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**A critical investigation into whether Year 8 students'  
learning about poetry can be made memorable  
through a drama-based approach**

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**Abstract**

*The change to linear GCSEs means large demands are placed upon students' memories, making it vital that teaching and learning is memorable. The action research reported here explores whether teaching through a drama-based approach can make basic aspects of poetry (i.e. the content) memorable. The investigation was undertaken with Year 8 students from a mixed 11-18 comprehensive school in East Anglia. Findings suggest that whilst students initially could not remember poetry they had previously read or studied, it seems drama could make learning about poetry memorable as students were subsequently able to recall both basic and more advanced ideas about the studied poems.*

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# **A critical investigation into whether Year 8 students' learning about poetry can be made memorable through a drama-based approach**

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## **Introduction**

General Certificates in Secondary Education (GCSEs) have been taught since September 2014 as two-year linear courses with assessments usually occurring at the end (Long, 2017, p.6). The Policy Paper published by the Department for Education (DfE) (2015) suggested that whilst universities, colleges, and employers' common dissatisfaction with school leavers' literacy and numeracy skills had been a contributing factor behind the reform, the new, more vigorous GCSEs would prepare students for further study and life post-education. Whether or not this is true, the reformed GCSEs require students to remember a large quantity of information from each of their subjects; for example, English Literature is assessed through closed-book exams, yet tests students on one play by Shakespeare, one 19<sup>th</sup> Century novel, a range of poetry, and a piece of British fiction or drama (DfE, 2013, p.4). As such, it is vital that learning is memorable.

My first mentor's Lead Practitioner project into memorable learning piqued my interest in this area of education, and made me consider how I, as a trainee English teacher, could improve the likelihood my lessons would be retained in my pupils' long-term memories. I decided to target poetry as my experiences seem to suggest approaches to teaching it consistently focus on analysis, and a pupil panel recently emphasised this as they reported that the only thing they could recall about their poetry lessons was line by line annotation. Therefore, with examination boards testing students on "no fewer than 15 poems by at least five different poets, and a minimum of 300 lines of poetry" (DfE, 2013, p.4), I wondered if a different approach might better facilitate retention. Whilst much research has been conducted into the relationship between learning and recall, studies linking poetry, drama, and memory seem non-existent. Regardless, this research aimed to explore whether drama makes poetry memorable. It is important to note that this investigation hoped to find out only whether basic aspects of poetry could be recalled. For it is true students are required to demonstrate a deep understanding of the poems in their examination, but they cannot hope to recall this, or in

fact acquire it in the first place, if they do not remember what the poem is about. Indeed, in both Bloom's and Marzano and Kendall's taxonomies, analysis is higher than comprehension (Marzano & Kendall, 2007, p.5, 13). Thus, making basic aspects of poetry memorable became the focus of this study as it seems the gateway to deeper understanding, and as such to students' success.

## **Context**

The research was undertaken during my second professional training placement with a top set Year 8 class of 30 at an urban coeducational comprehensive school for students aged 11-18 located in East Anglia. Although the rationale behind the study cites the demands of the GCSE course, it would have been unfair and unethical to test a new approach on a GCSE class, and so instead the Year 8 students were chosen. With this group, it would not be detrimental if the approach proved unsuccessful, and any benefits would only be advantageous. In a school with a high proportion of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students (26%) and a level of Pupil Premium students in-line with the 12.9% national average (DfE, 2017, p.1), the Year 8 class picked for the study was atypical. Out of 30 students, only three were Pupil Premium, two were EAL fluent (E), and one was EAL competent (D). Two pupils with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities were also in the group.

Prior to the investigation, drama had not been incorporated in the class' English lessons, but their teacher felt most would respond positively. Working with the group beforehand was very important, as it enabled potential challenges to be identified; for instance, the shy students for whom drama might be problematic, and the few members of the group whose behaviour was disruptive. As a result, possible solutions and strategies could be formed ready for implementation during the teaching sequence.

## **Literature Review**

In the introduction to this report, the lack of research regarding the relationship between drama, poetry, and memorable learning was highlighted. Nevertheless, by combining ideas from research undertaken in the three distinct areas this literature review will attempt to form a case for using drama to try to make poetry memorable.

## Memory and Memorable Learning

In order to understand what could make learning memorable, one must first have a basic understanding of memory itself; however, it must be noted that as this piece is the work of an English trainee teacher, the science of memory is not, and cannot be, the focus. A good place to start when seeking to explore memory is Atkinson and Shiffrin's multi-store model of memory. Combining findings from prominent research of the time, in their 1968 theoretical chapter Atkinson and Shiffrin outlined a model that splits memory into three structural components: the sensory register, the short-term store, and the long-term store, a fairly permanent repository of information (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968, pp.90-91). Due to advances in science over the intervening years, many would argue the model is outdated and irrelevant in modern society, especially since other models have come to prominence such as Baddeley and Hitch's Working Memory, an alternative to the short-term store. Yet Atkinson and Shiffrin's work was and remains a fundamental starting point when considering memory. In this way, the authors of the chapter suggested their work was only a general framework rather than a "finished theory" (ibid., p.91), and as such the chapter was incredibly successful in provoking more research. Despite the time that has passed, therefore, it is worth remembering Atkinson and Shiffrin's model and the implication of it that, fundamentally, if teachers wish to make their learning memorable, they are aiming for it ultimately to be encoded in their students' long-term stores.

Extensive research has investigated ways to help the storage of information in the long-term store. In 2013, Kelley and Watson experimented with Spaced Learning, a technique where instruction is highly-compressed and repeated after distraction activities (Kelley & Watson, 2013, p.1). The peer-reviewed research found the method had a significant effect on learning, and with a large sample and the internal validity increased by the attempts made to minimize the effects of potentially extraneous variables, such as learning taking place via other means (ibid., p.5), this finding appears convincing. Whilst at the time no comparison could be made as no other school used Spaced Learning (ibid.), this does not have to detract from the study but instead could emphasise its originality. Despite how successful Spaced Learning appears, questions are raised as to how it could be used to teach English, for Kelley and Watson acknowledge they only tested it in Biology and Physics classrooms (ibid., p.7). Since studying English (including poetry) necessitates engagement with whole texts that takes time Spaced Learning perhaps does not allow for, Spaced Learning will not be included in this action research, but as it could be a useful way to recap and

revise poetry, it is a method I am interested to follow the progress of. Nevertheless, Kelley and Watson make observations that still appear to have implications for this investigation, and so these will be considered accordingly throughout this report.

Meanwhile, Markant, Ruggeri, Gureckis and Xu's (2016) theoretical review explores the assumption that active learning leads to many positive outcomes including recall (p.142) by 'surveying' experimental research (p.143). Significantly, Markant et al.'s. conclusion that active learning "has positive effects on memory across a wide range of activities and student populations" (p.149) seems well-founded. For although the researchers do not explain how they surveyed each piece, the quality can be assumed due to the fact their report was peer-reviewed. Moreover, as experimental research involves active manipulation of the independent variable, it provides the strongest evidence of cause-and-effect relationships (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p.41), meaning the basis of Markant et al.'s. claims should be solid. Thus, assuming their definition is universal, active learning seems a good method to adopt to improve memory of poetry, and as such I followed some of the guidelines to creating active learning (e.g. giving students ownership, including objects, etc.) Markant et al. implicitly include, as the Teaching Sequence will outline.

