

# **Exploring Teacher Confidence in the Teaching of Poetry at Leaving Certificate and A level**

## **Final Narrative and Financial Report for SCoTENS Steering Committee**

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### **Abstract**

Poetry forms a central part of the study of English in many educational contexts. This research investigates teacher confidence in the teaching of post-16 level poetry in the Republic of Ireland (Leaving Certificate) and Northern Ireland (A Level). Previous studies on the teaching of poetry have highlighted issues such as students' negative perceptions of poetry; teachers' uncertainties about the nature of the poetry curriculum; appropriate pedagogical approaches for practitioners; the impact of the exam outcome; a tendency to adopt safe methodologies as a response to accountability pressures. The aim of this cross-border study, involving 84 teachers of English over a one-year period, was to explore teacher confidence in the teaching of post-16 poetry with a view to informing teachers' professional development needs given the listed challenges in this arena. This study adopted an explanatory sequential approach with the use of an online survey followed by a series of semi-structured interviews. The findings of this research indicate a high level of reported confidence in the teaching of post-16 poetry amongst teachers. A low level of teacher engagement with poetry outside school and poor in-service attendance was also noted by this cohort. Teachers asserted enjoying developing students' personal responses but felt challenged in this endeavour by exam pressures and student apathy. The research findings suggest that the development of teacher resilience in the face of performativity pressures needs to be prioritised to support the development of teacher confidence in adopting practices which transcend assessment dominated pedagogical practices.

### **Introduction: Poetry and its location in curricula**

Poetry can present significant challenges for students and teachers because of its compressed and heightened nature. Ezra Pound described poetry as 'language charged with meaning to the utmost degree' (Pound, 1960: 28) while fellow poet, Audre Lorde saw it as a 'distillation of experience' (Lorde, 1977: 36). According to the literary theorist, Northrop Frye, 'poetry is always the central powerhouse of a literary education' (Frye, 1963: 26). However, for many, including poets themselves, its enigmatic nature is not only what makes it special but also potentially elusive for those who are developing their craft as writers (Wilson and Dymoke 2017: 129) and also for those who are endeavouring to teach the genre.

Poetry as studied in schools in Ireland and Northern Ireland at post-16 level - i.e. in the culminating two years of a school career - provides an illuminating lens through which to investigate

issues which are pertinent to poetry education. In Ireland, the post-16 exams are Leaving Certificate and A level. Leaving Certificate is administered in the Republic of Ireland by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the equivalent in Northern Ireland is A Level, administered by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), although schools are free to choose whether to adopt CCEA's specification for A Level English or that of one of the other UK exam boards (AQA, OCR, Edexcel, WJEC). These two years of study constitute a bridge between schooling and further/higher education. At this stage, the genre has a discrete curricula identity in that it exists as a specific element to be studied within syllabi and examination specifications. Sigvardsson's systematic literature review on the teaching of poetry in schools noted that 'current educational politics, heavily influenced by neoliberalism, impose high-stakes examinations that challenge poetry curricula' (Sigvardsson, 2017: 584). Allied with, and beyond, these assessment challenges, there are specific subject and pedagogic knowledge demands as well as potential barriers to engagement with poetry both for teachers and students. Some of these students will also be tomorrow's English teachers whose grounding and immersion in the genre at this formative stage may influence their future pedagogy and practice.

### **Teacher confidence**

Over the past thirty years poetry teachers have experienced an escalating 'crisis of confidence' (Wade and Sidaway, 1990) in the classroom. The pressures of educational marketization have resulted in many teachers attempting to balance the often-divergent demands of parents, pupils, management, syllabus and exam. This 'rising tide' of accountability within the education system denotes a global reform movement emphasising standardization and higher stakes accountability (Conway and Murphy, 2013). Within this redefined space, teachers may experience 'emotional dissonance, a crisis of their sense of professional self-worth, and a sense of loss of control' (Perryman, Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2011: 186). Accordingly, Dymoke argues that 'there is a need to build confidence internationally' (Dymoke, 2014: 37).

The teaching of poetry is frequently allied with a sense of fear, anxiety and resistance amongst teachers (Bennett, 2009; Weaven and Clark, 2013; Xerri, 2013). In this 'risk-averse and high-stakes context' (Myhill and Wilson, 2013: 103) the discrepancy between poetry teachers' beliefs on the teaching of poetry and their confidence to enact such practice has long been noted (Wade and Sidaway, 1990; Weaven and Clark, 2013). Arguing that pedagogical practice is now more aligned with 'accountability, proficiency testing and their [teachers'] perceived need to teach mastery of specific reading skills', Perfect contends that poetry teachers have become 'little more than curriculum clerks' (Perfect, 1999: 731). As such, teachers' personal interest in poetry - a disposition cited to support teacher confidence - is frequently challenged (Lambirth, Smith and Steele, 2012).

