Exploring Perspectives: An Exposition of the English Teacher’s Voice on Poetry Studies and Classroom Methodologies – A Survey of Irish Teachers


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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is an exploration of the pedagogical methodologies being utilised at the current time by teachers of poetry at Leaving Certificate Level in Ireland. The results presented in this paper are gleaned from research conducted with eighty-five Leaving Certificate teachers of poetry throughout Ireland over a twelve month period, from June 2008 to June 2009. The first section of this paper serves to provide contextualisation for this study, highlighting the purpose and place of poetry studies in the post-primary classroom. The second section of this paper focuses on an exploration of the pedagogical methodologies being utilised on a daily basis in the classroom for the teaching of poetry at Leaving Certificate Level in Ireland. This investigation is predicated on the conviction that the successful teaching of poetry in the classroom lies not only within the selection of relevant themes, poets and poems but also within the remit of the pedagogical methodologies utilised by the English teacher in the teaching of this genre.

MEANING MAKING – A QUEST TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING

The first key to wisdom is assiduous and frequent questioning…
For by doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we come to the truth.

(Abelard, 12th century)

According to Cassirer et al., (2006) “Man is declared to be that creature who is constantly in search of himself- a creature who in every moment of his existence must examine and scrutinize the conditions of his existence.” This sentiment is attested to by Socrates in Apology, in which it is asserted that a life lead without question or examination is a life not worth living. It follows that we all seek a truth; a truth to which the question is oft times ambiguous. We seek to know, to understand, to apprehend, to engage with our very existence. We seek a “language that tells us, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said” (Edwin Arlington Robinson – poet). Such a quest cannot be achieved via empirical or linear study as reason fails to illustrate what lies beyond the parameters of the quantifiable. It fails to explore those oft illogical, contradictory and illusive qualities that define man and characterise his multiplicity of experiences. As noted by Cassirer et al., (2006) “Rational thought, logical and metaphysical thought can comprehend only those objects which are free from contradiction and which have a consistent nature and truth. It is, however just this homogeneity we can never find in man.” The manner in which we begin to achieve this task and explore at a level beyond the empirical begins at a very basic yet abstract manner as exemplified in ‘Schooling the Symbolic Animal’:

Thinking consists not of happenings within the head but of a traffic….of significant symbols- words for the most part but also gestures, drawings, musical sounds, mechanical devices like clocks, or natural objects like jewels, anything in-fact that is disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience.

(Geertz, 2000)

Man’s interpretation of his world and self as noted by Geertz (2000) is constructed through symbols and symbolisation. The juxtapositioning of these symbols affords us an abstract interpretation of the world around us. This innate process of assimilating, analysing, understanding and quantifying symbols, described as “the most amazing symbolic system humanity has invented” (Langer, 1979), has formed the essence of our interaction with the world from the dawn of civilisation. This process, traditionally thought to be culturally construed is now widely understood as an ‘instinct’ inherent to man, rather than an externally
constructed invention. Pinker (2000) drawing inspiration from the writings of Darwin in his expository book on language formation rejects the canonical conceptions of language development, arguing that the construction of our communicative form “is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture”. This ability to symbolise experience according to Levinson (2000) segregates and elevates us above what Dessalles (2000) refers to as our ‘animal substratum’ allowing us to manipulate these symbols into systems and patterns thus permitting us to translate experience into perceived reality. Cassirer et al. (2006) in accord with the assertions of Levinson asserts that “compared with the other animals, man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new dimension of reality”. This dimension unique to man, is referred to by Cassirer et al. (2006) as our ‘cultural dimension’, by Clark (2006) as our ‘cognitive niche’ and denoted by Levinson (2000) as man’s ‘socio-cultural adaptation’.

