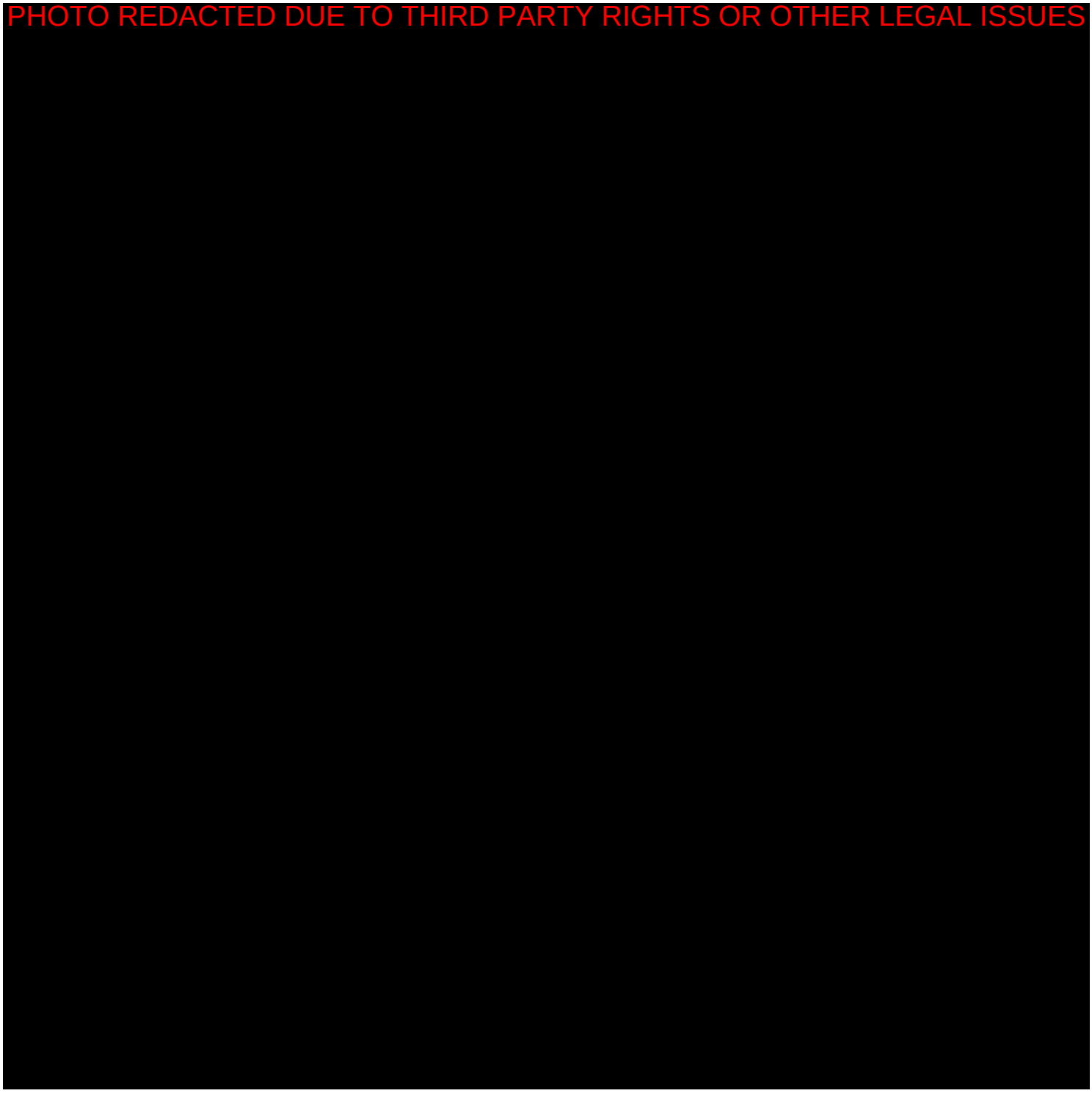
# Poetry in schools

A survey of practice, 2006/07



# Contents

# Executive summary

This report draws on evidence from 86 English subject inspections between September 2006 and July 2007.[1] The survey included primary and secondary schools of different sizes and settings, representing a range of social and economic contexts. Provision for poetry was evaluated in all schools alongside other aspects of English, including the quality of teaching and learning.

Provision for poetry was at least satisfactory in all the schools visited and good or very good in around two thirds. However, it was weaker than the other aspects of English inspected, suggesting that poetry was underdeveloped in many of the schools surveyed. Provision was slightly better in primary schools than in secondary schools.

Generally, pupils in the schools visited enjoyed poetry, especially where teachers used active approaches. The report includes examples of pupils' work. The best of these demonstrate a level of sophistication and self-expression that is a direct result of effective and engaging teaching.

The National Curriculum ensures that poetry is a common element of all pupils' experience in English and, as a result, pupils read a range of poems as they move through school. In schools visited, poetry work was often planned around the need to improve skills in writing and this approach limited the variety and quality of poems studied. Many pupils wrote well in response to poems they studied, but a focus on imitation reduced pupils' opportunities to write independently and about subjects that mattered to them.

The most effective lessons observed showed the positive impact of enthusiastic teaching and well chosen activities. However, many teachers, especially in the primary schools, did not know enough about poetry. This sometimes led to poor quality marking and a uniformity in practice, where the same few poems were studied across most schools.

Although these poems were mostly worth studying, many of them were relatively lightweight and pupils had only limited experience of classic poems and poems from other cultures and traditions. The range of poems studied in secondary schools was more varied. However, too few schools had a clear rationale for their choices and this reduced continuity in the poetry curriculum and progression in pupils' learning.

The end-of-key-stage national tests and examinations have had a significant impact on poetry in schools. Poetry featured less in the English curriculum in Years 6 and 9 in the schools visited because too many teachers focused on preparing pupils for the tests. In secondary schools, the amount of poetry which pupils needed to study at GCSE level, combined with overly didactic teaching methods, sometimes had a negative impact on pupils' attitudes. The emphasis on individual poems rather than the work of poets did not prepare pupils well for further study in English literature at Advanced level. Some pupils were encouraged to enter a selection of their poems for coursework but in general most pupils did not write any poetry during GCSE study.

The most effective subject leaders were highly influential. Their leadership broadened the range of poems studied, enhanced the quality of teaching, and provided pupils with a varied and rich experience of poetry. These leaders were also instrumental in enhancing the poetry curriculum and making good use of activities such as competitions and cross-curricular work to develop poetry. Good quality writing had often been produced as a result of effective residencies by poets in school. These events provided a good opportunity for pupils to discover their own voices as writers.

