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Schools as “Poetry-Friendly Places”: Michael Rosen on Poetry in the Curriculum

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This article explores the views of children’s poet Michael Rosen in relation to poetry in education. It is based on an interview in which Rosen not only discusses the significance of encouraging young people to engage with poetry at school but also analyzes a number of threats to poetry’s place in the English curriculum. This article identifies parallels between Rosen’s views and current education research and shows how in both cases there is a clear awareness of how certain educational policies risk undermining the value of poetry’s contribution to young people’s learning experience.

Keywords: assessment, creativity, curriculum, educational policy, poetry in education, poetry teaching

By means of his writing and talks, former children’s laureate Michael Rosen fiercely campaigns to safeguard poetry’s place in the English curriculum. He not only is a prolific children’s poet but also is actively engaged in training teachers in the use of poetry in education. By means of his residencies and workshops, Rosen attempts to develop young people’s enjoyment of poetry and to encourage teachers to see poetry as an intrinsic part of the curriculum. Rosen is convinced of the benefits that young people can derive from a creative and personal engagement with poetry, and that is why he at times appears to be on a crusade against political meddling in the curriculum.

Educational policy in the United Kingdom over the past few years seems to have had a negative impact on poetry in the classroom, and the possibility exists that the situation will be further aggravated by the recent consolidation of an assessment-driven approach that fails to put poetry at the very core of the English curriculum. In Goodwyn’s (2012) opinion, “the story from England is a valuable ‘warning’ to English teachers around the world to protect the true importance of literature from political interference” (215). Rosen is one of the most vociferous critics of such interference, which he deems especially harmful in the case of poetry. In an effort to explore his position on poetry’s status in education, I conducted the following interview with him in March 2013.

AN ASSESSMENT-DRIVEN CULTURE

In the interview, Rosen is highly critical of the effects of an assessment-driven culture on poetry’s place in the curriculum. 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, “a productive dialogue about assessment approaches will prevent poetry from remaining neglected on a pedestal” (2001, 39). Poetry teaching is reported as being “weaker than other aspects of English inspected” (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills [Ofsted] 2007, 5), which 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), 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” (155). Despite the fact that it is highly rewarding to engage students with poetry in a sustained fashion, “in many English classrooms, teachers are required to devise a curriculum that is strongly connected to high-stakes assessments” (Schillinger, Meyer, and Vinz 2010, 110). Goodwyn (2012) believes that “current

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assessment regimes. . . diminish what is valuable in the engagement of students with literature” (213). One possible solution to this problem lies in teacher education, which “is perhaps best placed to offer [a] 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 and 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 preservice programs that do not merely pander to the needs of an assessment-driven educational milieu. Lockney and Proudfoot (2013) 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” (150). 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). Rosen implies that 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.

NEGLECTING POETRY

A curriculum that sidelines poetry in favor of more “useful” subjects is, according to Rosen, misguided. It is disconcerting to note that “many schools still allocate a certain portion of a term or even year to the study of poetry rather than making sure that pupils experience the genre frequently” (Pike 2000, 41). According to Stables, “educators can easily fall into the Platonic trap of seeing poetry as of less importance than science and mathematics” (2002, 30). The dangers of such neglect are quite clear. For example, poetry’s place in the curriculum in New Zealand is jeopardized by a “cycle of deprivation which results from the neglect of poetry in the English programme, whereby a pattern of disadvantage is set up for the education of the next generation of students” (O’Neill 2006, 247). It can be argued that “unless education systems expose students to the study of poetry in depth, it is a value that eludes or escapes most, unnoticed and unmissed,” with the main consequence being that in the long run, such “pedagogical bypassing becomes profoundly entrenched” (Weaven and Clark 2011, 83). Dymoke (2012) points out how in New Zealand and England, “poetry could be seen as an increasingly unfamiliar text” (408) for young people. In New Zealand, “the lack of direct reference to poetry in examination objectives could ultimately lead to a cultural impoverishment of the curriculum,” whereas in

England, “poetry is becoming ever more synonymous with testing” (Dymoke 2012, 407–08). Such extreme situations undermine poetry’s place in the curriculum, and, according to Rosen, the most acute effect of such an approach is that children’s creative engagement with poetry is impoverished.