Although Markant et al. mention Voss, Gonsalves, Federmeier, and Cohen's (2011) study into volitional behaviour, they do not expand upon it. Yet Voss et al.'s report details an interesting investigation into the premise that successful educational active learning practices emphasise the importance of students having control over their learning (Voss et al., 2011, p.115). Dubbing this "volitional behaviour", Voss et al. investigate the impact this has on memory through a series of experiments where participants studied common objects through a small window during two viewing conditions (passive viewing versus actively choosing the window's position). After studying 75 objects in each condition, the participants' recall was tested. The researchers put measures in place to reduce effects of extraneous variables; for example, ensuring participants viewed the same information in the same order for the same time in both conditions (ibid., pp.115-116). This makes the conclusion that volitional control "provided substantial benefits to later memory performance" (ibid., p.119) seem more valid, and so I incorporated explicit choices (e.g. duration of tasks, group size, characterisation, etc.) to try to give students control over their own learning.

By reviewing some of the research into memory, it seems active learning should have positive effects on the retention of basic information about poetry. In this study, active learning will be implemented through drama, “a dynamic and crucially active way of learning” (Struthers, 2005, p.82) that allows the implicit guidelines from Markant et al. to be followed. As such, the literature surrounding poetry must now be explored to see if drama is already a common method used to teach this aspect of English.

## **Poetry**

Naylor and Wood (2012) consider teaching practices of poetry in their theoretical chapter. They propose that an approach influenced by Leavis and the New Critics is prominent in classrooms, where the text is seen to exist on the page and the nuances of language are responded to with no consideration of the context or poet (Naylor & Wood, 2012, p.13). Interestingly, this coincides with my own experiences as a poetry student, where the focus was always first and foremost placed upon the poet’s language use. Undertaking a close reading could allow students to take control as they could decide which elements to focus on in their analysis and form their own interpretations. However, Dias and Hayhoe (as cited in Naylor & Wood, 2012, p.13) note many students feel they cannot determine the meaning of the poem, regardless of whether they have contextual information or not, without their teacher, who is seen to be the poem’s ‘keeper’. Rather than taking ownership, as active learning decrees, this therefore implies learning for many students is entirely dependent on the teacher. Whilst the authors subsequently outline a ‘progressive’ practice of teaching where the classroom is a place of exploration and emerging meanings (Naylor & Wood, 2012, p.14) that seems more in line with active learning, the greater number of examples given for the traditional approach results in a much more convincing case for its prominence. Indeed, no examples are provided of how their “poetry lessons are part of this greater vision of what English teaching is” (p.14). Hence, Naylor and Wood’s chapter on the whole seems to convey a picture of heavily reliant poetry students.

Significantly, although Alexander’s (2008) research focuses on listening and its role in achieving understanding (p.220), she reinforces the notion that close analysis is prominent. For she notes “the vastly over-used approach to poems [is] via form (sonnet, haiku, limerick, etc.) or figure of speech (simile, metaphor, personification, etc.)” (ibid., p.227). As a result, even though Alexander had an alternative, more holistic form of engagement in mind, her acknowledgement seemingly reiterates

the prominence of dissecting language and structure in poetry lessons that could lack characteristics of active learning.

Meanwhile, Sigvardsson's (2017, p.584) systematic literature review undertaken to provide teachers with guidance seems to suggest the increasing prominence of a different approach to teaching poetry. Despite the research originating in Sweden, Sigvardsson's findings are likely to have applicability to England since many English research papers were used. However, systematic reviews are supposed to make it clear how all decisions are made (Denscombe, 2014, p.159), but Sigvardsson (2017, p.586) does not explain why "articles that discussed poetry reading in the second language classroom, reading bilingual poetry, or poetry as remedial reading were excluded". Despite this, the research seems comprehensive, and acknowledges its own limitations. Sigvardsson finds the "most dominant pattern in the articles is the many suggestions of a personal response pedagogy centred on the students' reading" (ibid., p.589). Most of the articles that propose this, however, also imply that students are reliant on teachers to help them form such a response (e.g. pp.589, 591, 592), perhaps contradicting the idea it is a student's own personal reaction to a poem. This could suggest active learning may not be occurring as students are passively adopting another's viewpoint instead of constructing their own. Furthermore, this could imply the personal response rewarded by exam criteria may be inauthentic at best, and at worst a learned-by-rote phrase included only to fulfil exam requirements. Hence, although the literature reviewed previously suggests that recall is a product of active learning, students' seeming lack of ownership over the formation of their personal responses to poetry may prevent this benefit from materialising.

Although his work was published nearly twenty years ago, the apparent lack of student autonomy in poetry lessons could perhaps be explained by Benton's 1999 report on The Poetry Research Project's follow-up study to their 1982 research. Benton surveyed over 100 teachers of pupils aged 11-16 (Benton, 1999, p.524), and it is one of his closing remarks that possibly explains the lack of active learning in poetry lessons. For Benton notes that the majority of the teachers' concerns in 1998 revolved around "examinations, time pressures and syllabus content" (ibid., p.529). In this way, he explains "sixty-five percent of teachers surveyed would agree with the proposition that 'I feel constrained by the examinations to spoon-feed my classes'" (ibid., p.530). Thus, the recent changes to GCSEs means the same pressures perhaps are relevant in modern society; indeed, Fleming and Stevens (2015) noted "the increased tendency to assess poetry in examination is a

cause for concern for many teachers” (p.182), which may be causing the comprehensive but inactive approach to its teaching.

Overall, some of the literature seems to suggest an absence of active learning in poetry lessons. Interestingly, a connection could be made between this and the National Curriculum. For example, at Key Stage 2 students should “learn to appreciate rhymes and poems” (DfE, 2013, p.22) and prepare them to read aloud and perform (DfE, 2013, p.37), but even though poetry is included in the Spoken English section of the Key Stage 3 and 4 curricula, reading appears to be the focus. As a result, there seems a lack of advocacy for active, creative learning, meaning both literature and the National Curriculum could be used to argue a new approach to teaching poetry should be tried.

## **Drama**

Although Cliff Hodges (2014, p.184) reports that poetry and drama are closely aligned, Franks and Bryer’s (2014) practice literature never once mentions poetry when discussing drama as a teaching method. Yet studies such as Athanases’ (2005) have linked drama to many benefits, including improved understanding of poetry. Perhaps Franks and Bryer (2014) have a good reason for excluding poetry when they claim drama is a “form that can be applied to the study of many kinds of texts – literary or mundane, printed or moving image, prose fiction or non-fiction, play text or film script” (p.153), or maybe it was an unconscious decision. Whatever the case, it raises questions surrounding the criteria they used to determine the aspects of English drama can effectively be used to teach.

