I mostly mean by creativity

Not from a book but from themselves

Look around you, see *what's going on in the world*.

I formed the three extracts from the I-poems above directly from the interview responses from these teacher participants. The order in which the lines are presented, are in the same order as the interview took place. In the poem by teacher participant 3, the teacher was enthusiastic and passionate. They spoke fast, putting their thoughts into the world quickly. I aimed to present this poem showing that passion, and the way this teacher was 'thinking out loud'. This led to my choices on the line breaks in this section of the i-poem. In the second poem, what struck me was the repetition of 'I think', which I wanted to emphasise by starting each phrase that begin with 'I think' on a new line, only to be broken when the teacher mentions the 'other' (either 'you' or 'they'). In the final two lines there is a shift in the poem and the teacher provides more of an outward view by using 'suppose' rather than think. In the last poem, from teacher participant 6, the focus was more on the projection of what can be achieved through poetry and creativity, and how as educator their aim is to give students the autonomy to be creative, particularly relating to the students' creative writing.

In these three poems I illustrate three perspectives of how poetry in education can provide students with a deeper understanding on their world in relation to the poetry they read or write:

1. Poetry to give students ideas 'about the modern world'
2. Poetry analysis to expand students' understanding about the world
3. Creativity through poetry writing for students' to reflect on their place in and with the world.

### 5.2.5 A wider range of poetry

#### **Changes**

Change the poems

More unseen,

A selection of poems.

Change the poems,

Choosing one,

Rather than forcing students to read one.

Change to pour some more

Examples of inspiring

Poem: like Tupac

In this poem, 'Changes', I bring together responses of students who would like to see a change in the poems they are provided with, not only by changing them, but also by giving the students permission to be 'choosing one', rather than being told what they should read. One of the students noted they would like to see inspiring poetry by artists such as Tupac. I thought this was particularly intriguing as it conveys the relationship between rap and hip-hop and poetry. The title of the poem reflects this comment, as one of Tupac's songs is called 'Changes', and is on the topic of changes for a more inclusive and equitable society. In the above poem I illustrate the changes the students would like to see for more inclusive

poetry education, where students might be able to contribute to decisions on which poems are read.

One student responded they feel 'forced' to read particular poems, which was a recurring comment. The word 'force' was used eight times in the survey by eight different survey respondents. Other language that was used was 'because some teacher told me to do so', or that they least enjoy poetry lessons when they are 'told what to write about'. This shows a reduction in student agency and a case for them to copy existing information, connecting this to the overarching theme that they read poetry 'because they have to'. Although some students accept this because it helps them pass the exam, many of the respondents wanted to see a change from the existing poems to more intriguing and relatable poetry, and one noted they would prefer 'choosing one'. However, in the poems below I illustrate most responses on the question, 'Do you think anything could be done to make poetry lessons better? Please give an example', which shows there were a variety of responses with regards to widening the range of poetry.

### **A wider range**

From this generation

A more broad range of poems

Not just those required.

### **Funny poems**

Fun poems

More relatable, funny poems

Rather than old fashioned, boring poems

Let students discover their taste

- Make poems happier -

In poetry

In these two poems, 'A wider range' and 'funny poems', I convey the students' desire or a more diverse selection of poetry, with a particular interest in poems that are funny, happier and more enjoyable to read and analyse. These poems both consider inspiring relatability

and agency for students. In the GCSE anthology clusters, particularly in the power and conflict anthology, the poems are often on serious topics, such as war, poverty and conflict with the self or, like in Seamus Heaney's *Storm on the Island*, with the government. These serious topics allow for little humour, and although these poems are important and valuable, the students note they would enjoy poetry more if it was more fun, communicating that a wider variety of poems would be welcomed. There appears to be an understanding that learning poetry has to be difficult, boring and serious, but there are many poems with humour out there, whether due to the form or structure. Furthermore, it is not only the poems itself, but also how they are analysed, taught, and how analyses are assessed in the secondary education context. Teachers did not mention humour in the interviews, although they did mention enjoyability, and that learning could be an enjoyable process:

*It's something you can do in one lesson, you know, you can do a poem and do some work on it in one particular lesson, give them access to high quality literature, so I think it's great. I really do think poems stimulate class discussions, I've had some excellent discussions over the years [...] I enjoy the aspect as well. I mean, even at all age groups, I've got like, you haven't seen the other year 9 class and you can't beat them when they come up with something."* (Teacher 3, England)

*"This is how you play with the students and with the, with the poems and with the language and I just love doing that. I thought that was fascinating. They were so eager, they were so enthusiastic."* (Teacher 6, The Netherlands)

Teacher 2 (England) mentioned that although the pressure on exams reduces enjoyment in poetry learning, she did see value in 'talking about poetry and see it as, you know, something they can just enjoy.' They continued that they were keen to 'think about [...] strategies to just enjoy poetry with kids.' Showing that they understood there was a way to enjoy poetry, but 'that's a thing that is missing at the minute.'

In the observed lessons, there were few instances of humour in the classroom, and when laughter did erupt it was often caused by a student's actions, such as a student flicking a ruler across the room and it landing next to another student. In classroom observation B2:1

there was some humour, which was instigated by a student, but followed through by the teacher. When students were studying 'The Horse Whisperer' by Andrew Forster, one student asked the teacher for 'puns about horses', and the teacher responded, 'neigh'. The students then went on to think of their own puns until the teacher said, 'sssh'. The silence that followed was broken up when a student entered from outside, complaining they had no clock or watch, so they did not know what time it was. Another student then responded with, 'time to get a watch. You've entered the comedy area.' This resulted in some laughter, but as students had very limited time to complete their analysis task on The Horse Whisperer, they all continued their analysis writing. As this example shows, humour in the classroom was well-received. It would have been intriguing to observe more instances of humour in the classroom to compare the students' attitudes towards humour in poetry learning. However, it was often the students who were humorous by causing disruption, rather than the teacher instigating a sense of humour. This example shows the ability of students and teachers to make jokes, even when the content is not aimed to be funny. However, it might be intriguing to understand whether and how fun, enjoyable, and funny poems may benefit the students' approach to learning poetry.

#### 5.2.6 Free poetry: more autonomy for teachers and students

##### **Free poetry**

More understandable  
Let us choose our own  
poem  
Make it more  
free to thought  
instead of  
exam spec.

'Free Poetry', was written in free verse to present the wishes of the students to have fewer restrictions and boundaries within their learning, and perhaps more agency. In this poem I illustrate the responses that show students would appreciate being able to pick their own poetry rather than focusing solely on the poems and the material for the exams. This

poem consists of responses from only English students. In Dutch schools there are no boundaries within the curriculum that tell students which poems to read, and this showed in their responses too. This does concur with the literature and the teacher's thoughts on limitations caused by policy and curriculum design, rather than classroom design and the teachers' didactic methods.

In an interview with teacher participant 5 (The Netherlands), the teacher connected opportunities for freedom in the lessons to provide space for student agency through personalised learning and creativity:

### **Trigger some creativity**

The opportunity to be

A little bit free

They will show something

About how creative they are

Rather than...

"I want you to build"

Give all the structure,

Do everything you expect that they will do

Because you are telling them to.

Give them a little bit of personalised education

Choose how they want to do that

They will come up with nice ideas

Leave it to them

They can come up with something

A little bit of time to think about it

I want it to come from them:

How would they express that?

I created this poem using only words from this teacher in the chronological order of the interview. In the majority of this poem, I convey the teacher's thoughts on the balance between structure and student agency, in which the teacher uses the pronoun 'they',

focusing on what the teacher thinks the students would appreciate and what would be most useful for the students when considering students' creativity. The teacher notes the value of personalised education, and to be cautious not to make education too prescriptive, because the student will end up doing the work only 'because you are telling them to'. In the final two lines I give a summary of this stream of consciousness from the teacher, where they depart from the pronouns 'you' and 'they', which they use to illustrate structure and agency, and go back to their own view ('I'), followed by the question in the final line, suggesting the teacher wants to learn from the students too. Through this synthesis, I aim to illustrate how the teaching and learning poetry can embrace the pillars of critical pedagogy, at least to some extent, within the boundaries of the curriculum, by considering teaching and learning poetry as an act of creativity and curiosity through dialogue and questioning.

The notion of a relatable curriculum through connection and student creativity and autonomy is the focus of this section of the thesis, as I aim to illustrate how the teachers comment on creativity and criticality and connect with critical pedagogical ways of increasing student engagement by teaching poetry beyond what 'the student has to'. Students responded to the survey with comments relating to wanting more modern poems, funny and enjoyable poems and poems 'for their age'. Both teachers and students in this study appear to understand that there is a purpose to poetry for enabling them to connect poems to their own context. However, time constraints sometimes hinder the ability for teachers to introduce a wider variety of poems. This appears in both Dutch and English participants. For Dutch participants, it might mean students are not introduced to poetry in their English lessons at all, and for the English participants it may mean a limited introduction to poetry only through the GCSE anthology that is read and analysed for the students' assessment.

In the following section the effect of time constraint is explored in more depth to understand whether they feel they are constrained by time, and if so, how the teachers in this study approach time constraints in the teaching and learning of poetry. Furthermore, we will consider the student voice in relation to time constraints in the classroom, and the impact it has on their learning and engagement with poetry.

## 5.3 Time constraints lead to teaching almost exclusively assessment material

### 5.3.1 Learning poetry: Why should I?

As I progressed in the analysis of the data, I began to see overlapping conceptions of engagement (or lack of engagement) with poetry in poetry lessons through the literature, the observations, the surveys and the interviews. I interpreted a summary of the responses and observations I made, which led me to write another *furniture game poem* or *I am poem*<sup>23</sup>. This resulted in the following I am poem:

#### **Why should I?**

I am a secondary school student  
I think poetry is dull and boring  
There's no point just  
Annotations, analyses,  
My parents don't use it,  
My siblings never needed it,  
Why should I?  
It can also be creative  
Help us find innovative ways to think,  
Give us a deeper understanding of world matters  
To make meaning,  
Develop vocabulary, language,  
Understanding culture...  
But not in English schools,  
Maybe in some Dutch schools?  
We just learn poems we

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<sup>23</sup> I was introduced to furniture game poems by Poet Laureate Luke Wright at the NATE conference in 2019. They start with 'I am a...' and the student inserts an item of furniture. Instead of an item of furniture, I chose to focus on my participants to join the different perspectives from the literature, observations, teacher interviews and the survey data.

Can't relate to  
Written by dead, white middle-class men  
About power, conflict and  
Mainly World War 1.  
They're all dead,  
They're not me.  
It's just to pass an exam  
What's the point?

The literature mentioned 'dull', and the students and teachers mentioned 'boring', the students reiterated that 'there was no point'. 'My parents don't use it, my siblings never needed it, why should I?' paraphrases the teacher and student responses: Teacher participant 4 (England) shared that the parents did not value poetry, and likewise one of the students noted it was 'boring and a waste of time, my siblings never had/have to use it in all their jobs they had in the past and currently have.' In the lines from 'It can also be creative' to 'understanding culture' I combine arguments from the literature with the student responses, showing that not all conceptions of poetry are negative. This poem illustrates that there are mixed conceptions of poetry teaching and learning, and around the purpose of poetry. Then in the poem, I make a shift in meaning as it begins to question the difference between what happens in Dutch and what happens in English schools. The answer is based on the responses from teachers and arguments from the literature, as well as what is included in the anthology. In the final four lines there are links to the issue of relevance and relatability of the poems, using arguments from the literature, the teachers' responses and the survey responses and combining all of these. The results from this study show that the end-goal is still the dominant focus, rather than personal exploration, particularly in English schools at Key Stage 4. However, it does provoke thought that there are positive attitudes towards poetry itself, leading to consider poetry as a worthwhile addition to the National Curriculum for English, both in The Netherlands and in England.

The free verse form of the poem reflects the entanglement of the voices and how they all resonate with each other with regards to the exam, although they come at it from different perspectives. I aim to convey through this poem that there are voices that understand there is a purpose to poetry in the classroom context, even when the focus is

predominantly on the end-goal assessment. Both students and teachers in this study share they want to see changes in poetry teaching and learning, to enhance engagement and enjoyability of the way they experience and understand the purpose of poetry. In Dutch schools there is the opportunity to explore poetry in different ways, but it is not always taught in teacher training and does not need to be included in classroom practice, causing schools in The Netherlands to a variety of approaches to poetry teaching and learning, if they include it in their lessons at all. Interviews 5 and 6 show that there is scope for introducing poetry as part of the curriculum of their school, although it is up to the teachers to implement this in classroom practice and constrained by teachers' workload and time constraints, as teacher participant 5 (The Netherlands) conveys through this poem I constructed to represent their views:

**You need to love teaching to put up with all the challenges**

It's not like everyone loves poetry  
I think it's one of the problems  
If you don't like poetry and  
You don't know how to read a poem and  
You don't know how to approach a poem how  
Are you going to teach that?

If we're going to implement something  
Really totally focused on some poetry  
Teachers – they will need some kind of schooling  
To learn how to approach that

Another colleague developed a poetry project and  
It didn't go on  
Colleagues didn't want to work with that.  
We do have a lot of work you know  
It's so busy  
It's so much work you know  
They already have the lessons prepared

They are just recycling lessons and using that

A new method

It is more work

Make new tests again

Work comes in again

Extra work and extra

*Moeite*<sup>24</sup>

That's why

It's a bit difficult.

No one is talking about motivation for teachers.

I wrote this poem in free verse with only direct citations from the interview with teacher participant 5 (The Netherlands) in chronological order. The stanzas that convey the changes in focus are:

Stanza 1: This introduction to the issue the teacher has with introducing a different approach to poetry lead to the final line, in which a question is posed by the interview participant.

In Stanza 2: I show the teacher's initial response to their own question.

Stanza 3: I include an example the teacher provided on a solution that a teacher in their school had to increase engagement, purpose and enjoyability in poetry teaching and learning. However, it also shows how their proposal was received and what the other teachers' responses were in their school.

Stanza 4: I aim to convey the core elements that the teacher shared on why introducing new ways of teaching and learning poetry were not perceived well. (Teacher participant 5, The Netherlands)

The time constraints and high workload are posed by this teacher to be a problem as there is hardly any time to plan creative lessons that deviate from the textbooks. Teacher participant

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<sup>24</sup> *Moeite* is a Dutch word for, in this case, 'effort'. Moe also means 'tired', and it has connotations with something that is tiresome.

6 (The Netherlands) shares this concern too. However, there is potential for change if the school and colleagues are open to changes and if there is training for teachers and time to create their own lesson plans. Furthermore, teacher participant 5 conveys the benefits of teaching and learning poetry in a way that they think will engage learners. The focus of the following poem is on the purpose poetry can have in education to benefit language learning and for the development of understanding variations between people::

**You can do much more than you might think**

Language awareness, interpretation,  
critical thinking, maybe even self-regulation,  
empathy, focus on the interpretation  
looking from different approaches and  
different views:  
Different countries, language variations  
It's not right or wrong,  
It's just a different variation.

This teacher shows that poetry has many attributes that help with making and shaping meaning as well as with communication and shows the teacher's understanding of the benefits poetry might have in the classroom that go beyond the analysis of poems as they are often analysed in the English language classroom. This teacher, through my poem, offers a way of reading poetry that creates space for poems to become relatable and approachable for students.

Although teachers mention time and other constraints frequently in the interviews, there were no direct questions in relation to time in the student survey. However, there were some associations with time when the students were asked what they found most or least enjoyable, and what could be done to make poetry better. One student mentions they wanted 'less poems for the exam', and another noted that they do least enjoyed poetry when 'it is time consuming and hard', but overwhelmingly they responded on the relatability of the content and wanting different poems to read. Teacher participant 4 (England) suggested that with more time the selection of poems could be made more varied, with more relatable poems. They are assuming that, because of the time constriction, students

are overwhelmed if they need to make sense of enjoy relatable poems 'difficult poems', causing a "narrow view of what poetry really is". The teachers in this study did mention time constraints and lack of time to teach poems, but also to prepare for poetry lessons to increase the diversity of poetry the students would get. Particularly teacher participant 4 from England, and teacher participants 5 and 6 from the Netherlands referred to time constraints as being one of the reasons for not teaching a wider variety of poetry, and poetry that the teacher enjoyed too, or hardly teaching any poetry at all.

Teacher participant 1 (The Netherlands) notes that due to individual learners learning at different speeds, sometimes they do need to continue with the topic and have to move on due to time restrictions and for the benefit of those learners who have completed their task on a poem:

### **Get it done**

Sometimes does end up with  
me just telling them things  
At some point you have to  
round it off so you might have to  
help them get it done quickly

You try not to be too bewildering and  
leave them in the wilderness

In this poem I purposefully repeated the 'you have to' phrase, which came up twice in this section of the teacher interview. I interpret this as the teacher understanding that they need to move on, whereas simultaneously not wanting to 'leave them in the wilderness.' The second stanza of the poem shows how the teacher sets the lesson up by not being '*too bewildering*', which would aim to allow as many students in the class as possible to follow the lesson and get something out of it. If students are asked things that they find '*too difficult*', they might find the lesson boring or are unable to participate and engage actively. Nine students responded that poetry can be 'hard to follow', 5 responded with poetry being 'difficult' or 'too difficult' and 18 responses were that they had trouble understanding poetry or did not understand it at all. This relates to time constraints leading to students going

through the material at a speed where they cannot get depth in understanding the poem, creating little space for students to personalise their learning.

In observation A1:1 (Netherlands), the teacher stimulated discussion between the students. The majority of students engaged with the discussion and thought of questions and came up with answers with regards to the meaning of the poem that was discussed. However, some students appeared to lose interest once they realised it was a lesson on poetry and a few were unable to answer the teacher's questions. I observed in observation A1:1 that some students would revert to sending messages on their mobile phones instead of engaging with the lesson material.

In the English schools there was a sense of increased time pressure, as teachers have to take into account the many different components of the English language and literature curriculum. In English literature the teachers cover one or two novels and one or two plays alongside the fifteen anthology poems and the unseen poetry. Students have to be able to analyse the texts, understand the themes and be able to contrast and compare poems, both in the unseen and anthology components of the GCSE assessment. Teaching the content and the poetic devices as well as analysis methods can be time consuming, and can restrict teachers from teaching in their ideal or preferred way, as Teacher participant 2 notes,

*'Ideally, I would be working in groups more. And doing sort of more student led activities. That's something that I'll do sort of occasionally throughout the term, but not every lesson because I feel like it takes longer to teach the points that I need to make and I feel like sometimes we're kind of towards a timescale. So it's perhaps more of a timescale that holds you back from being more creative.'* (Teacher participant 2, England)

Although this teacher did feel there were elements of group work and creative practice that they could apply to their teaching, there was also a sense of time being a restrictive factor in enabling their best practice. The teacher further noted that their teaching had changed over time and included less space for creativity and group work now than when they started in their teaching profession. The teacher reflected on doing more of this going forward. Unfortunately, we ran out of time for the interview to ask more on how they might implement this idea and how it could benefit purposeful practice:

*'I've sort of be thinking about obviously some of the lessons I used to teach when I was younger in the profession. I did do more groupwork. I think as part of my role I could be developing more student led activities with poetry. So that it's not always the visualiser and me annotating the poem and them copying the ideas down.'* (Teacher participant 2, England)

This response implies the concern that teachers are not motivated to engage with student-led activities, and the focus remains primarily on the annotations and providing students with the information they need for their GCSE exam. Both responses from teacher participant 2 and 4 suggest increasing the amount of student-led activities and group work if they had more time, which indicates that they find the planning and adopting group work activities in their lessons more time consuming, yet a more engaging way of learning. When the students were asked in a multiple answer question what they would like to see more of in their poetry lessons, group work was often included in their answers (59.6% of students included group work in their answer, other answers also included discussion and debate, see page 243-244 and Figure 10 for a detailed reflection on this survey question).

### 5.3.2 Motivating teachers to increase relevance in learning

As teacher participant 3 alluded to when indicating that 'it's the timescale' that holds them back, it feels as though teaching is restricted by time constraints and the focus on assessment. Teacher participant 5 (The Netherlands) noted that time constraints and work load issues can lead to a lack in motivation for teachers as well as students: *'No one is talking about motivation for teachers'*. The Dutch government provides incentives for people to become teachers with grants and funds, but the salary and work hours cause many of these people to quit the profession. A study by the Dutch Ministry for Education, Culture and Science ([Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en wetenschap, 2024](#)) conveys that there are fewer people applying for teaching degrees in secondary education despite the government investing in funding for their studies. A news article from a reputable Dutch media source ([Een Vandaag, Avro Tros, 2021](#)) stated that almost a third of new teachers quit their teaching profession within five years in 2021, with an increasing amount of teaching vacancies, as well as an increasing number of students, this leads to high workloads for current teaching staff, with very little reward for those already in the teaching profession. The Dutch Ministry

of Education, Culture and Science noted that the government has pay packages for those teaching in special-needs education and funds for people to become qualified teachers, but there is no information on a pay-rise for the current teachers. One of the main factors for people leaving the profession seems to be the lack in coaching and support for new teachers alongside the workload and work pressure ([Inspectie van het Onderwijs, Nederland, 2023](#)), which is what Teacher participant 5 (The Netherlands) alludes to as well.

In the poem below I present a similar view on workload and Teacherparticipant 6 (The Netherlands) their conception of the impact of the system they are teaching in. This poem is written in free verse, using a selection of phrases from the teacher interview in chronological order in which they were uttered during the interview. To develop an understanding of how this teacher conceptualises what could be done to improve English lessons in their Dutch school environment, I have brought the ‘tools’ and their solutions together in the first stanza, whereas in the second stanza I illustrate the teacher’s difficulty in realising these improvements.

### **Tools for change**

So much time involved and  
Within the system,  
If the board of directors says  
‘We want a different style of teaching’  
Give us the tools,  
Give us the time,  
Give us the money,

If you have to do it all  
In your own time  
At your own expense then  
It becomes too hard and  
Especially young people with family –  
I can totally understand that  
They are scared of change:  
It involves so much more work.

In the above poem I conceptualise the teacher's experience that even in a country without a restrictive curriculum, such as The Netherlands, there are problems with workload for teachers. Teacher participant 6 shares that the other teachers end up restricting themselves by following textbooks, which, according to them, possibly provides too many boundaries. I have conveyed this with the teacher's words in the next poem 'Textbooks have boundaries', through which I aim to show that when there is little to no curriculum in place in an environment where there is a high workload and time pressure, similar difficulties arise as those mentioned by the English teacher participants. I was intrigued that on the one hand this teacher noted that there were boundaries, yet on the other hand they did conceptualise a different way of teaching in which 'the sky is the limit' and where 'there is no limit' and 'they can explore their own direction'. In this poem I aim to introduce this contradiction, and through the contradiction I aim to show that when there is a balance between freedom to work in a different way and a framework, the students and teachers have a direction, as well as space to explore the direction of their teaching and learning practice:

### **Textbooks have boundaries**

With the textbook you

Have these boundaries

Within the boundaries

You have to work

If you do it a different way

You can show them

The sky is the limit

You still have to give them

Some kind of framework

Otherwise they're lost and

They don't know how to

Tackle it.

Just trying to make them realise

There is no limit

They can explore in their own direction

In the above poem, I aim to explore how by following textbooks, the teachers provide themselves with boundaries, and what goes beyond the textbook can feel, as this teacher explains, like too much work, as the tools, time and funds for these different ways of teaching and learning can cause the teachers to work extra on top of their already full workload. It appears many teachers, and the literature, are concerned with not only the content restrictions from the anthology poems, but also the time constraints that arise from a lack of teachers, a focus on the assessment and a need to cover all the core content, and the already high teaching load of teachers. To offer a slightly different view, Teacher participant 3 (England) felt the curriculum allowed enough time to include unseen poetry and anthology poems in their teaching and learning design:

*'I have sort of in the past tried different ways of doing things but I think you know at the end of the day, as long as you've got a poem in front of you, you can easily design, easily get a lesson out of it. You don't need to do things where kids move around the classroom or colouring or if you like that sticking in these bits that you do, you just need to get to the matter of learning and explore the ideas about the reading and I think you can do that in small groups and individually.'* (Teaching participant 3, England)

This extract from the interview conveys how the teacher focuses on the lesson material and that they switch between small group work and individual work, and value both types of learning: both through collaboration and for the learner as individual. At another point during the interview, this teacher noted,

*'I'm not saying we haven't done that at GCSE because sometimes you just have to do it. You just have to cover the content. But I certainly think there's more scope in years seven to ten to spread the poems out. Especially key stage 3. You've got much more opportunity then to space the poems out and then deliver them in more depth and stuff so ...'* (ibid.)

This response shows the value of introducing students to poetry early on in their education, to avoid the fear of unseen poetry later on (Lockney and Proudfoot, 2013). Teacher

participant 3 does contrast this sense of delivering poetry in more depth in the early years, which raises the assumption that in key stage 4 they might not learn poetry in as much depth with the set poems. However, this response illustrates that there is opportunity in the earlier secondary school years to include poetry in an engaging way, and possibly provides scope to include poems that are relatable for the students and potentially not as “difficult to understand”, so the students feel prepared for the more complex poetry at Key Stage 4.

### 5.3.3 Poetry through the years to avoid feeling scared of unseen poetry

The above interview data convey that introducing students to poetry earlier on can benefit their engagement and attitude towards poetry later. Although poetry writing does happen at Key Stage 3, and reading poetry does too, the way in which it is taught and learnt does not necessarily provide the consistency to set students up for success at Key Stage 4. However, in Teacher participants 2 and 3’s school, poetry is taught in Key Stage 3 to explore poetry analysis, and the poetry focuses on themes that students can connect with, as seen in the classroom observations where the poems ‘Vultures’ by Chinua Achebe and ‘The Horse Whisperer’ by Andrew Forster were taught. Although these poems are not particularly recent, they are taught in a way that provides students with an opportunity to connect with these poems.

The observations showed that there are possibilities in pedagogical practice to make, at least some, of the poems relatable to students by providing them space to explore poems either together or on their own, and to engage creatively and critically in making meanings through this process. Subsequently, by teachers adopting an approach to provide a theme but not the exact context to begin with, it provides students with space to gain perspective. By adopting a basic approach to teaching poetry in general, students may become more comfortable with the various methods of analysis and more familiar with poetic language, making the poems more accessible. However, poetry is not necessarily taught the same way in all schools and interviewing Teacher participant 4 (UK) gave a different perspective, as recounted in the next poem: ‘Writing poetry in year 7’. This teacher noted that poetry was not taught throughout the year, but there was some poetry writing in the lower years:

#### **Writing poetry in year 7**

A couple of times in half term  
Just seeing what they do.  
I think it would be better  
If they had more time to practise,  
To talk about it.  
Really just quite nice for them to  
Have very little, you know, rules  
Doesn't have to be a certain style.  
You can just go off and write a poem  
It's quite interesting to see  
What they bring back,  
I feel like I cheat:  
Forcing them to be creative,  
It does give them the opportunity  
Even if it's just five minutes  
It will have to be creative.

Similarly to previous poems, I wrote this poem in free verse. Here, I have applied this form to connect it to the teacher's lines 'have very little, you know, rules / Doesn't have to be a certain style.' I have used punctuation to signal a change in focus. For example, in the first two lines the teacher mentions an explorative approach to teaching poetry, then she focuses on time constraints for enabling this. I then move the poem to what the teacher says about how they might implement writing to stimulate the students' writing process by having 'very little [...] rules.' Subsequently, it comes back to how the teacher feels they are currently able to implement poetry writing in the classroom space: They feel as though the creativity they provide in the lesson is forced, whereas they would like creativity to come from the students with fewer prompts. The teacher does note later on that poetry writing does not have 'any proper space' and 'you have to give it a considerable amount of time for the kids to work on their confidence, to play with it, to have them look at different types of poetry, to look at different poets' and that some of these poetry writing activities can feel 'like, sort of a very ticky-box exercise'. Similarly to Teacher participant 3. (England), this teacher notes how 'the whole thing then again becomes quite prescriptive' in year 10 and 11, and indicates that

though there is scope for creative writing in the early secondary school years, at Key Stage 4 there is very little and 'it's sort of like a week-by-week thing that we follow, which you know, is good for the GCSE but it's not hugely creative.' This contrasts the GCSE exam preparation with creativity, which is intriguing as it indicates that the GCSE exams are not found to be creative. Interview participant 2 (England) notes that creativity 'is in the rulebook of the exams', which shows some conflicting views of how students can prepare for the GCSE and could cause teachers to teach differently according to their views.

#### 5.4 Useful or not useful?

One of the findings that stood out in the exploratory approach to understanding teachers' and students' perceptions of poetry in the classroom, was that there was a very clear focus on the 'end goal' (Teacher participant 4), but that the purpose of poetry in and of itself was sometimes lost in the classroom. Interview participant 1 noted it was something they would think of more in future as they felt the purpose was so obvious to them: *'[the purpose is] obvious because it's something I enjoy; I think it's brilliant, amazing and magical to connect with a mind at a different time. – get a real thrill out of that – part of our humanities group mind.'* Furthermore, they noted that, *'something that I feel is obvious because it's something that I enjoy, but that's not so obvious to them, maybe'* and added that it is *something that I should address more.*

The students from both England and The Netherlands had mixed responses and noted on the one hand that poetry helped them expand their creativity and was perceived as having purpose in the classroom context and beyond, and being useful for the student, as reported in the next poem: It's very useful.

#### **It's very useful**

Understand myself

Expanding the mind

Perspective of life.

Imagination

Create a hidden story

Finding morals

Express what you feel

Make minds more creative

Expand creativity

This poem was written in a haiku/senryu format, which has =<5 syllables in the first line, =<7 syllables in the second line and =<5 syllables again in the third line. I chose this format as I could focus each stanza on a different aspect of why poetry is understood as being useful by students, and because their answers corresponded with the right number of syllables. The survey question that prompted these responses was the survey question 'What are your reasons for finding it useful or not useful?' In the poem above it shows some students found poetry to be very useful, particularly when taking into account creativity, imagination and providing them with a (different) perspective of life. In contrast to these responses, other students did not understand why they were learning poetry and did not find it useful, as reported in the next poem.

### **It's not useful**

There's no point

Won't need it for the future

There's no point in it.

When you get older

You don't need a poem,

It's just for fun then.

Boring, waste of time

Poetry doesn't help me

Why do I need to?

It was intriguing to see that the majority of Dutch students responded that they did have an understanding of the use poetry has for expanding knowledge of language and culture. By contrast, the responses from the English students, although some acknowledged there was purpose, included that there was 'no point' (34.1% of English respondents) and 11.8% said they studied poetry for their exams. This suggests that almost half (45.9%) of the student survey respondents from English schools only studied poetry for their exams and/or did not see the wider purpose. Although this is a small sample size, the result concurs with Elliott (2020) who questions the purpose of the poems chosen in the GCSE exams. Furthermore, as Elliott (2020) and Cumming (2007) argue, the purpose of poetry in the classroom is often to analyse and annotate. The results of the student survey related to these arguments too, with 15 (17.6%) of the English students noting they were either not clever enough, did not understand poetry or left the question blank, and 16 (18.9%) stated they learnt about language analyses, annotations and language techniques through poetry lessons. This leaves 17.6% of English school students in the study suggesting poetry is useful for other things beyond the assessment focus, this includes analyses and annotations, as these skills are provided to help students pass the exam, teaching them specific structures of writing such as a *SEES paragraph* (Teacher participant 3, England) or a *PETAL paragraph* <sup>(25)</sup>. In the next poem I have presented the voices of the survey respondents in the English secondary schools, who indicated they learnt other skills from poetry mentioned the following:

**It helps destress sometimes**

teaches you how to write like a poet

helps express ideas and thoughts

encourages a deeper thinking

helps you understand what people thought

About the country

Learning more about the past

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<sup>25</sup> SEES stands for Statement, Example, Explain, Summarise  
PETAL stands for Point, Evidence, Technique, Analysis, Link

Learn to find implicit meanings  
Gives me an option to create a hidden story  
But in a simple, single lesson.

In the poem 'It helps destress sometimes' (the title was a response from the survey), I focus on two aspects of why the English students find poetry useful. The first stanza relates to the self and the inward-looking purpose of poetry to understand the self better and to engage in deeper thought. In the second stanza, the focus is on what the student can learn from and about the world through poetry, providing a different outlook. This relates to the essence of Critical Pedagogy, which is to question your place in the world (expressing your own ideas and thoughts) and with the world (how other people perceive the world and to learn from others).

#### 5.4.1 Belonging in and with the world

These are all skills that contribute not only to poetry, but to learning and education in general, to find our place in and with society (Freire, 1996), and to the ongoing process of creativity and criticality in the classroom (Bezemer and Kress, 2008). Teachers mentioned that they value deeper thinking too. Teacher participant 3 provided an example of how they embed poetry in learning about societal themes and making the poetry relevant and relatable to the students' lives or to other literature, which I have represented through the poem 'What you want to convey':

##### **What you want to convey**

You think about what you're teaching  
I know I'm going to be teaching about  
good versus evil  
I would think naturally in my mind about  
the poems that I've taught  
'oh, Vultures'  
Rather than doing it randomly,  
Connect it with a theme  
Pupils have a starting point and you can say

‘the character’s evil just like in the novel.’

This poem shows how the teacher connects themes students can relate to poems, rather than considering a poem first and asking the student what it means, this teacher provides the students with a theme (‘good versus evil’) and a poem to hook onto it. This allows the students freedom to explore how the poem might fit in with the theme and allows them to make it relatable and create connections with their own lives, as well as considering the theme in its historical and cultural context. I observed this lesson and can confirm that the strategy of providing structured freedom was successful. In the observed lesson (B3:3), the teacher introduced the poem by including a news article on Poland and connected this to the poem ‘Vultures’ by Chinua Achebe, which was originally written about Achebe’s experience of the Nigerian Civil War. This provided the students with some underpinning thoughts of the potential contexts in which this poem can be read, before giving the students time to shape their own meaning of this poem. The students were asked to annotate the poem on the theme of good and evil.