CURBING CREATIVE AND PERSONAL RESPONSES

Rosen censures an assessment-driven curriculum because it seems to place little value on the cultivation of students’ creative and personal responses to poetry. In fact, Stevens (2007) points out that “a huge amount of poetry is taught in schools, but not always with enough imaginative awareness of its possibilities (and inherent tensions) for creative exploration” (55). Cumming (2007) concurs with this contention and maintains that “though poetry is positively included, there is little attention and value afforded to children’s creativity with language” (99). The effect of not adequately capitalizing on children’s creativity in poetry lessons is that it may fail to be nurtured: “If there is no opportunity to link a child’s love of playing with language with what they are expected to learn about poetry in class, then that which they have could become irrelevant and devalued in school” (Cumming 2007, 99). One of the causes for creativity’s diminishing significance might be that the curriculum is prescriptive in nature and not developed in consultation with teachers. In fact, Doug (2011) maintains that “whereas at one time teachers had control of their own teaching, suddenly the National Curriculum disempowered the teacher because the English poetry syllabus started to become rather generic and formulaic—a view that one size fits all” (441). One of the results of this shift is that “while the aims of the national curriculum state clearly that pupils’ subjective responses to poetry should play a key role in the development of critical analysis and reflection skills within the poetry class. . . in practice this appears limited” (Hennessy and Mannix McNamara 2011, 217). A prescriptive curriculum disenfranchises teachers and restricts poetry teaching in such a manner that young people’s creative and personal responses might not be adequately fostered. Lambirth, Smith, and Steele (2012) believe in “the importance of opening up the school day to poetry in ways that the present trend for the encapsulation of poetry teaching in units of work does not allow” (79). While aware that some teachers manage to circumvent the restrictions of a prescriptive curriculum in their teaching of poetry, Rosen suggests that for the majority, the challenge to engender creativity while meeting the demands of assessment-driven educational policy is far too great.

A RESTRICTED APPROACH

Rosen is in favor of active approaches to the teaching of poetry and believes that students should be encouraged to engage with poetry in a variety of ways so that poems are not just perceived as printed texts but appreciated for their multimodality. Unfortunately, this might not be the view taken by the curriculum. For example, Gordon (2004) complains that “the inscription of poetry in the curriculum as a printed mode... may encourage a pedagogy that does not adequately recognise the potential of poetry to make meaning in a variety of modes” (97). Poetry ends up being “taught as a set of rules and procedures, with a terminology that relates to measurement of lines and stanzas, identification of elements and forms. Poems become riddles to which only the English teacher has the answer” (Sullivan 2005, 30–31). Stovall (2006) maintains that “despite the popularity of poetry slam and performance poetry, creative spaces for young people in schools are slowly being eliminated,” partly because the “visual and performing arts are not viewed as essential elements of the curriculum” (79). The insignificance accorded to active approaches to poetry goes counter to the idea that “teaching and learning need to be subversive—especially subversive of the strong urge towards the alienating boredom of a pre-determined curriculum with pre-determined outcomes” (Stevens 2007, 65). Gregory (2008) explains that “workers in youth slam are often keenly aware of how unpalatable the restrictiveness of the school curriculum is to many teachers and students, and promote youth slam as a means to overcome these limitations” (74–75). Despite poetry’s potential as a multimodal medium, the curriculum still seems to associate it with print, which does a disservice to students’ engagement with poetry. For instance, Gordon (2009) believes that “a curricular gap in attention to aural dimensions, though overt in the early years and tacitly assumed in the upper levels of attainment, is untenable with regard to the way pupils can and do understand poetry as sound” (173). Active approaches to poetry value its multimodality and underscore the fact that poetry lends itself to performance, which “has the potential not only to celebrate form and meaning, but also to instantiate a kind of knowledge whose educational value should be given equal status with the analytical understanding of poems that currently drives the examination system” (Pullinger and Whitley 2013, 172). Rosen’s faith in poetry’s potential for performance calls for a pedagogy that encourages students to transcend the close reading of printed poems, which is commonly the only way in which they are asked to engage with poetry.

