

“That’s Schoolified!” How Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment Shape the Educational Potential of Poetry in Subject English for Black High School Learners

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Abstract

This article explores the teaching of English poetry in two Gauteng high schools, one a suburban, former Model C school and another in Soweto. Both schools are attended predominantly by Black learners for whom English is not their first language. Nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators at the two schools. The choice of poems, pedagogy and assessment emerged as important themes in making poetry relevant and educational in South African schools. Writers from similar backgrounds, with common “race” or class-based identities, helped make poetry relevant, but were no guarantee that learners would relate to these poets. Teaching poetry was described as an intimidating experience both for learners and educators, resulting in many teachers retreating to the safe space of a defined set of teaching practices focused on figures of speech, literary devices and a line-by-line analysis of the poems. While some intentions existed to teach poetry in a way that encouraged a range of interpretations and possible answers to assessment questions, the standardised matric examination shaped pedagogical practices, as educators wanted to support learners to excel. These findings are interpreted in a post/decolonial context where a range of disparate “Englishes”, identities, learners and histories exist, and neoliberal education policies and practices increasingly standardise assessment processes, with implications for the teaching and learning of poetry.

Keywords: poetry; curriculum; poetry teaching; poetry curriculum; South African schools

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REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Education as Change

<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC>

Volume 24 | 2020 | #7600 | 20 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/7600>

ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)

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Language is a tool for thought and communication. It is also a cultural and aesthetic means commonly shared among a people to make better sense of the world they live in. Learning to use language effectively enables learners to acquire knowledge, to express their identity, feelings and ideas, to interact with others It also provides learners with a rich, powerful and deeply rooted set of images and ideas that can be used to make their world other than it is. (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011, 8)

Introduction¹

The Educational Potential of Poetry

The epigraph is taken from the South African Department of Basic Education's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). It outlines the purposes of language education for secondary school learners, including sharpening their thinking and improving communication. Languages can expose learners to new ideas, expanding their worlds, inducting them into cultural and aesthetic forms that are shared among groups, including their own social groups, and in the process helping them to express their identities. The CAPS proceeds:

The main reason for reading literature in the classroom is to develop in learners a sensitivity to a special use of language that is more refined, literary, figurative, symbolic, and deeply meaningful [It is] an added method of revealing, reinforcing, and highlighting their ideas. (DBE 2011, 10)

Literature is intended to expose learners to creative techniques used to enhance the ways in which ideas are shared. In this article I engage with the inclusion of one literary form—poetry—exploring how it may contribute to the objectives outlined in the CAPS statement. Research was conducted with educators at two high schools in Johannesburg: one a suburban former Model C² school and another in Soweto, Johannesburg's largest township. There were no white learners at either school. Nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators: five at the former Model C school and four at the township school. All the educators interviewed at the former Model C school were white. Each school's English department contained eight educators in total, meaning that approximately half the English educators at the two schools participated in the study. The research with educators explored the following question: How do the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices shape the educational potential of poetry in subject English for Black high school learners in Johannesburg?

¹ In this article, the term "Black" denotes not an essentialised racial category, but a social construct that has relevance for learners whose families were marginalised under apartheid. For the vast majority of these learners English is not their first language. I use the term to refer to learners whose families were classified as "Black African" under apartheid, rather than the more inclusive term popularised by Steve Biko.

² While the term "Model C" technically refers to a particular model of school governance for public schools in South Africa, it has become shorthand for former "whites-only" public schools.

By “educational potential” I mean the capacity to aid the processes mentioned in the CAPS: to sharpen thinking and the ability to articulate and communicate ideas effectively, as well as to induct learners into cultural and aesthetic forms shared among groups, including their own social groups. Poetry should help to build learners’ identities and help them learn about others. International and South African research on teaching poetry at schools has shown that the educational potential of poetry is not always realised.

International and South African Research on Teaching Poetry

Some international research on teaching poetry found it a difficult and alienating literary form, while other work suggests that it can helpfully bridge learners’ everyday and school worlds and foster their cognitive and emotional development (Benton 1999; Doug 2011; Dykmoke 2012; Linaberger 2005; Wilson 2013). In terms of negative findings, poetry’s language, diction and imagery have been experienced as unfamiliar and intimidating (Benton 1984). Educators describe insecurities around analysing and interpreting poetry (Benton 1999; Linaberger 2005). Poetry is often seen as elitist; British educators reported that students complained that poetry was “posh” (Doug 2011). These class-based divisions could be even more pronounced in South Africa, where class intersects with “race”, meaning that English poetry could be culturally unfamiliar and alienating.

