

## **Opportunities or constraints?**

### **Where is the space for culturally responsive poetry teaching within high-stakes testing regimes at 16+ in Aotearoa New Zealand and England?**

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*ABSTRACT: This paper argues that recent changes to two national high-stakes tests for English – the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in Aotearoa New Zealand and the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in England – have shifted the assessment emphasis further away from poetry than previously and have significantly constrained the defined space for the genre within examination specifications at 16+. In investigating the impact of these assessment changes, the paper considers opportunities that sample groups of teachers and their students in two culturally diverse cities have to engage with poetry in examination level classrooms and the constraints they experience. The research aims to inform international debates about poetry's position in culturally diverse classroom contexts and the implications of this positioning for teachers' professional knowledge and poetry pedagogy, as they prepare their students for high-stakes examinations.*

*KEYWORDS: Assessment; culturally responsive teaching; high-stakes testing; literature; poetry; poetry pedagogy.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper explores how a group of English teachers in two culturally diverse cities in Aotearoa New Zealand and England are able to respond to contextual factors in their poetry teaching during a time of curriculum change. Focusing specifically on the teaching and assessment of poetry at 16+, it considers opportunities that teachers and their students working in six contrasting schools have to engage with poetry in examination level classrooms and the constraints which they experience when doing so. The paper argues that recent changes to National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) courses in English in both countries have shifted the assessment emphasis further away from poetry than previously, in a move which has significantly constrained the defined space for poetry in some high-stakes examination specifications at 16+.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Conceptually the research draws on perspectives concerning the pressures of teacher performativity and accountability within controlled surveillance cultures (Ball, 2003; Jones, 2003; Perryman, Ball, Maguire & Braun 2011). The pressure to deliver results is juxtaposed by a desire expressed by educators to plan for teaching that is both culturally responsive (Bishop, O'Sullivan & Berryman, 2010; Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2011; Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011) and acknowledges the social literacies of students beyond the classroom (Street, 1995).

Allied to the above are critical perspectives on examination-level preparation and assessment of mother tongue English (Harrison, 1994; Kress et al., 2004; Locke, 2008, 2010; Marshall, 2011; Myhill, 2005; Snapper, 2006; Yandell, 2008). These are coupled with the specific pedagogical challenges of teaching a genre that is internationally acknowledged as presenting difficulties for many teachers who are preparing students for high-stakes tests (Benton, 1999,2000; Dymoke, 2001, 2002; Ofsted, 2007; Faust & Dressman, 2009; O'Neill, 2006; Hennessy, 2011). Building teacher confidence in writing poetry and assessing students' poetry (Dymoke, 2003; Dymoke & Hughes, 2009) is a key factor in developing teachers' poetry pedagogy, yet its importance is frequently underplayed by tests that privilege assessment of response to reading over creative composition.

## METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE SELECTION

The paper explores findings from a two-year research project on the teaching of poetry in secondary schools by teachers with a range of experience (from pre-service teachers to heads of departments). Its methodology utilises desk study; semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. My data collection took place during two, three-month periods in two culturally diverse cities in New Zealand and England in 2011-12. English departments in six secondary schools with diverse cultural and linguistic populations were the primary sources. 24 teachers of varying levels of classroom experience were interviewed (13 in New Zealand and 11 in the UK), 13 classes were observed (10 in NZ and 3 in UK), 4 small groups of students aged 14 -18 were interviewed (3 in NZ and 1 in UK), work samples, departmental activities, resources and displays were scrutinised in each location.

The NZ sample was supplemented by comments from 18 English teachers who participated in an in-service poetry event and 2 teacher educators working with secondary pre-service teachers in different graduate teacher programmes. A convenience sample was chosen with guidance from an experienced teacher educator. The NZ schools (A, B and C) were differently decile-rated<sup>1</sup> and included single sex and co-educational institutions from state and private sectors. The UK sample was drawn from 11-16 and 11-19 co-educational, state schools (D, E and F) known to me through my work as a teacher educator. They were chosen for the diverse populations that they serve. Approximate school populations were:

- A. Pakeha (of European descent) (70%); Māori, Pacific Islander and Asian students (30%);
- B. Pakeha (60%); Māori, Pacific Islander and Asian students (form largest groups within remaining 40%);
- C. Pacific Islander, Māori or Asian (90%); Pakeha (7%);
- D. British Asian (70% predominantly Indian); Black African (23% especially Somalian); White/other ethnic background (7%);

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<sup>1</sup> Decile ratings from 1-10 (10 is highest) are based on the proportion of students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from the low socio-economic communities. Decile 10 schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of these students. A decile rating is not an indicator of the school's overall socio-economic make-up.