Translation from the abstract to the tangible via the medium of the symbol allows man to formulate a cognitively accessible understanding of self and the world which he inhabits. Abbs (1976) noted that “through the energy of the symbol, he (man) could draw the external world into his consciousness where he could ponder its nature, purpose and meaning.” Langer (1979) adds that “a symbol is used to articulate ideas of something we wish to think about, and until we have a fairly adequate symbolisation we cannot think about it.” Cassirer et al. (2006) delves further into these ideas echoing and developing on the thoughts of both Abbs and Langer, asserting that it is innate for man to delve into his consciousness before returning to reality when confronted with a question or inquiry;

No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man’s symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves, man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium. (Cassirer et al., 2006)

Our ability to comprehend is thus interwoven with our symbolic understanding of experience. However man’s constant assiduous endeavours to elucidate ‘true’ expression in an attempt to unravel such complexities are often thwarted, as shrewdly noted in Pope’s famous dictum “What oft was thought but ne’er so well express’d”.

POETRY – A SYMBOL FOR UNDERSTANDING

The capacity of poetry as a symbolic form to represent both the conscious and subconscious, the cognitive and the affective is well documented. In ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ (1911), Sigmund Freud alleged that ‘true’ meanings are not always presentable in traditional terms or ‘true’ feelings presentable in traditional forms. Hence Freud deduces that dreams signify “a disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes”. In a similar manner O’Neill (1998) asserts that “man seeks to discover patterns in experience and to represent his awareness of those patterns in image-making. Art emerges from man’s impulse to make clear to himself through ordered representations the patterns of experience”. Just as dreams facilitate a subconscious acquisition of ‘repressed wishes’, art has the power to facilitate representation of the subconscious thought, cast illumination on the human experience, provide a source of emotional stimulation and also act as a form of imaginative understanding (Graham, 1997).
Eisner (2002) too outlines the role of the arts in “refining the senses and enlarging the imagination” and illuminates art as a mode of human experience and asserts that “the arts provide a way of knowing” (ibid). Symbolisation through language provides a means by which to access the psyche. This communicative forum is thus imperative to the individual; however it is within the capacity for embodiment and representation that the aesthetic power of language flourishes; the power to communicate through artistic design. This permissible terrain for meta-cognitive expression is acutely represented in the creation of poetry as an arts-based genre. As noted by Robert Penn Warren; “What is a poem but a hazardous attempt at self-understanding? It is the deepest part of an autobiography”. Shakespeare too reflects this ideology in an extract from ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ in which he details the power of poetry to give form to the creative and subconscious mind;

\[
\text{The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,} \\
\text{Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;} \\
\text{And as imagination bodies forth} \\
\text{The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen} \\
\text{Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing} \\
\text{A local habitation and a name.} \\
\text{(Shakespeare, 1623)}
\]

COGNITION AND THE ARTS – AN ESTRANGED AFFILIATION

Despite the clearly outlined benefits of arts based subjects, such as poetry, there was during the 20th century a widespread reluctance to recognise this sentiment within the classroom. A report commissioned by The Arts Council in 1979 entitled ‘The Place of the Arts in Irish Education’ (now commonly referred to as The Benson Report) outlines this trend:

While science benefited from changes introduced after 1900, arts subjects continued to be under-emphasised if not seriously neglected. Certainly if aesthetic education is regarded as integral to a balanced education then the characterisation of the system as “the murder machine” was all too true.

(Benson, 1979)

With a stringent focus on rationality, assessment and the quantifiable, “schools were to become effective and efficient manufacturing plants” (Eisner, 2003). The place of the arts became redundant in the classroom as a focus on measurability and accountability in education emerged at the forefront, with the promotion of quantifiable subjects such as mathematics and science.

In the process, science and art became estranged. Science was considered dependable; the artistic process was not. Science was cognitive; the arts were emotional. Science was teachable; the arts required talent. Science was testable; the arts were matters of preference. Science was useful; the arts were ornamental.