EMPOWERING TEACHERS

In the following interview, Rosen talks about the relevance that poetry can have for young people if teachers are given

the freedom to develop the curriculum. Sir Andrew Motion’s report for Booktrust (2010) expresses the concern that for some students, poetry is “dull and pointless,” “an elitist art form” (12) that is taught in such a manner as to estrange them even further. The fact that students “are still commonly introduced to poetry as something which is to be intoned reverentially or read in silence” means that they “view canonical literature as something which is inaccessible and irrelevant to them” (Gregory 2013, 120). This is part of the “the stultifying nature of the curriculum which frames English education in UK schools” (Gregory 2013, 120). Xerri (2013) shows how “demystifying poetry is crucial if students are to see poetry as something accessible and enjoyable, something they can read on their own without the teacher acting as a gatekeeper to meaning” (135). However, reaching that stage of individual student enjoyment might first entail providing teachers “with the opportunity and support to investigate all facets of their curriculum, particularly those that cause them fear and anxiety” (Weaven and Clark 2013, 210). This sense of apprehension is perhaps further amplified by a curriculum that hinders teachers from having a say about what kind of poetry they teach in class and the manner in which they teach it. For Rosen, it is important to empower teachers so that they can engage students in a variety of ways. The curriculum should not force teachers to focus exclusively on canonical poems, much less expect them to bequeath to students a reverential attitude toward poetry.

THE INTERVIEW

XERRI: What do you usually plan to achieve by means of the poetry events you do at schools? What do students get out of them?

ROSEN: Well, first and foremost, enjoyment and pleasure. I mean, we can now break that down and say all sorts of other things, but it’s mainly about enjoyment and pleasure. I’m not one of those people who think that poetry should be like medicine: you may not like it, but it’s good for you. I don’t want to get into that particular mindset. My view is that it’s enjoyable and pleasurable for a variety of very important reasons. For example, one of the useful things about poetry is that it doesn’t have to behave like most stories behave. Most stories tie up the endings, tie up all the knots. In the classic nineteenth-century novel, say, by Dickens or Tolstoy, either people get married or the villain is exposed and unmasked. Poetry doesn’t have to follow that pattern. Poetry can pose questions. Poetry can describe a state of being; it doesn’t necessarily have to say where that state of being comes from or where it’s going. So it offers children a different space to investigate who they are, different from the story and different from maybe science or philosophy, because it can deal with these other states of being that we have. In other words, sometimes life

doesn't seem to progress according to the rules of chronology and plot and melodrama, but we are in a state of euphoria or a state of depression or a state of distress. Poetry can explore those without necessarily having to resolve them or necessarily even having to actually make it that it's you that's expressing it. So it can displace those feelings onto creatures, onto trees, onto stones. Poetry is very good at that, because we are content with it being symbolic and representational and metaphorical. So it gives children that space. Also, poetry purely linguistically doesn't have to follow the syntax of continuous prose. Children don't have to obsess about their capital letters, full stops and finite verbs. Is it passive? Is it active? Have I got enough adverbs? Have I got enough adjectives? Have I got subordinate clauses? It doesn't have to bother with any of that. It can if it wants to, but it doesn't have to. So you show this to children, that you don't have to make sentences, you don't have to even use verbs if you don't want to, and certainly you don't have to use adjectives and adverbs. Do it however you want, and you can use all the flexibility that the English language has, with its grammar of shifting words around, turning them from nouns to verbs, from verbs to nouns, and so on. When you show this to children, then language becomes much more plastic, it becomes a material you can play with. Usually you can't get away with this in continuous prose, particularly with all the instructions that children have about what continuous prose should look like. So I think that's a very important space, because if you think about it, children are on the receiving end of the notion that language doesn't belong to them; it belongs to a higher order of being, some kind of invisible academy who are embedded in SAT tests and teachers' minds and perhaps ministers of education or something. It's very hard for children to get a sense that they own and possess this language. They do because they're out in the playground using it, they're talking to their friends, they're talking about the movies they like, and so on. So again, poetry offers a time when you can say, "Take control of this. You can write in all sorts of ways that you can see in other poems or almost in your speaking voice. You can do that." I think there are some powerful reasons why poetry is important. I can think of some others. A lot of poetry, particularly in the last one hundred years, is what people call confessional. That's to say it's not that you're confessing, but you're dealing with the things that you care about and matter to you. The problem is that in our lives, we always have things that we care about, and sometimes these are quite tricky to express, and we get troubled by them or they bother us or we can never quite figure out what it's all about. Poetry is a good space; it's a kind of release. The metaphor I sometimes give is the notion of a ping-pong ball bouncing around your head. You get the ping-pong ball out of your head onto the page, and this gives you an opportunity to objectify yourself. You're able to look at yourself on the page, and you can then make an evaluation. You can say, "Am I really that person? Is

that really what I think? Do I think something slightly different?" Then when you share it with other people, you hear what they have to say about that little piece of objectification that you've just done, and then again, you ask yourself, "Am I really what they think I am from reading what I've just written?" It may just be I had an argument with my brother, or my mum told me off. All this is a powerful part of what children and all of us need to do, which we might call self-realization or self-actualization.