Gleeson (2012) also discusses the professional knowledge base of teachers to highlight a perception amongst teachers that professionalism is derived from lay theory and classroom-based practices. This could also suggest there is a move by teachers towards pedagogy that centres on teaching to the test, a move which is ultimately made for pragmatic as opposed to philosophical purposes. When coupled with the time constraints of teaching loads and the pressure to 'deliver' learning in heavily prescribed intensively assessed curricula, teachers may feel disenfranchised to adopt 'participative pedagogies' (Gleeson 2012:13).

As a 'rising tide' of accountability (Conway and Murphy, 2013) advances, teachers are increasingly challenged in their efforts to develop and maintain a sense of confidence in the teaching of poetry. One of the most frequently cited challenges to the development of poetry teacher confidence is teacher subject knowledge (Dymoke, 2009; Lambirth, Smith and Steele, 2012; Weaven and Clark, 2013). Insufficient teacher knowledge of the genre has been noted as the greatest of fears for poetry teachers (ibid), a fear which can often lead to a sense of teacher fragility and challenges the potential of poetry to thrive in a school. Accordingly, the development of teachers as writers is seen as a key step in enhancing poetry teacher confidence (Ings, 2009, Myhill 2013). Student understanding and engagement are also cited as having significant influences on poetry teachers levels of confidence. Meaningful discourse and shared poetry experiences between students and teachers in the classroom are cited as potential strategies for building teacher confidence (Lambirth, Smith and Steele, 2012). However, a fear that student knowledge and cultural capital are not sufficient to achieve such engagement is a commonly reported teacher belief (Weaven and Clark, 2013; Xerri, 2013;).

Notwithstanding the noted challenges experienced by teachers, studies on the teaching of poetry continue to report the benefits, both personal and professional, of engaging in meaningful poetry activities in the classroom where poetry holds the potential to act as a 'joyous lifeline in a target driven job' (Wilson, 2012). For confident teachers in the post-16 classroom, poetry lessons may potentially be a gratifying experience, not only for them, but also for the students with whom this delight in poetry is shared.

### **Barriers to engagement with poetry**

In 2009, Weaven and Clark explored the presence and teaching of poetry in schools in Victoria in Australia. They found that 'very few Victorian Certificate of Education students of English respond to poetry texts in their final exams' (Weaven and Clark, 2013: 198). For entry into Victoria's universities, the state examination has a list of approved texts and teachers choose the texts that they think will best suit their students' context. The dearth of poetry texts chosen possibly points to challenges that teachers themselves have with the texts, or to teachers' perceptions of the challenges that students might have with them. In 2013 Weaven and Clark explored teachers' attitudes and practice regarding the teaching of poetry. They identified a stark lack of confidence in teaching, which constituted three elements, namely: fear of doing something that other practitioners were not doing; fear of students' lack of understanding of the genre and fear of the participant's own insufficient subject knowledge in this field. One participant whom they interviewed felt that practitioners who avoided teaching poetry did so as poetry was generally perceived to be too much of an obstacle or challenge. The respondent also stated that other practitioners might feel that 'you are not helping the kids, you're setting them up to fail' (Weaven and Clark, 2013:207). Their findings echoed Benton's 1984 UK study, conducted prior to the UK National Curriculum. However, his subsequent survey, in which he noted that teacher confidence in poetry appeared to have risen significantly (Benton 2000) came with a caution that this change appeared to have more to do with concerns for the art of poetry itself rather than how to teach poetry (Benton, 2000: 81). He also suggested that the assessment agenda and reactions to the implementation of the National Curriculum provoked many responses and thus possibly, meant that more fundamental concerns, over the place of poetry in schools, were overlooked.

Weaven and Clark (2013) also found concerns over the 'cultural capital' of some students and their perceived ability to access poetry as a result. This 'cultural capital' view can possibly be linked to

deep-rooted assumptions some practitioners might hold on how students are able to engage with poetry and how accessible poetry is for students. It suggests that protecting students from a task deemed to be too challenging would ultimately lead to no educational gains and result in failure. Such a view contradicts Ofsted (2007) which stated that contrary to teachers' beliefs on pupils' attitudes towards poetry, 'the majority of pupils expressed pleasure in both reading and writing poetry' (Ofsted, 2007: 7) At a secondary level, pupils (especially the more able) engaged with the cognitive demands of poetry and welcomed opportunities for multiple readings to enable them to decode and build up meaning in a poem. The report contends that all pupils welcomed the challenge and opportunity to engage with poetry within a social context, although notably it also states that 'in general, pupils' experience of poetry did not prepare them well for A-level study in English literature' (Ofsted, 2007: 4).

### **Impact of teacher confidence on poetry pedagogy**

According to Dymoke (2014), aligned with the loss of control experienced by teachers as a result of challenges like those outlined in the previous section, there is a tendency towards convergence or standardisation and a move away from creativity in the poetry classroom. The unconscious adoption of a 'safety first' model of poetry pedagogy means that creativity is relegated in perceived high-risk examinable aspects of the curriculum and considered but under-developed in untested aspects of the curriculum (Myhill and Wilson, 2013). As a result, for many teachers the potential of poetry remains elusive (Sekeres and Gregg, 2007: 467) and adherence to 'safe' pedagogical approaches aligned with technical analysis, modelling strategies and teacher ownership of meaning prevail (Dymoke, 2001; Perfect, 1999).

