

**Professional Contraction and the Growth of Teacher Confidence.
Experiences in the Teaching of Poetry from The Republic of Ireland
and Northern Ireland**

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Professional Contraction and the Growth of Teacher Confidence. Experiences in the Teaching of Poetry from The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

A rising crisis of confidence has been noted amongst teachers of poetry in recent years. Amplified by external factors such as high-stakes testing regimes, performance indicators, standardisation and accountability, teachers are increasingly challenged to provide immersive, imaginative and engaging encounters with poetry while developing and maintaining their sense of professional confidence. This research explores teachers' sense of confidence in the teaching of post-16 poetry and draws on data gleaned from 84 English teachers across the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Our findings indicate a strikingly high level of reported confidence amongst post-16 poetry teachers juxtaposed with low levels of informal poetry engagement, low levels of in-service poetry-related attendance and a reduced commitment to pedagogical innovation. The research points towards the emergence of a new professionalism in this context in which teacher confidence is reinforced through professional contraction and compliance with practices of pedagogical standardisation.

Keywords: poetry; teacher confidence; post 16; professional and pedagogical knowledge; CPD;

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Teacher Confidence

The development of confidence is noted as a key element of teacher professionalism, supporting the acquisition of teachers' knowledge and skills, their participation in networks of collaborative learning communities and their enactment of professional agency (Nolan & Molla, 2017). Confidence, identified in the Hay McBer model of teacher effectiveness (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2000) is defined as 'the belief in one's ability to be effective and to take on challenges' (DfEE, 2000, p. 38). There are two aspects to this definition. The first relates to an inner quality

of self-belief amongst teachers that they can be effective – ‘optimism about their own abilities’ (DfEE, 2000, p.21) – which may be based on, for example, secure knowledge of the subject or on a pedagogy that has been shown to obtain results in the classroom and in pupils’ exam performance. The second aspect is the outward-directed belief in the ability to take on challenges. This relates to a ‘conviction about the importance and value of what they are doing’ (DfEE, 2000, p.21). The latter component may lead to fluctuating confidence, depending on the nature of the challenge, or internal conflict if a teacher’s convictions about what they are doing in the classroom is at variance with external impositions on them regarding such matters as the curriculum or assessment. Perilously juxtaposed alongside the growing body of evidence on the importance of confidence is an escalating ‘crisis of confidence’ (Wade & Sidaway, 1990) and an ‘ontological insecurity’ amongst teachers who are subject to ‘a myriad of judgements, measures, comparisons and targets’ in their professional role (Ball, 2003, p.220). The pressures of educational marketization and hyper-surveillance compel teachers to meet the often divergent and competing demands of parents, pupils, management, syllabi and exams. This frequently referred to ‘rising tide’ of accountabilities denotes a global reform movement emphasising standardization and professional compliance (Conway & Murphy, 2013) which has permeated the education system. The poetry teacher, ostensibly afforded comfort, encouragement, insight, solace and strength from poetry (Palmer & Vander Ark, 2003) has not emerged unblemished within this reform and may in fact be particularly vulnerable to identity corrosion and loss of professional confidence (Wilson, 2010) given the paradoxical objectives of standardised educational regimes and the concurrent desire to stimulate meaningful encounters with poetry (Wright, 2005). As a result, fear, anxiety and lack of confidence have been cited as dominant influences in poetry teachers’ professional decision-making processes within

the Australian context (Weaven & Clark 2013). Xerri (2013) also points to issues of confidence amongst poetry teachers in Malta, asserting their evidenced resistance to poetry writing may be ‘due to their awareness of a gap in their professional training’ (p.149). In the UK also, diminished pedagogical confidence and heightened anxiety with subject knowledge have been evident amongst poetry teachers in both literary and linguistic metalanguage (Wilson & Myhill, 2012). Accordingly, calls to build teacher confidence internationally have begun to resound (Dymoke, 2014). It appears, with increasing clarity, that the significance of professional confidence in the teaching of poetry can no longer be neglected within professional development initiatives and individual teacher resilience enterprises.