(Eisner, 2002)

This psychosocial shift in perspective has had an immense impact on modern day schooling and pedagogies. Contemporary society prizes rationality, logic and cognitive exposition, resulting in the concurrent technical approach to schooling being charged with the ‘freezing
of our imagination” (Greene, 2000). Society has systematically extracted the affective, the creative and the subjective in order to increase the economic value of academia in an environment where “achievement has triumphed over inquiry” (Eisner, 2002). Skills such as visualisation, creativity and spatial awareness are being subordinated in place of skills such as rationalisation and analysis which has arguably lead to the perpetuation of the ‘Myth of the Arts.’

Best (1992) discusses the ‘Myth of the Arts’ which prevails in the debate between art and the sciences. This myth he describes as ‘the danger of subjectivism’ – the perception amongst society that poetry and the arts derive from subjectivity alone and are estranged entirely from any developmental cognitive process. Those who argue the subjectivism of the arts see it as a superfluous and unnecessary element in the curriculum. Best (1992) dispels this myth, highlighting that not alone is creativity and imagination evident even in the sciences but that cognition and reason is also implicit in the arts. “It is only because we are capable of rationality that we can have artistic feelings….cognition and rationality are inseparable from artistic feeling and creativity, whether spontaneous or not…the artistic feeling is itself cognitive and open to objective justification” (ibid). Stevens (2007) adds that subjectivity and objectivity should be treated as mutually beneficial rather than mutually exclusive and defines the objective of teaching poetry in the class as being by means of ‘informed subjectivity’. The necessity then for the utilisation of a balanced pedagogical approach on the part of teachers of poetry and other arts based genres is clear.

However as a result of the propagation of the ‘myth of the arts’ in society, the place of arts-based genres, such as poetry in our schools have become overshadowed and undervalued (Mission and Sumara, 2005). This perception is illustrated in a study conducted by Pink (2006). Pink performed a survey of pupils in which he simply asked if they would like to become an artist upon leaving the education system. He found that as the pupils progressed through the education system they were less likely to aspire to become artists. Pink concluded that this was due to the growing view amongst society as a whole that artistic, creative, aesthetic skills are of less importance and thus less esteemed then ‘easier assessed’ cognitive, linguistic and mathematical skills. He asserted on the basis of his study that we reside in an “era of left brain dominance”(Pink, 2006). Pink’s findings are not in isolation; a report on the place of the arts in New Zealand stated that “the education of feeling is generally ignored in education, despite the fact that all curriculum work affects the pupil’s view of the world and his/her life” (Ministry of Education, 2009).

THE TEACHING OF POETRY AT LEAVING CERTIFICATE LEVEL IN IRELAND

The current English syllabus was introduced at Leaving Certificate Level in Ireland ten years ago in 1999. Its primary focus is the critical engagement of students in all genres of English studies, with a view to developing pupils as independent and creative thinkers. In the time elapsed since the genesis of the current syllabus there has been a significant dearth of research conducted on its implementation into the contemporary classroom. The following section of this paper serves to present the results of research carried out on the methodologies being utilised by Leaving Certificate teachers involved in the teaching of poetry in Ireland. This research is predicated on the conviction that in order to afford students with optimal opportunity to engage critically and personally with poetry, the implementation of effective, strategic and innovative teaching strategies must be present, as attested to by Hanratty (2008) who argues that “poetry requires passionate personal engagement as well as the intelligent deployment of a wide range of (often, cross-curricular) pedagogical strategies”.
The Leaving Certificate Syllabus serves to build on the aims of the Junior Certificate English syllabus, which emphasise “the development of a range of literacy and oral skills in a variety of domains—personal, social and cultural. These key objectives are further refined and developed within the Leaving Certificate syllabus which seeks to “excite students with aesthetic experiences and emphasise the richness of meanings and recreational pleasure to be encountered in literature and in the creative play of language”. In the Leaving Certificate course, students are encouraged to develop a more sophisticated range of skills and concepts (NCCA, 2008). The key objectives pertaining to the aesthetic use of language at Leaving Certificate Level in the area of comprehension highlight the necessity for active pupil engagement through the reading and writing in a wide variety of aesthetic genres; engagement in the interpretative performance of texts; the development of skills of reflection; re-reading and evaluation. In the development of pupils’ skills of composition, the syllabus encourages frequent writing within the aesthetic forms encountered (e.g. poetry); the composition of ‘interventions’ (i.e. alternative scenarios based on texts studied) in order to enhance understanding; the use of response journals— expressive of students’ growing acquaintance with a text over a period of time and the composition of analytical and coherent essays relative to a text (NCCA, 2008).