XERRI: Would you associate these benefits that you've just mentioned with the reading or with the writing of poetry?

ROSEN: Well, they definitely relate to the writing, but I think they can apply to the reading as well, especially if you read poems in a way in which it's very open-ended and there's enormous amount of choice for the children to choose what they want to read or to hear read to them or to hear on recordings of one sort or another. Also, when they come to investigate a poem, if it's done in the most open-ended, gentle way, then they apply to the reading. If the reading is intermeshed with this very close-ended way of reading, what the educationalists call the retrieval way of reading, then you block off the interpretive and evaluative response, in which case I don't think that poetry is doing very much. You might just as well do that with a bank report or something.

XERRI: Anecdotal evidence shows that some people believe we should no longer teach poetry in this day and age, that it has become irrelevant and unimportant, that it no longer matters. What do you think about this?

ROSEN: All I can say is that it is for some and not for others. I think it's always been like that. I mean many gratify their poetic needs through song. If you take the great body of popular music, this is expressing language in a very poetic way, and it's very compressed. I was listening to an Adele song today, and I could think of it as a poem. It was very metaphorical; she was saying exactly what she felt, and it was displaced onto objects and things around her. She was talking about things in a symbolic sort of way. Adele is someone who is very popular for millions of people, so I would say in many ways that's where people are getting their poetry, that's where they're getting that way of thinking. At the same time, there are many popular channels of poetry that sort of scarcely go above the radar. Poetry slams, poetry clubs, poetry competitions of all kinds, and so on. So it beavers away below the radar in many ways. On the other hand, yes, there are some people who are completely indifferent to it, and that's the way it is.

XERRI: Recently you tweeted, "We know how to interpret from the day we are born. Education mostly consists of stopping children interpreting"[March 1, 2013]. What are your views on the effects of education on young people's engagement with poetry?

ROSEN: I think that the disposition of human beings in the world is to interpret, that is what we are meant to do as

creatures. We're looking, we're seeing, and then we think, we interpret, we act on our interpretations. Most education blocks this off because it says there is something we must do before a child is allowed to interpret. So when they come face to face with poetry, they face a problem. Most of us write poetry because we want our readers and listeners to have a conversation with themselves and with other people—in other words, to engage in a really interpretive act. But if in education we just keep asking questions that are really exam questions or just disguised but they just have right or wrong answers, then we block off that interpretive and evaluative response. I think that's to the loss of the child, the teacher, and ultimately the poet.

XERRI: So what do you think of Sue Dymoke's [2002] idea that the dead hand of the exam hinders students from engaging with poetry?

ROSEN: I would mostly agree, but not entirely so. There are teachers who are cunning, who know how to duck and dive, who look at those exams, look to see what's there, and rather than just simply teaching directly to the test know how to take their students on a circuitous route and how to open up the possibilities of these open, interpretive ways of reading by putting people in pairs, discussing things, and getting them to ask questions of the poem so that the questions are not coming from the examiner or the teacher but from themselves. They invite students to relate the poem to their own lives. How does the poem remind them of things in their own lives or in things that they've read so that they can include themselves in the response? When they do this, the students would actually in the end be able to answer those questions in the exam that much easier. People think that the best way to coach students for exams is to keep giving them exam questions. In fact, the best teaching doesn't bother; it goes one step beyond the exam so when the students reach the exam they find it easier or obvious and blatant because the kind of high-level conversations they've had would have given them the opportunity to engage in this kind of interpretive mode. Some teachers know this, and they get to that, and that's great. It's way more advanced than what I do.

XERRI: In his keynote speech at the 2013 NATE Conference, Sir Andrew Motion discussed how the overbearing pressure of the curriculum and assessment sometimes influences teachers' approach to poetry in the classroom. You meet many teachers when visiting schools and running training workshops. What are your thoughts on the way they go about teaching poetry?