From my observation notes:

*The teacher guided and directed the students towards themes for them to write on in this instance, but did not provide them with pre-existing meanings, attitudes or information about how the poem might relate to other wars, yet the students came up with similarities between the poem and World War 2. Teacher participant 3 allowed the students space to find out for themselves how the poem might reflect on war. The teacher explained this part of the lesson as being collaborative, where two students work together to annotate and discuss the poem. This lesson has a clear structure and allowed freedom for students to understand the poem based on their own knowledge, but with guidance of the teacher. The students asked questions throughout their annotation time and all students were focused on the task. One student was heard reading the poem out to their partner, and another noted there are some difficult words. The teacher responded by writing a glossary on the board for students to look at. There was a sense of collaboration and mutual respect in the room, which showed through the questioning, the sharing of a glossary, the reading out loud to help another understand the poem and by the teacher’s active listening to the questions that were asked while the teacher walked around the room.*

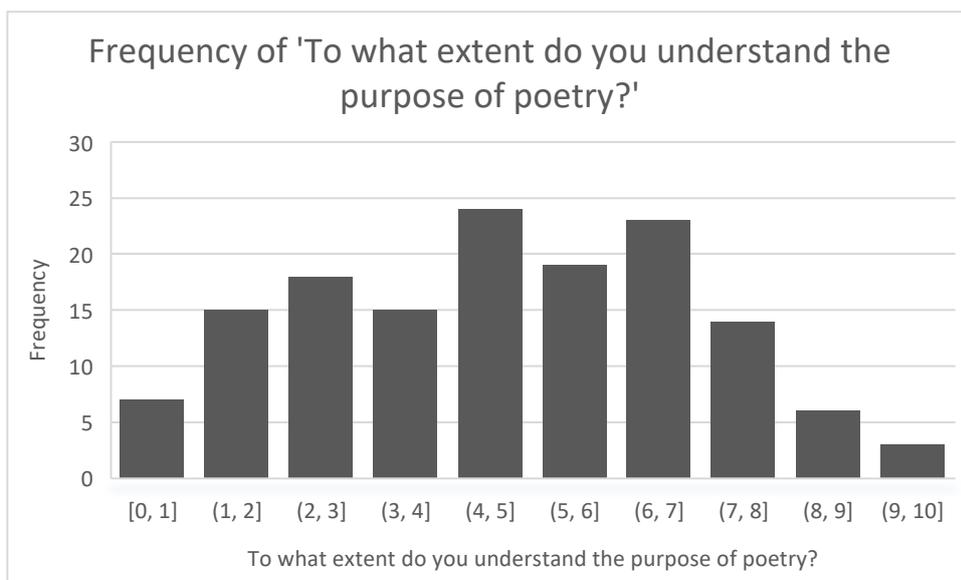
*When the twenty minutes are up for the students to work in pairs, the teacher regroups and asks the students questions, using literary terminology, such as ‘analogy’, ‘oxymoron’ and ‘pathetic fallacy’. The teacher emphasises the terms while he helps the students with their explanation, and helps the students’ build on their thoughts by elaborating on the points they made. In doing this, the teacher shows they are actively listening to the students’ thoughts and relating these back to the poem, showing a caring and understanding attitude towards the students’ perception of the poem, rather than spoon-feeding the students with the information he already has. The teacher seems to be open to learning from the students’ views of the poem too.*

Teacher participant 1 (The Netherlands) mentions in the interview that she gets ‘a real thrill out of’ poetry as something ‘magical to connect with a mind at a different time’ and notes it is ‘part of our humanities group mind.’ In the observation example above, students are invited to connect with these minds at different times, and to talk about it, which Teacher participant 3 mentions she would like to see more of. Teacher participant 1 also notes you just ‘have to talk and talk about it’ as it is not all about ‘having a pre-formed idea and then setting it down, but about discovering what you think, associate or describe by banging together a load of language.’ In the example of B3:3, the teacher provides space for the learners to discover what they think and to make links between the experiences and information they know and the words from the poem, which leads to them coming up with the connection between this poem and World War 2, even though it was originally about the Nigerian Civil War. This example illustrates that poems allow the learners to ‘make connections’ (Teacher participant 1, The Netherlands), which then gives the students something to hook the poem onto without it becoming too prescriptive. It is intriguing to note the similarities in what Teacher participant 1 notes about the way you can teach poetry, and how Teacher participant 3 demonstrates how this can work in practice.

#### 5.4.2 Understanding the purpose: “I don’t really get it properly”

When asked to what extent the students understood the purpose of poetry, very few students from both The Netherlands and England commented that they were confident in understanding the purpose (figure 11), which shows in the survey where in the top percentile of those who felt they did understand engagement only 14.6% responded they

did on a scale of 8-10. In contrast, 27.3% voted 1-3 on a scale of 10 on whether they understood why they were learning poetry. The remaining students were in the middle category, as seen in the figure below, with an average of 5.18 in relation to whether or not they understood the purpose of poetry. Showing students have somewhat of an idea of why they are learning poetry, but overwhelmingly are not confident in the intentionality behind poetry teaching and learning. I left this question open purposefully (and did not add 'classroom context', although this was implied), as not all Dutch students had poetry in the classroom context, and I was still curious to know what they thought the purpose of poetry was. Nevertheless, most students interpreted this question as 'purpose of poetry in the classroom context' or 'in education', as results showed in the open question that followed: 'please provide an example of what purpose poetry might have.' Some Dutch students commented that they did not know because they had no experience.



11 Figure 11. Frequency of understanding the purpose of poetry among English and Dutch students

The survey with students yielded the following responses:

**I don't really get it properly**

Part of the exam

It's on the curriculum

To waste our time

It is in our exams

Part of English and the exam

It's on the spec

Dissecting poems

The government tells you

We have to.

I created the above senryu-style poem based on different student responses, 'Dissecting poems' was an intriguing term of phrase that came up in the survey responses, bringing to mind poetry as something being dissected for a biology lesson, but not putting the poem back together again. It is about getting to know the facts or inner workings of the poem ('dissecting'), as though it is filled with organs that work in particular ways. This is in contrast with the idea of making and shaping the meaning of a poem based on the student's own understanding of the world and their experience. Furthermore, students noted they analysed poems because 'we have to' and because 'it is in our exams', or even 'because the government tells you', rather than for their own benefit. Again, this shows that they value poetry primarily to pass their exams rather than as something that might be useful in other aspects of life. When I connect the exam focus to 'dissecting poems', I aim to show that on the exam, and when preparing for the exam, students may feel like they are 'dissecting' a poem, which I relate to looking for what already exists inside, as opposed to looking at the poem to find something new or different. In looking only for what is already known, students 'regurgitate' - as Teacher interview participant 2 noted - existing information in the exam to be able to pass, which avoids searching for new and different interpretations of poems, or building on the students' knowledge.

Another student in the survey notes that poetry lessons would be better if they would not 'copy off the board'. Four responses were similar and indicate students think they are not engaged creatively or critically when copying off the board or copying down notes. It suggests that although the teacher may not want to provide students with information to revise, it does happen in classroom practice and creates a drive towards providing all the information necessary for the exam, particularly the anthology poems. In contrast, teachers

provide examples of how poetry can be utilised as a vehicle for communicating and exploring meanings in a non-binary way and observations show that this is included in classroom practice too. Nevertheless, some students feel poetry is boring and that they are 'forced to do it':

### **Boring**

They don't excite me enough  
The class gets forced to do it  
The topic isn't interesting  
It's boring – boring – boring – boring.  
When the poem is boring – boring.  
Sometimes it's boring.

This poem emphasises the sense that poetry is found to be difficult and beyond reach of the students, giving a sense of boredom – and perhaps also difficulty due to unrelatability - rather than a curiosity. The three lessons that were observed in the Netherlands were intriguing as they were very different poetry lessons.

The first lesson was exploration of *the poetry canon*, as the teacher called this during our pre-lesson conversation. In this lesson verbal discussion took place. Although some students were highly engaged and participating in discussion, others were on their phone and not engaging with the poems until the teacher directed a question at them.

In the second lesson the students were invited to engage with cut-up poetry. The students wrote poetry collaboratively after listening to a video on William S. Burrough's Cut-Up poetry technique. The classroom set-up (appendix 2) allowed students space to create their poems and to make decisions together. One of the students then presented the poem at the end of the lesson.

*In the third lesson, there was analysis and students were asked to analyse Ted Hughes's poems on animals. The teacher had provided a selection of Ted Hughes's poetry and a glossary of poetic devices. The students had to work individually and were asked to choose a poem and write four paragraphs on one of the animal poems by Ted Hughes that they were presented with. In their essays they had to include: an introduction, general impressions, form and meaning, and a conclusion. The essay had to be a response to the poem; an interpretation of the poem; show associations the student had with the poem; or on themes they found in the poem. In Observation A3:1, the tables were set out in rows of two (see Appendix 2) and the teacher was positioned in the front right corner of the classroom with the board behind them. This was a fairly classical classroom set-up and differed from the previous two observations in this school, where students were either in a room where there were multiple set-ups (two groups, one horseshoe shape in the middle and four rows of two along the window side). In comparison with the other two observations, this lesson had the most disruption to it. The students were silent while the teacher spoke, though as soon as the teacher asked the students to work and stopped talking, the students began talking and some engaging with their phones rather than with the poems in front of them. Most students sit in the back of the room, so the teacher moves to the middle of the room to be nearer to them. Six students show up late to this lesson and need the teacher to repeat the assignment. Being able to analyse poetry is not part of the Dutch final assessment, but was useful for the tests the teacher set prior to the final exam, the PTA<sup>26</sup> exams.*

The lack of focus on the subject material was in stark contrast to the previously observed lessons: engaging with cut-up poetry and analysing poetry as a group and discussing the more historically contextualised poems in pairs, groups and twos. It is clear that the students in this study were less disruptive and more engaged with the topic when participating actively in making meaning collaboratively and writing poems than the individual work on analysis, which Gregory (2013) describes as 'dull, dry and boring' (p. 129).

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<sup>26</sup> PTA stands for Programma voor Toesting en Afsluiting and translates to: programme for assessment and closing. These tests are provided at various times during the year and are created by the teachers on the content the students have covered during the term.

I created the following poem out of responses from students in English schools who found poetry useful primarily for the GCSE exam, but '*not in daily life*':

### **GCSEs, GCSEs**

Not in daily life

It helps with GCSEs,

Useful for analysis

get your final grade

not for personal writing

we need poems to pass

The above poem I have connected the student voices without any changes to each of their responses, although there may be an 'and' or an 'I' missing to stick to the Senryu-style poem. The title of this poem relates to the responses from students focusing on poetry as purposeful for their GCSEs. While I was going through the data, and found the response 'it helps with GCSEs', I realised this had seven syllables, which would make up the middle line of a senryu or haiku. I looked for responses within the same theme, to see if I could find responses that had 5 syllables or that would have 5 syllables if I would take 'and' or 'I' out of the line without losing the integrity of the original response. The lines of this poem all fit in the same theme, and within the poetic structures of the haiku or senryu, which is the basis on which I formed this poem.

It is intriguing to see the opposing attitudes towards poetry. Whereas the Dutch students found poetry useful to understand language and culture better, or just 'don't know' why they are learning poetry, the English students responded more negatively. 61.2% of English students responded they least enjoyed poetry when the poem was boring, when they were analysing or annotating, or when they found it difficult to understand. In contrast, no Dutch student commented that they did not understand the poem, and only 15% noted that they least enjoyed poetry when it was either boring or difficult to understand. Besides, those students who did not have poetry lessons or perceived themselves to have poetry lessons, which was 30% of Dutch student respondents, the thing in poetry students most disliked

was poetry writing (13.3%), followed by when you ‘do something you can’t choose’ or cannot write ‘free poetry’ (10%). This suggests students in these Dutch schools appreciate autonomy when it comes to making choices of what to write about and how to write it. However, one student also responded that they least enjoyed poetry when they did not know what to write about, indicating that some students possibly do appreciate a structure or theme for their writing.

Especially in the context of the English survey respondents, a majority did not like the aspects of poetry related to the exam, such as annotations and analyses. This suggests they may not understand the purpose of poetry beyond the scope of the exam, and if the learners do not understand the purpose beyond passing their GCSE exam, then they may not enjoy poetry as much as those who engage with poetry for their own benefit as well as for language and cultural awareness. In Hattie’s meta-analysis (2023), it shows that the key to enabling learning is for that learning to have a purpose. Consequently, if learners do not understand the purpose of a subject apart from the extrinsic goal of passing the exam, then they will not engage with it in as much depth.

## 5.5 Normalising poetry in an exam-focused system

Teachers seemed aware of the many purposes poetry might have that go beyond the focus on the GCSE exam or passing the final exams in The Netherlands. Teacher participant 4 indicated they wondered whether it came across for the students and noted the creative and enjoyment of poetry is overshadowed by the focus on the ‘end-goal’: the GCSE exam. This shows that poetry is not normalised in daily life, but seen specifically as an exam component. Teacher participant 4 (The Netherlands) expresses their worry that ‘*they don’t see the value of English*’ when I asked her about student engagement in poetry lessons. In the following poem, I have summarised the key elements this teacher in a Dutch secondary school shared on the topic of the value of English and in particular of poetry.

### 5.5.1 What are they being exposed to?

**What are they being exposed to?**

Jumping through each particular hoop to get to this outcome  
I think teachers are to blame for that as well  
Everyone's so focused on that  
We don't really talk about how it's lovely to just  
Pick up a book and read it and enjoy it,  
Or sometimes just sitting down and writing something  
It's all become a very outcome driven focused thing,  
Rather than something which has value in and of itself.

In the Netherlands, Teacher participant 1 saw great value in poetry and considered protest poetry:

*"When you look at poetry and protest – becomes clear that it can have a function of its own with strong words – speaking out about things – not all about having a pre-formed idea and then setting it down, but about discovering what you think, associate or describing by banging together a load of language"*(Teacher participant 1, The Netherlands).

The same interview participant argued that poetry should be 'normalised' as students can sometimes fear poetic language:

*"So it becomes normal and not 'ooh poetry, you've got to read it in your special poetry voice and have you special poetry trousers on to appreciate it and be super brainy' and ehm, some kind of nerd to be interested in it. So normalising it is a challenge, especially if it's only coming in the fourth or fifth year."*(ibid.)

This challenge of normalising poetry, or English more generally, is something other teacher participants felt too. Participant 4 noted that the purpose of English more generally is not always clear and they feel they are *"trying to constantly talk about the benefits of English and why it's not just a thing to do till you turn sixteen and then never do again, but it's something that you will get value from forever."* (Teacher participant 4, The Netherlands) Furthermore, they note that *'English [is] just so vital to higher development, which ultimately is what school's about.'* (ibid.) This teacher considers poetry to be highly valuable

as a way to explore emotions, empathy and language in a playful way, *'A thing we're not doing enough of because we're constantly working towards that end goal of the exam and thinking, you now, they have to know where to put a full stop and actually language is, you can play with it, having fun with it.'* (ibid). Which, as this teacher argues, does not necessarily happen in the classroom, due to the focus on the exam: *'I think that doesn't kind of necessarily kind of marry it with what we do in the classroom so I think that there's a ... because everything we do is so tailored towards the GCSEs.'* (ibid.).

What we can learn from these teacher voices, is that although the purposes of poetry in the classroom are clear, poems are not always understood by students and is feared or seen as something difficult, especially the unseen poetry in English schools. Teacher participants 2 and 3 (England) changed their approach to poetry teaching and no longer teach it in blocks, but as part of literature more broadly. As the teacher notes, the GCSE exam results have improved and poetry is 'normalised', rather than seen as something students need to put their 'poetry voice' and 'poetry trousers' on for. In the English school that participated in this research which did have poetry taught in blocks, the unseen poetry was the more difficult component, and the teacher struggled to find time to teach this.

A potential solution to 'normalise poetry' in the classroom may be to justify its purpose through teaching more unseen poetry, which provides the teacher with more autonomy in which poems to read and analyse. Whether this unseen poetry is relatable to other texts they are reading or relatable to the students experiences, backgrounds or the world they know, this could help change the attitude of learners (and possibly teachers) towards poetry to some extent. In the next section, I will consider the relevance of poetry in more depth to understand what the students in this survey would find more purposeful and how teachers would like to see purposeful poetry happen in the classroom, as well as connect their voices to shape an understanding of what can be done and is already done to improve poetry's place in the English classroom.

Teacher interview participant 3 (England) noted that *"it's always like the terrifying experience where they've got two unseen poems they have to write about and compare so if they get used to that from year seven then it's not going to horrify them and we found last year our pupils got excellent grades in the unseen poetry.* Adding to classroom practice from year 7 appeared to reduce the fear and of poetry. Furthermore, Teacher participant 3 (England) noted that unseen poetry was difficult and challenging, as it's *"something they*

*can't revise' and argued that 'you can't just give them a superficial understanding of poetry. They've got to have an understanding of the concepts and bigger ideas from year seven onwards so it doesn't come at their door at year eleven.'* Following this, the school had recently implemented the change in their poetry teaching structure, where they taught unseen poetry from year 7 onwards and used poetry to contribute to the literature, as this teacher exemplifies when reading Jekyll and Hyde with their year 9 students:

*I know I'm going to be teaching about good versus evil and I would think naturally in my mind about the poems that I've taught and sort of go 'Oh Vultures' with good versus evil. So you tend to think ahead about what you want to do and what you want to convey and also how it fits in with – I think poetry's best – if you fit it in with a novel or a topic that you're doing.'* (Teacher participant 3, England)

Teachers often related normalising poetry to teaching it not only in one year or in one block, but throughout the school time and going beyond the anthology poems. Teacher participant 5 suggested the fear of poetry if they are only introduced to it later during their time at school, and noted students thought of poetry as being 'Shakespeare', which relates to what Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) said about having a poetry voice with special trousers. Poetry is, in these cases, perceived as a commodity and an art that is not accessible to students, and relates it to difficulty, which in turn can lead to 'fear' 'terror' or 'horrifying them' as students perceive classroom poetry as unrelated to their own life. The two teachers in the school that had recently made the shift from only teaching poetry in blocks in the upper years, to teaching poetry alongside other literature throughout the secondary school years, felt this resulted in students being more confident and able to analyse and critically read poetry, whereas those who do not have this option, found that poetry was often difficult for students, such as Teacher participant 4 (England), who stated poetry was difficult for students to understand and something they did not see the value of. This leads into the next theme of relatability, as when poems are made more relatable to learners, this reduces the distance between language and meaning, and provides an easier way for students to interpret poems.

## 5.5.2 Structured teaching and learning

### **Creativity and criticality work in tandem**

'Do whatever you want'

their creative voice is not probably

Woohoo

Their critical voice will be so strong

Their critical voice is going to come in and say

'what am I supposed to do?'

They'll be very critical

They'll be paralysed.

In this poem, using only words from the interview with Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands), I indicate an understanding that when students are not provided with structure, they are going to question more and will be 'paralysed' and unable to engage in creating their own material or making their own meaning. For this reason, it seems important for students to have a structured approach to their learning. Arguably, a similar phenomenon occurs when teachers are presented with a very open curriculum and very little structure, they are unsure what to do and use textbooks instead, as happens regularly in the other Dutch school and in Swedish schools (Lind, 2019). Consequently, when both teachers and students are unsure what the intention of teaching the poem is, the data from the survey and interviews shows that teachers and students seek structure, whether this is assessment structure or a textbook.

Teacher participant 5 (Netherlands) notes that in their teaching students also need some structure but in addition they need space to be creative:

*'I think the most important thing is leave it to them' so that they can come up with something and give them a little bit of the time to think about it.' [...] and of course, you need to help them out, it's not just say 'do whatever you want.' [...] this is also a part of the project I'm doing, the last part is that they needed to express what they wrote regarding the poem they chose and it can be a perform... it can be I dunno, maybe I painting, or music, they can*

*write something [...] do whatever they want to do so I want it to come up from them, how would they express that.'* (Teacher participant 5, Netherlands)

The teacher continues that this is quite difficult for some of the students:

*'The fourth years now, I see they really like the instruction from, you know, they're really for the ehm, that you tell them what to do and when I have to hand in and of course it is for a mark so, they are really like this.'* (ibid.)

In the interview, this teacher shows that students as well as teachers benefit from some form of structure, and in the observations those lessons where there was a clear structure, whether it involved engaging with poetry writing or reading. Teacher participant 6 (Netherlands) commented on how teachers complete their teacher training and follow the prescribed teaching methods and argued they preferred a more questioning approach to understand what goes on in the students' minds and make the teaching more relatable for these students. In this sense, their structured approach was flexible, depending on the students' interests. This flexible approach proved difficult for other Dutch teachers, who felt their workload was already high and they had no time to restructure their school's curriculum as this would mean restructuring their exams too:

*'the teachers need the training for that, because you now it is, it is hard if you have to plan 5 lessons. Now you have every day you teach and you have four to five lessons and you have to plan all these five lessons every time with a new method. [...] you need to make new tests again because you cannot use the same tests from last year [...] It is more work [...] that's why it's a bit difficult, you know, we overwork, and I do understand where it's coming from [...]. We often talk about motivating the students, make sure the students are engaged and motivated, but no one is talking about motivation for teachers.'* (Teacher participant 6, Netherlands)

It appears that not only do the students from the survey learn English because they feel they have to, or because 'the government tells them to', but the teachers also teach English in the prescribed or easier way because, due to workload, overwork and time pressure they find it

difficult to come up with new structures and ways to make their teaching more flexible. In the English schools this appears to often be due to the assessment regulations, yet in The Netherlands, where the teachers have, in theory, more autonomy on what to teach and how to assess the students to some extent, there are similar issues due to workload and time constraints.

## 5.6 Empowering the learner

In this section I explore the student agency, and if the students from the survey convey whether they want to be empowered, have agency and autonomy. Although there were no direct questions on this in the survey, the students did comment on wanting more freedom and not wanting to 'have to do something in an exact way'. In the poem below, I illustrate how the students responded to the question 'When do you least enjoy poetry lessons?' It was intriguing to note that they often used the pronoun 'we' in the poems, suggesting as a group they wanted more agency, and as a group they did not enjoy poetry when they had to, for example, analyse the structure. It suggests a sense of community within the classroom environment.

### **I don't like poetry lessons on Monday**

When you have to listen the whole lesson and  
Do something about poems you can't choose  
When you have to do something  
In an exact way.

When we have to listen a lot.  
When we are analysing a poem  
When we analyse the structure  
When we analyse  
When we have to evaluate,  
When it's hard to follow  
When we must check our grammar

When we have to read it by ourselves

In silent and not share ideas...

When we're writing essays

When we're in big groups

When I'm by myself

When I can't engage with it.

When I have no motivation for it

And my mind is closed.

Contrasting the previous poem, in this poem I consider when the respondents did not enjoy poetry lessons and why that might be. I have divided the stanzas according to which pronouns were used, as when we think about student agency, it can be valuable to know who is being addressed in their response: do the students feel their lack of engagement with poetry is something personal (I), a wider issue (we), or possibly something the students want us as educators to understand (you). Subsequently, in the first stanza the focus is on the 'you', and as such addressed to the reader. The responses in the above poem show that these students want to feel empowered in their lessons: they want choice and they do not want to have to do things in 'an exact way.' This could relate to them not enjoying poetry because they feel 'they have to' do it in a particular way, rather than exploring options of how to read, write and analyse poems. Furthermore, because of how the survey question was phrased, most responses start with 'when', which I left in to emphasise the different reasons for not being able to engage with poetry.

Another reason why these students might not enjoy poetry was because of the analysis aspect of poetry lessons. Predominantly the English students responded that they disliked this component, and some Dutch students who engaged in poetry analysis concurred. Analysing poetry for assessment purposes can create these strong boundaries, wherein students have little freedom to input their own thoughts, feelings and opinions. Dymoke(2002) suggested that students were 'at the dead hand of the exam' (p. 85) which may lead to, as Ford (2015) notes in his opinion piece on Michael Gove's English GCSEs, 'regurgitating information memorised along with the poems' (paragraph 3). Although this might be one method in ensuring they have the information to pass the exam, what is the

purpose of teaching in this way for students in the present, as well as in the future? And if there is a lack of purpose and intentionality for further learning, this might be one of the key reasons why these students disengage with poetry. For the students in this study, the most negative responses are around the analysis, annotations and the relatability of poetry. The most positive responses were around group work, discussion and their own input in learning about poetry, such as which poems to read and poetry writing.

Teaching poetry in a different way, to inspire productive thought, may still lead to good exam results, as the second school in this study shows, where students are empowered to come up with their own ideas and poetry is taught throughout the year in groups to connect themes to their own world and to historical contexts, often through discussion and language play. This is shown particularly well in the poetry lessons by Teacher participant 3 (England) involving the analysis of a theme that occurs in a poem, without particularly setting the poem in a specific historical context, and as such, the students have space to explore and connect to the poem. Although there is still a focus on the exam, one of the teachers explicitly mentions that we 'should not talk about the GCSE' (Teacher participant 3, England), but that it does play a part in what kind of poems are taught and how they can prepare students best for the unseen elements of the English literature exam. This shows that within the boundaries of their full curriculum, there is still some space to play with language and use poetry as a vehicle for sparking discussion and communication between students and between teacher and students, and as a vehicle for exploring connections with the students' place in and with the world, through the word.

### 5.6.1 Student Agency

In this section I represent the students' voices in what can be done to make poetry lessons more engaging from the students' perspective. When students were given a voice to share what could be done to make poetry lessons better in the classroom, answers often conveyed a sense of wanting it to be more engaging, poems they could connect to and sometimes more playful ways of teaching poems too, as is seen in the poem below, which contains answers directly from the survey results, structured in poetic form.

The responses in the poem below are all answers to the survey question, 'Do you think there is anything that could be done to make poetry lessons better? Please give an example'.

These answers from the survey responses tell us how these students' experience of poetry might improve, and this selection of responses show that these students have some thoughts on how to create a more engaging learning experience in their poetry classrooms. As was noted earlier in the poem 'a wider range', in the poem below, I bring together voices that suggest a wider or different range of poetry, and 'reading poetry different from those required'. When considering student agency, it is intriguing to become aware of the agency they might want, and what they think would improve their learning experience. I created the poem below primarily from the English student survey responses, apart from the final line, which is a response from a Dutch student.

### **Poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Don't use paper

Make it more engaging

Incorporate games.

Change the poems

More interesting poems

More unseen poetry

More poems from this generation

Reading poetry different from those required

We should read some online

Instead of always reading a poem in the anthology

More relatable, funny poems

Rather than

Old fashioned boring poems

By not picking hard poems

Let us choose our own poems

Make poems more understandable.

Let students discover their taste in poetry.

I decided on the title for this poem as it represents the theme that comes out of the responses, that students want more poems of their time.' Some students note they do not want paper and that they want online poetry, bringing poetry off the page and into the world they are familiar with. Yandell (2014) points out the exclusive curriculum that does not capture the world or society that the students live in by avoiding any web-based literacies. As we can see in the responses from the survey, that even though there was no direct question on the platforms on which poetry is taught, there were responses on including online or other poetry beyond the anthology. It is also intriguing that one of the students suggests they are 'old fashioned' poems and emphasises a call from students for a wider range of poems from different times to allow students to 'discover their taste in poetry'. Although all of the above poem was made up of individual student responses, collectively they show a clear theme of students wanting more agency and autonomy in the choice of poetry, to enable them to explore poems in relation to their cultural, societal and personal experience and understanding.

There were responses on wanting to read beyond the restricted anthology poems, and also for someone to change the selection of poems for them, to include more interesting poems. This is an intriguing point as it shows both a need for students to include poems they might enjoy, and to be taught it in a way that is more accessible (through games and digital modes). These two notions suggest a collaboration between teacher and learner may be an effective way of providing the students with choices on what might be relatable for them, providing the teacher with the role of facilitator. It becomes clear through the above voices, that students from this survey are seeking common ground with the textual mode they receive, and find it difficult to connect with and relate to the anthology poems, as shown when one of them states, 'reading poetry different from those required'.

Dymoke's (2012) study in New Zealand, shows that empowering students through giving them the opportunity to choose a text worked well, although teachers sometimes found it challenging to know when a poem was good enough to be worthy of analysing. It was a good exercise for learners to seek poems beyond the historically contextualised clusters of poems and provided them with a sense of empowerment through seeking a poem they would enjoy reading. The sense of purpose came from finding connections with

the poem and their own lives, while simultaneously encouraging students to consider language techniques used to make meaning within those poems.

The survey results from my study further showed that students wanted more time to understand the poems, not just 'on the surface', but in more depth. They found the poems difficult and suggested 'not picking hard poems' and 'making poems more understandable'. This suggests not only that students want agency in their choice of poems, or that teachers need to allow for students to have access to a wider range of poems, but that sometimes students wanted more time with a poem to learn to understand it, or they may want to learn a poem in a different way. When considering the overarching theme of purposeful poetry, it could be that poetry loses its purpose when it is rushed, only read in a particular historical context, and when it is a poem students cannot easily connect with. Perhaps this illustrates that students do not necessarily need an entirely new anthology, but that they might benefit from learning poetry in an alternative way that allows for the student to build a relationship with the text that evokes understanding.

The observations showed that students in the year 9 classroom, taught by teacher participant 3 (England) were able to connect to the poems they received and were provided the freedom to interpret the poem to relate it to their experience and understanding of the world. This was achieved with twentieth century poetry, which is not particularly new, but was poetry that was open to interpretation, so that students could discuss the text with peers and gain an understanding of what it meant to them, before the teacher explained the poem in its historical context. Although students did not have agency in text choice, they did have agency in the way the poems were analysed, which they achieved in groups. This gave them space to explore meaning-making using their own language.

*The poems they received in two of the observations I conducted in the year 9 group were 'Vultures' and 'The Horse Whisperer'. These poems were from an Unseen Poetry booklet, which the students all had a copy of. Vultures was used to explore the analogy of the vulture to describe a balance between good and evil. The teacher asked the students to consider good and evil in this poem, but gave very little context at the beginning so the students were able to explore this view for themselves. In 'The Horse Whisperer', students were asked as a whole group whether they thought this could relate to current situations, to which a few students responded that they could. This made the poem come to life in their world and*

*allowed them to analyse it with their own understandings in mind and connecting these to the historical context in which the poem was set. This provided the student a sense of agency, without neglecting the analysis process, considering poetic techniques and structures of writing to explore meanings that could come out of the poem. This led to each answer being slightly different, offering innovative answers that built on the students' existing experience and knowledge as well as their newly acquired understanding that they learnt from the teacher and from each other.*

In lessons where student agency was minimal and the teacher stood at the front of the room the questions from the students were about the content and context at times, answering questions from the teacher. However, in some cases not enough time was allocated to the students to respond to the questions. It might be that a longer pause or a different phrasing of the question would incite more student responses. In a few cases, the students did not respond to the question itself, but rather, they questioned the relevance, relatability or the purpose of the poem or the question. This offered an intriguing insight as to the direction of their curiosity. It is not that students are no longer curious, but more likely that students are curious about why they are learning the content, rather than the content itself.

### 5.6.2 Curiosity in students

For student agency to happen, there needs to be a purpose or motivation for their learning incentive. The observation data and survey data showed that when students had no understanding of why they were learning poetry, they were increasingly curious about why they were reading the poem, as opposed to what the poem was about and how meaning is made using the language and structure of the poem. In lessons where the purpose was clear for students and they understood that they were learning to understand the poem to improve their own language skills or their ability to make meaning from an existing text, students were more inclined to respond on the content and become curious about the poem's meaning(s).

In those lessons where there was student agency from the start, such as in Teacher participant 3's (England) classes, the students became more curious about the content of the poem and how it related to their own experiences. They were questioning how the text

related to their own understanding of the world, and this enabled the students to see poetry in different contexts: not only in its historical context, but also how it connected to themselves. In lessons where there was little student agency and students were asked to annotate poems along with the teacher, the students would take notes, but would, as happened with school 2 observation 1, try to stick to the original meaning and were trying to understand how the poem was meant to come across by the poet, rather than what it meant to them. In these classes there were students who did not participate at all until a question was directed specifically at them, and students became more passive in their learning. They would wait for the teacher to ask them questions directly, and were often silent, rather than raising questions or coming up with ideas themselves. The teacher would often fill the silence by a prompt or by answering the question in-part themselves, which allowed the students to have something to add to the answer, rather than coming up with an original answer of their own. In this sense, they were avoiding creative and critical thinking and were primarily learning answers that would help them pass the exam, rather than learning about how the poem could relate to experiences within their world and their understanding of the world.

Curiosity relates to criticality in the sense that curiosity invokes questions, the questions that connected to this sense of curiosity in the survey were 'When do you think critical thinking happens in poetry lessons?' and 'Can you recall a time when you weren't engaged in critical thinking?' These questions led to intriguing responses and a wide variety of understandings of critical thinking. Most answers related to the thought process of coming up with a meaning. 25.5% of the respondents mentioned 'annotating', 'analysis' or the poem as a mystery to solve, whereas only 5.5% suggested critical thinking happened when 'putting their own slant on it' and considering their view. 8.3% of the respondents said critical thinking had something to do with collaboration and discussion, seeing poetry reading and analysing not as something to do on their own, but something to engage in together. Other answers referred to poetry writing and checking grammar and spelling, thinking outside the box, and 35.8% did not understand what critical thinking meant, had 'no experience or typed '?' in the survey, showing that many do not know what critical thinking means, which is worrying when 'critical reading' and 'critical style' are both mentioned in the exam mark scheme (AQA, 2017; Edexcel, 2017). Considering many

students focused on group work, I continued to look at responses on collaboration, discussion, and dialogue in relation to poetry learning.

In the next poem I aim to demonstrate the thought process, and how this is or could be a collaborative learning process through questioning. This goes beyond students doing poetry 'because they have to consider poetry as something that can lead to thought-provoking discussions on interpretations and trigger different meanings through collaborative meaning making.

### **Collaborating**

When You...

...need to read and write about a poem  
and you start to think about it  
...give certain criteria  
the students will look more into it  
...would go deeper about the meaning and discuss it

When We...