In addition the Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English handbook (NCCA, 2009), developed for teachers of the current syllabus, highlights the necessity for pupils to engage critically with poetry through a variety of active learning methodologies. It highlights the capacity of poetry to evoke emotive expression and advocates rich encounters with each poem studied;

Poetry works in a sensuous manner. It seeks not just to communicate ideas or to give a message. It creates a series of powerful images/pictures/scenes in our imagination which interact in various ways and create sensations, feelings and experiences. Learning to read poetry means learning to interpret those scenes and experiences not at a literal level but at a level of ulterior meaning. (NCCA, 2009)

The Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English handbook advises that “literacy development equated with the teaching of minimalist, functionalist skills” (NCCA, 2009) will not afford students the opportunity to “experience the significance and power of language in their own personal and social contexts” (ibid) and further notes that “to be successful, literacy development must be contextualised within meaningful experiences of language” (ibid).

The philosophy of personal engagement with the aesthetic genre is further exemplified in the Resource Materials for Teaching Language handbook which was written to supplement and develop the ideas and methodological approaches outlined in the Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English. In this document teachers are urged to be innovative in their approach to the teaching of poetry in the acknowledgement that “each author will play creatively with the genre; it is through being able to appreciate the characteristic approach of an author in contrast with other authors that we can come to understand and achieve insight into individual artistry” (NCCA, 2009). Teachers are encouraged to experiment with activities such as those which will investigate pupils’ stereotypes to the teaching of poetry (2009 p.26). It is avowed that the teaching of poetry through novel and challenging activities such as those outlined above will serve to “enrich their (students) sense of the resourcefulness of poets and the potential of the imagination to distil poetry out of almost anything” (NCCA, 2009). This research serves to explore the opportunities afforded to pupils to engage in such ‘novel and challenging’ activities, through an investigation into the pedagogical methodologies being utilised by the poetry teacher at Leaving Certificate Level in Ireland currently.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research based on perspectives as in this study is qualitative inquiry, based on subjective realities therefore quantitative data alone was not sufficient to explore often deeply embedded individual responses (Dyson, 2006). This study therefore takes a pragmatic research approach (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005), embodying the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research. This research employs the use of quantitative research to achieve a broad and encapsulating response framework from which the qualitative research finds its basis and delves beyond closed response into deep inquiry.

Field research occurred in two phases. Phase one involved the collection of data via postal questionnaire. A semi-structured questionnaire was selected as a research tool for this phase as it provides large scale statistical results, while also reflecting the underlying perspectives of teachers. This stage of the research centred on an investigation through six lenses into the teaching of poetry at Leaving Certificate Level: The Leaving Certificate Teacher of poetry, Leaving Certificate poetry studies, The Leaving Certificate poetry syllabus, resources utilised, methodologies employed and The Leaving Certificate Examination. This paper focuses on lens five; methodologies employed.

Questionnaires generate a considerable amount of statistical data from a large distribution of participants on predetermined variables but fail to examine these variables in-depth. In order to analyse the impact of the introduction of the current Leaving Certificate syllabus on English teachers and on their subsequent teaching strategies it was essential to conduct individual interviews with a cohort of practicing teachers. As noted by Gerson and Horowitz (2002);

To unravel the complexities of large scale social change, it is necessary to examine the intricacies of individual lives. Individual interviews provide the opportunity to examine how large-scale social transformations are experienced, interpreted, and ultimately shaped by the responses of strategic social factors.