Other research has found that educators endorse poetry as important, with its educational potential linked to emotional resonance and real-life topics. Educators in some studies said poetry was relevant to life, and that it allowed students to engage through emotional responses, rather than pure rationality (Benton 1999; Wilson 2013). Poetry catalyses imaginative inquiry, cross-pollinating more rational and scientific school subjects and tasks (Young 2016). Poetry enables personal and emotional links with poems, an unusual interaction between students and the texts they generally encounter in classrooms (Doug 2011). Poetry also encourages forms of multimodal learning, combining the written word, audible voice and bodily movement (Archer and Newfield 2014; Simecek and Rumbold 2016). It has the potential to enhance both students’ classroom based and real-life literacies (Dykmoke 2012). The educational potential of poetry is therefore linked to its ability to connect with learners’ emotions, as well as their lives outside the classroom. The traumatic experiences that many Black South African learners face in relation to a violent society plagued by poverty and inequality may result in poetry being an important cathartic outlet. Poetry could provide a medium through which students make sense of their daily lives, in the context of a divided and confusingly fractured society, resulting in its fertile educational potential.

While little research has been conducted on poetry teaching in South African classrooms, some work indicates that poetry may hold potential if it draws on existing cultural forms, such as praise poetry and popular culture, for example hip hop (Cooper 2016; Newfield and D’Abdon 2015; Newfield and Maungedzo 2006). Promoting multimodality is important in this regard, which means not privileging written forms

over oral, visual, bodily or other forms of meaning-making. Engaging with poetry outside South African classrooms has demonstrated rich potential for learning, with multimodal classroom poetry producing similar results (Newfield and Maungedzo 2006).

Some research finds poetry to be alienating, unfamiliar and irrelevant, yet other studies indicate the opposite: that poetry may catalyse connections to learners' lives outside the classroom and tap into their emotional worlds. These paradoxical findings indicate that it may be the curriculum and pedagogy—the poems chosen and the ways they are taught—that determine the educational potential of poetry.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

While English poetry may be alienating because it is not taught in the mother tongue of the majority of South African learners, research on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) hints that English poetry may still have educational potential for Black South African learners. Poetry has the ability to make links with learners' everyday lifeworlds, a central focus of research on CRP. Under the banner of CRP or asset-based pedagogies, research in the United States of America has shown that meaningful classroom learning and improved academic outcomes can be attained by resonating with students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992): their cultural resources, values, worldviews and experiences. This approach refutes marginalised students' cultural resources as deficient or a hindrance to learning (Gonzalez and Moll 2002; Lee 2007; Moll et al. 1992). Instead, links between students' out of school resources and discipline-specific school learning are encouraged in efforts to enhance the education of marginalised and minority youth (Ladson-Billings 1995; Lee 2007; Moll et al. 1992). CRP aspires to integrate the values, practices and experiences of marginalised groups into the pedagogical process, drawing connections between reference points that students bring to classrooms and the knowledges and practices that they encounter at school (Moll et al. 1992; Ladson-Billings 2009). This has been shown to improve their self-esteem, interest in academic work and relationships with educators (Gay 2000; Howard 2001; Leonard and Hill 2008). Common themes in poems, such as apartheid, as well as the origins of the poets and the contexts they write about, have close connections to the real lifeworlds of Black South African learners, implying that teaching poetry may be highly relevant and beneficial.

Exploring forms of CRP through poetry could be a timely intervention in South Africa, as poetry teaching has shown rich promise for Africanising and decolonising curricula, which is sorely needed (D'Abdon 2016). Nationwide student protests at South African universities in 2015 and 2016 critiqued the colonial, irrelevant nature of university curricula. Black students felt that universities remain dominated by lingering colonial practices and knowledges, resulting in alienating and uncomfortable educational experiences. The protests have sparked research in multiple academic disciplines into what it means and takes to “decolonise” a curriculum. These protests raise the question of whether high school curricula, pedagogies and institutions are similarly plagued by

forms of coloniality. While poetry may be considered a foreign genre with colonial connotations, linked to its classic forms as practised in Europe, a large body of local poetry exists, including poems by Black South Africans, indicating that it could be used to decolonise curricula.

South African poetry could be considered a form of indigenous knowledge with rich educational potential. This notion of indigeneity links knowledge forms and practices to the places where they are produced, rather than advocating for a form of essentialism. African poetry as indigenous knowledge is place-based and Africa-centred, historically forged but fluid and changing (D'Abdon et al. forthcoming). Poetry as indigenous knowledge draws on a range of linguistic and stylistic traditions and choices, with both local and global connections (D'Abdon et al. forthcoming). As a body of work, South African poetry is forged in the settler-colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid experiences, calcifying droplets of knowledge through poetry, a living archive of these interactions (D'Abdon et al. forthcoming). Here I explore the relationship between poetry, place and notions of indigeneity, asking how learners' perceptions of poems, poets and place shape what and how they learn from poetry.