Pedagogical Practice in the Poetry Classroom

The noted sense of fear, anxiety and even resistance allied often with the teaching of poetry (Bennett, 2009; Weaven & Clark, 2013; Xerri, 2013) adds significant challenge for teachers attempting to engage in meaningful educational experiences with their pupils within a performance-oriented arena.

In this ‘risk-averse and high-stakes context’ (Myhill & Wilson, 2013, p.103) a discrepancy between poetry teachers’ beliefs on the teaching of poetry and their confidence to enact such practice poses concern (Wade & Sidaway, 1990; Weaven & Clark, 2013). Aligned with a loss of control experienced by teachers within the current culture of educational performativity is a tendency towards pedagogical standardisation and a departure from creativity in the poetry classroom (Dymoke, 2014). Sigvardsson’s (2017) systematic review on the teaching of poetry noted that ‘current educational politics, heavily influenced by neoliberalism, impose high-stakes examinations that challenge poetry curricula’ (p. 584). This is echoed by Snapper (2013) who argued that

within the poetry classroom ‘it is the end-point of the teaching – the examination – as well as the intense time and performance pressures under which teachers and students work to prepare for that examination, which to a great extent determine the pedagogy’ (p. 36). As a result, poetry is vulnerable to becoming a ‘packaged commodity’ (Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2011, p. 217) devoid of experiences that transcend examination-based imperatives. The emergence of this ‘safety first’ model of poetry pedagogy and aligned relegation of perceived ‘high-risk’ aspects of the curriculum (Myhill & Wilson, 2013) means that, in many classrooms, the potential of poetry remains elusive (Sekeres & Gregg, 2007, p467). Within these redefined educational parameters, ‘safe’ pedagogical approaches aligned with technical analysis, modelling strategies, pupil passivity and exam preparation prevail (Dymoke, 2001; Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2013 & Perfect, 1999). For many teachers the associated professional relegation begets a loss of personal interest in poetry and a concurrent challenge to professional confidence (Lambirth, Smith & Steele, 2012).

The Case of The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

Centred firmly within reins of neo-liberal reform and its associated market, managerial and audit-oriented practices (Gleeson & Knights 2006), education provision in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is subject to much debate. Within the Republic of Ireland evidence of professional reductionism is well documented and supported through dominance of the technical paradigm in Irish educational discourse and debate (Gleeson, 2012). In this context, the professional knowledge base has frequently been defined by teachers as ‘classroom-based’ and ‘practical’ rather than ‘research-based’ or ‘theoretical’ (Sexton, 2007) and the significance of pedagogical proficiency is demoted in favour of subject expertise (Sugrue, C., Morgan, M., Devine, D., & Raftery, D., 2001). Irish teacher identity has also been shaped within the frame of individualism and

instrumentalism with teachers in this context often failing to identify closely with, amongst other professional values, participative pedagogies, reflective practice and collegiality (Gleeson, 2012 p. 13). In Northern Ireland, Hanratty's research on poetry teaching at Key Stage Four found that teachers endorsed the importance of a range of methodologies (Hanratty 2008 & 2011), but openness to personal response or other innovative pedagogies meets resistance at A Level due to the need for teachers to prepare students for what serves as a university entrance exam, the tight assessment objectives and the pressure to obtain favourable results for schools league tables. Additionally, opportunities for professional exchange are largely limited to meetings arranged by awarding bodies.

Endorsed and amplified by increasing accountability mechanisms, in both contexts, is a heightened and compliance-focused expectation of teachers and concurrent acknowledgement of their critical role in ensuring quality of educational provision (Conway & Murphy, 2013 & Hyland, 2018). While the influence of professional standardisation and bureaucratic accountability on pedagogical practice within the poetry classroom is clear, as outlined earlier in this paper, the impact on teacher confidence within the poetry classroom is less clear.