Phase two of this research therefore involved the collection of qualitative data via interview. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for phase two of the research as they facilitated the researcher to delve further into the emerging issues from phase one. It afforded the collection of data in a discursive, flexible and ‘emergent’ manner (Charmaz, 2003). It was not constructed to obtain response on a set of pre-defined response categories which would almost certainly fail to identify emerging issues of interest. Such a focus, according to Marshall and Rossman (2006) places appropriate emphasis on the ‘emic’ perspective and in doing so successfully subverts the ‘etic’ perspective. A focused analysis of the etic perspective was integral to the research undertaken in phase two of the research.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The teacher questionnaire elicited a 58% response from the schools to which it was distributed. 85 teachers in total responded to the questionnaire. Of these teachers 25 (31%) were male and 56 (69%) were female. Four teachers chose not to respond to this question. 23.8% taught in single sex boys’ schools, 23.8% also taught in single sex girls’ schools and 52.4% taught in co-educational schools. 50.6% taught in voluntary secondary schools; 27.1% in community schools; 5.9% in comprehensive schools and 5.9% in vocational schools.
63.5% of respondents taught English prior to the introduction of the syllabus in 1999. The research cohort for phase two is detailed in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>Syllabus taught (current/ Previous)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher C</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher E</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher G</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher H</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>both</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Phase Two Participants

While this paper focuses on just one of the six lenses used to research teachers’ perceptions on the teaching of poetry at Leaving Certificate Level; teaching methodologies, it is necessary to contextualise these findings with two responses emergent from lens one in relation to self-reflection on the part of the English teacher. In response to questions focusing on self-reflection, participants’ answers were positive. Participating poetry teachers reported high levels of self-efficacy. 96.5% of respondents in this research felt they are very confident in terms of their professional capacity. Further to this and of equal importance for the effective teaching of an engaging poetry studies course, is the enjoyment experienced by teachers themselves in their profession. Again, this research highlights a high level of positivity among teachers towards the teaching of poetry, with 92.5% of teachers reporting to the high levels of satisfaction and enjoyment experienced in the teaching of poetry at this level. The positive sense of self-efficacy and personal enjoyment experienced by teachers in their daily interactions in the classroom provides an interesting contextualisation for findings obtained on the teaching methodologies utilised by these teachers.

While the pedagogical opportunities afforded to teachers through the framework of the current syllabus are abundant, there remains reluctance amongst poetry teachers to embrace such opportunities in the classroom. Teaching methodologies retain a traditionalist approach to the greater extent and the teaching of poetry studies in the Leaving Certificate classroom appears to belie the innovate roots from which the syllabus found its genesis. Active engagement in alternative arts-based activities deriving from poetry is limited in its usage. The illustration of poems through pictorial representation is an infrequent activity in the Leaving Certificate classroom with over half (58.8%) of teachers in this study ‘rarely’ (25.9%) or ‘never’ (32.9%) using this pedagogical approach to poetry studies. Similarly the use of drama-in-education as advocated in the Leaving Certificate English Syllabus and accompanying documents is largely negated, with 75% of English teachers ‘never’ (33.3%) or ‘rarely’ (41.7%) using this technique in the teaching of poetry. However, the potential benefits of such pedagogical approaches are duly acknowledged by the teachers in this research with one teacher stating “I know if you asked me straight out what I should do – that is what I should do. It helps the pupils to empathise with the poet themselves” (Teacher C).

The composition of poetry in the Leaving Certificate classroom is a strategy strongly advocated in the syllabus, however this research found that this approach is utilised to a very limited extent by the majority of teachers (67.4%) in this study, who reported that they ‘sometimes/ rarely’ ask their pupils to compose poetry and a further 16.9% of teachers who reported that this pedagogical approach is ‘never’ utilised in their classroom. The pressure to focus solely on material being examined at the end of this course of study was cited as a
primary reason by many of the participating teachers for the exclusion of this methodology. As poetry writing is not examined formally as part of the Leaving Certificate exam it is therefore not viewed by the pupil as beneficial to their learning. According to one interviewee: “I’ve tried before (to develop pupils poetry writing skills) but students say this isn’t relevant…the points, the points, the points” (Teacher A). Another teacher in this study reported similarly stating:

No we don’t. I don’t have time and I feel embarrassed to tell you that but no. It’s something I should do more often but I’m concentrating so much on the syllabus, the curriculum, the curriculum and I’m so obsessed with it that I’m forgetting; I’m leaving out very important details like getting student to compose themselves.

