The Poetry and Memory Project

Project Report, March 2017

Poetry and Memory: Project Report

This is an extended version of the report submitted to the Leverhulme Trust at the end of the project's three-year funding.

Principal Investigator: Mr David Whitley
Research Associate: Dr Debbie Pullinger

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Notes

Percentages are rounded to the nearest decimal place.

Quotations are taken from both survey responses (S) and interviews (I)

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Executive summary

The Poetry and Memory Project was initially a three-year interdisciplinary project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, which set out to investigate the distinctive value of the memorised poem and its place in contemporary society. Data was collected through a national online survey, in-depth interviews, and from literature. Together, these three elements now constitute substantial and rich data set.

The emerging findings point strongly towards memorised poetry being a resource with the potential to enrich lives in different ways over many years. Knowing a poem by heart appears to support a very distinctive quality of attention and connection which in turn fosters a rich and lasting relationship with that poem. Such a relationship is not antithetical to the kinds of understanding produced by literary analysis and close reading, but has the potential to work in synergy with it. Equally, for many people, the memorised poem plays a valuable role in making meaning from life's experiences, and to give expression to meaning in language.

These insights constitute an important perspective for current educational culture, where poetry memorisation is sometimes perceived as a superficial or even counter-productive form of engagement. In contrast, our findings suggest that integrated memorisation practices can work fruitfully in synergy with other forms of engagement, performance, appreciation, and meaning making.

Acknowledgements

1. Background and objectives

Learning poetry by heart was once inscribed in the British school curriculum and woven into the fabric of cultural life, but has now declined to the point where knowing and being able recite poetry is no longer a cultural norm. At the same time, there is a distinct nostalgia for a time when people could readily summon up lines of verse, supplying poetic insight for any occasion and reinforcing a sense of shared cultural heritage. This dichotomy was reflected in our own, earlier study of teachers' perceptions of poetry teaching: some thought that memorising poetry was 'old fashioned' if not a real threat to enjoyment and engagement; but for those who had learned poetry themselves when young it was evidently a cherished resource for teaching and for life. Whilst memorisation and recitation were reinstated on the English primary curriculum in 2012, it was not on the basis of research evidence. Since then, informal reports have indicated that in some classrooms the requirement is being met with reluctance, with some teachers using potentially counterproductive methods. At secondary level, reversion to 'closed book' examinations, with its implied obligation to memorise, has been met with similar ambivalence.

At the heart of this ambivalence are questions about the relationship memorisation has with engagement and understanding. The wider cultural context, meanwhile, is one in which there are signs of reviving interest in the practices of memorisation and recitation – perhaps in part a result of anxiety about the increasing outsourcing of our memory to external devices. Our project therefore took as its central research questions:

- What is the distinctive value of the memorised poem?

- What is the relationship between memorisation and understanding?

The enquiry was therefore not into the value of *learning* poetry, a question that tends to put the focus on the act of memorisation. Rather, working on the assumption that a poem often unfolds its significance for a person over time, we set out to investigate the variety of ways in which the memorised poem may be experienced and be valuable. Our aim was to find out, in the broadest possible terms, what is distinctive about this form of engagement.

2. Research activity

a) **Data collection**
   We investigated our questions through three strands of enquiry.

   i. Literature research
       As an ongoing strand of our data collection, our literature search ranged across several fields, including theories of poetry, memory studies, the history of memorisation and recitation, and theories of cognition.

   ii. Survey
       We conducted a national online survey to find out what poems people in the UK knew by heart, and in what ways they were valued. At the heart of the survey was the question: what poem do you know by heart? Those knowing two or more were asked to select the one holding the most personal significance. Three open-ended questions then invited the respondents' reflections on their experience of knowing that poem. Further, closed questions elicited information about when and where they learned both that particular poem and any other poetry, and their reasons for

doing so. Some multiple-choice questions gauged their attitude towards learning poetry, and a final section gathered demographic data.

This was a qualitative survey which would enable us to investigate variations, patterns and relationships within the dataset, rather than a sample survey through which claims for significance within a population might be made. Through careful design of the survey instrument and the portal, we aimed to elicit measured and reflective response rather than automatic box-ticking. Both were then piloted and refined through several iterations. To increase response rate as far as possible, we worked with the university communications team and with Forward Arts and their National Poetry initiative. This gained us national media coverage, including a feature on Radio 4's *Today* programme.

The survey attracted just over 500 responses, including some returned via the 'print and post' option – an attempt to increase accessibility for older people who are less likely to have computer access and/or IT skills. A large proportion of respondents had clearly devoted considerable time and effort to the survey, offering thoughtful, detailed responses to the open-ended questions. After the initial clean-up operation, 470 responses were coded and analysed.

iii.   Interviews
From an initial analysis on the survey data, we identified emerging themes and further questions, and followed these up in 38 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. From the volunteer survey respondents, we selected a set that represented different attitudes to learning poetry as well as a range of age, life experience, and cultural background. Additionally, we interviewed a small number of 'special cases', each with a particular experience relevant to the enquiry. These included, for example, a professional poetry reciter, a leading voice coach, and an academic with a profound knowledge and appreciation of poetry who professed inability to remember a single line.

In line with our interest in the memorised poem in its broader context, the interviews did not focus exclusively on, or indeed begin with, the selected poem. Rather, each was a responsive exploration of that person's experience of poetry through the course of life, both inside and outside formal education. Questions about learning and ongoing experience of the selected poem were considered within that exploration. At the end of each interview, the survey respondent interviewees were given an opportunity to recite their selected poem, if they so wished. Unsolicited comments about gaining personal insights from the interview increased our confidence in the methodology.

b) Data analysis

The survey responses and the transcribed interviews together constitute an extensive and rich set of data. Use of MAXQDA software has allowed us to use combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques on the different types of data. For the qualitative analysis, the coding categories were developed both from the research questions and from themes suggested by the data. The statistical functions of MAXQDA have then enabled us to run

quantitative enquiries not only on the variables within the survey data but also on codes from the qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts. The data has yielded some compelling results and insights, and there is significant potential for further analysis.