... read different poems  
that the students are interested in  
... Love to write a poem  
and find the meaning behind it  
...are in a group and talking  
about what we had read  
... discuss the context of the problem  
Talking about the quote

Describing

Explaining

Sharing notes

Share their ideas

leads to a more open mind and a necessity to enquire

## Collaborating

I Some students see poetry and critical thinking as a collaborative and dialogic act, and although most students saw critical thinking as connected to assessment, analysis and annotations, these responses show that poetry and critical thinking, as defined in the literature review, can lend themselves to social semiotics, as the students describe how sharing ideas leads to *'a more open mind and a necessity to enquire'*, which goes beyond only assessment and grading, but leads to enhanced collaboration skills. Although not all these lines are directly about collaboration, they do include a sense of *'we'*, showing they are not on their own doing poetry, and do not see their difficulty engaging with poetry as something personal, but many see it as a collective challenge. The students from English schools were more likely to discuss poetry analysis and poetry reading as a collaborative act, whereas Dutch students were more concerned about poetry writing, which is perhaps considered a more individual activity. However, the Dutch students did mention reading each other's poems and checking other poems on the grammar and spelling, which is also an aspect of collaboration. Furthermore, the Dutch students from Teacher participant 1's (Netherlands) observations were invited to collaboratively write a poem using a cut-up poetry technique where they were tasked with cutting up newspaper headlines and sticking random words on a blank piece of paper, to see what kind of meaning might come out. They were invited to read their poem out as a group as well, which not everyone appeared to enjoy during the session. However, they were all actively taking part in creating the cut-up poetry.

In the following poems, I have collated the responses to the question: 'when do you think critical thinking happens in poetry lessons?' I wanted to investigate how students understand critical thinking. Initially, I asked students, 'Do you know what critical thinking could mean? If so, please provide some words you associate with critical thinking.' As it is sometimes easier to provide an example of when a concept happens, rather than a definition, I also wanted to ask the students when they thought critical thinking happened. This led to insightful responses that were often related to students' views and perspectives of poetry, rather than relating to evaluation, feedback and assessment, which were directions of the responses when asked to provide words students associated with critical

thinking. The poem 'your view' focuses on those responses that related to opinions, views and perspectives:

### **Your view**

When you...

... have to give your opinion

... read what the writer has written and make a judgement on what you think they have written about

When...

...Inferring

... exploring your own perspective of the poem

... annotating we need to think of our own ideas about the text

Giving my opinion on them

Thinking about what poems could mean

Think about it with an open mind

A necessity to enquire.

This poem was structured in three stanzas. In the first stanza the second, third and fourth line show responses with regards to views and opinions, whereas in the second stanza the focus shifts to exploration and connecting the text to the students' thoughts. In the third stanza, I brought the two notions of critical thinking together to show that critical thinking is something that, according to these participants, happens through giving opinions and thinking about interpretations with an 'open mind'. I found the final two lines thought-provoking, as it shows an understanding of poetry not having one right interpretation, but that there are potentially multiple possible meanings when we read poetry with an open mind. Both these lines come from the same response (English student) in the survey and illustrate the notion of questioning the text with an open mind.

### **A poem or a murder mystery?**

Dissecting a poem

Annotating, annotate, annotating, annotate

We are annotating

We are analysing

Analysing, analyse, analysing, analyse...

Start looking for answers

When analysing, do analysis

looking into the meanings of texts, phrases

Looking for implicit and explicit meanings

A hidden meaning

Discover the implicit meaning

Figuring out the motive

Why the authors wrote the poem and

Why they used the techniques they did?

Going through the poem's meaning

Thinking about styles and meanings

Make links

Try to understand what a symbolism symbolises actually.

Thinking,

Questioning,

Every part of the poem

To explain the poetry

Understanding the deeper meaning

behind the texts,

For a grade.

This poem, which I created from the student survey responses, shows that students see poetry as a mystery to solve, considering '*symbolisms*', '*hidden meanings*', '*implicit*

*meanings' and 'deeper meanings'*, to understand what is *'behind the texts'*, and one student noted critical thinking happens in poetry lessons 'for a grade', rather than for their own benefit. This connects to poetry being taught as a puzzle to solve (Dymoke, 2003, p. 15) which shows in the teacher responses too, when Teacher participant 2 (England) mentions the 'dissecting' of poems and 'regurgitating' notes. Teacher 4 (England) argues that students want the annotations and analyses given to them so they can pass the exam, as opposed to considering how the poems can relate to them. Their own view is not valued for the assessment in their eyes, according to this teacher and the student focus, as shown in the above poem, is around finding the correct answer, rather than exploring meanings, linking it to the notion of poetry being binary: a text that has to be read in a particular 'correct' way. This is done in order to pass the exam, but devalues the students' own views.

Intriguingly, in the Dutch schools students did talk about the analysis of poems, but often related critical thinking to writing good quality poems and questioning the language that is used, rather than the meaning that is made. One Dutch student noted that critical thinking happens when students are 'not using your creativity', whereas others considered it similar to creativity and suggested it was 'thinking outside the box'. This shows a lack in understanding what critical thinking is amongst students, even though they are expected to engage critically in their education. Clarity on how critical thinking can be developed through poetry reading and writing could help students become more understanding of poetry can be used as a vehicle for communicating with and for creativity and critical thinking, which is a skillset to develop throughout life and one that embraces curiosity, this is expanded on in more detail and with examples in Chapter 7. Where critical thinking was related to assessment purposes, some examples from the students' responses concerned the binary approach of there being a right and a wrong way to read and write poetry, similarly to what Myhill and Wilson (2013) suggest. This connection between poetry and right and 'correctness' is portrayed in the Senryu style poem I wrote below:

### **No mistakes**

The way things are spelled  
When you want a good poem  
Correcting mistakes

Additionally, the notion of a right and wrong way to read poetry may restrict a feeling of language play, as play stimulates that notion of making mistakes, rather than avoiding them (Whitton, 2018).

## 5.7 Concluding thoughts

The student surveys, teacher interviews and classroom observations addressed the themes of relatability, relevance, normalising poetry, curiosity, creativity, criticality and exam-focused teaching and learning. The findings from the data suggest students and teachers would embrace an empowering approach to poetry teaching and learning that ‘frees poetry’ from the curriculum and exam constraints. However, as teachers point out, the lack of time and workload causes them and/or their colleagues to stay focused on the ‘end goal’, rather than to introduce and include poems that are more relevant, or to engage in poetry writing in the upper secondary school years. In the year 9 class there were opportunities for students to engage with poetry curiously and creatively, and poetry was included not as something taught exclusively on its own, but as a vehicle for communicating themes that arose in other forms of literature too. This enabled students to see poetry as a part of English that they did not do because they ‘had to’, but allowed students to see the value in learning poetry.

In the Dutch education system, poetry is voluntary, which meant that although teachers saw the value of teaching poetry, they might not get the chance to introduce it to students to the extent they would like to due to workload and time constraints. However, it provoked thought to see the respondents’ answers concerning poetry writing. Students in Holland felt that poetry writing was a useful act of creativity to learn vocabulary and to become better at English, and that poetry reading was a way to learn about language and culture. It shows students do have a sense of purpose in learning poetry. In the next chapter the values of poetry for language and culture will be considered in detail, based on the data collected.

## 5.8 A discussion of assessment and intentionality in poetry teaching and learning

### 5.8.1 Lesson content: The poetry anthology and beyond

This chapter aimed to explore research questions 1 and 2.

1. What are some teachers' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education in England and The Netherlands?
2. What are some students' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education in England and The Netherlands?

Both of these questions were considered while taking into account the focus on performativity and assessment in schools, and what both the students and teachers shared on the restrictions and the potential of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education. The GCSE awarding bodies include fifteen anthology poems. The English schools in this study use the AQA exam board. The GCSE anthology poems form part of the final examination in combination with an unseen poetry question, which asks students to compare two unseen poems during the exam (DfE, 2014; AQA, 2017).

Students in this study responded with a range of answers when asked about what they would like to see improved in the poetry classroom. One of the answers was that students wanted more diversity and 'more relevant poems' and 'poems for their age', indicating that some of the poems are difficult to connect with for these learners and they responded that more poems that directly related to them, or that were fun to read, would improve their poetry lessons. This aligns with the Lit. in Colour report by the Runnymede Trust (2021), which showed the limitations of the current literature overall for the multicultural society in which we live, and sharing student responses on how they related to the books and poetry read in their school. The responses were similar to this study, in saying they did not feel they could relate well to the literature they were introduced to in schools. The English schools in this thesis were predominantly white working class, and highlights that for these students it is also difficult to relate to the poems from the GCSE anthology. One student responded they wanted to spend more time on a poem, presumably to be able to understand the poem better, as some other students responded they found poetry lessons 'difficult' and the poems 'hard'. It is assumed that providing students with more opportunity to connect a poem to their own world, culture and life may improve the engagement with poetry.

In the concluding thoughts of Chapter 2 of this thesis, I began by noting that ‘poetry is arguably one of the least well-taught subjects of the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4’ (Nobles, 2016; Dymoke and Hughes, 2009). After considering the teachers’ and students’ thoughts on poetry in the curriculum with regards to creativity and critical thinking, I do question this statement, as the data provides evidence that there is creative and critical practice happening in one of the schools, and a creative and critical attitude towards poetry teaching and learning is adopted by all teachers in this study, who are continuously seeking ways to improve classroom engagement, in spite of the pressure. Some of these teachers show that there are ways to play with poetry and meaning-making that encourage creativity and curiosity in the learning process. The teachers in this study show resilience in being able to include poetry in engaging ways, although most of the teachers comment that it would make poetry more engaging if they had time to either teach the poems in a different way, or to teach different poems that are more relatable. Furthermore, the students suggested different poems and more opportunities to learn poetry beyond the assessment focus, as this made poetry ‘boring’. Nevertheless, the current curriculum and the GCSE anthologies provide a limited view of what poetry is, due to the set GCSE anthology poems, which in the two English schools that were observed both ‘*power and conflict*’, an anthology cluster that relates primarily to war poems. Additionally, the focus on performativity leads to time and workload pressure for both teachers and students, leading to fewer opportunities to engage creatively with poetry teaching and learning.. When discussing poems with teacher participant 3 (England), they point out that, ‘*no one really understands so... even the examiners don’t like it.*’ Furthermore, they convey that, ‘*I went on a course and they said Tissue will never be set as a main poem. That doesn’t stop people from using it as a second poem to compare it to the chosen poem by the exam board.*’ The poem, *Tissue*, is the only poem in this GCSE anthology cluster written by a woman of colour, Imtiaz Dharker.

Cox (1993) argued three decades ago that the curriculum included a narrow anthology, and this curriculum has become narrower since. Teacher participant 4 indicated that they too found the anthology ‘narrow’ with little space for exploration of other poems. In conjunction with this, Nelson-Addy (2019) describes the curriculum as based on the ‘dominant culture’ (p. 195) and that it limits the voices that are exposed within the educational setting. Students argue that the poems are ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘not for our age’,

implying that more contemporary and relatable poetry would increase their engagement with the poetry curriculum. Although teachers would like to see contemporary poems too, Teacher participant 4 (England) thinks that there is value in teaching students some of the anthology poems, though it would be nice to have more diversity. Teacher participant 3 (England) shares that in Key Stage 3 there is more flexibility to include a wider variety of poems, and uses these in the observed lessons too, when he introduces a poem from a working-class perspective with Andrew Forster's *Horse Whisperer*, the perspective on World War 2 from Chinua Achebe (Nigerian poet) in *Vultures* and a poem in two languages in *Search for my tongue* by Sujata Bhatt. The selection shows poems through different cultural and (de)colonial lenses but does not yet include contemporary poetry from the year students were born and more recent.

#### 5.8.2 Teacher and student responses: working towards the 'end-goal'

All teachers commented on the assessment, and Teacher participant 4 (England) commented on the focus on the assessment and the idea of the 'end-goal'. This can be perceived in conjunction with Ball's (2003) notion on performativity, which is a 'mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays a means of incentive, control, attrition and change' (p. 216). Performativity, according to Lumby (2009) and Appel (2020), leads to a decrease in literary diversity, which Blake (2020) conveys in her study on the narrowing poetry anthologies over the past thirty years. This literature concurs with Teacher participant 4 (England) who shares that there is 'very little room in the curriculum to just do things that you think are important for the sake of it', and that teaching happens in a 'very structured way and there's no room to kind of explore things'. This implies an understanding of the potential poetry has as being part of the curriculum, but it falls short on addressing the pressure of working towards the exam that leaves little room to explore 'something that's really quite valuable to them just because there's no time to do it.'

The English students respond that they would enjoy poetry lessons more if they did not have to 'over-analyse a poem' as it 'takes all of the free-thinking out of it.' The drive towards performativity and assessment goals here is in contrast with freedom, yet also, as Teacher participant 4 (England) notes, that the 'prescriptive' writing activities are 'very ticky-box' exercises, which is 'good for the GCSE but it's not hugely creative'. Frustrating not only

freedom, but also creativity with working towards the GCSE. Similarly, Xerri (2013) explores the pressure on exams and notes that the focus on annotations for exams 'stifles creativity' in the classroom' (p. 137). Another student notes they do not enjoy poetry when 'we have to sit independently and annotate a poem. That isn't at all interesting'. If the students do not find the learning they do for their assessments interesting, inspiring or engaging, then how can schools and teachers create a more engaging and thought-provoking environment for students to learn poetry in?

This findings chapter, in combination with the literature review chapter on English in the education system provides an understanding of a narrow curriculum with little room for students to express themselves and a clash with what teachers and students ideas of how it could be more interesting if there was more time and less pressure. Students in this study do not appear to mind analysing poems but they do comment they do not enjoy 'copying off the board' and 'annotating the poem'. In his guide to *Teaching English Literature*, Snapper (2015) argues that this way of teaching poetry creates a reductive type of study, which can lead to a lack of enjoyment with regards to poetry. Lockney and Proudfoot (2013) remark that this lack of exploration and attention to the art of meaning making in poetry makes poetry a 'pointless' component of English.

Amongst student respondents, those who did not find poetry useful commented that this was because 'there's no point', that they 'won't need it for the future', and that it is 'boring' and a 'waste of time'. This reiterates Lockney and Proudfoot's (2013) argument. When students are required to 'extract data' from the poem (Snapper, 2015) and as Dymoke (2003) expresses: to view poetry as a puzzle to solve or a 'closed guessing game' with right and wrong answers, then students will find it difficult to relate to poetry as there appears to be no purpose or underlying intention other than to copy meaning or find the clue that the teacher is hiding (Dymoke, 2003, p. 15). Dymoke (2003) argues that the level of support students get in structuring their answers, 'emphasises the idea of a poem being too much like a puzzle into which right answers can be slotted' (p. 111). When relating this to the year 9 observations, where students were able to explore poems and shape their own meanings before discussing it with the whole group, students were able to, with limited prompting by the teacher, find relevance in poems and reimagined poetry to fit their own place in the world.

The frameworks in Key Stage 4, such as the National Curriculum and awarding bodies' frameworks, can lead to a reduction of the autonomy of the teacher. Kress et al. (2005) argue that this focus on the assessment is due to the marketisation of education. In this study, the lack of autonomy was an issue raised by 5 out of the 6 interviewed teachers. Teacher participant 2 noted that although they were able to include poems throughout the year and did include a wide range of unseen poetry, they were still 'working towards a timescale', which limited the freedom to engage in more student-led activities. Teacher participant 3 noted that there was a sense of freedom and autonomy at Key Stage 3, but that in year 10 and 11 you sometimes 'just have to do it. You have to cover the content'. In the Dutch schools, where there is no government-proposed assessment on poetry, the teachers still felt that they had limited time and that their workload was already full, reducing the time they had to plan lessons and explore new poetry activities, yet there is more space in the Dutch curriculum for students to explore and play with language to learn about, as the students note, the English language as well as the culture.

Coles (2013) explores the understanding of 'what English is' and points out that English means different things across the classes. Coles (2013) criticises Gove's 'knowledge-rich' curriculum (Gove in Neumann et al, 2020) as it shows a one-sided view of what English is. It can be argued that the politicised agenda for a National Curriculum with narrow poetry anthologies that include predominantly dead, white middle-class men deny the public of poetry that is recent and socio-culturally representative of the current society. The findings in this study confirm that as both the teachers and the students consulted comment on the importance of the relatability of the poems. The observations show that when unseen poetry was taught, and students had more room to interpret these poems and explore meanings either in groups or individually, they were more focused on the material than when they received GCSE anthology poems and poems with possibly more complex language that these learners found 'difficult' to understand.

### 5.8.3 Differences in teaching and learning between the Dutch and English cohort: what is the impact of the end-goal?

The impact of the focus on the 'end-goal' and the exam is that there is less space for student-led activities, as Teacher participant 2 observed. Furthermore, there is little space to

explore poems in more detail and students focus on what is on the surface, rather than what might be found beneath it (Snapper, 2015). The focus on the end-goal inhibits creativity and explores finding 'hidden meanings' as opposed to original and innovative meaning-making processes. Benton (1999) argues this can lead to spoon-feeding students, rather than exploring different ways in which language can make and shape meaning, and ultimately leaves little room to play and enjoy language. In observations B1:1, B1:2 and B1:3, B3:1, B3:2 and B3:3 and C1:1, C1:2, C1:3 I observed elements of teachers handing the students information. In these lessons, students were presented with a poem, and the classroom annotated it together with help from the teacher and the visualiser. This is not to say all lessons are like this, or that teachers find this method to be a purposeful approach to teaching poetry itself, but when time is limited this does provide a way to introduce the students to the historical context and language devices of the poem in a structured way. However, in the classroom observations where there was no visualiser and the class was split in smaller groups or pairs to engage in annotation, I perceived the students to feel more confident to include their own experience and existing knowledge in their annotations and analyses, whereas in the whole-class annotations with visualiser and teacher, the teacher transmitted more information to the student, and the students would, on occasion, call back. There appeared to be less opportunity in these lessons for students to relate poems to their own experience and provided students with less opportunity for agency in the meaning-making process during the analysis of poems.

Due to the focus on exams, the lessons in English schools are very much focused on reading and analysing poems as opposed to poetry writing. The English teacher participants note that at Key Stage 3 there is space for poetry writing, but as this is not an assessed component, it is not generally applied at Key Stage 4 (Teacher participant 3 and 4). The students note this as well, as the majority of students have not written poetry since early Key Stage 3. This contrasts the Dutch schools, where there is an emphasis on writing poetry and becoming familiar with the English language through either creating cut-up poetry (Teacher participant 1) or writing poetry and spoken word for assignments, as in the case of Teacher participant 6. The students are invited to engage with creative writing through poetry, whereas in the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 there is 'no call for that' (Teacher participant 3, England) since the creative writing component does not include writing poetry anymore. Considering the assessment as the primary focus of poetry in

English education, both students and teachers and poetry as an act of creativity in the Dutch schools, there appears to be more scope in The Netherlands for a wider variety of applications to learn and develop an understanding of the art of meaning making through poetry reading and writing. Nevertheless, in both countries, students illustrate a want for an increase in autonomy in the classroom, and in both countries teachers consider group and student-led activities more enjoyable for the learner than individual work.

In The Netherlands, much like in England, teachers are impacted by their workload and the limited time they have to create lesson plans and find poetry that is suitable. Nevertheless, the students in The Netherlands want more freedom in what they could write, and focuses primarily on structural, grammatical and spelling approaches to poetry learning, often sticking to textbooks to realise a structured and grammatically correct approach (Fasoglio, 2015; Schaap, 2017), which shows in the findings too, where Teacher participants 5 and 6 (Netherlands) note their colleagues use textbooks to reduce their workload in lesson planning and assessment writing. Teacher participant 5 (The Netherlands) notes there are few incentives for teachers to go beyond, and that there is a focus on student motivation, but *'nobody talks about teacher motivation.'* As although there is more space for student autonomy in The Netherlands, it is very school-dependent to what extent this is realised, due to the curriculum with very little structure and few boundaries. In any case, poetry in the Dutch classroom seems to contribute mostly to the purpose of learning the language.

Teachers and students, appreciate autonomy and room to include poetry they enjoy in a way that they feel is purposeful and beneficial for students, but within some boundaries. As Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) conveys, that when you *"say 'do whatever you want', the students' creative voice is not probably 'woohoo', but 'their critical voice is going to come in and say 'what am I supposed to do?' [...] They'll be very critical. They'll be paralysed."* It appears that for poetry in education to be purposeful and engaging, poetry teaching needs to be similar to a structured poem, like a sonnet or a villanelle: there needs to be a clear structure, yet within that structure there should be a sense of freedom to make and shape meaning through language, and to be creative and engage in criticality. Stevens and Fleming (2015) illuminate that a structured space to express and reflect on themes and topics that apply relevance to the student gives students a strong foundation to begin with, but they argue that it should not be structured to the point where the students are unable to use their own voice in their writing. In the following two chapters, language learning through

poetry to make and shape meaning, and a way forward towards a creative and critical approach to poetry teaching and learning will be explored, to understand how to create space for increased engagement in English poetry teaching and learning within and beyond the boundaries of the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 and the assessments that have been designed by the exam boards and awarding organisations.

## 6 Findings: ‘How to English’: Language and culture with and through poetry

### 6.1 Introduction

Poetry is more than just considering poetic devices and understanding the original meaning or reading a poem in its historical context. Poetry, particularly according to Dutch students, is also a way to improve language skills and to broaden vocabulary, as well as to understand culture. Whether this culture is historical or contemporary, poetry seems to play a considerable part in learning about British culture, both in England and The Netherlands. In my fieldwork, it was engaging to observe how students were playing with language in the Dutch classroom whilst doing ‘cut-up poetry’, and in the English year 9 lesson they were engaging in discussions and relating the language in the poem to the present-day. In the year 10 and 11 classrooms in England, the primary focus was on understanding the language in its historical context and rarely considered the relevant ‘other’ cultural contexts the poems could be read in. Furthermore, similarly to one of Bates and Connolly’s (2023) respondents (Head of English) some English teachers commented on the ‘dead white men’ (Jennings et al. 2024) in the anthology, which reduced the relatability of the poems. In Bates and Connolly (2023) the Head of English mentions that ‘at Key Stage four it does become a very dead white man, you know, pre 20<sup>th</sup> century world and we’ve got a choice how..., to change that’ (p. 515). Bates and Connolly note here that Key Stage 3 is less prescribed than Key Stage 4 and allows room to provide ‘alternative kinds of cultural capital’ (p. 515). With the higher rate of prescription, it is not only students who struggle to enjoy the text, as teacher participant 4 noted they found it difficult to pretend to like some of the anthology poems and would rather teach more relatable content to the students; poems that they enjoyed, so they could share the teacher’s enthusiasm for these poems. For students to engage in poetry, it matters what their teacher’s and their own attitude is towards the texts they are asked to read.

In this chapter, I focus on how poetry is perceived by teachers and students of this study in relation to language and culture and how it can be used, is used and is not always used as a vehicle for exploring English language and culture. Furthermore, in this chapter I will consider creative and critical thinking in the poetry classroom. This will be expanded on in the final findings chapter, Chapter 7: *Flights of Fantasy*. When I initially considered reading poetry in different contexts, I looked at the historical, political and socio-cultural contexts in which poetry can be made relevant. The categories of themes in this chapter are based on Braun and Clarke's framework for Thematic Analysis (2022) and presented in in Figure 12. The themes in this chapter arose from the teacher interviews initially, and in particular teacher participant 2 (England) who noted poetry was a way to expand vocabulary. Teacher participant 6 (Netherlands) similarly shared that students can improve their vocabulary through learning poetry. The student surveys highlighted a similar notion that through poetry they could 'understand English better', which is where the thought for the title of this chapter originated. Furthermore, I noticed that in the teacher interviews culture was mentioned too, as the teachers shared how poetry could expand students' world view, and students responded that poetry 'lets you experience a bit of culture.' For both English and Dutch poetry teaching and learning, both language and culture appeared to play a significant role in the value and purpose of poetry in the classroom. Consequently, this led to the data that is represented and analysed in this chapter, using both methods of poetic inquiry and thematic analysis.

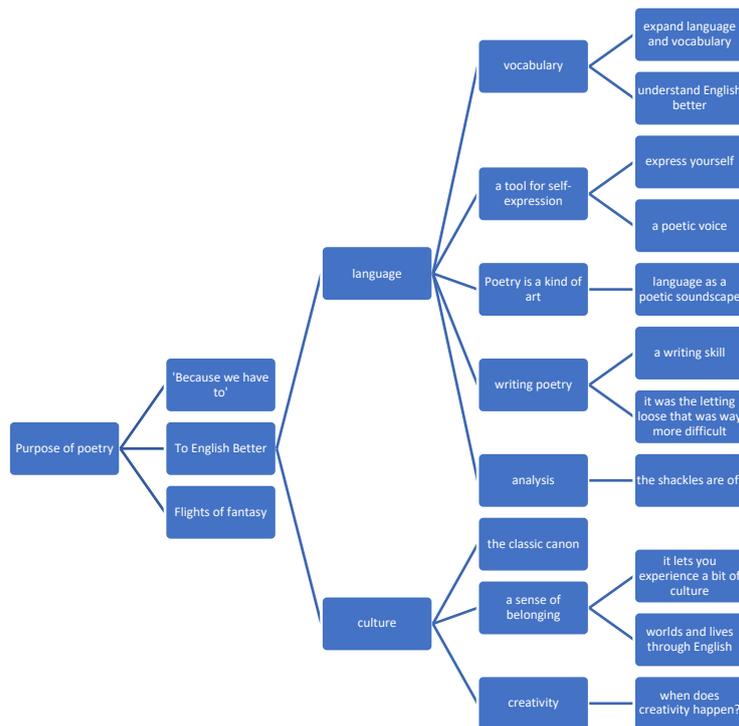


Figure 12 Thematic analysis of 'to English better': A full-page view of themes can be found in Appendix 2

## 6.2 Culture

### 6.2.1 It lets you experience a bit of culture

#### **A bit of culture**

It lets you experience a bit of culture

Develop understanding

Both the modern and the historical world and its culture

A deeper understanding

of historic events

To allow students to understand

poetry from different time periods

it originated from

England

Poetry is coming from

England

I think

It lets you experience a bit of culture

In the above poem I present Dutch student survey responses to when they were asked ‘why do you think poetry is taught in English?’ It was intriguing to see that there were no answers to this question on culture and history from English students. However, when they were asked why they find poetry useful or not useful, there were three responses with regards to cultural and historical aspects: *‘it provides understanding of history’*, *‘we will become more advanced into the English language and its history’*, and: *‘To develop understanding of both the modern and the historical world and its culture’*. In contrast, English students’ responses primarily focused on analyses, annotations, making meaning of existing poems and that it was ‘part of the exam’. When asked why they thought poetry was taught in English, with 13.25% of the English respondents and none of the Dutch respondents commenting on assessment directly. English respondents answered this question with different terminology to the Dutch students, primarily relating the purpose of poetry teaching to making meaning, learning language techniques, language features and grammar, whereas the Dutch students’ focus was more concerned with the writing, presenting, and reading of poetry.

### 6.2.2 Focus on the anthology

In the English schools, teachers and students alike noted the focus on war poetry. Of these students 28.2% (24) English students indicated that war poetry, poems including action or horror and poems *‘about soldiers’* were the poems they enjoyed reading. Two students named specific poems: ‘Exposure’ and ‘Bayonet Charge’. This does not particularly mean that this is their favourite poetry, as it might be some of the only poetry they are aware of being exposed to in their recent education. Teacher participant 4 (England) indicates that the predominant theme in poetry lessons is war, and argues that it provides *‘such a narrow picture of what poetry really is’*:

#### **We’re not giving it the space**

It feels like such a narrow picture

Of what poetry really is

Even key stage three

We do war poetry.

Which is fine,

There is some good war poetry.

It's an interesting

Thing contextually to

Talk about but there

Are so many other poems that

We just don't do.

It feels very limited

To one specific type of poet.

I'm not that enthusiastic

About Wilfred Owen,

There's so many things

to be enthusiastic about

kids know when you're not enthused or

they're not passionate about it

I think the best teaching comes

When you're passionate about

What you're teaching.

Those historical events that happen

Are quite interesting to think about

Try to get them to

Picture what it would be like.

Try to get them to

Empathise with the poems or with

The characters

I remember doing all sorts of interesting

Things, but it just feels like  
There's not as much space for it  
As there used to be.

In this poem I present the ongoing internal dialogue the teacher (teacher participant 4, England) has with regards to the topics of poems in the anthology and the challenge of providing enough information, keeping the poem interesting, allowing for empathy and connection with the poem, and providing a focus on the GCSE anthology poems. I have illustrated this using a free verse structure with stanzas, to show the thought process of the teacher and the different impacts teaching a narrow anthology has on students. The poem shows the awareness of the teacher that both student and teacher need enthusiasm for students to be passionate about learning. It suggests the teacher finds it more challenging to be authentic in their passion and enthusiasm in a classroom that follows a narrow GCSE anthology, with poems that are perhaps unrelatable for students and teachers. The focus is often on what the student wants, as Teacher participant 5 (The Netherlands) suggests, and not on what might impact the teacher's enthusiasm and motivation in teaching.

Teacher participant 4 (England) continues to note there is not as much space for doing 'interesting things' as there used to be and shares examples of a contrast between when they were at school and them teaching now. In the interview, This teacher connects this contrast in teaching practice to the space for teaching with and for creativity:

*'when I was at school it felt like English generally was much more creative'. This sense of a restrictive anthology and a focus on the 'end goal' takes away space to 'just show them a poem that I enjoy and talk about [...] and get them to talk about it, without the pressure you know, of 'how would you write this in a SEES paragraph?'* (Teacher participant 4, England).

It appears that it is not only the anthology of poems that feels restrictive, but also that the way students are asked to write their analyses in structured ways is limiting. This suggests a cultural limitation to what they are learning as well as a limited exposure to different types of writing styles due to the paragraphs having to be written in a particular way, potentially reducing the space for creativity.

As discussed earlier, Benton indicates a need for getting away from the idea that only 'dead white males with frilly shirts' can write poetry (2000, p. 528). The lack of a broader cultural approach to poetry leads to a dull, dry and boring experience with poetry (Lockney and Proudfoot, 2012; Gregory, 2017, p. 129). Unlike what happens in TESOL, TEFL and even Dutch secondary school classrooms, there still appears to be very limited opportunity to play with language because are required to adhere to a certain structure. Consequently, students are often provided with all the information to include, like a puzzle that needs to be solved (Dymoke, 2003, p. 15 and p. 111)), or an object from which to 'extract' data (Snapper, 2015, p. 31).

### 6.2.3 Relating poems to other texts and topics through collaboration

Teacher participant 3 (England) explored poetry and socio-cultural context in the classroom, as observed, when relating poems to the present-day and providing space to consider what students think the poems are about. When teaching the poem 'Vultures', he did suggest World War 2 as the original context, but then went on to relate the theme of 'good and evil' to other texts, such as Jekyll and Hyde. Hereby, Teacher participant 3 provided space for students to make their own meaning, rather than providing them with the meanings the students had to know for their assessments. It allowed for creative and critical thinking amongst students. In this lesson, there was space to engage with each other and collaboratively annotate the poem to make meaning, hereby engaging in Kress and Bezemer's (2015) understanding of *social semiotics*, where students communicate with each other to make meaning. The importance of social semiotics in education stems from Hodge and Kress (1988), who refers to Volosinov (1929/1986)'s argument that signs are determined by forms of social communication, and that the 'semiotic quality and the continuous, comprehensive role of social communication as conditioning factor' is expressed most fully and clearly in language (Hodge and Kress, 1988, p. 13).

As an example of this, in the observation of the year 9 group (B3) the teacher supported and guided the students, yet he did not annotate with them. Rather, this teacher considered some of their answers with the rest of the group after they had spent ten minutes discussing and writing down their own thoughts in pairs, working on putting their thoughts into 'signs', or in this case, language. The teacher would sometimes ask them to

pair up or work with three or four students too, but kept these collaborative moments shorter than the work in pairs, which allowed students to stay on-topic and avoided lower engagement with the text.

In the interview with Teacher participant 3 (England), when inquiring about dialogue and group work in the classroom, they noted that they never worked in groups of more than 4 to avoid distraction and disengagement with the topic, and would most often provide space for students to work in pairs. This was an effective way to facilitate collaborative learning in the classroom, and in the three observed lessons the group work indeed appeared effective and productive for students. When asked to share their thoughts with the whole group, some students were hesitant, but all who were asked ended up sharing what they had written, and the teacher responded with some constructive and primarily positive feedback. In the observation notes, I wrote:

*The classroom is learning about the poem 'Vultures' by Chinua Achebe and the students have just annotated part of the poem and are now engaging in a discussion with the whole class. The teacher relates the poem to The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas by John Boyne and gives a short explanation of the views presented in the poem. One of the students speaks up and relates the poem to both sides and that people can be good and evil at the same time. The teacher compliments the student and elaborates on their answer. While the students are writing their analyses, the teacher walks around the room and compliments the students' on their work when it looks good. At the end of the lesson, the teacher comments that he is impressed by the students' attitude and response on the poem and during the lesson.*

The positive feedback during this lesson resulted in students working independently and collaboratively on the poem at hand. At times they disengaged momentarily with the analytical writing but would continue to talk about the poem and make it relatable.

In a lesson at the other English school where observations were carried out, group work was included in the lesson too. In school observation C1:2, the teacher made an effort to facilitate group work with groups of up to four.

*The teacher introduced the next activity on Bayonet Charge by Ted Hughes. After providing the students with some historical context for the poem, the teacher gives the students a task*

*to carry out in small groups. Because of the way the students were seated in the room, the teacher made a conscious decision to split some of the students up to provide the students with a better opportunity to focus on the task at hand. While the students were making notes and engaging in conversation with each other, the teacher walked around the room and asked students questions to help guide them, such as 'what's he not done?' The teacher provides space for the students to ask questions too. One of the students asks the teacher about mental health in relation to the poem. After around 15 minutes, the teacher regroupes and asks to hear the students' thoughts, after one of the groups respond, the teacher opens up a discussion to the whole class, and invites others to contribute to the group's comment. The teacher notices one of the groups is not participating as actively as the others, and draws them into the conversation by asking them to share their answer.*

It was intriguing to find these different approaches to group work and the effect they had on the learning process. In the group that studied *Vultures*, the students were given prompts by the teacher and any questions the students asked were explained to the whole class, whereas in the lesson where *Bayonet Charge* was discussed, the students were given more information prior to the group work, and more open questions during the group work. The teacher in this instance did not regroup when students had questions but walked around to assist them. In both cases students were asked to present some of their thoughts at the end. In the lesson where the poem '*Vultures*' by Chinua Achebe was introduced, this was done by stopping group work and discussing with students what they had written, including the teacher in the conversation. Yet in the other class the teacher did not ask the groups to share their findings out loud. Another difference in group work between these two lessons was the timing. In lesson 1 the group work happened in the first half of the lesson, before students looked at a poem individually, whereas in the *Bayonet Charge* lesson, there is a lot of whole group discussion in the first half of the lesson, with group work primarily taking place in the last 20 minutes of the lesson. In this class, I perceived more students to be distracted, which might be due to the group work taking place in the last part of the lesson, or due to the students receiving more open questions.