Athanases’ (2005, p.88) investigation into poetry was based on the premise that students learn more from intensified study, rehearsal, and class performance of a piece of literature (i.e. one poem) than they learn from months of more conventional study. In order to test this, Athanases created a 7-week unit of active lessons (ibid.), and used ethnographic methods to gather his data. According to Denscombe (2014, pp.114-115), this means the study is grounded in empirical research, provides a holistic view of the outcomes, and has ecological validity. Athanases’ finding that greater understanding is the product of intense contact with a poem is a logical conclusion that shows one benefit of using drama as an active approach to teaching poetry. As such, his ideas were used to support some of the pedagogical decisions I made, as the next section will show.

Ferguson (2014) also links drama to improved understanding of poetry in her contribution to a theoretical collection of research summaries that “highlight promising teaching practice at the classroom level” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). Whilst her work is not peer-reviewed, many of Ferguson’s claims are based on research that is, and so it seems her summary can still be useful to consider. Ferguson’s citation of Hughes’ 2000 theoretical proposition that “dramatic activities can be more effective for exploring poetry and can result in higher comprehension” (Ferguson, 2014, p.1) supports teaching poetry through drama. Moreover, Ferguson uses this as a premise to link individual drama activities to improved understanding through the skills needed to carry out each task. If her theoretical assumptions are therefore true, her summary could be seen to provide extra justification for the inclusion of some of the activities incorporated in my teaching sequence, including the tableaux.

Aside from improving understanding, it is conceivable that drama has other benefits, and accordingly Ragnarsdóttir and Þorkelsdóttir (2012) found many advantages of using drama in the classroom through their three-year longitudinal study in Icelandic schools. Taking place in another Western country, it is likely the findings are applicable to the UK. In fact, Iceland’s provision of drama differs between schools (Ragnarsdóttir & Þorkelsdóttir, 2012, p.3), linking to England where increasing prominence of the English Baccalaureate (the combination of GCSE English, Maths, two sciences, a foreign language, and history or geography) is causing some schools to heavily cut drama’s timetable. In this study, observation was a prominent data collection method, which the researchers claim allowed information to be acquired directly, “without guiding the students’ answers” (ibid., p.11). However, as the Hawthorne Effect states the awareness of observation causes people to change their behaviour (Coessens & Van Bendegem, 2006, p.121) the study perhaps underestimates the effect the researchers may still have had on the participants. Despite this, the benefits found from using drama (e.g. creating active participation in lessons, developing cooperation, stimulating personal development) still seem valid. What is more, Ragnarsdóttir & Þorkelsdóttir note Somer’s 1996 finding that “drama helps students retain school work in their memory” (as cited in Ragnarsdóttir & Þorkelsdóttir, 2012, p.6), an encouraging result that reinforces my own study’s aim.

## **Reflection**

Looking closely at some of the research into poetry, drama, and memory allows one to hypothesise that drama could lead to recall of poetry. Common approaches to teaching this aspect of English at present do not seem to include characteristics of active learning, and as such if a different approach was used perhaps retention of what the poem is about could be improved, which in turn could increase the likelihood of deeper analysis being remembered.

## **Teaching Sequence**

The lessons in the teaching sequence took place on a Monday afternoon, but due to external factors there was an unexpected, large gap between the first and second lessons, which, although unfortunate, would perhaps introduce an interesting dimension given the focus on memory. The poems chosen for exploration all had a strong speaker's voice that, according to Athanases (2005, p.89), invites drama to be used, and for the first two lessons the furniture was pushed to the sides of the room to try to promote this different approach to the text (Irish, 2011, p.11). However, I had not anticipated how much this would exacerbate the disruptiveness of a few of the male pupils, and so for the third lesson, the normal layout resumed with the addition of a small stage area.

To explore Simon Armitage's 'Give', a poem that gives a voice to a homeless person sleeping on the streets, many drama activities were undertaken including role-play, conscience alley (a task that provokes students to express and explore ideas), and the creation of a tableaux. Yet it was 'Packing-Up', an activity highlighted in Kempe and Warner's (2002) chapter, that incited the most meaningful discussion (p.xii). The students role-played the speaker of the poem who, in this scenario, knew he or she was going to become homeless and had to decide whether they would take with them a bag of tinned food or a blanket and some sentimental items (i.e. the speaker's wedding photograph and their child's first cuddly toy). As such, this activity attempted to replicate Markant et al.'s (2016, p.144) observation that manipulating objects increases the likelihood of retrieval through the inclusion of the props.

Following this, John Hegley's 'Super Sunburn', a piece of free verse about child abuse, was taught predominantly through two, highly-structured drama activities, the first of which required students to devise a scene that fit their brief. After each scene was performed, the violence depicted was discussed, before a decision was made as to whether it was right or wrong. The lesson ended with

hot-seating the characters of the poem, an activity that “can prove to be a memorable and insightful way of exploring character motivation and development” (Struthers, 2005, p.95), and facilitated whole-group participation.

This contrasts to the third lesson, where students had extensive freedom as they first were asked to turn Grace Nichols’ ‘Hurricane Hits England’ into a dramatic scene. As the poem’s unconstrained, irregular style mimics the hurricane that helps the migrant feel closer to their new home, a choral reading is afforded. As such, the students created one, and took ownership of their learning by choosing to produce a whole-group reading, thus conforming to a key principle of active learning that Markant et al. (2016, p.142) and Voss et al. (2011) focus on.

After this sequence, a lesson was used to collect data and conclude the mini-unit on poetry.

## **Research Questions**

Through extensive reading and consideration, the following research questions (RQ) were determined:

RQ1: Do students remember poetry they have previously read or studied?

RQ2: Does a drama-based approach to teaching poetry seem to make basic aspects of poems memorable?

The main focus of this piece is the second research question, which corresponds with Denscombe’s first type of research question, “predicting an outcome” (as cited in Bryman, 2012, p.9) as it aims to see if drama could perhaps have any effect on the retention of learning.

## **Ethical Issues**

Prior to undertaking this research, the Faculty of Education’s Ethics Form was completed. As a result, many ethical issues were considered but reporting them all is not possible within this discussion. However, following *The Good Research Guide*’s advice, informed consent was gained from the participants (Denscombe, 2014, p.153) in a way the school’s Professional Tutor deemed acceptable. Meanwhile, Bryman (2012, p.135) stipulates research is unacceptable if it causes any form of harm, and accordingly ‘director’ roles were included in certain activities to avoid placing

undue stress on the shy girls in the class. Moreover, after a tragic incident occurred at the school, one or two poems that were possibly going to be used in the investigation could have caused distress. I therefore anticipated the likelihood sensitive issues would be raised, as Denscombe (2014, p.344) proposes is necessary and chose the poems accordingly. By taking these measures and more, the study aimed to work within the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) (2018, pp.6-37) guidelines.