In addition, this research found that similar to the pedagogical neglect of poetry composition, the use of creative-imitation as advocated in the syllabus documents is also being under-exploited, a factor due to time constraints and exam pressures according to the participating teachers. Only 9.4% of teachers in this research ‘often’ use creative-imitation in class and a further 35.3% ‘rarely’ utilise this pedagogical technique. As noted by one teacher, “when it comes down to it we’re working within the confines of the exam” (Teacher F).

In relation to the development of pupils’ ability to critically respond to and personally engage with poetry, the pervasion of a traditionalist approach to teaching is evident from this research. The use of response journals has been advocated in the Leaving Certificate Syllabus as a means of affording students with the opportunity to track their evolving perceptions of individual poems, thereby furthering pupils’ personal engagement and developing their critical responses to poetry. This research found that the majority of Leaving Certificate poetry teachers (65.9%) do not use response journals in their poetry class. In addition while over half (51.8%) of the teachers in this research ‘always’ ask pupils for a personal interpretation of a poem and a further 41.2% ‘often’ ask pupils for a personal response, difficulties in terms of pupils’ self-efficacy and encouraging a subjective pupil response encountered by teachers has in many cases resulted in the provision of response notes from the teacher for the pupil. As acknowledged by one participant, “I know teachers who give reams and reams and reams of pages of their own notes to students” (Teacher D).

In exploring the autonomy allocated to the Leaving Certificate pupil within the poetry class, this study sought to identify the frequency with which teachers permitted their pupils to select poetry to be studied. 30.6% of teachers in this research asserted that they ‘rarely’ allow their pupils to choose poems to be studied in the poetry class and a further 18.8% stated that this pedagogical approach is ‘never’ utilised in their class. Only 20% ‘often’ afforded their pupils the opportunity to select their poetry texts and 29.4% of teachers ‘sometimes’ facilitated this activity, suggesting a classroom dynamic in which the teacher holds autonomy relating to poetry selection. The following perspective is reflective of this finding but also highlights that infrequent use of this method is not necessarily connected with a lack of motivation on behalf of the teacher but more passivity on the part of the Leaving Certificate student: “I think the students are often quite happy if I select the poems. I suppose if people desperately wanted to do a poem of course I’d say yes but it hasn’t really come up. They’re usually happy enough to go with the selection that I’ve chosen” (Teacher A).
EMERGENT ISSUES

The findings outlined above highlight to a certain extent a disparity in the participating teachers’ philosophies and the pedagogical methodologies they employ in the poetry class. Results gleaned on teacher reflexivity indicate those poetry teachers who partook in the research to be interested and motivated in their profession, while results obtained on the methodologies employed by the same teachers suggest adherence to a traditionalist rather than innovative approach to teaching poetry in the class. Further to this, a key finding of this research highlights a reliance on the supply of notes at Leaving Certificate Level on both the part of the poetry teacher and pupil. While teachers outlined their attempts to obtain a personal response from pupils on poetry studied, they further asserted their attempts to be often thwarted by a demand for conclusive meaning and detailed notes on the part of the pupil. This ‘battle’ and its impact on teacher motivation is reflected upon by Teacher D who stresses “I’m fighting against this and some of them are just sitting back passively you know, ones who are very bright. They’re just not engaging because they know they’re going to learn these (notes) off. Then when you give them a question some of them regurgitate the notes without even twisting them to answer the question. I find that very disheartening”. Similarly Teacher C states “They (pupils) don’t think on their feet. Anything they write in the exam they have learned off by heart”.