I identified **Group work** as a subtheme of belonging, as group work shows how students find their place in the classroom environment and with their teacher and peers, as well as showing the teacher's purpose and the direction in which the teacher guides the

students, and how this guidance impacts the students' engagement and their analyses of the poems they are looking at. In all the classroom observations, there was groupwork to some extent. Intriguingly, each teacher had their own methods of initiating and facilitating group work and would incorporate it at different times in their lessons. Teacher participant 3 (England) would start with an introduction of a poem, but give away very little about the poem and allow students to collaboratively make meaning, before opening up the discussion to the whole group and asking students to share their thoughts. In contrast, Teacher participant 4 (England) would start by sharing contextual and historical information about the poem, followed by some annotations and then introduce groupwork for students to gather these thoughts and make meaning from them. In the observed Dutch school (Teacher participant 1, The Netherlands), this was different again as in the poetry analysis lesson the teacher aimed to discuss the poem with the whole group from the beginning of the lesson. These different ways and moments of engaging with group work in poetry lessons, and different classroom set-ups to allow group work to happen, created different dynamics between students and teachers and amongst the students themselves.

Through learning about culture and English language in collaboration, students' own culture has the potential to come to life, as well as the original cultural context the poem might have been written in. Group work seems to be an effective way to allow students to engage with poetry on their own terms, as well as considering discussion questions and topics laid out by the teacher. The lessons that were observed that showed most connections between the original and present context, were those by Teacher participant 3 (England), where students read the poem initially. They spent very little time on the receiving end of information, and more time considering what they felt the poem meant. The other group work techniques led primarily to students coming up with ideas on what the poem meant in its original context and how it related to, in some instances, the poets' lives and the lives of those who had been through similar experiences. An example of this comes from my observations of a poetry lesson where the poem 'Kamikaze' by Beatrice Garland was introduced.

*After the teacher invited the students to open their anthology books and go to the page that had Kamikaze by Beatrice Garland on it, the teacher introduced the poem and gave the students some background to the poem. In the process the teacher asked students some*

questions with regards to the historical context, which helped the students find connection points. The teacher asked the students whether they knew what a Kamikaze was as well. After this brief introduction, the students were shown a video clip of a Japanese family, whose relative was a Kamikaze pilot who, at the last minute, decided against flying. The video showed how this man was frowned upon by society, and how the family coped with the judgement, and their own judgement of their father and grandfather. It showed how the family felt ashamed of their relative. By seeing these lived experiences, students were able to see the real-world effect of what was described in the poem. The teacher brought the context of the poem into the present by asking students if anyone would be willing to do what kamikazes did. Students commented saying, 'the military shouldn't have been allowed to do that.' This started a conversation on why anyone would choose to be a kamikaze, and whether it was an act of patriotism. The teacher asked students to put their hands up if they thought they were a patriot. No students did this. One student said, 'I like Boris Johnson, but I wouldn't go that far.' Another student came up with reasons why people would do this, 'if they didn't they would be seen as cowards.' The teacher asked this student if they had done this poem before. The student answered that they had not, but did know a lot about World War 2, which led to conversations about WW2. At the end of the lesson, the teacher noted they would continue this poem after half term, and that the student who knew about WW2 would 'lead us up on this, he's the expert', which showed the teacher was open to students leading discussions and sharing their interest. (observation, C1:3)

## 6.3 Language

### 6.3.1 Understanding worlds and lives through poetry

#### **Worlds and lives**

everyone in the world knows some English

English is the world language

Language spoken by many,

It's our language.

'Worlds and lives' is the Edexcel anthology selection which was added in 2021 after the 'lit. in colour' project was published. I chose this title to amplify that English is a world language, and that it is used in various ways in different cultures, countries and settings. Although these lines reflect only a few students who considered the global aspect of English, this poem represents the idea that language and identity are connected, and that English is a global language. I structured the poem starting with a longer survey response and ending on a short response to illustrate the outward look (*everyone in the world*) to an inward view of English (it's *our* language). When considering poetry in connection with language and identity, it shows an understanding of poetry as a vehicle to makes meaning to the wider world, and at the same time to express *ourselves* through language. It is signalling a sense of poetry as a vehicle for communication, something that is 'spoken by many', but then contrasting it with poetry, which is often not understood, found difficult or irrelevant by students.

It can be argued that because English is a world language, through playing with it in poetic ways, we learn to make different meanings and are free from the grammatical constraints of prose, essay-writing and the analyses students write. Subsequently, by engaging in poetry writing and reading, students are able to explore language on different levels and have the opportunity to improve their communication and understanding of the different ways in which language is used. Furthermore, with English being a world language, poetic English could allow students to more easily interpret and share meanings from different cultures within and beyond Britain.

In the interviews, it was not foregrounded that English was a global language, although there was mention of the relatability of language to shed light on real-world challenges, as in the following examples, which were introduced in the previous chapter, when considering poetry within and beyond the assessment. Here these poems are illustrated to convey how poetry can be used to teach about language and culture:

Teacher participant 2 (England):

you can hook the context and sort of

hang that in the background: it opens it up

I suppose, and it makes it **more of a worldly view.**

Teacher participant 3 (England):

I think it even brings out the best in people  
who are down the scale

I think when you see

The relevance

It can give them ideas  
about **the modern world**.

Teacher participant 4 (England):

I think poetry in particular just feels very dry.

I think that's the thing we struggle with

the ability to express how you feel or how you perceive someone,  
**the world or the things that matter to you**

Teacher participant 5 (Netherlands):

you can show them that the sky is the limit

I think that's what I mostly mean by creativity

Not from a book but from themselves

Look around you, **see what's going on in the world**.

The interview questions did not set out to ask about the connection English poetry might have to provide a more worldly view. However, in these four cases the notion that through poetry students are able to understand better what is going on in the world, illuminates the positive impact poetry can have on students' education.

Although the interviews mention the applicability of poetry to students' understanding of socio-cultural contexts, the interviews and observations indicated a value of the content of the taught and learnt poems, rather than on language and its global application more generally. This, made these survey responses stand out as they show language as part of the students' identities, and English is seen as a living language that is set in the world, providing students with the opportunity to make sense of the world. This juxtaposes Brian Cox's (1993, p. 26) argument that English is taught as a dead language. Only some respondents commented on the use of poetry to enhance English language

communication skills, and it would be intriguing to further look into how students experience their identities through the language taught in school.

### 6.3.2 Poetry to help with vocabulary and language learning

#### **To expand language and vocabulary**

recognise the techniques to

enhance vocabulary

Wider range of vocabulary

To expand your language and vocabulary

To learn better the vocabulary

Creativity and vocabulary

Good for your vocabulary

And grammar

I think

in English they speak a lot of

figurative language Poetry is a way to use

your creativity with language, with literature.

In the way which writers use

certain words and language techniques

the concept of understanding

different language features.

Understanding different

Language features

Develop analysis and literary techniques

to learn context.

further their ability to annotate and analyse

to understand techniques and

what has happened.

In the above poem I have focused on the different aspects that came out of the survey responses that relate to language learning. Students responded focusing on the broadening of their vocabulary, the language techniques writers and poets use (how the poets approach language techniques), and then in the fourth stanza I include responses that link those language techniques to analysis (how students approach language techniques). Across both countries, student responses versed the idea of poetry as a way to expand their vocabulary. The first stanza focuses on the English responses, whereas in the second stanza Dutch responses are included. The third and fourth stanzas show survey responses from the students in England. In creating this poem, I perceived that for the survey responses from English students the focus was on developing 'language features', 'analysis', and 'literary techniques', whereas in the Dutch schools the focus, was on expanding vocabulary and improving their communication skills. This is an intriguing contrast as it highlights English in these English schools as a product to analyse and unpick, whereas in the Dutch schools the emphasis was more on learning words in poetry and being able to express themselves aesthetically, rhythmically and creatively through English language. This is a difference which may be due to English being taught as 'an other language' in The Netherlands, as in TESOL and TEFL classrooms English is taught in a more practical way, rather than an analytical way (Khatib, 2011). However, it could also be due to the way the curriculum is laid out, providing room for active engagement in English lessons in Dutch schools where students are given space to write and discuss poetry and language, whereas in the English schools there was an emphasis on reading skills as opposed to writing skills. This can be seen in the curriculum and awarding bodies too, where students are invited to engage in critical reading styles, although there is no mention of expressing the self in diverse ways, such as through poetry.

Similarly, Interview participant 4 (England) mentioned that particularly with the 'lesser able students' they quite often felt as though they were *'almost sort of telling them what to think about in a poem, and then they write it down and, ehm, then they regurgitate that in the exam.'* They note it is often *'so time dependent'*, which leads to less time for *'students to be able to think critically about a poem'*, because *'perhaps that's time that you feel you don't have as you're working towards these assessments'*, which may contribute to this focus on analysing and annotating techniques, as opposed to putting the techniques into practice through (poetry) writing. According to some of the teacher participants this

drive towards assessment is often the cause of the focus on annotations, analyses and techniques that concern the reading of the poem and the historical context of the poem, rather than using the students' own experience and understanding of the world to read and write poetry.

Table 9 shows an overview of the poems that were taught and analysed during the 9 observations that were conducted in years 10 and 11 (Key Stage 4). The school that had recently redeveloped their poetry teaching and noted that they included more unseen poetry, which had led to higher grades, had 4 lessons with unseen poetry, and only 2 with anthology poems. The school that taught poetry in blocks was doing a block on anthology poetry during the observations and, as such, all the poems that were included featured in the GCSE anthology. This teacher did mention in the interviews that the primary focus was on the anthology poetry and they taught these as unseen poems to the students so they would have practised the techniques used to approach an unseen poem. The teacher commented that, *'last year our results for unseen poetry were, just looking at it question by question, very down. Even the kids who did well, generally did badly on that question.'* They noted one of the key challenges for their students was the level of reading, due to the students' reading age. This meant that they could practise the language in the GCSE anthology poems, but sometimes would not understand the unseen poetry:

*'like the anthology poems, you know if they, if all else fails they can write down what the story is about with a couple of the quotations they've remembered and that, that can be enough but for the unseen poems they can't read it. That's a massive problem. And I think it's really hard by the time they get to year nine if their reading age is below to try and have a significant impact on that while also trying to teach a whole class full of people how to be successful in their GCSE it becomes really difficult.'* (Teacher participant 4, England)

This contrasts with what was said by Teacher participant 3 (England) concerning the unseen poetry lessons:

*'we were concerned about the unseen poem, especially at year eleven. It's always like the terrifying experience where they've got two unseen poems they have to write about and compare so if they get used to that from year seven then it's not going to horrify them and*

*we found last year our pupils got some excellent grades in the unseen poetry. They came out pretty confident so that... I know you shouldn't talk about exams and that but you do have to think about... work backwards and think 'well, poetry's a key part of it, especially the unseen poetry', so it's something that they can't revise so you can't just give them superficial understanding of poetry. They've got to have an understanding of the concepts and the bigger ideas from year seven onwards so it doesn't come at their door at year eleven.'*

(Teacher participant 3, England)

In both these schools it shows that there have been or are problems with how the unseen poetry is taught. By teaching (unseen) poetry throughout the years and introducing students to different types of poetry and ways of meaning making through poetry, Teacher participant 3's approach led to higher marks. Teacher participant 5 (The Netherlands) noted that their aim in the school was to start introducing poetry from the first year in secondary school to ensure students would not fear poetry and consider other poets besides 'Shakespeare':

*'If we talk about poetry or poetry or about poems, what is the first thing that comes to your mind? And really, they all said 'Shakespeare'. And it seems like this is the only reference they have of poems or poetry. Some of them don't know what poetry is [...] I think, especially now that we can use modern poetry for that [...] so I think it's a really nice idea to work with modern poetry, and maybe poetry written by writers from something or somewhat like their age.'* (Teacher participant 5, Netherlands)

This teacher continued to show why they wanted poetry taught from the first year in secondary school, which links to the interview excerpt from Teacher participant 5 (Netherlands) :

*'I would love to work with poems from Sylvia Plath with my students from the [upper years], I tried last year, once... and it was really awkward because they have no idea how to approach that. That's why I'm busy with that project, we start from year one, where we can set some layers and start with something simple and it should build up to something more complex for example.'*

This interview response illustrates how this teacher perceives poetry through the years to be beneficial for students to become more familiar with poetic styles and a wider range of poetry, and more relatable, inclusive and contemporary poetry too. Furthermore, teaching poetry through the years may not only be useful for Dutch poetry teaching and learning settings, but for English teachers too, as they can bring in their preferred poetry rather than relying on the anthology poems. Teacher Participant 3's (England) increase in results for the unseen poetry exam after providing poetry throughout the school years rather than in blocks provides an example of how poetry teaching throughout the years, and increasing the range of poetry that is taught, can benefit assessment results as well as the students' attitudes and familiarity with poetic structures. It would be intriguing to see whether a class with low reading ages, such as one of the classrooms Teacher participant 4 (England) teaches, would benefit from teaching poetry throughout the years, rather than in blocks. As the students themselves noted, poetry can benefit vocabulary and language learning, which means it might stimulate learners to read and could support the improvement of reading ages if poems are relatable and accessible for these learners. This could be a thought-provoking topic to explore in more depth. However, given the time constraints and high workload of the teachers, it might be difficult to implement this in some schools, as it would take time to find suitable poems and to create questions and any other materials needed.

*Table 7 Poems taught during year 10 and 11 observations in English schools*

Lesson observation	Poem	Anthology or Unseen
Observation B1:1	Exposure by Wilfred Owen	Anthology
Observation B1:2	An Old Woman by Arun Kolatkar	Unseen
Observation B1:3	Mrs Tilscher's Class by Carol Ann Duffy	Unseen
Observation B2:1	The Ballad of Hillsborough by Simon Rae	Unseen
Observation B2:2	The Manhunt by Simon Armitage	Unseen (although poet does appear in anthology)
Observation B2:3	War Photographer by Carol Ann Duffy	Anthology

Observation C1:1	Bayonet Charge by Ted Hughes and Remains by Simon Armitage	Anthology
Observation C1:2	Exposure by Wilfred Owen and compare to choice of: Remains by Simon Armitage, Bayonet Charge by Ted Hughes or Charge of the Light Brigade by Lord Alfred Tennyson	Anthology
Observation C1:3	Charge of the Light Brigade by Lord Alfred Tennyson, Exposure by Wilfred Owen, Bayonet Charge by Ted Hughes, Kamikaze by Beatrice Garland	Anthology

### 6.3.3 Gaining a better understanding of the English language

#### **Understand English better**

Making links between

Words and feelings,

Understanding connotations

And English better

It's an important part of the English language

To better understand language

Gives you a better understanding,

To get a better understanding of

the English language

I think that you can understand

English better

It makes you understand

The language more

I created this poem from primarily English survey respondents. Based on the high-stakes assessment format in many English schools, I was intrigued by the responses as they show that these English students do not only perceive poetry to be there to develop analytic skills and knowledge of language techniques, but that there is a purpose to poetry that goes beyond this. These responses were answers to the question: *'why do you think poetry is taught in English?'*. . In this poem I aim to convey that for the English students understanding language better was seen as a reason for teaching poetry that goes beyond analysis techniques. From these responses it shows that some students would connect their feelings to understanding language, which links to expressing the self through language and conveys how poetry can play a role in developing communication about emotion through language. Nineteen responses from English students contained the word 'express', and 23 of the responses from Dutch students included the word 'express' when considering the purpose of poetry, how useful poetry might be and when creativity happens in poetry lessons This shows that to some extent there is an awareness that learning poetry can improve ways to express the self.

In the interviews vocabulary also came up in a few different contexts. For example, teacher Interview participant 4 (England) noted that *'for a lot of them there's language issues, you know, like, they can't understand the vocabulary so they struggle to just get the gist of a poems sometimes independent of me, let alone thinking about it in a critical way'*.

Teacher participant 2 (England) provided an example of how vocabulary played a role in making connections with other texts:

*'my pupils will know the word 'illusion', which is connected to another literary text and so they can say, 'oh that links to Macbeth', or maybe 'that's similar to 'the Darkness out there', so they can connect poetry, there's like a connection and that thematic link to other books as well.' ... 'they can see it contextual as well and hopefully write themselves and learn sort of more messages as well from the poem.'*

Teacher participant 2 (England) further notes that they have been *'using poems that we've been studying as a tool for developing vocabulary'* and connecting this vocabulary to the

creative writing tasks, showing that poetry is not only there to be read, but can assist with creative writing ideas:

*'students have obviously been preparing for creative writing tasks and I've been sort of going back to some of the poetry that they've studied and using the vocabulary from the poetry as a way of stimulating and developing their vocabulary. So that's been something that I've tried to embed in my teaching more recently.'*

The responses from both Teacher participants 2 and 4 show that poetry can be used to explore vocabulary as either part of creative writing to embed the vocabulary in students' own writing, or to create connections with other texts and explore the different contexts in which a word can be used. Both examples emphasise English as a living language, where students are required to think actively about the way in which words make and shape meaning and the relevance of the vocabulary in various contexts.

In one of the Dutch schools vocabulary was seen as something that students had to translate in the *Stepping Stones* system this school used: *'because it's really like 'okay learn the Stones', you have to know how to write them for the test, you have to know how to translate the words, so you need to remember the vocab and then you teach them the grammar and that's it.'* This teacher in particular felt it was difficult to get other teachers on board due to time constraints and an already full workload. When they refer to 'the stones', they mean the *Stepping Stones* text book, the Dutch textbook for learning English. Another teacher from the same school noted they are *'not a fan of studying vocab'*, and tries to teach students *'vocab through things like poetry, literature, articles – I hardly ever used the books, because I didn't like them at all [...] they are not very motivating for the students. Usually the topics are not up to date'*. It is clear that the cohort of teachers participating in the research found teaching vocabulary through poetry and novels to be a useful way to consider scaffolding the students' language.

From my personal experience of using *Stepping Stones* in my secondary school, I wanted to contribute the following:

*I remember in my secondary school that we used the Stepping Stones books too and as the teacher described the vocabulary and translation exercises, I related to the way they felt it*

*prevented students from really learning the language. You would follow a Stepping Stone, which would be on a particular topic, and then you would have to do a quiz at the end, where you translated some of the key words from that topic either into English or into Dutch, and had to implement the words in existing sentences. Although I am bilingual, and my English was more proficient than most of my peers because I spoke it and read it a lot at home, I often failed these quizzes and had to drill exact words in my head, or I would get a low mark for the quiz. There seemed to be little room to allow students to play with language and include similes. It had to be answered exactly by the book, which for me was frustrating and demotivating. I recall talking to a bilingual friend who was in a different class but worked with the same system. She had recently failed her quiz because she wrote her answers using American English spelling. The lack of freedom for the students to play with words to make and shape meanings was not motivating, and now 16 years after I left secondary school, these similar issues still arise in classroom English. It was interesting to hear the teacher's perspective on this binary approach of teaching students vocabulary, and thought provoking to learn that poetry was considered as a way to enhance vocabulary through creative and critical thinking processes. (Diehl, reflection)*

Poetry offers a way to learn language in a culturally inclusive way, allowing for students to try different ways of shaping meaning, rather than being driven towards one way of expressing themselves. As the students note too: poetry is purposeful because it provides space to 'express feelings', 'express yourself' and is a 'creative expression.' In the poem below I introduce poetry as a way of expressing the self.

#### 6.3.4 Poetry as a way to express yourself

##### **Express yourself**

Express emotions

that you can't talk about

Expressing yourself in an artistic form

Express the way you feel

Express ideas and thoughts,

It helps learn language skills.

Express things in a fun and interesting way

Creative expression

Poetry, seen as a form of art, often relates to expressing emotions or feelings, which some students noted in their responses. In this poem I share some of the survey responses that related to poetry being used as a tool for expression. These responses are both from Dutch and English students. The poem is split into two stanzas, the first one explores the connection between emotion, art and expression, whereas the second stanza presents the connection between expressing ideas and language skills in different ways. Teacher participant 4 (England) expresses their own value of learning poetry to express the self, and notes that this is one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching poetry:

### **A poetic voice**

When poetry is done well and  
Students engage with it, they  
Are able to express themselves  
Gave them the ability  
To say this thing - Probably the  
best feeling I ever get  
out of teaching poetry is  
when I give them a voice for something.

Poetry and teaching poetry is  
A good way to look at other  
People's emotions, develop  
Those empathy skills. I think  
Poetry is quite attainable?  
Kids can write poetry themselves  
And see it as a way of ...  
Expressing themselves if they  
Look at how other people have done it.

This poem is written in 7 or 8 beats per line, with the final lines in 9 and 10, to illustrate how rhythm adds to the communication process, and the how changing the rhythm can help signal a change in the narrative. Furthermore, in this poem I want to convey that teaching poetry is purposeful not only due to the language that is used, but also how that language is used to make meaning or to emphasise an idea. In this case I aimed to emphasise the value the teacher places on bringing emotion and creativity into poetry teaching and learning.

Two of the students in the survey responses share the value of the rhythmic, and aesthetic form of poetry that can teach students the 'beauty of the language'. The first 4 lines are made up of one response from one Dutch student, and the final line is by another Dutch student.

### **Language as a poetic soundscape**

Poetry requires rhythmic expression

some languages lack it.

almost every language can express itself aesthetically,

it can't do it rhythmically.

You learn the beauty of the language.

Through the rhythm of the language, students can learn to express themselves and language can express itself too, as different people will read a text differently based on their prior experience. The teacher in the poem 'a poetic voice' suggests that teaching poetry is purposeful for more than just learning words, but also useful for how we can improve communication through language, by expressing feelings and emotions in poetic verse, while simultaneously developing '*empathy skills*'. This is another finding that relates to what one of the purposes of poetry might be: to make and shape meaning not only of the world, but also of the way the world can be seen through different lenses. By using existing poems and understanding the views and then relating it to how students' own views are expressed, students may get a better grasp of the language they are speaking. Similarly, Teacher participant 6 (The Netherlands) mentions that '*they've got to be able to express themselves through the lingua franca*'. This is a teacher in The Netherlands, who shares that '*whether*

*they go into business, whether they go and do something more creative'* students have to be able to communicate clearly and creatively.

This emphasises the opportunity for poetry to be more than just the analyses of techniques, hidden meanings and historical contexts, as it highlights that poetry could be purposeful as a 'living language' (Cox, 1993, p. 26) for students and allows for students to play creatively with meaning making and fostering a sense of curiosity and evaluative thought (Newton, 2014). Poems can spark questions about students' own lives, or about the lives of those around them, providing them with tools to help develop understanding of their place in and with the world. In the classroom, this seems to be something that is not often taught or present, and the survey and interviews show that this cohort would feel improvements to the way students can engage with poetry could be made through fostering self-expression (and reflection) in the poetry classroom, to stimulate language learning and understanding language primarily as a tool for communication.

During the observations, the year 9 observations stood out as containing the most space for students to express how they felt about a poem, how they related to the words or how they considered the poem relating to the present-day or to their own lives. They were able to make connections from their own pre-existing knowledge, as I report my observations:

*In the first observation I did with the year 9 class, it became clear very soon that the teacher expected the students to actively participate and interpret the poems based not only on what information the teacher shared about a poem, but also on their own pre-existing knowledge. It was clear in this first observation that this teacher values the students' voices when he provides the students with the poem 'The Horse Whisperer' by Andrew Forster and said, 'rather than me telling you what it's about I want to let you discuss in pairs or threes to give you a chance'. This approach allows the students to explore meanings and express what they find, giving them an active role in the lesson. The teacher then gave the students ten minutes to write their initial ideas down, while walking around observing the work and answering any questions students may have. The teacher invited me to walk around too, which I did, and as I looked at some of the responses, I noticed there were a wide range of meanings as students focused on different aspects, some taking a poem more literally, whereas others made notes on impacts of industry. Once the students wrote their answers down, the teacher*

*asks some to share their answers. The teacher picked students in the class to respond. Soon, the conversation in the classroom moves onto technology and jobs being taken over by technology.. The teacher then invites the students to undertake another individual writing exercise, focusing on the topic of society and industry. The teacher invites students to notice 'how many industries have gone under' and provides an example from his own experiences, introducing the topic and showing through this example the type of answer he would like the students to provide, without telling them what the content of their answer should be. In this way, the teacher engages with his own lived experience and provides a human and vulnerable element to engaging students in creative and critical thought. The students do the activity, and when the teacher asks for responses a few students share their own examples on the impact technology has had in an industry they know something about, and relate the poem to.*

*the rise of social media and engage in conversation on how this changed industries. The conversation then moves to how technology has decreased employees in car industries, specifically pointing out MG Motors and how they have significantly increased their revenue, although they have decreased the employees that work at the factory. Another student follows this by saying that, 'technology is evolving, but we have stopped', to which another student responds that this 'is scary.' This interactive classroom discussion happens near the end of the lesson, and the lesson ends with a final homework exercise. (Observation B3:1)*

Although in this lesson the teacher has steered the students towards analysing the poem and has shared examples to connect the poem to the students' world and lives, there is also space for considering the self and the society the students live in, rather than only the poem's historical context. This allows for discussion and conversation to flow and for students to engage in the lesson material and to express the thoughts they have through being creative with language and curious about the content and how it relates to the self. The above observation is an example of how poetry can be used as a vehicle to initiate guided discussions, another way in which poetry can be used is to consider writing skills.

### 6.3.5 Poetry to improve writing ability

#### **A writing skill**

when/how to use techniques in a sentence  
To develop the English language  
To learn how to write  
be creative with writing  
a way to use your creativity  
with language, with literature  
To formulate a great story  
English is a language a lot of people understand so  
when you write poetry in English  
many people will be able to enjoy it

Respondents from both The Netherlands and England commented on the written aspect of poetry, which was an intriguing insight as in the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 and in the AQA and Edexcel assessments, poetry writing is not an assessed component, and the survey shows that 89.1% of English students in this survey have either never written a poem, cannot remember writing a poem, or have not written one while being in Key Stage 4 (year 10 and 11). A much lower, but still considerably high percentage of Dutch students in this survey - 67.7% - had never written a poem, could not remember writing a poem or had not written one in the last 2 years, and of those 67.7% (42 respondents), 35.7% of Dutch students had never written a poem. These results show that particularly in this cohort of schools, the English schools wrote visibly less poetry in the upper years of their secondary education, although creative writing is a component of the final exam, whereas creative writing is not part of the Dutch exam, yet still a greater proportion of students wrote poems either for their own benefit or for a school project. Out of the 89.1% of English students, only 6% said they had never written a poem, and 21.6% could not remember the last time they wrote one.

Although this data only shows phenomena of these particular schools, it connects with the literature, where it is argued that students in English secondary schools do not frequently write poetry in Key Stage 4, even though writing is seen as a useful tool to engage in poetry actively, rather than reading it primarily in a passive way (Almond, 2021). Both teachers and students in my study agree, to some extent, that they would like to see more

poetry writing. I did not observe any poetry writing activities in the English schools. In the Dutch school I observed, there was one example of poetry writing, which was cut-up poetry.

*During the second Dutch lesson I observed, the students were given an introduction of cut-up poetry with a video about William S. Burroughs' understanding of this method of cutting up newspaper articles and creating poetic texts using the words from the original articles. The students were asked, in small groups, to create their own cut-up poetry. The teacher had provided the students with large print newspaper articles, scissors, a glue stick, and an A4 sheet of blank paper. She asked the students not to think too long about where they were going to place which words, as this activity was geared towards being creative with words, while it 'quietened the critical voice for a while' (teacher participant 1, Netherlands, Observation A1:2).*

The teacher gave further reasoning to the purpose of cut-up poetry in the interview, which I convey in the poem below.

### 6.3.6 Thinking for ourselves: finding freedom through poetry reading and writing

#### **It was the letting loose that was way more difficult**

I wanted them to experience playing with language  
rather than expressing themselves  
I wanted them to learn that it was about  
Discovering what you think or associate  
We did cut-up poetry

In this poem I aim to represent the teacher's experience of playing with language to consider the structure rather than meaning making, yet allows students freedom to play with language in different ways and explores how students can make meaning in different ways. This session is also presented in two of the student survey responses:

#### **3 Senryus: when does creativity happen?**

When we make our own

poetry out of other  
by cutting, gluing

When we had to write  
our own new poem out of  
other poems

I enjoy the most  
To put a poem together  
With random words

Language and playing with language appears to be an act that involves a simultaneous sense of freedom and structure, which I aim to represent by writing these three Senryus, which are structured, but also offer a freedom of thought within the syllabic constraints of the Senryu. Students in both English and Dutch schools commented on wanting more freedom in their writing, whereas from the observations, it was often the more structured approach that was effective. Similar to this poem, within the boundaries that we provide students with, they can find freedom. However, we do need to allow those thoughts to flourish. When a student is handed an exam question with precise rules to follow, such as to write a PETAL paragraph structure containing particular content and specific analyses, this can reduce the sense of purpose in poetry teaching and learning, as the student's input in the learning process is reduced. Teacher participant 3 (England), argues that there are opportunities in the teaching and learning of poetry for free thinking and to invite the students' own response within the assessment structure. The teacher notes that the focus of the exam boards (also referred to as awarding bodies) is not on the regurgitated information, but on the ability of students to creatively and critically evaluate a text, which is seen in the following poem that I constructed using the teachers' words from the interview. The lines are placed in chronological order, and each stanza represents a theme the teacher introduced. The poem begins with a stanza on what the examiners say and the assessment, then the second stanza introduces the opportunity for students to do 'their own free thinking'. Following this, I return to the examiners and the unseen, finishing on what is expected of the students by the teacher and the exam board:

### **The shackles are off**

The examiners say  
Every year they enjoy  
Unseen poetry  
They like the freedom's off  
The shackles are off.

They can do their own free thinking on it  
Rather than us saying  
'this is what you've got to do',

Examiners always enjoy  
Marking the unseen poetry  
They generally get *their* response

Not what they've learnt off the teacher  
The revision guide  
Youtube.

In poetry writing, a student might receive a structure (a sonnet or a haiku) and a topic or theme, and then they have the freedom to interpret that topic or theme in a way that speaks to them and fits into the structure: they are playing with language without being too critical about the grammatical correctness or the content, similar to Teacher participant 1's (Netherlands) lesson on cut-up poetry. Finding methods that provide students with space to flourish, as the students themselves wish for too, allows them to make and shape meaning and, most importantly, to play with language without a fear of being wrong.

#### **6.4 Towards a synthesis of language and culture in poetry education**

Playing with language through the structures of poetry seems to be an effective way to improve language and communication skills, considering cultural values and relatability of

words too. This is shown in this study by both students and teachers commenting on using poetry to improve vocabulary and making meaning too. In the surveys, students note that the purpose of poetry could be to improve *creativity and vocabulary, to express feelings, or to express yourself*. These responses show the wide range of ways in which poetry can be purposeful in the classroom context. However, as Elliott (2020) notes, poetry in the English classroom is often about 'getting to grips with analysis' (p. 80), rather than teaching poetry as an 'aspect of written communication' (p. 17). In Dutch schools and at Key Stage 3 there is some room for writing poetry, yet due to there being no assessment on poetry writing, it is not often included in the upper years of secondary school. Nevertheless, poetry writing helps '*develop your English*', as the students note, and helps '*expressing the way you feel about certain things*'. Some English students did respond with '*expression*' and '*creativity*', but there were also responses that said, '*it doesn't*' have a purpose, or that it '*helps pass the GCSE*'. 24.7% of these students indicated they did not know what the purpose was for studying poetry. For these students, the focus will be on the final assessment, which does not necessarily embrace how poetry can be utilised for language and cultural awareness. Coles (2013) notes that culture should be included in education as a critical tool to help 'question and explore social practices of the past and the present day' (p. 52).

Poetry can be, and often is, utilised as a vehicle for learning language both for international students and for those whose first language is English. Lida and Chamcharatsri (2022) point to poetry allowing students to communicate meaning and providing space for students to express themselves and to reflect on emotions in another language. Hanauer (2010; 2012) shows that poetry teaching and learning is ever-gaining popularity, and the teachers in this study convey their value of poetry as it could be taught in the classroom, even when Teacher participants 5 and 6 have limited opportunities to include poetry due to workload. They understand the value of poetry as a way to learn vocabulary, explore meanings and as a way to play with language. Wilson and Dymoke (2017) and Wilson and Myhill (2013) convey that the metaphorical language of poetry and the rhythm in poems allows for language construction and re-construction, which is ultimately a way of playing with language. Rather than deconstructing a poem to find, as the one of the students put it, the '*hidden meaning*'.

In contrast, constructing and reconstructing poetry allows students to find their meanings and allows space for dialogue to consider each other's meanings too. In

observations B3:1, B3:2 and B3:3 there was structured and timed space for dialogue in small groups, allowing for students to make meaning, as opposed to finding *hidden* or *implicit* meanings that some students talk about when considering when critical thinking happens in poetry lessons.

Both teachers and students responded on how poetry allowed students to read, write, perform and listen to poetry, and shows the wide range of ways in which poetry can complement the aims of the Department for Education (2014) as it enables the student to gain ‘a strong command of the spoken and written word, and to develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment.’ In the curriculum’s current state, there is a worry that students are not enjoying poetry. The data shows mixed results, with some not seeing the point and finding it boring or difficult, and others valuing poetry as a way to learn about history, culture, language and expression. By emphasising the purpose of poetry, the value of poetry’s place in the curriculum may become clearer to both teachers and students.

Through discussion and group work teachers and students are able to connect ideas and make and shape meaning out of existing poems, or write their own to improve their vocabulary and ability to communicate in a clear and more precise way. A student notes that poetry allows them to ‘*formulate a great story*’ and another notes it helps them with their ‘*grammar and vocabulary*’, which is part of the National Curriculum specifications (DfE, 2014). Consequently, by playing with language, students are learning about grammar and vocabulary while engaging creatively in their writing process.

