'Poems look like a mathematical equation': Assessment in poetry education

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ABSTRACT
This article considers the influence that assessment exerts on poetry education. By means of research conducted in a post-16 educational context in Malta, it shows that teachers' and students' practices in the poetry lesson are determined by the kind of examinations that candidates sit for. When the mode of assessment is constituted solely by the traditional essay test that excludes students' personal response, their engagement with poetry might be impaired and teachers' role becomes highly pronounced. The article demonstrates how assessment plays a key role in governing teachers' and students' practices in the classroom. However, it is also argued that other factors are equally responsible for their approach to poetry.

KEYWORDS: assessment, literature examinations, essay writing, poetry education.

1. INTRODUCTION

The emphasis placed on assessment in poetry education might undermine students' engagement with poetic texts and hinder the reading of poetry for personal pleasure (Benton, 1999, 2000; Dymoke, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013; O'Neill, 2006, 2008). In English Studies, one of the traditional ways of assessing students' knowledge of poetry has for long been the essay, either as an assignment or else as part of an examination. In contexts like Malta the essay is sometimes construed as the only means of engaging students with a poem and they are most often discouraged from describing and analyzing their own thoughts and feelings about an unseen poem or a number of poems by a particular poet. However, the washback of

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this is that it leads to a reductive approach to poetry in the classroom. Washback consists of the effects of tests on the micro-levels of teaching and learning (Cheng & Curtis, 2012). Despite the fact that poetry lends itself to group discussion, performance and creative activities, to a large extent the 21st century has not really resulted in a transition in the way students' knowledge of poetry is assessed. This means that the approach to poetry is still negatively influenced by the examinations that students sit for at the end of a course of study.

This article explores the impact of an assessment-driven culture on teachers' and students' engagement with poetry. It is based on research conducted at a Maltese post-16 institution, i.e. a school that caters for the needs of prospective university applicants typically aged between 16 and 18. The article examines teachers' and students' beliefs and attitudes in relation to assessment in poetry education, focusing especially on their views about the role of the essay in assessing knowledge of poetry. It analyzes the influence of such beliefs and attitudes on classroom practices and shows that teachers' and students' awareness of examination realities leads to a limited approach to poetry in the lesson. The article problematizes the validity of traditional ways of assessing students' knowledge of poetry while inviting a consideration of alternative approaches to assessment in poetry education. Despite the fact that it builds on previous literature focusing on the effects of assessment on poetry education, this article also shows that the approach to poetry in the classroom is equally influenced by other factors.

2. POETRY AND ASSESSMENT

The teaching and learning of a number of areas in English Studies are prone to being affected by the apparent obsession with assessment in education. This is especially true of poetry. The essay test is an intrinsic part of most literature courses; however, since very early on it has been heavily criticized because of its washback effect, structure and purpose. Courses that are too heavily dependent on examinations do not provide students with sufficient training in the creative aspects of English, and even essays written at school act as a form of training for what the examination requires, rather than what the subject requires (Holbrook, 1967). Such essays reveal that the traditional examination "tyrannises over the whole syllabus" (Holbrook, 1967: 66). The traditional examination essay question inhibits good teaching and impels teachers to resort to the "process of explicating texts, providing notes and practice for model answers, and suggesting tactics for the manipulation of generalisations into shapes required by different questions" (Scottish Education Department [SED], 1968: 28). This does not mean that the critical essay has no value in poetry education or that it cannot be used to convey students' personal response. However, ineffective teaching leads to a situation in which students present examiners with "stale second-hand opinions memorised from

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teachers' notes or some standard authority" and in this way manifest "a dreary unthinking orthodoxy" (SED, 1968: 33). If examinations undermine students' engagement with literature they are not genuinely contributing to the learning process.

Poetry has been identified as being especially susceptible to the demands of assessment given the fact that it is sometimes misconceived as a difficult genre (Fleming & Stevens, 2015). The connection between poetry and assessment is perceived in a rather negative manner, especially due to the washback effect that examinations have on poetry teaching and learning. An early publication by Muir, Niblett, Le M. Simpson and Newbold Whitfield (1937: 6) posits that examinations aimed at discovering whether a poem has been understood are "illogical and tautologous […] a degradation of poetry". Mathieson (1980) comments on how teachers' preoccupation with examinations is to blame for the problems they encounter when teaching poetry.