To sum up, poetry holds rich educational potential to connect with learners' everyday lives in meaningful ways and to engage them by transcending purely rational and cognitive forms of inquiry, delving into emotional domains through multimodal methods of teaching and learning. This is particularly relevant in a society with traumatic circumstances and histories, such as South Africa. Despite this fertile potential, some research has found that educators struggle to teach poetry and learners experience it as elitist, unfamiliar and alienating. Connections between poetry and forms of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy highlight the potential to link learners' lifeworlds to the classroom, simultaneously prioritising their academic success and socio-political consciousness. This may be particularly useful in South Africa, where university students have recently dismissed curricula and teaching as underpinned by colonialism, rather than familiar cultural reference points. I explore how this may be achieved by delving into poetry curricula choices as well as educators' teaching and assessment practices in two high schools in Johannesburg.

Producing Poetic Data: Research Contexts, Interviews with Educators and Analysis

As mentioned, the research formed part of a broader project led by the South African Poetry Project (ZAPP), a collective of poetry practitioners, scholars and educators. Some educators have been drawn into the ZAPP network through their postgraduate studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, where they met academics involved in the network. A group of these educators, along with poets and academics, attend ZAPP meetings. During one of these meetings, educators from two schools volunteered their schools as research sites. The educators then introduced the research team to school management and staff and facilitated interviews with their colleagues in the English

departments, as well as interactions with learners who were participating in extracurricular poetry activities.

The large, former Model C school is located in a suburb approximately 20km from central Johannesburg. It had an all-white student body in 1994, but is now attended exclusively by Black students. The Soweto school is also located approximately 20km from central Johannesburg and is attended mainly by isiXhosa-speaking and, to a lesser extent, SeSotho-speaking learners. While few of the learners at either school came from English-speaking households, learners at the former Model C school had greater English resources at their disposal and were more affluent, relatively speaking, than learners who attended the school in Soweto.

The research project was described to educators at the two schools at an English department meeting and educators were then requested to volunteer if they were prepared to participate in an individual interview. The nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews took place in empty classrooms after school, lasting approximately one hour each. Interviews were fairly open-ended, allowing the participants to interpret the questions on their own terms (Burman 1994). An interview schedule was roughly followed, probing a range of areas related to the teaching of poetry in classrooms. Interview questions explored where they have studied, heard and read poetry (inside and outside formal tuition spaces), which poems they find rewarding, challenging or unpleasant to teach, their aims, experiences and methods in teaching poetry and which poems they believe students enjoy the most.

The interviews were transcribed in full and a thematic analysis was conducted, identifying key themes in the transcripts, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach. This involved becoming familiar with the dataset as a whole and an initial generation of codes, used as the basis for identifying key themes. Interpretations were then made, assessing the relevance of these themes in relation to the dataset as a whole, the research question and contexts (Braun and Clarke 2012). A descriptive account of the findings was produced, with the key themes of the curriculum, teaching methods and assessment standing out from the initial analysis. These themes were then interpreted using relevant theoretical and analytical concepts and frameworks. The research project was approved by the ethics committee of the relevant institution and the confidentiality of all participants was maintained.

Findings from the Research

Theme 1: “The Moment There Is Something They Can Relate to It Opens up the Conversation”: Curriculum Choices and the Relevance of Poetry

The first issue that shaped whether poetry resonated with learners at both schools was the difficulty of the language contained in the poems. An educator at the township school said:

It's a language issue. Low English. Most of the poems in the syllabus, yoh they're hard; they completely turn them off poetry, which is terrible. Kids with higher English do well. Even them, if you not thinking, writing, being creative in English every day, even English first language kids are turned off [It's a] way of thinking and expressing they're not familiar with If it's clearly a love poem or a self-affirmation poem that's the genre and the language is clear, then kids can really connect with that.

As this educator explained, even mother tongue English-speaking learners regularly struggle with language used in poetry, so non-native speakers are not likely to be enticed to explore these cultural artefacts and students at township schools really battle to understand the poetry set in the curriculum. Not only is the vocabulary often difficult, poetry contains a “way of thinking and expressing” that is unfamiliar to township learners. Educators at the former Model C school expressed similar sentiments:

“Eating poetry” [a poem by Mark Strand], they don't have a flipping clue. It's on a different level. They don't relate to it. “London” by William Wordsworth goes right over their heads. Not relevant to our learners. So you spend the entire hour explaining content to them and never get to that point where you can actually enjoy poetry. I actually think we should incorporate some of their musicians.

The language used, the genre of poetry, the poets and their contexts, such as Wordsworth in London, contribute to learners' inability to “relate” to the poem. Educators spend the vast majority of their time explaining what individual words mean and providing learners with information on the cultural context, inhibiting pleasure in poetry. This educator indicated that connecting with learners' cultural resources, “their musicians”, may help to alleviate this discord. The concept of relevance appeared regularly in the interviews. One educator described relevance as follows:

I would have poetry that deals with issues more relevant to young people; they respond to those poems better. It comes back to their frame of reference. ... But we cannot just expose them to that. I suppose that's why we still do Shakespeare. ... I would keep the mixture of poetry but would change the balance. More South African and African writers and poetry. They respond so much better. So much more participation and questions.

