Language play in the classroom: encouraging children’s intuitive creativity with words through poetry

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Abstract

This article begins by identifying that children have a spontaneous predilection for playing with language, engaging in poetic discourse even before their first poetry lesson. Although children’s language play is relatively un researched in the classroom, in a case study of two groups of pupils aged between 10 and 11, it was observed that children engaged in creative word play, and that this was generated in response to interaction with poetry and each other. This article suggests that children’s poetical experiences may best be nurtured by building bridges between children’s existing knowledge of language play and the specialised knowledge of poetry taught in the classroom through a teaching methodology based on socio-constructivist principles.

Key words: language play at home and school, intuition, poetry, socio-constructivist approach

Introduction

There is much research to suggest that children experience a range of poetry pre-school and outside of the classroom. By taking an ontogenetic approach, which considers the development of the proto-poetic experience in the child, linguistic creativity and invention can be seen as an important part of human experience. Poetry in its many different forms can be traced through the evolution of the human race, and observed in children at its most prevalent and real through their spontaneous inclination to play with language. Ninety per cent of vocal exchanges in the first year of a baby’s life consists of playing with language (Crystal, 1998). Parents induct the baby into the culture of their social environment through different forms of language play, and this may well include poetic discourse in the form of nursery rhymes. In this way, children are exposed to poetry at an early age, and in turn they are able to use what they have heard to create literary narratives meaningful to them. Fox’s (1993) study of a collection of 200 oral stories told by five children aged between three and a half and five years revealed that the children were able to produce rhymes, rhythms, compose songs and poems as well as create poetic and lyrical narratives.

These children had experienced many books being read aloud to them, leading Fox to conclude that: “their imaginations are furnished with all sorts of interesting material which they can interpret and reinterpret in ways which are maximally meaningful and personal to themselves” (1993, p. 14). Chukovsky (1966) also observed how the language of pre-school children was enriched by poetry and fantasy. In his book From Two to Five he carefully noted down what children said, commenting on their inventiveness and plentiful manipulation of language.

It is suggested then that from a very early age children have an intuitive knowledge of poetic genres, though the meta-language for demonstrating that knowledge by talking about poetry is not fully developed (Thompson, 1996). Other research (Goswami and Bryant, 1990), on younger children who have not yet begun to read, demonstrates that most children have an ability to detect rhyme and alliteration. It is not clear how much can be attributed to genetic predisposition or to the environment, although it is proposed that “the truth almost certainly lies between the two” (Goswami and Bryant, 1990, p. 24), but it is evident that children have a knowledge and understanding of poetry and its uses, and that they have a spontaneous desire to play with language using poetic devices.

The oral culture of play enacted in song, chant and rhyme becomes a significant part of relationships and social interaction with peers, for as children become older they reject what has been preserved by adults for something that is self-organised and unique to them, becoming part of a complex playground culture (Blatchford, 1996; Grugeon, 1988; Opie, 1993; Opie and Opie, 1969). The Opies have observed that when children engage in the lore and language of the playground, they abandon ‘adult approved’ rhymes for their own oral tradition of rhymes, songs and jokes that: “are at once more real, more immediately serviceable, and more vastly entertaining to them than anything else they learn from grown-ups” (Opie and Opie, 1959, p. 1). It is one of the most important ways in which children interact together to “explore and explain in their own terms their perception of the world that they are living in” (Grugeon, 1999, p. 13). Grugeon relates how a student teacher observed
children engaging in “spontaneous use of complex rhythms and phonological patterning, use of alliteration and assonance, the handling of sophisticated narrative structures and rhyme” (Gruegeon, 1999, p. 15), hence signifying a spontaneous predilection towards the use of the ‘poetic function’, and leading to the conclusion that rhymes and word play are central to children’s oral culture. As Koch (1970, p. 8) writes, “one thing that encouraged me was how playful and inventive children’s talk sometimes was. They said true things in fresh and surprising ways”, while Hall (1989, p. 98) has observed how pupils aged 10–11 years “are inordinately fond of word-play”. Many such observations have led Crystal to suggest “that it is part of the normal human condition to spend an appreciable amount of time actively playing with language . . . or responding with enjoyment to the way others play” (1998, p. 6).