- E. E: British Asian students (64% predominantly Indian); White (11%); Black African/Caribbean (7%); other ethnic background (18%);
- F. F: White (66%); mixed ethnic minority (33%);

All data were collected using ethical principles and with the informed consent of participants, whose names have been anonymised in the reporting. A grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) was used during question generation, data collection and analysis, thus affording more flexible opportunities for discussion points to emerge and for rich descriptions to emerge. The material has been analysed through repeated readings, re-codings and follow-up discussion with some teacher participants.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The questions underpinning this research were arrived at through engagement with the critical perspectives outlined above. They ask:

- Where are the opportunities for poetry within two changing national assessment frameworks at 16 + in terms of:
  - what can be taught??
  - what is assessed
  - what can be locally selected to suit school contexts and individual learners?
- What are the constraints, pressures or challenges in teaching poetry within these high-stakes testing regimes?
- What are the implications of these opportunities and constraints for teacher's poetry pedagogy?

## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

For Gay, culturally responsive teaching is a “holistic” and empowering approach to learning which uses “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches *to* and *through* the strengths of these students” (Gay, 2010, pp. 31-2). However, Sleeter (2011) contends that the encroachment of standardised curricula resulting from neoliberal reforms are endangering the empowering approaches that can be achieved through culturally responsive teaching. She warns against the inadequacies of a focus on cultural celebration in preference to academic learning, and the dangers of reducing distinct ways of being and learning to checklists.

Sleeter and Cornbleth (2011) argue that such teaching should engage students intellectually. They contrast rote learning of an extract from a sacred or canonical text (an act which may be culturally responsive but lacking in intellectual engagement) with the example of analysis and interpretation of song lyrics and poems from different traditions or parts of the world. With reference to Au (2007), they point both to the narrowing of the curriculum in US schools which occurs when it is aligned with high-stakes tests and the shift to teacher-centred learning (Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011, p. 57). The research presented in this paper focuses on the impact that curriculum alignment is having on the teaching and learning of one aspect of the English

curriculum, poetry. The small-scale study explores only poetry-related data and, specifically, the opportunities and constraints presented by assessment design. However, this exploration may provide indicators of other potential culturally responsive practices and perspectives by the teachers and students in the sample group.

Themes emerging from the data are explored in this paper in terms of:

- opportunities for poetry study/culturally responsive teaching of poetry (particularly the genre of poetry, poetry text choices and poetry writing);
- constraints on poetry study experienced by teachers (particularly: confidence; assessment of poetry writing and of unseen or unfamiliar poems; the shift of emphasis away from poetry within examination assessment).

In conclusion, I will consider the implications of these opportunities and constraints for teachers' poetry pedagogy.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR POETRY/CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING OF POETRY**

### **Background to examinations**

The two educational systems featured in this study use the following high-stakes tests:

#### ***NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement)***

Aligned with the New Zealand curriculum in 2011, the revised NCEA is assessed through successful completion of credit-bearing Achievement Standards by senior students aged 16-18. Each Standard is pitched at a level of difficulty from 1-3. Between 4 and 8 Standards at each level are assessed internally and at least 3 are externally assessed. Student achievement is recognised at each level by award of a Pass, with Achieved, with Merit or with Excellence.

#### ***GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education)<sup>2</sup>***

Students in England study GCSE courses **either** in English **or** in English Language *and* English Literature. Introduced in 2010, these courses replaced GCSEs that included coursework. Each school registers its students for GCSE examinations administered by one of four examination boards: AQA, Edexcel, OCR or WJEC. Each board's examination specifications adhere to national subject and assessment criteria closely aligned to the National Curriculum KS4 programme of study. The boards have some flexibility in course structure. GCSEs are examined by a combination of external and internal (controlled) assessment modules that can be

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<sup>2</sup> A leak by the *Daily Mail* revealed an intention by Michael Gove (UK Secretary of State for Education) to return to a two-tier system bearing similarities to the Ordinary level and Certificate of Education system abolished in 1986. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2162369/Michael-Gove-plans-scrap-dumbed-GCSEs-bring-O-Levels.html> (retrieved 21/6/12). [Announcements made after the acceptance of this paper reveal that, from 2017, English will be examined by a single end-of-course examination. This will be set by one examination board and form part of an English Baccalaureate certificate. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-19626663> (accessed 12/10/12).]

taken at two assessment points in the school year. Final GCSE qualifications are graded from A\* to G.

The two interconnected strands of the NZ English curriculum appear to facilitate an integrated approach to teaching and learning in English that is reflected in the flexibility and choice permitted in its assessment frameworks. In contrast, the separation of reading, writing and speaking and listening in English and Welsh National Curriculum English, coupled with a hierarchical emphasis on prescribed print-based English Heritage texts, determines a greater level of prescription within GCSE English courses.

### **The genre of poetry: NCEA**

Poetry as a specified genre makes a very limited appearance in the rubrics and question papers of NCEA Standards assessments. Students are required to write about an “an unfamiliar” text from each of the genres of prose, poetry and non fiction in their 90851 level 1 externally assessed examination. However, the majority of internally and externally assessed Standards are not genre-specific. Therefore, *teachers and students have a very free rein to choose which genres they respond to or create in the classroom* for assessment purposes.