Some of the main descriptive statistics for survey responses are given in the appendix.

c) Links and collaborations

We have established an excellent network of relationships with organisations and individuals in a range of relevant fields, most notably a close working relationship with the directors of Poetry By Heart, a recitation competition for schools in England. As a major cultural and educational initiative aimed at realising the potential value of poetry memorisation and performance for young people, Poetry by Heart has considerable synergy with the aims and focus of our research, and we have developed a mutually beneficial ongoing dialogue and sharing of perspectives.

At the end of the funded phase of the project (December 2016) we ran a series of forums, each with select group of invited experts and leaders in the fields of poetry and poetry education, as follows:

> *Formal Education* – Representatives from English teaching associations, initial teacher training institutions and exam boards

> *Informal Education and the Arts* – Representatives from poetry education and promotion bodies, and literature and arts organisations

> *Wellbeing and Therapy* – Individuals and institutional representatives with an interest in the role of the arts in human health and wellbeing.

These forum discussions provided us with some valuable insights into the ways our project findings relate to current concerns in each field, and into the challenges of realising the potential value of poetry in our changing society and education system.

Outside the UK, together with Poetry By Heart we presented initial findings at NCTE, a large conference for teachers of English in Atlanta, Georgia (November 2016). The panel discussion provided an opportunity to explore implications with teachers and with US organisations running school recitation competitions. This included Poetry Out Loud, in which over 300,000 young people participate annually, and with whom we shared a platform.

3. Findings

This project entered a field in which there is practically no existing research. We therefore believe that our study makes a vital contribution in staking out the territory: defining the subject as an important area of research interest; identifying and conceptualising the key issues; offering an initial theorisation of poetry memorisation as a phenomenon and process; and opening up a dialogue within constituencies both inside and outside formal education.

If reactions to the idea of reinstating poetry memorisation within formal education are, as mentioned above, somewhat mixed, there is nevertheless a sense among the general public that the memorised poem is of value – a view held by over 90% of our survey respondents. Until now, however, the exact nature of that value has not been properly examined or articulated. Our

findings indicate not only that memorised poetry *is* valuable; they also offer an account of the specific ways in which it operates within personal experience.

As expected, the emerging picture is a complex one that may also be usefully located in relation to broader questions about the nature of poetry, and about engagement with poetry – and indeed with art generally. Nevertheless, our headline findings centre on three distinct aspects.

a) **Poems and canons**

There were 287 different poems selected by our survey respondents, of which 66 were selected more than once (see Appendix A). Insofar as this memorised 'tradition' represents an informal alternative to more conventional canons, it has implications for how we might think about both the 'uses' of poetry, and the cultural processes of selection more widely. We are still engaged in discussion, debate and analysis as we consider how best to position this memorised canon. Its single most striking feature is that it is more conservative than the poetry syllabuses currently found in schools and higher education, being highly centred on male, white, British and Irish writers, most of whom have been dead for at least fifty years (see Appendix B). Compared with those syllabuses, however, the memorised canon continues to value popular verse of the past which is no longer regarded academically, as well as giving a significant place to poetry with a strong appeal to the ear and to humorous works. Moreover, although largely conservative in cultural terms, elements of ethnic and regional diversity are clearly present. Given that the poetic tradition is often considered a cultural asset which underpins the expressive richness of the English language, we feel there is therefore scope for the alternative tradition of poems, held in the heartlands of memory, to be seen as a positive aspect of national identity, especially if its conservative qualities are reinvigorated and extended by practices incorporating greater diversity. This is an aspect that might be considered by new initiatives to support memorisation in the future, and indeed, has been a conscious aim in Poetry by Heart's selection of poems for recitation.

b) **Memorised poetry and life experience**

For nearly all of our respondents, knowing some poetry by heart is regarded as an enriching, life-enhancing experience. The survey ranking gave an indication of the effects most likely to be experienced. Appreciation of the poem itself was the most prevalent, closely followed by the role of the poem as an emotional resource. However, the other suggested benefits were fairly evenly represented, as shown here (percentages rounded to nearest decimal place).

Helps me appreciate the poem more	72%
Gives me a source of comfort in tough times	63%
Helps me understand the poem better	56%
Is good for being able to play with language	54%
Helps me to make sense of life	44%
Is good for making connections between things	42%
Gives me confidence that I am able to remember things generally	40%
Helps with being able to express ideas	39%
Makes no difference	3%

does not show up in these statistics is both the particularity of experience and the striking variety in the ways people engage with a poem. Some significant dimensions of variation include: the preferred mode of sensory engagement (especially the degree of auditory engagement); the degree to which a poem is experienced as charged with personal meaning and significance; the degree to which that meaning may change over time; the use of the poem in familial or social contexts. Fleshed out by findings from the qualitative textual analysis, the emerging picture of a memorised poem is a highly multifaceted one. It is variously described, for example, **as a personal possession**, and as an **emotional resource** or talisman.

> I'd be lost without my internal anthology which is unique to me and my family. (S)

> Snatches come to me almost every day from different places. It's like having a little treasure chest really. (S)

> That night I memorised it and it has been my 'security blanket' ever since. (S)

and as a **living entity**:

> A poem is like a person – if I met you next week I wouldn't expect you to be the same. (S)

> Many have 'stuck' over many years and have become like personal friends deeply rooted in my head. (S)

> Breathe the sound and rhythm of a voice into them, and they transubstantiate from 'readings' into 'beings'. (S)

Whether conceptualised as a human or some other sort of living entity, for these people a poem is experienced as a being with whom one has a personal relationship. It is possible that these respondents are not simply reaching for a familiar metaphor, but are describing an experience that proceeds from a neurological reality. In his account of the divided brain, Iain McGilchrist explains that while encounters with inanimate objects tend to be mediated by the left cerebral hemisphere, whose attention is exclusively on the inanimate and the mechanical, it is the right hemisphere through which we tend to process encounters with other human beings or living things, and also with all forms of art. Thus, the 'living creations' of art, music and poetry 'can be understood only if we appreciate that they are more like people than texts or concepts or things' (McGilchrist 2009, p. 96).[1] This proposition seems congruent with the fact that reflections on the memorised poem were conspicuously communicated through a lexicon of love – as indicated by the fact that the word 'love' appears in over 90% of the responses to open-ended questions.

