

The Poet-tree Project

by Sadie Phillips



Context

I am a Year 5 teacher in my fourth year of teaching at Canary Wharf College in London. Last year, I was given responsibility for Writing within the school and I am also part of the Literacy Team. Although my specialism lies within Writing for Pleasure, it soon became clear that this was impossible to develop without cultivating children's engagement in Reading for Pleasure first. Creating a reading for pleasure culture is an essential part of my role.

OU Research inspiration and rationale

The Teachers as Readers research project (Cremin et al, 2008, 2014) reveals that a robust RfP pedagogy encompasses four specific practices: reading aloud, informal book talk and recommendations, and independent reading time within a highly social reading environment. Through surveys (with staff and children), observations and discussions, poetry was identified as a particular weakness and ***I wanted to address the poetry knowledge gap*** by reciting a poem a day so that we were *all* exposed to a range of poetic styles and poets as this was noted as a weakness across the school.

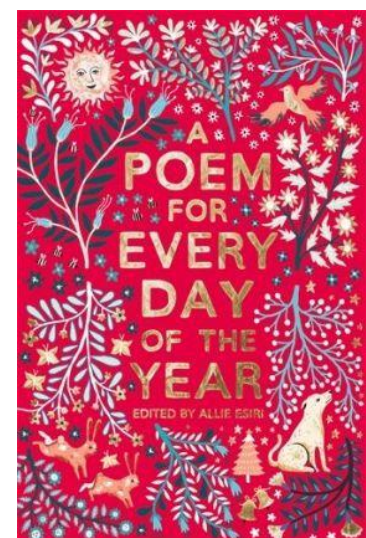
Reading aloud and discussion of shared texts was a crucial strand of the RfP pedagogy identified in the TaRs research. It enabled children to access rich and challenging texts, prompted the children's affective engagement and created a class repertoire of '*texts (or poems) in common*' to discuss. There were also some very positive insights into children's enjoyment of poetry from a recent online survey for National Poetry Day ([A Thing That Makes Me Happy: National Literacy Trust, 2018](#)). Nearly half of the 8-18-year olds sampled said that they engaged with poetry in their free time: not just as readers or writers, but as viewers, listeners or performers.

Aims

1. **To expand our class knowledge** of poets and poetry by sharing a poem a day.
2. **To make space and time for Reading for Pleasure** and the building of reciprocal reading communities in my classroom, balanced alongside reading instruction.
3. **To extend reading relationships to the wider community** by eventually sharing these poems with parents and the wider school community.

Outline

Initially, I wanted to build up the class repertoire of '**poems in common**' and build their enjoyment of poetry in school. I thought that perhaps the reading aloud of short, snappy poems might make an enjoyable alternative to the class novel, hoping that the energy and enthusiasm of celebrating poetry might be entertaining for the audience, as well as the reader. I set about creating a poetry display on the class bookshelf and also began **reading aloud one poem every day from the book** 'A Poem for Every Day of the Year'. I did this for a few minutes each day after lunch so as not to disturb or replace our end-of-the-day story time. The children really engaged with it and would participate in a brief class discussion about each poem after listening to it.





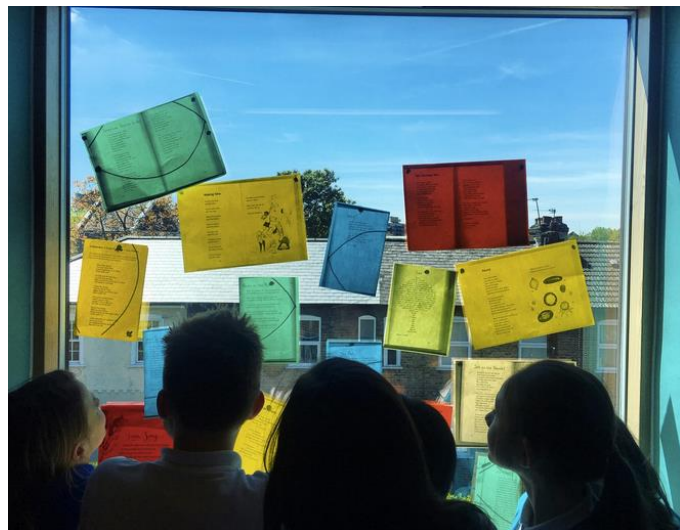
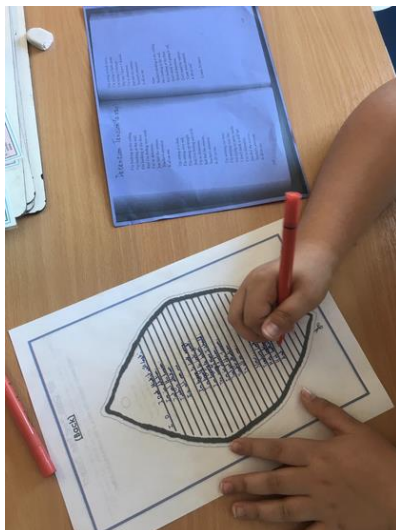
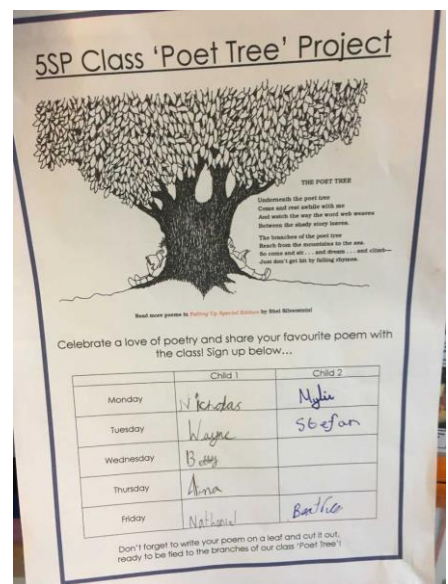
The poetry books in the book corner were also being chosen for cosy reading or reading for pleasure time (free choice).