[1] Since September 2005, the Framework for the inspection of schools has not required detailed inspection of subjects of the curriculum in institutional inspections. Ofsted's evidence on subjects is therefore obtained from its programme of surveys, focusing on a particular subject in a sample of schools nationally.

# Key findings

- Provision for poetry was at least satisfactory in all the schools visited and good or very good in around two thirds. However, it was weaker than the other aspects of English inspected, suggesting that poetry remains an area for development in many of the survey schools.
- The National Curriculum and the national strategies have confirmed the place of poetry as a core experience for pupils. As a result, all pupils in the survey read and wrote poetry, although the quality of provision varied greatly in the schools visited. Most of the pupils enjoyed poetry. Teachers' good use of active approaches increased enjoyment and the quality of pupils' responses to poetry.
- Many teachers, especially in the primary schools visited, did not know enough about poetry and this was reflected in the limited range of poems studied. Classic poems and poems from other cultures were rarely studied and too many of the poems chosen lacked sufficient challenge. Weaknesses in subject knowledge also reduced the quality of teachers' feedback to pupils on the poetry they had written.
- At GCSE level, the amount of poetry to be studied often had a negative impact on teachers' approaches and pupils' responses. Very few pupils wrote poems in English lessons during their GCSE course. In general, pupils' experience of poetry did not prepare them well for A-level study in English literature.
- The lack of focus on poetry in the end-of–key-stage national tests limited the range of the curriculum in Years 6 and 9 in the schools visited.
- It was common for pupils to write poetry in imitation of specific genres or particular poems but they had insufficient opportunities to write independently. Planning poetry teaching around the needs of writing also limited the range of poems pupils read.
- The best schools visited worked effectively with poets and encouraged pupils to contribute to competitions, local festivals and school reading groups to extend good quality work. They used poetry successfully across the curriculum.
- Effective subject leadership in the schools visited had a significant impact on the quality of pupils' experience of poetry, particularly in the primary schools where many teachers were not English specialists.

# Recommendations

Schools should:

- ensure that poems studied by pupils include classic poems and poems from other cultures and traditions, and that poetry chosen is sufficiently challenging
- secure the place of poetry in the English curriculum in Years 6 and 9
- improve progression and continuity across the key stages by careful planning for poetry teaching
- provide opportunities for pupils to write independently.

The national strategies should:

- provide training for teachers on poetry, including long-term planning, the choice and range of poets to be studied, and ways of assessing poetry effectively.

The examination boards should:

- review the place of poetry in GCSE English and English literature courses and provide support and guidance for schools in order to enhance teaching and learning.

# Introduction

1 Exactly 20 years ago, *Teaching poetry in the secondary school: an HMI view*, was published. This highly influential pamphlet was a passionate argument for the central place of poetry in the secondary English curriculum. It argued:

> Poetry matters because it is a central example of the use human beings make of words to explore and understand. Like other forms of writing we value, it lends shape and meaning to our experiences and helps us to move confidently in the world we know and then to step beyond it.[2]

2 The report argued that poetry should be at the heart of work in English 'because of the quality of language at work on experience that it offers to us'. However, it also reflected on the lack of poetry in much teaching of English in secondary schools at the time: 'Poetry is frequently neglected and poorly provided for.' Since then, poetry has been given a central place in the National Curriculum for English and inspections confirm that it is a common element in all pupils' experience of English in schools. Despite this, the emphasis over recent years on raising standards of basic literacy has meant that little detailed attention has been given to the teaching of poetry. In this context, it was opportune to conduct the survey, particularly given current revisions to the National Curriculum and an increasing emphasis on creativity within English.

3 This survey found that provision for poetry was at least satisfactory in all the schools visited, with nearly two thirds of the schools providing well for it. However, these figures do not tell the complete story. Inspectors' judgements during the visits were less positive about poetry than about other aspects of English provision, such as the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of leadership and management. This suggests that poetry remains a weaker element of provision even where the overall effectiveness of English is strong.

4 Provision was slightly better in the primary than in the secondary schools surveyed. This is because poetry is more likely to be enjoyed by pupils in primary schools, where there is a greater emphasis on performance and original writing. In secondary schools, some teachers feel constrained by national tests and examinations and this tends to have a negative impact on many pupils' response in lessons, especially at Key Stage 4. Overall, only eight of the schools visited made outstanding provision for poetry, suggesting that many have some ground to make up if their work in this area is to reach the standard of the best.

[2] *Teaching poetry in the secondary school: an HMI view*, Department for Education and Science, HMSO, 1987.

# Part A: Teaching and learning poetry

## Pupils' attitudes to poetry

5 The common perception among many teachers, especially in secondary schools, is that pupils have a negative attitude towards poetry. This was not what the survey found. The majority of pupils expressed pleasure in both reading and writing poetry. Attitudes were more positive among younger pupils. Some Key Stage 4 pupils considered the study of poetry at GCSE level to be dull and pointless, but this view was largely formed by the didactic approaches used by some teachers to prepare pupils for examinations.

6 Pupils were very clear about why they liked poetry. First, they enjoyed reading and sharing poems. Pupils in primary schools, in particular, enthused about opportunities to read aloud and perform poems to a larger audience, for instance during assemblies. Many pupils had also enjoyed learning poems by heart and reciting them to larger groups. Older pupils, particularly the more able, enjoyed the intellectual demands poems made and their ability to inspire frequent rereading:

> 'You find out something different each time.'
>
> 'Poems make you think more.'
>
> 'I like the hidden meanings; you can bring your own meaning to the poem.'

7 When asked about writing poems, pupils of different ages said that:

> 'In a poem you can express emotions. You can't do this in a story… You can confide in a poem, it relieves the stress.'
>
> 'You are controlling the pen. You can make up your own rules… poetry's not like normal writing. It's like playing the piano.'
>
> 'It's like diving into a place you don't know.'

These positive attitudes towards poetry may well reflect its place in contemporary culture, including rap and pop lyrics, its use in advertising and the popularity of some performance poetry.

8 What was very clear during the survey was the positive effect of teachers' active approaches on pupils' enjoyment. During a Year 6 lesson, the inspector wrote:

> Pupils had been reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* and their task was to express her feelings in the form of a tanka.[3] The teacher used a range of strategies, including mini-whiteboards for initial ideas, her own demonstration of the tanka form and pupils' discussion of their first drafts with their partners. Music and a lit candle worked powerfully to create a mood of total concentration. The results were moving and impressive. Lines and phrases included: 'Stained with loneliness', 'Silently creeping exhaustion of worry', 'No longer hope – mere betrayal'.