In line with the notion that a poem is perceived as a living entity, there is strong evidence that both particular poems, as well as an interest in poetry generally, are almost always **passed on** *in vivo*. For many of our respondents, their chosen poem had been 'passed on' to them from another person, often in childhood and within the family, though sometimes in school with an inspiring teacher. Of those whose selected poem was acquired in childhood, 54% said this had happened outside formal education. For these people, a love of poetry is often traced back to a significant person such as a poetry-quoting parent or grandparent,

> My mother has died, and I realised how important poetry was to my mother. And it might not have been the poetry I would've chosen because it was a rather rumpty dumpty stuff. But that was really part of her legacy to me. (I)

> I love it because my late father used to recite it to me when I was a child and I learned it from him. (I)

> I should say that I love lots of serious poetry as well, and probably recite that to myself more often, but this is special because I learned it straight from my Gran.

One way the memorised poem appears to acquire its own particular life force is that it exists within **a web of personal connection** – to certain places, to significant life experiences, or to people (especially those who have been loved).

> Thinking about them does take me back in my mind to a particular desk and classroom at school. (S)

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[1] McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World.* New Haven; London, Yale University Press.

> When I recite or read it I am instantly transported to a particular time of unrequited painful love, first love. (S)

> In my mind it is also connected with the novels about ancient and classical Greece written by Mary Renault … it forms part of a romantic melange created during my youth and early adulthood. (S)

> It is deeply embedded in my memories of my father. (S)

This concurs with Catherine Robson's study of the experience of the recitation canon at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Robson found that although the poems in the recitation repertoire may be regarded as simpler and less yielding to criticism than the 'classics of the New Critical canon', once memorised they tend to 'develop relationships with the person and the context that always carry the potential to develop into a complex affair' (Robson, 2011, p. 26).[2]

However, this condition of being embedded within life experience does not mean that the poem itself is necessarily perceived impressionistically or in a purely subjective mode. On the contrary, these respondents also tended to have a very strong sense of their known poem's formal and semantic qualities. What differentiates it from the poem as an object of literary study (where the textual, abstract or conceptual qualities are foregrounded) is that the memorised poem tends to retain its connection to a web of personal, embodied associations. Indeed, for these events and experiences, the poem may itself act as a powerful mnemonic, tagging them with significance and transfixing them within the inner life. Like songs, memorised poems seem to have an almost uncanny capacity for forging their own, strong networks of vivid association that remain in the memory over long stretches of time.

> It has acquired layers of memory. For example, I remember reciting this poem to myself as I walked in the alps, and the places and experience of walking there, the details of the paths, the alpine flowers come back to me when I think of the poem.

> It takes me back to a time when I was young, and reminds me forcibly of how strongly I felt things then.

Once embedded within memory, the learned poem is able to play a role in **finding meaning within life's experiences,** and to offer **a language that will give fitting expression** to meaning.

> 'Prayer' by Carol Ann Duffy feels like it is the story of my life.

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[2] Robson, C. (2011). *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

> My oldest and favourite sister had gone to boarding school and I missed her desperately. The poem seemed to express what I felt about her absence better than I could.

Meaning-making and expression may take place at the scale of small moments, as, for example, for the person who spoke about the sight of new leaves in spring always being intensified by Gerard Manley Hopkins' lines, 'the weeds in wheels shoot lovely and long and lush'. Or it can be at the scale of a whole life, as in the quote about Duffy's poem, above. This capacity to render both large and small events more intense and meaningful almost certainly contributes in turn to the memorised poem's key role as an **emotional resource**. And it is probably the combination of this with an internalised sense of the poem's formal structure that enables it to work so effectively, as was often reported, as a **container** for strong emotion.

> It was like a temporary home while I was homeless, these familiar poems. (I)

> It's a place to inhabit. A place for your brain to be, a familiar place for it to be, if you're challenged by other things, I suppose. (I)

These and other similar descriptions of a poem as **a thing that houses or holds** have echoes of Donald Winnicott's theory of the transitional object as a holding place or container. As voice coach Patsy Rodenburg asserted in one of our interviews, poetry is like 'a concrete thing that will hold you. We can only go into dangerous places with structure. This is my great aria that in all the work I do, that if we don't understand structure we cannot engage in the unbearable'.

c) The memorisation process and experience of the poem

The phrases 'by rote' and 'by heart' occur frequently in the open-ended survey responses. Our analysis suggests that these two colloquial expressions do point towards a real difference in the practices and processes of learning, which may in turn tend to produce different experiences of the memorised poem itself. The way individuals relate to a memorised poem is undoubtedly the product of a complex of factors that include personal psychology, family culture, and school experience. There are certainly cases where a poem learned 'by rote', takes root and comes to be experienced in a fuller way:

> The best thing is realising that even though you may have thought that you were learning 'by rote' and so was everyone else, many things have 'stuck' over many years and have become like personal friends deeply rooted in my head. (S)

> I love knowing it now but learned it entirely through fear. (S)

In learning a poem 'by rote', the goal, and often the focus of the process, tends be the memorisation itself rather than engagement with the poetry. Our findings indicate that the poem learned in this way is rather *less likely* to be retained over a prolonged period, or

may not be as fully appreciated, or both. On the other hand, a productive, fruitful relationship with a poem is *more likely* to result from learning that might be described as 'by heart'. In contrast to rote learning's more functionalist, mechanical approaches, this deep or **organic learning** may be characterised by a focus on the poem's inherent qualities, including its sensory attributes, and by an attitude of curiosity and playfulness. It appears that when encountered in these ways, both the whole shape and the particularities of the poem may become deeply familiar. Indeed, that knowledge of the whole may create a sense of **internal space**, so that there is a sense of **inhabiting**, or being inside the poem.

> With some poems, I know the poem so well that I don't have to think about them, and then I can sort of play around inside them, and different shades and meanings come to you. (I)

> I seemed to come to know the poem from inside, as if it were a landscape that I had to navigate with my eyes closed, learning where the dips and climbs were, when to turn left or right, and what outcrops to avoid; it felt very physical. (I)

The case presented so far may appear to set the memorised poem above or apart from other forms of engagement, as some kind of ideal. But the evidence from our interviews indicates that, on the contrary, the memorised poem tends to exist in vital relationship with the same poem in other forms or modes. The poem held in the memory – and therefore within the body – is often strongly associated with a particular material text, and tends to be experienced as existing within **a wide mental and textual landscape** that may include: wholly and imperfectly recalled poems; lines and fragments; poetry in published volumes and anthologies; handwritten personal notebooks; and quotations shared with others, both orally and in writing. Page and memory are experienced as mutually supportive counterparts within a multimodal nexus or **textscape**. Thus, memorised poetry may be understood not as a single or discrete category, but as *one* form of engagement within an ecology of interdependent forms and exchanges.

