

# Making Poetry Primary: Investigating the impact of a year-long poetry presence at Highfield Primary

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## FINDINGS OVERVIEW

### Introduction

In September 2014, the government rolled out a new curriculum that promoted poetry recitation, discussion and presentation. The intention was to help improve standards in English, however the approach was hotly debated. Highfield Primary in Enfield, London – a school with a significant EAL population – decided to tackle the poetry challenge by bringing in a resident poet, Cheryl Moskowitz, to work with pupils and staff two days a week over a full academic year.

Cheryl's work ranged from structured creative activities through to spontaneous support. Throughout, she focused on instilling poetry as a 'presence in its own right' within the school, offering it as a 'way of thinking' and as a tool that pupils and staff could draw on whenever needed. As the academic year came to a close, independent researcher Kate McBarron explored the impact of this sustained 'poetry presence' by documenting and analysing the experiences and opinions of staff, pupils and Poet Cheryl herself. In particular, the research focused on impact across the following areas: pupil written & spoken word abilities, pupil social-emotional wellbeing, and teacher confidence.

### Results

- The impact of the poetry presence on **pupil written & spoken word abilities** was explored using teacher observations and reflections gained via interviews. It was observed that poetry helped to improve children's use of language when writing, it supported spoken language development, and it provided benefits across the curriculum – not just within the confines of English lessons. A variety of enabling factors were highlighted, namely: the use of a creative process, the increased opportunities for the children to stretch themselves, the act of making poetry personal, and the children's enjoyment of the poetry-related activities.

Throughout the year, there was a focus on using poetry to support EAL children. In combination, these dedicated EAL poetry sessions and the poetry activities taking place in class offered: opportunities for extra involvement in language-related activities; opportunities for enhanced progress on an individual level; and regular exposure to a wider vocabulary.

- When it came to **pupil social & emotional wellbeing**, the poetry presence was found to help increase confidence – the children were taking risks academically, sharing ideas in class, and performing in class and assembly. The poetry presence also helped the children to express & process emotions, and it helped to encourage social cohesion. Factors that enabled these changes were highlighted as: the non-threatening environment created by the poetry activities; the variety of avenues for emotional expression offered by poetry; the extra opportunities for speaking in class and performing; and the extra recognition of achievements – for example, through praise given by Poet Cheryl or as a result of poetry competitions.

Considerations when using poetry for wellbeing were highlighted by the research. These covered the importance of: getting the children used to the process; making space and time away from the usual classroom environment (for example, for small group work or one-to-ones); catering for individual personalities; and being sensitive to problem areas.

- Empowering the teachers to use poetry was recognised as vital for building on Poet Cheryl’s work at the school in the future. The poetry presence did lead to a desire to make changes to **teaching practice**, and this was partly due to increased teacher confidence when it came to using poetry. This confidence developed as a result of: the teachers trusting in the expertise of Poet Cheryl; the teacher training sessions that were offered; the opportunities for mirroring Poet Cheryl’s approach; and the teachers having access to a source of tailored ideas. The school itself made a strong commitment to poetry and this was also identified as a factor that encouraged teachers to review their practice. Considerations for teaching practice when incorporating poetry were highlighted as: the need for creative solutions when balancing curriculum requirements; the importance of getting the timing right within the academic year; and a willingness to test the boundaries.

Additional observations were made when it came to using poetry with young children. It was suggested that teachers: take a spoken approach, take on the role of ‘encourager’, and follow a ‘say “yes” and build’ strategy.

## Discussion

When considering the factors that enabled the poetry presence to have an impact across each of the core areas, three overarching factors stood out. These were:

- the use of a creative process
- the presence of an expert
- and the act of making poetry personal.