Play with language in the classroom

In a focused examination of the literary environments of two case study primary schools in England, with a detailed analysis of two teachers’ and their pupils’ experiences of poetry, it was observed that over the school year children aged between 10 and 11 years engaged in creative word play as they interacted with poetry and with each other. These data were collected through observation of poetry sessions, field notes, interviews of the research participants and analysis of children’s written work. As there is very little research on children’s play with language in the classroom (Crystal, 1987), this study uncovered some important evidence that the “grammar of that secret society” (Mole, 2002, p. 37) is very much a part of the literary environments that children are engaged in.

The following is an account of some of those instances of language play, and the conditions in which it occurred. All names have been changed for anonymity. In each school, Chadwick and St. Albans, two groups of six children were observed interacting with poetry in very different conditions in five poetry lessons. The first part of the discussion demonstrates how play with language is perhaps traditionally viewed in the classroom – as something that is subversive and underground, to be kept from adults and shared exclusively with peers. In the classroom in Chadwick school, there were very few opportunities for language play. In contrast, the second part of this account details how the teacher in St. Albans school encouraged language play in class and how this enhanced children’s experience of poetry and interacting with each other in a positive way.

Chadwick school

In this extract from the data, Chadwick school pupils engaged in language play as they attempted to create similes based on those they had read in Ted Hughes’ poem *The Warm and the Cold* (see Appendix 1).

Sarah: “A cat in its basket like a chicken on a barbecue” (Laughs).
Jem: “Chicken on a barbecue”. (Giggles) “Are you going to write that?”
Sarah: “Yeh!”

As Sarah and Jem began to experiment with language imagery, their ideas generated huge enjoyment; however, there was a distinctly subversive feel to the exchange. It was spoken in hushed voices, so that the teacher could not hear, and Jem’s comment “Are you going to write that?” suggested that to do that would be quite daring and maybe against the teacher’s wishes and expectations, as the simile had not been constructed according to the formal instructions and modelled examples. This small extract of speech gave the impression that playing and enjoying language was something that was part of a classroom subculture, and is possibly driven ‘underground’ because of a perceived lack of teacher endorsement and encouragement. Perhaps this is due to the inflammatory nature of word play, for as Crystal states, “it is dynamic, exciting, anarchic . . . anything goes” (1998, p. 54).

Further manipulation of language occurred between Peter and Jem as they discussed the meaning of the word ‘chrysalis’ in relation to the ‘mummy’ described in the poem.

Sarah: “A cat in its basket like a chicken on a barbecue” (Laughs).
Jem: “Chicken on a barbecue”. (Giggles) “Are you going to write that?”
Sarah: “Yeh!”

Peter: “Yes, but a cocoon is like a co-coconut.”
Jem: “A co-coconut?”
Peter: “Yeh, it’s like a co-coconut, except you can’t eat it.”
Jem: “That’s funny” (Laughs).
Peter: “And bugs live inside it.”
Jem: “That’s rubbish. You’re being silly.”
Sarah: “Are you talking about butterflies?”
Peter: “I read it in the dictionary.”
Jem: “Perhaps it said cocoon.” (Pause)

The pupils seemed to savour repeatedly the sound of the nonsense word Peter had created. Jem appreciated the play with language, but as Peter added detail to his original idea, she ridiculed his attempts. That’s funny’ was swiftly followed by ‘That’s rubbish’ when Jem appeared to feel that Peter did not live up to the quality of ludic language he initially displayed. Crystal suggests that “language players are in effect operating within two linguistic worlds at once, the normal and abnormal, and trading them off against each other” (1998, p. 181). This involves risk taking and sometimes failure when the recipient does not understand or fails to find it funny, which is what seemed to have happened here. Jem then brought the conversation back to the root word which Peter had played with, ‘coconut’, signalling an end to this period of play.
Word play continued, encouraging laughter and enjoyment again, but also resulting in the creation of a simile that had meaning.

Sarah: “Ben, what would you put a cat in its basket with?”
Ben: “I can’t think.”
Peter: “A toilet roll” (Laughs).
Ben: “A toilet roll” (Laughs).
Peter: “A toilet roll in the toilet.”
Sarah: “Like a teabag.”
Ben: “Like a teabag in a teapot.”
Sarah: “Yeh, like a teabag in a teapot.”