Methodology

The aim of this cross-border research study was to explore teacher confidence in the teaching of post-16 poetry across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The post-16 level was selected as the terrain for inquiry of this study given the documented influence of accountability pressures exerted on this level in both contexts. In this study, reference to post-16 education focuses on Leaving Certificate level education in the Republic of Ireland and on General Certificate of Education (GCE) A Level in Northern

Ireland. Both programmes comprise a two-year course of study for students culminating in a high stakes terminal examination in English Literature, including poetry.

Drawing specific reference to post-16 educational provision, the study sought to explore the following research questions:

- 1. How confident do English teachers assert themselves to be in the teaching of poetry at post-16 level?*
- 2. What self-reported impact does teacher confidence have on approaches to teaching post-16 poetry?*

Research Design

This cross-border research study recruited two discrete cohorts of post-16 poetry teachers from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. All participants in this study had taught post-16 poetry for at least one academic year. The research population was identified through the Department of Education and Skills (DES) post-primary schools index for the Republic of Ireland and through the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) schools index for Northern Ireland. Random sampling of schools from both populations was employed to identify the sample of poetry teachers in each context for contact. An email, containing full details of the research study including ethical approval and compliance was sent to the principal in each of the randomly selected schools, North and South. This email invited the participation of post-16 poetry teachers in each school in a linked online survey. Principals were invited to forward the email invitation and survey link to all eligible teachers in their schools. Eighty-four respondents across both cohorts accepted this invitation and participated in the online survey. Full ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics

Committee in both institutions. In addition, Graziano & Raulin's (2010) six 'ethical checks' were conducted on the established design. The study comprised a pre-piloted online semi-structured 28 point survey, including both Likert rating scales and open-ended questions. The survey was designed to explore four key areas; teacher confidence and poetry engagement; challenges to confidence; pedagogical practices and engagement in continuous professional development. A short demographic section ensued. One link to the online survey was created for all participants, with both the Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland participants completing the same research survey questions. The online format supported question branching for the collection of demographics at the end of the survey, therein ensuring both a streamlined and contextually responsive experience for participants. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics, an online survey management system, and went live for a three-month period. Once downloaded, the survey data was divided according to participant context (Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland) then sub-divided in both datasets according to reported confidence levels (low to moderate levels of confidence and very high to extremely high levels of confidence). This supported the analysis of data based on the reported confidence level of participants. SPSS was employed for the analysis of quantitative data while the qualitative data obtained was subject to thematic analysis involving a six-stage process as per Braun & Clarke (2006). This involved familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial codes, the thematic grouping of codes, a review and check of themes, the naming of themes and the production of a final research report.

Findings

Demographics

Eighty-four respondents (n= 18% male, 81% female, 1% undisclosed) engaged in phase one of this research inquiry. Respondents ranged in age from 23 years of age to 60 years of age. The majority of respondents (33%) had taught poetry for between 11- 20 years as demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. to be placed here

Figure 1. Years Teaching

Responses represented a balance of views from both poetry teachers in the North of Ireland (54%) and the Republic of Ireland (46%). The majority of respondents within Northern Ireland taught post-16 poetry in Grammar schools (72%) while a split of teachers from Voluntary Secondary (38%) and Community Schools (38%) formed the majority cohort from the Republic of Ireland respondents.

As demonstrated in Figure. 2 below, 56% of respondents surveyed taught in co-educational schools across both contexts with the remaining 25% teaching in single-sex girls' schools and 19% teaching in single-sex boys' schools.

Figure 2. to be placed here

Figure 2. School Type

The highest level of education acquired by the majority of survey respondents (49%) was a Bachelor's degree. Additionally, 41% of respondents had secured a Master's degree and 4% had achieved a Doctoral degree.

No significant correlation was found between age and self-reported confidence levels or

between degree award (i.e. Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral) and confidence levels. Nor were there any statistically significant difference in scores for male and female teachers or across scores for teachers in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland.

However, a small correlation between confidence levels and numbers of years of teaching poetry for Leaving Certificate or A Level was found.