ROSEN: Andrew is absolutely right. It got squashed and squashed and squeezed and squeezed. It got pushed into the GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] anthology, which I would probably grudgingly concede has introduced poetry to more students, introduced them to a wider variety of poetry than there was before. I would probably have to concede that I was probably wrong about that anthology largely because of the fact that the poets who

appear in the anthology go out and perform their poems to thousands and thousands of children. I didn't anticipate that, so I will eat humble pie on that one. People like John Agard, Simon Armitage, and Carol Ann Duffy perform live to thousands of students in cinemas and big theaters or wherever teachers take them. Students wouldn't otherwise have encountered it if that anthology hadn't been in place. In primary schools and in the lower secondary, I think poetry tends to get squashed into what the teachers themselves are encouraged to call poetry units or in Years 5 and 6 ignored altogether. There just isn't time for it. There are these all-important literacy and maths tests, and teachers have to score in those, otherwise all the heavens will open and Ofsted will turn up and the school will be turned into an academy and placed under special measures and funding will be taken away. All the penal qualities, all the penal measures that surround schools actually in the end impact on things like poetry, art, music, dance, and even P.E. So Andrew is absolutely right. In terms of the effect it has on the teaching of it, I would just say that teachers sometimes feel that it's either unnecessary or it's in danger of lowering the marks of their class and perhaps it's better not to spend too much time on it. They're only doing it because it's somehow there in some old curriculum documents or because somebody might have said to them, "Oh that poem works well." It's very hard for me or for anybody else to say that what schools need is a poetry policy. They need to make their schools poetry-friendly places for poetry to be around in the mortar, between the bricks and in through the bricks, and it can flow. Poetry can flow as in the veins. In the primary and even secondary school curriculum, poetry can crop up while you're doing ancient Egypt or Tudors and Stuarts or photosynthesis. There's a place for poetry, because it can be short and quirky and it can be one person's view and you can leave it about on the walls. You can just play with it. It can be there at the end of the day. It's actually a very safe place for children and teachers to go to. But it's very hard for that way of thinking in the present climate to be heard.

XERRI: How could things change?

ROSEN: I think first and foremost we have to rid ourselves of the notion that education is run by the Secretary of State for Education. We are obsessed with the idea, trapped in the idea that this person, this mandarin, that it's somehow his job or her job to synthesize what is good and what should be taught and then to dictate that to these thousands and thousands of professionals and children. It seems like a completely weird, state-controlled view of knowledge and culture and skills. I don't know how we got to this. I mean, it's utterly Stalinist. It is utterly totalitarian. These are the kinds of things that Stalin and Hitler dreamed of, that you could have somebody with the power to say, "You will study William the Conqueror and you will recite this poem and you will learn about Young's modulus of elasticity." It's quite, quite absurd! So we will only break

this control, this rigid downward control, when teachers and researchers can take control of education. It will be the job of the Secretary of State for Education to facilitate that, to enable it to happen. You have thousands of years of experience in that day-to-day business of pedagogy. It's there in the teaching profession, in the people who have gone on to teacher training, and in the people who've retired. It's there that you can find the wisdom and knowledge of what you do with this child and that child. All you have to do is engage the teachers in the study and research of what they're doing. In that environment, I would wave the flag for poetry, as I'm sure other poets would. We'd do our best to show teachers what an incredible ally, what an incredibly useful friend poetry is. I think in that environment, that point can be made. The idea that it should be dictated by the Secretary of State, who says, "Children will learn poetry!" is just another way of putting them off it, because the teachers would do it reluctantly and the children would do it reluctantly. A few would like it, as always. So what? Education is really a form of popular art; it's about democracy, it's about everybody taking something from it. Everything that comes from central government in that particular way is ultimately elitist, because it involves failure. We have to take poetry away from that. That can only happen if we take poetry away from that whole idea of grading, selecting, and segregating of children. That can only happen when—and it's inevitable that it will happen one day—teachers and researchers and trainers take control of education themselves.

XERRI: In a blog post last year [Rosen 2012], you questioned Michael Gove's proposal that students as young as five should be expected to learn poetry by heart. In your "Letters from a curious parent," you often cast doubt on proposals that aren't supported by solid research evidence. What are your thoughts on the effects of politicians' decisions on young people's education? How could such decisions affect young people's engagement with poetry?