Although each pupil contributed different ideas, Peter the toilet roll, Ben the shoe, Sarah developed her own idea but implied that it had come out of the time of sharing, “Yeh, like a teabag in a teapot.” Even though Ben said he could not think at Sarah’s initial question, once Peter and Sarah began sharing ideas, he was then able to respond with a suggestion. In this section of discourse there were some emergent signs of playing with language, particularly when the teacher was not present, which suggested a growing confidence in the use of language and with each other. As Crystal argues:

“Just as metalinguistic skills in general require a stepping back, so too does language play . . . It therefore seems very likely that, the greater our ability to play with language, the more we will reinforce our general development of metalinguistic skills, and – ultimately – the more advanced will be our command of language as a whole” (1998, p. 181).

In poetry lessons two to five there seemed to be no further opportunity for pupils to play with language, and none was witnessed, as in the first session. This could have been attributed to the teacher taking greater control of language during the latter sessions. Whereas in the first session children had been encouraged to work in groups this was not the case in later lessons. Work was given out independently and often designated to specific ability categories and this seemed to have had an impact on group interaction. The teacher also demonstrated anxiety over writing, which was particularly evident when she modelled a haiku, and her predisposition for accuracy in her own verbal interactions with the children suggested that they had to be precise in the way they responded to her questions. She did not joke or laugh with pupils, and certainly did not encourage them to do the same between themselves. In many ways then the classroom atmosphere was not conducive to play with language, and language appeared to be something that was functional, to be used to get the task done with what appeared to be the minimum of enjoyment inside the allocated literary hour. When language play occurred, it appeared to be regarded by the children as a mischievous act. This was suggested by pupils keeping voices low, laughing secretly, looking around to see if the teacher was in earshot and only sharing with other pupils.

St. Albans school

In contrast, observations of play with language in St. Albans school reveal that it was both stimulated and incorporated within the daily literary session as a normal part of interactive practice. This was encouraged by the teacher who joined in with pupils, and very often initiated it, much to the amusement and approval of the young learners. Language play was used for example when discussing ideas to include in their own poems.

Hannah: “Under the soggy soil, A patch of worms, Prepare for a battle.”
Andy: “Prepared for battle? With what?”
Jeremy: “With glasses” (Laughs).
(Everyone else joins in laughing)
Andy: “Yeh, with glasses.”
Nia: “So who do you think should go first?”
Julia: “How can they be wearing glasses?”
Joshua: “I don’t know.”

Occasionally language play was manipulated to enhance a mundane activity, as in session two where a mispronounced word provided opportunity for word play association.

Jeremy: “Err, Julia can I have that fesaurus after you?”
Andy: “Fesaurus?”
Nia: “That one’s better.”
Andy: “Thesaurus not fesaurus.”
Jeremy: “I don’t care.”
Joshua: “Tyrannosaurus.”

and:

Hannah: “Giraffe?”

Humour played an important part in this classroom, instigated by both teacher and pupils, who, in turn, demonstrated a general appreciation of each other’s contributions, and this was often linked to play with language. The teacher, for example, would often make jokes, which the class readily laughed at, as in the third session when they were discussing preferences for words used in a poem about the earth.

Cherie: “I like the word ‘stubble’.”
Teacher: “You like the word stubble? Makes the Earth sound like George Michael now doesn’t it?”

This had the effect of embracing all the class in the poetry event, possibly making the moment more accessible. Additionally in this session a pupil dis-
played inspired repartee when a peer suggested an idea based on the personification of a pencil’s figurative ‘death’.

Teacher: “Right, last line ‘But my spirit will live on’.”
Andy: “‘But my spirit will live on’.”
Josh: “It’s not Jesus, Andy.”

Andy also demonstrated the art of comic timing in simultaneously offering both encouragement and discouragement to his work partner in a brief but frank exchange of contrary opinions.

Andy: “Oh, oh, you can start at that one.”
Julia: “In the springy green grass, A family of woodlice, Are having a family dinner.
In the centre of the garden, A small insect, Is having so much fun. Up the smooth step, A snail crawls back home again – Home sweet home.”
(Andy applauds)

Teacher: (To Jeremy who is looking in the thesaurus) “You’re not looking up rude words are you?”
Jeremy: (Laughs) “I don’t do that!”