9 A teacher working with a Year 8 class made conscious use of a variety of strategies to engage all pupils. The inspector wrote:

> The lesson begins with a cloze exercise where pupils work in pairs to supply missing words to a poem. The poem itself is challenging and the activity involves pupils in exploring complex relationships, using verbal hints in the poem. After an initial exchange of ideas, the teacher shows the pupils a series of visual images on the interactive whiteboard and asks them to choose the image that most reflects their understanding of the poem. The teacher then plays short extracts from different pieces of music, asking pupils to write down the ideas suggested by each. The music and pictures help pupils to clarify their ideas about what is happening in the poem and will later help when they are asked to do some draft writing of their own.

10 The most effective teaching during the survey made good use of strategies such as: drama and role play; cloze, sequencing and other activities that encourage pupils to play with and deconstruct poems; prepared readings of poems; setting poems to music; and choosing images, including moving images, to match poems. One secondary school ran a summer school project for gifted and talented pupils which involved creating a short film, using a poem as a stimulus. This had been so successful that the department was seeking to develop the project within its normal taught programme for all pupils.

[3] A tanka is a form of Japanese poetry where the first and third lines have five syllables and the second, fourth and fifth have seven syllables.

11 The best teaching also provided pupils with opportunities to read and share a wide range of poems. Pupils studied different types of poetry and were helped to understand how writers create effects. They then applied these poetic devices in their own writing. Success lay in the delicate balance between analysis, composition and personal response which involved pupils in thinking about poetry and provided the opportunity for them to enjoy their own creativity.

12 Where the balance was not right, teaching became dull and pupils were insufficiently challenged. In some cases little more was required of them than to repeat the teacher's views or spot the poetic device, as in this example of a worksheet seen during the survey, which listed the following questions about a poem:

> How many lines does it have?
>
> Which lines rhyme?
>
> List all the words that rhyme.
>
> How many syllables are there in each line?
>
> Can you find an example of: simile, metaphor, personification and onomatopoeia?

The over-use of tasks like this means that pupils' enjoyment diminishes and poetry becomes a chore rather than a pleasure.

## Pupils writing poems

13 Across Key Stages 1 to 3, the teaching of poetry is dominated by the needs of writing, in particular the long list of genres that pupils are encouraged to produce. This leads to the current most common practice in teaching poetry: the teacher chooses a particular type of poetry, such as a haiku or ballad, identifies the characteristics of the form and asks pupils to imitate the chosen form.[4] This approach has many strengths, as it ensures that pupils read a range of types of poem and understand the characteristics of particular forms.

14 The following poems were written in direct imitation of particular poems. In them, we can see young writers, freed from the problems of creating their own poetic form, exploring the power of language and rhythm to create particular effects:

### The Magic Box

I will put in the box…

The moving wind of an Australian gale,
A green lightning bolt from Iceland,

The thermal threatening of a thrashing thumba.

I will put in the box…

The luminous hair of an Antarctic Armadillo…
An ear of an Aggressive Ant,
A tree's last word spoken out of its trunk.

I will put in the box…

The sweat of an ancient architect,
The fixed glass of a broken mammoth's eye,
The last loving laugh of a lirainosauras.

*(Harry, Year 5)*

### In my dreams

In my dreams I wear…

A firework of glistening blue pearls
Against a parachute of blackcurrant silk.
I become a butterfly, vibrant iridescence,
Lighting the shadow of the dusky Earth.

In my dreams I wear…

Raindrops of shimmering cherry-coloured beads,
Light bouncing off the glossy satin balls,
Which flow over the expansive blueberry ocean,
Of my soft cerulean dress.

*(Rachel, Year 9)*

[4] The haiku is an epigrammatic Japanese verse form of three short lines.

15 However, this approach was taken too far in some of the schools surveyed where it became the only way that pupils were introduced to poetry. It also reduced the number and range of poems that pupils read, since poems were chosen only where the teacher wished pupils to complete a piece of writing. Used in this way, poetry becomes primarily a teaching tool for language development rather than a medium for exploring experience.

16 The best practice goes beyond this, adopting a range of approaches both formal and informal. Some of the teachers in the survey encouraged pupils to choose and read poems during their independent or group reading sessions, or to compile their own anthologies of favourite poems. Teachers who were especially keen on poetry routinely read poems with pupils as a matter of course and without the need for constant study or written imitation. The result was that their pupils read a much wider range of poems and were able to talk more knowledgeably about them. In other schools, teachers built poetry study into the curriculum, for example by taking advantage of particular occasions such as Guy Fawkes' Day and Christmas or other religious festivals.

17 One school went further than most in giving poetry a very high priority. The subject leader explained her approach in this way:

> How do we ensure children discover poems and poetry by 'accident'? At our school we have done this by ensuring we have a wide range of poetry books available for them. We then give the children a reason for exploring these books – the most effective motivator we have found tends to have a competitive edge to it. As we believe many poems should be heard, not just read, we organise poetry speaking competitions. Children from as young as five learn a poem by heart and perform it to their class. A group of winners from each class is then selected to perform in front of the whole school, and are judged by an invited panel of VIPs. We also encourage children to write their own poems on any subject, in any form, for entry into a range of national competitions. Any successful entries tend to be published in a glossy edition which motivates many of our pupils. We also hold termly handwriting competitions which involve the copying of classic poems. Our prizes for these competitions always come in the form of poetry books and we even make sure Father Christmas delivers a poetry book to our Key Stage 2 pupils each year!

18 The great strength of such approaches is that pupils are given opportunities to show what they know and can do by writing independently. Where pupils only imitate chosen forms and the topics are prescribed, this leaves little scope for them to explore their own feelings and experiences. This limits pupils' original writing.

19 There is a particular irony in relation to practice for older pupils where poetry is a significant aspect of English at GCSE level. Most pupils study both English (language) and English literature, and both courses require the study of poetry. The irony is that pupils spend a significant amount of time studying poetry written by others but most of them write no poems of their own. This is because writing poetry remains an optional element of the course and the common requirement for presenting original poetry involves a collection of original poems with a commentary. Since many teachers believe that this is difficult to teach and assess, most pupils are encouraged to submit an alternative prose option instead. This perhaps explains the comment from a Year 11 girl who said to inspectors, 'I can't remember the last time I wrote a poem.'

20 A common approach in earlier key stages is for pupils to write their own poems in response to, or as preparation for, the study of taught poems. However, once pupils have embarked on their GCSE course, most teachers feel that there is too little time in a crowded examination timetable for what they perceive as a luxury.