This educator grappled with the issue of relevance, explaining that the poetry curriculum should address familiar topics, but that learners also need to be exposed to issues that may be beyond their immediate reference points. Her mention of Shakespeare is probably due to the assumption that he engages with universal and timeless themes such as love, justice and betrayal. In the interview she realised through reflection that the same themes can be found in African texts and that these local texts are less difficult for learners to comprehend than Shakespeare. She concluded that a balance of local and international authors should be included in the curriculum and that the weighting is currently skewed in favour of authors from elsewhere. Her experiences of teaching African and South African poetry led to her view that students relate better to local poetry, with increased participation and greater willingness to engage in dialogue

through questions. Relevance is therefore both related to individual poems connecting with the challenges learners face, as well as a broader issue related to the composition of the curriculum as a whole and the overall flavour of its content. She highlighted that relevance requires both familiar authors and topics, but also new ideas. Relevance was often complicated:

For poetry to be interesting they need to read poets from similar backgrounds to them. Role models in their types of communities. [But] just to say we need more African poets or more Black poets, it's not getting to the complexity of the issue. Cause you bring like Koleka Putuma poem and it's amazing ... that type of poet, like Model C school bam nails it, but here that English level and way of speaking and even some of the issues, they're not the same issues, they may be connected ... but just because a person's Black and has a history of being oppressed by white people, it doesn't mean that people are experiencing that in the same way.

This township school educator explained that poets who originate from similar backgrounds to learners help to promote poetry and make poetry relevant. However, prominent poets who grew up in the townships usually progress in their education beyond the levels reached by most township children; their knowledge of English develops exponentially and they are exposed to new contexts due to their professional success. Simply matching township schools with poets who began life in the township is therefore no guarantee that learners will relate to the work these poets ultimately produce. This educator therefore felt that, as these poets become more middle class and cosmopolitan, their work is more likely to resonate with learners at former Model C schools. Township learners will not necessarily relate to their poetry, even if they share a "racial identity".

Further insights into poetry's relevance are illuminated by one poem that educators believed learners loved and another that they felt learners disliked intensely:

I did a poem by Lebo Mashile "Tomorrow's Daughters" ... that thing. We spent 4 periods; we were meant to spend two. I try to have flexibility when it's touching the kids. The moment there is something they can relate to it opens up the conversation. A lot of the SA poems they get it, but like the English poets, we have to do sonnets, they are tested on the Italian and the Shakespearian sonnets and that kind of poetry they battle with. I also have to research those poems a lot. I teach African and South African; we teach Achebe. I relate better to that kind of poetry, so I teach it better.

Lebo Mashile's "Tomorrow's Daughters" was described by three of the five educators at the former Model C school as a poem that formed part of the curriculum and excited learners. Unlike Shakespearean sonnets, "the language, the concepts, the ideas, the themes" of this poem are accessible to learners. It also offers a rich reservoir of meaning in terms of the themes alluded to in its figurative language, its politics and cross-references to other poets. The educator mentioned Achebe as another author whom she

enjoyed teaching, illustrating the relevance of African authors in these South African classrooms.

The choice of poems also needs to be considered in relation to the curriculum as a body of work:

Next year I'm in charge of Grade 10 so I'll do it a bit differently. Because of the poems that were chosen, it's either political or extremely depressing. Whereas when they choose something by Keats, Byron, Wordsworth, they go for something about love, nature. Which I think does both of them an injustice, I don't think it gives a complete or nutshell picture.

Caricaturing African and South African poetry as only engaging with politics, while Western poetry addresses the themes of beauty, nature and love, misrepresents the entirety of these bodies of work. It also problematically insinuates that while Western poets deal with universal themes of nature, love and beauty, Africans only engage with local political conflicts such as apartheid.

There was evidence that educators found international poems that could stimulate "relevance":

Interviewer: Can you name a difficult poem to teach?

Interviewee: "London, 1802." He writes about Milton and I really struggled to get them to turn on because it was so removed from their political culture. Removed from their time. ... Then we did "Next, Please", but they responded to it better because the abstract theme in it was something they could identify with. The language in "London" was high but that wasn't the problem and they didn't do too badly on it in the test, they just studied the poem like a parrot. ... I wish I could have done something with them that was a bit more relevant. And by relevant I don't mean more modern or even South African necessarily, just relevant to them.