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) offers guidance to teachers about ensuring appropriate texts chosen for assessment purposes are drawn from within the broadly labelled genres: visual, oral, written (extended and short). “Poetry/song lyric” is one of the genres listed within the guidance (NZQA, 2012). The explicit inclusion of song is worth noting. It could be perceived as an attempt to broaden perceptions about the nature of poetry, to recognise the crossover between poetry and song (in, for example, ballad, ode and lyric forms) and to provide opportunities for a broader and/or more inclusive interpretation of the genre than the term “poetry” might allow. The term embraces the importance of Māori recited and sung poetry (such as waiata, oriori, pao). It also acknowledges contemporary song lyrics as a way into poetry study. In doing so, the term “poetry/song lyric” is perhaps making the idea of using poetry for assessment purposes more accessible to teachers and students, who would otherwise choose not to use it<sup>3</sup>.

### **The genre of poetry: GCSE**

In contrast to the New Zealand senior curriculum, poetry is located in demarcated sections of the English GCSE courses on offer. School F adopted the AQA specification (the country’s market leader). Schools D and E used WJEC, a popular choice in the local authority where the study took place. Opportunities to respond to or write poetry are outlined in Table 1.

### **Poetry text choices: NCEA**

There are no prescribed authors or named texts within NCEA English, and Shakespeare is no longer a prescribed author. Some NZ teachers are very unhappy about this change. For them, Shakespeare presented a challenge to their professional conceptualisation of the subject English, and they thought that Shakespeare’s

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of accessibility and poetry is explored in a forthcoming paper.

influence on language and literature still needed to be acknowledged in assessment terms. Nevertheless, the lack of prescription presents significant opportunities for engagement in textual work that can be geared to specific students' interests, concerns and contexts. Wanda, an experienced teacher in School C, appreciated the freedoms that the newly aligned standards and curriculum gave her. She stated: "If we had a canon it would disadvantage our students because they are outside of the dominant culture.... We can use texts which speak to our kids." Jen, another of her School C

	English	English Language	English Literature
AQA	<p>✂ <b>Unit 2: Controlled Assessment Speaking and Listening.</b> Three equally weighted activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• presenting</li> <li>• discussing and listening</li> <li>• ✂ role playing. (20%)</li> </ul> <p>■ <b>Unit 3 Controlled Assessment: Part a: Understanding creative texts (literary reading)</b> – three tasks from a bank of titles. Students write about their study of literary texts, drawing on a Shakespeare play, a text from the English Literary Heritage and a text from a different culture.</p> <p><b>Part b: Producing creative texts</b> – students select &amp; create two tasks from a bank of published titles. (40%)</p>	<p>✂ <b>Unit 2: Controlled Assessment Speaking and Listening.</b> Three equally weighted activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• presenting</li> <li>• discussing and listening</li> <li>• ✂ role playing. (20%)</li> </ul> <p>✂ <b>Unit 3 Controlled Assessment: Understanding spoken and written language and creative writing</b> - three tasks (from a bank of titles) on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ✂ extended reading (text of any genre)</li> <li>• creative writing - predominantly non-fiction</li> <li>• spoken language study. (40%)</li> </ul>	<p>■ <b>Route A: Unit 2 External exam: Poetry across time.</b></p> <p>a) response to contemporary poetry &amp; poetry from Literary Heritage in <i>Moon on the Tides</i> anthology.</p> <p>b) Response to unseen poem. (35%)</p> <p>✂ <b>Route A - Unit 3: Controlled Assessment - The significance of Shakespeare and the English Literary Heritage</b> - one task linking two whole texts. (25%)</p> <p><b>or</b></p> <p>■ <b>Route B: Unit 5 Controlled Assessment.</b> Response linking contemporary and Literary Heritage poetry from <i>Moon on the Tides</i> anthology or poems of own choice (includes opportunity to make audio or visual versions of poems studied) (25%)</p>
WJEC	<p>■ <b>Unit 3 Controlled Assessment: <i>English in the world of the imagination</i></b></p> <p>Literary heritage poetry &amp; Shakespeare. (10%)</p> <p>✂ <b>Unit 4 Controlled Assessment: <i>Speaking and Listening</i></b> Communicating and adapting language; interacting and responding; creating and sustaining roles. (20%)</p>	<p>✂ <b>Unit 4 Controlled Assessment: <i>Spoken Language: Using Language: Speaking and Listening</i></b> Communicating and adapting language; interacting and responding; creating and sustaining roles. (20%)</p>	<p>■ <b>Unit 1 External Assessment: <i>Prose (different cultures) and poetry (contemporary)</i></b></p> <p>Contemporary Unseen poetry comparison. (14%)</p> <p>■ <b>Unit 3 Controlled Assessment (linked texts): <i>Poetry and drama (literary heritage)</i></b></p> <p>Poetry from WJEC GCSE poetry collection and a Shakespeare play – chosen by school (not <i>Othello</i> or <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>). (25%)</p>

■ Poetry is compulsory

✂ some use of poetry possible within part of the unit

% = within overall assessment

**Table 1. Poetry in the AQA and WJEC 2010 GCSE specifications**

colleagues, stressed that “what connects” was important rather than “which poets”. As a result, the range of authors used included published work and performances by Pasifika poets of Samoan heritage including Tusiata Avia, Selina Tusitala Marsh and Karlo Mila and Māori writers such as Apirana Taylor. Specific poems by these writers were also used by many teachers in School B and in the wider sample.