The paramount nature of final exams at the post-16 stage in schooling exacerbates the negative impact of examinations on pedagogy as teachers revert to safe methodologies that seem most likely to guarantee success for their students. Snapper, writing about poetry at post-16, observes that 'it is the end-point of the teaching – the examination – as well as the intense time and performance pressures under which teachers and students work to prepare for that examination, which to a great extent determine the pedagogy' (Snapper, 2013: 36). Confidence, defined as 'the belief in one's ability to be effective and to take on challenges,' is one of the dominant professional characteristics in the Hay McBer model of teacher effectiveness (DfEE, 2000: 22). Therefore, for many teachers, it would appear that the exam culture in which they have to operate not only has an impact on their pedagogy but also on their confidence in the genre. This key issue is the focus of our study.

### **Methodology**

The aim of this cross-border research study was to explore teacher confidence in the teaching of post-16 poetry across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, with a view to informing teachers' professional development needs in this field. In this way the study sought to explore the following research questions:

1. How confident do English teachers assert themselves to be in the teaching of poetry at post-16 level?
2. What commonalities exist between the key learning experiences reported by teachers in their development as poetry educators?

3. What impact does teacher confidence have on approaches to teaching post-16 poetry pedagogy?

### **Research Design**

The research design utilised an explanatory sequential design (Creswell and Clark, 2011). This approach facilitated robust analysis to take advantage of the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods (Green and Caracelli 1997; Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998). As noted by Creemers et al (2010: 140), a combination of approaches provides greater opportunity for mapping, analysis and interpretation of experience and also provides a more holistic understanding of the research area than may be gained if relying on one paradigm alone. Ethical integrity was central to the research conceptualisation and design of this research project. Full ethical approval was sought from the each research institution's ethics committees and Graziano and Raulin's (2010) six 'ethical checks' (p.62) were conducted on the established design.

This cross-border research study recruited two discrete cohorts of post 16 poetry teachers from the island of Ireland. All participants in this study had taught post-16 poetry for at least one academic year. The research population was identified through the post-primary schools index access for the Republic of Ireland through the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and for Northern Ireland through the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI). Random sampling of schools from both lists was employed in order to identify the final sample of poetry teachers in each context for phase one contact. An email, containing full detail of the research study including ethical approval and compliance was sent to the principal in each of the selected schools, North and South. This email invited the participation of post-16 poetry teachers in each school in the linked online survey. Principals were invited to forward the email invitation and survey link to all eligible teachers in their schools. Eighty-six respondents across both cohorts accepted this invitation and participated in the phase one online survey. At the end of the online survey, phase one participants were invited to submit their email address for contact if they wished to engage in the follow-up phase two research interviews. The received contacts were stratified according to reported confidence level and 13 poetry teachers who reported being 'very to extremely' confident in the teaching of post-16 poetry were recruited for participation in phase two of this study.

### **Phase one**

Phase one comprised a pre-piloted online semi structured 28 point survey, including both Likert rating scales and open ended questions, to capture participants' views on their level of confidence in relation to the teaching of post-16 poetry. The survey was designed to explore four key areas; teacher confidence and poetry engagement; challenges to confidence; pedagogical practices; engagement in continuous professional development and was followed by a short section focusing on participant demographics. One link to the online survey for all participants was created, with both the Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland participants completing the same research survey questions. The online format supported question branching for the collection of demographics at the end of the survey, therein ensuring both a streamlined and contextually responsive experience for participants. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics, an online survey management system, and went live on the 24<sup>th</sup> January 2018. The survey was closed on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2018. Use of the survey and the subsequent

results provided an initial indication of the underlying perspectives of teachers in relation to the research question. (Cohen et al 2007).

Once downloaded the survey data was divided according to participant context (Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland) then sub-divided in both datasets according to report confidence level (low to moderate levels of confidence and very high to extremely high levels of confidence). This supported the analysis of data based on the reported confidence level of participants. SPSS was employed for the analysis of quantitative data while the qualitative data obtained was subject to thematic analysis involving a six-stage process as per Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial codes, the thematic grouping of codes, a review and check of themes, the naming of themes and the production of a final research report.

Sixty-six (35 Northern Ireland and 31 Republic of Ireland) full completion responses and a further 18 partial completion responses were recorded for this phase of the research bringing the total number of phase one participants to 84.