The effects of assessment and the way poetry is examined are of concern to most teachers and are perceived as detrimental to students' engagement with poetry (Benton, 1999). Even though teachers seem to value a response-based approach to the teaching of poetry, when preparing students for examinations they feel under pressure to ensure that their students can deliver appropriate answers (Dymoke, 2002). Sedgwick (2003: 99) reports that teachers are unable to teach poetry as creatively as they would like to because of the pressure of examinations and he calls this "a dangerous state of affairs". Calway (2008) affirms that teachers of English fear poetry because of examination specifications; their enjoyment is replaced with anxiety and uncertainty. Poetry makes teachers feel "alarmed, naked and inadequate" and feeling compelled to decipher a poem "is scary when an exam class is in front of you demanding to know what it 'means'" (Calway, 2008: 60). The anxiety created by the belief that examiners are expecting a specific kind of response to a poem seems to be one of the leading factors for which some teachers probably use a restrictive kind of pedagogy when teaching poetry. Ofsted (2007: 7) suggests that students' view that the study of poetry is "dull and pointless […] was largely formed by the didactic approaches used by some teachers to prepare pupils for examinations". According to Snapper (2009: 2), the "exclusive emphasis on written literary analysis of poetry under exam conditions which dominates from GCSE onwards, along with a significant reduction in time spent on other modes of response (such as performance), and on creative writing" only serves to bolster students' alienation from poetry. This implies that teachers and students end up killing the creativity of a poetry lesson by focusing almost exclusively on annotations in the hope of covering all possible examination questions. According to Ofsted (2012: 44), this approach to poetry is an example of "the negative impact of tests and examinations". Naylor and Wood (2012: 8) affirm that "[p]oetry has become part of the mechanism of assessment at GCSE, such that the pressures on the study of it have become burdensome". In their opinion (Naylor & Wood, 2012: 19–20), "[t]he pressure to provide guaranteed 'C' grades and above leaves English teachers little room for failure. This means that the freedom for teachers to be creative and innovative is

limited, counter-pointed by the absolute requirement to deliver in exams and assessments, therefore playing safe". It seems as if assessment forces teachers to adopt teaching methods that lead students to pass their examinations successfully rather than enjoy poetry.

Students seem to share their teachers' anxiety and this has a negative effect on the way they engage with poetry during a lesson. In fact, a Maltese study indicates that "students feel the need to 'learn' the poem because of how the assessment system is structured, ending up reading poetry notes only to reproduce them in examinations in order to get more marks" (Camilleri, 2005: 51). Snapper (2006: 32) remarks that "[o]ften students come to A Level – and leave A Level – seeing poems as irritating little verbal puzzles set to test them in exams, to see whether they can get the right answer". Advanced Level English examiners in Malta seek to dispel this myth by indicating that "the overall aim" of the unseen poem component in the examination "is neither a treasure hunt for meanings nor a chase after the 'right' interpretation" (MATSEC, 2009: 8). Despite these reassurances teachers and students persist in perceiving poems as texts that need to be unravelled. For this reason, Snapper (2009: 2) contemplates "whether the current regime, where poetry is so strongly associated with an increasingly reductive, instrumental examination culture, is in fact counter-productive". Teachers and students are led to forget that poetry has a life outside the classroom and examination hall and by failing to comprehend its relationship with the world beyond the educational context they are unlikely to enjoy it (Snapper, 2009). It seems clear that an assessment-oriented approach to poetry has the potential of undermining students' engagement with the genre for much longer than the duration of their studies. This is especially so if students come to inherit the misbelief that a poem can only be interpreted in a conventional manner.

A country's educational policy can have a negative impact on poetry, especially if it puts a premium on an assessment-driven approach that fails to put poetry at the very core of the English curriculum. For example, Goodwyn (2012: 215) asserts that "the story from England is a valuable 'warning' to English teachers around the world to protect the true importance of literature from political interference". One of the effects of an assessment-driven curriculum is that "time and examination pressures may lead to 'teaching to the test', a falling off in enjoyment of poetry, a closing down of some things that teachers previously valued and a loss of the creative to the analytical" (Benton, 2000: 92). For Dymoke (2001: 39), "a productive dialogue about assessment approaches will prevent poetry from remaining neglected on a pedestal". Poetry teaching is reported as being "weaker than other aspects of English inspected" (Ofsted, 2007: 5) and this is partly due to "an inappropriate emphasis on tests and examinations" (Ofsted, 2012: 13) that is impinging on the English curriculum. This is particularly so in the case of poetry: "Weaknesses in the teaching of poetry include an emphasis on analytic approaches at the expense of creative ones" (Ofsted, 2012: 44). In a study by Hanratty (2008: 155), the majority of surveyed English teachers "complained that the pernicious influence of an examination-driven curriculum could be particularly malign