Poetry Teacher Confidence

The data demonstrates a high level of reported confidence in the teaching of post-16 poetry amongst participants. Of the 84 survey respondents, 23% of poetry teachers defined themselves as 'extremely confident' in teaching poetry. 36% self-reported as 'very confident' in the teaching of poetry, followed by 32% of teachers asserting moderate confidence levels in the teaching of poetry (see Figure 3). Only 6% of teachers in this survey self-reported as 'slightly confident' and 3% of teachers as 'not at all confident' in the teaching of post-16 poetry.

Figure 3. to be placed here

Figure 3. Poetry Teaching Confidence levels

Teachers' high levels of confidence extended to a variety of domains in poetry teaching with 'very confident' emerging as the majority response in four out of five areas associated with the teaching of poetry, namely: developing students' responses (38% 'very confident'), selecting poems/poets to be studied (37% 'very confident'), evaluating students' written responses (44% 'very confident'), providing feedback on students' written work (41% 'very confident').

In relation to specific areas or domains of confidence, as illustrated in Figure 4 below, a slightly lower mean confidence level was found amongst respondents in relation to

‘encouraging authentic subjective student response’ where the majority of poetry teachers asserted themselves to be ‘moderately confident (40%).

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Figure 4. Domains of Confidence

Poetry beyond the classroom

Respondents reported a low level of engagement with poetry outside of prescribed school activities as demonstrated in Figure 5. below.

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Figure 5. Poetry beyond the classroom

A large majority (66%) of poetry teachers in this research reported ‘never’ (42%) or ‘rarely’ (24%) writing poetry in their own time. Twenty-five per cent noted that poetry writing in their own time is an activity they ‘sometimes’ engage in, while only a combined 9% of poetry teachers reported writing poetry in their own time ‘often’ (5%) or ‘always’ (4%). Listening to poetry outside of school time was also reported as an infrequent activity amongst poetry teachers in this research. Fifty per cent of teachers reported that they ‘rarely’ (33%) or ‘never’ (17%) listen to poetry in their own time. Thirty-nine per cent of teachers outlined listening to poetry outside of school ‘sometimes’, with a further 11% reporting listening to poetry ‘often’ (7%) or ‘always’ (4%) in their spare time. Performing poetry was also reported as an activity that the vast majority of poetry teachers never engaged in with 87% of survey participants asserting that they ‘never’ perform poetry in their spare time. Poetry readings were also cited as

an activity that poetry teachers choose not to engage in outside of school time. Sixty-one per cent of poetry teachers noted that they ‘never’ (38%) or ‘rarely’ (23%) attend poetry readings in their spare time. Twenty-four per cent of respondents stated they ‘sometimes’ attend poetry reading while 16% of respondents noted poetry readings are an activity that they ‘always’ (5%) or ‘often’ (11%) attend. Participants noted greater engagement with reading poetry in their spare time with the majority (46%) of teachers asserting this is an activity they ‘sometimes’ engage in. A further 35% stated they ‘sometimes’ (23%) or ‘always’ (12%) read poetry in their spare time while 15% of poetry teachers stated they ‘rarely’ read poetry in their own time and an additional 4% of respondents stated this as something they ‘never’ engage in.

Continuous Professional Development

Participants, across both jurisdictions were critical of the availability and quality of the in-service provision accessible to them. Referring to the availability of in-service courses for post-16 poetry over the past five years, 78% of respondents described this provision as ‘poor’. A further 12% of poetry teachers described in-service availability as ‘fair’. Only 10% of respondents described poetry in-service availability as ‘average’ or above average. No statistically significant variance of response was found between respondents teaching in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Perhaps as a result of participants’ perspectives on the availability of in-service provision, participants’ reported attendance at in-service training was found to be low. Seventy-seven per cent of poetry teachers noted that they had not attended any form of poetry in-service in the past five years as demonstrated in Figure 6. Again, no statistically significant difference was noted between respondents teaching in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Figure 6. to be placed here

Figure 6. Poetry In-service attendance

Respondents who had attended poetry in-service in the past five years (n=16) were asked to rate the quality of in-service provision encountered. The majority (33%) of respondents cited the quality of in-service provision experienced in the past five years as 'average'. An additional 41% of respondents reported less favourably, citing this provision as either 'fair' (28%) or 'poor' (13%). Only a combined 26% reported the quality of in-service experienced to be either 'good' (13%) or 'excellent' (13%).