In summary, our research evidence points strongly towards memorised poetry being a resource with the potential to enrich lives in many different ways over many years, and to become a personal language capable of articulating deep emotional currents and subtle perceptions that cannot be communicated in any other form.

When we embarked on our study, one of our subsidiary questions was about how the very personal relationship with a memorised poem related to the kinds of understanding produced by literary analysis and close reading. These two modes of engagement may engender very different kinds of experience. As George Steiner argues, to be what he terms a *reader* requires immersion and internalisation, while being a *critic* implies a distance from the text in order to find one's angle on it (Steiner, 1979).[3] Like Catherine Robson, we were prompted to ask whether, 'one can

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[3] Steiner, G. (1979). '"Critic"/"Reader".' *New Literary History* **10**(3): 423–452.

combine the perspective of a critic with the devotion of the reader who has memorised the text?' (Robson, 2012, p. 28).[4] What the evidence from our study suggests is that the two are not mutually exclusive but may exist in a synergistic relationship. Moreover, knowing a poem by heart appears to support a very distinctive quality of attention and connection, which in turn fosters a rich and lasting relationship with that poem.

We believe these insights constitute an important perspective for current educational culture, where poetry memorisation is sometimes perceived as purely functional (a means to an end), as a superficial form of engagement, or even as a counter-productive practice. Our findings indicate the potential benefits of integrated memorisation practices that work *in synergy* with other forms of engagement, performance, appreciation and meaning making. Memorised poems, in this context, may constitute an immensely valuable resource for life.

4. Summary of achievement and future plans

The principal aim of the project was to investigate the value of memorised poetry and its place in contemporary society, and we have undoubtedly constructed a clear account that sheds new light on the question. The data we have collected is substantial, both in range – from responses to the survey – and in depth – from individual reflections in both the surveys and interviews. We have begun to discern significant patterns within this data, and have identified a number of central themes that we know are of interest to leading figures in the fields of education, arts dissemination and therapeutic interventions, some of whom were present at our expert forums. The modest size of the project has limited what we could achieve within the funding period, and there is significant potential for further development. In particular, further analysis on our very rich and extensive data set, which has now been transformed into a sophisticated database, would almost certainly yield further, valuable results. We are currently investigating routes to developing work on both the data and the project findings – including making the database publically available to researchers for other studies – and to realising the project's potential to influence thinking and policy within education.

In addition, we are exploring possibilities for projects that will bring the work to a wider audience. Since the project findings indicate that the memorised poem may act as a bond within a family or community, and that poems are most fully alive in performance, we consider it vital to extend the project outputs beyond the printed page. Possibilities include:

> *A trade book* for a general audience, offering an accessible account of the poetry at the heart of the nation and of the benefits of the memorised poem.

> *A website* to act as a showcase for the poems that people in the UK know by heart, with audio recordings of recitations, and reflections on memorised poems, plus additional resources to help with learning and reciting poetry

> *A live literature show*

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[4] Robson, C. (2011). *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Publications

Pullinger, D., & Whitley, D. (2016) 'Beyond measure: the value of the memorised poem'. *Changing English,* 23(4). Invited article for special issue on 'The Uses of Poetry'.

Pullinger, D. (2015) 'Poetry Recitation: Traditions, Terms and Conditions'. *Writing in Education, 63.*

Whitley, D. (2014) 'Discovering Sense Through Sound'. *Writing in Education*, 63.

Pullinger, D., & Whitley, D. (In preparation) 'Against Abstraction: Pedagogy, Memory and the Life of the Poem' (working title) for *English in Education.*

Pullinger, D., & Whitley, D. (In preparation) 'Inhabiting poems: insights from the Poetry and Memory project' (working title) for *Philosophy and Literature.*

Further articles exploring implications in relation to different fields and professional audiences are in planning.

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Appendices

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Appendix A. Poems selected in the survey

Respondents were asked to give the title of one poem they knew by heart, and the name of the poet, if known. Those knowing more than one were asked to select the one most significant for them. There were 287 different poems represented, of which 66 were selected more than once. Frequency rankings are shown in Table 1, and breakdown by period in Table 2.

Poet	Poem	No of respondents
Lear, Edward	The Owl and the Pussy-Cat	18
Carroll, Lewis	Jabberwocky	12
Shakespeare, William	Sonnet 18 – Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?	10
Yeats, W B	The Lake Isle of Innisfree	8
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor	Kubla Khan	7
de la Mare, Walter	The Listeners	7
Keats, John	Ode to a Nightingale	7
Shakespeare, William	Sonnet 116 – Let me not to the marriage of true minds	7
Frost, Robert	Stopping by woods	6
Larkin, Philip	This Be the Verse	6
Marvell, Andrew	To His Coy Mistress	6
Keats, John	Ode to Autumn	5
Thomas, Dylan	Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night	5
Wordsworth, William	Daffodils	5
Yeats, W B	An Irish Airman Foresees His Death	5
Brooke, Rupert	The Soldier	4
de la Mare, Walter	Silver	4
Frost, Robert	The Road Not Taken	4
Henley, W E	Invictus	4
Herbert, George	Love III – Love bade me welcome	4
Masefield, John	Sea Fever	4
Milligan, Spike	On the Ning, Nang, Nong	4
Shelley, Percy Bysshe	Ozymandias	4
Auden, W H	Funeral Blues	3
Davies, W H	Leisure	3
Hood, Thomas	I remember, I remember	3
Masefield, John	Cargoes	3
Newbolt, Henry	Vitai Lampada	3
Owen, Wilfred	Dulce Et Decorum Est	3
Shelley, Percy Bysshe	Ozymandias	3
Tennyson, Alfred Lord	The Lady of Shallott	3
Yeats, W B	He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven	3
Yeats, W B	When You Are Old	3
Belloc, Hilaire	Tarantella	2
Betjeman, John	A Subaltern's Love Song	2
Burns, Robert	Tam O'Shanter	2