Poetic relevance is not necessarily tied to place of origin or the identity of the author. This educator explained that Larkin's "Next, Please" was popular among the learners because they could relate to the universal theme and the language was accessible. However, Wordsworth's "London, 1802" required a great deal of contextualisation in terms of the changing values the poet felt were being eroded with the emergence of industrial society. The context in which that poem was written and the themes that it spoke to had little connection to Black high school learners in post-apartheid South Africa. Another difficult issue that further complicates the teaching of poetry, explored more substantially in the next section, is that good teaching takes time. The issue of morals and values is timeless, but to make "London, 1802" relevant would require detailed history lessons and an understanding of the poet's context. In this sense "relating to their own lives" is not simply about the themes being the same, such as morality, but the ways in which these themes play out in their particular historical context. The fact that "Next, Please" by Larkin was relevant to learners implies that

relevance is not only about place or the origins of the poet, but is also linked to the pedagogy used and how educators help learners to find relevance as they navigate the distance between their own time and place and that of the poet.

Relevance was a complex issue related both to individual poems and to the corpus of poetry that was presented to learners as a whole. The accessibility of the language clearly impacted on relevance, as second- or third-language speakers not comprehending the vocabulary of the poem resulted in alienation. Writers from similar backgrounds, with common “race”-based or class-based identities, helped make the poetry relevant, but were no guarantees that learners would relate to these poets: the poets may have left the township, or may no longer focus on its cultural reference points. Educators were aware that African and South African poetry was more likely to resonate with learners, but stressed that it was good for them to experience other cultures and perspectives. Educators were reticent to perpetuate stereotypes of Western poetry dealing with universal issues and African poetry only addressing politics. It became clear in the research that relevance was not related to curriculum choices alone, but was forged in the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

Theme 2: Grasping at Figures of Speech: Poetry Pedagogy

Most of the participant educators said that they used a structured process to teach poetry, including a focus on poetic devices and figures of speech, as well as line-by-line analysis. One educator explained:

If they don't know figures of speech it's going to be difficult for them to engage Poetic devices and figures of speech we do at Grade 8. So as they reach Grade 12 it's easier to understand. Then we go to the lines in the poem; what is the implication, what is the message, what is the poet trying to teach us. Then the learners get interest cause they compare it to their life situation. Cause once they get interested it's easier. But if you make it difficult, they won't like poetry.

Difficult vocabulary and an alien literary and cultural form led this educator to believe that breaking the process down into a number of constituent parts can enable learners to understand poetry better, generating interest. He stated that this method prepares learners for a high school experience in which poetry is an annual event, meaning that poetic devices and figures of speech provide scaffolding that can be reused and built upon as learners progress in their secondary schooling. Other educators stated that the use of these devices was for the benefit of the educators, rather than the learners:

I find it easier to teach those kinds of structures in that poetry. They're easier for teaching. That's what I feel.

Another educator agreed that the use of this highly structured teaching style helped with her insecurity around teaching poetry:

They have to number their lines. I read through the poem or one of them reads through it first. Then we'll do the structure of the poem, what is the line structure what is the stanza structure. We have a little structure bubble. Some of them come to class with their numbered lines and little structure bubbles. We discuss the vocabulary. Then we do a line-by-line breakdown. Line 1 what figures of speech, literary techniques. Then I ask them so what do you guys think this poem is about, but we don't discuss it in too much depth. I think I'm a bit insecure of teaching, I didn't do a 4-year B.Ed. So I constantly check with other educators and kids.

One of the difficulties of teaching poetry is that it is an interpretive, fairly abstract literary form, without a linear format and a singular, clear piece of knowledge that can easily be conveyed to learners. This means that the educator easily loses control of the pedagogical process in poetry teaching: they are unaccustomed to teaching this genre and it provokes anxiety. This is particularly the case for educators who feel they have not had adequate training, such as the educator above. One way of countering this insecurity is to construct a structured method for teaching poetry, a set of practices that can easily be replicated and repeated and which ensures that, at a minimum, the learners leave with a set of notes that provide evidence that teaching has taken place. Learners' written work can be used to demonstrate to school management and education department personnel that the educator is performing efficiently.

One of the problems with this approach is that poetry becomes characterised by attempts to identify correctly whether a figure of speech is, for example, a metaphor or a simile, rather than a focus on interpreting the meaning of the poem. An educator said:

I show them that our perceptions of the poem will be different and also the different figures of speech might be different ... for example the same line could be personification, can be metaphor, or hyperbole and all of us are right. So the whole point of that is that I want us to approach the poem from our own perspective and we must try analyse it. ... I'll ask them to pick up that metaphor but there will always be a child who picks up the personification so we'll have that discussion and as long as they can justify it then I welcome conflicting views.