Poetry offers a diverse range of perspectives on viewing, analysing and exploring language. This can help within the curriculum, with constructing and structuring answers for exam questions that possibly go beyond using acronyms for a systematic paragraph structure, but are also fruitful and vital skills in life beyond the classroom as it encourages expression and reflection on our place in and with the world, and, as Freire notes, with each other (Freire, 1996). Consequently, I argue that if poetry can be placed in the classroom beyond the boundaries and constraints of the curriculum, it can play an active role in empowering students and encouraging dialogue and have a societal impact with regards to citizenship as it helps us to think about not only what meaning we make, but also how we establish those meanings. Xerri (2016b) suggests when students are invited to include their own interpretations, it can empower them, and contrasts this with reading poems as a

'mathematical equation' (p. 1). This analogy is similar to Snapper's (2015, p. 31) expression of a poem as an object from which to 'extract' data, and the analogy of one of the students, who notes that they are 'dissecting' the poem. This prescriptive focus on annotations, argues Xerri (2013), 'stifles creativity' in the classroom (p. 137).

In school B (England), with Teacher participants 2 and 3, space is created to some extent to allow poetry to flow through the years and enhance poetry's place in the curriculum, not just as something for exams, but as a vehicle for making connections between literature and lives through considering themes and relating these to the current lives of the students. In this way, the western 'classic' canon does not need to be abandoned but can be embraced to seek relatability and to be read in a variety of contexts. Similarly, Pike (2003) notes that it is not especially the text itself that is problematic, but how it is analysed. A poem, such as *The Horse Whisperer* by Andrew Forster - which was taught as an explorative poem by the year 9 teacher, Teacher participant 3 - can provide space for students to relate to, if they are invited to explore the meanings, rather than being spoon-fed the answers (Dymoke, 2009; 2012).

Another challenge teachers have in the English poetry classroom is the prescriptive writing style for the exam. The focus on the writing structures, such as a SEES paragraph, that are mentioned by Teacher participant 4 relates to what Dymoke (2002) argues when she says that assessment 'produces kids who can produce responses rather than kids who can produce poems' (p. 88) and the focus on annotations rather than on creativity (Dymoke, 2002). Similarly, Marsh (2017) addresses the concern that the formulaic answers are detrimental to students' creativity. Teacher participant 4 too is concerned about the limited exposure this provides to students on their writing, which potentially reduces their creativity in meaning making. Furthermore, participant 4 indicates that it is not only the essay writing style that is prescriptive in its structure, but that the creative writing activities that are done are often 'ticky-box' exercises that seem 'prescriptive'. She notes that although one or two poems that are written during these exercises can be really good, most students do not spend much time on them nor value these activities.

Cumming (2007) indicates that if there is no opportunity to value activities that embrace language play, students' creativity is stifled (Xerri, 2013). Similarly, Kress et al. (2005) suggests that the 'packaged interpretations' (p. 133) cause students not to base interpretation on their own experience and knowledge but to re-use the information they

have received from the teacher, which does not focus on communicating knowledge, but on regurgitating it. A few students show they concur, noting that when they are '*copying off the board*' or '*copying*', this is not being creative. During the cut-up poems with teacher participant 1 there was space for play with language, and it was even encouraged to switch the critical voice off. Similarly, teacher participant 3 notes that he encourages free thinking in poetry lessons and that the best answers come up '*when the shackles are off*'. This shows that when students are provided with material (the poem) and some structure (consider the poem in light of the theme good and evil, such as in the lesson on 'Vultures' by Chinua Achebe), then the students are able to use their own knowledge to explore the poem, as they have not yet received information from the teacher.

This chapter has considered a variety of aspects relating to culture and language and how these can be explored through poetry reading and writing. By creating space for relatable language and relevant cultures, students may engage with poetry in more depth. Teacher participants 2 and 3 (England) include a cultural diversity and a range of different poems through considering the unseen poetry as part of the literature study as a whole, which begins in year 7. Teacher participant 5 notes that students need to be introduced to a wide range of poetry to ensure they become comfortable with the poems and learn the language of poetry before being introduced to, as they suggest, someone like Sylvia Plath. In The Netherlands it seems that teachers have the freedom to trial poems and poetry lessons, even when this means their workload increases. In England, there appears less space for teachers to include poetry they enjoy, and the unseen poems that were chosen in the observations were often poems that have been in past unseen poetry bundles or anthologies.

Language play appears a highly valued attribute to poetry teaching and learning, both in the literature and in the findings. Language play embraces the creative and critical thinking process of the learner to aid the communication of meanings through the spoken or written word. Writing poetry is acknowledged by students and teachers to be an enjoyable and playful process that stimulates language learning, self-expression and self-reflection, as well as using the imagination and using 'your fantasy'. However, in the English poetry analysis lessons, the students and teachers feel they have limited time to express themselves and therefore they focus on learning the content for the exams. I would like to argue that the results of these surveys, interviews and observations reveal that there is

scope within the curriculum to engage creatively with poetry. It appears that both teachers and students are frustrated about various aspects of poetry classes, such as time constraints and extra work though they do recognise the pedagogical benefits of language play with poetry. The students are apparently more enthusiastic if the poems are relatable and fun to read, without the pressure of examination requirements. Poetry is taught and read best throughout the years to build students up for reading complex poems that are not always within the scope of the language they use but do express emotional and culturally relatable components that students can discuss through group work and individually. In the following chapter, the focus will be on creativity in the classroom, which aims to show the potential poetry has, and how creative practice is applied in poetry teaching and learning within this study.

## 7 Findings: Flights of fantasy

### 7.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the research questions that focus specifically on creativity and criticality:

- To what extent, if any, do creativity and criticality feature in teachers' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in the participating schools? and

To what extent, if any, do creativity and criticality feature in students' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in the participating schools?

To answer these questions, the focus of this chapter is predominantly on the perspectives that were elicited from the students and teachers, in comparison with the observation data. Some examples from the observations have been included to elaborate on a comment from either the teachers' or students' responses. This chapter will consider the various views that emerged from embedded quotes from the interviews as well as poems from the student surveys and the interviewed teacher participants.

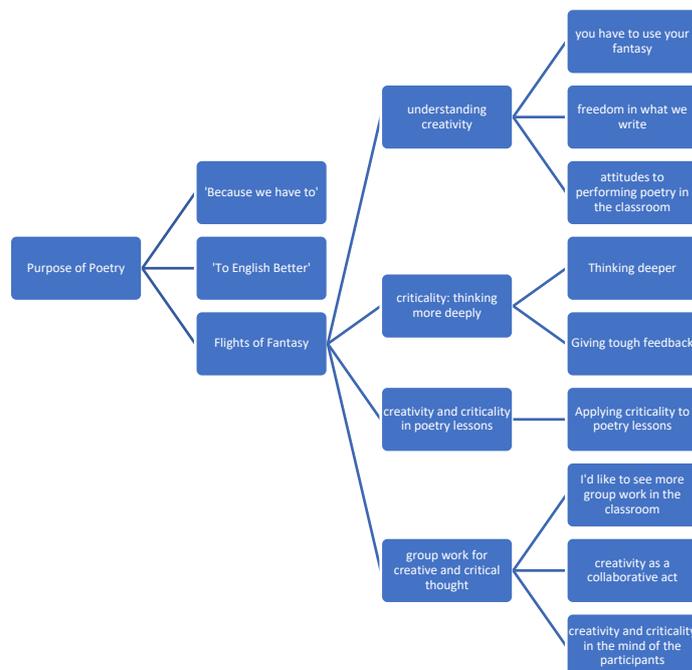


Figure 13 themes in 'flights of fantasy' (full page view in appendix 2)

In the literature review, creativity is one of the key concepts, and considering creativity not as something to assess, but as something that constantly flows through classroom practice, whether it is sending, receiving, guiding or facilitating poetry lessons. Creativity, as Kress and Bezemer (2015) describe it, is every sign, gesture and utterance we make that is new; an 'act of innovation'. In poetry teaching and learning, creativity is understood by students and teachers in different ways. The one component of creativity that the responses have in common, is that is something that comes from the mind, whether this is being 'full of ideas' or having 'an open mind.' Teacher participant 2 (England) noted it was to 'step away from the confines of the structures' and having their 'own ideas', and another suggests it is something that allows students to 'run with their own ideas'. Creativity, throughout the surveys and interviews, was often understood as a concept that allows freedom and for students to do their own thinking and reflecting. It is perceived by the participants in strong contrast with mindless copying or regurgitating information, which one student noted was what they least enjoyed about poetry lessons, when asked the question 'what do you least enjoy in poetry lessons.' they did not enjoy 'when we are copying off other people'.

Once I had developed an understanding of how students and teachers perceived creativity in the poetry classroom, and what aspects I understood as not being creative or enjoyable, I considered criticality. Through the literature, criticality is perceived as providing a space for questioning and controlling the quality of creative ideas (Newton, 2014). This, in turn, connects to wise thinking, as our thinking needs purpose and direction to be effective. We have seen that the exam boards, awarding organisations and curriculum mention the word 'critical', in the sense of developing a critical reading and writing style. However, it is not explained what is meant by critical reading and writing for teachers and students. Hence, I wanted to find out how students and teachers conceptualise creativity and criticality, to understand how they perceive the relevance of these concepts in their classroom practice.

Results for both English and Dutch respondents show that many students consider creativity to be 'thinking outside the box', 'opening up the mind' and 'filling up with ideas', suggesting that creativity is something that does not necessarily happen 'on paper', but something that happens in the students' thought process. Considering this, we can see how students perceive the phenomena of creativity as a thought process, although a small number responded that they saw creativity as something to do with the arts, and this could include crafting things by hand too. All students and teachers had some understanding of

creativity and the results showed an overlap in the way they conceptualised creativity, often considering it to be in the mind, relating to imagination, but also in the crafting of something.

When I asked teachers and students what they thought critical thinking meant and how this was applied in poetry teaching and learning, the results varied more and many students were uncertain what it meant. Teacher participant 2 (England) noted that they did not apply critical thinking at GCSE level, but that it was applied at A-level, whereas Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) suggested criticality worked in tandem with creativity, and suggested they did function together although the students' critical voice was often stronger than their creative voice. However, when I prompted whether criticality could also be considered as questioning, the teacher noted the students did have space to question texts and meanings and to consider the relatability of the poem they read in relation to the real world. In classroom practice this showed too, and creative and critical thought was present, at least to some extent, in all classroom observations, both in England and in The Netherlands. In this chapter I will explore students' and teachers' conceptions of creativity and criticality and offer an insight into the relationship between creativity and criticality and poetry teaching and learning in the contexts of the participants, and connecting their understandings of creativity and criticality to the literature. In doing so, I aim to answer the aforementioned research questions. Furthermore, in this chapter, I will offer insights into how creativity and criticality link to imagination through poetry teaching and learning as suggested by the teachers and students in this study, as well as the literature. Finally, I will discuss how poetry can lend itself as a vehicle for creativity and criticality, as well as creativity and criticality enabling the making and shaping of meaning through reading, analysing and writing poetry.

## 7.2 Understanding creativity

In the survey, I invited students from The Netherlands and England to answer the question 'what does it mean to be creative?'. I deliberately removed the specification of 'in poetry lessons', as not all Dutch students had what they perceived as 'poetry lessons' and to gain a broad overview of their conceptions of creativity more generally. Some responded with

regards to poetry, as this was the main theme of the survey as a whole, but most responded more generally. The next question regarded poetry lessons more specifically, 'when does creativity happen in poetry lessons?', to allow students to answer on how they conceptualised poetry in connection with creativity more specifically. The first question invited short answers from the students, which I subsequently turned into haiku/senryu format<sup>27</sup>, as the answers often matched the criteria of the senryu and brought together voices to convey a clear connection between the students' voices and the themes that came out of the thematic analysis.

In the poem below I illustrate the students' varied responses on creativity in a Senryu style poem. I have included the students' responses as they fit into the structure of a Senryu, rather than joining up the narrative, which emphasises both the variety in responses as well as the connection between the responses on what creativity meant to them.

#### **An exquisite mind**

To create something  
Thinking outside the box  
Unique, original

To be inspiring  
Create incredible ideas  
Something original

Different ideas  
Out of the ordinary  
Do what you like

Full of ideas  
Think different about the world

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<sup>27</sup> Haiku/senryu: A poem consisting of 1 or more stanzas with 3 lines each. The first line is <5 syllables, the second line <7 syllables and the third line <5 syllables. A haiku makes reference to the natural world or between 'people and the natural world, whereas a senryu includes elements from human nature. (Friedenberg et al., 2024, p. 240)

A different perspective

To open your mind

Let imagination free

A big fantasy

To make things up

Bring imagination

Into reality.

To make something with

your brains or hands, like art

to be expressive.

In addition to the students' responses, I wanted to understand how teachers conceptualised creativity, particularly in relation to poetry teaching and learning, but more generally how they thought about creativity in the context of school. Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) discussed creativity through examples of their own classroom practice. One of these examples was the cut-up poetry they used as a way to introduce poetry while it 'kind of quietened the critical voice for a while'. Although the teacher saw creativity and criticality as working 'in tandem', they also noted that students can get '*paralysed*' by a sense of having to be critical and used the cut-up poetry to offer '*concrete instruction: cut up these poems with a pair of scissors.*' Creative thinking then, is not questioning, but doing. This could relate to making something original, innovative and unique, but also to thinking of original and unique ideas, depending on the task at hand. One of the lessons I observed was the lesson on cut-up poetry:

*As I entered the classroom space, I noticed the tables were set-up in two U-shapes, one within the other. The teacher's desk was quite far away from the students in this rectangular space, and there was a staircase in the room on the opposite side of the teacher's desk, leading to a different learning space upstairs behind the teacher's space. It was a set-up that worked well for the purpose of this lesson, as students were asked to work independently for most of the lesson, and as such having the teacher's desk at a distance provided the students*

*with space to work on their own and with each other, without feeling watched by the teacher. As the students were invited to work creatively in groups with materials provided by the teacher, this set-up allowed for the students to work independently, yet if they had questions they were able to approach the teacher easily.*

*The teacher began this lesson by checking attendance and asking the students how they were doing. The teacher walked away from their desk and closer to the students once they had read out the attendance register, which provided a more inclusive feel in the room. I was positioned between the teacher's desk and the students, near the entrance door of the room. This allowed me a clear view of what was happening from both perspectives and provided me with distance between myself and the students, to remain in an unobtrusive position. The teacher introduced the topic of cut-up poetry by first engaging in *The Beats Poets* and introducing students to different ways of writing in, what I would call, a stream-of-consciousness style of poetry writing. The teacher then showed a YouTube clip of William S. Burroughs talking about cut-up poetry<sup>28</sup>. The students were listening to the video, and some were giggling awkwardly. It seemed as though they were unsure of what to make of the video. Once the video had finished, the teacher invited the students to do their own cut-up poetry to see what came out. She stimulated students to cut words out at random, and to randomly display them on a piece of blank paper to see if any sense would come out of it. The teacher asked the students to work in pairs or threes while she handed them newspaper headlines and blank pieces of paper. The teacher then retreated to her desk to allow the students space to create their cut-up poetry. The activity was given in two parts. First, the students put all the words on a page at random and looked at whether the words they used had any meaning once put together. The students were then asked to rearrange their words slightly if they wished to do so. As a final activity, the teacher asked the students to present or perform their cut-up poem. They could nominate one person to present or they could present as a group or pair. Some students found this challenging, whereas others stood up and performed their poem to the rest of the group. This lesson included various aspects of creativity and provided space for students to turn off their 'critical voice', and engage creatively with new material and new techniques to make meaning. The students were engaged with the activities throughout this lesson.*

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rc2yU7OUMcl&t=76s>

Teacher participant 2 (England) had a slightly different take on creativity to Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands). Where Teacher participant 1 noted the student needed something concrete to be able to be creative, Teacher participant 2 suggested that:

*'it's sort of being able to step away from the confines of a structure and having their own ideas and some freedom with the subject. So, them being able to formulate their own ideas and not just relying on something that's taught. Them running with their own ideas and being able to share those with confidence.'*

This response shows a similar conception of creativity to the students' responses on creativity being in the mind and having their own ideas. Teacher participant 2 further noted - when asked to what extent they think students are able to *'run with their own ideas'* - that in the classroom context, some students *'feel that they have to learn a poem in a particular way to get a particular grade, but of course the exam board are looking for original interpretations'*, connecting creativity to originality, which is similar to what the students responded in the survey too.

Teacher participant 3 (England) explored the connection between creativity and criticality in poetry lessons, and shared that poetry is *'about original perceptive ideas'* and that they *'let them look at it first before I start telling them maybe what it's about and stuff. Just to encourage a bit more free thinking about it.'* This teacher indicated a sense of creativity coming from within, and it can only be explored if students feel they have the freedom to do their own *'free thinking'*, and *'the shackles come off'* in the unseen poetry component because you get responses based on students' creative explorations, rather than a formulaic response the student has potentially copied from their revision guides and classroom notes. Although Teacher participant 1 noted that creativity happens when students are provided with a structure, the students have freedom to express themselves within that structure.

Teacher participant 4 (England) related creativity to *'the ability to express how you feel or how you perceive someone, the world or things that matter to you. A way to articulate in a way that feels satisfying for you'*, and noted that they do not feel this type of creativity happens in the poetry classroom: *'poetry would be such a lovely way to get them*

*to explore that and to build up the confidence for them to share kind of their own creative ideas and talk about how they feel about things.'* This way of viewing creativity as connected to emotions and expressing feelings relates to what some of the students responded to: that creativity is *'expressing yourself'*, and adds another dimension to the previous three teachers' views of creativity, which lend themselves to the key themes explored in this chapter:

1. Doing or making something
2. Freedom to run own ideas and original interpretations
3. Free thinking about poetry
4. The ability to express how you feel
5. Enjoyability of writing and reading poetry

The final two interview participants from The Netherlands considered creativity as a concept that invites freedom in the classroom, and the sixth participant explicitly connected the concept of creativity to enjoyability in poetry writing and reading extensively. Additionally, Teacher participant 5 (Netherlands) noted that:

*'creativity, yeah, when I offer this opportunity to be a little bit more free in the lesson, they will show something about how creative they are. Because, the thing is, if you come here and just give instructions and tell them 'I want you to build, I dunno, I want you to make a game with cards, you know, and then you give all the structure, everything that you want from them, that you expect that they will do – probably they will make that, but just because you are telling them to do – but if you give them a little bit of piece of personalised education, in which they – you do give them though the substantial meaning of that – that assignment – but then you tell them that they can, ehm, choose how they want to do that, I think they will come up with very nice ideas. [...] I think the most important thing is 'leave it to them' so that they can come up with something and give them a little bit of time to think about it.'*  
(Teacher participant 5, Netherlands)

This notion of giving the learner autonomy in their learning process is a recurring theme both in the student responses and the teacher interviews, particularly when it comes to creativity in the classroom context. Autonomy in poetry learning allows the student to come up with their own meanings based on their own knowledge, rather than copying the teacher's understandings of a poem. Knowledge here is interpreted as Giroux (2011, p.?) describes it: the combination of experience, information (facts) and history (others' shared experience). The students were free to include their own experiences and understanding of the world in their analyses, which creates an environment in which students can learn to relate to the text in front of them and feel able to make and shape something with it.

Interview participant 6 (Netherlands) added to this idea of freedom that there should be a sense of enjoyability: 'creative writing was something I was into and my students, well they loved it, they loved it.' [...] '*use your imagination, make it into a fascinating story.*', and followed this up with '*giving them the freedom to write a poem and showing them all the different techniques and how it can be effective and they loved that, they thought that was really clever.*' The word 'love' implies a consideration not only for the freedom to write, but also for the enjoyability that comes with writing something original or coming up with original ideas of what a poem might mean, making a connection between students having fun and poetry. The students iterated this, noting they wanted 'more fun poems'.

This fifth view of creativity, underpinned by teachers' and students' thoughts on what it is, is enjoyability. It is these five themes that pave the way to considering creativity not as something that needs to be assessed, but as a fundamental and pedagogical concept that runs through all educational practice: applying students' experiences and understandings of the world to the topic or material in an enjoyable and liberating way. Teacher participant 6 (Netherlands) indicated that creativity and play are similar, and that play often happens in groups. Consequently, this teacher emphasises the value of group work in their lessons as a way of learning.

### 7.2.1 You have to use your fantasy

When considering poetry in the classroom, I invited students to share not only what creativity meant to them, but also *when* they thought creativity happened in poetry lessons. The results were varied, and although some students focused particularly on the analysis of

poems, there were also students who connected poetry writing with creating 'images in my head':

### **Images in my head**

You have to use your fantasy

When making a poem myself

*Je bedenkt een mooi gedicht* - You think of a beautiful poem

Play with words in sentences

Not everyone is creative with words

People can also be creative with visual arts

Through made up poetry

Making up poetry and

Performing the poetry in a creative way

Students are original and do it their own way

The classroom observations showed the use of students' imagination to some extent. For example, the cut-up poems that were written and performed by the students in the Dutch classroom, were enjoyed by some, yet others found especially the performance aspect daunting. It showed they were playing with words in sentences and engaging in the visual art by not only considering the words, but also considering how the words were laid out on the page. In observation B1:2 students were invited to draw a picture to visualise what they thought an old woman looked like, to allow them to use their own imagination before reading the metaphorical and descriptive poem *An Old Woman* by Arun Kolatkar. In observation B2:1 the class considered meaning making in *The Ballad of Hillsborough* by Simon Rae. The students watched a film at the start to engage them with the relevance of the poem to the Hillsborough disaster, giving them some prior understanding of what the poem was about and allowing the students to imagine the emotions of the event before engaging in their analysis of the poem. In Lesson B3:1 students were asked to consider what they thought the poem was about, allowing them to use their imagination to relate it to their world, rather than immediately considering the poem *The Horse whisperer* by Andrew Forster in its original context.

Teacher participant 2 (England), who noted that creativity was stepping '*away from the confines of a structure and having their own ideas and some freedom with the subject*', alludes to the possibility of the students using their imagination and engaging with poetry beyond the confines of the curriculum, while considering their own experiences and understandings within the context of learning poetry and writing. Subsequently, an increased focus on imagination and fantasy could provide space for students to see beyond what they know and engage further in what lies beyond this. , Through engaging creatively, students have the opportunity to consider not only how they perceive the world, but also how others might perceive the world, whether this is through a thematic approach of 'good and evil' as in *Vultures* by Chinua Achebe, or considering social change as with Andrew Forster's poem *Horse whisperer*. Opening up imagination and a sense of 'fantasy' for students provides space for creating empathy, and this can be made to happen in combination with dialogue to learn from each other's perspectives. Through using imagination and dialogue, the students were then provided with an opportunity to practise learning in the world, with the world, and through the word (Freire and Macedo, 2005).

### 7.2.2 Freedom in what we write

One of the responses from a Dutch student concerned that poetry lessons could be made better by giving students '*freedom in what we write*'. This suggests some students do want to write poetry, and when they were asked when they thought creativity happened in the classroom, this included *writing poetry*, providing a connection between creativity, poetry and writing. Whether it was about thinking of a beautiful poem or '*when you write what you mean*,' this question resulted in a range of responses. The question: 'when do you think creativity happens in the classroom?' provided students with a space to write a short answer. Of respondents from both Dutch and English schools 24.8% noted they thought creativity happened when they write poems. In the following poem, I illustrate student responses with regards to the connection between poetry writing and creativity.

#### **Made up poetry**

You can write what you feel  
When making a poem myself

You write what you mean.

When writing your own poem.

You make a combination of rhymes and rhythm

Think of things to write about

A theme to base your poem on

It could need suggestive metaphorical ideas

Something you know a lot about

Telling a story

Usually it's a true story

We write poetry

You have to be creative or else

The poem will be very boring

In this poem I aim to show how students conceptualise poetry writing in diverse ways, yet the commonality of these responses lies in the essence of a poem: it is storytelling through metaphor, rhythm and sometimes rhyme. Poetry can be seen as an act of creativity where students can share their own stories and feelings, or something they know 'a lot about'. In English secondary schools, where the focus is on poetry analysis, students are working with existing stories that might not include what they feel, stories they can directly relate to, nor are they particularly poems that can easily convey what students mean. Writing poetry could stimulate this conception of poetry as a vehicle for sharing feelings, meanings and experiences through rhythmic and creative storytelling. Although the students responses include these conceptions of poetry, Teacher participant 4 (England) observed students in their school found it difficult to share poems that are connected to people's experiences and emotions:

*I feel that a lot of our kids lack empathy, they struggle emotionally and I think a lot of that comes down to them not actually knowing how to express themselves. Not feeling that it's cool or socially acceptable to kind of show how they feel. [...] I think*

*it's endemic of this generation. I say that generation like I'm a million years, but you know what I mean. I think poetry would be such a lovely way to get them to explore that and to build up the confidence for them to share kind of their own creative ideas and sort of talk about how they feel about things. [...] we do some of our own poetry writing but it feels like, sort of a very ticky-box exercise rather than... you know, it doesn't have any proper space. (Teacher participant 4, England)*

Additionally, the teacher explained that most of this poetry writing takes place at Key Stage 3, yet alludes to the idea that it would be purposeful to consider emotion through poetry writing for learners. Teacher participant 6 (Netherlands) did a trial with poetry writing with the upper year secondary school students and indicated that *'they were so eager, they were so enthusiastic'* to play with the poems and the language. The teacher introduced the students to a variety of poems: *'they found out that with looking at all the different poems that most of the time they link to emotions'* and then asked them to pick an emotion and write about it in groups, indicating that emotions are something all students can relate to, to some extent, and that *words can be so powerful* at bringing across emotions. The activity Teacher participant 6 (Netherlands) put forward to her students was to *'pick an emotion and write about that and then in groups'*. This teacher shared that they made them work in groups *because they help one another and that's really effective.'*

Returning to the students' words in the poem 'made up poetry', and focusing on the other aspect of this poem, namely, poetry as a way to tell stories, resonates in Teacher participant 3's (England) interview response:

*We've introduced more writing challenges because we realised that sometimes we're probably overloading them on the analytical side so I know my year sevens wrote a poem recently and when the curriculum comes back we'll be embedding it more in sort of sevens, eights and nines, writing their own poem. The only problem is at GCSE there's no real call to write a poem.'*

*Writing is more sort of descriptive or to write a story rather than writing a poem so it's a shame that the exam board took that out but obviously that would be embedded more at year 10 and 11. [...] And if you do it well you can get a powerful piece of writing so, yeah, they took that out.'*

Due to poetry writing not playing an active role in the GCSE exam, it is not applied to Key Stage 4 in this school, even though it might have benefits for learners within and beyond the scope of the curriculum. The teacher conveys a strong focus on the analytical side of poetry yet notes that there is space at Key Stage 3 to include poetry writing, similar to Teacher participant 4 (England), from a different school. They too noted there is some space for writing in the lower key stage, but not at Key Stage 4 due to the focus on the 'end goal'. For example, Teacher participant 4 (England) acknowledged the potential poetry writing could have at year 10: *'you could probably put it in at the beginning of year 10 and because I know that will help with the crafting and the carefully selected words, so yeah, that would be something we could have a look to that.'* This response shows an openness and freedom for the teacher to consider including a creative aspect within the Key Stage 4 curriculum to enable students to improve their understanding of and ability to write creatively and that it would benefit the ability to make and shape meaning through language play. These responses from both students and teachers in this study illuminate that there is a motivation to engage in more writing, although this would have to be in conjunction with the GCSE exam to ensure it would not take away from the students' time to develop their skills for their final assessments. This freedom to explore shows that within the curriculum there is some space to explore different ways of teaching poetry through, for example, the craft of creative writing, enhancing vocabulary through poetry reading and writing, and by providing space for poems to increase in relatability for learners by giving students space to understand poems through their experiences and perspectives on the world, whether they are working as individuals or in pairs or small groups. Particularly School 2 (England) included these alternative ways to consider poetry and to improve the students' understanding of the purpose poetry might have.

### 7.2.3 Attitudes to performing poetry in the classroom

When considering performance, many students feel insecure about performing poetry (Ashforth, 2023), and this showed in the surveys and observations too.

In school B (England) it was common for students to read the poem out. In all three classrooms, students would be asked to read out a stanza of a poem. I noticed no student would volunteer, and the voices were often mumbled while reading through the stanza as quickly as possible. It seemed as though they wanted to get their turn out of the way quickly. There was a sense of embarrassment at having to read the poem and a lack of confidence in reading it clearly. In none of the lessons did I notice anyone 'perform'. They were reading the poem out loud, but not loudly and often monotonous. This was not only the case in the English school. When the students were requested to present their cut-up poems in observation A1:1 (Netherlands), students were hesitant to perform their poem too. However, they did stand up to perform their group's poem. I wonder if, because they had more time to familiarise themselves with the text and they put the words together as a group, this may have given them some confidence as they may have felt less alone when reading out their poem. Although in the English school (B) the students were asked to read one stanza each, and depending on how many stanzas there were, this meant that they were not doing it on their own, yet there was less connection between the students and how they might present the poem together, and as such, each student was presented with reading one stanza in a whole, but not given space to discuss how they might want to read it.

Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) commented on asking students to read aloud, and noted it was important for the teacher to read out loud too, to provide students with an example of how they might read certain lines or stanzas of a poem to give students something to build their own performance on. However, the teacher noted that it was not always a good idea for students to read out loud:

*'If it's really excruciatingly bad I think it's a mistake to get them to read aloud because then it's a really negative experience. I try to model reading aloud so I'll speak aloud things I wonder about as I'm reading things I notice. The function of reading aloud is to model the process of reading and how you respond,'* (Teacher participant 1, Netherlands)

This response leads to the question whether reading aloud should be something that students have to learn to do, or whether it is sometimes better for the teacher to read the poem aloud, or for the teacher to show a video of someone else reading the poem.

In the year 9 cohort, during observation B3:2, the students were given a poem in two languages *Search for my tongue* by Sujata Bhatt. The teacher tells the students that he will not read the poem as it is partially in an Indian language, and that he will show the YouTube video, *'where it's done better'*. This example could also relate to other poems that are performed in dialect, providing students space to see someone performing using their own accent and dialect, and might provide students with confidence to read poetry out in their own voice, and learn that poetry can be written and performed using a variety of voices, challenging the lack of diversity in classroom practice, as noted by Olive et al (2024), who share Elliot et al. (2019)'s perspective that the 'current lack of representation implies that only white, male, middle-class perspectives are worth reading about and studying' (Olive et al., 2024, p. 121). 'It is vital for the health of these subjects and for the young people studying them that the widest possible range of students see themselves represented in the literature that is taught' (Olive et al., 2024, p. 121). It is important to note that the data was collected prior to the addition of the new anthology clusters to the AQA Exam Board. It would be intriguing to see how poets might respond to local poetry and possibly local poets reading out poems in their own language. Teacher participant 4 (England) commented that it would be a great addition to have space in their teaching load to introduce students to more local poetry, but that the focus on the assessment and potentially needing to take students away from other classes would prevent this from happening.

The question whether students enjoy performing poetry gets varied responses. One Dutch student said they enjoy *'reading poetry ourselves and performing'* most, whereas another noted that *'Performing the poetry'* is what they least like about poetry lessons because *'I just don't like to perform'*. Another argued they do not think creativity happens in poetry lessons when *'we have to perform someone else's poem'* and another noted creativity does not happen when *'we are listening to poems'*. In contrast, another student responded that creativity happens in poetry lessons when *'performing the poetry in a creative way'*. One of the students noted they most enjoy poetry when *'it's a video of someone performing the poem.'* These mixed responses lead to questioning students' and teachers' perceptions of the purpose and value of performing poetry, and what might be

done to engage students in poetry performance to allow poetry to come to life. In Spoken Word artist Kate Tempest's book *On Connection* they illuminate how performing poetry and spoken word can bring people together and create shared understandings.

Teacher participant 4 (England) suggested introducing slam poetry into the classroom so that *'it takes away that fear of showing to be interested in it.'* This teacher indicated that poetry slams do happen at their school, but *'because it's sort of voluntary the kids that get involved with it are the kids that are probably doing this sort of thing anyway'* and that *'what I think we should do is make it a thing that everyone does with their classroom and the kids don't have to opt to do it'*, which would allow more students to watch performances from other students as well as potentially be encouraged to perform themselves. The teacher considered poetry slams as useful ways to look at poetry beyond the anthology poems:

*'I think it would be really valuable but I feel like at the minute we're not giving it the space and you know, the anthology poems are, they're okay, you know they're... some of them I really like, some of them I really don't like.'*

Although there is some suggestion that students could engage in performance through poetry, this is only mentioned on a few occasions throughout the study. Poetry might be a performance art as well as a language art, but in schools it is more closely analysed for its language techniques than to practice performance or to perform by playing with the language through, for example, taking note of accents. In general, the preferred methods of introducing poetry to students is by presenting them with a version of the poem read by someone else, to invite students to read some or all of the poem themselves, or for the teacher to read the poem aloud. There appears little focus on acknowledging the creative aspect of bringing across messages through performing poetry in these lessons. However, this is not to say that lessons where poetry is *lifted off the page* and brought to life through performance are not included in poetry lessons or are not valuable for students' development of their understanding of the language, structure and the content of specific poems.

## 7.3 Criticality: thinking more deeply

### 7.3.1 Thinking Deeper

Criticality is often considered closely related to creativity, as is shown in Chapter 3 of this thesis, where I explore Newton's (2014) approach to productive thought as being a combination of creative, critical and wise thinking. Unlike creativity, this concept is mentioned in the exam board or awarding organisation and the curriculum. Students need to develop their critical reading and writing styles, but in order to do this, students and teachers alike need an understanding of what is meant by criticality in the context of secondary school education, and how it might be applied in their classroom practice, perhaps using creative methods to engage learners critically. I asked both students and teachers how they perceived criticality, and asked teachers whether they thought creativity and criticality were connected, and if so, how. It was intriguing to find that there were many different ways in which both students and teachers understand critical thinking, although more than half were able to respond that they knew, at least to some extent, what critical thinking meant. When I asked students in the survey, 'Do you know what critical thinking could mean? If so, please provide some words you associate with critical thinking'. Of the respondents 68.3% showed that students were able to associate some words with critical



I created two poems to illustrate these varied responses amongst students' perceptions of critical thinking. In the first poem, the focus is on how meaning is made by reading critically. The second poem is a diamond shaped poem. Diamond shaped poems often have a synonym or antonym as the first and final word in the poem. Here, I chose 'critical' and 'evaluate', which were both words that came up in the survey responses. The poem begins to express the words that relate to how students in this study conceptualise critical thinking and how they relate it to their place 'in the world' (when do they think they are engaging in critical thinking?), and then to being 'with the world', considering how they develop their understanding of other people's thoughts, which relates more to evaluating the world they are with. Consequently, through only using words students associated with critical thinking, in this poem I still represent the students' voices in as a narrative, by moving through the varied understandings of critical thinking.