where the teaching of poetry is concerned". Despite the fact that it is highly rewarding to engage students with poetry in a sustained fashion, "[i]n many English classrooms, teachers are required to devise a curriculum that is strongly connected to high-stakes assessments" (Schillinger, Meyer & Vinz, 2010: 110). Goodwyn (2012: 213) believes that "current assessment regimes […] diminish what is valuable in the engagement of students with literature".

One possible solution to this problem lies in teacher education, which "is perhaps best placed to offer critical challenge to the current dominance of exam-driven schooling and to call for radical change in terms of how teachers receive and implement curriculum" (Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2012: 390). Ensuring that teachers capitalize on creative approaches to poetry is probably one way out of the impasse, but in order for teachers to do so they need to be empowered by pre- and in-service programmes that do not merely pander to the needs of an assessment-driven educational milieu. Lockney and Proudfoot (2013: 150) maintain that "current contexts for the teaching of poetry suggest we inhabit a space between encouragement for a creative pedagogy, set against the more prescriptive effects of an assessment-driven curriculum". An analysis of teachers' metaphors of poetry teaching highlights that while they describe it as a "lifeline, freedom from directives and escape […] it is also possible to infer a note of resignation in responses describing the status of poetry in a high-stakes context" (Wilson, 2013: 82–83). Most probably teachers who wholeheartedly believe in poetry's place in the curriculum and in the significance of creative approaches to it are probably best placed to counter the effects of assessment-driven educational policy.

3. BACKGROUND

This article reports some of the results of a broader study investigating teachers' and students' beliefs, attitudes and practices in relation to poetry and poetry pedagogy. The article focuses on those results concerning poetry and assessment. The study was conducted at a post-16 institution in Malta and its participants included 8 poetry teachers, 15 students, and a chief examiner and syllabus designer. The teachers were preparing their students for the Matriculation Certificate examination in English, an Advanced Level examination that students usually sit for at the age of 18 after following a two-year course in a post-16 institution. This nine-hour, high stakes examination consists of a number of language and literature components, including two focusing on poetry. One of the poetry components is comprised of a set text (e.g. Wilfred Owen's war poetry) while the other consists of an unseen poem. In the examination, candidates are provided with one hour for each component, both of which are assessed by means of an essay that must not be shorter than 400 words.

Currently, post-16 institutions in Malta preparing students for the MC English examination rely by default only on the aims and objectives specified by the syllabus (MATSEC, 2010). Given the absence of a test manual or supplementary documentation to guide teachers and students preparing for this examination, teaching is based almost exclusively on the syllabus. However, this document is fairly dry, consisting of only ten pages. The information on the two poetry components—discounting the titles of the set texts and the poets' names—amounts to only 522 words. Other local studies have complained about this dearth of information, calling for more details on objectives, performance conditions, analysis criteria, and the analysis and interpretation of candidates' errors (Baldacchino, 1998).

In order to explore the participants' beliefs, attitudes and practices in relation to the assessment of poetry, this study employed a mixed methods approach. A poetry lesson delivered by each teacher was observed using a structured observation schedule. This schedule helped to identify the most common lesson events. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were held with all of the participants. Each one-on-one interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

4. DREADING THE EXAMINATION

This study found that the main event during poetry lessons consisted of the teacher explaining a poem through analysis. Student initiations were minimal and teachers mostly asked closed questions. The emphasis in most of the observed lessons was—to use Billy Collins's (1988: 58) metaphor from 'Introduction to Poetry'—on "torturing" a poem for meaning. Students seemed to rely on teachers' interpretation rather than produce their own. Hence, lessons were very teacher-centred and the balance of power was strictly in favour of teachers, who occupied the role of gatekeepers to a text's meaning. There was an awareness of the impending examination and this seemed to affect teachers' and students' attitudes toward the approach to poetry in class.