Respondents were asked to identify any areas related to the teaching of post-16 poetry with which they would like further professional development. Two common themes emerged from this question. The first theme emerged as a desire for additional support on essay content and marking including greater clarity related to exam requirements and expectations. Comments supporting this theme included *'Perhaps essay content and marking. Although I feel fairly confident in this area I'd like some reassurance that I'm doing the right thing'* and *'I'd like to see more organised exemplars of exam answers, fully broken down and explained. Department guidelines sound good but they're very open to interpretation'*. The second emergent theme related to a desire for support around the technical aspects of poetic analysis where respondents' comments included a desire for support on *'how language creates effects'* and others noted *'Personally I would struggle with metre/beat, so if I was to get technical help that would be an area'*. Another teacher outlined that *'Courses are usually about what percentage each assessment objective should make up in an examination response or the importance of repeating the exact words of the question endlessly to show focus. I would like to be told exactly what content knowledge is expected – techniques, language analysis and,*

especially, exactly what contextual knowledge is expected'. Both themes were dominant and evident across teachers of all reported confidence levels from both research contexts.

Pedagogical Preferences in Poetry

Respondents were asked to list the aspects of post-16 poetry teaching which they most enjoy. Common across both jurisdictions was an enjoyment in developing pupils' personal responses with teachers asserting such sentiments as *'I enjoy giving students the freedom to make their own meanings of the poems'* and *'watching pupils grow in confidence to the point where they independently advance their own interpretations and see alternative readings possible'*. Additionally, respondents cited enjoyment in engaging in the analysis of poetic technique with students. Responses included: *'identifying how the poet has used form/structure/poetic techniques to convey meaning and create ambiguity or tone'*; *'I like analysing the poet's craftsmanship – language choices which enhance meaning or content and examining whether the structure also contributes to understanding'* and *'the use of figurative language and the complexity of meaning with poetry'*. An additional dominant theme noted only amongst high confidence teachers (self-cited as 'extremely' or 'very confident') in both jurisdictions was enjoyment in linking poetry to students' own lives. High confidence respondents highlighted enjoyment in the way that *'poetry invites students to challenge aspects of their lives that they may hitherto have accepted blindly'*.

Challenges in Poetry Teaching

When asked about the challenges encountered in teaching poetry, respondents across both jurisdictions raised similar concerns. Central to the tensions associated with the teaching of poetry for participants were: the impact of assessment regimes and exam

preparation, student apathy and time constraints. Additionally, teachers in Northern Ireland cited lack of resources as a key challenge to their work also.

Focusing on assessment, respondents commented that *'The method of marking is much too prescriptive leading to checklist teaching'* and *'How poetry essays are marked by exam boards is killing the teaching of poetry'*. In response to the demands of the exam one teacher noted *'I just take a pragmatic approach to teaching it and teach to the test. I'm being honest here!!'* When discussing the challenge of student apathy, responses included *'a negative mindset towards poetry from some students...some say they dislike it and seem to see it as lesser than other forms of literature'* and *'Many students seem to hate poetry and see it as something to just learn off the notes to. Students seem to want 'the answer' and not want to critically analyse or explore poetry for themselves'*. When highlighting the impact of time constraints poetry teachers' comments included *'The pressure of time is the biggest challenge. In order to cover the specification there is about 75 mins of teaching time per poem'* and *'There are too many prescribed poets/poems on the course and as a teacher I find I am lecturing or/and preselecting in order to complete the syllabus. I am guilty of approaching many of the poems as literary works as opposed to lyrical works'*.

The listed challenges appeared to transcend respondent confidence level as the challenges identified by teachers who self-declared as 'confident' mirrored those who self-declared as having 'moderate' to 'low' confidence. When asked to identify the challenge which holds greatest impact on their role as a poetry teacher, the impact of examination and assessment was cited.