#### **Trueness of a text**

You wait for the best answer  
You think about the meaning and even  
the trueness of a text  
You don't just accept everything that's written down

#### **Critical thinking**

Critical  
Analysing, comparing  
Feedback, corrections, common sense,  
Overthinking, strict, deep, important thinking  
Logical, thinking deeply, implied, suggests, improve  
Language, structure, questioning, rhetoric,  
helpful, development, you  
Opinion, thinking  
Evaluate

### 7.3.2 Giving tough feedback

Some learners associate critical thinking with being ‘harsh’ and ‘tough’, either them being tough with the feedback or their work being marked in a strict way. In the poem below, I wanted to represent the students’ voices by writing the poem in stanzas of the same line-length, to provide a poem that embraced the strictness that was mentioned by the students. In the last stanza I create a shift in meaning in the students’ responses, by first considering ‘a firm look on possible mistakes’, and ending with ‘assess it for a grade’, to show the focus on performativity in this poem, whilst making a “mistake” and ending the poem with a two-line stanza. In this poem I aim to show how some of the students understand critical thinking not as something that encourages questioning and the making of mistakes, but rather a constraint on creative thinking, as answers need to be ‘perfect’, and work is ‘harshly marked’, showing the pressure some students may feel when they are asked to be critical.

#### **Good or bad? Correct?**

You want

Everything to be perfect

In your head and your poetry

Harshly marking work

Give tough feedback

On the poem...

Strict thinking -

Not making it easy

Thinking very strict –

With lots of critique

Thinking in a very precise and

Serious manner

Usually kind of mean, but

It makes people better

if you tell them what's wrong.

A firm look on possible mistakes

Assess it for a grade.

These responses fit into the theme of *critical thinking is critique* as it tends to focus on a negative view of criticality, which allows for few mistakes so students expect to have to produce a correct piece of work, and consider it as a necessary evil in order to do well: it's 'usually kind of mean'. These responses tell us that critical thinking is perceived in a wide variety of ways that can create confusion in students. When students are asked to be 'critical' in and of their work, if they perceive critical thinking as being tough and harsh, this could have a negative impact on their engagement, as it creates a sense of a binary approach to poetry reading and writing, in which the student produces right or wrong answers (Myhill and Wilson, 2013). One student responds that critical thinking is 'making no mistakes', which suggests that their writing has to be flawless. This may lead to less creative responses to questions, as students' fear of being wrong increases and leaves less room for exploring possible answers. Instead of getting 'the right answer. As a consequence, students focus more on performativity and the assessment than their own sense of curiosity and exploration.

Dymoke (2012) and Myhill and Wilson (2013) argue that there is no one right answer, and that although there are wrong answers. By allowing students space to explore multiple answers, students are able to apply creative and critical thinking skills and base their learning not only on the factual information they have been provided, but also their own experience and other previously learnt information they may already have. Furthermore, when exploring topics in this way, students are able to learn from each other as well as from the teacher through creative thinking, exploring through questioning, and applying critical thinking to their decision-making and problem-solving.

It is important to express clearly what critical thinking means in the context of education and how it applies to the practice of teaching and learning. In order to stimulate explorative and curious thought, there needs to be an understanding of what critical thinking is and how it applies to classroom practice. Rather than examining it solely at the end, critical thought can flow through classroom practice, so that students are engaged with the subject material in a curious and effective way. Teacher participant 1 notes, '*you can't*

*create curiosity in people, that has to be cultivated over time'*, indicating that creating a sense of criticality is an ongoing process, similar to creativity. It might be that 'evaluative thinking', or potentially 'curious thinking' could be terms that have fewer negative connotations and might prove more productive as a concept in the classroom context to provide a productive space for creative and curious explorations.

Another way in which student respondents conceptualised critical thinking was as judgement and being judged on their work. I have represented the different ways in which 'judgement' was present in the survey responses with regards to the two questions on critical thinking:

- Do you know what critical thinking could mean? If so, please provide some words you associate with critical thinking
- When do you think critical thinking happens in poetry lessons?:

In this poem, 'create a judgement', the stanzas are three lines, apart from the first stanza. Each stanza represents a response that included the word 'judgement' or 'judge', to present how this word was used by the students, and in which context. Each stanza includes a single response from the survey with the word 'judgement' or 'judge' on a separate line to bring this word forward as the key theme. Furthermore, by bringing these responses together in one poem, I aimed to illustrate that the students who used this term to answer questions on critical thinking often related judgement to the analysis, and sometimes to objective analysis or analysing facts. These responses relate critical thinking to analysis and objectivity, and only once is evaluation mentioned.

### **Create a judgement**

Judge something before even knowing  
I'm sure about one thing:  
It is a bad thing.

Analysing facts to create a  
judgement  
on something or someone

Analysing something  
in order to find  
Judgement

Where you make  
Judgement  
Based on facts

Objective analysis and evaluation  
Of an issue to form a  
Judgement.

Judge  
Not by your emotion  
But by pure rules.

This poem presents the different ways in which the word 'judgement' was used by participants, in combination with analysis and evaluation, but also in relation to truth-finding, conceptualising the word 'judgement' as an objective word as a vehicle to make judgements.. It is intriguing that when asking students and teachers about how they interpret creativity, multiple voices commented on creativity being connected to emotions, hereby relating creativity to the subjective, whereas it appears that critical thinking is based around the objective, logic and facts and *'thinking hard about something serious'*. Critical thinking seems to embrace questioning and that *'you won't just accept things around you just like that. You will see yourself and develop your opinion'*, which alludes to critical thinking creating self-awareness and, although students may not connect creative and critical thinking, this response also illustrates that critical thinking might help students develop their creative thought, by developing their views on the world through questioning. In combination with that creative notion of expressing yourself, critical and creative thought would work 'in tandem', as teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) suggested.

## 7.4 Creativity and criticality in poetry lessons

### 7.4.1 Applying criticality to the poetry classroom

Although most students provided an answer to the question on critical thinking, not all of them were able to. 31.7% of respondents from the student survey indicated they did not know what critical thinking was or just responded with a question mark:

#### **I have no idea what critical thinking means**

No, No I don't

Sorry

No

No

I don't know

I'm not sure ???

Nope.

I don't know what that means.

I created this poem from the students' responses using to the concept 'critical thinking' only in the title. Without seeing the title, it would not be clear what the topic of the negatives in this poem was, illustrating that if students are unaware of what 'critical thinking' means, they are unable to apply it. Students might need more than only the adjective *critical* in their mark schemes. It needs a more specific explanation. Similarly, this poem may need more explanation than just the content of the poem itself to be able to understand what it is about. The ambiguity then, in this poem, is done on purpose. Next, I considered teachers' understanding of 'creativity' and 'critical thinking', and whether they could share examples of teaching practice where the class was engaged in creative and/or critical thinking. Teacher participant 2 (England) mentioned that it was 'sort of in the rulebook of the exam to be creative,' showing they understood the value of creativity. However, when initially asking whether the students had an understanding of critical thinking, the teacher noted that critical thinking was not an assessment objective of the GCSE, and as such was not part of

their teaching. I conveyed their response in the I-poem below, where the first four lines start with 'I', then the teacher elaborates on an example of critical thinking in their a-level practice, before sharing that at GCSE they do not have a focus on critical thinking, leading to the last line which begins with 'I' again.

### **I don't tend to focus on critical thinking**

*I don't know if the teachers do, but*

*I don't say sort of look we're having a critical. Maybe more at A-level*

*I would, because*

*I think that's part of the modules where*

*they have a synoptic unit and it's sort of*

*looking at putting a Marxist perspective with something or feminism,*

*but at GCSE that's not one of the assessment objectives so*

*I don't tend to focus on that.*

Following this question, I asked Teacher participant 2 (England) whether they saw a link between creativity and critical thinking. They responded with a different insight into creativity and criticality than previously mentioned, which was interesting as it showed that when considering it from this perspective where the two concepts are used together, critical thinking did have a place in poetry teaching and learning. I created the poem below from the teachers' response. In the first stanza I share their initial response. The stanzas that follow are represented in free verse to show the stream-of-consciousness in which the teacher was thinking out loud. In the second stanza, the focus is on the 'creative thinking' and in the third the focus is on the teachers' conception of 'critical thinking', illustrating how the teacher sees these two concepts as different, yet their connection is made clear: creative thinking links to the students' interpretations of a poem, and critical thinking relates to how they structure the interpretation and their argument for it.

### **What is creativity?**

I haven't really thought about it -

We do teach it

without knowing that we're doing it.

It is in the rulebook of the exam:

They have to be creative.

We hope that they are going to be

Creative in their interpretations

And their analysis of the poems.

The Critical thinking part would

Perhaps come from how they organise

Their argument about the themes

The question that they've

Been asked to

Respond to.

In the above poem, the teacher's response shows that critical thinking is included in the learning process when the students consider how they organise an argument. Teacher participant 5 (Netherlands) explained that for students to establish and explain their argument, they try to engage them in group work as this allows for discussion and establishes a deeper understanding of what they have learnt or are learning in the lessons:

**Try**

*'usually I try at least once a week to put*

*them in groups, to discuss, or*

*you know to do-*

*even if it's just to make some grammar exercise and discuss it amongst*

*themselves and*

*you know, 'if*

*you don't know ask*

*your classmate' and then make*

*them try to explain, trying to help*

*each other or so,  
I try to do that very often.'*

In this poem, I aimed to begin each line with a pronoun, to show how teacher participant 5 (Netherlands) presents critical thinking as a concept students achieve together. In this poem I begin and end the poem with the words 'I try', which aims to illustrate this teacher is exploring what works for her students and how to develop productive and critical spaces for discussion in her classroom. The poem is written in chronological order in which the teacher responded to the question on providing an example of when they provided space for critical thinking in their classroom. With regards to poetry, this teacher commented that trying to '*stimulate the students to develop their critical thinking and their looking from different approaches and different points of views*' can be achieved through poetry teaching and learning, especially by introducing poetry from '*different countries and language variations*'.

Although Teacher participant 5 (Netherlands) was enthusiastic about critical thinking and including it in their classroom practice. However, they are also aware that they do not have a fully understanding of what it means and how it can be applied to their practice. I represent this in the poem below in which I aim to convey the teacher's inner thought process by alternating each line with what the teacher says, and what the teacher thinks out loud, in this way introducing this teacher participant 5 (Netherlands) conceptualisation of critical thinking and how discussion is an important element of critical thinking.

**What is criticality?**

*sometimes I'm like  
'hey, I think I really know what criticality is now'  
and then after 5 minutes I'm like  
'okay, I don't think I really know what it is.'  
So I am struggling with that right now, myself.*

Teacher participant 3 (England) considered critical thinking in the context of questioning, as well as considering critical thinking as being able to explain connections between literary

texts or ideas the students have, to engage in justifying their thoughts. Teacher participant 3 (England) even connected critical thinking to higher marks in the assessment:

**They can**

*'if they want to get sevens, eights, nines at GCSE exams  
they've got to sort of create their own particular ideas [...] because  
they've read part of a book or story that  
they can  
'oh that can explain back to that, or  
that eludes to this particular story' and stuff so  
they can see some cross-over as well with regard to the literary texts  
they've read.*

In this poem I share Teacher participant 3's (England) conceptualisation of critical thinking as something students need to get high marks on. This contrasts with Teacher participant 2's (England) comment that critical thinking is taught at A-level, and not at GCSE, as the focus in this poem is that students need it to pass their exam. I chose to start each line with 'they', apart from where the teacher provides an example of a student's potential thought-process when answering questions using critical thinking. This is a type of 'I-poem', although the pronoun is 'they'. In this poem I bring the focus to why 'they' (the students) need critical thinking to engage in intertextuality, to gain higher marks for their exam and to be able to explain their understanding of a poem clearly.

This teacher continued to relate critical thinking to poetry in particular and noted that *'poetry is not a one-off lesson'*, he conveyed that *'you always try to see the bigger picture and works great with other literary texts.'* This response provokes the connection with critical thinking as taking a step back to see the bigger picture to avoid the 'dark side of creativity', which allows for creative thought processes, but without questioning the process or engaging in wise thinking (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Kämpylis and Valtanen, 2010). Critical thinking as described by Teacher participant 3 (England) alludes to creating space for wise and constructive thought processes, which Newton (2014) describes as critical or evaluative thinking.

Teacher participant 6 (Netherlands) shared the connection between questioning and critical thinking during their interview, and was curious about how students read. This teacher shared in the interview that they would ask the students questions and *'did a lot of talking with my students'*. I represented the teacher's voice in the following poem, conveying the questions the teacher asked and through this poetic form distinguishing clearly the teacher's own thoughts and the questions they asked the students by posting the question in italics, providing a sense of the teacher's inner monologue and their own reflection on students' journey to conceptualising their thoughts.

### **Do you question it?**

*Whatever you read, do you question it?*

*Do you accept things the way...?*

So many of them had very set ideas

*Did you think about it?*

*Or is it coming from your parents*

*Or peers, or whatever?*

*Can you explain to me what makes you think this way?*

And that was very interesting.

Teacher participant 6 (Netherlands) mentioned that they would invite conversations on uncomfortable topics and gave the example of racism in a rural-school setting in a previous teaching role, where Teacher participant 6 (Netherlands) questioned the students, asking them *'I want to hear your view, your thinking, how did you come to this opinion?'* This questioning and curiosity from the teacher allowed the students to move away from their set ideas, and when this did not work the teacher would show them another side to their argument through other modes of communication, such as film. The teacher noted that now classroom discussion topics are often around fake news, and Teacher participant 6 (Netherlands) said they encouraged students to question the news rather than to follow blindly what others share, think and believe:

*I said, 'you need to get as much information as you can, from different sources, not just from one source ... and that hopefully makes them think',*

*I said, 'and communicate, talk to each other,  
somebody else might have a totally  
different view and  
good arguments.  
Listen to  
them.'*

I wrote this poem using the shape of a nonet, yet I used more syllables to accurately represent the teacher's voice. I wanted to represent the teacher's value for students listening to each other and to emphasise the teacher's advice to students with regards to listening to and reading a wide range of sources to enhance students' critical thinking skills. This response was sparked by talk of criticality and engaging the students in critical thinking. It is clear the teacher understood being critical as questioning from this response, but also looking at the world through different lenses by listening to each other, which relates to the idea of taking a step back too, and considering the wise and constructive processes that make up a way of understanding how critical thinking can be applied to the classroom context.

Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) viewed criticality as something that can cause paralysis in students but connected it to questioning. However, in this case it concerns questioning the self and whether students are doing something right or wrong, going back to that idea of the binary approach. The teacher contrasts creativity and criticality, and shares that,:

*Their critical voice is going to come in and say 'what am I supposed to do' and they'll be very critical and they'll be paralysed [...] It was more difficult to get them to be, to let go and allow the element of chance to come in and how they assemble the words than it was to get them to adjust and apply their own ideas to what they came up with.'*

This connection between creativity and criticality is intriguing, as it suggests that criticality can decrease students' creativity, and their 'critical voice' needs to quieten sometimes to allow their creative thinking to come forward. Similarly, Newton (2014) observes creative

thinking as something separate, yet connected to, problem solving. Newton (2014) notes that creative tasks put 'the onus on the students to take responsibility for their thinking' which can lead to creativity sometimes being 'unpredictable' (p. 65), yet by allowing the students this freedom, students are able to engage in creative thought not only through considering how to solve problems, but how to find problems too. Newton (2014) cautions that creative thinking needs to be approached with care and clear guidance from the teacher to avoid students from, for example, disengaging, putting in low effort to avoid ridicule, or getting stuck in their train of thought and being unable to solve the problem, relating to the '*paralysis*', that teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) mentions in the above interview quote.

Lastly, Teacher participant 4 (England) had an understanding of critical thinking as something that is a '*more deep analytical look at something, question things a bit more. I think there's scope for it. I think it probably largely depends on the class that you're teaching.*' This relates to the idea of critical thinking as promoting questioning, yet it relates to some of the students' responses too, as 17.9% of respondents' answers included the notion of 'deeper thinking' or 'analytical thinking'.

The results of the survey and from the interviews with teachers, show that critical thinking seems to concern the following traits:

1. Discussion
2. Questioning
3. Justifying ideas and thoughts
4. Deeper thinking
5. Analytical thinking

Teacher participant 4 (England) thought that there was scope for it, but felt that critical thinking is not always present in poetry teaching and learning, which I have conveyed in the poem below, made up of Teacher participant 4's interview response on what critical thinking meant to them and whether they could provide an example of critical thinking in their classroom context:

### **Time dependent**

Apply a more deep analytical look at something,

Question things a bit more

There's scope for it.

Depends on the class

The curriculum –

So limited, so structured –

With the more able class it might happen naturally,

With the lesser able students ...

I quite often feel that

You're almost telling them what to think about a poem,

Then they write it down and

Then they regurgitate that in the exam.

So time dependent.

For less able students to be able to think

Critically about a poem

perhaps that's time you feel you don't have

as you're working towards these assessments.

They find it quite difficult to get

Deeper than just the surface

They need that prompting

It is a skill you can practise

I think it does develop with time,

It's a thing that they do struggle with.

Although Teacher participant 4 (England) did not mention creativity in this answer, it does suggest that critical thinking, similar to creative thinking, does not constitute copying or regurgitating information. Similarly, one student responded that creativity did not happen in

poetry lessons 'when we copy off the board'. Manuel et al. (2009) illuminate this by arguing that mindless copying is one of the few examples of an act that does not constitute creativity. Subsequently, the data shows that creativity and critical thinking both stimulate expression and reflection of students' and teachers' views and understandings of the world and of the subject they are exploring. Students and teachers in this study often conceptualised creativity and critical thinking as terms that embrace expression, which is a thought that I will develop in combination with the data in the next section

## 7.5 Group work for creative and critical thought

### 7.5.1 'Ideally, I'd like to see more groupwork in the classroom'

*Group work* was a recurring theme in both the student survey responses and in the teacher interviews. Creativity helps students express themselves, and is thought of by the cohort in this study as primarily a mental process as opposed to something to do with making objects, such as art. To enable students to express themselves in different ways, one of the ways in which students can voice their opinions and share their views, but also to listen to others' views and opinions, is through group work. From the survey, group work came up as one of the things most students were doing, but also one of the learning strategies they would like to see more of in the classroom. In one of the survey questions, students were asked to choose from the following options (Figure 14). In this section, I will first introduce some of the results that came out of the multiple selection questions from the student survey, and then return to the way in which students and teachers expressed their thoughts on group work, discussion and dialogue in the classroom.

What would you like to see more of in poetry lessons? You can select more than one answer

- Group work
- Individual work
- Poetry Reading for exams
- Poetry writing activities
- Discussion
- Poetry reading for pleasure
- Debate
- Other...

Figure 15 Question from student survey: 'What would you like to see more of in poetry lessons?'

The students answered with multiple responses, leading to the results in Table 9. These results show that a majority of student participants in this survey would like to see more group work, discussion and debate in the classroom. This contrasts with the 9.6% of students in this survey who would like to see more poetry reading for exams. This could be either so they feel better prepared for their exam, or, as one student suggested, because they feel as though they should 'read less poems and spend more time on one' to improve their understanding of a poem.

Table 8 Results from the student survey question 'what would you like to see more of in poetry lessons' in order from most to least responses, in numbers and percentages

Option	Amount	Percentage
Group work	74	51%
Discussion	56	38.6%
Debate	49	33.8%
Poetry writing	37	25.5%
Individual Work	25	17.2%
Poetry reading for pleasure	24	16.6%
Poetry reading for exams	14	9.6%

Other	0	0%
<b>Total students: 145</b>	<b>Total responses: 279</b>	

As shown in the table above, some students (8.3% ) noted they thought more group work would be something that could make poetry lessons better when they were asked an open question concerning what could make poetry lessons better and there was a variety of response here. The results show that there was group work in the lessons, with 59.6% of responses on ‘which of the following lesson styles apply to your poetry lessons?’ showed that group work was applied, and amongst respondents in the UK 73.1% of the respondents who answered this question (78/83) responded with group work. Although this possibly means they were all familiar with group work and this lesson style applied to all their learning, as the students who participated in the research were those whose lessons I observed and had lessons from teachers I interviewed. It does show that they remembered the group work activities and wanted to share that they had this experience with group work.

The responses in table 9 show that students appreciate group work, and in addition to these responses I wanted to find out how group work took place. I observed engagement with group work activities in the observations and asked the teachers about how group work might happen in their classroom context, and how often it would occur. When considering the value of group work, I felt it was important to understand what kind of group work already happened in the classroom context, and teacher’s experiences and use of group work in the poetry classroom. In the next section I will explore group work in combination with creativity.

### 7.5.2 Creativity as a collaborative act

Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) conveys how creativity can happen as a collaborative act through group projects such as making cut-up poetry, where students have to decide together how they are going to play with the language and which words to include in their poems, as illustrated in the observation notes in Chapter 6 and in section 7.2. Teacher participant 2 (England) considered creativity in allowing students space to think for themselves, rather than copying from a page and notes that they’d ideally like to do more

group work, *'so that it's not always the visualiser and me annotating the poem and them copying the ideas down'*.

When asked for an example of when students were both creative and critical in the reading of their poem or the poem they were studying, the teacher responded by sharing that students analyse poems either in small groups or in a teacher-led (whole group) activity:

*'If they were sort of analysing poems either in groups or a teacher-led activity they would be picking out imagery or picking out key features and then explaining and then analysing their interpretations. And then that would move on to planning an essay where they put forward their arguments to respond to the question about power or how love's presented, or whichever theme it might be.'* (Teacher participant 2, English)

In activities where students are reading the poem and making meaning of the language together, either in a whole classroom discussion, or in small group activities, there is some evidence here that the teacher provided space for students to include their own creative and critical thoughts, as opposed to only following the teacher's annotations on a visualiser, as I observed on two occasions. On both accounts, the teacher attempted interactions with the students to provide a whole-group discussion on what to include in the annotation, and in both, but particularly in the first instance, the annotations were mostly written by the teacher, with only two student voices making regular suggestions on either questions around the meaning. This technique, in this instance, needed continuous prompting from the teacher for students to respond, and very few actively participated in the annotation activity. In this same group, when students were given a poem and asked to explore it by considering the imagery that the poem evoked, there was an increase in response variety and wider participation from the classroom. In the small group work I observed, the students had the opportunity to learn from each other, rather than predominantly listening to the teacher's understanding of the poem. This increased the opportunity for active listening, as well as or sharing their own views.

All teachers in the interviews considered the value of group work, or working in pairs, when providing examples of how creativity and criticality were present in classroom learning

and teaching, whether it was on discussing poems in small groups (Teacher participant 3, England), looking at different themes in each group to come up with new perspectives on a text (Teacher participant 5, Netherlands) or working in groups as an ideal, but difficult to realise due to the lack of motivation from students and the prompting the teacher needs to do to ensure the students gain some understanding of the poems in the lesson (Teacher participant 4, England).

Group work is often considered positive and said to improve the ability to negotiate social and cultural views and while allowing students to engage in social semiotics through collaboration (Bezemer and Kress, 2015). Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) argues that students' knowledge is expanded into the 'zone of proximal development' through collaboration with those who are slightly more knowledgeable. This could be a teacher, but this could also be a group of students with a different set of experiences, as each student will be more experienced in one thing than another. In a study by Dobson and Dobson (2021) where secondary school students worked together on a problem-based project, it was found that the student-led activity had a positive impact not only on the students' engagement and active listening skills. Moreover, student-led group activities 'hold the potential to empower students and enable them to become more community minded' (p. 103). This relates to the understanding that the cohort of students in my research wanted more autonomy and freedom in the poetry classroom. Through guided groupwork, where the teacher acts as the facilitator, there is the potential for greater engagement with the poetry. However, this would depend on the selected poems and whether students find them relevant and relatable or not. If they cannot connect with the text, it might be more difficult to invite them into student-led discussion on the poem. In the next section we will consider how groupwork happened in the classroom and how I observed the dialogue taking place in the classroom observations I also focused on students' and teachers' thoughts on the design and impact of group work in poetry teaching and learning. Furthermore, the notion of group work will be connected to my final three research questions on the teachers' and students' conceptions of creativity and critical thinking in the classroom, to understand whether, particularly the teachers, perceived group work as a way of teaching and learning that could increase students' creative and critical thinking.

### 7.5.3 Creativity and criticality in the mind of the participants

The findings described in this chapter concern teacher and learner views on creativity and criticality. Due to creativity often being defined by students in this study as something that happens 'in the mind' and is 'out of the box' thinking, I did not feel able to observe when creativity happened. However, I could note when students were connecting poems to their own lives, or questioning poetic techniques and meanings poems may have in different contexts. Furthermore, in the lessons it was clear when the teacher was transmitting information, and when they were inviting the students to question the poem in relation to its context with the teacher taking on a facilitating role. Additionally, it was clear how teachers created space to provide students with opportunities for creative and critical thinking, and where teachers facilitated collaborative meaning making through group work, pair work and whole group activities. Some opportunities from teachers to allow students to collaborate and think creatively and critically had very clear boundaries, possibly to guide the students along a clear route through the poem, so that they would not be confused as to what the activity might be. Teacher Participant 4 (England) was a teacher who provided students with space to work in groups and engage in discussion. However, they set clear boundaries to encourage them to talk about a topic that was previously introduced in that lesson, and to ensure students understood what the question was. Once the teacher was able to acknowledge students had some understanding of a poem, the teacher gave the students more open questions or more space to explore a poem for meaning, rather than being prompted with what a potential meaning might be. In one observation, the task was not understood by all groups. One group in particular was distracted, and students would easily disengage with the poem and discuss their lives beyond the context of poetry.

All the teachers, at some point during the observations, chose to show the poets or other narrators to present a poem, which engaged learners and provided them with a different perspective and with an opportunity to hear the poem being performed by the original author or by a professional performer. Although these observations showed clear examples of teachers and students engaging creatively and critically with the content, I found it difficult to note how they experienced it themselves. Subsequently, this findings chapter focuses primarily on the teachers' and students' conceptions of these concepts and how they felt these concepts were part of their teaching and learning practice, rather than

focusing on my interpretation as the observer in the classroom. Creative and critical components that provided students with space to make their own meaning were included in the cut-up poetry from Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands), the discussions Teacher participant 3 (England) facilitated during poetry lessons on 'Vultures' and 'The Horse Whisperer', the invitation to see the world through other perspectives with language by Teacher participant 2 (England) in Simon Rae's *Ballad of Hillsborough*, and the effective questioning and structured group work approach from Teacher participant 4 (England). When students did not interact or were not focusing on the topic, I observed teachers increasing their guidance on the topic, and prompting answers to help the students with their own thought-process. It became clear to me in these observations, that some students wanted the teacher to give them answers, and when the teacher withheld these, a few students became disruptive. This could have various reasons that are beyond the scope of this study, yet it was intriguing to observe that some other students appreciated the space to come up with their own meanings, either individually or as a group, whereas other students were hesitant to engage with this creative and critical approach to their learning.

Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) shared that, 'You have to learn when to shut up and let them because it's gold there.' And the observed lessons all allowed at least some gold elements of *'free thinking'* for the students. Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) further noted that they think 'the authentic reactions are the most important.' This response connects to the notion of creativity, and to what Teacher participant 6 (Netherlands) conveyed about students being *'set in their ideas'* and questioning them to go beyond what they think they know. Elements of creative and critical thought to engage democratically in society, with curiosity and questioning, rather than *'accepting things as they are'* (Teacher participant 6) can be seen in the literature too.

## 7.6 Towards a synthesis of creativity and criticality in education

In this chapter, I set out to explore teachers' and students' conceptions of creativity and critical thinking, leading to the chapter title 'Flights of Fantasy', as student responses from

the survey showed that creativity has connotations with the imagination, thinking from different perspectives and being able to think freely. .

Teachers and students were all confident in answering this question, and although the answers varied from 'using your fantasy' to 'being full of ideas', most answers included the sense of innovation that Kress and Bezemer (2015) mention. The first section of this discussion will concern teachers' and students' conceptions of poetry in the classroom in conjunction with the literature. This will be followed by a section on applicability of creativity and criticality in the classroom, and finally this chapter will be drawn to a close by looking at how creativity and critical thinking work *in tandem*, and what potential it has to become aware of these concepts flowing through the poetry classroom, and how teachers are applying it to classroom practice. This will provide suggestions on how creative and critical thought can flow through teaching and learning poetry, even if it is one of the least well-taught subjects of the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 (Nobles, 2016; Dymoke and Hughes, 2009).

#### 7.6.1 Creativity: Perceptions from literature and practice

Creativity is often perceived by the teachers and students in this study as something that primarily happens in the mind, and provides space for freedom of thought, innovative thinking and is valued by teachers and students as adding pleasure and enjoyability to the learning process. These are similar understandings of creativity as found in the literature, particularly how creativity relates to innovative thought (Kress and Bezemer, 2015; Boden, 2004; Craft et al., 2001). Connected to the teaching and learning of poetry, there was a focus on the enjoyability of writing and reading poetry as well as connecting creativity to the emotional. Criticality is sometimes perceived as the opposite of creativity by both students and teachers, rather than as a concept that flow together with creativity. This is an intriguing finding, as the literature suggests creativity inspires curiosity, and curiosity aids creativity (Bregman, 2020). Furthermore, the two concepts in combination with wise thinking aid productive thinking too (Newton, 2014).

Teacher participant 2 (England) noted that creativity is something that has to be taught in schools as it is '*sort of in the rulebook of the exams*'. However, looking at the AQA exam boards' mark scheme, policy documents and the Curriculum for English, it does not appear in any of these documents (DfE, 2014; DfE, 2017). However, creativity is still seen as a

'desirable attribute within education' (Patston et al., 2021, p. 207). Amongst students creativity was often understood as something to be in the mind, such as *using the imagination*, being *full of ideas* and *thinking out of the box*. Similarly, teachers observed creativity as a thought process and a valuable component to English as it allows for opportunities to be '*a bit more free*' (teacher participant 5, Netherlands) in the lessons. Although 'thinking outside the box', was a much-used expression by students, this was not one that was used amongst teachers. Creativity as understood by teachers in the context of poetry primarily being concerned expression, enjoyability and freedom to come up with original interpretations. In accordance with both teacher and student perceptions of creativity with regards to poetry teaching and learning, I came up with the following attributes for creativity based on the findings from the interviews and surveys:

1. Doing or making something
2. Freedom to run own ideas and original interpretations
3. Free thinking about poetry
4. The ability to express how you feel
5. Enjoyability of writing and reading poetry

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) distinguishes reactive and proactive creativity. The types of creativity mentioned by the teachers and students is primarily focused on the proactive notion of creativity, as at least the first four attributes from the findings show connections with innovation and original thought. In practice and through the observations I noted a variety of both reactive and proactive creativity. Reactive creativity is seen as responding to a prescriptive model (Benton, 2000), and in the lessons I observed, I perceived this reactive creativity lesson observations in English schools, where the students were asked to respond to specific poetry and often within a particular historical or socio-cultural context (this was observed in all lessons to some extent, but more so in observation A1:3; observation B1:1, B1:2, B1:3; B2:1, B2:2, B2:3; C1:1, C1:2, C1:3). In observations in the B2 classroom, there was a focus on annotating poetry. Although this was done with the whole class, rather than the teacher, the students were expected to respond by acknowledging specific techniques and devices used in the poem as they were preparing for their exams. In the observed lessons A1:1, A1:2 and B3:1, B3:2, B3:3 there were instances of reactive creativity too, yet students

were also given the freedom to come up with their own meanings with regards to the text. This meant that students in these observed lessons were able to relate the poem to their own experiences, rather than focusing on specific contexts to read the poem in and subsequently for a proactive creative approach to understanding the poem as it allows for innovative meaning making processes and often included collaborative and dialogic elements to encourage a social semiotic approach.

Xerri (2013) argues that the focus in schools on annotations hinders the students' creative process, and in schools those lessons where annotations were the main focus, a lower engagement was observed. Furthermore, based on the surveys, there were multiple examples of students who responded that they did not think creativity happened '*during the annotation of a poem*', '*when analysing the poem*', nor '*when we write essays*' and '*when reading the poem*'. These responses relate to Xerri (2013), but also Pasquin (2010)'s notion that when students do not make their own meaning, but respond to what they think the teacher and examiner want to see, reading and analysing poetry loses its sense of innovation. Consequently, I argue that allowing students the space to reflect on the meaning of a poem before providing them with contextual information, such as in observations A1:1, B3:1, B3:2 and B3:3 can provide an effective way to stimulate creative thought in learners and, although they might not choose the poem itself, it allows some autonomy for the learner to choose the direction of the conversation about the poem.

In a society that is constantly changing and growing, not only the material should be inclusive and relatable for the learner, but also the way the students are taught and the way in which they learn the materials can improve motivation in learners. Pike (2003) argues that relatability not only stems from the text but also from the way in which it is taught. Observation B3:1 illustrates that when students are provided with a sense of structure, such as a theme to make sense of the poem, without spoon-feeding its context, they are able to come up with relatable meanings. Hence, I would argue that to make GCSE poetry anthology poems easier for students to connect with, providing students with a thematic way of analysing a poem, rather than analysing the poem for one specific analysis, provides students with permission to relate the poem to their own way of seeing and understanding the world. Through conversations in pairs, small-groups and with the whole class, students can share these experiences and understandings and learn from each other, as well as from the teacher and the poem itself.