Conversely Teacher C discusses how such a methodology is a fluid daily feature of their poetry class rather than ‘a battle’, “The bulk of my methodology, the bulk of how I impart my knowledge to them is note taking. We don’t spend too long on each poem before I move onto the next one. I certainly would give them a good idea of what the poem is about before I move onto the next one.” The impact of this style of teaching on pupil enjoyment is echoed by one teacher from phase two, who felt that, An awful lot of students now want to be spoon fed with notes and you have this ridiculous situation then where pupils are learning off essays by heart for the leaving cert which is crazy. Where is the originality going to come in? I know teachers who give reams and reams and reams of pages of their own notes to students. It’s hard to justify from the point of view that it’s just for points they’re doing it. I believe an awful lot of those students that are forced with all their notes, after their leaving cert they will never ever open a poetry book again. (Teacher H)

Teacher D too suggests that the unnecessary provision of notes for pupils at Leaving Certificate Level may be indicative of the self-efficacy of the poetry teacher, “I think some teachers give them out ‘cause they want they’re pupils to do well. They’re afraid it will reflect on them if their pupils don’t do well and that they won’t do well if they don’t have all these phrases”. Concluding on this theme Teacher A remarks, “It’s ironic in some cases that we’re back to the rote learning which we’ve been trying for the last fifty years to get away from”.

CONCLUSIONS

From a positive perspective, this research has found that poetry teachers working at Leaving Certificate Level are highly confident in the implementation of the syllabus and readily enjoy the challenges it presents. However time constraints and exam pressures have been asserted by a vast majority of teachers as detrimental to their pedagogical ambitions within the poetry class. Such demands have forced a reductionist approach to the provision of active learning methodologies at Leaving Certificate Level; encouraged a focus on pre-scripted response to
poems and in doing so shifted emphasis from critical engagement to rote learning, a displacement in engagement from the creative to systematic. The findings of this research do not stand in isolation; in relation to the provision of ‘non-traditional’ methodologies at Junior Certificate Level, O’Neill (1998) comments that “One sees again the clear evidence of the traditional pattern of class-work in relation to poetry”. Based on the findings of this research the same may be asserted relating to poetry provision at Leaving Certificate Level in Ireland currently.

The findings of this research combined with that of O’Neill (1998) bear similarity to those of research conducted on the English National Curriculum which found that “there was insufficient time to read anything which is not named and that the pressures of a crammed curriculum mean that there is now less time for poetry than formerly” (Benton, 2000). In addition the focus on the production of ‘correct’ responses to poetry from the perspective of both the teacher and student in light of the summative examination is not a secularised finding. Benton (2000) highlights a similar pressure experienced by teachers and students in England “to produce an acceptable (i.e. to the board) or ‘correct’ response” in the summative poetry exam. O’Neill (1998) contends that “teachers need to worry less about meaning and technical terminology, about knowledge, themes and the ‘right’ answers, and put more of their energies into finding strategies which give poems the space to speak to the students”, a sentiment echoed by Dymoke (2002) who stresses that poetry taught with such a secularised focus has become “deadeningly linked with written response on terminal examination papers”.

On balance from the perspective of teachers, the poetry syllabus currently utilised at Leaving Certificate Level in Ireland warrants accolade. Its opportunity to engage pupils at a critical, personal and aesthetic level is absolute. The preservation of opportunity is now called to attention. The value of education and poetry as outlined in this syllabus must continually be elevated above demographic functionalities in order to afford students with an education embodied with the attributes inherent to the development of the individual as a critically engaged, independent and creative thinker.

The spirit of inquiry is eternally energised and renewed by the need to have a bit of fun. This, to me, is the real meaning of education: asking questions in a spirit of intellectual seriousness and genuine wonder and then putting the heart into enjoying the myriad playful possibilities of life…Maybe the answers are there; and maybe they’re not. But the questions are asked. That’s the important thing.

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