Sometimes humour was also used at the expense of another, as in session five.

Teacher: “Right, stand where you are. Let’s see what you come up with. Great! Nia’s group?”
Nia: “Julia’s playing, Julia’s playing with Lucy, Jeremy’s playing cool um . . . so . . . Hannah’s lost in poetry, and Joshua’s heading the ball.”
Teacher: “Excellent, thank you.”
Joshua: (Whispers to Jeremy) “Andy’s the fool.”

In all the sessions observed, there was a general air of humour and enjoyment of language, and an appreciable grasp of word play that permeated teacher and pupils’ times together.

It was observed that if the teacher encourages play with language, as in St. Albans school, then it could become a part of the teaching and learning culture that is endorsed by both pupils and teacher. This led to a discourse of learning that included language play as a natural part of engaging with each other and the poetry. This gave many of the sessions a fresh and exciting feel to the work, and a general feel of enjoyment and appreciation, both of the text and of the reader’s response.

A pedagogical approach to teaching poetry

In noting these examples of play with language it is significant that they occurred during a poetry lesson, for there is much evidence that children have a predisposition towards the use of the ‘poetic function’ in oral language and an intuitive understanding about poetic devices. It is this that prompts Crystal to suggest:

“... the axiom which should underlie all work on language intervention, whether in classroom or clinic, is the same that underlies all good educational practice: that one will make most progress when teaching can be related to what the student already knows” (1987, p. 184).

This is particularly relevant to a subject like poetry, because there is evidence to suggest that many teachers have found poetry to be deeply problematic. Ray’s research (1998), involving a questionnaire given to 48 second-year primary trainee teachers, revealed how their own experiences of poetry at school had shaped their perceptions and attitudes towards their own teaching of poetry. It showed that teachers’ experiences had been much more negative in secondary school than primary, some of the reasons being that poetry was “studied too critically so that it ruined the initial feel of the poem” (p. 7). Although Ray (1998, p. 6) sensed that throughout the study there was “a vague underlying optimism that poetry could fulfil all kinds of expectations, if only one could learn to understand it”, these expectations came from a focus on the usefulness of literacy. When asked the reasons for teaching poetry the majority of teachers offered cognitive justifications in terms of using the poem to teach such things as sentence structure and extend vocabulary knowledge. Ray (1998) concludes that BEd and PGCE trainee teachers who are non-specialists in English may have confused perceptions of poetry based on their own experiences in the classroom. She suggests that this can be addressed by the trainees experiencing both the enjoyment and appreciation of a variety of different poems, which they can then channel into devising poetry programmes.

Other studies have revealed similar attitudes (Harriison and Gordon, 1983) to Ray’s research. A questionnaire by Wade and Sidaway (1990), which targeted middle school teachers’ (9–13) attitudes and beliefs about poetry teaching, showed a discrepancy between what teachers thought they should be doing, and a lack of confidence in carrying this out. They also asked middle school pupils about their experiences of poetry and the overriding feeling that pupils communicated about poetry was that they were interested, but the teacher’s approach often led to a negative experience.
Today’s teachers may be intuitively aware that poetry has much more to offer, but, perhaps because of negative experiences in their own school life, may create similar experiences for their pupils, due to the anxiety and worry poetry evokes for them. If ‘the teacher is the key to the delivery of the curriculum and the teacher’s own experiences, actions and attitudes will exert their own influence’ (Wade and Sidaway, 1990, p. 75), then it would seem that any framework for helping teachers to teach poetry must acknowledge teachers’ feelings and experiences about poetry, and encourage them to engage with poetry in a positive and non-threatening way.

The following discussion outlines a pedagogical approach, which would encourage teachers to develop their understanding of poetry parallel to understanding how children best learn about it, and would provide them with a theoretical base upon which they could flexibly teach poetry to engage and meet the different needs and experiences of their pupils.