Byron, Lord	She Walks in Beauty	2
Clare, John	I Am!	2
Davies, W H	Leisure	2
Donne, John	The Sunne Rising	2
Edgar, Marriott	The Lion and Albert	2
Eliot, T S	The Journey of the Magi	2
Eliot, T S	The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock	2
Flecker, James Elroy	The Old Ships	2
Frost, Robert	Fire and Ice	2
Frost, Robert	Nothing Gold Can Stay	2
Hardy, Thomas	The Darkling Thrush	2
Hopkins, Gerard Manley	Heaven-Haven	2
Hopkins, Gerard Manley	Inversnaid	2
Houseman, A E	Loveliest of Trees, The Cherry Now	2
Hunt, Leigh	Abou Ben Adhem	2
Keats, John	This Living Hand	2
Kipling, Rudyard	Gunga Din	2
Kipling, Rudyard	If	2
Larkin, Philip	At Grass	2
Larkin, Philip	The Trees	2
Milligan, Spike	Silly Old Baboon	2
Milne, A A	Halfway Down	2
Noyes, Alfred	The Highwayman	2
Oliver, Mary	Wild Geese	2
Owen, Wilfrid	Anthem for Doomed Youth	2
Shakespeare, William	Sonnet 29 When in disgrace	2
Tennyson, Alfred Lord	Ulysses	2
Thomas, Edward	Adlestrop	2
Thomas, R S	The Bright Field	2
Yeats, W B	The Second Coming	2
Ahlberg, Allen	Emma Hackett's Newsbook	1
Aiken, Conrad	Morning Song of Senlin	1
Allen, Philip	After Mrs Norton: The Horse and His Master	1
Angelou, Maya	Still I Rise	1
Anon	All the Scarlet Poppies	1
Anon	Dunderbeck	1
Anon	Love is Like a Lump of Gold	1
Anon	Pangur Ban	1
Anon	Romance del Conde Arnaldos	1
Anon	The Twa Corbies	1
Anon	What a Wonderful Bird the Frog Are	1
Armitage, Simon	Give	1
Arnold, Matthew	Dover Beach	1
Arnold, Matthew	Longing	1
Ashbery, John	They Dream Only of America	1

Auden, W H	Deftly, Admiral, Cast Your Fly	1
Auden, W H	Lullaby	1
Auden, W H	Night Mail	1
Auden, W S	September 1, 1939	1
Baudelaire, Charles	De Profundis Clamavi	1
Belloc, Hilaire	Jim	1
Belloc, Hilaire	Matilda	1
Berry, Wendell	The Peace of Wild Things	1
Betjeman, Auden, MacNeice	Erotic Poem	1
Betjeman, John	Hunter Trials	1
Betjeman, John	In a Bath Tea Shop	1
Bible, The	Psalm 130	1
Bible, The	Psalm 23	1
Blake, William	Eternity	1
Blake, William	Jerusalem	1
Blake, William	London	1
Blake, William	The Sick Rose	1
Blake, William	The Tyger	1
Boland, Eavan	The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me	1
Brock-Broido, Lucy	Housekeeping	1
Brooke, Rupert	Fafaia	1
Browning, Robert	Home Thoughts From Abroad	1
Browning, Robert	The Pied Piper of Hamelin	1
Burns, Robert	To a Mouse	1
Byron, Lord	Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (1 stanza)	1
Byron, Lord	The Destruction of Sennacherib	1
Carroll, Lewis	The Walrus and the Carpenter	1
Carroll, Lewis	You Are Old Father William	1
Cashdan, Liz (R)	Operating Table	1
Catallus	Odi et amo	1
Causley, Charles	Colonel Fazackerly Butterworth-Toast	1
Causley, Charles	Timothy Winters	1
Chaucer, Geoffrey	The Canterbury Tales, General Prologue	1
Chesterman, Hugh	Sir Nicketty Nox	1
Chesterton, G K	The Donkey	1
Clifton, Lucille	To My Last Period	1
Clough, Arthur Hugh	Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth	1
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor	Cologne	1
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor	The Rime of the Ancient Mariner	1
Connolly, Billy	She Stood On the Bridge	1
Cooke, Edmund Vance	Moo Cow Moo	1
Coolidge, Susan	New Every Morning	1
Cooper Clarke, John	I Wanna Be Yours	1
Cope, Wendy	After the Lunch	1

Coward, Noel	This is to Let You Know	1
Crane, Stephen	In the Desert	1
cummings, e e	anyone lived in a pretty how town	1
cummings, e e	somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond	1
Dahl, Roald	Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker	1
Dahl, Roald	Cinderella	1
Dahl, Roald	Hot and Cold	1
Dahl, Roald	The Porcupine	1
Dahl, Roald	The Toad and the Snail	1
Daryush, Elizabeth	Still-Life	1
de la Mare, Walter	Nod	1
Desprez, Frank	Lasca	1
Dickinson, Emily	Because I Could Not Stop For Death	1
Dickinson, Emily	Exultation is the going	1
Dickinson, Emily	Hope is the thing with feathers	1
Dickinson, Emily	I cannot live with you	1
Dickinson, Emily	Success is Counted Sweetest	1
Dickinson, Emily	The bustle in a house	1
Diop, David	Africa	1
Donaghy Michael	Machines	1
Donaghy, Michael	Two Spells for Sleeping	1
Donne, John	A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning	1
Donne, John	Holy Sonnets: At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow	1
Douglas, Keith	Aristocrats: I think I am Becoming a God	1
Drayton, Michael	The Parting	1
Duffy, Carol Ann	Mrs Icarus	1
Duffy, Carol Ann	Prayer	1
Duffy, Carol Ann	Water	1
Dunn, Douglas	The Kaleidoscope	1
Eliot, T S	Portrait of a Lady	1
Eliot, T S	The Wasteland	1
Fanthorpe, U A	Atlas	1
Farjeon, Eleanor	Cats Sleep Anywhere	1
Farjeon, Eleanor	William I – 1066	1
Ferlinghetti, Lawrence	Recipe For Happiness Khaborovsk Or Anyplace	1
Finn, Charles C	Please Hear What I'm Not Saying	1
Flecker, James Elroy	Rioupéroux	1
Flecker, James Elroy	Tenebris Interlucentem	1
French, Bruce	Blackbird in Early Spring	1
Frost, Robert	Provide, Provide	1
Fuller, John	Valentine	1
Galsworthy, John	The Downs	1
Grahame, Kenneth	Ducks' Ditty	1
Gunn, Thomas	Tamer and Hawk	1
Hardy, Thomas	A Trampwoman's Tragedy	1