21 But there are notable exceptions. An inspector wrote this account of one Year 10 lesson:

> The teacher began by giving a personal view of why people write poems. He also provided a range of thoughtful reflections on the nature of poetry and the way in which it can help people to make sense of life, occasionally even acting as therapy. He followed this up by using the interactive whiteboard to share some visual images reflecting the poems from other cultures that pupils were currently studying as part of their GCSE course. The task in this lesson was for pupils to write a poem that reflected their own, local culture, as though for an American school audience. The teacher then read a poem written the previous year by a pupil at the school, and talked about the ways in which the pupil had tried to recreate some of the grimmer aspects of life on the

estate where she lived. He then presented, as a contrast, a poem of his own written about a favourite local park. The teacher talked thoughtfully and well about this poem, explaining why he had wanted to write it and how he had tried to create particular effects. The pupils listened with interest. The teacher explained how certain lines needed to be improved but also how he had left others in, simply because he liked the sound of them. This was a particularly effective approach to demonstrating writing for pupils. The teacher provided pupils with a number of possible starting points for their poems, for instance peering from a bedroom window, but in other respects left them to work independently. Pupils made good progress in the time remaining within the lesson and some useful and impressive first drafts emerged. The following example shows good control of the free verse form, with the build-up of concrete details leading skilfully to a lyrical conclusion.

### The Rain

Rain pours
Dripping down the faces
Of children at play
Washing away the cares
Of busy adults
As cars pass through puddles
And the rain
Make a pattering tune.

People run through the streets
Hoods up
Folders above heads
Colourful umbrellas moving with the rain.
Girls with styled hair
Rush to find cover.
It rains so often here
But the rain is like music
Like a song that needs to be heard.

*(Melissa, Year 10)*

22 In some schools visited, teachers were confident enough to encourage pupils to submit an original selection of poems as part of their English coursework and build on this with students studying English at A level. The following is from a boy studying English in the sixth form who, clearly, has been helped to discover his own voice through original writing:

### Northern Lad Meets the English Language, Fights

Lupus cervum videt
Lupus cervum tenet

I watch the words on the page, arranging them in my mind,
pronouncing them in my throat
Turning them into words that mean something else,
'contract',
'contract', a mumble or giggle or both
My claws extend
and... 'contract'
With my pulse and with the hair on my back
Northern lad meets the English language, fights.

Lupus cervum videt
Lupus cervum tenet

What are the principle tenets of this contract? An understanding at the end of each sentence?

But there's always a claws

Never a simple answer in the pages I flick through,
cartilage on paper,
my clause on the ink,
one leap and northern lad cervum occidit,
deer no more
These promises of sense are never kept
Hunting and interpretation are your only hope, at best

Northern lad meets the English language, fights.

Note: 'Lupus cervum videt lupus cervum tenet' – the wolf watches the deer, the wolf understands the deer.

'Northern lad cervum occidit' – northern lad kills the deer.

*(John, Year 12, William Howard School, Brampton, Cumbria)*

23 Other good practices used by the schools surveyed involved visits by writers, events for National Poetry Day and local festivals to encourage pupils to write poems independently. Competitions were often highly effective. One inspector visited a school where these were particular strengths of provision:

> This school takes National Poetry Day very seriously. All pupils are expected to write during the week leading up to the day and poetry features in most of the English lessons over this period. Pupils are expected to read and perform their poems to their peers and many do so with enthusiasm. Several hundred poems are then displayed in the atrium near the English department and these are much read and discussed by other pupils through the term. The school also has good links with local literary festivals and sites of interest such as Dove Cottage, where Wordsworth lived. As a result, the school receives regular visits from poets and other writers. The school has also introduced a number of poetry prizes, open to all pupils, named after past teachers who were also writers. The strong writing culture within the school means that many poems are submitted. Pupils are expected to present a portfolio of original writing. The winner of the senior prize this year was a Year 10 pupil whose work, independently written and submitted, included the following two poems:

### Ninety-nine

The day may come when we meet ourselves
at ninety-nine, our feet having polished
the floors of a hundred and one countries.
We'll have waxed Steinways with our fingertips,
clung on as their vinegar-polished abodes
careered down the rubbish tip bank, yes

we may meet ourselves aged ninety-nine
and see what the years have seen.

### Snow White's Evil Twin

'Step on it, pixie' she snarls at the dwarf in the front of the limo.
Jet black, like the darkest
  room of her palace,
She divorced Prince Charming when she was the richest
  of dames in the province, the Queen of the Bitches,
  her words sprouting out of a throat fresh as sin
  through bloody red lips;
Snow White's evil twin.

Lacy ribbons on a red leather corset
  are just what her spider-silk hair needs to keep it
  together, for now, anyway, just to stop it
  from coming apart and losing its shape
Underneath the past drapes
  of her veil of secrets.

Nobody can say that they know her within
  or indeed that they know what is driving those lips,
  what leaves stiletto footsteps wherever she's been
  sealing the glazed over hotel floor, a kiss
  moving swift through a wallet,
  looking for tips.

*(Alex, Year 11)*

## Marking and assessing poetry

24 Many teachers in the survey were unsure how to respond to pupils' poetry writing. There is an understandable sensitivity about commenting on writing that might be intensely personal. However, the inadequate feedback given by many teachers on pupils' poetry often reflected weaknesses in their subject knowledge and their lack of confidence in opening up a dialogue with pupils about their writing. This is likely to explain the common use of responses from teachers, in primary schools in particular, such as, 'Lovely poem,' 'Super,' or 'I like the rhyme.'

25 During the survey, inspectors saw many comments of this kind on poems that were of poor quality and called out for guidance from an informed teacher. This was one of the reasons why so much of pupils' poetry was inferior to other types of writing in their books.

26 Too many teachers in the survey missed opportunities to improve pupils' poetry writing through lack of attention to re-drafting. Too often, the first drafts became the final drafts. As a result, potentially outstanding writing remained undeveloped. For instance, one first draft from a Year 6 pupil included the following lines:

> In autumn the dew on the floor is diamonds.
> The trees are tin foil, the grass is swishing waves
> The leaves on the floor are like crunchy crisps.

This promising first draft needed more work to become a complete and successful poem, but the teacher's marking indicated that no further work would be required.

27 Many teachers have particular difficulty in teaching and responding to free verse, despite the fact that so many recent and contemporary poets have used the form widely. This is no doubt the reason why so many pupils cannot write poems unless they rhyme, often with disappointing consequences.