A way forward

Research in cognitive science (Newman et al., 1989; Rogoff and Lave, 1984) has shown that children’s everyday experience is the foundation upon which they construct an ‘intuitive understanding’ (Vosniadou, 1992, p. 349) of their cultural environment. This understanding can also be referred to as naive knowledge and could be considered by teachers as being unimportant. But, as Boekaerts (1992) argues, for high-quality knowledge acquisition to take place it is extremely important that children’s constructs are understood, for it is suggested that these constructs are hard to change. Vosniadou (1992) shows that when ‘school knowledge’ contradicts experiential knowledge, children assign it to separate domains rather than extending and developing previous knowledge. It therefore remains separate from, rather than a part of, the restructuring that goes into appropriation.

Through my own research I have found this to be the case; when investigating children’s perceptions of rhyming and non-rhyming poetry (Cummings, 1993), the learners believed that humorous poetry rhymed and non-rhyming poetry was serious. They retained these beliefs despite school experiences involving serious poetry that rhymed and humorous poetry that did not, which contradicted their entrenched beliefs.

To assist teaching and learning, Vosniadou (1992) recommends that teachers need to recognise the mental models of thought children have already constructed through their own experience. Her own extensive studies involving children’s understanding of the shape of the earth have shown that any restructuring of naive knowledge has to be carried out gradually and slowly, and that children can go through many levels of different understandings before they can appropriate the specialised knowledge of school.

This current study suggests that there should be greater connection with children’s literary experiences outside of school and in the classroom, and that children’s body of pre-existing knowledge and literacy practices could be more widely acknowledged in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DfEE, 1998) and Primary National Strategy (PNS) (DfES, 2006) for literacy. If children have a spontaneous predilection for play with language, and poetry as a function within language is intuitive, then this would suggest that a pedagogical approach to teaching poetry needs not only to acknowledge this, but also to use children’s experiences as a starting point to develop that desire and instinct (Chambers, 1995; Pirie, 1987; Rosen, 1989). This could work to re-establish poetry’s role within the community as a way of sharing experience, rather than mis-representing it by breaking it down into ‘skills’ and ‘processes’ (Comber and Cormack, 1997, p. 22), using it, for example, as a vehicle to teach metaphor or rhyme. Although poetry can have a function of teaching skills and processes, this should not be its prime function.

The theory of socio-constructivism

It is suggested that the theory of socio-constructivism can be applied to the teaching of many different subjects in the curriculum (Littledyke and Huxford, 1998). A more traditional view of construction of knowledge by mainstream educators has been that knowledge is constructed individually with little reference given to the surrounding environment (Fleury, 1989). However, social constructivism sees personal constructs being developed in a social context, with particular emphasis in Western schooling on language as the main communicator of those experiences. Tobin puts it succinctly:

“Social interactions using a shared language enable the teacher and learners to communicate and test the fit of their knowledge with others’ representations. When the fit reaches an acceptable level it is concluded that a consensus has been achieved, in the sense that personal constructions bear a family resemblance to the constructions of others with whom negotiation has occurred” (1998, p. 195).

It would seem that a methodology underpinned by such a theory could work well with the teaching and learning of poetry by considering that some of the main characteristics of socio-constructivism are that:

- social interaction is at the heart of teaching and learning;
- existing knowledge is seen as important and that it is essential that any new knowledge is linked to that;
- adult and child form a joint partnership;
- teaching and learning is relevant to a child’s culture and the community as a whole.

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The arguments highlighted about poetry are that it is a social activity and that children have a spontaneous predilection for play with language and an intrinsic knowledge of poetry. In making explicit arguments about poetry and socio-constructivism, it would appear that a pedagogy based on this theory could encourage a teaching and learning climate that successfully engages children’s instinct for poetry and learning and develops the two together in a way that unites, rather than divorces, teaching and learning experiences from the classroom and life outside school. It could be approached as below, which takes into consideration a number of teaching strategies that would promote the principles of the socio-constructivist theory. The following is adapted from Scott et al. (1987), who suggest teaching approaches based on a constructivist approach to science. I have adapted their framework for the teaching of poetry with socio-constructivist underpinnings.

A teaching approach to poetry based on the socio-constructive view of learning

**Orientation**

Arousing children’s interest, imagination, creativity, emotion and intellect by engaging in poetic experiences that are easily accessible, e.g. reading and discussing a poem together on a subject that children can relate to, such as a humorous poem, or a nonsense poem.