Hardy, Thomas	The Voice	1
Hardy, Thomas	Weathers	1
Harrison, Tony	National Trust	1
Harvey, F W	Knowledge	1
Hayes, Milton J	The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God	1
Heaney, Seamus	Digging	1
Heaney, Seamus	The Given Note	1
Heien, Heinrich	Loreley	1
Hemans, Felicia	Casabianca	1
Herrick, Robert	To Daffodils	1
Hodgson, Ralph	The Bells of Heaven	1
Hopkins, Gerard Manley	God's Grandeur	1
Hopkins, Gerard Manley	Spring	1
Houseman, A E	The Colour of His Hair	1
Isherwood, Christopher	The Cormorant	1
James, Kyrie (R)	The Vikings	1
Johnson, Ben	It is Not Growing Like a Tree	1
Joyce, James	Lean Out of The Window	1
Keats, John	Bright Star	1
Keats, John	La Belle Dame Sans Merci	1
Keats, John	Meg Merrilies	1
Keats, John	Ode on a Grecian Urn	1
Kipling, Rudyard	Cities and Thrones and Powers	1
Kipling, Rudyard	The Way Through the Woods	1
Kipling, Rudyard	Tomlinson	1
Larkin, Philip	Dockery and Son	1
Larkin, Philip	Since the Majority of Me	1
Lawrence, D H	Last Lesson of the Afternoon	1
Lawrence, D H	The Piano	1
Lewis, Alun	Goodbye	1
Lewis, Alun	Postscript: for Gweno	1
Love Flea	Simic, Charles	1
Macauley, Lord	Horatius	1
MacNeice, Louis	Entirely	1
MacNeice, Louis	Leaving Barra	1
MacNeice, Louis	The Taxis	1
McCrae, John	In Flanders Fields	1
McDiarmid, Hugh	The Bonnie Broukit Bairn	1
Mcdonald, Ian	Caged	1
McGough, Roger	The Fallen Birdman	1
McLuskie, Donna (R)	Sand	1
Merwin, W S	Separation	1
Milligan, Spike	Down the Stream the Swans All Glide	1
Milligan, Spike	Dr Bell	1
Milligan, Spike	Mary Pugh	1

Milligan, Spike	None Today, Thank You	1
Milne, A A	Disobedience	1
Milne, A A	The King's Breakfast	1
Milne, A A	The Knight Whose Armour Didn't Squeak	1
Milton, John	On his Blindness	1
Milton, John	Sonnet 10 Lawrence, of virtuous father virtuous son	1
Mitchell, Adrian	Celia, Celia	1
Mitchell, Adrian	The Ballad of Sally Hit and Run	1
Moglica, Elliott	Sonnet 17 from 'The Proton Man': Justin Trudeau	1
Neruda, Pablo	If You Forget Me	1
Newbolt, Henry	Drake's Drum	1
Owen, Wilfrid	Futility	1
Owen, Wilfrid	Strange Meeting	1
Owen, Wilfrid	The Last Laugh	1
Partridge, Oliver (R)	English Boy	1
Paterson, Don	Waking with Russell	1
Paterson, Don	Why do you stay up so late?	1
Patten, Brian I rely on you	I caught a train that passed the town where you lived	1
Plath, Sylvia	Daddy	1
Plath, Sylvia	Letter in November	1
Plath, Sylvia	You're	1
Pope, Alexander	Ode on Solitude	1
Pound, Ezra	In a Station of the Metro	1
Pound, Ezra	The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter	1
Prelutsky, Jack	I Am My Master's Dragon	1
Presley, Hovis	I rely on you	1
Preus, Kirsten	If Roses Grow in Heaven	1
Propertius, Sextus	Elegy II, 27	1
Raleigh, Walter	The Passionate Man's Pilgrimage	1
Richardson, Justin	What'll Be the Title?	1
Rilke, Rainer Maria	Herbsttag	1
Robin, Robertson	By Clachan Bridge	1
Rossetti, Christina	Remember	1
Sappho	Raise high the roofbeams, carpenters!	1
Sassoon, Siegfried	Everyone Sang	1
Sassoon, Siegfried	Suicide in the Trenches	1
Sassoon, Siegfried	The General	1
Scott, Walter	Lullaby of an Infant Chief	1
Shakespeare, William	Sonnet 126 O thou, my lovely boy	1
Shakespeare, William	Sonnet 130 My Mistress' Eyes	1
Shakespeare, William	Sonnet 138 When my love swears that she is made of truth	1
Shakespeare, William	Sonnet 30 When to the sessions of sweet silent thought	1
Shakespeare, William	Sonnet 60 Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore	1
Shakespeare, William	Sonnet 94 They that have the power to hurt and will do none	1

Shakespeare, William	Three Witches' speech, Macbeth	1
Shakespeare, Willliam	Full Fathom Five	1
Shelley, Percy Bysshe	Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats	1
Shirley, James	Death the Leveller	1
Silverstein, Shel	Bear in There	1
Silverstein, Shel	For Sale	1
Silverstein, Shel	Snowman	1
Simpson, Cassandra (R)	Child of Sark	1
Smith, Stevie	Not Waving But Drowning	1
Spender, Stephen	To My Daughter	1
Stevenson, Robert Louis	From a Railway Carriage	1
Stevenson, Robert Louis	The Lamplighter	1
Stevenson, Robert Louis	Where Go the Boats	1
Stewarrt, Bianca	Drown	1
Tennyson, Alfred Lord	Morte d'Arthur	1
Tennyson, Alfred Lord	Tithonus	1
Tessimond, A S J	Talk in the Night	1
Unknown	Tomatoes	1
Voznesenski, Andrei	The Parabolic Ballad	1
Walcott, Derek	Elsewhere	1
Walcott, Derek	The Young Wife	1
Williams, Hugh Menai	The Lazy with Money	1
Williams, Rowan	Rublev	1
Wyatt, Thomas	They Flee From Me	1
Yeats, W B	Among School Children	1
Yeats, W B	The Dolls	1
Yeats, W B	The Song of Wandering Aengus	1
Yeats, W B	The Wild Swans at Coole	1

Table 1: Poems selected for the survey, ranked by number of respondents selecting

Classical – AD 150	5
Old English – 150AD–1066	1
Middle English 1066–1500	1
Renaissance 1500–1660	51
Neoclassical 1660–1780	3
Romantic 1780–1830	56
Victorian 1830–1880	72
Late Victorian to Modernist 188–1930	149
Mid twentieth century 1930–1980	87
1980–2014	45

Table 2: Numbers of poems from historical periods

Appendix B. Poets selected in the survey

There were 68 poets represented in the survey selections. Frequency rankings are shown in Table 3.