## **Methodology**

Two methodologies, a case study or action research, seemed most appropriate for this small-scale, single-context investigation. Whilst a case study explores “the particularity, the uniqueness of the single case” (Simons, 2009, p.3), it tends to focus on existing phenomena, and I wished to introduce drama into the classroom. Hence, action research was chosen because the methodology involves self-reflective cycles of planning a change, then implementing, observing, and reflecting upon it before re-planning accordingly (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p.21). Despite the notion that action research is deemed to be constantly ongoing, Denscombe (2014) reports this “is something of an ideal and that, in reality, action research often limits itself to discrete, one-off pieces of research” (p.150), making it suitable for the time constraints upon this study and fitting in with my own cycles as a reflective practitioner.

Furthermore, by implementing and evaluating a change, action research enables teachers to “study their own classrooms – instructional methods, their own students, and their own assessments - in order to better understand them and be able to improve their quality or effectiveness” (Mertler, 2017, p.4). As such, undertaking action research would allow my professional development as a teacher (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p.22). In this way, Denscombe's (2014) observation that “action research tends to involve an extra burden of work for the practitioners, particularly at the early stages before any benefits feed back into improved effectiveness” (p.156) seems of little consequence, since it is essential that the most effective methods are used to teach students, especially given the weight educational achievements hold in the determination of their future possibilities. Indeed, BERA/RSA (2014) note “every learner is entitled to teaching that is informed by the latest relevant research” (p.7), and accordingly this action research hopes to begin to contribute in a very small way to ideas surrounding the teaching of poetry. For the generalisability of action research has often been questioned, with Denscombe (2014) claiming “action research

[...] is vulnerable to the criticism that the findings relate to one instance and should not be generalised beyond this specific ‘case’” (p.154). Yet Simons highlights different ways a case study can in fact be generalisable, and as such this is relevant to action research as a fellow small-scale single context investigation. Through adopting her perspective, this study perhaps could have concept generalisation, in that the concept of memorability generalises “even when the specific instance is different” (Simons, 2009, p.165). Whatever the case, this piece fundamentally seeks only to offer tentative suggestions about the teaching of poetry.

## **Methods**

A common conception about action research is that it does not dictate what methods should be used for data collection (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p.34; Denscombe, 2014, p.148). As such, this investigation used both traditional and alternative methods.

To gather background information, the class completed a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) prior to the teaching sequence. Brace (2004, p.43) observes an accurate, informative questionnaire needs careful consideration and planning before writing, and so prior to designing the questionnaire, key areas were identified, including how well students remember poetry. The questionnaires were completed in lesson time as Nardi (2016) advises this “generates a much better response” (p.129), and as a result I received 25 completed questionnaires (5 students were absent). Although students may have fallen into a pattern of answers, the variety of question styles (e.g. open, closed, tick the box, rate personal feelings, etc.) should, according to Denscombe (2014, p.165), have prevented this.

A different method was devised to measure the effect of drama on retention. The collages, or rivers of reading, created by students in Cliff Hodges’ (2010) experiment seemed an ingenious way to collect data. Thus, one week after the sequence of lessons, the class were asked to record all they could remember about each poem on one side of A3 paper. All students used one of the two recommended layouts (a list or a spider-diagram) to complete the individual activity (see Appendix 2 for examples). To truly test their memories, I would have liked this data collection to have occurred after a longer period of time, but the constraints upon this research made this impossible. As Kelley and Watson’s (2013, p.5) five-day gap between learning and testing was deemed long enough to eliminate short-term memory accounting for test scores, however, my

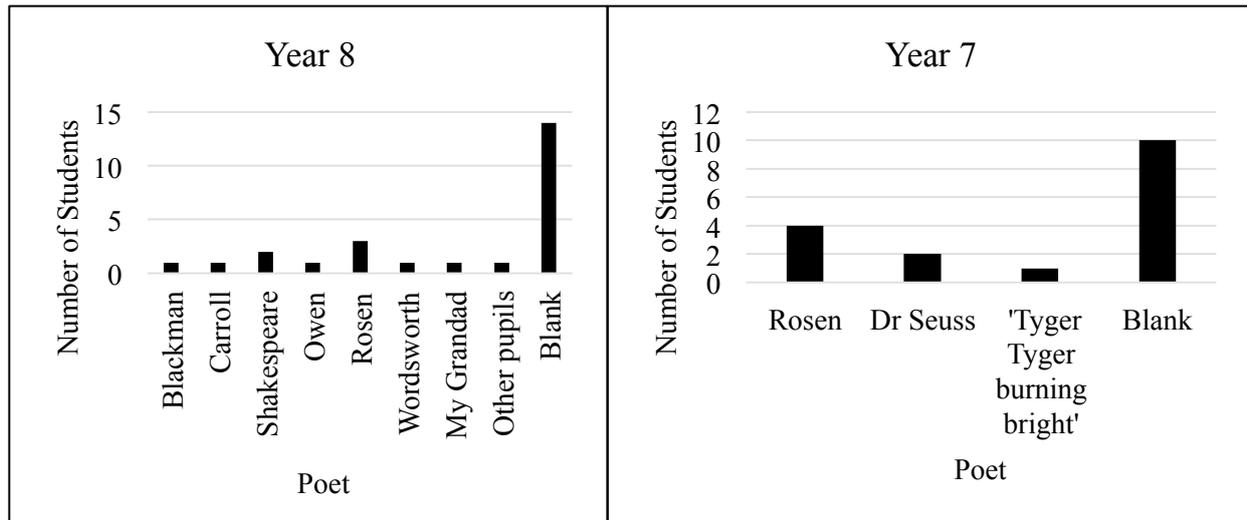
seven-day gap was seemingly validated. In order to make the sheets easier to compare and summarize, I categorised the responses to each poem as either: blank (the student could not remember and so did not write anything for the poem as instructed), absent (the student missed the lesson), basic (they remembered basic aspects of the poem, e.g. 'Give' is about homelessness), or detailed (they wrote comments that included the basic ideas but developed them further). Whilst this study was aiming to achieve only recall of basic aspects of the poems, it quickly became apparent a fourth category was needed to reflect the more advanced recall of some students.

After completing their A3 sheets, the students were asked to either compose a poem or write a story based on one of the poems. Although Kara (2015, p.5) notes creative writing can be drawn on for research, this piece of students' work was not used as a method for data collection. Nevertheless, it is important to mention it here because the informal conversations I had with students about their decision-making provided interesting information that reinforces some of the data, and so some of the comments will be included in the Results and Discussion section that follows, in which each RQ is addressed in turn.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **RQ1: Do students remember poetry they have previously read or studied?**

Answering this first research question was vital to the relevance of this investigation as the rationale would be undermined if data showed students remembered poetry they had read or studied. As Figure 1 shows, however, out of the 25 questionnaires completed by the Year 8 students prior to the teaching sequence, 14 reported in response to Question 1 they could not remember the last poet whose work they had read, a figure that would have been higher had answers such as 'My Grandad' and 'Other pupils' been discounted. Question 6 sought to help establish students' memories of poetry further by asking how many poets they could name, and here, 18 participants reported they could only name 1-3 poets. This suggests their poetry lessons from the previous year had been forgotten, for the Year 7 unit includes poems from a maximum of 11 poets, including Shakespeare, Bronte, and Whitman. As such, the data from this questionnaire seems to show students on the whole do not have a good memory of poetry, supporting the reasoning behind this action research.