**Elicitation/structuring**

Helping children to engage with poetry and with each other’s ideas by giving time for children to respond individually and corporately. This might involve periods of quiet meditation ‘thinking time’ followed by sharing of responses such as ideas, feelings and experiences that are stimulated by engaging with the poetic.

**Intervention/restructuring**

Encouraging children to experiment and play with language through engaging in activities such as sharing favourite poems, writing in different forms and communicating in exciting poetic ways their thoughts and feelings. To encourage children to see poetry as an exciting medium of expressing feelings, thoughts and ideas, which can be worked on together, or individually, and shared among the classroom community.

**Review**

Helping children to recognise the significance of their play with language by sharing what they have found out about poetry, about themselves and about the constructs of language through meta-language.

**Application**

Relate work on poetry to wider constructs of language development in school and home. Encourage bridges between home and school knowledge by relating achievements to literary environments they engage in outside of the classroom, such as playground chants, books read at home, nursery rhymes they know, poetry they might write at home. Encourage a literary community by encouraging every child to participate in the development of the classroom community through active involvement and acknowledgement of private and corporate literary practices.

This represents a generic approach to the teaching of poetry but the following demonstrates how socio-constructivist principles can be applied specifically in a literary session. In the following session, I have chosen the poem *The Warm and the Cold* by Ted Hughes (1985) (see Appendix A) as the focus for the event. Owing to the ideas surrounding this session, inspired by the poem, I would teach this in Autumn/Winter.

**Orientation**

Arousing children’s interests, emotion and intellect by encouraging children to brainstorm collectively about things that are warm and cold in winter time, such as bonfires and frosty mornings. Collect ideas on board in two separate columns under Warm and Cold.

**Elicitation/structuring**

Allow children time to think individually about experiences when they have been really cold and warm. Share responses with partner, then with table groups. Ask children to meditate upon ideas they have shared together, and while they are doing this display slides of warm and cold images inspired by Winter. As they are looking at the images read the first verse of *The Warm and the Cold*.

**Intervention/restructuring**

Encourage children to play with language by giving time as a whole class, and in their table groups, to discuss the meaning of the first verse and how the language, imagery and structure used conveys meaning and heightens impact. Encourage children to think about the way in which they can communicate their experiences of warm and cold through poetry by encouraging them individually to write some ideas down, and then to share and construct a group poem with those on their table.

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Review

Helping children to recognise significance of play with language by each group sharing their poem, and discussing how their imagery, language and structure conveys meaning.

Application

Draw children together round a picture depicting an animal keeping warm on a cold winter’s night. Read the whole of The Warm and the Cold poem. Ask children to collect words and items outside of school that express their experiences of warm and cold. Make a display board on which the Ted Hughes poem, their group poems and any words, pictures, items (such as an autumnal leaf, a scarf, gloves) can be shown.

Conclusion

This paper began with the recognition that children have an intuitive disposition to playing with language in and out of the classroom, and examples were given from two classrooms. It was observed that when the teacher encouraged word play, the children’s interaction with the poem and with each other was energetic and exciting. It is suggested that language play is a natural and positive part of children’s development and that by adopting a methodology based on socio-constructivist principles, teachers can connect children’s experiences of word play with that of poetry.

Research suggests that children are engaged in rich and diverse forms of literacy outside of school (Burnett and Myers, 2002), and that they need opportunities to discuss and explore their own personal literacy practices in school in order to build bridges between home and school experiences. Carter notes how important it is that teachers understand the creativity present in spoken discourse for “... creativity and cultural embedding are not the exclusive preserve of canonical texts but are pervasive throughout the most everyday uses of language” (2004, p. 21). Through increasing their understanding teachers can draw parallels between everyday language and literature. However, in examining the NLS (1998) to see if children’s body of knowledge is referred to and drawn upon it is clear that, though poetry is positively valued in school, there is little attention and value afforded to children’s creativity with language. In the teaching objectives for poetry for 7–11-year-olds, there is only one reference to children explicitly drawing upon their own body of experience and that is for 8–9-year-olds, where it is stated that children should: “... write poems based on personal or imagined experience...” (DfEE, 1998a, p. 39). Furthermore, the renewal of the English NLS in the form of the PNS (2006) only briefly refers to including children’s personal experiences from ages 7 to 11 years, while there is some reference to children making adventurous word and language choices at ages 6–7 years. Given that research has already identified that poetry is challenging to teach, any literacy framework needs explicitly to link children’s knowledge outside of the classroom with that of school knowledge. This would seem particularly pertinent for those teachers who did not specialise in English at university, and therefore rely on a more literal interpretation of support documents to help them teach poetry effectively. With a growing body of evidence suggesting that children have an intuitive understanding of poetry, and spend a significant amount of time playing with language, this needs to be recognised and included more fully as a strand contributing to the development of children’s poetic understanding and experience.