Despite the fact that half the teachers blamed students for the practice of analyzing poetry for meaning, they also admitted that what is partly responsible for students' attitude towards poetry is "the way they are taught" (Teacher D, henceforth TD).[1] According to one interviewee, some teachers "have this kind of fetish of showing or inculcating into their students the idea that a poem contains a message or a moral" (TC). Students "tortured" poetry "because basically that's what we are driving our students to do, to find the meaning for a poem" (TG). This happened because "the way the exam is at the moment is not allowing for an appreciation of the use of language" (TG). Since students "want to pass an exam… they think that there is a certain way of doing things" (TH). One interviewee implied that teachers

might also be to blame for this by saying that "unfortunately we're too exam oriented" (TF). She explained that "the dissection of a poem in class" could lead students to "think that I'm dissecting it too much" despite any efforts "to make it not look like I'm analyzing it too much, that I am enjoying it" (TF). She went on to say that "I'd love them to think of me as a person who is making them enjoy poetry. Even though I don't read poetry, I love it" (TF). For another teacher it had to do with the fact that "our students are not being given the chance to express themselves" (TA). A colleague of his agreed with this idea and pointed out that "most of them are afraid of making a mistake because education has drummed into them that when you speak out in class you have to be right and the teacher has to applaud you" (TG).

In contemplating their own teachers' practices, nine students revealed that teachers were somewhat responsible for their perception of poems as texts to be analyzed for meaning. These students indicated "that sometimes they do instil this into us" (SJ) and that teachers "analyze it in the same way we do; we imitate them in a way" (SN). One student explained that "there are unfortunately many teachers who make poems look like a mathematical equation, like there's no other way, as if there are only two methods how to work it and that's how you have to do it" (SE). Another student agreed with this idea, and according to her, "teachers usually go for the meaning so that we can understand what it's all about", but the risk was that "when [the teacher] goes about it in a way in which I can't really appreciate it, the poem loses its beauty" (SL). Some other students held themselves accountable and claimed that "they tell us never to over analyze and torture it but sometimes you do end up doing that especially if it's a poem you don't like" (SD). For one particular student, "those teachers who are passionate about poetry… do get it through a bit but then they still focus obviously on the educational way in which we're meant to do it" (SH). This meant being encouraged by teachers "to identify all the things that we would need for the crit essay", especially since "it's more the technical details that they focus on" (SI).

The majority of students indicated that the practice of "torturing" poetry was mostly motivated by their awareness of the impending examination and of what they were expected to do when writing an essay on poetry. One student confessed that "with poetry we don't enjoy it; we just think about the exam" (SC). Another student concurred by saying that "if there are people who don't like poetry they're going to be constantly reading it in bits and trying to find a meaning in it and they mess up their whole understanding of the poem" (SL). They did this in the hope "that if they really attack what's written then they'd get better marks" (SA) and so as a student "you're going to do everything you can to actually understand it and take it apart piece by piece" (SC). Students tackled poetry in this way because they "probably worry about what they'll do in the exam" (SG) and sometimes they even "panic because in the exam you only have one hour to write an essay about a poem" (SF). For nearly half the students "poetry is sometimes difficult to understand and unless you do that you won't get it" (SN). One student explained that "without the meaning we feel lost, with the meaning we feel secure; without it it would almost be impossible to write an essay"

(SI). This led a number of students to believe that in "every sentence in the poem you have to find a meaning behind it so you can build a 500 word essay, to just fill it up sort of" (SM). The following comparison probably best describes what some students felt about the effect of such an attitude towards poetry: "It's like a prisoner of war and they try to take every piece of information out of it to understand it and ultimately they just end up killing it" (SJ). Nonetheless, given their beliefs in relation to what is expected of them in the examination, almost all the students seemed to agree with this view of things: "What the lecturer actually does is more beneficial to the students as far as lectures go for the purposes of the exam; it's more useful" (SB).

In relation to the "torture" of poetry for examination purposes, the chief examiner and syllabus designer conceded that assessment does influence teachers' classroom practices and students' engagement with poetry: "I think that it shapes it and that it constricts it to an appreciable extent". However, he also pointed out that "the encounter exists in the first place because of—and through—awareness of that assessment". He claimed that "this probably doesn't 'kill' the encounter with poetry for those students who were always going to have a meaningful relation with poetic language. Indeed, it might also goad it". While valuing "an emotive and intuitive, untutored and unrehearsed response from students", the examination provides a way of "framing" the encounter. If it did not exist "it's probably going to bring back all the impressionistic responses to poetry that Eliot in the early part of the twentieth century was worried about". According to this examiner, "the idea that poetry is there to be enjoyed makes us think of another way of looking at poetry, that it demands a rigour of response, that it demands a discipline of response". He claimed that "the enjoyment… is never going to be entirely an unrehearsed enjoyment".