While the educator above does indicate that she encourages different interpretations of the poem, her description indicates that the lesson centres on interpretations of the figures of speech. The purpose of the poem, the intentions of the poet and the ways in which he or she uses these devices become peripheral to the exercise; the priority shifts to breaking the poem down into its constituent parts, so that it becomes manageable and "teachable". The focus is transferred to the parts—in this case the figures of speech—rather than the meaning of the whole poem, with the primary concern being to identify and classify these correctly. Rather than using the figures of speech to help understand the poem, the figures of speech become the focus of concern in and of themselves. Poetry becomes a technical exercise to identify forms of language, rather than fulfil the aims of the CAPS, which state that poetry should aim to develop learners' identities,

learners should learn about others and be exposed to new ways of expressing their ideas. One educator expressed his frustration with this state of affairs:

Interviewee: Using poems to explain figures of speech ... is not a poem. It's a tickable term that's going to be tested in the exam. Who the hell writes a poem for great examples of metaphors? The way we study in a very theoretical, disconnected nature in school and make it a real thing. Poetry is an artistic expression, is a social behaviour, social event. It is a social practice, it's creative.

Interviewer: Why is it that way in school?

Interviewee: Because of the way the education system is in a long history that comes from a different tradition of poetry really. Or a tradition that favoured the written poetry as opposed to performed poetry. At some point people decided ... English educators in schools decided that poetry was a good thing to have in it. But so few of those people have ever been exposed or interested in real poetry, or been to poetry recitals or heard poets speak. So they don't know actually poetry is that. You'll often hear teachers say we need to know the figures of speech. That's like you make a system into it. That's schoolified. School needs to take things in the world and like make points on them. ... The irony is you just learn the constituent parts, but you don't put them into the whole again.

Part of this participant's frustration with teaching poetry at school is that what he calls "a real thing"—an active event or process—becomes transformed and divorced from its original context. In the process poetry changes from something that is alive—performed, and embodied—to dead words on a page. The reasons for "killing" poetry in this way are multiple, including some already alluded to, such as breaking poetry up into parts and focusing on specific devices that help to interpret lines of the poem, but not necessarily understand its overall meaning. Through this process, poetry teaching is based on strategies to pass tests, rather than, in line with the ambitions of the CAPS, to build learners' identities and help them to find creative and novel ways to express their thoughts.

One of the difficulties described in this process is that a necessary change of context occurs when poetry is transferred from the poet's studio, a performance space or reading room and placed in the school context. At school a certain amount of standardisation is required across the system; schools operate in rule-governed environments and they are controlled by the auspices of the state, all of which stifle and repress creativity, spontaneity and individuality. The process of "schoolifying" poetry operates to homogenise the process, in direct contradiction to the logic and purpose of poetry. Repeated readings of a poem are never identical and do not aspire to be so. However, the school system works to make things the same, uniform, with textbooks and memoranda that educators use to mark assignments. The ever-looming spectre of assessment had a considerable impact on how poetry was taught at the two schools.

Teaching poetry was described as an intimidating experience both for learners and educators. Confronted with this challenge, many educators retreated to the safe space of a defined set of teaching practices focused on figures of speech, literary devices and a line-by-line analysis of the poems. While some educators said that this made learning easier and that they could build on this knowledge in the future, these practices clearly also aided them. One educator was particularly vocal in his critique of poetry teaching at school, describing it as similar to other school learning processes that extract a practice and knowledge from its natural context, decontextualising and breaking it up into pieces, standardising it so that it is unrecognisable from its original form.

Theme 3: “There Are Some Teachers Who Won’t Teach If They Don’t Have a Memo”: Assessment

In South Africa, secondary school culminates with the matric examinations, the most important set of assessment tasks that determine whether or not learners may continue with tertiary studies. Preparing learners for poetry in the matric examinations was described by one educator as follows:

Interviewee: With the matrics you have to prepare them for the final exam, so it’s out of our control, although we know more or less what they will ask. That’s also something I try not to do.

Interviewer: Teach to the test?

Interviewee: You do that with your matriculants. You know what questions they’re going to ask. There won’t be questions outside of the parameters of the study guide. We make copies of the important notes.

This educator admitted that although she tried to avoid “teaching to the test” in general, this is largely not possible for the matric learners. A lot is at stake in matric and many educators feel they will be doing their learners a disservice if they do not utilise practices that are likely to improve learners’ results, even if these are anti-educational, such as reproducing and disseminating study guides. A fairly standardised, consistent set of questions is posed in these examinations, issues that are outlined in the above-mentioned “study guide”. Educators can transcribe notes and ensure that all the learners have access to these “answers” prior to the exam. Standardised answers for poetry assessment questions were also evident in the fact that a number of educators mentioned “the memo” or memorandum, a document constructed and shared between educators that details acceptable answers to examination questions. Memos are constructed by English department educators to act as standardised, acceptable answers for tests and are then used across multiple classes. In the case of matric, memos from past examinations are distributed to schools, as educators revealed:

There are some teachers who won’t teach if they don’t have a memo. So they going to want to have a feeling of what the answers would be to the questions, obviously so that they can go through them for their classes. But that depends on your experience and

approach to poetry. I see poetry as open to interpretation and that's how I introduce it to the Grade 11s, how poetry can change perspectives. Whereas there are other teachers who want to know that this can only be a metaphor and if it can be anything else then that must also be on the memo. It comes down to experience and it comes down to just level of knowledge you have with regard to genre, that type of poetry, and that poet.