28 The following examples, all from primary schools, show how specific the best marking can be:

> 'Some fantastic metaphors. You need now to think about the rhythm of the lines. Sometimes you will have to add words or leave words out.'
>
> 'Look at this line. Does it fit the mood of the rest of the poem? Try to write another line, perhaps using a simile, e.g. snow falls like…'
>
> 'You have tried hard to use interesting verbs like gleaming and chattering. To make the structure of the poem clearer, leave a space between verses.'

In one exceptional case, a teacher in a middle school responded to a Shakespearean sonnet from a pupil with her own. It began:

> You hope you didn't drive me round the bend.
> Of course not. Reading poems is just great.
> (As long as they've been written well.) But then,
> Of course, yours was. And marking is my fate.
> How often have I sat and ticked and sighed
> And let my gaze stray outside to the sun,
> The field, the grass, the greening countryside,
> The lounger, book and wineglass on the lawn…

Some teachers find marking a chore; however, these effective examples show both the engagement of the teacher and the potential for stimulating poetry writing of ever higher quality.

# Part B: The poetry curriculum in schools

## What poems do pupils read in school?

29 The National Curriculum is very clear about the poems to be read in school. In primary schools, pupils are expected to read poems from a range of cultures, good quality modern poetry and classic poetry. In secondary schools, pupils should read poetry from the English literary heritage, poetry written for young people and adults, and poetry from different cultures and traditions.

30 As part of the survey, all the schools visited were asked to list the 10 poems they believed all their pupils should read. They were encouraged not to take the request too seriously but told that their response would contribute to providing an overall picture of what is most likely to be taught in schools. The results give an interesting insight into the most popular poems used in the schools surveyed and reveal significant differences between practice in the two phases.

31 In the primary schools visited, the same few poems were chosen again and again. This reflects the fact that large numbers of primary teachers are not English specialists and tend not to be keen or regular readers of poetry. This has been confirmed by a recent survey by the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA), which revealed that over half the teachers involved in their research could name only one, two or no poets at all.[5] Poetry has not been a national priority for training in recent years. As a result, many teachers appear to rely on poems they were taught at school, or on guidance from colleagues and published materials. Ofsted's survey indicated that a small number of poems constitute the poetry curriculum for many pupils. On the basis of the survey's findings, most pupils were likely to read the following poems at some stage in their primary school:

'The Highwayman' (Alfred Noyes)
'On the Ning, Nang, Nong' (Spike Milligan)
'Jabberwocky' (Lewis Carroll)
'The Owl and the Pussycat' (Edward Lear)
'From a Railway Carriage' (R L Stevenson)
'The Listeners' (Walter de la Mare)
'The Magic Box' (Kit Wright)
'The Sound Collector' (Roger McGough)
*Revolting Rhymes* (Roald Dahl)
'Dog in the Playground' (Allan Ahlberg).

32 There is a clear pattern to these choices. Teachers chose nonsense or humorous poems (Milligan, Carroll, Ahlberg), poems that tell a strong story (Noyes, De la Mare) or poems that are relatively easy to imitate (Wright, McGough). While all the poems listed are worth studying, together they do not reflect fully the National Curriculum criteria. In particular, good quality classic poems and poems from different cultures and traditions are missing. Furthermore, too few of these poems are genuinely challenging or connect with the direct experience of primary pupils. The most popular 'classic poem' in the survey was Blake's 'The Tyger', and a very small minority of schools used poems such as 'Daffodils', 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin'. Poems by Benjamin Zephaniah were the most likely contribution to understanding other traditions.

33 The most effective schools provided a wider and richer selection of poems. This was strongly associated with the quality of subject leadership. The best provision in the primary schools visited was where the subject leader, almost always an English specialist, provided a strong lead and was able to recommend a wider range of poems to his or her colleagues.

34 The experience of poetry in the secondary schools surveyed was very different. There was no agreement in the schools visited about the poems that should be taught at Key Stage 3. Teachers used a far wider range of poems than in primary schools, reflecting the fact that most secondary English teachers are likely to be subject specialists. However, at Key Stage 4, the choice of poems was dictated entirely by schools' choice of examination board. A few poems appeared consistently to be studied in most secondary schools, with Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et decorum est', W H Auden's 'Stop all the clocks' and Dylan Thomas's 'Do not go gentle into that good night' among the most popular. There was, however, more agreement over the poets who ought to be included and Shakespeare, Blake, Hughes and Heaney were named regularly, with John Agard and Benjamin Zephaniah the most popular poets from other cultures.

[5] *Teachers as readers in the 21st century*, report on phase one of research project, UKLA, 2007.

35 A number of points need to be made about the secondary poetry curriculum. First, many departments used poems which were also popular in primary schools, such as 'The Listeners' and 'Jabberwocky', or included a unit in Year 7 on narrative poetry. It was likely, therefore, that some pupils read the same small number of poems again when they started secondary school. Second, schools very often studied individual poems rather than poets. Pupils' experience of poetry tended, therefore, to be of single poems written by different writers. Even when specific poets were prescribed for GCSE, the focus of the study tended to be on similarities across poems by different authors (such as their treatment of a common theme) rather than the characteristics of individual writers. This does not prepare pupils well for A-level study in English literature. Finally, the influence of the prescribed poets at GCSE frequently extended into Key Stage 3; very often, departments began work on the GCSE poetry anthology at the end of Year 9, limiting further the range of poetry read.

36 In secondary schools there was a lack of clear direction to the poetry curriculum, so that pupils' experience of poetry varied considerably from class to class. Very few secondary schools in the survey had explicitly considered what kind of overall experience of poetry they would like pupils to have. What should the study of poetry look like from 11 to 16? Which poets ought pupils to read? How does study in one year prepare pupils for subsequent work? This problem was especially evident at Key Stage 3, when most English departments tend to organise their curriculum around units of work, often lasting half a term or less. Although provision varies from school to school, a typical programme might involve the study of a unit on narrative poetry in Year 7, followed by a thematic unit, perhaps on animal poetry, in Year 8. Because poetry tends not to feature in the national tests, it has a lower profile in Year 9. Some schools begin their GCSE study early and might start with work on Seamus Heaney or Ted Hughes, or teach a unit on war poetry. The question which inspectors asked – and which was rarely answered satisfactorily – was why? What is the rationale for a programme at Key Stage 3 that comprises, for example, narrative poems, some poems about animals and some Wilfred Owen poems, and how does this constitute a coherent programme for teaching poetry that builds progression in learning?