The above findings indicate that while teachers seemed to want students to enjoy poetry they could not avoid being party to its "torture". Some of them blamed examination demands for this while a few admitted that their poetry lessons were too teacher-centred. Similarly, the students' experience found its resonance in Hughes's (2009: 21–22) description of studying poetry at school:

> Our teachers encouraged us to find the specific meaning in the text, placed there by the author, whether intentionally or not. There was one meaning that could be uncovered and we were trained to do so. Often we didn't need to search for meaning at all because the 'correct' meaning was served up to us by the teacher; all we needed to do was listen and regurgitate the answers in our essays.

The students concurred that the reading of poetry in class usually emphasized an analytical approach to the exclusion of everything else. They pointed out that in "torturing" poetry they were either mimicking their teachers or else doing so out of their own accord given their awareness of what was expected of them in the examination. Adopting such an approach to a

poem allowed most students to feel as if they could find the hidden meaning. They seemed to do so despite realizing that poetry could also be appreciated in ways that underscored its creativity and plurality of interpretation. According to Lamarque (2009: 419), "[i]nterpretation, so naturally linked to poetic meaning, does not have paraphrase as its principal aim so much as the encouragement and enhancement of a distinctive poetic experience within readers". Such an experience was probably stifled by the participants' attempts to "torture" poems for meaning. In conducting such a practice they seemed unaware that there was "no metaphysically pure notion of meaning that can be isolated from the network of language and thought in which our meaningful acts and utterances find their home" (Jollimore, 2009: 158). For the examiner, the effect of the examination on teachers' and students' approach to poetry was undeniable but while conceding that this might restrict them to "torture" poetry one also needed to acknowledge that the examination created an opportunity for a more "disciplined" approach. Whereas "torture" suggests the infliction of pain as a means of coercing someone to say or do something, discipline implies controlling someone's behaviour in order for it to be in line with a set of rules. A "disciplined" approach presumably leads students to read poetry in an academically acceptable manner.

This study suggests that teachers' and students' classroom practices are heavily influenced by the examination and by their corresponding beliefs and attitudes. Teachers succumb to explaining the meaning of poems because of apparent examination pressures while students collude in this approach by expecting their teachers to provide them with the key to a poem's meaning. Students' apparent apprehension with respect to poetry is due to the fact that in the examination they are expected to demonstrate their understanding of a set text or an unseen poem in a limited amount of time. Not having a teacher to unravel the text for them makes them perceive the task as inordinately challenging.

5. PERSONAL RESPONSE IN EXAMINATION ESSAYS

As part of the MC English examination, students' knowledge of poetry and their skills in relation to it are assessed exclusively by means of essays; this is a direct consequence of the examination's heavy emphasis on reading and writing skills. This study shows that despite acknowledging the value of students' personal response, the participants were somewhat ambivalent with respect to its presence in examination essays.

According to six teachers, personal response in an essay on poetry should be encouraged because a poem is "a personal happening for the poet and for his reader and it's ridiculous to put aside this kind of personal take on a text" (TC). If it is not encouraged then the teacher is "just teaching them to pass an examination, to conform to ideas" (TA). One particular teacher explained that he "always tell[s] them there is not one truth"; he

encouraged them to come up with their own interpretation as long as it "is within the context of the poem" (TG). For another teacher, an essay is always "based on a personal response" but while "initially the response has to be subjective" the student was then encouraged to "move towards objectivity" (TH). In fact, three teachers felt that "there has to be a personal response but not entirely subjective… this element of subjectivity has to be very, very delicate" (TB). They claimed that while "every essay is a response to the poem" students had to keep in mind that in an essay the "major subject is the poem itself rather than other things which the poem might make me think of" (TD). Two teachers in particular were very wary of personal response, and while one of them discouraged it altogether because "you often end up with something stale or stupid ideas" (TF), the other one restricted it to the conclusion by telling students "you are a reader and you have to in a way objectify yourself and step back and try to think of the effect of this poem on any potential reader" (TE).