### **River of Experience: Interim activity**

Participants who volunteered to participate in phase two of the research were stratified into two sub-groups according to confidence level (low to moderate confidence and very high to extremely high confidence). Random sampling was then applied in both the Northern and Southern contexts within the moderate to extremely high sub-sample. This supported deeper investigation into the emergent issues from phase one with poetry teachers who asserted a high level of confidence. The sampled cohort (n= 6 Republic of Ireland, n=7 Northern Ireland) were contacted and emailed with an interim activity. The interim activity pack contained a collage exemplar, accompanying notes on the collage exemplar and reflection prompts. Participants were encouraged to read the materials and then create a 'river of experience' in the form of a critical incident collage documenting pivotal experiences in the development of their confidence as a poetry teacher. An optional river template was provided for participants, which they could use to sketch or outline their own river of experience prior to the paired interview and bring with them. The river template was adapted from that developed by Cliff Hodges (2010) to support reflection on private reading experiences. The purpose of the adapted tool was to provide participants with the opportunity to reflect on the critical experiences shaping their confidence development as poetry teachers in advance of the phase two interviews.

### **Phase two**

Phase two comprised a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews (n=13). The interview schedule comprised 9 questions focused on teacher confidence in the teaching of post-16 poetry and was developed based on key existing literature on the teaching of poetry along with a focus on emergent issues from phase one. The interview schedule served to support exploring into the following areas; factors supporting the development of teacher confidence, specific areas of confidence in the teaching of poetry, the identification of areas where confidence was limited and approached to the teaching of post-16 poetry. Phase two participants were asked to bring their 'River of experience' collages to the interviews to support their interview responses. In advance of drawing on the interview schedule, participants were invited to discuss their critical incident collage and to explain how the experiences that they chose to include influenced their confidence development as poetry teachers. Interviews extended to, on average, forty minutes in duration. Each interview was

voice recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis as advocated by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage process for thematic analysis was used to categorise and analyse data.

## Emerging Findings and Discussion Points

### Demographics

Eighty-four respondents (n= 18% male, 81% female, 1% undisclosed) engaged in phase one of this research inquiry. Respondents ranged in age from 23 years of age to 60 years of age. The majority of respondents (33%) had taught poetry for between 11- 20 years as demonstrated in Fig. 1 below.

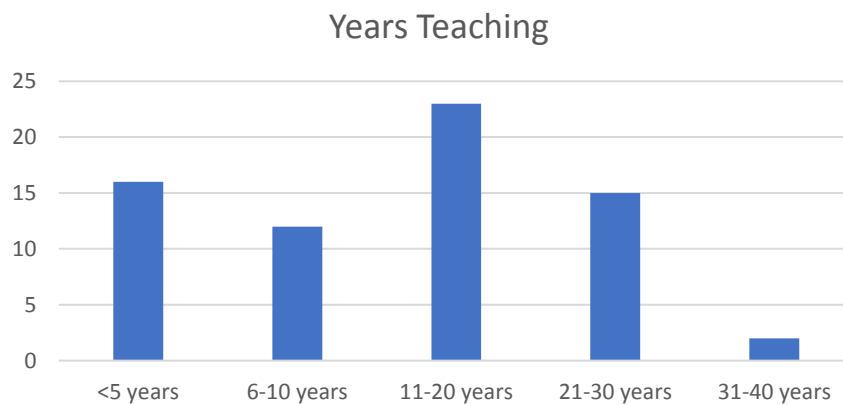


Fig. 1

Responses represented a balance of view from both poetry teachers in the North of Ireland (54%) and the Republic of Ireland (46%). The majority of respondents within Northern Ireland taught post-16 poetry in Grammar schools (72%) while a split of teachers from Voluntary Secondary (38%) and Community Schools (38%) formed the majority cohort from the Republic of Ireland respondents. As demonstrated in figure 2 below fifty-six per cent of respondents surveyed taught in co-educational schools across both contexts with the remaining 25% teaching in single-sex girls' schools and 19% teaching in single-sex boys' schools.

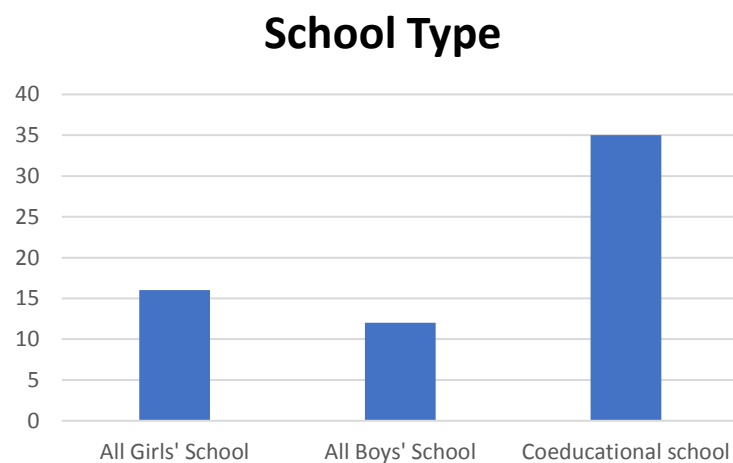


Fig. 2

The highest level of education acquired by the majority of survey respondents (49%) was a Bachelor's degree. Additionally, 41% of respondents had secured a Master's degree and 4% had achieved a Doctoral degree.