Poet	No of respondents selecting	No of *different* poems within total
Shakespeare, William	27	10
Yeats, W B	24	9
Keats, John	18	7
Lear, Edward	18	1
Frost, Robert	15	5
Carroll, Lewis	14	3
de La Mare, Walter	12	3
Larkin, Philip	12	5
Hopkins, Gerard Manley	11	6
Milligan, Spike	10	6
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor	9	3
Kipling, Rudyard	8	6
Owen, Wilfrid	8	5
Tennyson, Alfred Lord	8	5
Wordsworth, William	8	3
Auden, W H	7	5
Masefield, John	7	2
Dickinson, Emily	6	6
Eliot, T S	6	4
Marvell, Andrew	6	1
Blake, William	5	5
Brooke, Rupert	5	2
Burns, Robert	5	4
Dahl, Roald	5	5
Donne, John	5	4
Milne, A A	5	4
Robert Shelley, Robert	5	2
Thomas Hardy	5	3
Belloc, Hilaire	4	3
Betjeman, John	4	3
Byron, Lord	4	3
Flecker, James Elroy	4	3
Henley, W E	4	1
Herbert, George	4	1
Newbolt, Henry	4	2
Thomas, Dylan	4	4
Donaghy, Michael	3	3
Duffy, Carol Ann	3	3
Hood, Thomas	3	3

Housman, A E	3	3
MacNeice, Louis	3	3
Plath, Sylvia	3	3
Sassoon, Siegfried	3	3
Silverstein, Shel	3	3
Stevenson, Robert Louis	3	3
Arnold, Matthew	2	2
Browning, Robert	2	2
Causley, Charles	2	2
Clare, John	2	1
cummings, e e	2	2
Davies, W H	2	1
Edgar, Marriott	2	1
Farjeon, Eleanor	2	2
Frye, Mary Elizabeth	2	1
Hayes, J Milton	2	1
Heaney, Seamus	2	2
Hunt, Leigh	2	1
Lawrence, D H	2	2
Lewis, Alun	2	2
Milton, John	2	2
Mitchell, Adrian	2	2
Noyes, Alfred	2	1
Oliver, Mary	2	1
Paterson, Don	2	2
Pound, Ezra	2	2
Thomas, Edward	2	1
Thomas, R S	2	2
Walcott, Derek	2	2

Table 3: Poets selected in the survey, ranked by number of respondents selecting

Appendix C. The number of poems known

Nearly half the respondents said they knew between 2 and 5 poems. 20%, which equates to a hundred people, knew between 10 and 50 poems, and 1.6% (8 respondents) made the impressive claim to know more than 50.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	1	9.26%	46
2	2–5	46.48%	231
3	5–10	22.54%	112
4	10–50	20.12%	100
5	More than 50	1.61%	8
	Total	100%	497

Table 4: The number of poems respondents claimed to know by heart

Appendix D. Demographic data

The gender split of respondents was 75% female; 25% male.
They were aged from 18 to 91 years, with bulge in 50 to 70 year range, as shown in Figure 1.
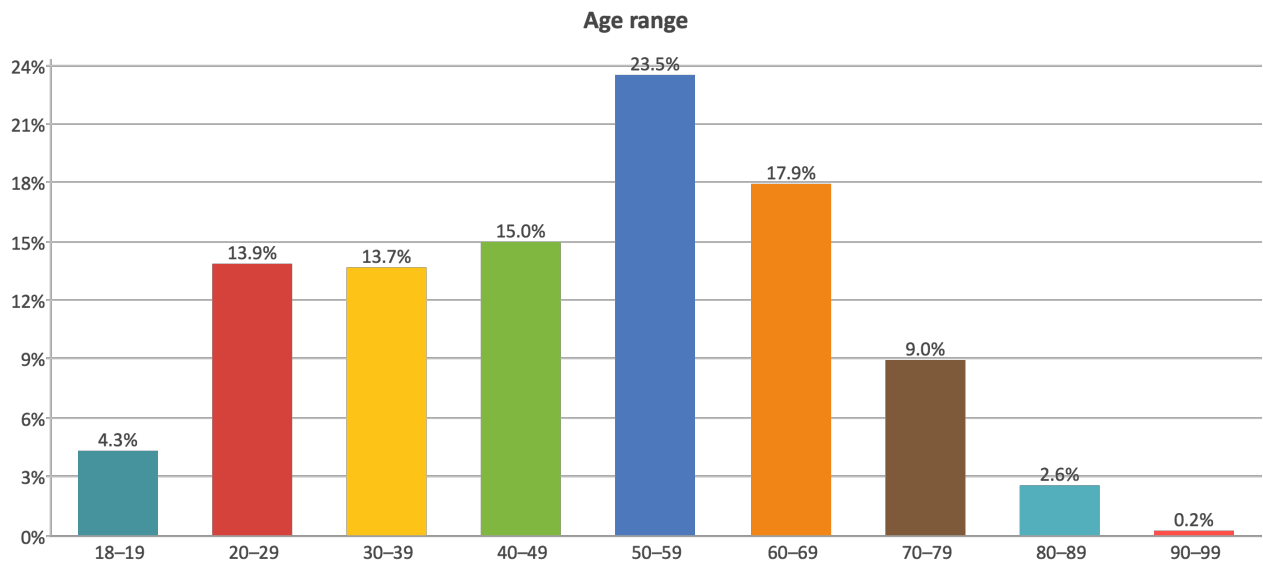
Age range

Figure 1: Age of survey respondents, in ten-year brackets

It is unlikely that these statistics reflect the pattern of memorisation in the population generally. What it probably confirms is that the number of people who have some memorised poetry is greater amongst older age groups, and increases dramatically in people of more than 50 years. For age brackets above 60, however, the number of returned surveys decreases because the number of people having access to computers and/or IT skills declines.