And:

And then we have a memo meeting and I'll say this is also another way of looking at it and the child has responded. Very often we can't accept that second answer. So if we gonna teach the children "be open minded, it's open to your interpretation", then we need to include that in the memo. In our memo discussions, we are a bit too rigid in terms of what we expect.

There was evidence in the research that educators often had good intentions to teach in an open-minded way and accept a range of interpretations for examination questions, but in practice this was made difficult by the construction of memoranda with prescribed examination answers. Many educators then worked backwards, using these memos in future classes to ensure that learners had access to the "correct" answers, inhibiting the possibility of teaching poetry in a more dynamic, interpretive, multimodal and experiential manner. The educator above indicated that this pedagogical method was due to anxiety and a lack of experience, rather than a belief that this is the only acceptable method. The fact that educators explained to the learners that, as readers of poetry, they need to be open-minded, indicates that a will existed to teach in an alternative manner. However, the reality of school life, including the pressures of examinations, the desire to be fair to all learners by having standardised answers and the fact that educators have different levels of experience, all mean that "the memo" is often retained as an invaluable tool that structures the teaching of poetry. This resulted in the subject of English being perceived in a certain light:

It's as if the English curriculum is structured around teaching them the facts. English has become a study subject like history. You get the poem; you get the notes. You study those notes, write the test. You study notes from the textbook and go and write on what you studied. Instead of feeling the language on your mouth and watching it on paper and becoming comfortable in that skin or in that tongue, to speak in that tongue. So no, I don't think they express themselves.

Similar to the educator who critiqued how poetry becomes "schoolified", this educator described how poetry is learnt on paper rather than on the tongue; it is a disembodied and uncomfortable experience, one that is largely alienating for the learner. This means that learners do not express themselves in poetry, or English for that matter, as they are reduced to automatons that are simply required to memorise and repeat what they are given in the notes and the textbook. One educator lamented how this teaching and learning process compared with her own university education, expressing disappointment in school education:

I struggle. I really really struggle. One thing I enjoyed about varsity is that I felt like this is for you and the world. It was enrichment. If you want to pass, tell me why it's a good poem. Not tell me ABC.

What does it mean that poetry is “for you and the world”? It implies that, rather than its purpose being to demonstrate that a learner can memorise certain answers and recite them, the process is designed to give learners agency, to encourage them to build a relationship with the poetry and the poems and create their own answers.

While some intentions existed to teach poetry in a way that encourages a range of interpretations and answers to assessment questions, the standardised matric examination shaped pedagogical practices around this event, as educators wanted to support learners to excel in this ordeal. Participant educators indicated that standardised assessment procedures went beyond the matric examination, as it appeared that a “memorandum” was created for school tests and examinations. Desired answers were pre-recorded on this document as the only acceptable responses, limiting learner agency and the freedom to produce alternative interpretations of the poems.

Discussion: Finding the “Poetry of Poetry” in a Neoliberal Education System

Research with educators teaching Black learners in Johannesburg found that the choice of poets and poems, combined with teaching and assessment methods, significantly shaped the educational potential of poetry. It highlighted that the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment need to be focused on collectively if the teaching of poetry is to become a form of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Choosing empowering poems will not be effective if they are taught and assessed in ways that do not elicit connections with the lives of learners. Similarly, methods of teaching and assessment require a body of poems that speak to the issues and worlds inhabited by learners.

While English poetry clearly has the educational potential to make connections to learners’ everyday lives, stimulating interest and classroom-based discussion, this finding was not always true across the poetry curriculum or for both schools in the study. The teaching of certain poets and poems was described as unintelligible, irrelevant and boring for learners. The accessibility and the relevance of poetry were first and foremost related to the language used in the poems and the difficulty of the vocabulary for learners studying in a language that they do not speak at home, despite it being their language of instruction at school. This intersected with the topics and contexts that the poems engaged with and the origins of the authors, as certain poems were experienced as radically unfamiliar and difficult for students to understand. Writers from similar backgrounds to learners helped make the poetry teaching more relevant but did not guarantee that the poetry would resonate with learners. Similarly, the fact that a poet originated from an unfamiliar context would not necessarily occlude the relevance of their work for South African learners. Educators felt that it was important for learners to be exposed to international poets, highlighting perspectives from elsewhere. A feeling

existed that a balance was required from the curriculum, with a substantial body of South African and African poetry needed to make the material relevant for learners. That said, educators warned against creating a binary between foreign poetry that engaged with “universal issues” and South African poetry that spoke to “local politics”. The issue of “relevance” was central to these debates in the eyes of educators, who believed that it was tied to the contexts, authors and themes dealt with in the poetry.