All the students seemed to be aware of the need to avoid any subjectivity in their essays on poetry and there was a fear that analyzing their thoughts and feelings about a poem could be "dangerous" (SA) or "risky" (SN). They acted in a "cautious" way because they were "afraid that the examiner won't agree or something like that" (SF). One particular student maintained that "it shouldn't be like that because if you're writing your own opinion it should be valued, but examiners might judge you because they don't agree with your opinion" (SN). Besides being wary of the examiner's presumed expectations, students also kept in mind their teachers' instructions about writing essays on poetry: "They tell us that you have to remain objective and that the essay is not actually about your opinion but about what the poet is saying" (SL). One student recounted an episode in which he once "got quite a big shouting at from a teacher because what I spoke about in the essay was not how other people talk about the poem" (SI). This view was echoed by another student who claimed that "giving my opinion in an essay is not right… it's not the place in which I have to give my own opinion, it's where I need to analyze the opinion of someone else" (SE). Ten students confirmed that their teachers told them to restrict their personal response to the conclusion: "They tell us to include it in the conclusion so as not to throw the whole thing off" (SJ). As a result, a number of students thought that "it's better not to mention your views and leave the essay as it is… your point is out of the point, sort of" (SO). However, despite being aware that they needed to be "careful" (SH) with regards to personal response, seven students still "feel it is important" because "it lets you think not just what others think, to let yourself think about the poem and not just what they tell you" (SK). As one student put it, "what's the point of writing an essay if you don't show what you think about it… we're not encouraged to do that, however" (SO).

According to the examiner, when students write about poetry they are "very hesitant. They look for structure. Their responses are rehearsed perhaps in terms of what we expect them to say". For this reason, students' personal response "should be given quite a lot of importance". He maintained that teaching should be "sensitive and helpful in directing students in how to best write an essay that can communicate that personal response to

poetry". At the same time, marking of students' work should be "sensitive enough to be discerning about it where it occurs—and to not mark down other students who don't give a 'personal' response".

The above findings seem to indicate an element of ambivalence in relation to students' personal response in examination essays on poetry. While some teachers claimed that they encouraged students to provide their personal response in an essay, this was contradicted by the students who were very cautious not to do so because of teachers' and examiners' expectations. Moreover, classroom observation showed that in poetry lessons student initiations occurred far less than teacher explanations. In most of the observed sessions, the line-by-line analysis of a poem was conducted exclusively by teachers, who seemed to indicate that theirs was the only possible reading of the text. Only a few teachers encouraged students' personal response to the poem and in almost all the sessions teachers failed to create opportunities for student interaction and active participation. This seemed to refute the teachers' claim that they urged students to include their personal response in their essays about poetry. The examination and the beliefs and attitudes associated with it appeared to influence teachers' and students' practices with respect to the teaching and learning of essay writing.

6. IMPLICATIONS

This study shows that teachers and students approached poetry in class in a highly restricted manner. Teachers focused on explaining a poem to their students and the emphasis was mostly on what the poem meant and not on their personal response to it. The teachers' explanations guided the students through a line-by-line analysis of a text; even when this was carried out in a literary criticism seminar, students' contributions were limited. Both teachers and students seemed to believe that this was the right way of approaching poetry in class, especially since poetry was conceived of as difficult because of its hidden meanings. The act of analyzing a poem was deemed to be the means by which these meanings could be elucidated. The participants admitted that analysis resembled the "torture" mentioned in Collins's poem, and they identified with the situation described in this poem. Due to examination pressures and shared attitudes and beliefs, the participants felt constrained to adopt such an approach toward poetry. However, this did not mean that the students were satisfied with the fact that their seminars were teacher-centred. What seemed to be paradoxical about the students' attitudes was that, while they colluded in the approach to poetry adopted in their seminars by means of their beliefs about poetry and concerns with the examination, they were also aware that poems should be approached in a more engaging manner. Whether this awareness was developed through their earlier experiences of poetry in

primary education or through exposure to poetry in non-assessment contexts merits further research.

This study demonstrates that by adopting an analytical approach to poetry and nurturing the belief that it was a difficult genre, teachers positioned themselves as gatekeepers to a poem's meaning in the classroom. This led students to feel dependent on their teachers in order to understand a poem. They came to see poetry as a genre that could only be engaged with at school and solely in an academic manner. The study indicates a contradiction between how teachers spoke about their role within poetry pedagogy and their actual practices. Teachers' role as gatekeepers was manifested by the fact that they chose which poems were read in class and how these were to be read. The emphasis placed on explaining canonical poems typical of examination papers meant that there was a significant disparity in the balance of power between teachers and students. Student participation was minimal and not actively encouraged. The teachers' role as gatekeepers helped to consolidate students' belief that a poem had a hidden meaning that could only be accessed by means of a teacher's guidance.