Several poetry in-service participants stated that there was a remit within the teachers’ appraisal system for New Zealand teachers to demonstrate cultural responsiveness (they used this actual term). They had previously set themselves poetry-related appraisal targets such as developing their skill in reading poetry aloud from a range of cultures or extending the choice of poetry texts they use in the classroom. In English schools there is no such cultural appraisal remit, but teachers are required to use inclusive practices, to differentiate and to select texts that might be appropriate for individual learners. Nevertheless, the text selections they are able to make for examination purposes (and indeed the examination papers themselves) are much more restricted than those of their New Zealand colleagues.

Two NZ teacher participants at the in-service event (who were from the same city school) were concerned to ensure the poetry texts and reading/composing activities they used were accessible to ESOL students. They considered that second-language barriers sometimes prevented use of poetry with certain classes. Ben, also from the wider NZ sample, remarked on the emergence of Pasifika and Māori poets during his lifetime. He enjoyed giving students access to “the multiplicity of voices and connections between them”. In a system without prescribed texts, emerging voices can perhaps be more quickly integrated into a scheme of work than new poets in the UK would be. However, several experienced teachers commented that freedom to select texts presented its own challenges. Sasha, from school C, asked: “What happens if I choose the wrong thing?” The responsibility of choice could, therefore, lead to self-imposed restriction and uncertainty. Freedom to select a text could perhaps lead teachers to fall back on more familiar, tried-and-tested “winners”, which may be key texts in their personal repertoire but may not necessarily engage the current student cohort.

Both New Zealand teacher educators commented on these opportunities. Maryanne offered a very pragmatic view about availability of writers:

Drawing on students’ prior knowledge and experiences often sees teachers choosing “local” poets, also there is the bonus of perhaps being able to get a poet to visit school. These “local” poems often have a universal application anyway.

Her collocation of “local” with “universal” points to questions about the nature of interpretation, that is, how and whether texts that speak to one community or culture can be read and responded to by those with other cultural perspectives? Ryn argues that universality is not concerned with enforcing conformity: rather it is an evolving and unpredictable potentiality that, together with particularity, forms the basis of life. (Ryn, 2003, p. 122). Lesley commented more specifically on how using carefully selected poetry enabled teachers and students to:

grappl[e] with texts where there are ways in but no complete or right answers... [to see] the power of cultural interpretation... [to explore] cultural texts that open students to different lenses and experiences.

Her comment emphasises Ryn's "potentiality" and the opportunities it might bring. For this teacher educator, poetry provided a mirror on a variety of experiences and gave students the chance to develop understandings/respond to different ways of being.

Student choice of texts is a required element of some NCEA Standard assessments. For example, in the guidance for the 4-credit, internally assessed, level 1 Standard 91104 ("Analyse significant connections across texts, supported by evidence") teachers are reminded that "at least one text must be student selected" (NZQA, 2012, p. 2). Teachers and students are also able to use newly composed texts from any genre in assessed responses. An example is a student's choice of *The Facebook Sonnet* by Sherman Alexie. Published in *The New Yorker* in May 2011, this was written about in an internally assessed paper in November 2011 alongside Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Block's *Psyche's Dark Night* (NZQA, 2012).

### Poetry text choices: GCSE

The National Curriculum English KS4 Programme of Study lists canonical authors, including Shakespeare. The list influences examination boards' set text selections for GCSE external examinations and their guidance about text selection for internal controlled assessments. Since the mid-1990s in England, the inclusion of English Heritage and other advisory lists in the National Curriculum has led to the creation of substantial, examination-board poetry and prose anthologies. GCSE anthologies tend to dominate students' experiences of poetry study, because each anthology is the main source of poems for use with GCSE classes. As stipulated by national requirements, the anthologies contain a range of English, Welsh and Irish Literary Heritage poetry. They also include work by pre-twentieth century and contemporary poets.

WJEC's anthology includes poets such as Alice Gray Jones and Katherine Philips, who are considered to be important writers within Welsh Literary heritage (Sage, personal communication, March 1, 2012). The anthology is organised alphabetically. The intention is that the poems can be used flexibly to fulfil the requirements of the controlled assessment piece. AQA's *Moon on the Tides* has some overlap with WJEC's choices, but a markedly more multicultural mix of poets are represented, including Black British, British Asian, Pakistani, Kurdish and Iranian writers such as Jackie Kay, Daljit Nagra, Imtiaz Dharker, Choman Hardi and Mimi Khalvati. The text is organised in a series of thematic clusters addressing "universal and timeless issues" (AQA, 2010).