37 One department wished to locate poems within their historical and cultural context and provided units in Year 7 on the literary heritage (covering Beowulf, Chaucer, Shakespeare and some poems such as ballads) and in Year 8 on Victorian literature. It is right that departments should find their own answers to questions about the shape and direction of poetry study in their schools, but the programme chosen should be the result of conscious and considered choices such as these, rather than depending on what is available in the stock room, or on the whims of individual teachers.

38 One problem with the lack of long-term planning for poetry is an absence of continuity from stage to stage. The tendency to duplicate the study of particular genres at primary school and in the early part of Key Stage 3 has already been noted. There is then a large gap between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. Poetry has a relatively minor place in the English curriculum at Key Stage 3, especially in Year 9 when teachers are concentrating on preparing pupils for the national test. The emphasis at Key Stage 3 tends to be broadly creative, with a continuation of primary school practice in the reading of poems followed by written imitation. However, what awaits pupils at GCSE is a significant focus on studying a large volume of poems, with a concentration on analytical, literary-critical work and few opportunities to write original verse. The contrast between the place and direction of poetry work at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 could not be more pronounced. Overall, this does not add up to a coherent approach to studying poetry in secondary schools.

39 This report has already referred to the impact of the national tests and examinations on the poetry curriculum. This works in two very different ways. National tests for 11- and 14-year-olds rarely include tasks that ask pupils to read and respond to poems or to compose their own. As a result, teachers concentrate far less on the experience of poetry in English when planning their curriculum in Years 6 and 9, preferring to focus their test preparations on those genres that are more likely to feature. This is not an argument for testing the reading and writing of poetry at ages 11 and 14. However, consultants working with the national strategies, local authorities and others need to work closely with teachers to ensure that pupils' experience in these two key years becomes more than a narrow preparation for the national tests.

40 The effect of national testing is very different at Key Stage 4. The issue, noted earlier, is the sheer volume of poetry prescribed by examination boards, the focus on technical analysis, and its impact on the way that teachers teach poetry. This can lead to dull and repetitive teaching. Typical comments during the survey from pupils in Years 10 and 11 included:

> 'The teacher reads the poem. We all annotate it and then she tells us what it means.'
>
> 'We do exactly the same thing with every poem.'
>
> 'The whole class writes one person's view of the poem.'

41 Teachers themselves shared this dissatisfaction with the ways in which they considered that they were constrained by the demands of the examination:

> 'The poetry element is overwhelming; there's too much poetry. Pupils groan, "Is this another poem?" It is difficult for us to present poetry in a positive light. The syllabus is putting pupils off.'
>
> 'GCSE sucks a lot of the fun out of poetry.'
>
> 'It's death by poetry. It becomes a treadmill up until Easter in Year 11.'

42 One inspector noted during a visit:

> Students said that they liked poetry. However, it must be stressed that poetry in the department relates mostly to preparing pupils for examinations. The only area where poetry appears to be enjoyed and where creative writing takes place is in Years 7 and 8. Despite the outstanding results in GCSE English literature, provision for poetry is satisfactory rather than good because of the focus on teaching to the tests and examinations. This focus has meant a sacrifice of real enjoyment and of writing poetry creatively.

43 One impact noted by inspectors was that responses towards poetry became more differentiated as pupils moved through the school. Able pupils, including boys, were often motivated by the increasingly analytical approach at GCSE, whereas less able pupils sometimes became de-motivated. As one girl put it, 'I just don't get it.' Pupils for whom English was an additional language also found the focus on poetry at GCSE challenging. Of course, the best teachers found ways of keeping the study of poetry alive and this report has drawn attention to many examples of good practice. For example, one department took a large number of pupils to Belgium as part of a cross-curricular study involving history and the war poets. All pupils, including some who were not well motivated by their normal school studies, described the visit as one of the best things they had ever done. Inspectors also met many pupils who had enjoyed visits organised by the examination boards to meet some of their set poets and to hear them read and talk about their work. It is in experiences like these that pupils truly come to recognise 'the quality of language at work on experience' that poetry offers us.

## Leading and enhancing the poetry curriculum

44 Where inspectors judged provision for poetry to be outstanding, it nearly always reflected very good leadership. The report has already commented on the need for good quality subject leaders in primary schools, where many non-specialists lack confidence in and knowledge of poetry.

45 The importance of effective leadership can be seen in this personal account of practice by one outstanding primary subject leader:

I would say that poetry is very important to me. Over the years I have experimented with writing my own poems, read certain poems over and over again, listened to poets reading their own work and made friends through poetry. It is from this perspective that I have always approached poetry in school. I believe it is important to introduce children to key poets and poems, including some classics. It is also important to provide children with the opportunity to write their own poetry, based on the work of these poets, but I also believe it is vital to give children the freedom to make their own discoveries and compose their own poems from 'scratch'. As the coordinator for literacy I have endeavoured to incorporate poetry into every year group at least once a term. To ensure coverage and progression, the school has developed a programme for teaching different styles of poetry. To support colleagues who are not particularly confident with poetry, named poets and poems are suggested. To further support teachers, a range of very specific pupil targets has been introduced; these consider the language, organisation, features and purpose of different poetic styles (e.g. performance poems, narrative poems). They act as a teaching sequence and also as a list of success criteria which help teachers to plan lessons and pupils to evaluate the success of their writing.

46 Similarly, in the better secondary schools, good leadership provided an imaginative and clear view of the total poetry curriculum. One inspector wrote:

> This is a school with a very clear rationale for teaching poetry, based partly around the choice of certain themes and partly around the need to find poems and approaches that will work for pupils with English as an additional language. The departmental view is that poems need to have 'emotional resonance' if they are to engage and motivate pupils. The approach to poetry in Year 7 is influenced by the school's cross-curricular programme involving English which had led to the choice of poems about war. As a result, the English department decided to follow this up in Year 8 with poems that focused on relationships, providing an antidote to the harshness of the war poems.

47 Schools where subject leadership was effective often used imaginative approaches to engage pupils and develop a love of poetry, such as the following:

This secondary school appoints a pupil Poet Laureate each year. The current school Laureate was required to submit samples of her own work, together with an application form, followed by a formal interview. In discussion with the inspector, she showed a good understanding of the importance and purpose of the role, which was to raise the status of poetry in the school. She saw her role as not just to write poetry but to make a definite and positive contribution to the lives of other pupils. For instance, she wrote a poem about moving from primary to secondary school, aiming to show how pupils' anxieties are often resolved happily once they arrive at their secondary school. She has worked in a range of forms and styles to record and comment on school events such as the retirement of a long-standing teacher and parents' evenings. The poems she writes are displayed in the school and in the school newsletter. She also performs the poems in front of large audiences of pupils and parents.