Teacher education and development should target practitioners' knowledge and skills in relation to poetry pedagogy so that they are able to employ effective approaches to poetry in the classroom. Some of the characteristics of an effective poetry pedagogy are listed by Fleming and Stevens (2015: 193), who invite teachers to: engage students with a wide variety of poems; employ flexibility in the way a poem is read and studied; use the most appropriate methodology for a specific poem rather than applying the same method for all poems; encourage students to be active in their approach to poetry rather than subject them to question and answer sessions every time a poem is read in class; provide students with the necessary background to a poem before expecting them to analyze it; enable students to experience a poem before studying it in detail; and help students to note the characteristics of poetry as a genre when compared to other text types. The pedagogy used by teachers should not be restricted to helping students understand a poem's meaning but should capitalize on poetry's creative use of language, especially since this study seems to confirm Stibbs's (2000) idea that teachers and students discount the significance of a poem's aesthetic qualities. As Barrs and Styles (2013: 191) remind us, "the teaching of poetry needs always to keep in touch with the sensual aesthetic qualities of poetry […] We all need to be re-connected, all the time, to the basics of poetry – sound, rhythm, pattern, music, play and pleasure". Snapper (2013: 40) claims that "[i]n the teaching of poetry […] we particularly see the ways in which reductive, de-aestheticized approaches can disable the text, cutting it off from its full expression". He blames such pedagogy for students' resistance to poetry. Effective poetry pedagogy probably puts a premium on the aesthetic qualities of a poem.

Teachers should re-evaluate their role in a poetry lesson from that of gatekeepers to individuals who invite multiple readings and personal responses to a poem. Smith and Connolly (2005) show that when a teacher's authority over the interpretation of a poem is

reduced students are much more likely to engage in dialogue about the text. In literary criticism seminars especially, teachers should avoid a teacher-centred approach by maximizing student involvement through individual contributions, pair work and group work. This is fundamental since seminars have the potential to encourage students to become aware of their assumptions and unpick them, as well as expose students to a wide range of opinions, thus showing them that there is no right answer when studying English Literature (Gibson, 2010: 4). Given that learning is more effective when teachers are aware of their teaching styles and learners are aware of their learning styles, it is important that teachers employ a pedagogy that caters for the different learning styles of their students and encourage them to exploit these styles for autonomous learning (Rosenberg, 2013). Teachers should be aware that the main lesson event should not always be their explanation of a poem; student initiations should be encouraged and there should be plenty of open questions on the part of teachers. Despite the fact that it is desirable for students to be taught how to analyze a poem, this should not be the only activity they are engaged in in class. Students should be enabled to adopt a variety of ways of reading a poem and encouraged to share their personal and creative responses to it. Heavily influenced by Rosenblatt's (1995) theories, Burdan (2004: 23–24) endorses an approach that views reading as a transaction in which "neither reader nor text is a passive object. Instead, both are active in the creation of meaning and both are affected by this creative act. From this perspective, reading is transformed from a passive process in which meaning is received from or found within a text to a dynamic, dialectical process through which meaning, contingent and plastic, is created by both reader and text".

Taking his cue from Rosenblatt's (1994) idea that individual readers carry their own baggage and that this has a bearing on their reading of a poem, Sedgwick (2003: 48) proposes that young people should be encouraged to "make each poem their own". Moreover, they should be invited to bring poems they would like to discuss to the lesson so that the choice of poetry to be read in class is not monopolized by the teacher in the guise of an expert (Connolly & Smith, 2002; Xerri, 2014). Classroom activities should not be geared solely toward helping students pass the examination but aimed primarily at cultivating a lifelong engagement with poetry.

Lastly, in order for assessment to contribute to students' engagement with poetry, alternative approaches to the traditional essay question might need to be taken into consideration. Snapper (2006: 30) feels that we need to "envisage a different kind of assessment that does not tie us down to detailed, atomized readings of each set text condensed into 45 minutes of frenzied writing in exams". To reform assessment in poetry education it might be necessary to take into consideration a variety of formal and informal modes. Elkins (1976) feels that when assessing students it is important to use a variety of assessment measures since this proves motivating for students given that no single test can fully manifest their achievement. The incorporation of coursework within the assessment of literature is lauded for bolstering interest on the part of students (Micallef & Galea, 1991).