The poetry of certain South African poets provided a fertile space for promoting a form of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Lebo Mashile’s “Tomorrow’s Daughters” clearly struck a chord and inspired learners, connecting classroom learning to relevant issues in their lives. “Tomorrow’s Daughters” was written by a young Black South African woman and addresses the issue of young Black women becoming poets, delving into issues of racism, sexism, norms about bodies, who speaks and who is recognised. The poem exemplifies for learners that people like them can become creators of knowledge used in school textbooks and that poets can highlight issues that are relevant to their lives, including racism, social norms pertaining to bodies and the silencing of certain voices. The poem is intended to provoke socio-political consciousness, an integral component of CRP and forms of critical pedagogy that aim to explore how teaching and learning can be used to validate the experiences and perspectives of learners who are marginalised in their daily symbolic and material interactions (Giroux and Simon 1989; Ladson-Billings 2014). But the poem also makes links to other contexts, namely Emily Dickinson in nineteenth-century America. CRP is therefore not necessarily insular; it does not only address learners’ cultural practices and reference points. It also holds the potential to expand their worlds and transport them to new places.

Curriculum choices that impact on the educational potential of poetry cannot be analysed independently from teaching and assessment methods. Many educators did not feel confident teaching poetry. To deal with their lack of trust in themselves, they sought refuge in the more comfortable mode of breaking poems down into manageable pieces, identifying figures of speech and helping learners to understand individual lines rather than poems as a whole. Educators were honest that these practices were not only for the benefit of learners, but also for themselves. It was acknowledged that teaching underpinned by study guides and assessment dominated by memoranda are problematic and anti-educational, but educators feared that they would leave their students at a disadvantage if they did not provide them with access to these resources that apparently helped distribute the “knowledge” needed to pass examinations.

The centrality of high stakes testing is indicative of the infiltration of neoliberal ideology and values³ into education systems in South Africa and elsewhere, presenting considerable challenges to teaching poetry in a way that is meaningful and empowering for learners. Regular inspections of workbooks by education department officials, the

³ These values coerce non-commercial spheres such as schools to operate “more like a business”.

high stakes of standardised tests and the practice of producing memoranda with official answers further illuminate the negative effects of neoliberal policies and practices on poetry teaching. Similar findings have been observed elsewhere. Increasingly standardised assessment regimes in the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand have restricted the space for the teaching of poetry (Dymoke 2012). A follow up to an earlier study of poetry teaching in the UK found that educator concerns about examinations, syllabus content and time pressures were far more pronounced 16 years later, indicating that neoliberal policies and practices have had a negative effect on poetry teaching (Benton 1999).

Neoliberalism is not solely to blame for this state of affairs, as educators' insecurities about poetry teaching impacted on their practices, as demonstrated in the current study by their focus on "line-by-line" analysis and the concern with teaching figures of speech. Xerri (2013) argues that while students and educators blame assessment for the problematic way that poetry is taught in the classroom, they collude in the process. They do so by continuing to imagine poetry as an obscure literary form and by employing conventional analytical methods based on the search for hidden meaning rather than experiencing "the poetry of poetry". In Xerri's (2013) opinion, breaking poems down into individual lines destroys these literary artefacts. Neoliberalism has impacted on pedagogy and assessment practices, with negative effects on learning areas like poetry, which relies on emergent processes that lead to a range of different interpretations. However, educators collude in these processes, not necessarily because they lack effort, but due to insecurities around teaching poetry and their fears that they will not prepare students adequately.

The combination of curricula choices, pedagogy and assessment practices influenced learners' experiences of poetry in the classroom and its relevance to their lives, including their educations. If poetry is to become a form of CRP and fulfil the objectives of the CAPS, these three aspects—that form part of a unified educational process—need to be focused on collectively. Poems with great potential to engage and stimulate learners will have little effect if they are only taught by analysing figures of speech in a "line-by-line" fashion. Similarly, methods of teaching that allow learners to experience "the poetry of poetry", while also generating insights into the techniques used by poets, are unlikely to engage learners if the poems chosen for analysis are irrelevant to their worlds. If the sole intention of educators is to prepare learners for standardised examinations, it is also unlikely that the educational potential of poetry will be realised. This is not to say that examinations are irrelevant to learners, as they form an integral part of successful social mobility. It is to advocate for poems and methods of teaching that expose learners to the poetry of poetry, help build their identities, give them tools to express their ideas creatively and aid in their academic success. All of these are integral theoretical tenets of CRP and the South African curriculum outlined in the CAPS documents. This should be done while being mindful of the local and broader, global contexts in which education systems play out.

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