### Poetry Teacher Confidence

As illustrated in Figure 3, the data demonstrates a high level of reported confidence in the teaching of post-16 poetry amongst respondents with the majority of teachers asserting themselves to be either 'moderately confident' (35%) or 'very confident' (35%) in the teaching of poetry. An additional 24% of poetry teachers surveyed asserted themselves to be 'extremely confident' in the teaching of poetry. Only 5% of teachers in this survey reported themselves to be 'slightly confident' (4%) or 'not at all confident' (1%) in the teaching of post-16 poetry.

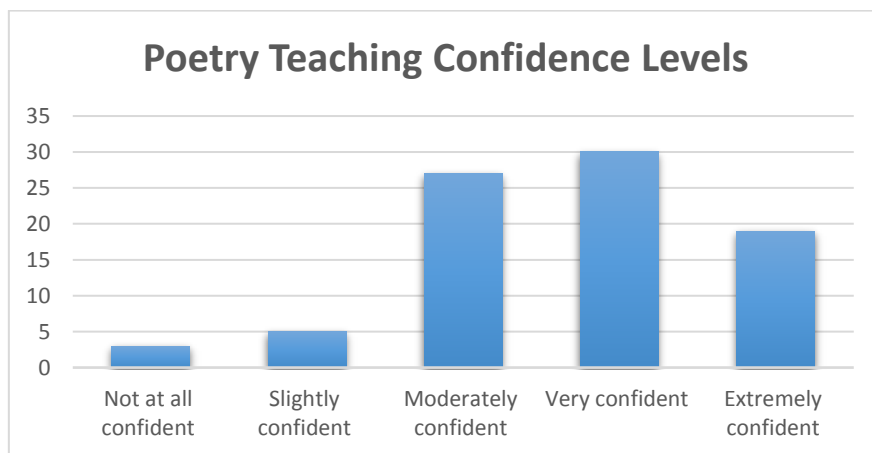


Fig. 3

This high level of confidence extended to a variety of domains in poetry teaching with 'very confident' emerging as the majority response in four out of five areas associated with the teaching of poetry, namely; developing students' responses (38% 'very confident'), selecting poems/poets to be studied (37% 'very confident'), evaluating students' written responses (44% 'very confident'), providing feedback on students' written work (41% 'very confident'). As illustrated in Figure 4 below, a slightly lower mean confidence level was found amongst respondents in relation to 'encouraging authentic subjective student response' where the majority of poetry teachers asserted themselves to be 'moderately confident' (40%).



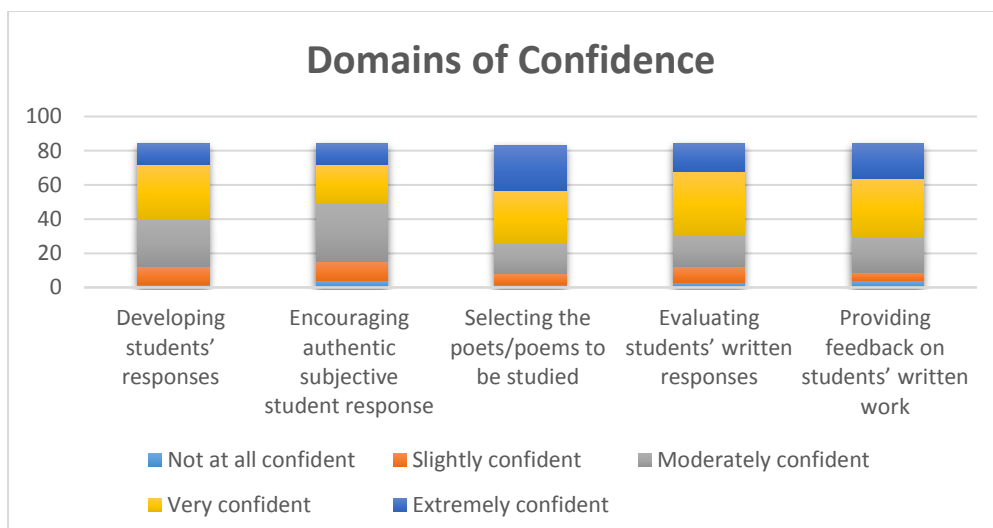


Fig. 4

### Poetry engagement beyond the classroom

Respondents reported a low level of engagement with poetry outside of prescribed school activities. A large majority (66%) of poetry teachers in this research reported 'never' (42%) or 'rarely' (24%) writing poetry in their own time. Twenty-five per cent noted that poetry writing in their own time is an activity they 'sometimes' engage in, while only a combined 9% of poetry teachers reported writing poetry in their own time 'often' (5%) or 'always' (4%). Listening to poetry outside of school time was also reported as an infrequent activity amongst poetry teachers in this research. Fifty per cent of teachers reported that they 'rarely' (33%) or 'never' (17%) listen to poetry in their own time. Thirty-nine per cent of teachers outlined listening to music outside of school 'sometimes', with a further 11% reporting listening to poetry 'often' (7%) or 'always' (4%) in their spare time. Performing poetry was also reported as an activity that the vast majority of poetry teachers never engaged in with 87% of survey participants asserted that they 'never' perform poetry in their spare time. Poetry readings were also cited as an activity that poetry teachers choose not to engage in outside of school time. Sixty one per cent of poetry teachers noted that they 'never' (38%) or 'rarely' (23%) attend poetry readings in their spare time. Twenty-four per cent of respondents stated they 'sometimes' attend poetry reading while 16% of respondents noted poetry readings are an activity that they 'always' (5%) or 'often' (11%) attend. Participants noted greater engagement with reading poetry in their spare time with the majority (46%) of teachers asserting this is an activity they 'sometimes' engage in. A further 35% stated they 'sometimes' (23%) or 'always' (12%) read poetry in their spare time while 15% of poetry teachers stated that they 'rarely' read poetry in their own time and an additional 4% of respondents stated this as something they 'never' engage in.