48 The notion of a school laureate has also been developed in Birmingham where the local authority runs an annual competition. This proves to be highly motivating for pupils, many of whom are keen to find a wider audience for their work. The poem that follows shows one of the short-listed poets exploring her own identity in a brief but effective poem that plays well with language:

> Why you wanna put me down,
> Pidgin hole me,
> Class me,
> Divide me,
> Caste me?
>
> Was yu problem,
> To see me
> Believe me,
> Know me fe what I really am?
>
> I is me,
> No other,
> Is like me
> There is no,
> Another,
> Me.
>
> For this is my,
> Identity.
>
> *(Emma, Year 11)*

49 One secondary school made use of a lunchtime club to motivate young writers. The inspector wrote:

> The school has a 'Bookies' club, a lunchtime reading and poetry session attended today by 15 pupils and four adults. The session was marked by an impressive enthusiasm for poetry and very evident enjoyment by all involved. Members of the club read their own poems and commented on each other's in a very supportive manner. The poems read during this visit covered a wide range of topics including racism, child abuse, humour and respect. During the session, some poems written by Adrian Mitchell were discussed. This was a very impressive session; it was an excellent way of getting pupils to think about wider issues and their contributions were thoughtful and incisive, as well as being well valued by the adults present.

50 Other schools run poetry competitions, organise a Writer of the Month celebration and invite writers into school to work with pupils. Parents in one small primary school visited during the survey run their own weekly poetry club, while in another primary school each class produces its own poetry anthology. Many pupils, especially the older ones, are increasingly made aware of poetry forums and websites where they can present their own poems and engage in discussion about writing. Inspectors also saw examples of effective cross-curricular initiatives, in both primary and secondary schools, which often involved good practice in reading and writing poetry. Pupils often wrote very powerfully about their own feelings and topical issues in lessons other than English. One inspector visited a successful middle school and wrote about the reasons for its effective provision:

> Teachers in this school, and not just the English teachers, see poetry as a joined up process. Reading and analysis inform writing and the development of critical understanding. Poetry is threaded through the culture of the school: assemblies, publications, and poetry celebrated on plasma screens throughout the school. All Year 7 pupils produce their own poetry anthology. This has high status and parents and other pupils are involved in commenting on the poems written. In English, pupils are introduced to a wide range of poems taught well by an experienced and talented team. This has a significant impact on the effective use of poetry in cross-curricular contexts. For instance, poems are used in art to stimulate collage work and ceramics. Pupils are asked to write poems about the rain forest and global warming in geography, and war poetry features in history. The biggest factor at play here is the very effective and ambitious leadership that drives the development of poetry across the school.

51 The following poem was written in a geography lesson in this school:

### What do you see?

In the dusty villages of Ghana
Tell me, what do you see?
I see children weak and fragile
Sitting by buckets; the water looks vile.
I see mothers, stirring a huge pot of rice –

Inside there's enough to feed a few mice.
I see fathers weary; they're picking up sticks
To rebuild their houses for they can't afford bricks.
There are so many people in misery
So tell me friend, what do you see?

In the busy streets of Accra
Tell me, what do you see?
I see children stealing from shops,
Cleaning car windows with the battered heads of mops.
I see muggers running across roads
And kids about four, carrying heavy loads.
I see men in cars, polluting the air
(It won't kill them so why should they care?)
Ill-treated women wanting to flee
So tell me friend, what do you see?

In a small house in Accra
Tell me, what do you see?
I see white people sitting around
Telling the news of great wealth they have found.
I see faces, people smiling with glee,
The money they have will help people be free.

I see Oxfam, Comic relief and Wateraid
Showing people that there's no need to be afraid.
Aid helps people become who they want to be
So tell me friend, now what do you see?

*(Rheanna, Year 9)*

52 Several of the schools in the survey had been involved in writer-in-school projects. This can be highly motivating for pupils, introducing them to writers working in a range of different styles and traditions, including performance poets. The following poem was written after a workshop with a writer who encouraged pupils to work on a particular theme, suggested by the title:

### Metamorphosis

It was time
I pulled back the covers,
Gave a slow, languorous yawn.
The creamy light of the moon seeped onto the
Floorboards,
Trees and lampposts cast strange shadows on the walls.
Cautiously, I tiptoed across the wooden floor,
Onto the landing.
The air felt cold and uninviting,
Opening the back door,
I heard the muffled sound of the kitchen tap.
Drip. Drip.
I was more urgent now,
I could feel it.
The grass was cool and damp on my feet.
Then - a tingling at the top of my ears.
Slowly, they started to prick up,
I could sense my eyes slipping in and out of focus.
I was trying just so hard to conceal my pain.
It was as if I were being forced down to the ground,
My whole body started to feel soft and warm.
Out of my fingertips,
Sharp claws appeared.
The pain eased gently,
An itching at the bottom of my spine,
A pushing.
A stretching,

I was now balanced purrr-fectly on all four paws.

*(Hannah, Year 7)*

53 In another school, two poets spent five days working with Year 6 pupils. The account below gives a clear indication of the positive effect of the experience on pupils, in helping them not only to learn about themselves as writers but also to learn about themselves as people:

The residency focused on the role of language and translation in a school where the majority of pupils speak English as an additional language. Using Bengali poems and stories, as well as the pupils' own experience, pupils were able to explore issues of language, communication and identity.

One impact of the residency was that the poets were able to build a connection for the pupils between the words on the page and the person who writes them. For the pupils, a writer is usually an elusive figure, tangible only through what has been written. Here, the poets were able to develop the idea of bilingual poetry as pupils became real life poets in their own classroom.

The sessions began by discussing with the pupils the impact of different languages in their lives, focusing on Bangla and English. The group discussed which participants' families used Bangla, who, why and when. Where might we see Bangla written in our daily lives? What were the advantages of being able to read both languages? When might we use Bangla rather than English, and vice versa? What language do we dream in?

The sessions developed through the sharing of stories from the past. Each of the pupils was invited to retell poems and stories which had been passed down by their families. Some of the pupils chose to write fragments of these stories or myths, helping them to explore language and culture by drawing on their own experience and their families' to create a sense of their own unique identity.

The pupils involved in the project were in their last year at primary school, and the residency provided a bridge for them during the difficult transitional period between primary and secondary school. They were able to take the time to reflect through poetry on who they were and where they came from, giving them confidence in their own identity before they moved on to the next stage of their education.[6]

Through this experience, we can clearly see how poetry is helping pupils 'to lend shape and meaning to their experiences' in order to 'move confidently in the world we know and then to step beyond it'.[7]

[6] 'The full account of this and other poetry residencies can be found on the website of the Poetry Society.