**Figure 1: Responses from both the Year 8 and 7 classes to Question 1 of the questionnaire, ‘Who was the last poet you read? If you cannot remember please leave blank’**

Yet these results could reflect this class’ specific experience. In this way, the Year 8 students could (due to factors unknown) have had an atypical experience of poetry; for instance, they might not have covered the Year 7 poetry unit. I therefore decided to use the questionnaire with my Year 7 class who were also studying poetry to see if the data would be consistent and so possibly rule out this eventuality. Once again, the most popular response to Question 1 was ‘blank’, which 10 out of the 17 respondents gave (4 in the class were absent), whilst one student interestingly wrote the first line of Blake’s ‘The Tyger’ as they seemingly could not remember the poet or the title. Furthermore, 15 out of 17 students reported in Question 6 they could name only 1-3 poets. As a result, gaining responses from a different class seemed to support my conclusion that students predominantly do not seem to have a good memory of poetry.

From this data it could be argued the approaches taken to teaching poetry, such as close analysis reported by Naylor and Wood (2012), are not succeeding in encoding poetry into students’ long-term memory stores, perhaps because of the dependence upon teachers highlighted (both implicitly and explicitly) in the literature reviewed previously. As such, the questionnaire data could be used to suggest a new approach to teaching poetry could be tried. Interestingly, a different approach could lead to improvements in attitudes towards poetry. Although beyond my research questions, I wanted to know how my students felt about poetry before starting our work on it, and the questionnaire results showed 18 out of the 25 students were apathetic towards poetry, and no one

loved it. Thus, it would be interesting to see if the abandonment of what students deem “instrumental and dull” methods (Sigvardsson, 2017, p.93) leads to more positivity towards poetry.

**RQ2: Does a drama-based approach to teaching poetry seem to make basic aspects of poems memorable?**

*Results from the A3 Sheets and Discussion*

Through the simple fact that no A3 sheet was left completely blank, it seems that everyone could remember something from our work on poetry. However, as Table 1 shows individual poems were occasionally not recalled, perhaps due to the memory of the poem decaying or becoming lost before it could be encoded in the long-term store (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968, p.93).

	<b>Blank</b>	<b>Absent</b>	<b>Basic</b>	<b>Detailed</b>	
<b>‘Give’</b>	2	3	16	9	
<b>‘Super Sunburn’</b>	1	1	13	15	
<b>‘Hurricane Hits England’</b>	5	3	15	7	
<b>Total</b>	8	7	44	31	90 (30 responses x 3 poems)

**Table 1: Results from the A3 Sheets**

Overall, the number of blanks is minimal (8), but it was surprising that seven weeks after the first lesson only 2 participants left ‘Give’ blank. Although unplanned, this time between the lesson and the testing may perhaps be more representative of GCSE study, where the poetry could need to be retained for nearly two years if it is the first aspect of the course taught in year 10. According to the class teacher, during the unexpected gap between the first and second lesson pupils kept asking where I was, suggesting an eagerness to return to their work on poetry, and at the start of our lesson on ‘Super Sunburn’, I overheard various comments about our previous poem (all names are pseudonyms):

*“Beatrice was homeless.”*

*“You said if you were going to be homeless you would take the teddy!”*

*“I don’t think the speaker was like the normal things we hear about homeless people.”*

*“I still think taking the food would be the best idea.”*

From this, it seemed that the memories some students had formed of the activities were long-lasting, as temporary recollections would have long since faded from their short-term memories (Kelley & Watson, 2013, p.1). Yet it was pleasing to see from the A3 sheets that, for the most part, memories of the tasks translated into recall of the poems themselves when students recorded their ideas about 'Give'. Hence, this suggests the poem had been made memorable through the drama activities, which, for the most part, involved lateral thinking and the students applying their own thoughts and feelings to the speaker's situation.

The amount of blank responses is of further interest when considered in relation to the different drama activities used in each lesson. For, whilst going beyond the scope of this investigation, when viewed together one can begin to speculate about which drama activities seemed to have the most successful effect on memory. As previously stated, the fact that 'Give' was largely remembered seven weeks later implies the drama activities aided recall. Contrasting to this, 'Hurricane Hits England' was studied only the week before the data collection, yet it had the largest number of blanks (6). It is likely the poem's complexity contributed to this, and when coupled with the extensive amount of creative freedom, the activities may not have translated into meaningful, memorable learning for some students. Indeed, a group of boys' dramatic interpretation of the poem was silly, and probably did not aid recall of the poem, nor allow the group to experience the improved comprehension that Ferguson (2014, p.3) suggests arises from the chance to dramatize poetry. Finally, the lack of blanks for 'Super Sunburn' (1) suggest the tasks made it the most memorable of the three poems. This may have been due to the structured, progressive nature of the two main drama activities that allowed the class to become familiar with the poem but still be creative and make decisions, as active learning entails. As a result, it could be suggested drama has a bigger influence on memory when it is highly-structured; however, it must be acknowledged that these suggestions are built on a relatively small difference in the data that may not be statistically significant. If further research finds that drama has a similar impact upon memory, it therefore would then be important to investigate which specific drama activities produce the best recall. Alternatively, the poems could vary in terms of their inherent memorability. 'Super Sunburn' and 'Hurricane Hits England' have neither a set rhyme scheme nor meter, but 'Give' is written in iambic tetrameter. This prevalent rhythm offers perhaps another reason why 'Give' was largely retained, as Pullinger and Whitley (2016, p.315) appear to suggest strong and distinctive patterns and rhymes are associated with memorability. Although far from conclusive, the idea a poem's

innate memorability may have influenced the results in this study therefore makes it another variable to consider in future research.

So far only the blank responses have been discussed, yet by looking at all of the categories (again see Table 1) a general pattern can be seen. It is important to reiterate here that even though a fourth category was included, recall of basic ideas about poetry was the aim of the study. Accordingly, most responses (16/30) for 'Give' were categorised as basic, with the 9 detailed responses coming from the more conscientious students in the class. This was the same with 'Hurricane Hits England' (15 basic, 7 detailed), although after the higher number of blanks for this poem, I was expecting fewer, if any, detailed responses. 'Super Sunburn', however, defied this pattern as most responses were detailed (15). Thus, this supports the idea previously raised that Hegley's poem was made the most memorable, and suggests the drama-based approach in this third lesson prompted a deeper level of critical thinking than I expected. Significantly, this appears to have been the case even for a shy student, henceforth known as Alice, who adopted one of the 'director roles' incorporated to facilitate participation and make the drama inclusive, as Struthers (2005, p.83) recommends. Whilst I worried the director roles might lead to social loafing or an increased long-term problem - indeed, Athanases (2005) instead suggests "students reticent to speak in front of a class need coaching" (p.95) – the extract from the Super Sunburn section on Alice's A3 sheet (see Figure 2) shows the development of her understanding of this poem does not seem to have been stunted by her different, yet crucially still active, role. As such, it suggests that it is not only performing, but the whole dramatic process that can have a positive impact on memory.