Through use of an anthology, all students will engage with a small body of poetry, albeit from a selection made by an examination board. They will also experience a variety of rhyming and free verse forms including sonnets, villanelles, dramatic monologues and, in the AQA anthology, a ghazal. The inclusion of *Ghazal* by Mimi Khalvati could, in some small way, reflect the increasing cultural diversity found in English Literature as it is represented in the school curriculum. It would be interesting to know how many students nationally study this specific poem.

The NZ teachers in schools A, B and C were aghast at the suggestion of restricted textual choice within GCSE. Ironically, only two teachers, Ilona and Amy, countered this view. Both had experienced teaching English in the UK system. They described

how they drew on knowledge of National Curriculum pre-twentieth century authors and poets from GCSE anthologies when selecting material for their classes. Nevertheless, they appreciated the freedom to use poets and poems in ways that were unrestricted by GCSE assessment criteria.

The GCSE anthologies were devised specifically for the 2010 specifications. They are artificial anthologies rather than real texts, designed for a specific student audience and for assessment purposes. The fact that these texts are published print anthologies (with online versions) potentially restricts opportunities for newly composed poems that might be more appropriate to students' contexts, experiences or abilities (as was demonstrated in the use of the Facebook poem used by the NZ student outlined above). Greater flexibility in terms of choice could also serve to stimulate discussion about poetry's currency as a contemporary medium that can engage many different audiences.

I asked teachers to comment on the content of their GCSE anthology. In each case, they drew comparisons with the poetry text choices that were offered previously in the so-called "legacy"<sup>4</sup> specifications. In some of these specifications, poetry had been packaged into categories such as "poems from different cultures and traditions". Three teachers from schools D and E commented on the WJEC legacy specifications in terms of relevance and the fact that they seemed to be "more multicultural". Although use of a WJEC anthology had previously been an option, both the schools had chosen to select their own poems for study. Yandell (2008) provided insights on examination students' discussions of multicultural literature in a London classroom. He described the "classroom's potential as a site within which different versions of the self can be fashioned and experimented with" (Yandell, 2008, p. 38).

Teachers in my study thought they had personally been able to select poets who "meant something" to their students or "led to a wider exploration of world issues that had more relevance to our students' lives". In school D, Sheema showed me how individual teachers drew on a range of poets to suit their own classes. The two legacy poetry coursework tasks referred to works by Moniza Alvi, Imtiaz Dharker, Shahana Mirza, Zoriana Ishmail-Bibby and Abdi-Noor Haji Mohammed. Mohammed's poem "Does Thierry Henry Know About This?" is set in war-torn Somalia and refers to an international football star, Thierry Henry, a copy of whose football shirt is owned by one young Somali. This poem had been chosen specifically by Dean, working in school D with a high proportion of Somali learners. Through responding to the situation of the boy in the poem, students were perhaps able to arrive at a better understanding of war that members of the local community had experienced and of how poetry can bring a reader closer to such experiences. One student wrote:

living in the U.K. in a safe, sheltered environment, I have not experienced the sour warzones and I never wish to... Abdi Noor is successful and getting the reader involved and making him aware that war is serious.

School D's Head of English wished the new WJEC anthology could contain work by Afghan, Somali and Pakistani poets: "if you have a Eurocentric setting then you'll be okay but not for our kids". In preparing students for Unit 3 controlled assessment

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<sup>4</sup> In this context, "legacy" refers to the exam specifications used prior to 2010.

work (see Table 1), teachers found that poetry choices were now determined by the choice of Shakespeare text and the choice of theme (either “love and relationships” or “conflict”). Her department had decided to focus on “conflict” and teach the same Shakespeare play, *Romeo and Juliet*, with Wilfred Owen’s poem *Dulce et Decorum est* (plus two other teacher-chosen poems from the anthology). Although this may well have aided their planning as an English team, and potentially aided comparison of students’ assessed achievements across the exam cohort, it had greatly restricted the range of poems that individual teachers could now draw on.

Paula, a teacher from school F, which was using the 2010 AQA anthology, did not like the poetry selection or feel so confident about teaching it as the legacy anthology. However, she recognised she was not as familiar with it yet. The cluster of poems for relationships was “nicely chosen for [exploring] feelings” but she thought that the multicultural content was less evident than in the legacy anthology: “the type of students who might benefit from exploration of culture, morality, beliefs etc. need this kind of topic to be made explicit – I think it was in legacy, not so prominent now.”