[7] *Teaching poetry in the secondary school: an HMI view*, Department for Education and Science, HMSO, 1987.

# Notes

This report draws on evidence from English survey inspections conducted between September 2006 and July 2007. The poetry survey took place as part of the annual subject inspection programme for English. The subject inspection programme evaluates the overall effectiveness of English in schools, as well as teaching and learning, achievement and standards, the curriculum, leadership and management, and inclusion.

# Further information

## Publications

*Teaching poetry in the secondary school: an HMI view*, Department for Education and Science, HMSO, 1987.

## Organisations and websites

The Poetry Society
22 Betterton Street
London
WC2H 9BX
Tel 020 7420 9880
Fax 020 7240 4818
www.poetrysociety.org.uk

Poetry Book Society
Fourth Floor
2 Tavistock Place
London
WC1H 9RA
Tel 020 7833 9247
Fax 020 7833 5990
www.poetrybooks.co.uk

The United Kingdom Literacy Association
4th Floor
Attenborough Building
University of Leicester
Leicester
LE1 7RH
Tel 0116 229 7450
Fax 0116 883 7451
www.ukla.org

# Annex

The schools listed below were visited for this survey. Poetry from schools marked with an asterisk has been quoted in the report.

| School | Local authority |
|---|---|
| Arthur Dye Primary school, Cheltenham | Gloucestershire |
| Burnley Heasandford Primary School | Lancashire |
| Camborne Science and Community College | Cornwall |
| Cardinal Newman Catholic School: A Specialist Science College | Luton |
| Castle Hall School, Mirfield | Kirklees |
| Challock Primary School, Ashford | Kent |
| Chingford Foundation School | Waltham Forest |
| Christchurch Primary School | Redbridge |
| Colliers Green Church of England Primary School, Cranbrook | Kent |
| Connaught School for Girls | Waltham Forest |
| Craven Primary School | Kingston upon Hull |
| Douay Martyrs Roman Catholic School | Hillingdon |
| Dunston Riverside Community Primary School | Gateshead |
| East Acton Primary School | Ealing |
| Easington Community School | Durham |
| Enfield Grammar School | Enfield |
| Foston Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School | North Yorkshire |
| Freeman's Endowed Church of England Junior School, Wellingborough | Northamptonshire |
| Frogwell Primary School, Chippenham | Wiltshire |
| Gateacre Community Comprehensive School | Liverpool |
| George Farmer Technology and Language College, Spalding | Lincolnshire |
| Gooderstone Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School | Norfolk |
| Gosforth High School | Newcastle upon Tyne |
| Gospel Oak Primary School | Camden |
| Grange Primary School | Ealing |
| Grays Convent High School | Thurrock |
| Great Wyrley High School | Staffordshire |
| Great Yarmouth (Voluntary Aided) High School | Norfolk |
| Hadrian Primary School, South Shields | South Tyneside |
| Hampton Dene Primary School, Hereford | Herefordshire |

| School | Local authority |
|---|---|
| Hamsterley Primary School | Durham |
| Hasmonean High School | Barnet |
| Higham St John's Church of England Primary School | Lancashire |
| Highcliffe School | Dorset |
| Highfields Science Specialist School | Wolverhampton |
| Holmesdale Technology College, Snodland | Kent |
| Isebrook School, Kettering | Northamptonshire |
| Ivanhoe College, Ashby-de-la-Zouch* | Leicestershire |
| Jessop Primary School | Lambeth |
| Kenninghall Primary School | Norfolk |
| Keswick School* | Cumbria |
| Lamplugh Church of England School | Cumbria |
| Matley Primary School | Peterborough |
| Middleton Primary and Nursery School | Nottingham |
| Moorside High School, Stoke-on-Trent | Staffordshire |
| Northfield Primary and Nursery School, Mansfield | Nottinghamshire |
| Oakfield School | Somerset |
| Oakway Infant School, Wellingborough | Northamptonshire |
| Osbaldwick Primary School | York |
| Our Lady's Roman Catholic Primary School | Wigan |
| Padiham St Leonard's Voluntary Aided Church of England Primary School | Lancashire |
| Painsley Catholic High School | Staffordshire |
| Park Grove Primary School | York |
| Parklee Community School, Atherton | Wigan |
| Phoenix High School | Hammersmith and Fulham |
| Princes Risborough Primary School | Buckinghamshire |
| Queensbridge Primary School | Hackney |
| Rainford High Technology College | St Helens |
| Ralph Allen School, Bath | Bath and NE Somerset |
| Ravens Wood School | Bromley |
| Rossgate Primary School, Hemel Hempstead | Hertfordshire |
| Ryelands Primary School | Croydon |

| School | Local authority |
|---|---|
| Samlesbury Church of England School | Lancashire |
| Sandy Lane Primary School | Bradford |
| Saviour Church of England Primary School | Manchester |
| Scott Lower School, Bedford | Bedfordshire |
| Shevington High School | Wigan |
| Shorefields School | Liverpool |
| Snettisham Primary School | Norfolk |
| South Petherwin Community Primary School | Cornwall |
| Southfield Primary School | Ealing |
| St Michael's Roman Catholic School | Southwark |
| St Peter's Church of England Controlled Primary, Newport | Telford and Wrekin |
| St Theresa's Roman Catholic School | Barnet |
| St Wilfrid's Church of England High School and Technology College | Blackburn with Darwen |
| Stafford Sports College | Staffordshire |
| Stanground College | Peterborough |
| Stewart Headlam Primary School | Tower Hamlets |
| Stretford High School | Trafford |
| Sunnyside Primary School, Northampton | Northamptonshire |
| Sutton Coldfield Grammar School for Girls* | Birmingham |
| Tavistock College | Devon |
| The Alfred Barrow School, Barrow-in-Furness | Cumbria |
| The Henrietta Barnett School* | Barnet |
| The Hermitage School, Chester le Street | Durham |
| The King David High School | Manchester |
| The King's School Specialising in Mathematics and Computing | Wakefield |
| Thythorn Field Community Primary School, Wigston* | Leicestershire |
| Tinsley Junior School | Sheffield |
| Tweedmouth Community Middle School | Northumberland |
| Wareham Middle School | Dorset |
| Watton Junior School | Norfolk |
| Woodkirk High Specialist Science School | Leeds |
| Yewlands School Technology College* | Sheffield |

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