### Super Sunburn

About two children who recieve [sic] "super sunburns" from there [sic] dad which is actually meant to mean that thier [sic] dad smacks them. in [sic] the poem they talked about some of the moments the dad would hit them including if he caught them cheating at monopoly or if they started fighting. The poem got its name because when the dad smacked them it left a bright red mark like a "super sunburn"...

**Figure 2: An extract from the 'Super Sunburn' section on Alice's A3 sheet**

The conclusion that ‘Super Sunburn’ was the most memorable of the three poems was supported by the students’ subsequent creative writing. To finish their unexpectedly short unit on poetry, the pupils wrote either a poem or short-story telling the back-story or future of a character from one of the poems. Whilst this task was not a research method, it would be remiss not to discuss what it suggested about the data gathered. 13 out of the 23 creative pieces handed in used ‘Super Sunburn’ as their stimulus. Moreover, 9 out of the 11 students I had informal conversations with reported one of the reasons they had chosen the poem was because they remembered it the best (to see all the students’ comments, see Appendix 3). The first exception was ‘Olive’ who revealed the amount of analysis she remembered about ‘Super Sunburn’ surprised her, but she instead chose ‘Hurricane Hits England’ because she felt a connection with its speaker. The other exception was Alice, who reported, “I thought it would be the easiest idea to do and so I wanted to do it. I wouldn’t say I remember the poem better”. Apart from these two students, there was therefore alignment between which poem the A3 sheet said the individual remembered the best, the students’ actual choice of poem, and their explanation of the reason behind their decision. As such, the creative writing task seemingly supports the conclusion that ‘Super Sunburn’ was recalled most comprehensively. Yet, perhaps more importantly, the fact the creative writing included details of the stimulus poems suggests the students’ long-term memories must have successfully transferred relevant memories back to their short-term stores (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968, p.94), implying drama made all of the poems memorable to some degree.

#### *Advantages and Challenges of the Main Research Method*

The A3 sheets are not an established research method, and so decisions about how to handle the practicalities of using them to collect data had to be made without the benefit of other researchers’ experiences. As such, I deemed it necessary to the whole class’ learning to introduce a time limit within which the sheets had to be completed; however, this may have prevented some students from writing all they could. To avoid this, students could have finished their sheets at home, but Nardi’s (2016) advice about questionnaires once again rang in my ears and I felt I might never see the sheets again if they left the classroom. Also, if filled out at home, resources (such as the internet) could have been used, resulting in skewed data. Although I emphasised before the students started that the task had to be undertaken alone, it appears two pairs of students may have helped or copied each other’s idea about ‘Hurricane Hits England’. Whilst this is a small number out of a class of 30,

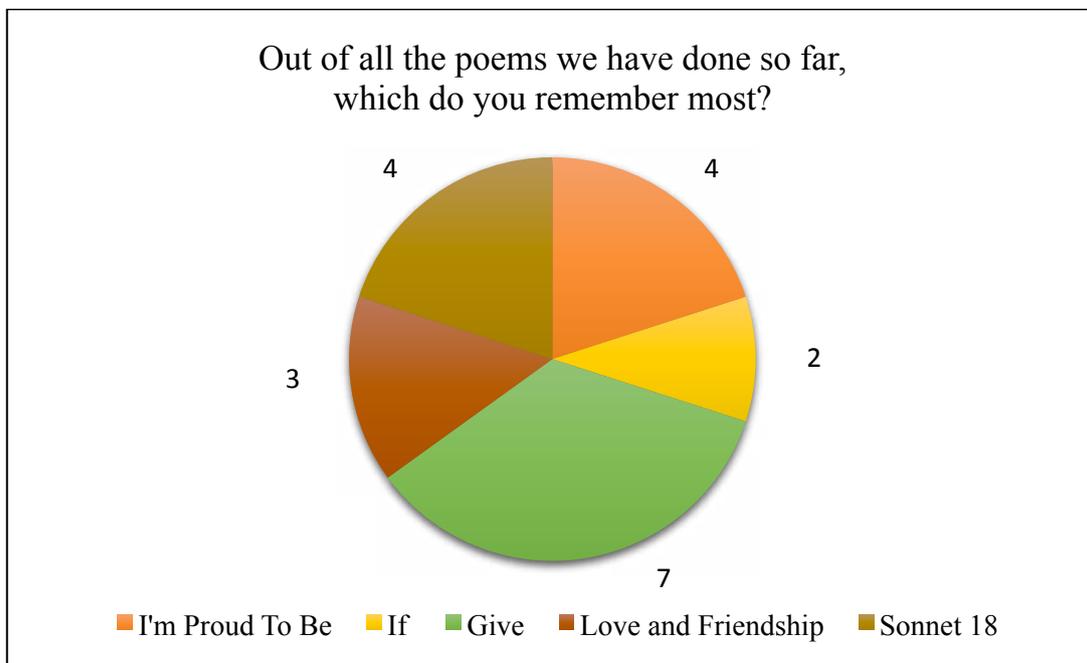
it is problematic as it makes it impossible to know when categorising the responses who in the pair initially recalled the idea.

Despite these limitations, there did appear to be some advantages of using the A3 sheets to collect data. The sheets allowed the students to take ownership of the task, and some seemed to take real pride in presenting their work. Giving the students a blank sheet allowed them to recall anything they could about the poems, as opposed to only the ideas I deemed important, which would have been the case had I asked them to complete a test. As a result, I hoped the sheets would give me a more accurate, holistic picture of what they could remember, even though the participants were not prompted by questions, which Tokuhama (2014, p.183) notes can “serve as successful triggers for some people”. Due to this, it was important the task was made as accessible as possible, and so an example layout was visible at all times on the board. Meanwhile, rather than indicating an inability to remember, the blanks on the sheets could be a sign that I chose to test the students’ memories in the wrong way, as I had, in Sprenger’s terms, “changed lanes” (Sprenger, 1998, p.67) by teaching through drama but testing through writing. Yet the fact that no one left their paper completely blank could suggest this was not the case, and that the method was in fact appropriate. In this way, the A3 sheets fundamentally suggest the students could recall ideas about the poems as they were completed, in most cases, quite comprehensively, with some of the data reinforced by the creative writing task.

Having weighed up some of the pros and cons of using the A3 sheets as a research method and establishing it may have accuracy, it could be suggested the data collected has some validity. As such, although the exam pressure Benton (1999) reports is still very much at the fore, this data could be used to suggest a dramatic activity could be included in and amongst the ‘spoon-feeding’ of analysis, as the process of redintegration would hopefully make the latter more memorable as memory of the drama would link to memories of the analysis, and so unleash a flood of details (Coon & Mitterer, 2015, p.237) about the poem. Thus, it could also be argued that Franks and Bryer (2014) could have included poetry in their list of forms of literature that can be taught through drama, or in fact incorporated an extended section on using drama to teach this aspect of English. My data suggests drama can be used to teach poetry and in fact make it memorable, and so perhaps at the very least, the authors could have prevented ambiguity by explaining why it is that poetry is not mentioned once in their chapter.