I have argued that a methodology for teaching poetry, underpinned by socio-constructivist principles, works with children’s natural predilection to play with language in a community setting. As Grainger has observed, “their young voices bear a poetic energy derived from their society, culture and community, an energy which I need to help them recognise, value, and develop further in the classroom” (1999, p. 295). If their experiences are not taken into account, then information about metaphors, alliteration, onomatopoeia and so on will have little meaning, other than as specialised knowledge that has little relevance to the constructs already in place. And, if there is no opportunity to link a child’s love of playing with language with what they are expected to learn about poetry in class, then that which they have could become irrelevant and de-valued in school.

Fenwick has observed that pupils “often display an understanding of poetry which has hitherto been unsuspected” (1995, p. 28), while Wade claims it is important as soon as children enter school that the knowledge they bring with them about poetry is shown to be valued, and secondly that what happens in the classroom extends “the knowledge, skills and pleasures that are embryonic in the young child” (1981, p. 193). If this does not happen, then as Wade suggests, “we may achieve satisfactory answers to all our questions without involving pupils in the experience of a poem” (1981, p. 47). By adopting a socio-constructive approach I believe teachers and pupils can work together to create a literacy community where they bring their own experiences into the classroom and engage with poetry in ways that are supportive and creative, with a commitment to extend that knowledge in novel and innovative ways. But for such an approach to work successfully, it needs to be presented and implemented from initial teacher training, with support documents available in all schools that show how the theory of socio-constructivism underpins practical poetry activities in the classroom.

Although a child may have limited experiences engaging with poetry and language play in the...
classroom, outside the teacher's influence, poetry in whatever form is still thoroughly enjoyed (Crystal, 1998; Opie and Opie, 1959). It may be that language play and poetry is being forced underground, a developing subculture in which children's vital engagement with poetry is becoming increasingly divorced and isolated from the experience of poetry in the classroom. It need not be this way. By establishing a socio-constructivist approach to poetry, children can use their knowledge of language play outside school to enhance their learning of specialised knowledge in school and so create, together with the teacher, their own 'literary tradition' (Koch, 1970, p. 39), for as Benton observes, "the imaginative conditions within the child . . . are right for the enjoyment of poetry" (1978, p. 113).

Appendix A

The Warm and the Cold poem by Ted Hughes (p. 87)

Freezing dusk is closing
Like a slow trap of steel
On trees and roads and hills and all
That can no longer feel.
But the carp in its depth
Like a planet in its heaven.
And the badger in its bedding
Like a loaf in its case.
And the owl in its feathers
Like a doll in its lace.

Freezing dusk has tightened
Like a nut screwed tight
On the starry aeroplane
Of the soaring night.
But the trout in its hole
That can no longer feel.
The hare strays down the highway
Like a root going deeper.
The snail is in the outhouse
Like a seed in a sunflower.
The owl is pale on the gatepost
Like a clock in its tower.

Moonlight freezes the shaggy world
Like a mammoth of ice –
The past and the future
Are the jaws of a steel vice.
But the cod is in the tide-rip
Like a key in a purse
The deer are on the bare-blown hill
Like smiles on a nurse.
The flies are behind the plaster
Like the lost score of a jig.
Sparrows are in the ivy-clump
Like money in a pig.

Such a frost
The flimsy moon
Has lost her wits
A star falls
The sweating farmers
Turn in their sleep
Like oxen on spits.

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