### 7.6.2 “It’s a way to express your emotions and thoughts”

Poetry is often connected to the emotion and encourages self-expression and self-reflection. In both the teacher and student responses I identified the theme of poetry to express your emotions and thoughts, both when considering creativity and how this concept relates to poetry teaching and learning, as well as when exploring the purpose poetry has in classroom contexts, where the connection between poetry and creativity was often highlighted. A Dutch student participant noted the way the English language is ‘*rhythmic*’ and, because of this, a language that ‘*can express itself aesthetically*’, lending it well to ‘*expressing yourself*’. They mention this as one of the reasons why poetry is taught as part of English. The respondents from England focus primarily on annotating skills and understanding different language features, but also mention that English language teaches them ‘*deeper meanings*’. There is one English student who notes that poetry is taught to ‘*express/show how feelings can be put into words*’, and although this connects to expression, it is not necessarily the students’ own expression here, but that of the poet. This relates to what is stated in the National Curriculum (2014) on creativity, where it notes that creativity should be appreciated, but that it does not include in the curriculum that it should be applied by students.

Didau (2021) is concerned about English ‘becoming a clockwork version of itself’, suggesting the authenticity and creative ways in which language can be explored turns into robotic responses. Cushing (2018) argues that this reduction of creativity in the classroom threatens the emotion and exploration that can happen through poetry. It can be argued that through reading poetry, learners are able to become more empathetic in their understanding of the ‘other’ and more compassionate too. Due to poetry being open to interpretation, it can be read in a variety of contexts, leading to students having opportunities to learn not only about expressing and reflecting on themselves, but also reflecting on the other’s experiences. Teacher participant 3 (England) puts this into practice by picking themes, and allowing the students to explore the contexts to make meaning from the poem based on their shared existing knowledge. Through this process, the students are able to engage in self-reflection, expression and exploring the experiences of others in the classroom. Poetry teaching and learning lends itself well to dialogue, which can support the development of a social semiotics in the classroom space, as students make and shape

meanings together based on their shared understandings, experiences and any contextual and thematic information shared by the teacher.

### 7.6.3 “Expressing yourself by writing”

Teachers commented on the limited opportunities for poetry writing, as there is no longer an opportunity to write poetry in the creative writing component of the language paper and as such is not a primary focus in Key Stage 4. In Ofsted’s report (2007) on poetry, the limited writing of poetry during the GCSE course was mentioned. Similarly to the teachers, Dymoke (2001) noted that poetry was not directly assessed, and subsequently rarely taught in schools. However, Lockney and Proudfoot (2013) argue that poetry writing can contribute to students’ engagement with poetry reading. The teachers in my study confirm the value of poetry writing and of students engaging in poetry creatively through language play. Particularly Teacher participants 1 (Netherlands) and 6 (Netherlands) comment on the benefits poetry writing has had for their students and, as Teacher participant 1 notes, it ‘quietens the critical voice’, allowing students to play as opposed to constantly questioning and fearing failure. Including poetry writing as part of a creative writing strategy could increase students’ appreciation of the poetry they read, and allow them to play with language in a way that is less prescriptive. This could be successful within the current curriculum to improve both creative writing skills and students’ understanding and relatability with poetry.

### 7.6.4 Creativity and criticality in poetry teaching and learning

Creativity and criticality are not always seen as being connected in the first instance. For instance, Teacher participant 2 (England) does not see critical thinking as part of the GCSE exam, but more as something students engage with at a-level:

*I don’t know if other teachers do, but I don’t say sort of look we’re having a critical. Maybe more at A-level I would, because I think that’s part of the modules where they have a synoptic unit and it’s sort of looking at ehm, putting a Marxist perspective with something or feminism, but sort of at GCSE that’s not one of the assessment objectives so I don’t tend to focus on that.*

However, when asking about whether there was a connection between creativity and critical thinking, the teacher reflected and noted that,

*I suppose we do teach it without knowing that we're doing it. It is in the sort of rule book of the exam that they do have to be creative. Well we hope that they are going to be creative in their interpretations and their analysis of the poems. And then the critical thinking part would perhaps come from how they organise their argument about the themes and the question that they've been asked to respond to.*

This analysis of the poems could relate to the reactive creativity Csikszentmihalyi (1997) discusses, as students are asked to *'pick out imagery'* or

*'picking out key features'* followed by an analysis of *their interpretations*, after which the students would *move on to planning an essay where they put forward their arguments to respond to the question about power or how love's presented, or whichever theme it might be.'*

Although the notion of analysing students' own interpretations can be proactive creativity, as they might come up with novel meanings when they are all asked to write about the same theme they are responding to a prescribed model and existing material (Benton, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). This confirms Dymoke's (2017) argument that teachers and students do not have to be proactive in their analyses, nor are they necessarily invited (although they could be) to relate the poetry to meanings that are relevant to the learner. This assessment-based model of creative and critical writing is in contrast with the creativity and critical thinking that the Dutch teacher participants consider, as Teacher participant 1 suggests that creativity relates to letting *'go and allow the element of chance to come in'*. In this instance, letting go of questioning and asking *'what am I supposed to do?'*, which they relate to critical thinking.

These different understandings of creativity and critical thinking, and how they work, as Teacher participant 1 (Netherlands) suggests *'in tandem'*, show the complexity of the term and to enable successful practice of creativity, teachers and students need to understand what it means to engage in critical thinking. This clarity would aid the direction

of the analytical process of making and shaping meanings out of poetry. Furthermore, Moseley et al. (2005) indicate that for critical thinking to be successful, there needs to be a 'community of enquiry' (p. 23). This suggests group work and collaborative work aids the creative and critical thinking process. This suggests that group work and dialogue in classroom practice are a valuable tool for learning to explore in general, and to make meaning of poems as this allows for multiple perspectives. With this in mind, I suggest further research into teachers' and students' inclusion of creativity and critical thinking in classroom practice, to understand how dialogue and group work can be an effective and engaging way to enhance the learning experience. As the student responses show, there is a mutual desire for more group work in poetry lessons, but in order for this to be able to happen, these collaborative spaces must be provided effectively.

## 8 Concluding thoughts: Towards a synthesis of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education

### 8.1 A Hope for Poetry

1. What are some teachers' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education in England and The Netherlands?
2. What are some students' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in upper secondary school education in England and The Netherlands?
3. To what extent if any, do creativity and criticality feature in teachers' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in the participating schools?
4. To what extent, if any, do creativity and criticality feature in students' conceptions of poetry teaching and learning in the participating schools?
5. Are creativity and criticality put into practice in the participating poetry classrooms in England and The Netherlands. If so, how?

At the start of this thesis, I perceived a lack of hope for the teaching and learning of poetry in secondary schools, particularly in England. This felt confirmed during Covid, where poetry became an optional part of the GCSE assessment. I feared it might disappear from the curriculum in its entirety due to the negative experiences I heard about from peers, students I tutored, and I heard about in the media. It appeared that poetry did not fit into the neat and tidy curriculum that I was reading. I felt disheartened, as I perceive so much value through poetry writing and reading. I have seen how it emphasises emotions, allows people to perceive the world through different lenses, and how it can shed a different light on the lives of those who write the poems too. Poetry seemed such a valuable vehicle for creative and critical thought, as the writing offers an emphasis on the creative thinking skills, and the reading and analysing of poems we have written ourselves or those we read by others can provide such a profound way of looking at our place in and with the world.

In this thesis I set out to applying creative and evaluative thinking, by including poetry within the thesis and by writing about poetry's place in the secondary school environment. As I conducted the interviews, analysed the survey responses and wrote down the notes from observations, I realised there was a hope for poetry after all. The teachers I

interviewed were all passionate about poetry, and saw the benefits poetry could have in the classroom context. Some would appreciate more time to create lesson content around poems they enjoyed reading, but all enjoyed, to some extent, the teaching of poetry. The teachers cared about the student engagement too, and I perceived our interview conversations as being in favour of poetry teaching and learning. As I went through the survey responses, it stood out to me that although students may not enjoy poetry, many did suggest they saw the value in learning poetry to expand their language skills, to think more critically, and to engage with language creatively. As I shifted through these perspectives from teachers, students and from my own experience, a new and more positive perspective began to emerge, and a hopeful perspective on poetry teaching and learning in the secondary school classroom.

## 8.2 Connecting the literature to the data

Through the literature, I explored many benefits of including poetry in the classroom, to aid creative and critical thinking and to engage in conversations and build on the students' knowledge. Some of the literature suggested that poetry is negatively perceived in schools, which some of the data reiterates. One of the major challenges that the teaching and learning of poetry in the upper secondary classroom faces, is the focus on performativity and high stakes testing, with little flexibility on choice of poems due to the GCSE anthologies, lack in school funding and lack of time for teachers to plan new lessons with different (unseen) poems. Another challenge concerns a lack of cultural representation in the poetry, with a majority of poems having been written by white men. However, teacher participant 3 (England) in particular, illustrated through the observations in the interview, that when poetry is not prescribed to students, but students are provided space to explore connections with poems and relatability to real-world issues, there is potential to make a wider variety of poems, including those that may be seen as culturally less relevant to students, somewhat engaging. Teacher participant 4 (England) did suggest the anthology poems provide a very 'narrow view of what poetry really is', which aligns with the literature (Elliot and Courtney, 2023; Nelson-Addy et al, 2019), and the report on Lit in Colour by the Runnymede Trust (Elliot et al., 2021). The exam board (AQA) and awarding organisation (Edexcel) have made significant changes by adding new and more inclusive GCSE anthology clusters, yet the most

popularly taught ones: 'love and relationships', and 'power and conflict', currently remain unchanged. This is perceived through the data as somewhat problematic, although it appears that there is more at stake here than just changing texts for a more inclusive GCSE anthology. Through observations and teacher interviews, I noticed the passion of teachers for poetry teaching and learning, and observed how teachers made poems more culturally relevant to students by providing students with space to explore themes and contexts of poems that connected, in some way, to their own lives and the present-day world. There were also opportunities, particularly in the year 9 class I observed, to create connections between the original context in which the poem was written, and the here and now, such as in the poem *Horse Whisperer* by Andrew Forster.

These examples, and those examples from teachers in the Dutch schools show poetry provides ways to engage with language in new ways, to play with language in both poetry reading and writing, to expand vocabulary, while having permission to fail as there is no one right way of reading, writing or analysing a poem. Poetry lends itself to creating relatable content out of historical contexts, and as a vehicle to express and reflect on the self. In this sense, poetry has proven to be a powerful component of the English literature curriculum that can be empowering for learners as they play with language and meaning, and should be taught and learnt with the purpose and intent of exploring different contexts, themes, human nature, and the natural world too. The observations, survey data and interviews all suggest there is a real purpose for learning poetry in the classroom context as a way to explore vocabulary and to understand the craft and artful ways of making meaning, as well as to explore cultures and histories through different lenses, such as teacher participant 4 did with *Kamikaze* by Beatrice Garland, and teacher participant 3 did with *Vultures* by Chinua Achebe.

Participants in this study did note that a wider range of poetry would be an improvement (interview participants 2 and 4, as well as student survey respondents), as students and teachers would be able to choose those poems that would introduce learners more easily to potentially complex poetic texts and provide students with agency to choose poems that were, as one of the students put it, 'for our age'. Teacher participant 4 (England) noted that their English teacher had more freedom in what they taught, and when I explored the choices of texts over the years as listed in Blake's (2020) thesis, there is evidence for a narrowing anthology. In 1994, Cox argued that the curriculum included a

narrow anthology, but as Blake (2020) shows, there were 6,903 poems by 1,093 poets in the anthologies set by exam boards and awarding organisations, whereas in the current setting there are 119 poems by 73 poets (p. 3). Although the number of available poems has been reduced considerably, some students and teachers in the survey and interviews reveal they would benefit from '*less poems*' (survey respondent) in the classroom, whereas others would like to see this wider range. This contrast could relate to the type of poems students and teachers might want in the classroom: possibly a narrower range of complex poems that students find difficult to understand, but a wider variety of poems that are potentially easier to relate to, and to read and analyse. It also depends on how the poems are being analysed: Do the students have space to explore the poem for themselves, and produce their own meaning? Or do the students follow a set schema that helps them produce a particular meaning? These differences in the approach to meaning-making can have an influence on student engagement.

If all poems need to produce similar meanings for the poems in the curriculum anthology, students and teachers may feel overwhelmed by the content they need to cover as they regurgitate existing information. Students might find it difficult to understand the language that is used, or expected to come up with a "correct" answer, rather than exploring the connections between the poem and the real-world (past or present). The theme of relatability recurred in all three findings chapters as something students and teachers would like to see more of in poetry lessons. Alongside this, there is scope for more freedom and variety in choices of poems through preparing for the Unseen Poetry element of the exam. However, teacher workload and time constraints may cause teachers to be unable to choose and prepare poems that go beyond what is already included in their school lesson plans. Poetry, as posed in the National Curriculum for English at Key Stage 4 (DfE, 2014) should be taught 'to develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment (p. 3). The students comment on their wish for a '*wider range*' of poems, '*different poems*', '*more exciting poems*' and '*better and more enjoyable poems*', yet some would also prefer to '*spend more time on one poem*'. Through the combination of using poetic inquiry and thematic analysis in this thesis, I explored these responses in depth and aimed to bring together the voices of the students and teachers to gain a deeper understanding of what it is that brings them joy in poetry teaching and learning, and where they feel poetry becomes dry and boring.

I would argue that there is space for the inclusion of poems that might be more directly relatable to students by introducing students to a wider range of unseen poetry, with 'more fun poems', 'more relatable poems', and 'poems for our age' (student responses). However, in the English and Dutch classrooms alike, there is an element of time constraints for the teachers, which may lead to them re-using poems or, as teacher participant 4 noted prior to one of the observations, teaching the anthology poems as unseen poems, rather than focusing on more easily accessible poetic texts for students.

Teacher participant 3 (England), who teaches a year 9 class, has a more positive attitude to the curriculum, and their school has adopted a way of including different types of poems by including them as part of reading other texts, by considering themes rather than historical contexts, and by providing space to make poems relatable for students. Pike (2003) discusses the notion that it is not always the language that is difficult about a poem, but how it is read and analysed, and this was one of the key findings in my explorative research too. Yet teacher participant 3 (England) does admit that in year 11 students 'have to' learn the anthology poems in a way that prepares them for the exam. In the year 11 classes in the same school, teachers were including multimodal practices to engage the learners, by showing videos of poets performing the poem, or videos that related to the original context the poem was written in, yet they also included prescriptive whole-class annotation lessons with a visualiser, limiting the creativity and relatability for learners in order to provide them with the information necessary to pass the GCSE exams, which aligns with Xerri (2013) when they argue that this prescriptive focus on annotations 'stifles creativity' (p. 137). However, it is also worthy to note that group work was a tool used often to engage students in discussion and meaning making, allowing to bring their voice into the meaning-making process, and group work was considered by most students as something they would like to see more of in their learning.

There appears to be hope for a more inclusive, playful and purposeful way of teaching and learning poetry in the upper years in secondary schools, both in England and the Netherlands, yet changes in schools and in lessons that enhance the agency and autonomy of the students' explorations and understandings of poetry may provide a more inclusive approach to improving poetry's place in the curriculum.

Looking back at the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education in 1999 (NACCCE, 1999), there was a different take on creativity in English than there is now.

Creativity was one of the most poignant parts of the curriculum, showing how English and the arts related closely to each other and how poetry could serve as a vehicle for making connections between disciplines in the curriculum. Furthermore, the NACCCE (1999) argues for the recognition that 'the dynamic, interactive nature of culture is a fact, not a theory, which is at the heart of cultural change and evolution' (p. 115). Abbs (2003) explores the relationship between language and the arts at a similar time.

There are multiple ways in which poetry can be made more inclusive in teaching and learning practice. It could be by providing students with more agency and autonomy, or by teachers having more agency in their choice of poems and providing them with time to shape lessons using these poems. It can also be through opening up discussion spaces with learners about what constitutes a 'literary canon', and what the value is of such a canon. Another way in which poetry can be made more inclusive, based on the literature and the data in this study, might be to teach the existing GCSE anthology poems thematically, rather than within specific contexts, to provide students with structure on how to conceptualise a poem, but with a freedom to explore how the poem connects to themes. Whether changes are made pedagogically through how teachers teach and how students are able to learn to read and analyse poetry with purpose, or whether it is broadening the range of poetry students are introduced to, there are ways within the space of the barriers of the curriculum to be creative with poetry, and to engage critically and purposefully with poetic texts.

Poetry has the potential to thrive in the curriculum as a purposeful and engaging component of English. However, there must be agreements within schools, and between the stakeholders of the curriculum, including students, as to how poetry can be best taught and learnt. Assumptions of what constitutes 'the best of British culture', must be evaluated regularly, and when poetry is not taught effectively in the classroom, there should be space for evaluation of the quality of poetry teaching and learning, to ensure that students can engage in multiple ways. I would argue that there is a case for reintroducing poetry writing too, to understand the craft that goes into poetry, to work within other boundaries of meaning making through language that go beyond grammatical boundaries. This provides space for students to be creative, and as in the example of the cut-up poetry, to collaborate on meaning-making through language play too.

### 8.3 An overview of the data

In The Netherlands, the literature was thin and there was very little available on poetry and literature teaching and learning in upper secondary school English. However, what was available showed how secondary school education could benefit from poetry for the purpose of language learning, understanding the socio-cultural values of other cultures, and to explore language creatively (Fasoglio et Al., 2015; Schaap, 2017). The data suggested teachers were struggling with similar issues to the English teachers. Namely, the high workload and lack of motivation for teachers to engage with their subject beyond teaching from textbooks. Nevertheless, the three teachers that were interviewed and the classroom observations with teacher participant 1 (Netherlands), all showed a passion for language and teaching, and aimed to include poetry to aid language learning, cultural awareness, and creative and critical approaches to communication. Similarly, Kress et Al. (2005) suggests a 'curriculum for English as a vehicle for communication and a curriculum of notions of sociality and of culture' (p. 5). By adopting such curricula, poetry could be included in both sections, which is what the findings allude to: poetry as a way to stimulate conversation and discussion as well as a vehicle for learning vocabulary, and poetry as a way to engage in historical and recent socio-cultural values.

Students found poetry learning useful to 'think critical', 'for your writing skills', 'learning English' and it 'helps express ideas and thoughts'. These responses, amongst others, indicate poetry teaching and learning at these schools in The Netherlands allowed space for creative and critical learning, although not all students understood its value: '*I didn't learn very much but I liked it*', '*I don't think poem is very useful for the exam*', or it was found '*good to expand your creativity, but not important*.' These varied responses conveyed that the intentionality behind poetry might need clarifying. There is room for further and ongoing studies with regards to teaching and learning of purposeful poetry, and it would be intriguing to explore whether if the intention behind poetry was clear to the student, they would enjoy poetry more.

Enjoyability of poetry is an important factor to the teaching and learning of poetry for engagement. However, poetry lends itself well as a vehicle for creative and critical learning too, which is purposeful, but can be challenging rather than enjoyable. Although teachers and students are not always aware of how creativity and critical thinking '*work in*

*tandem'* (teacher participant 1), through the surveys, interviews and observations the direction they would like to take in their teaching if they had the space, would include space for collaboration, dialogue, social semiotics, and including more relatable poetry in the classroom for students to connect with and relate to their place in and with the world (Freire, 1996; Freire & Macedo, 2005). This suggests there is opportunity for raising awareness of the long-term values of adopting a creative and critical approach to classroom teaching and learning, and there are examples of this happening in all classroom observations, through teacher interviews and in the student survey responses too.

#### 8.4 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis contains a contribution to the existing literature, as it provides a fresh perspective that relates to the existing body of research. The students' voices shed light on their lived experience of poetry learning in secondary schools, how they perceive poetry, how they understand the purpose of poetry and what their attitudes are towards poetry teaching and learning at Key Stage 4 and in the upper secondary years in The Netherlands. Furthermore, it provides an understanding of the boundaries of poetry teaching and learning and the opportunities within the curriculum to still enable a creative and critical approach to poetry. The data shows evidence of engagement and enjoyment, of both teachers and students exercising agency to some extent, although there are voices of those who would appreciate more agency and autonomy in their teaching and learning, and most importantly more time and space. One important implication of the findings where enjoyability is evidenced, is that in school contexts constrained by curricula, funding shortages, high-stakes assessment and other aspects of neoliberal education systems, pedagogies of possibility (and hope) are still to be found.

The comparative element of this study, to consider poetry's place in a school with a less prescribed curriculum and no set texts, shows that similar challenges are present, and as such it provides some evidence for the text choices not being the only issue with a lack of engagement with poetry, but that there are other challenges in teaching and learning more broadly, particularly with regards to funding cuts, time constraints, and high workloads. In this study, I share a view of the complexities that teachers work within to engage students, from small-scale and in-depth teacher perspectives. Through the student surveys, I shed light on the problems with poetry that students run up against, but again, it also shows a

hope for poetry as many of the responses showed the students valued the creative and collaborative engagement they could have with and through poetry lessons.

I opted for the inclusion of a triangular approach, so I could explore the students' teachers' and my own conceptions, to create a transparent and honest account of teachers' and students' experiences, but also to reduce my own bias, as I saw some exceptional teaching and learning in the observed schools. Considering student, teacher and researcher critical views and interpretations allows for an in-depth understanding of how the challenges surrounding the teaching of poetry are managed within these schools, providing ideas for practice and providing a space for these teachers and students to share their views on poetry as it is taught and learnt in schools. Teachers do not often get to observe in other schools, and I felt privileged to be able to share their practice through thematic analysis, poetic inquiry and through the observations I describe in this thesis. This study aims to be relatable and adaptable to other environments, and aims to open up further dialogue on how engagement with poetry might be improved within and beyond curricula.

Through the methods of inquiry and presentation, this thesis is not only on poetry, but also presented with and through poetry, to show that poetry can be utilised successfully as a vehicle for meaning making and as a method of inquiry to bring voices together and to create a connection between the researcher and the research participants. Through poetry we can connect ideas, find similarities and differences, explore the voices of others, and interpret them to make meaning. Poetry has the potential to connect people while providing a playful space to explore assumptions and understandings of our place in and with society. In this thesis I have explored and evaluated in-depth my own assumptions, as well as those of others, to develop my understanding of my own place in the world, and to relate to and evaluate the truths of those who are living secondary education. This journey through poetry has encouraged me to play with language and to consider my positionality as a researcher in this field too, by engaging with the voices of the respondents and participants as well as the literature in dialogue and with language play.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: List of Edexcel Anthology clusters

Table 9 Edexcel Anthology cluster: Relationships

Poet	Poem	Year	Gender	Ethnicity
Joanna Baillie	A Child to His Sick Grandfather	1790	Female	White British
William Wordsworth	A Complaint	1807	Male	White British
Lord Byron	She Walks in Beauty	1814	Male	White British
John Keats	La Belle Dame Sans Merci: A Ballad	1819	Male	White British
Robert Browning	My Last Duchess	1842	Male	White British
Elizabeth Barrett Browning	Sonnet 43: How do I Love Thee?	1850	Female	White British
Thomas Hardy	Neutral Tones	1876	Male	White British
Elizabeth Jennings	One Flesh	1966	Female	White British
Vernon Scannell	Nettles	1980	Male	White British
John Cooper Clarke	I Wanne Be Yours	1982	Male	White British
Ingrid de Kok	My Father Would Not Show U	1988	Female	South African
Carol Ann Duffy	Valentine	1993	Female	White British (Scotland)
Simon Armitage	The Manhunt (Laura's Poem)	2007	Male	White British
Jen Hatfield	Love's Dog	2008	Female	White British

Wendy Cope	First Date – She & First Date - He	2012	Female	White British
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Table 10 Edexcel Anthology cluster: Conflict

Poet	Poem	Year	Gender	Ethnicity
William Blake	Poison Tree	1794	Male	White British
William Wordsworth	Extract from the Prelude: Boating	1799-1805	Male	White British
Lord Byron	The Destruction of Sennacherib	1815	Male	White British
Lord Alfred Tennyson	Charge of the Light Brigade	1854	Male	White British
Christina Rossetti	Cousin Kate	1862	Female	White British
Thomas Hardy	The Man He Killed	1902	Male	White British
Wilfred Owen	Exposure	1918	Male	White British
Denise Levertov	What were they like?	1967	Female	British-American
Gillian Clarke	Catrin	1978	Female	White British (Wales)
Mary Casey	The Class Game	1979	Female	White British
Carole Satyamurti	War Photographer	1987	Female	White British
Ciaran Carson	Belfast Confetti	1989	Male	White British (Northern Ireland)
Benjamin Zephaniah	No Problem	1996	Male	British (Jamaican Barbeidan heritage)
John Agard	Half-Caste	2005	Male	Afro Guyanese (living in Britain)

Jane Weir	Poppies	2005	Female	White British (Anglo Italian)
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Table 11 Edexcel Anthology cluster: Time and Place

Poet	Poem	Year	Gender	Ethnicity
William Blake	London	1794	Male	White British
William Wordsworth	Composed upon Westminster Bridge December 1802	1802	Male	White British
John Keats	To Autumn	1819-1820	Male	White British
Robert Browning	Home Thoughts from Abroad	1845	Male	White British
Emily Dickinson	I Started Early – Took my Dog	1862	Female	White British
John Davidson	In Romney Marsh	1894	Male	White British
Thomas Hardy	Where the Picnic Was	1914	Male	White British
Edward Thomas	Adlestrop	1914	Male	White British
Fleur Adcock	Stewart Island	1971	Female	New Zealand
Grace Nichols	Hurricane Hits England	1987	Female	Guyanese-born (1959) living in UK (since 1977)
U A Fanthorpe	First Flight	1988	Female	White British
Moniza Alvi	Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan	1991	Female	Pakistani-born British <sup>29</sup>
Tatamkhulu Afrika	Nothing's changed	1994	Male	South African
Sophie Hannah	Postcard from a Travel Snob	1996	Female	White British

<sup>29</sup> <https://moniza.uk> last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025

Elizabeth Jennings	Absence	Published 2012, written pre-2001	Female	White British
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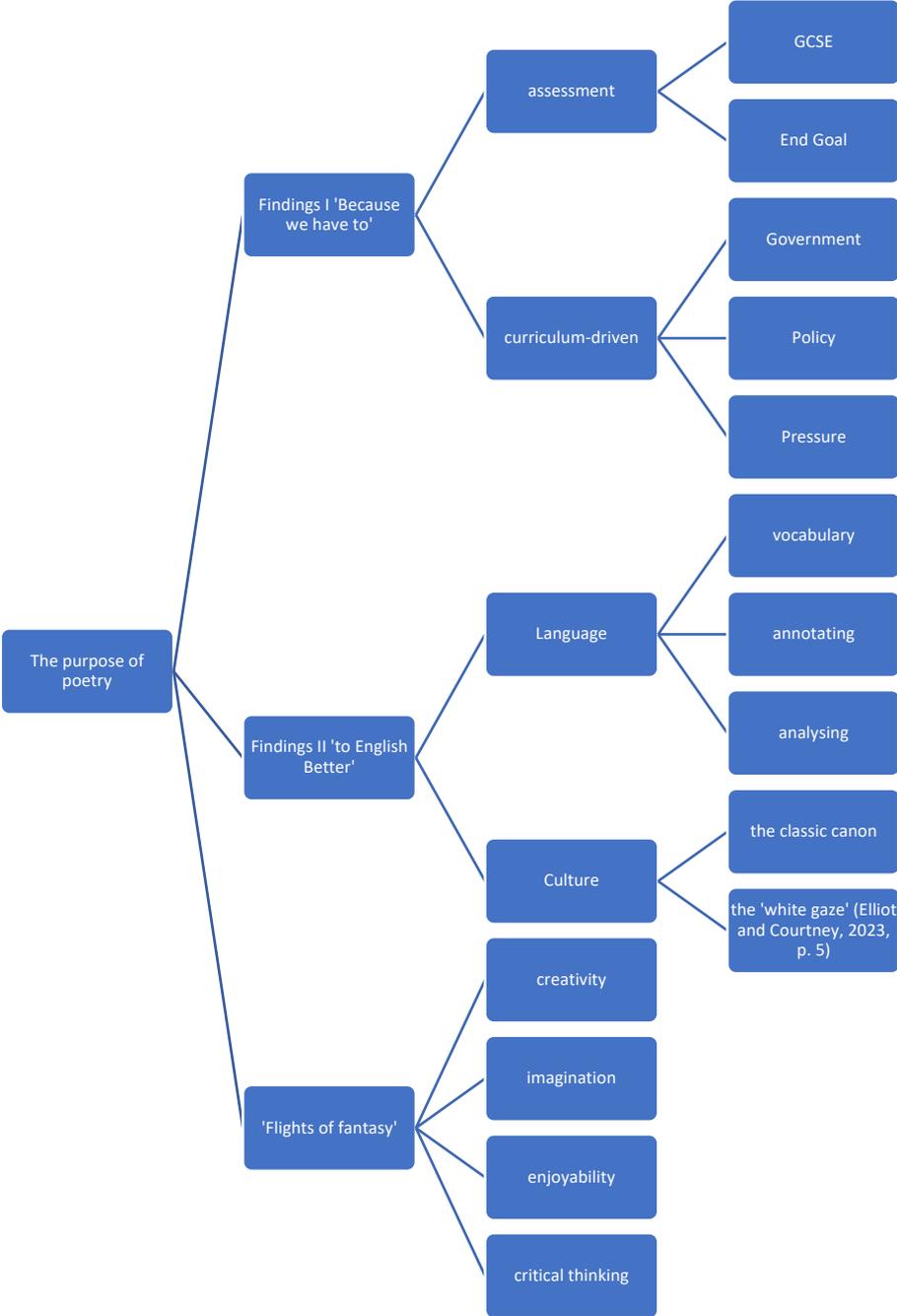
Table 12 Edexcel Anthology cluster: Belonging

Poet (Belonging)	Poem	Year	Gender	Ethnicity
William Wordsworth	To My Sister	1798	Male	White British
John Clare	Sunday Dip	1800s	Male	White British
Letitia Elizabeth Landon	Captain Cook (To My Brother)	1820	Female	White British
Emily Bronte	Mild the mist Upon the Hill	1839	Female	White British
Robert Bridges	Clear and Gentle Stream	1873	Male	White British
Thomas Hood	I Remember, I remember	1914	Male	White British
Grace Nichols	Island Man	1984	Female	Guyanese-born (1959) living in UK (since 1977)
Carol Rumens	The Emigree	1993	Female	White British
Benjamin Zephaniah	We Refugees	2000	Male	British (Jamaican)
Choman Hardi	My Mother's Kitchen	2004	Female	Kurdish-Iraqi
Amy Blakemore	Pechkham Rye Lane	2007	Female	White British
Imtiaz Dharker	In Wales, Wanting to be Italian	2014	Female	Pakistani-born British
Kayo Chingonyi	Kumukanda	2017	Male	Zambian British
Zaffar Kunial	Us	2018	Male	British (Indian parents)

Raymond Antrobus	Jamaican British	2018	Male	British (Jamaican descent)
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Appendix 2: Large version of thematic figures

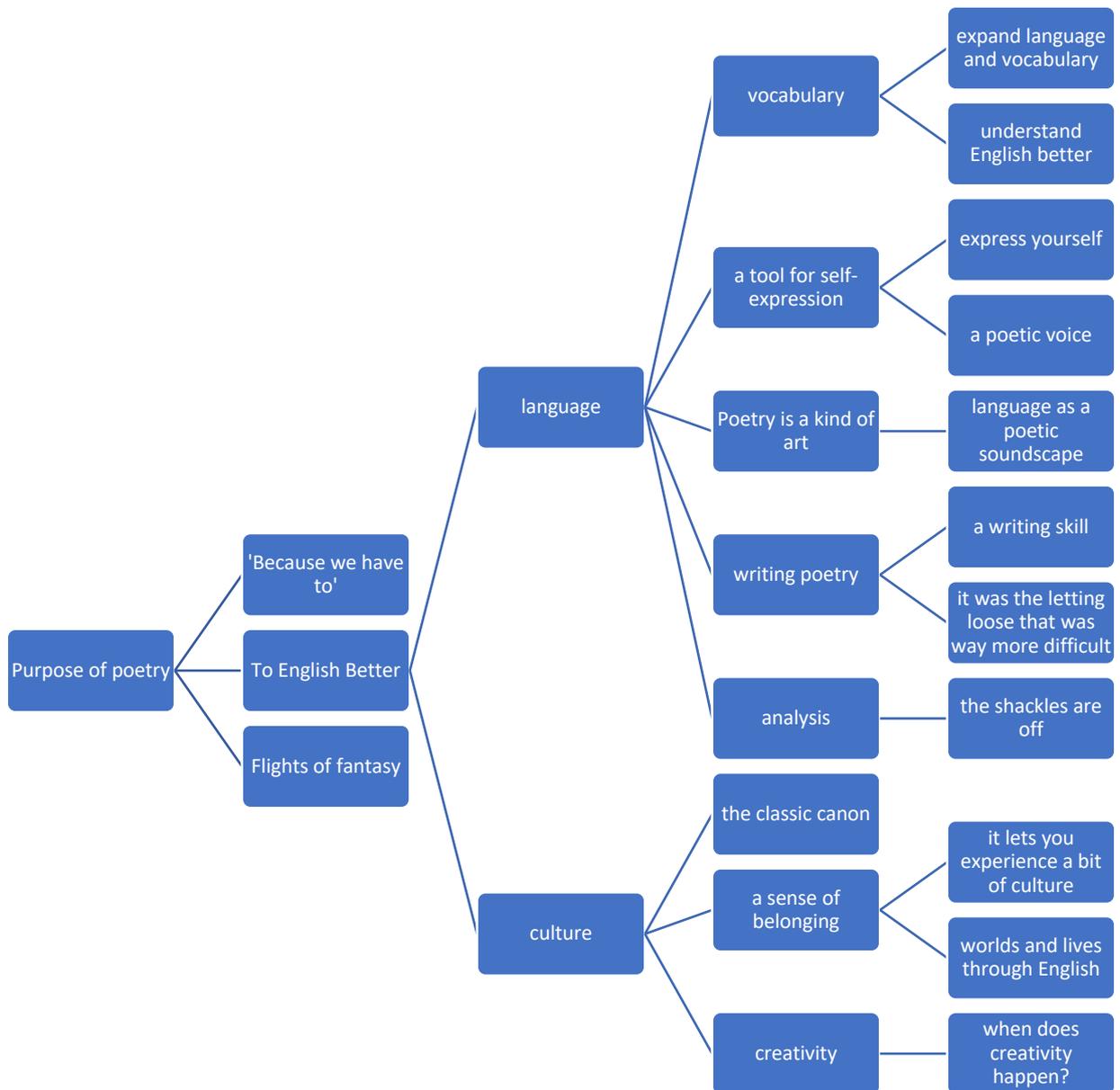
Key themes from the findings, as shown in Methods chapter