*A Comparison Point*

Yet this report does not wish to make hasty, unfounded recommendations; after all, it is a small-scale piece of action research that may or may not be generalisable. To try to support the data collected from the Year 8 class therefore, the lesson on ‘Give’ was taught to the Year 7 group. This lesson was very different to how they had been learning poetry, and so at a later point 20 pupils (1 was absent) voted anonymously to show which poem they remembered the most. Whilst Figure 3 shows that ‘Give’ was the most popular answer, lending some support to the data produced from Year 8, this cannot be considered conclusive evidence that drama has a positive effect on memory, as it was only the most common answer by a small margin of three. This may be due to several factors, including the students’ more recent, extensive work on ‘Sonnet 18’, and the disruptive behaviour of some pupils. For at the beginning of the lesson on ‘Give’, Coles’ (2005) observation that “nearly every explicit reference to listening in the classroom was negative” (p.118) proved true as the students took a long time to settle into the new approach and different class layout. In fact, two boys never managed to settle, and at different occasions had to be removed from the class. Despite the behaviour improving in the second half of the lesson and with the ‘Packing-Up’ activity once again provoking a very thoughtful discussion, the learning was therefore disjointed, which may have led to encoding difficulties and so ‘Give’s’ narrow lead.



**Figure 3: The distribution of votes by Year 7**

This comparison ultimately highlights the need for further research. If the conditions of the research had allowed, I would have liked to adopt a procedure similar to Voss et al's. (2011) and have the students learn about poetry through common methods (i.e. close analysis outlined by Naylor and Wood (2012)) and a drama-based approach before comparing the effect of each. Conducting my investigation in this way might have established more effectively whether drama makes poetry memorable.

### **Final Thoughts on the Data**

Overall, the data collected seems to suggest drama can make poetry memorable, perhaps as it is a vehicle for active learning and so facilitates behaviours that boost memory as Markant et al. (2016) show throughout their piece. Although this investigation did not seek to establish other benefits of drama, those found by Ragnarsdóttir and Þorkelsdóttir (2012, p.8) such as co-operation, problem-solving, creativity, and responsibility all seemed to be occurring within the Year 8 classroom – with a few minor exceptions. As such, drama may indeed be linked to other benefits, as the pieces discussed in the literature review suggest, as well as the encoding of memories about poetry in the long-term store this report has seemingly found.

Perhaps the main message to take away from this data is that although drama was used here as the sole teaching method to try to establish its effect, this may not have to be the only way to see its benefits. As such, it may not have to be a choice of whether to teach a dramatic lesson or a learning-driven analysis lesson. Perhaps drama can be interspersed in teaching, as this study suggests that students not only learn through this active approach meaning vital lesson time is not forfeited, but also that their recall is facilitated. In this way, drama could be used to teach the introduction lesson of a poem, or even just a small segment of it, to help the poem stick and aid later memories of other analysis. Ultimately, this data does not lead to the proposal that drama should be used to teach whole poetry units, but instead suggests there is perhaps a place for it within teaching pedagogy to help make learning about poetry memorable, especially at times such as the GCSE years when examinations are so important.

## **Conclusion**

This research hoped to align with the principle of beneficence that states “research on people should always be done ‘for the good of people’” (Denscombe, 2014, p.345), as it aimed to make a small contribution to ideas surrounding effective poetry teaching. In this way, this action research concludes that students do not seem to remember poetry they have previously read or studied, but through drama this perhaps can be changed and poetry made memorable. Thus, when I teach poetry at GCSE, I hope to put this into practice and include a drama-based activity, not as a “fun, add on activity [but as] a creative [and] deliberate process” (Athanases, 2005, p.88) where the contribution to students’ learning is apparent (Franks & Bryer, 2014, p.161). This may prove dependent upon the type of class I have; however, doing so would also contribute more necessary data to the exploration of this research question that could, if these findings were confirmed, make this study a small part in a wider picture of effective poetry teaching. In the meantime, this study has not just personal and professional relevance to me in that I want my teaching to be as effective as possible, but it could also prove useful to other English teachers. With this in mind, I will be sharing my provisional findings with the English Department at my placement school.

Ultimately, undertaking this research has allowed me to incorporate drama into English lessons, giving the Year 8 class a different, and hopefully enjoyable learning experience. Through the process, I have learnt a lot about research and my own teaching practice, including the organisational considerations one must make when incorporating drama, such as space management. I will proceed in my training with the implications of my piece in mind, not overlooking its limitations but having an open mind about what it seems to present. In future research (whether it be mine or that carried out by another practitioner), the basic premise of this investigation would need further study before the impact of specific drama activities could be compared. Also, whether students’ individual differences and preferences affect memorable learning would need establishing. If research disputes the findings of this investigation, practitioners need to continue exploring what makes learning memorable, for Kelley and Whatson (2013, p.2) note that one of the core functions of education is creating long-term memories. Indeed, in modern society, success in national assessments is so important to the students’ future possibilities, and as such teachers need to give them the best chance of remembering important information by doing all that they can to make their teaching memorable.

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## Appendix 1

### The Questionnaire

1. Who was the last poet you read? If you cannot remember please leave blank.

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2. How often do you read poetry? (please circle)

Daily      Weekly      Monthly      Only when we do it in school

3. Out of 4, how much do you like poetry?

1 = hate it      2 = don't mind it      3 = like it      4 = love it

.../4

4. State one thing you like/dislike about poetry

---

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5. Please tick the box for the statement that best summarizes how relevant you think poetry is in modern society.

Poetry is not at all relevant in modern society and should be forgotten

Poetry is only relevant because it is included in English exams

Poetry is relevant in English classes as another type of writing, not just because it is on the exams

Poetry is relevant in all aspects of society, and not just in schools.