These findings may indicate that poetry is viewed by teachers as an element of school English rather than a genre that they wish to engage with for their own pleasure (Dymoke, 2002). Additionally, this could be due to perceived time pressures or constraints in relation to the assessment load of poetry. In particular, such issues can be linked to the introduction of a new specification in NI and to the breadth and volume of poetry that is to be covered in both NI and ROI.

## Poetry in-service

Participants, across both jurisdictions were critical of the availability and quality of in-service provision. Referring to the availability of in-service courses for post-16 poetry over the past five years, 78% of respondents described this provision as 'poor'. A further 12% of poetry teachers described in-service provision as 'fair'. Only 10% of respondents described poetry in-service provision as 'average' or above average. No statistically significant variance of response was found between respondents teaching in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Perhaps as a result of participants' perspectives on the availability of in-service provision, participants' reported attendance at in-service training was found to be low. Seventy-seven per cent of poetry teachers noted that they had not attended any form of poetry in-service in the past five years as demonstrated in Figure 5. Again, no statistically significant difference was noted between respondents teaching in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In their research on relationship between teachers' CPD and their beliefs about learning and teaching, deVries, Jansen and van de Grift (2013) identified that the greater teachers' participation in CPD, the more student oriented those teachers are. The findings of this research therefore pose cause for concern in the drive to create student-centred educational experience within the post-16 poetry class.

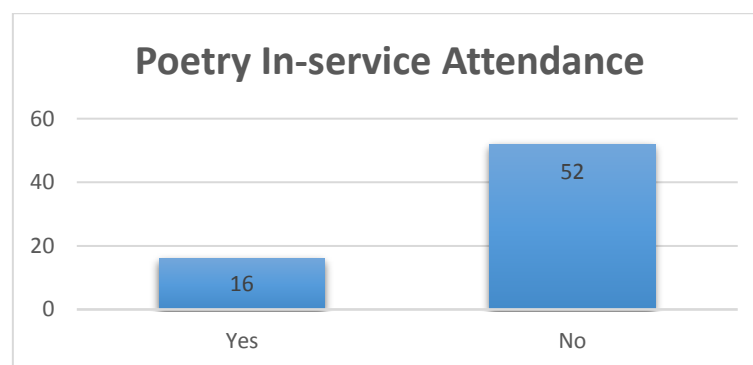


Fig. 5

Respondents who had attended poetry in-service in the past five years (n=16) were asked to rate the quality of in-service provision encountered. The majority (33%) of respondents cited the quality of in-service provision experienced in the past five years as 'average'. An additional 41% of respondents reported less favourably, citing this provision as either 'fair' (28%) or 'poor' (13%). Only a combined 26% reported the quality of in-service experienced to be either 'good' (13%) or 'excellent' (13%).

Respondent were asked to identify any areas related to the teaching of post-16 poetry with which they would like further professional development. Two common themes emerged from this question. The first theme emerged as a desire for additional support on essay content and marking including greater clarity related to exam requirements and expectations. Comments supporting this theme included '*Perhaps essay content and marking. Although I feel fairly confident in this area I'd like some reassurance that I'm doing the right thing*' and '*I'd like to see more organised exemplars of exam answers, fully broken down and explained. Department guidelines sound good but they're very open to interpretation*'. The second emergent theme related to a desire for support around the technical aspects of poetic analysis where respondents' comments included a desire for support on 'how language creates effects' and others noted '*Personally I would struggle with metre/beat, so if I was to*

*get technical help that would be an area*'. Another teacher outlined that *'Courses are usually about what percentage each assessment objective should make up in an examination response or the importance of repeating the exact words of the question endlessly to show focus. I would like to be told exactly what content knowledge is expected – techniques, language analysis and, especially, exactly what contextual knowledge is expected'*. Both themes were dominant and common across responses from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and across teachers of all reported confidence levels.

The findings of this research therein indicate the primary concern for teachers within the post-16 poetry class to be the development of their technical poetry competence in order to better support teaching for examination purposes. This finding draws unfavourable parallel to the claims of DeLawter (1992) that teachers concerned with the development of technical skills and testing relegate themselves to the positions of mere 'curriculum clerks'.