I wanted to take this new routine one step further and give **more choice** to the children because I had read through the TARs research that this could improve enjoyment and engagement of Reading Aloud.

I began by **asking children to choose a favourite poem to read aloud to the class** or asked for volunteers to read the poem of the day from the existing book that we were using. It wasn't long before I was inundated with requests!

Daily 'Poet-Tree' Readings: I brought in an old twig tree and introduced it to the children as our special 'Poet-Tree'. I explained that any poems, once they had been read aloud, could be added to the tree for others to enjoy. The only 'rules' were that you had to practice reading aloud before you performed, you had to share why you chose the poem and what it meant to you and that you had to copy it out onto a leaf for others to enjoy afterwards. The leaves were then laminated and the children could choose a coloured ribbon with which to tie it to the tree.

This was a new initiative but the routine after lunch was already in place. We kick-started the project **by papering poetry around the room** one lunchtime so that the children had the opportunity to walk around, read the poems and choose one that they would like to perform. This enabled all children to get involved with the project straight away. We also put up a sign up sheet in the book corner and, due to popular demand, increased the readings to two poems per day. We printed lined-leaf templates for the children to write on and kept the dedicated poetry display in the book corner so children could easily access more poetry.



Impact

- It only took 3 days of the teacher reading from 'A Poem for Every Day of the Year' before the children began to volunteer to read aloud themselves.
- **Children signed up to read aloud poetry** and the weekly list was mostly full.
- When new leaves were added to the tree, children would gather around it to read.
- Children began to choose poetry books from the new display to read during Cosy Reading time (free choice reading).
- The children were visibly excited when the tree appeared in the classroom and couldn't wait to contribute to it! **They enjoyed choosing their own poems to perform.**
- Performances improved over time as children were able to see the teacher and their peers model reading aloud with expression, pace and tone.
- **Children began to opt for poetry books from the library (in particular boys).** When asked, they indicated they had never chosen poetry books from the library before.
- Three children asked their parents to buy them poetry books to read at home.
- Children's discussions and reflections about poetry became more in-depth, moving away from 'I liked it because it rhymed' to 'I like the way the author described the bird, it reminded me of Autumn in the park.' **Poetry talk became more sophisticated.**
- **Parents enjoyed reading the poetry during pick-ups** with many staying later to read.
- When the poet-tree was placed inside the school atrium on display, many children could be spotted stopping to read a poem or sharing a poetry leaf with a friend.
- Children began to make more connections between poetry during literacy lessons.
- Children often write poetry in their Writing for Pleasure books (free choice)
- Reading a poem or two each day after lunch became a great way to settle the children down and engage them straight after lunch. It really set the tone for the afternoon's learning.



Reflections on impact the TaRs research has had on practice

The TaRs research really made me consider who had ownership over what was read aloud and who did the reading. Handing over that choice to the children had an immediate impact, as they felt empowered. Having a selection of shared 'poems in common' meant that we could all chat about poetry more confidently, discussing our likes, dislikes, language features and observations or queries. This really helped when we started our poetry unit in literacy as the children were already familiar with discussing poems. Having the physical poet-tree in the classroom was a constant reminder to spare a few minutes per day to reading aloud poetry and it also meant we always had the poems on the leaves to refer back to - or read over and over again!

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