6. How many poets could you name? (Please circle)

1-3

4-9

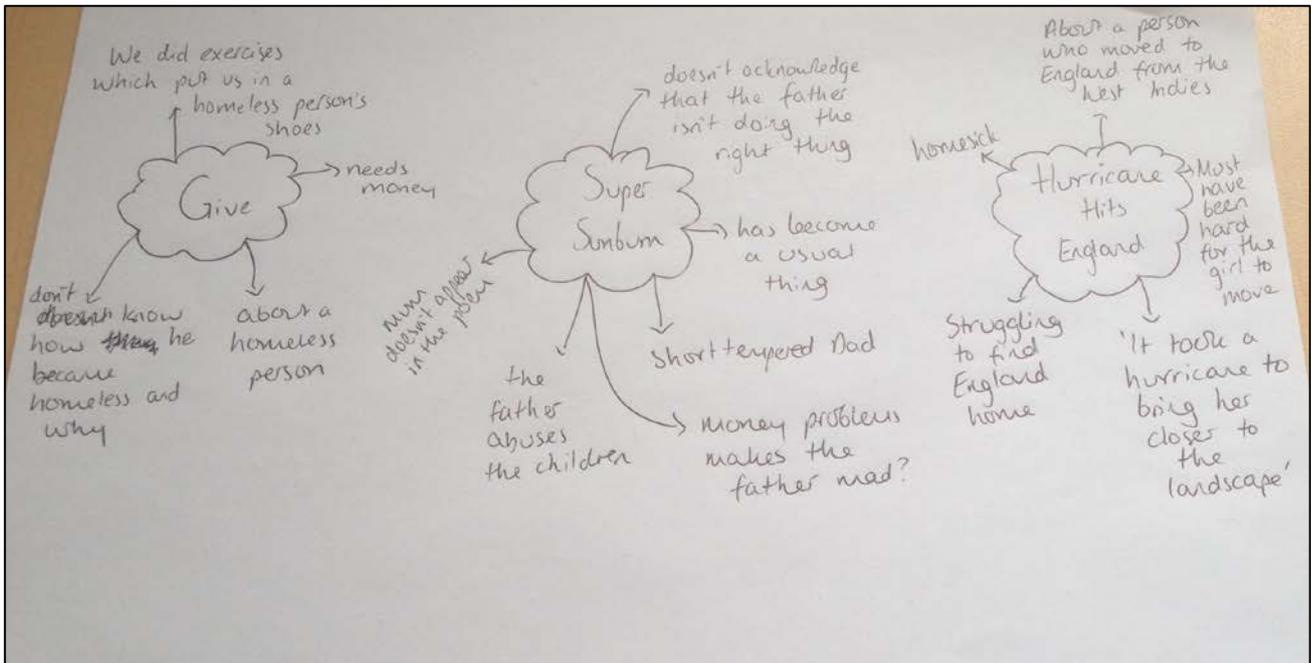
10-15

16+

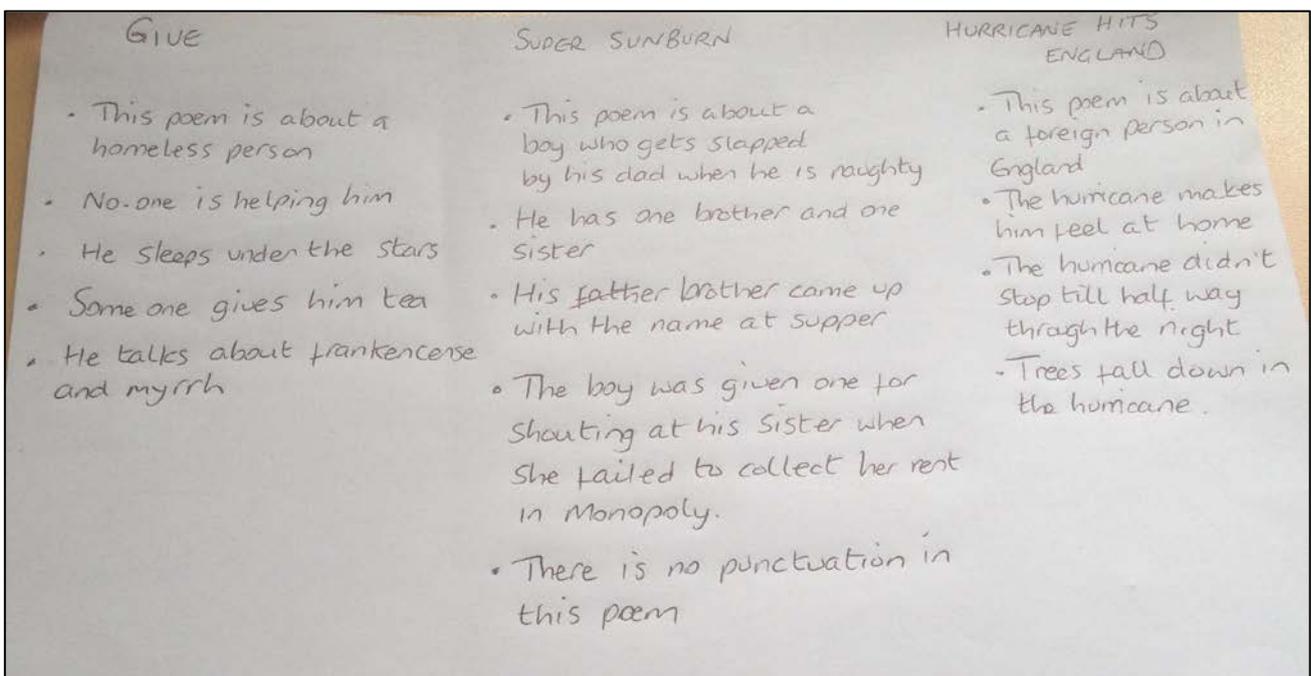
## Appendix 2

### Examples of Layouts Used to Complete the A3 Sheets

#### Example 1: The Spider-Diagram



#### Example 2: The List



## Appendix 3

### Comments from the Informal Conversations about the Creative Writing Task

#### 'Give'

##### *Chose the Homeless Man*

Alice - "I thought it would be the easiest idea to do and so I wanted to do it. I wouldn't say I remember the poem better."

Brandon - "I remember this character the best out of all the poems."

Will - "We were really active in this lesson so I remember it most."

##### *Chose the Homeless Female*

Jenny - "I remember this poem quite well, including some of the techniques it has. I wanted to know more when I read it and thought now I can create the back story. It was interesting and in general quite a nice poem."

##### *Chose a Passer-by*

Hettie - "This poem sticks out, I like it the best and it's clear in my head. The poem shows the homeless person's point of view. I want to show something different."

### **'Super Sunburn'**

#### *Chose the Child (the Speaker)*

James - "I found the poem the most interesting and I had an idea that the dad could be taken to prison. I remember it the best."

Leon - "I chose it because I remember it most and this character."

#### *Chose the Dad*

Ester - "The poem was engaging, it had different themes, I enjoyed it and the dad was the character that I could remember more from it."

Hannah - "I wanted to show the opposite side of the story than the one the poem shows, because there are two versions of the story. The poem sticks out in my head the most, and I found it relatable in a way as everyone is punished if they are naughty, but here it is taken too far."

Mitchell - "I remembered the poem and that character the best."

#### *Chose the Brother*

Tony - "'Super Sunburn' is clearest in my mind, and I thought it would be good to give another perspective on the story. It was the most interesting poem, and I wanted to make more of it."

### **'Hurricane Hits England'**

#### *Chose the Girl (the Speaker)*

Olive - "I remember 'Super Sunburn' the best out of the three poems as we did more analysis. I'm surprised that stuck even though we did it through drama and not writing and making notes. But the character from 'Hurricane Hits England' is like me. I moved here four years ago, then went back, then came back again. It sort of explains my feelings too."