ROSEN: Broadly speaking, politicians do have an effect on education and on poetry because they make pronouncements, they embed these in documents, the documents arrive on the head teacher's desk, the head teacher then delivers it to the teacher, and lo and behold, it's happened. Ultimately, that may or may not have a good effect. I just think that there is a better way of making education a better place to be for everybody and to raise standards, and that is when teachers become engaged in the process of devising the curriculum, of researching their practice, and have power over what it is they're doing, collectively and individually. The model could be different. The idea that the Secretary of State for Education with his limited experience of life pronounces, "I think five-year-olds should do this," I think is quite, quite absurd. It really is, as many people have said, analogous to the Health Secretary saying, "I wish you didn't use chloroform and you used ether or something for anaesthetic." I mean, what does he know? He

really doesn't know, and even if he does, it's still not the right way to do it, because what you do in that way is disempower people. You want teachers to be powerful people, powerful in the sense of knowing what they're doing and how they're doing it, and powerful in terms of experimenting as well, to have the confidence to experiment. In terms of whether learning poetry off by heart is a good thing or a bad thing, I will just say that if you read lots of poetry with children, they will learn it off by heart. That's because poetry has been devised over thousands of years in order for people to do that. It's almost like a silly tautology and a very ignorant tautology for Michael Gove to have said this, because the point about poetry is that it is devised with its memory devices locked in, whether it's the alliterative form or the rhythmic form or the rhyming form or the constant repetitions of words and phrases. That's what it's there for. He has said, "You've got to teach them to learn it off by heart." Now all you have to do is to make it readily available in quite large quantities and do it regularly and the children will say, "I want to learn that one. Can we learn that one?" You as a teacher will find that your job is to enable them to learn it and to learn the ones they want to learn. You cannot read a poem like Spike Milligan's "On the Ning Nang Nong" without at least half the class knowing it by the end of the day and the rest of the class pleading with you to do it several times so that in the end they get it. Of course as a teacher you can tell them, "Tell you what, let's perform it in assembly next week without the words. We'll just do it and we'll act it out and we'll bang drums while we're doing it." It is utterly infectious. Every single word has got a big hook on it which says, "Remember me." Then you have somebody who's ignorant as Michael Gove saying, "You must teach children how to do it." You don't. You just do it. You don't teach them anything. I go in and some of my poems are just like "On the Ning Nang Nong," and I do it. Then I say, "Now you do it back to me." Then together we do it one more time, and then the whole school knows it. That's how easy it is. He in his ignorance is saying what he's saying. They're just like nursery rhymes in the way they're constructed. "It's raining, it's pouring. The old man's snoring. He went and bumped his head and couldn't get up in the morning." You can say that several times to a group of four-year-olds, and they will ask you to say it again, particularly if you do it with funny little accents. By the end of the week, every child knows it.

XERRI: What effects will the new curriculum have on poetry and on students' engagement with poetry?

ROSEN: A little bit early to say, but probably more of the same. Teachers being resigned and fed up, being treated like factory hands with no control over their work. They have to struggle to find space and time to be able to do these more humanistic things because there's such a huge domination of English and maths in the way in which schools are judged that there's like a clamp on education which says, "Schools will be judged on English and maths

results.” So the arts side gets squashed and squeezed. They tell the teachers, “I would do that after school as an optional extra. It’s not central to the curriculum. We will judge the school purely on English and maths.” It is very, very narrow-minded, ignorant, and ultimately self-defeating, because whatever human beings we might imagine having in the future, they will need to be people who know their emotions, who care for each other, who are flexible and open-minded about learning new things, and also awake to possibilities that the world can and must be a better place than it is now, because it is utterly unsatisfactory. We need people who can invent things and invent new ways in which we socialize, in which we are together as human beings. Now this takes the fantastic contribution of art to play in that, and I obviously stick poetry there amongst the arts. It is incredibly narrow-minded that this curriculum has been devised looking backwards. It’s been devised thinking, “What did grammar school people do fifty years ago when I was at school?” Rather than looking forwards and saying, “Do you know that in thirty years’ time when these children are adults, the world is going to be yet again different?” So instead of thinking of how we can prepare these children for this very different world, this curriculum says, “How can we prepare these children for the 1950s?” It’s quite absurd, and I think poetry will suffer, of course. Yes, it will go on being this optional extra where you do a few acrostics and a few poems, where you tell the children how good they are before the children get a chance to read them. It’s the classic process that a lot of education does. It tells the child, “Here is this great poem because it’s by this dead white man who’s wonderful and great and brilliant and now you will read it and you will find out why it’s great.” It’s just an affirmation of the status quo. That’s not what poetry is written for. Poetry is written to challenge and open up possibilities, not just simply to reinforce the status quo, with the exception of one or two patriotic poems, of course.

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