Students cannot leave their cultural identity at the door of the classroom; it is a resource that they can enable their learning (Yandell, 2008). Chris, a published poet and teacher from school E, commented that the WJEC legacy specifications provided greater opportunities for students to write creatively about cultural issues for themselves. They were able to use poetry as a stimulus much more than was possible with the current specifications. The extent to which the 2010 GCSE specifications enable teachers to tailor text selections to individual students’ abilities, life experiences and cultural contexts in which they live is therefore an important issue – one which their NZ colleagues appeared much freer to deal with.

### Poetry writing

Wanda, a School C teacher, explained that the principles of *Te Kotahitanga*<sup>5</sup>, underpinned some of the department’s text selections and poetry activities. Modelling of writing was one way in which emphasis on shared experience and identity could be exemplified. English teachers at school B seemed to have a clear grasp of how the principles of *Te Kotahitanga* informed their practice, particularly in terms of developing Māori and Tongan students’ confidence as communicators. Three staff talked of how they modelled writing poetry for their classes. One used Glenn Colquhoun’s *The trick of standing upright here* as “a template” for her writing, deliberately attempting to place aspects of her culture and language in context. Anna, a teacher who led School A’s creative writing programme, also regularly participated in poetry writing activities with students and shared work in progress.

Identity is also important within National Curriculum English. Legacy GCSE specifications provided opportunities for exploration of this topic through poetry coursework (WJEC) and examination tasks (AQA). However, the extent to which GCSE students were currently able to explore issues of identity had changed. AQA now offered potentially greater flexibility. One teacher in school F taught a “Me, Myself, I” unit in preparation for a controlled creative writing assessment for English GCSE. She focused on use of metaphor and language to explore identity. Students

<sup>5</sup> An initiative aimed at raising achievement of Māori students and building respect through recognition of cultural perspectives and a focus on teacher/student relationships.

listened to Robbie Williams singing “Angel”. They read and discussed Simon Armitage’s poem “Mother, any distance greater a single span” in small groups. These pieces were stimuli for their own writing, in which they were encouraged to use metaphorical language to explore a relationship with someone. This was a challenging task. Opportunities for writing about poetry on personal issues within WJEC courses seemed much more limited in both schools. Sheema, from school D, said that at one time she would model writing with students, but “I wouldn’t think of doing it now because it’s not assessed.” The high-stakes test was constraining this teacher’s pedagogical choices, an issue which is returned to below.

### **Constraints on poetry study and culturally responsive teaching of poetry**

In investigating the opportunities offered by new, high-stakes courses poetry study, it becomes clear that there are also a number of constraints. The most significant of these pertain to teacher confidence, support with assessment of poetry writing, unseen texts preparation and the intense demands placed on teachers with regard to student performance. These constraints point to a shift of emphasis away from poetry within examination assessment that has implications for the future of the genre within high-stakes tests.

#### **Confidence**

Sasha, in School C, commented on the responsibility she was faced with in choosing appropriate texts. A potential constraint within the flexible NZ system is teachers’ levels of confidence about making such choices, not just in terms of specific texts but also in terms of poetic forms and opportunities for students to write poetry. I had expected to find distinct Māori or Pasifika forms taught in some NZ classes, especially as the schools were located in a city with a high Māori population. I specifically asked teachers about their teaching of these forms. Experienced staff in schools B and C revealed that a mihi<sup>6</sup> might possibly be taught as part of identity unit. However, this would only happen if the teacher felt confident about using it and was able to research it fully in preparation. In the three schools it appeared that other Māori forms would be very rarely read or composed. This seemed to reiterate the importance of theme as the prime driver for textual choices. Green asks whether Pakeha poets should use the language and culture of Māori (Green, 2010). For example, is it trespassing for poets from other cultures to borrow Māori motifs and narratives? Sensitivity to origin, connotations and reasons for use is important when engaging with all cultural forms and artistic practices. The limited range of forms could be explained by lack of confidence about the genre coupled with a desire not to offend. Conversely, it could be perceived as an excuse not to take creative risks that might lead to greater cultural understanding and inclusion for fear of the impact that this might have on students’ assessment outcomes.

#### **Assessment of poetry writing**

Guidance on writing poetry for internal assessment is included within NCEA’s level 1-3 exemplar material, but this simply advises on poem length in comparison with prose texts. A portfolio approach (with drafting and redrafting over a year under supervised conditions) is encouraged. There was considerable discussion, particularly

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<sup>6</sup> A structured form of Māori greeting used in a welcome ceremony (pōwhiri).

in Schools B and C and among the wider sample, about the difficulty of marking students' poetry. Some teachers perceived the lack of assessed NCEA exemplars of students' work as a barrier. They wanted greater certainty about what was required and were therefore reluctant to include students' poems in assessed portfolios unless guidance was provided. Locke describes students as "credit gatherers" (2010, p. 10) and teachers who are "fixated by the need to produce results" (2010, p. 14). Although I did not observe such fixations, several teachers in school B spoke of the "risk" of submitting poetry for a Level 1 internally assessed creative writing unit. Submission of a short prose piece was perceived as less of a gamble. Assessed exemplars published online in November 2011 still preclude assessed poetry. Therefore, teachers may well remain reluctant to exploit this opportunity.