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

Respondents were asked to list the aspects of post-16 poetry teaching which they most enjoy. Common across both jurisdictions was an enjoyment in developing pupils' personal responses with teachers asserting such sentiments as *'I enjoy giving students the freedom to make their own meanings of the poems'* and *'watching pupils grow in confidence to the point where they independently advance their own interpretations and see alternative readings possible'*. Additionally, respondents cited enjoyment in engaging in the analysis of poetic technique with students. Responses included: *'identifying how the poet has used form/structure/poetic techniques to convey meaning and create ambiguity or tone'*; *'I like analysing the poet's craftsmanship – language choices which enhance meaning or content and examining whether the structure also contributes to understanding'* and *'the use of figurative language and the complexity of meaning with poetry'*. An additional dominant theme noted only amongst high confidence teachers (self-sited as 'extremely' or 'very confident') in both jurisdictions was enjoyment in linking poetry to students' own lives. High confidence respondents highlighted enjoyment in the way that *'poetry invites students to challenge aspects of their lives that they may hitherto have accepted blindly'*.

When asked what challenges they encounter in teaching poetry, respondents across both jurisdictions raised similar concerns. Common themes emerged around the impact of assessment regimes with a strong focus placed on exam preparation, student apathy towards poetry and time constraints given the breath of the curriculum.

Focusing on assessment, respondents commented that *'The method of marking is much too prescriptive leading to checklist teaching which is killing the teaching of poetry'* and *'How poetry essays are marked by exam boards is killing the teaching of poetry'*. In response to the demands of the exam one teacher noted *'I just take a pragmatic approach to teaching it and teach to the test. I'm being honest here!!'*. When discussing the challenge of student apathy responses included *'a negative mindset towards poetry from some students...some say they dislike it and seem to see it as lesser than other forms of literature'* and *'Many students seem to hate poetry and see it as something to just learn off the notes to. Students seem to want 'the answer' and not want to critically analyse or explore poetry for themselves. Pupil apathy towards the teaching of poetry is however not a new phenomenon. Almost fifty years ago Painter (1970) highlighted the difficulty experienced by many teachers*

encountering student apathy towards poetry. Significantly the work of Painter draws parallels between lack of pedagogical innovation and student apathy towards poetry. Given the prominence of assessment and assessment driven models of teaching discussed by participants in this research, it is perhaps unsurprising then that many teachers in this study struggled with the challenge of student apathy.

When highlighting the impact of time constraints poetry teachers' comments included *'The pressure of time is the biggest challenge. In order to cover the specification there is about 75mins of teaching time per poem'* and *'There are too many prescribed poets/poems on the course and as a teacher I find I am lecturing or/and preselecting in order to complete the syllabus. I am guilty of approaching many of the poems as literary works as opposed to lyrical works'*. Additionally, teachers in Northern Ireland cited lack of resources as a key challenge to their work also. These challenges appeared to transcend teacher confidence levels because the challenges identified by teachers who self-declared as 'confident' mirrored those who self-declared as having 'moderate' to 'low' confidence. When asked to identify the challenge which holds greatest impact on their role as a poetry teacher, the impact of examination and assessment appeared as a common and dominant theme across responses.

Poetry teachers were also asked to consider if there are any aspects of poetry that they would like to teach or feel would be appropriate for inclusion in the post-16 poetry class that they have not had the opportunity to teach to date. A consensus emerged across both jurisdictions on the desire for reduction of curricular prescription related to the poems and poets that are available for study at this level. This theme dominated responses across all levels of confidence. Comments included *'I'd love one free choice for teachers. Let us choose one poet ourselves to teach. The comparative section is a hugely open section. Why not widen the choice of poets available?'* and *'I would like to move away from the depressing poetry of Plath and at times Bishop and have a wider and more varied selection of poets on the course'*. The second most frequently reported response to this question from participants was 'no', with teachers across both contexts asserting they are satisfied with their current approaches to the teaching of poetry. Comments included *'No, I follow the specifications of the syllabus'* and *'In the context of what's required for the exams, no. Student workload precludes me going off into the long grass too much'*. This may suggest compliance towards or an acceptance of the traditional models of poetry teaching set against a backdrop of performativity and assessment dominated practices. Such compliance has been asserted to act as a barrier to creativity in schools (Myhill and Wilson 2013) resulting in the adoption of traditional pedagogical models and approaches in the teaching of poetry as identified by Hennessy & Mannix McNamara (2013). The findings of the current research therein highlight a predominance of pedagogical approaches by practitioners more closely aligned to conformity, prescription and assessment than pedagogical innovation and creativity and reflect a 'risk-averse' approach (Myhill and Wilson 2013) to the teaching of post-16 poetry. Such findings also pose concern for the development of students' creative capacity as the cultivation of student creativity is argued to depend largely on 'teachers' own efforts to engage in creative thinking and teaching' (Xerri 2013, p.141).