Exploring Poetry Education Provision

Poetry teachers in this study were also asked to consider if there were any aspects of

poetry they would like to teach or feel would be appropriate for inclusion in the post-16 poetry class that they had not had the opportunity to teach thus far. A consensus emerged across both jurisdictions that a reduction of curricular prescription related to the poems and poets that are available for study at this level would be beneficial. This theme dominated responses across all levels of confidence. Comments included *'I'd love one free choice for teachers. Let us choose one poet ourselves to teach. The comparative section is a hugely open section. Why not widen the choice of poets available?'* and *'I would like to move away from the depressing poetry of Plath and at times Bishop and have a wider and more varied selection of poets on the course'*. The second most frequently reported response to this question from participants was 'no', with teachers across both contexts asserting satisfaction with their current approaches to the teaching of poetry. Comments included *'No, I follow the specifications of the syllabus'* and *'In the context of what's required for the exams, no. Student workload precludes me going off into the long grass too much'*. Interestingly, when asked to comment on any other factors influencing their level of confidence, there was a divergence of response between teachers who cited confidence levels of 'extremely' to 'very high' and those who cited themselves to be 'moderately', 'slightly' or 'not at all confident'. For the former 'high confidence' cohort, teachers' passion for and love of poetry was reported as key to their confidence. These teachers' comments included *'I have a personal interest and love for poetry than not all teachers may have. I see how my passion and enthusiasm can alter students' experiences of studying poetry'* and *'I think I feel confident because it is something I enjoy and have never had difficulty with, even when I was in school'*. Whereas for 'lower confidence' teachers the need for additional support, through both formal and informal support structures, dominated responses. These teachers commented *'I am lacking in confidence teaching poetry and*

would love CPD [Continuing Professional Development] in this area' and 'I think it would be hugely beneficial for CCEA [Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment] to share more sample responses with detailed commentaries to justify the awarding of marks'. A sense of an unrelenting quest towards confidence was outlined by one teacher who commented 'Each year I add to my body of knowledge but feel there is always more to know. I often feel I do not do my students justice'.

Discussion

Set in two high stakes educational contexts where teacher performance is closely audited, the findings of this research with respect to self-reported levels of teacher confidence appear at first encouraging. Teachers across both contexts reported a very strong sense of confidence in the teaching of post-16 poetry. This professional confidence was reported by teachers to extend across a wide range of activities related to the teaching of poetry including developing students' personal responses, the selection of poems and poets for study, and evaluating and providing feedback on students' written work. A reduction of confidence was noted however with respect to teachers' perceptions of their ability to encourage authentic subjective student response. The exclusive reduction in reported confidence amongst poetry teachers for this undertaking is a cause for reflection. Central to the development of authentic response is a commitment to 'inquiry based' discussions which support students 'to explore complex questions where there are no clearly defined right or wrong answers' (Dawson, 2009, pp. 66–67). Unlike the aforementioned classroom tasks which hold the potential to support processes of standardisation and which supported high confidence levels amongst teachers in this study, the development of authentic response was reported as a challenge to the confidence of poetry teachers. Evidence of a tension between professional conformity and the development of authentic student response emerges

with uncomfortable, but perhaps unsurprising clarity in a context where socio-cultural pressures towards conformity and standardisation have been identified as ‘barriers’ to creative endeavour in schools (Myhill & Wilson 2013).

While the personal, pedagogical and professional merits for educators operating as “Reading Teachers” (see, for example, Cremin, 2014) and “Teachers as Writers” have been well documented in recent years, the findings of this research demonstrate divergence from such pedagogic models. Teachers in this study demonstrated limited personal engagement with poetry. Almost half of the poetry teachers who participated in this study admitted to never engaging in poetry writing in their own time. Listening to poetry was also found to be an infrequent activity amongst the large majority of English teachers in this study. Other activities found to be peripheral to respondents’ engagement were poetry performance and attending poetry readings. Additionally, and perhaps reflective of the ‘prevailing culture of individualism’ within the Irish educational context (Gleeson, 2012, p.7), seventy-seven per cent of poetry teachers in this study had not attended any form of poetry in-service in the past five years. The personal and professional commitment of poetry teachers to engage with poetry beyond the classroom appears limited, drawing on the findings of this research. Such findings could be a cause for individual reproach. However, situated within this myopic response is endorsement of a divested responsibility for learning which fails to acknowledge both the imperative for collective and effective professional development supports and the dichotomised responsibilities shouldered on educators in the knowledge society.