Current GCSE specifications offer limited opportunities for assessment of students' written poetry. For this reason, teachers in schools D and E found it hard to make time for poetry-writing in lessons. One of WJEC's online FAQs on controlled assessment asks: "Can candidates write poetry for their creative writing assignments?" and answers: "This is not usually suitable as it can be difficult to assess and can cause problems of comparability. It should only be considered in *exceptional* cases where the candidate *has a particular aptitude for poetry*. A commentary might prove useful" (my italics) (WJEC, 2010). Within the AQA course, controlled assessment poetry writing is permitted. The assessment criteria employ "generic" conventions to facilitate assessment of creative work in a variety of genres. Paula from School F commented that the option to write poetry was being chosen by more students in 2012. (In School F, this amounted to approximately 16-24 students across 8 groups rather than the 2 students who had previously submitted "original writing" during the final year of the legacy course). The teacher structured the timings of her controlled assessments to make redrafting possible. She asked students to write two paragraphs of commentary to help "guide" her marking. If a student has a teacher who is confident about writing and assessing poetry herself then, evidently, there are potentially some options for writing poetry in both examination systems. For less confident teachers this is evidently a constraint.

### **Unseen and unfamiliar texts**

As is shown in Table 1, the GCSE English Literature specifications must include an *unseen* assessed element. The WJEC unseen format was perceived as "more difficult" than previously, when only one poem was responded to. In preparing students for unseen poetry assessment, teachers in all three UK schools drew on poems from previous examination papers and structured support materials devised in-house. School F also used poems from the legacy AQA anthology. Isir, from School E, said that members of the department used to be "inventive in unseen poetry preparation but we stick to a plan now". Unseen preparation in School E stretched over a period of 6 to 8 weeks of one school year (a period which also included other exam preparation activities). Sheema, from school D, expressed concern about the pairs of poems that might be set in future: they might resort to "dredging up those old school poems" by D.H. Lawrence and other poets that had featured on examination papers several decades ago. Her comment seems to point to an issue about the nature of unseen poetry assessment: to what extent does the nature of the unseen task provide opportunities for students to explore perspectives that are current and culturally relevant to their own lives? Isir, from school E, prepared her students for the unseen

challenge by “making contemporary” connections and developing materials which would “mean more to [the students]” than those provided in published GCSE textbooks. She thought that the tasks and the poems selected in the first literature examination (taken by her Year 10 student in June 2011) were appropriate for her cohort “although the poems can be challenging for some”. She talked about “Decomposition” by Zulfikar Ghose (a poem exploring the narrator’s reactions to a photograph of a beggar asleep on a Bombay pavement) which appeared on the paper with Rupert Loydell’s “Tramp”). Her students had been asked to write about the similarities and differences in the poets’ portrayals of people’s reactions to individuals on the edge of society. She thought “Decomposition” was “a good poem culturally: our kids will be aware of it”.

In the NZ schools, the pressure to prepare for externally assessed *unfamiliar* texts standards seemed far less apparent than in the English schools. Sample exam papers were available (some of these included published poems by school-aged students). The style of the unseen questioning is quite different from the GCSE essay style response with its comparative element. The Level 1 unfamiliar texts standard requires student to focus on a specific detail in one poem and to respond to several structured questions before commenting on the poem as a whole. Poetry is one of three “written texts” to be responded to in a total of one hour whereas with the WJEC GCSE unseen paper (see Table 1) students write about two linked poems for a total of one hour of a two-hour paper.

In the English schools, Perryman et al.’s “pressure cooker” (2011) was in evidence in a way not witnessed in the NZ schools I visited. There was a tangible air of anxiety about controlled assessments, unseen texts preparation and test results in each department visited. One teacher was questioned by a senior manager about missing English mock grades and grades that were below whole-school target levels. This discussion was entirely about data; there was no awareness of the teacher’s immediate situation. A colleague in school E worried about whether pre-service teachers would be able to observe examination-level teaching, because controlled assessments were due to take place during their visit. In a third school, a discussion with GCSE students was cancelled because they could not be released from their classroom. In schools D and E, the arrival of the new GCSEs had had a knock-on effect on teaching in Year 9<sup>7</sup>. Preparation to jump the high-stakes assessment hoops was beginning even earlier. Departments were using GCSE legacy unseen questions as part of a “bridging unit” to help students prepare for GCSE poetry study.

### **Shift of emphasis away from poetry within examination assessment**

Perhaps the most significant constraint on poetry teaching within the two testing regimes was the shift of emphasis away from poetry in the course of the NCEA alignment and GCSE revision. This shift has significantly constrained the defined space for poetry in some examination specifications at 16+.