According to Baldacchino (1998: 110), its use "will help reduce the current emphasis on examinations and enhance activity-based learning, motivating students towards increased participation". In the use of tests it is important to minimize students' dependence on lecture notes by requiring contact with the text (Spiro, 1991), such as expecting students to engage with unseen poems as part of an examination. Moreover, it is also necessary to encourage candidates to identify with the texts they encounter and to provide a personal response to them (Spiro, 1991), thus translating motivating strategies in the classroom into the test situation. If assessment is varied in its approaches there is a better chance of it enhancing teaching and learning, and bolstering students' engagement with literature.

7. CONCLUSION

The effects of assessment on classroom practices in relation to poetry still seem germane to any discussion on poetry education in the 21st century. In fact, Dymoke (2003: 183) contends that "[t]he place of poetry within public examinations and the effect that this has on teachers' and pupils' perception of poetry remain significant issues for the English curriculum in the twenty-first century". This study shows that assessment in combination with teachers' and students' beliefs and attitudes in relation to it influence the way they approach poetry in the classroom. Their approach seems to be determined by the modes of assessment, their anxiety in relation to the examination, and their beliefs as to what is expected of candidates when critically engaging with a poem. The consequence of this is that if poetry is approached solely as an academic genre to be studied for examination purposes, teachers and students are unlikely to perceive it as something to be read and written for pleasure. Together with teachers' and students' shared beliefs about poetry (Xerri, 2013), assessment plays a pivotal role in shaping engagement with poetry.

The fact that in the MC English examination candidates' knowledge and skills in relation to poetry are assessed solely by means of essay questions is somewhat problematic. When this mode of assessment is given exclusivity there is a risk that the washback effect on teaching and learning is negative. Basing assessment only on an approach that when misapplied leads students to cram their heads with reproducible knowledge or to believe that their task is to "torture" a poem is fraught with danger. As shown by this study, classroom practices tend to become restricted in nature. Teachers focus on enabling students to analyze poems for the purpose of performing successfully on the examination. Lessons tend to be highly teacher-centred and generate the misconception that poetry possesses hidden meaning. The perils of this situation underscore the need for more inclusive approaches to assessment in the 21st century, ones that invite a variety of ways of engaging with poetry during a course of study and that challenge conservative beliefs and attitudes with respect to poetry.

This study builds on previous research highlighting issues related to "teachers' perceptions of poetry, confidence and the support needed for examination level teaching of a genre that is in danger of becoming increasingly unfamiliar to many students" (Dymoke, 2012: 395). Nevertheless, unlike most other research in poetry education conducted up to now (Benton, 1999, 2000; Dymoke, 2001, 2002, 2012, 2013; O'Neill, 2006, 2008), the results of this study show that to point an accusatory finger solely at assessment is to ignore its collusion with the shared attitudes and beliefs held by teachers and students. Rather than on its own, it is in combination with these shared attitudes and beliefs that assessment plays a pivotal role in shaping engagement with poetry. The practice of treating poetry as a genre set apart from all others, because of the notion that it is abstruse, is as damaging as the practice of encouraging only conventional ways of responding to poetry. Associating poetry with some form of underlying meaning that can only be extracted through a methodical analysis of every single word on the page only helps to inflate its cachet in a way that does poetry a huge disservice. As Simmons (2014) points out, "the in-class disembowelment of a poem's meaning can diminish the personal, even transcendent, experience of reading a poem". While meaning is surely important in both the writing and reading of poetry, it should not be the sole focus of a poetry lesson. Gillis (2014: 37) explains that "[w]hat we might learn from a poem, the message or meaning it might impart, is likely to be bound up with its pleasures. And so, the best way to study a poem is to try, in the first instance, to enjoy it".

The present study is meant to encourage teachers, students, syllabus developers, examiners, teacher educators, and other stakeholders to counteract the effect of those factors that consort with one another to shape the questionable way poetry is sometimes approached in class. By reflecting on the reasons for such an approach, they might feel motivated to stimulate change.

NOTES

1   In the analysis, teachers and students will be referred to as T and S, respectively. These letters are followed by another one designating each individual (A, B, C, and so on).

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