There were slightly more men than expected in the age bracket 70–90 years, which was quite surprising, given women's longer life expectancy. This could be because older men are more likely than older women to use the internet.

Nearly 67% were educated to undergraduate degree level; and 47% held a postgraduate qualification.

We asked only that respondents be resident in Great Britain at the time of the survey. 86.09% identified themselves as 'British', 2.02% as Irish and 11.9% as 'Other'. The question about cultural background, for which multiple answers were permitted, produced more diverse picture, as shown in Figure 2. 60 per cent identified their background as 'English', with the other 40 per cent distributed amongst the rest of the British Isles and 'Other'.
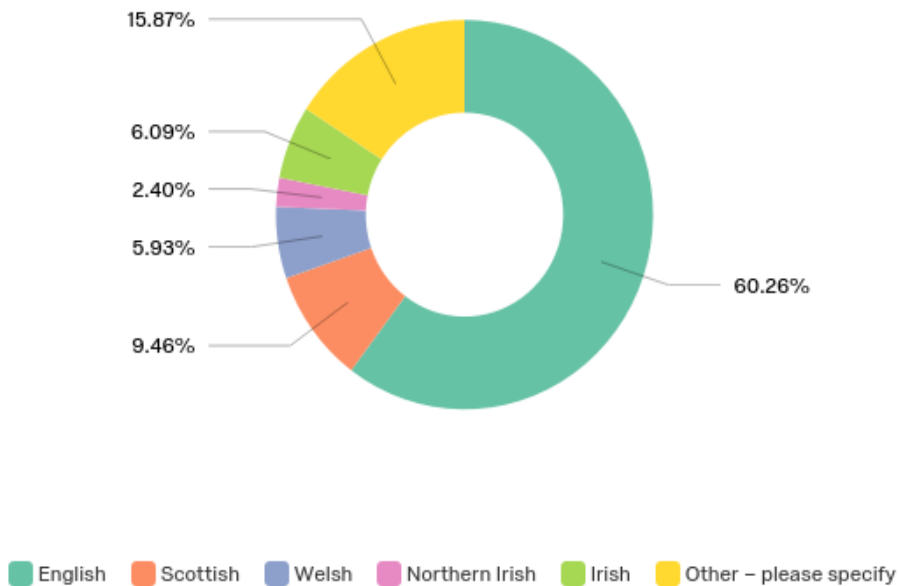

Figure 2: Survey respondents' cultural background

Appendix E. When, where and why poems were learned

88% of the respondents said that they had learned some poetry as a child. Just over two thirds of of the poems learned before school-leaving age were learned in school: 38% in secondary school; 33% in primary; 29% outside school.

The predominance of school-based learning was reflected in people's reasons for learning. Respondents could select more than one reason, however, and, as can be seen in Figure 3, having a poem suggested and choosing for oneself were not mutually exclusive.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Because a teacher required or suggested that I learn it	71.23%	312
2	Because a parent or other relative required or suggested that I learn it	25.11%	110
3	To perform at a public event – for example, a competition or festival	31.51%	138
4	To recite at a social occasion – for example, a wedding or funeral	11.19%	49
5	Because I chose to learn it myself	67.35%	295
6	Other – please give details	21.00%	92
	Total	100%	438

Table 5: Reasons given for learning poems as a child

82% learned poetry as an adult, and the primary reason for learning was for pleasure.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	For personal pleasure	85.68%	347
2	As a personal challenge	42.72%	173
3	To perform at a public event – for example, a competition or festival	15.31%	62
4	To recite at a social occasion – for example, a wedding or funeral	16.05%	65
5	For professional purposes – for example, working as a professional actor or voice artist	11.11%	45
6	Other – please give details	23.95%	97
	Total	100%	405

Table 6: Reasons given for learning poems as an adult

Of the poems selected for the survey, around half were learned between the ages of 10 and 20 years (49%), with the rest being learned before the age of 10 (16%), from 20–25 years (11%) or after the age of 25 (21%). (2.5% could not recall the age at which it was learned.)

Just over half of the poems were learned outside formal education, with personal pleasure or challenge being the most prevalent reasons.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Because a teacher required or suggested that I learn it	21.53%	107
2	Because a parent or other relative required or suggested that I learn it	3.82%	19
3	To perform at a public event – for example, a competition or festival	6.64%	33
4	To recite at a social occasion – for example, a wedding or funeral	3.22%	16
5	For professional purposes – for example, working as a professional actor or voice artist	2.41%	12
7	For personal pleasure	65.19%	324
8	As a personal challenge	23.54%	117
6	Other – please give details	26.56%	132
	Total	100%	497

Table 7: Reasons given for learning the selected poem

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Appendix F. Attitudes to learning poetry

Over 90% of respondents agreed (31%) or strongly agreed (60%) with the statement that 'Learning poetry by heart is valuable'. Only 1.8% disagreed.

This opinion was generally mirrored in the response to the statement that 'Learning poetry should be part of the curriculum' (74% in total agree and strongly agree), with a small increase in disagreement (8.6% in total disagree and strongly disagree).

When asked to choose from a list of possible benefits of knowing a poem by heart (with multiple selection permitted), all were well represented, with the top two being that it aids appreciation of the poem and that the poem is an emotional resource.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	helps me understand the poem better	56.07%	277
2	helps me appreciate the poem more	72.27%	357
3	helps me to make sense of life	43.52%	215
7	helps with being able to express ideas	38.87%	192
8	is good for making connections between things	41.70%	206
4	gives me a source of comfort in tough times	62.96%	311
5	gives me confidence that I am able to remember things generally	39.68%	196
6	is good for being able to play with language	53.64%	265
9	makes no difference to me in any way	3.44%	17
	Total	100%	494

Table 8: The perceived benefits of knowing a poem by heart