The Head of English in School C perceived that the New Zealand English curriculum as a whole, and the NCEA standards in particular, had moved on to “concentrating on the *how* rather than the *what*”. She saw this change in terms of *how* does a writer use

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<sup>7</sup> Year 9: students who are 13 -14 years old.

language and *how* might a text fit in thematically or linguistically with a group of other texts rather than *what* types/genres, titles or authors should be studied. This teacher's perceptions, echoed by comments from other teachers in all three schools and at the in-service poetry event, have implications for the choices a teacher can make and the different ways in which NCEA standards rubrics might be interpreted. Lesley, a teacher educator, was not sure if the place of poetry had changed that much; it had "often been put in the 'too hard' basket." However, in her opinion, there was a feeling among teachers she worked with that "with the deletion of standards for short texts, [poetry] is likely to go even more." It would seem that teacher perception is a key factor in poetry's presences in and potential absences from examination-level classrooms.

With regard to GCSE, the three sample schools had all chosen to remain with the exam boards they had worked with prior to 2010. In each case, the English department's stated reason for this choice was connected with previous examination successes. Other factors influencing choice included the nature of their student cohort and the level of support and training offered by the examination board. However, the new WJEC English specifications (adopted by two schools) had changed significantly. Early results from internal "mock" assessments in Schools D and E were indicating that the number of students likely to attain GCSE grades A\* - C might be greatly reduced from previous years. It is impossible to say why this might be the case without access to students' exam scripts and pre/post examination test data.

Clearly it takes time for any new examination specification to bed in and one cohort of GCSE students is never the same as the next. Gardner (2007) argues that one indicator of the low status of the teaching profession was that, unlike, for example, medicine or the legal profession, it does not have control over the assessment dimension of its task. The GCSE students were not being offered the same opportunity for engagement (as their predecessors had been) with poetry that drew on their own cultural contexts. Sheema, from School D, felt disempowered by her inability to offer them such an opportunity. Although this is but one small element of the overall assessment process, it could be very significant, not only in terms of what the students eventually achieve but also in their relationship with poetry in adulthood.

## **CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS' POETRY PEDAGOGY**

Within the two new assessment regimes at 16+, poetry occupies potentially less assessment space than it once did. This does not mean that poetry is perceived as being without importance by English teachers: 6 of the 24 interviewed (4 in NZ and 2 in England) wrote poetry and many others enjoyed working with poetry texts. However, interviews with experienced teachers in both countries were tinged by a sense of regret for the loss of poetry from classroom work. With this came the loss of the professional control they had previously demonstrated through teaching poems that had been deliberately chosen to suit their own students. Only one teacher in each country, Wanda in School C and Paula in School F, stated that they were now able to do more with poetry at examination level than previously. In Wanda's case, she felt freed up to use poetry texts more readily. Paula felt able to encourage more students to submit their own poems for assessment. Both in their own ways could be said to have reclaimed poetry for their students from the examination "conveyor belt"

(Benton, 2000, p. 81) on which it is has been placed. In addition, they show that there are opportunities for poetry for confident risk-taking teachers, who are prepared to take the less frequented track rather than stay on the safe road.

There is evidently a need to build confidence internationally to enable more teachers to teach poetry for internal and external assessments when and where poetry can be chosen. One way to carve out space for the genre would be to ensure that examples of effective poetry practices are made more widely available to teachers and students through face-to-face and virtual networks. Where writing poetry is an option, English teachers need to be able draw on support from those who have tried it so that they can feel more secure in offering this assessment route to their own students. Teachers would welcome provision by NZQA of exemplars of assessed poetry portfolio pieces for NCEA examinations. Similarly, those preparing for GCSE examinations would not feel so discouraged to submit students' writing if examination guidance made successful student poetry writing appear to be less of an unattainable goal.

In terms of poetry's space within examinations, teachers need to ask publically about the narrowing of the curriculum (Au, 2007) that results from high-stakes testing of English. The profession needs to raise its concerns about the potential "travesties of learning" (Locke, 2008, p. 304) that teachers are obliged to engage their students in as they prepare for contorted assessments where poems must fight their corner against a Shakespeare play or poems must be responded to in twenty minutes of an exam. To raise one's voice or take the less popular assessment option might be not be easy choices. Both acts represent personal and creative risks, particularly within assessment regimes where performance tables, "no-notice" inspection teams and revised teaching contracts impinge on teachers' professionalism and jeopardise their job security.

As I write, the NCEA is gearing up for the introduction of Level 3 standards and students all over England and Wales have just completed their first full set of GCSE papers. Once these results are published, further reflection by the teachers in the sample schools could perhaps lead to changes in their choices of approach to examinations and the poetry content of their courses. In England, however, it is more likely that they will have to grapple with a whole new set of National Curriculum changes, including newly prescribed poets (potentially including John Dryden) and de-modularised, "Ordinary"-level style, high-stakes testing of English at the end of two years of study. Poetry's fragile space within high-stakes English examinations could be narrowed yet further as these changes bring new challenges for teachers' professional knowledge and the ways in which individual learners' experiences can be embraced and acknowledged in the classroom through poetry.

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