Drawing on the work of Knorr Cetina, Jensen (2007) “the desire to learn emerges as a result of a productive interplay between frequent encounters with knowledge and the steadfast commitment that arises from being a member of an innovative-orientated community” (p. 497). For teachers in this study the opportunity to engage in and with an

‘innovative-orientated community’ appears elusive. Participants, across both jurisdictions, were critical of the availability and quality of the in-service provision accessible to them echoing criticism of the historical lack of cohesion, funding and professional focus associated with CPD in Ireland over the past twenty years (Gleeson 2012, p.9-10). Moreover, in a context which places eminence of value on standardised practice and conformity, the professional learning practices adopted by teachers in this study appear consistent. Notwithstanding the reduced levels of confidence reported by participants related to the development of authentic student poetic responses and the reported enjoyment derived by teachers in this endeavour, teachers in this study asserted a desire for professional support and development in two key areas; essay content and marking, including a specific focus on exam requirements and technical poetic analysis. The contracted ambition for professional development evidenced here points to a concerted focus amongst teachers on standardised and standardising practices within the poetry classroom guided largely by the imperative of testing and performance. This focus demonstrates a sense of resignation amongst participants who appeared to sacrifice calls for professional development in pedagogic activities from which they derived a sense of professional satisfaction for professional development calls that appeared to be better aligned with bureaucratic standards and performance indicators. The ‘moral yardstick’ for professional development applied by teachers in this study reflects the findings of Jensen (2007) who found ‘playful endeavours of embetterment are overshadowed by motives related to duty, copying and guarding against mistakes’ (p.499) amongst professionals operating within the knowledge economy. Accordingly, endeavours to challenge contracted professional learning practices, such as those evidenced in this study, which fail to challenge the fragmentation of expectation weighted upon teachers and which continue to ascribe the challenges associated with

professional development as individually established, appear fated in failure.

McNess, Broadfoot & Osborne (2003) asserted the emergence of a 'new professionalism' amongst teachers who were more likely to find satisfaction within a more constrained and instrumental role. The findings of this research appear to corroborate this proposal. When asked to consider aspects of poetry they would like to teach or feel would be appropriate for inclusion in the post-16 poetry class that they had not had the opportunity to teach thus far, consensus of response emerged across both jurisdictions on two items. The first, that a reduction of curricular prescription related to the poems and poets that are available for study at this level would be beneficial. The challenge of student apathy cited by teachers in this study may resonate here. Pupil apathy towards poetry education is however a phenomenon with historical familiarity. Almost fifty years ago Painter (1970) highlighted the difficulty experienced by many teachers encountering student apathy towards poetry. Significantly the work of Painter draws parallels between lack of pedagogical innovation and student apathy towards poetry. Given the prominence of assessment and assessment-driven models of teaching discussed by participants in this research, the challenge of student apathy holds predictability. The second most commonly cited response from participants was 'no', with teachers across both contexts asserting satisfaction with their current approach to poetry education. This finding suggests a compliance, albeit resigned, amongst poetry teachers to the demands of the prevailing technical paradigm (Gleeson, 2012). Moreover, this research suggests that professional confidence within the poetry classroom may be buoyed on teachers' sense of proficiency in operationalising and navigating within these cultural dictates. Such reflection ultimately provides space to consider the benefits of professional doubt. Wheatley (2002) contends that teachers' doubts regarding their choice of goals, methods, or curricula often arise from teachers'