Interestingly, when asked to comment on any other influences on their confidence as post-16 poetry teachers, a divergence of response was noted between teachers who cited their confidence levels as 'extremely high' and 'very high' and those who cited themselves to be 'moderately', 'slightly' or 'not at all confident'. For the former 'high confidence' cohort teachers' passion for poetry was

reported as key to their confidence. These teachers comments included '*I have a personal interest and love for poetry than not all teachers may have. I see how my passion and enthusiasm can alter students' experiences of studying poetry*' and '*I think I feel confident because it is something I enjoy and have never had difficulty with, even when I was in school*'. Whereas for 'lower confidence' teachers the need for additional support, through both formal and informal support structures dominated responses. These teachers commented '*I am lacking in confidence teaching poetry and would love CPD in this area*' and '*I think it would be hugely beneficial for CCEA to share more sample responses with detailed commentaries to justify the awarding of marks*'. A sense of an unrelenting quest towards professional confidence was outlined by one teacher who commented '*Each year I add to my body of knowledge but feel there is always more to know. I often feel I do not do my students justice*'.

## **Early Conclusions**

This research highlights a strong sense of confidence amongst teachers in the teaching of post-16 poetry across both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Concurrently it highlights limited personal and professional teacher engagement with poetry beyond the classroom. Teachers in this study also reported the development of technical poetic and assessment knowledge as primary CPD ambitions. Such findings suggest a compliance amongst poetry teachers to the demands of the dominant cultures of assessment within the education system and suggests that proficiency in the operating within these cultural dictates currently supports the development of poetry teacher confidence. Though not altogether unsurprising given the weight of performativity pressures experienced with the education system, such findings require immediate attention in order to realign the role of the poetry teacher from that of assessment technician to engaged educator. Importantly, the research also highlights that for many teachers the development of students' ability to engage personally and critically with poetry acts as a catalyst also for enhancing teacher confidence. Yet, it appears from the findings of this study that student apathy and disengagement marks a daily struggle for teachers in the classroom. The need to support teachers to transcend curriculum narrowing and technicism emerges as a key finding from this study. The development of teacher confidence drawn from the narrow confines of assessment proficiency acts as a barrier to engaged and creative encounters with poetry. Accordingly, the development of teacher resilience needs to be prioritised to support teachers transcend the boundaries of assessment regimes and begin to derive confidence from curricular innovation, student engagement and pedagogical creativity therein opening up the potential to reinvigorate engagement with poetry in all of its rich complexity.

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## Financial Report\*

#	Costc	Costc (T)	Account	Account (T)	Budget	ActuaSpent	OutstandingPOs	VATonPOs	Available Funds
+	Σ5	<b>B</b>	<b>Budget Based Income</b>		<b>-4,750.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>-4,750.00</b>
-	Σ4	<b>56157</b>	<b>Industry-TCTOP: Exploring Teacher Confidence in the teaching of</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>-4,750.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>-4,750.00</b>
-	Σ3				<b>-4,750.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>-4,750.00</b>
	5	56157	Industry-TCTOP: Exploring Teacher Confidence in the teaching of	3110	Lab Supplies/Consumables	791.00	0.00	0.00	791.00
	6	56157	Industry-TCTOP: Exploring Teacher Confidence in the teaching of	3300	Books	0.00	115.50	0.00	-115.50
	7	56157	Industry-TCTOP: Exploring Teacher Confidence in the teaching of	3400	Reprographics	0.00	24.00	0.00	-24.00
-	Σ5	<b>C</b>	<b>Research Consumables/Materials</b>		<b>791.00</b>	<b>139.50</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>651.50</b>
	9	56157	Industry-TCTOP: Exploring Teacher Confidence in the teaching of	3900	Travel and Entertainment	3,959.00	872.37	0.00	3,086.63
	10	56157	Industry-TCTOP: Exploring Teacher Confidence in the teaching of	3903	Kilometres	0.00	73.74	0.00	-73.74
-	Σ5	<b>T</b>	<b>Research Travel</b>		<b>3,959.00</b>	<b>946.11</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>3,012.89</b>
-	Σ4	<b>56157</b>	<b>Industry-TCTOP: Exploring Teacher Confidence in the teaching of</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>4,750.00</b>	<b>1,085.61</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>3,664.39</b>
-	Σ3				<b>4,750.00</b>	<b>1,085.61</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>3,664.39</b>
-	Σ2	201901	Oct 2018			0.00	1,085.61	0.00	-1,085.61
-	Σ1	1000926	Jennifer Hennessy			0.00	1,085.61	0.00	-1,085.61
	Σ					0.00	1,085.61	0.00	-1,085.61

\*Please note, as per our email and telephone conversation on 5th September 2018 the remainder of the available funds will be used to provide travel bursaries for a small number of English pre-service teachers from the South to attend the 2018 BERA NI SIG. The findings of this research will be disseminated at this conference supporting the further dissemination of results to a large cohort of vested parties from both the North and South. Time will also be allocated in the workshop run by the authors at this conference for networking between the pre-service teachers North and South and structured discussion between the group on issues arising from the research which hold impact for these participants in their future careers as teachers.