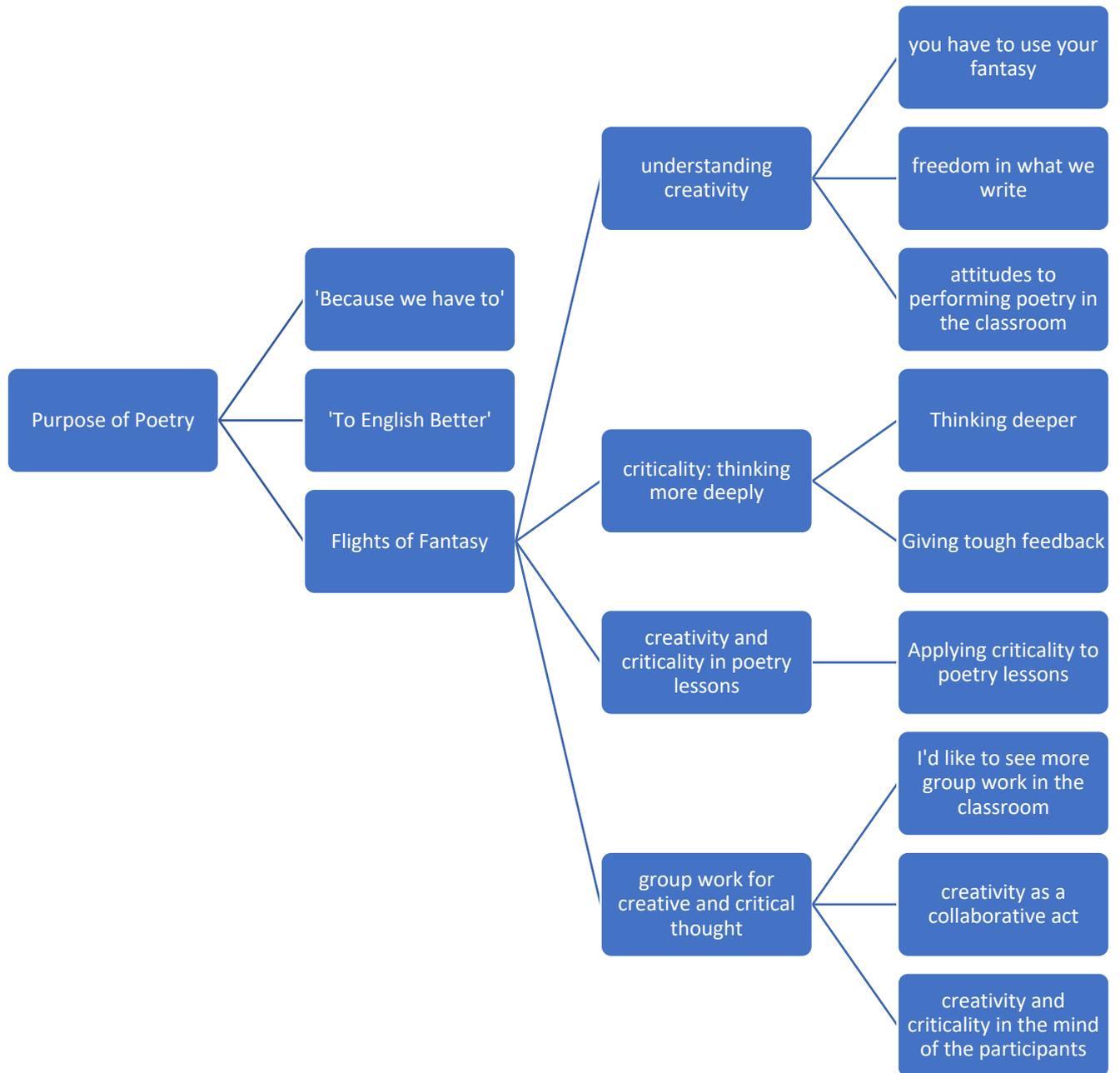
## Findings Ch 5: 'Because we have to' themes and subthemes



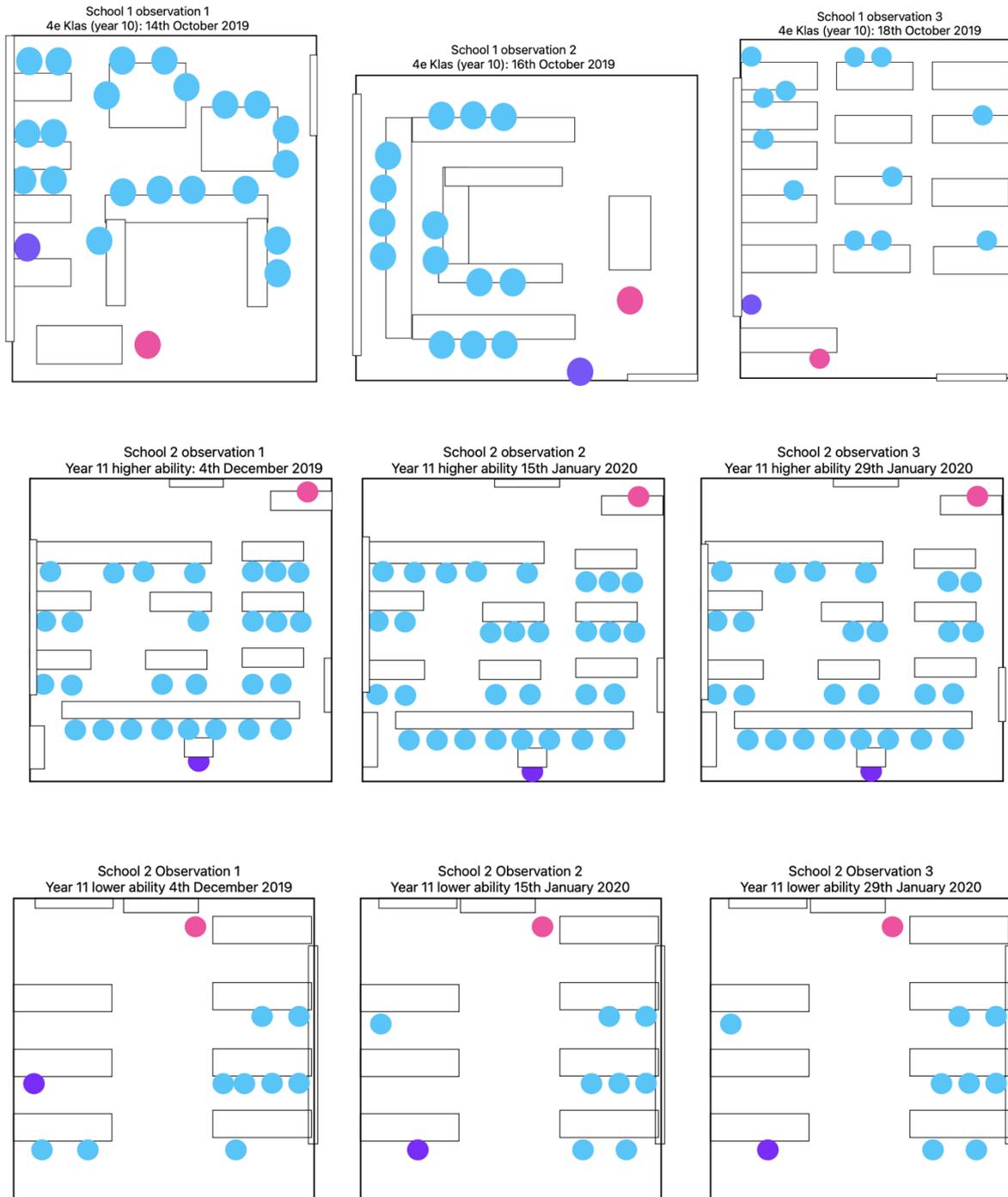
## Findings 6: "To English better" themes and subthemes

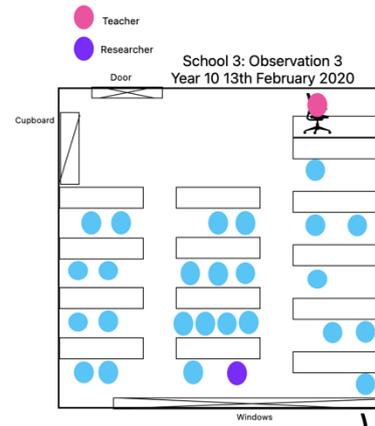
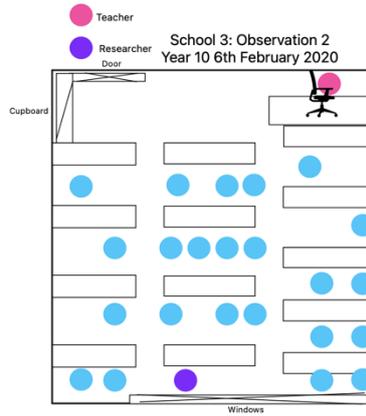
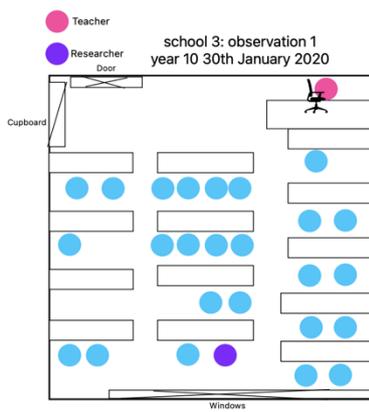
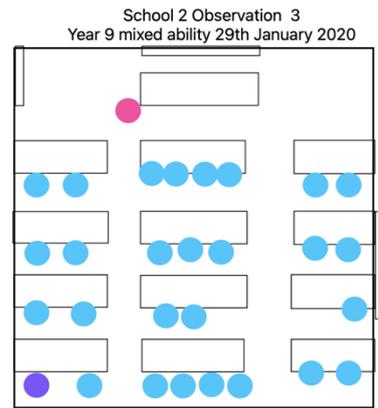
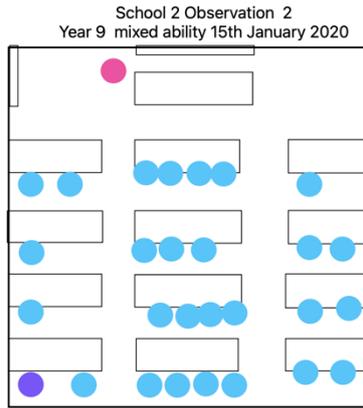
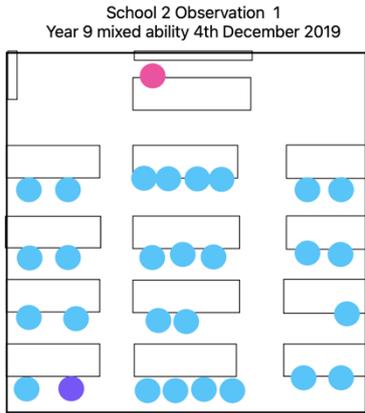


Findings Chapter 7: “Flights of fantasy” themes and subthemes



## Appendix 3: Classroom layout





## Appendix 4 Teacher ipoems 1-6

### Ipoem 1 Teacher participant 1

#### **Experience playing with language**

I think stories are a great way of teaching pupils about human experience

I think poetry is a good thing to use in the classroom because it's condensed

I find novels a bit unwieldy in the classroom

The value I think is that there's room for interpretation

I deliberately try and use scaffolding -

to help them look for their own answers

It does sometimes end up with me just telling them things

I think it's a time constraint

I think people get turned off

I think sometimes the choices in the curriculum

and by the teachers are not particularly appropriate

I have actually an issue with a lot of children's literature

It's more like an adult pretending, thinking, and interpreting

how they think a child sees the world, which

I think is often very inaccurate

I think children's literature can be very very powerful at its best

and very insipid at its worst

I think there may be reading lists somewhere

but we don't have to use them

I can do whatever I want and

I intend to keep it as broad as possible

I pick classics - it cuts down on workload

I'm locking that aspect to the curriculum which is prescribed

I intend to use, recycle them

I don't have to  
I could do other things too

I tend to try and pick up on things that are going on in the dynamic  
I wanted to give them something that was a bit muscular  
I wanted them to understand that  
I was trying to link it with their person  
I don't know how successful this was  
I'm about to get their poetry essays in

I'm asking them to look at the answer to form function and meaning,  
the function element - I emphasise it less  
Perhaps it's something I should address more  
I think it's brilliant, amazing and magical to  
connect with a mind in a different time  
I personally get a real thrill out of that  
I've attempted –  
finding a poem that voices something that they connect with emotionally.

I feel, I feel it,  
I see are they still engaged  
are they starting to drift?  
I'll bring in new elements

I wanted them to experience playing with language  
rather than expressing themselves  
I wanted them to learn that it was about  
Discovering what you think or associate  
We did cut-up poetry

I do think that they work in tandem,  
I mean their creative voice is not probably

Woohoo

Their critical voice is going to come in and say  
'what am I supposed to do?'

I think they're generally thinking in terms of the exams  
I think they just accept that this is what they have to get through  
I think it's easier to connect it to music and visual art  
than it is to connect it to grammar  
I think it's easier to concentrate on what it makes you think  
than what it makes you feel, because it gets more concrete

I was teaching in a small school,  
I could introduce literature and poetry in the first year,  
I think it's important to pick up those threads  
You can't create curiosity in people,  
I think that's difficult,

then it becomes history rather than  
English, which I think is okay  
I think that teaching literature and poetry,  
as well as connecting with art is kind of teaching something through – English

I get them to do that a lot  
they don't really hear it until they do that  
I think it's really essential  
I mean, if it's really excruciatingly bad  
I think it's a mistake to get them to read aloud  
I'll speak aloud things I wonder about as I'm reading, things  
I notice.

I think the students were also quite surprised how much  
they could find in a short poem

I know, and then you have to learn when to shut up and let them,  
it's gold there  
I think the authentic reactions are the most important.

Ipoem 2: Teacher participant 2

**A different viewpoint**

before I became a teacher  
I enjoyed my poetry lessons as a student.  
I think that's probably one of the reasons  
I wanted to become a teacher

I enjoy those discussions that we can have  
I can read a poem in one way  
I can teach it in that way but  
another student might come up  
with a completely different viewpoint.

I've been using poems that we've been studying  
as a tool for developing vocabulary

I think it's sort of  
being able to step away  
from the confines of a structure  
some freedom with the subject

I think, just from sort of  
discussions I've had with my own students  
some of them feel that they have to  
learn a poem in a particular way  
I think that confuses them  
they're frightened to have their own opinion on it

I just think it goes back to that idea of creativity.  
It gives an opportunity to look at a text and unpick it  
deconstruct it for themselves  
I think that makes it a bit more accessible  
I'd like them to be sort of reciting poems -  
writing their own poetry  
I think if the set texts were narrowed –  
there would be more opportunity

I would sort of explain it as being able to justify  
I think formulating their own ideas - organising them  
I don't think, well,  
I don't say sort of look we're having a critical  
I'm not sure how  
I think it is a good tool for setting up  
their debates and their opinions and ideas,  
I haven't really thought about it in that way  
I suppose we do teach it without knowing that we're doing it.

I think that they do quite like the poetry lessons:  
they're not looking at long pieces of text  
I think they quite like the break  
I think they quite like analysing  
you can hook the context and sort of  
hang that in the background: it opens it up  
I suppose, and it makes it more of a worldly view.

I think they find it hard to get excited,  
I think that sort of looking at connotations  
not being too prescriptive in your teaching of a text  
I feel like sometimes we're kind of towards a timescale

I would be working in groups more.  
I've sort of been thinking about obviously some of the lessons  
I used to teach when I was younger in the profession.  
I did do more groupwork.  
I think as part of my role  
I could be developing more student-led activities with poetry.

### Ipoem 3 Teacher participant 3

#### **Poetry is a convinced way of being creative**

I do try to use poetry in a  
creative way  
I also think poetry encourages  
creative thinking  
I always say  
create your own ideas  
I try to get them so  
creative in a writing way.  
Creative in a thinking way as well.

I'm fortunate enough to have some classes that  
Come up with some great ideas  
I think you've got to see it as;  
poetry is not a one-off lesson  
I feel that we do poetry justice  
We do embed it in our work.

I think the way you do it  
I would tend to do more groupwork  
I've got various opinions on groupwork  
I always start it off where they can think and share ideas.  
I think it mixes it up.

When I teach a poem I'll always –  
I'll always try to give them very little information  
Then we can discuss it  
I try to let them look at it  
first before I start telling them  
To encourage a bit more free thinking about it.

I think it's just a convinced way of being creative  
I do think every poem that you teach  
I always like the deeper underlying  
I think it's great.  
I really do think poems  
stimulate class discussions  
I've had some excellent discussions  
over poetry.

I enjoy the aspect as well  
I mean  
I've got like  
You haven't seen  
I think it even brings out the best in people  
who are down the scale  
I think when you see  
The relevance  
It can give them ideas  
about the modern world.

**I feel, I think poetry**

I think poetry and teaching poetry  
look at other people's emotions  
develop those empathy skills.  
I think kids can write poetry  
see it as a way of expressing  
I think that doesn't necessarily...  
marry it with what we do in the classroom  
everything: tailored towards the GCSEs  
I feel ... sort of like a perfunctory,  
there's no depth to it.  
I think there's very little room to just do things that  
you think are important

I feel like poetry is such a ... rich thing to get into.  
I think a lot of our kids don't enjoy it;  
I think a lot of them have kind of ideas that it's quite boring.  
I feel like we're really missing out,  
on something that's really quite valuable;  
there's no time to do it.  
I think it would be really valuable,  
I feel ... we're not giving it the space  
There is some good war poetry

I feel like just the GCSE's changed,  
I mean,  
I've been teaching 9 years and even when I started  
it was quite restrictive,  
I was at school it felt like English –  
much more creative.

I feel like my English teachers had a lot more scope  
I think poetry in particular just feels very dry.  
I think that's the thing we struggle with  
the ability to express how you feel or how you perceive someone,  
the world or the things that matter to you

I feel that a lot of our kids,  
lack empathy,  
struggle emotionally,  
I think poetry would be such a lovely way ...  
to explore that

I feel that the anthology is so limited  
I love like E. E. Cummings,  
That kind of lack of rules I think that's a struggle  
I like about E.E. Cummings is how you can  
break the rules of language.  
we're constantly working towards that end goal

I just think there's loads of stuff where it's  
not just old dead white men.  
I just don't feel like it's enough  
it just switches them off.  
I feel quite restricted by and sort of feel a bit stifled,  
I'm not learning either.

I find it very frustrating and it's hard to say,  
I think you know my teachers had a lot more flexibility.  
My English teacher,  
I loved my English teacher. She was so enthusiastic  
I'm faking that in the classroom a little bit,  
I'm not that enthusiastic about Shakespeare,

I'm not that enthusiastic about Wilfred Owen  
I think the best teaching comes when  
you're passionate about what you're teaching

I hate all of the stuff like 'always look conflict is interesting to boys'.  
I don't think that's true.  
I'd like to do more creative stuff to be honest.  
I do feel everything is so focused on that end goal

I think a lot of meaningful learning happens in  
spaces where it's a bit less structured  
I know why we have to have it,  
but it feels like everything we do is based on that

I suppose critical thinking is  
a more deep analytical look at something,  
question things a bit more.  
I think there's scope for it.  
I think it's probably largely depends on the class.  
I feel with the curriculum itself:  
so limited and so structured  
I quite often feel you're almost sort of telling them what to think  
to be able to think critically about a poem  
perhaps that's time that you feel you don't have

I'll give them a poem without speaking to them about it  
I think it depends very much on the students;  
they find it quite difficult to get deeper than just surface level  
I think it is a skill you can practise  
I think it does develop with time  
I think it's a thing that they do struggle with.  
'how effectively can they look at a poem?'

I really think it would be better to look at more poems  
I just feel like that's where I feel we're losing them a bit

I wonder how valuable children see creativity as.

I mean, genuinely,

I think we're so focused on this end product

I think perhaps being creative is

not a skill that we encourage

I think actually our kids don't see the value.

I think it's to do with the GCSE and school generally

I think teachers are to blame for that as well,

I think everyone's so focused on that,

I think the problem is they don't see the value of English

I think we try,

I think probably with mixed results

I think it's quite a good way to sort of rationalise my feelings.

So I talk about that with kids – do something,

I think that the problem is they don't write

I think it's sort of constantly being really enthusiastic

I think it's really hard to change the opinion

you see them maybe six hours a week

I think that's a really difficult thing to do.

I think ideally

it's very student driven

I think I really like that,

I think in an ideal world it would be lovely

students are sort of like buzzy with it and excited

I feel like I'm asking them a lot of prompt questions,  
draw their ideas out of them.

I think in terms of developing their independence,  
I think they struggle to think,  
I think the way that I teach almost becomes like  
I'm coercing them  
I think that's where we get issues

I just think with our kids... low reading ages  
I think some can't even understand the poem  
I think they really struggle to  
push themselves onto that next level of thinking

I just think it's you know, it's all flip flops  
I think the national curriculum is not applicable to everybody –  
I find that very frustrating about education  
I think a problem is that's not a thing that we're prioritising  
I think as an English teacher  
I think English just so vital to higher development

I mean there's good practice everywhere,  
I just wish we had more time  
I think ... it just comes down to time

I love it when students write poetry  
they kind of share something  
they're able to express themselves.  
I think that to me is really special,  
the best feeling I ever get out of teaching poetry,  
is when I give them a voice for something.  
I think it does give them that opportunity  
It will have to be creative

I would love to have more time to do that

I would just sit in the back of my art class and just write

I do worry that a lot of them don't,

I think, this idea that it's being open

about your feelings, being creative,

I think, that's seen as something to avoid.

I think I've become very guilty,

of going through the motions of the anthology poetry

ways I can be creative within the constraints...

I think it's not the ideal environment

there's definitely got to be ways of doing it.

Strategies to just enjoy poetry.

...that is missing.

Ipoem 5 Teacher participant 5

### **More than you might think**

I think you can do so much with poetry

I think for many things like language awareness,

interpretation, critical

thinking, maybe even

self-regulation, empathy.

I think you can do much more than you might think

I think for my own experience,

I haven't really been able to work with poetry yet

I'll probably try to focus

on the interpretation

I think it's very nice to make students aware

of the language variation,  
the social and emotional  
we can use modern poetry for that

I think writing could also be a good idea, but  
I think, is the best to start with; reading  
they get familiarised with; poetry  
I mean, if you tell them to write a sonnet,  
it's nice – that they understand  
what is the sonnet

I see that we all somehow we struggle  
I look at the other school where I was working  
I wouldn't have that much opportunity

I know that there is no method  
the timeline can be really, yeah, not enough.  
we start running to stress  
I'm still busy developing everything

I see they really like the instruction from,  
you tell them what to do and how to do  
it's a really deductive method

I try at least once a week to put them in groups  
I think for their language development it is very good  
I think probably it will be a nice debate and a nice discussion.  
I think they will come up with very nice ideas  
I think when you offer them a piece of personalised education,  
  
no one is talking about motivation for teachers.

### **The sky is the limit**

I'm a very passionate teacher  
I can totally understand that they are scared of change  
it involves so much more work.  
I've taught in New Zealand and there  
the kids were always very excited.  
I just love it

I think it's sad that poetry is not part of the curriculum  
I think it should be  
I introduced it to my students  
I want them to play –  
I'm not a fan of studying vocab, so  
I try to, I try to teach them  
through things like poetry, literature, articles –  
I hardly ever used the books,  
I used to make different tests,  
I didn't want to do the tests from the book  
poetry is more than just a silly poem on a page in a book

I make them work in groups because they help one another  
This is how you play  
with the students – with the poems – with the language  
I just love doing that.  
you can show them that the sky is the limit  
I think that's what I mostly mean by creativity  
Not from a book but from themselves  
Look around you, see what's going on in the world.

You can't force them  
You can't just let them roam  
They said 'this is powerful!'  
I said, 'yeah, but this is what words could do'  
In the 21<sup>st</sup> century you don't learn vocab.  
You don't learn grammar rules,  
You apply them

She did spoken word poetry  
She taught me more than I could teach her  
I asked her once to do it in class,  
They stood up and they applauded

I did a lot of talking with my students and  
I just wanted to find out what went on in their heads  
I want them to think, not just consume  
Why I like the personalised learning so much,  
I don't believe in marks,  
I do believe in feedback

## Appendix 5a: Ethics Approval



Shaped by the past, creating the future

9<sup>th</sup> October 2017

Martina Diehl  
martina.b.diehl@durham.ac.uk

Dear Martina

**Reviving poetry in the English classroom: An exploratory approach to stimulating creativity and criticality in poetry lessons ages 13-16 (Ref 2836)**

I am pleased to inform you that your ethics application for the above research project has been approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee.

May we take this opportunity to wish you good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nadin Beckmann".

Dr Nadin Beckmann  
School of Education Ethics Committee Chair

Leazes Road  
Durham, DH1 1TA  
Telephone +44 (0)191 334 2000 Fax +44 (0)191 334 8311  
[www.durham.ac.uk/education](http://www.durham.ac.uk/education)

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## Appendix 5b: Participant Information Sheet

Title: participant information sheet for teachers

You are invited to take part in a research study of Reviving poetry in the English classroom: An exploratory approach to stimulating creativity and criticality in poetry lessons year 9-11

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is conducted by Martina Diehl as part of her PhD research at Durham University.

\* This research project is supervised by Dr. Dimitra Kokotsaki (Dimitra.kokotsaki@durham.ac.uk) from the School of Education at Durham University.

The purpose of this study is to explore how creativity and criticality are stimulated in poetry teaching and learning

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a project which will benefit the understanding of the value of teaching and learning poetry. You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview on creativity, criticality and engagement in poetry teaching and learning

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45 minutes.

You are free to decide whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences for you.

All responses you give or other data collected will be kept confidential. The records of this study will be kept secure and private. All files containing any information you give are password protected. In any research report that may be published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you individually. There will be no way to connect your name to your responses at any time during or after the study.

\* This project is self-funded.

If you have any questions, requests or concerns regarding this research, please contact me via email at [martina.b.diehl@durham.ac.uk](mailto:martina.b.diehl@durham.ac.uk) or by telephone at 07432036949

This study has been reviewed and approved by the School of Education Ethics Sub- Committee at Durham University (date of approval: 9<sup>th</sup> of October 2017)

Kind regards,

Martina Diehl

1st of October 2021

## Appendix 5c: Consent form

### Declaration of Informed Consent for teachers

- I agree to participate in this study, the purpose of which is to explore how creativity and criticality is stimulated in poetry teaching and learning with ages 13-16.
- I have read the participant information sheet and understand the information provided.
- I have been informed that I may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study without penalty of any kind.
- I have been informed that data collection will involve the use of audio recording devices.
- I have been informed that all of my responses will be kept confidential and secure, and that I will not be identified in any report or other publication resulting from this research.
- I have been informed that the investigator will answer any questions regarding the study and its procedures. Martina Diehl, School of Education, Durham University can be contacted via email: [martina.b.diehl@durham.ac.uk](mailto:martina.b.diehl@durham.ac.uk) or telephone: 07432036949.
- I will be provided with a copy of this form for my records.

Any concerns about this study should be addressed to the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee, Durham University via email to [ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk](mailto:ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk).

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Date	Participant Name (please print)	Participant Signature
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I certify that I have presented the above information to the participant and secured his or her consent.

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Date	Signature of Investigator
------	---------------------------

Leazes Road  
Durham City, DH1 1TA  
Telephone +44 (0)191 334 2000 Fax +44 (0)191 334 8311  
[www.durham.ac.uk](http://www.durham.ac.uk)  
Durham University is the trading name of the University of Durham

## Appendix 6: Survey Responses

# Poetry Survey ages 14-17

Exploring poetry lessons

\* Indicates required question

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1. Where do you go to school?

*Mark only one oval.*

- England  
 The Netherlands

2. What is your age? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- 12  
 13  
 14  
 15  
 16  
 17  
 18

3. What is your gender? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Female  
 Male  
 Prefer not to say  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Open Questions

### Poetry, Creativity and Critical Thinking

4. What does it mean to be creative? \*

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5. When does creativity happen in poetry lessons? If you have an example, please provide this. \*

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6. Why do you think poetry is taught in English? \*

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7. When do you most enjoy poetry lessons? \*

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8. When do you least enjoy poetry lessons? \*

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9. What do you most enjoy about poetry lessons? \*

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10. What sort of poetry do you like reading most?

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11. When does creativity not happen in poetry lessons? Please give an example. \*

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12. Do you think there is anything that could be done to make poetry lessons better? Please give an example. \*

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13. Do you know what critical thinking could mean? If so, please provide some words you associate with critical thinking. \*

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14. When do you think critical thinking happens in poetry lessons?

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15. Can you recall a time when you weren't engaged in critical thinking in poetry lessons? If so, please provide an example.

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16. When was the last time you wrote a poem?

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17. The poem was written for... \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- A school project
- Personal Interest
- Extra curricular activity
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

18. On a scale of 1-5, to what extent did you enjoy writing a poem? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

1   2   3   4   5

not :      very much

### Scale questions

Please answer these questions with 0 being 'never' and 10 being 'always'

19. To what extent do you enjoy poetry lessons? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

20. To what extent do you find poetry lessons useful? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

---

---

21. What are your reasons for finding it useful or not useful? \*

---

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22. To what extent do you understand the purpose of poetry? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

---

---

23. Please provide an example of what purpose poetry might have. \*

---

24. To what extent is creativity present in poetry lessons? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

---

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25. To what extent is critical thinking present in poetry lessons?

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="radio"/>									

26. Provide an example of a time you felt creative during a poetry lesson. When was this?

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### Multiple Choice Questions

27. Which of the following lesson styles apply to your poetry lessons? You can select more than one answer.

Check all that apply.

- Group work
- Individual work
- Discussion
- Debate
- Poetry reading for exams
- Poetry reading for pleasure
- Poetry writing activities
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

28. Which of the following options are your preferred ways of learning poetry? Please select two or more answers.

Check all that apply.

- Reading poetry by yourself
- Reading poetry out loud in the classroom
- Listening to poetry being read
- Discussion
- Debate
- Poetry writing
- Analysing poetry on your own
- Analysing poetry with a small group (2-5)
- Analysing poetry with everyone in the classroom

29. What would you like to see more of in poetry lessons? You can select more than one answer

Check all that apply.

- Group work
- Individual work
- Poetry Reading for exams
- Poetry writing activities
- Discussion
- Poetry reading for pleasure
- Debate
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix 7: Observation Checklist

Multimodality	How/what	Where
Table set up		
Lighting		
Walls		
Teacher		
Students		
Colours		

**Total time teacher speaks:**

**Total time group work:**

**total time individual work:**

**total time students speak (discussion / questions):**

**Total time of lesson:**

- Tick the yes/no box every time it happens
- Fill in the time during the observations
- Say something about how the teacher 'manages' the classroom; about how they 'communicate' in the classroom and what 'teaching techniques' are used
- Say something about how the learner behaves in the classroom; about how they communicate with the teacher and with each other.
- Elaborate on why certain aspects are creative and others are less or not creative and critical (copying directly without interpretation).

Observation checklist

Does this happen?	Yes / No	Time?	Amount?	How?
Group work (small groups)				
Group work (with whole class)				
Individual work				
Teacher facilitates				
Teacher dictates				
Teacher provides information				
Teacher asks questions				
Teacher disciplines				
Students engage with course material				
Students disengage with course material				
Students show interest				
Students ask questions				
Students discuss				
Students are quiet				
Students are creative				
Students are reciting (copying without interpretation)				
Students are critical				

## Appendix 8: Interview questions

This was a semi-structured interview. Questions were prepared, but not always followed in the same order, or asked in exactly the same way. This depended on where the conversation led. This is an example of the questions I posed, and were the questions from interview 2. In bold are the key themes I aimed to discuss. In the answers, this teacher discussed some of the other themes, such as group work & collaboration amongst students.

1. Are you OK for this to be **recorded**?
2. Some informal chat and explanation that this is a semi-structured interview. "I've got some questions, but we might cover those questions as we talk so more of a dialogue really."
3. So, my first question is, 'what's the **purpose of teaching poetry** to you? And how is this conveyed in the classroom?
4. Could you maybe give an example of a(nother) way that you would share the **purpose of poetry** with the students?
5. What does **creativity** mean to you, if you think of kids being creative in the classroom?
6. Do you think creativity happens in poetry lessons, and sort of to what extent do you think that happens?
7. Do you think the unseen part is a valuable part of the **poetry curriculum**?
  - a. Could you say more about why you think that?
  - b. Do you think it matters that the unseen poetry is often also more contemporary?
8. In an ideal world, how would you like to see poetry being taught and learnt, if you didn't have to stick to the **boundaries of the curriculum**?
9. Do you think sometimes the curriculum prevents you from teaching in that way?
10. Do you think the poems are difficult for students?
11. When you talk about unpicking the poem, what do you mean with that?
12. Yeah, so looking at the effects of the language techniques?
13. Would you be able to define **your understanding of critical thinking**, or maybe if it's difficult, because it is, maybe just some **components** that you think belong to critical thinking?
14. How do you think **critical thinking** presents itself in the poetry lessons?
15. Do you think the students have an **understanding of critical thinking**?
16. Do you think it would potentially give students more of a **purpose in poetry** if they had more of an explicit understanding of **critical thinking**?
17. If you look at **creativity and critical thinking** as two combined concepts, do you see a link between the two? Do you like to use them as an intertwined kind of concept?
18. Could you think of an example where you had a lesson where children were both **creative and critical** in the reading of their poem or the poem that they were studying?
19. Do you see your students as being **engaged in poetry lessons**? How do you recognise them being engaged?
20. If you perceive students sometimes as having a **lower engagement** with poetry, why do you think that might be?

21. If you could give other teachers advice on how to **improve the engagement** with their students, what kind of advice would you give?
22. Could you describe your **ideal way of teaching** and the way you teach in the classroom and are they similar or do you sometimes have to change the way you teach?
23. In terms of maybe professional development or CPD is there anything you are doing to improve your teaching for poetry?
24. Do you **enjoy poetry**?
25. What do you enjoy about poetry?
26. A question I asked in the other interviews: Do you write poetry yourself?