concerns about the expected effects of each choice. The lack of professional doubt reported in this study evidences a clarity amongst respondents on the expected effects of their pedagogical decisions. The lack of engagement with professional development activities as reported in this study also suggests that such activities are considered unnecessary by teachers to the accomplishment of their pedagogic goals. Where doubt was reported, teachers' reflections were directed towards the pursuit of certainty, as evidenced in responses such as '*I would like to be told exactly what content knowledge is expected – techniques, language analysis and, especially, exactly what contextual knowledge is expected*'. The pursuit of certainty however merits caution, given its potential to create attachments to "*teaching goals, topics and methods where certainty is easiest to obtain*" (*ibid*). In the case of this research, professional certainty was deemed most readily accessible through professional contraction – a relegation of the value of professional development opportunities that extend beyond examination requirements, relegation of the need for alternate learning experiences and relegation of those facets of professional engagement cited by teachers to evince a sense of satisfaction and delight. Levitt et al (2008) suggested that in response to higher demands for accountability 'it is plausible that professionals organise their work in a way to meet the targets imposed on them and 'score' high in the elements that are being measured and compared in league tables, while not necessarily focusing on these elements that are mostly beneficial for the service recipients" (p.4). The findings of this study appear to support such assertion. Corrosion, both personal and professional, through the instrumentalisation of poetry education appears a regrettably routine yet complex phenomenon across both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland given its alignment with contextually based performance indicators and its potential to significantly bolster teacher confidence.

Conclusions

Acknowledging the amplified calls for more invigorated, meaningful and critical student experience in the poetry classroom, the findings of this research assert the need for both structural and conceptual reform which acknowledge the significance of teacher confidence, providing opportunities for professional accomplishment, success and reward which transcend technicist endeavour. A triadic response, encompassing the roles of teachers, teachereducators and policymakers within the continuum of teacher education, merit consideration. In the first instance, attention to the role of teacher agency in the pursuit of professional advancement has been growing over the last decade (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). Drawing on the work of Bandura (2001, p. 1) agency involves 'the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one's life'. It embodies interaction 'with and within' specific contexts 'with individuals who, alone or in groups, make decisions, take initiatives, act proactively rather than reactively, and deliberately strive and function to reach a certain end' (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). For teachers, the enactment of agency in the rejection of professional contraction includes exploration of available opportunities for professional learning, both formal and informal. In this sense, the enactment of the agency is understood to resist the burdened weight of divested accountability discussed earlier, affording space for engagement with role-liberating rather than role-limiting professional development opportunities. These include exploration of the roles of reading teacher, teacher as writer and teacher as researcher, along with more widely recognised formalised professional conference, networking and in-service opportunities. Engagement with such pedagogical roles and supports serves not only as a counterbalance to the persuasive pull of professional contraction but also expands opportunities for pedagogical innovation and risk-taking. The derivation of confidence

from pedagogical proficiency rather than bureaucratic compliance serves as a significant milestone in this pursuit. Such an approach serves not to eschew the pressures of performativity experienced by teachers but rather to encourage a critical, informed and student-focused response to such pressures which embraces teacher agency as the catalyst for advancement. For teacher educators, the challenge of supporting the development of professional resilience in teachers is a complex but necessary step in the rejection of professional contraction. Attention to the often-understated area of teacher professional confidence requires prioritisation in this endeavour. In this way, teachers can be supported to transcend a myopic vision of professional achievement in favour of a vision buoyed by meaningful engagement with poetry within and beyond the classroom, which encourages engaged and critical student responses, which nurtures an extended appreciation of the genre and which elicits intellectual responses to curriculum change and the pressures of performativity rather than adherence to a stance of uncritical compliance. Approaches to the development of teacher confidence, which fail to provide space for creative pedagogical experiences scaffolded with an assurance of the value of doubt and uncertainty as central tenets to any authentic professional learning experience, will serve only to exacerbate tensions associated with the pull of neoliberal values. Finally, a shift in vision and value away from the buttressing of bureaucratic accountability measures towards the promotion of intellectual accountability, energised by an emphasis on continual professional development, is required at a policy level to facilitate and sustain the advancements made by teachers and teacher educators. Re-scripted, teacher confidence in the classroom, underpinned by teacher agency, pedagogical innovation and a focus on student learning, holds the potential to support invigorated engagement with poetry in all of its rich complexity.

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