



# Introducing Young Poets' Stories

How can we support young people in writing freely and developing as poets? **Sue Dymoke** and **Anthony Wilson's** recent research explores what helped some of the young poets who had success in the Foyle Young Poets Awards.

*Young Poets' Stories* is a research project that we have been engaged in since February 2020. The research is funded by The Foyle Foundation, in conjunction with Nottingham Trent University and The University of Exeter. This was initially a two-year project which focused on the creative development of a sample group of 30 young writers aged 13–30, who were either top 15 winners or highly commended poets in the Foyle Young Poets Awards during 2012–2019. In this article we would like to share initial findings from our research and point to some key issues about young people and poetry writing which we hope will be of interest to English teachers.

## What are the Foyle Young Poets Awards?

This highly prestigious competition run by the Poetry Society has been running since 1998 and has been funded by the Foyle Foundation since 2001. It currently attracts in the region of 16,000 poem entries each year from many places in the UK and around the world. Young writers aged 11–17 years are eligible to enter as many poems as they wish and there are no restrictions on poem length. Some competitors enter through their schools but the vast majority submit poems individually. All those who enter have the opportunity to sign up for the Young Poets' Network run by the Poetry Society.

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The entries are read by a panel of judges including two established poets. Past judges have included Raymond Antrabus, Jackie Kay, Keith Jarrett and Maura Dooley. From the vast pool of poems 100 winning poems are selected. These consist of a ‘top 15’ and a further 85 highly commended entries. Some young writers achieve a level of success in more than one year of entry.

Following this success, various types of writing support are offered, including a bag of new publications, access to potential commissions and internships, networks and, in some cases, ‘further sustained mentoring’ (Poetry Society, 2021, p.31). Many winners have gone on to achieve publication and wider recognition for their work. These include major figures in contemporary poetry such as Helen Mort and Caroline Bird who are strong advocates of the competition and have both spoken of the impact that it has had on their development as writers.

### Why are we researching young poets?

The current project builds directly on our previous poetry writing research within a variety of school and out-of-school contexts. *Drafting and Assessing Poetry* (Dymoke, 2003) focused on the drafting techniques of established poets and explored how young writers could learn from these. Our two edited books *Making Poetry Matter* (Dymoke, Lambirth and Wilson, 2013) and *Making Poetry Happen* (Dymoke, Barrs, Lambirth & Wilson, 2015) explored a wealth of poetry research and practice taking place in international primary and secondary school contexts. The volumes both stressed the importance of raising poetry’s profile as a vital medium for all young people and drawing on poets’ practices to build teacher confidence in and enjoyment of using poetry in a rich variety of ways in their own classrooms.

In our recent work, we have focused more specifically on the socially contextualised practice of poetry writing. We perceive a pressing need to open the door to poetry opportunities and networks for all young people, both in their schools and their wider communities (see Wilson and Dymoke, 2017; Dymoke, 2017; Dymoke and McGuinn, 2021).

### The Young Poets

During 2020–22, a period which coincided almost entirely with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent series of lockdowns, we were able to have some fascinating in-depth online conversations with young poets who were very willing to reflect on their development and share draft work in progress with us. The poets responded to a call sent out through the Poetry Society. We selected 6 writers who had been top 15 winners and 24 who were highly commended. As a group they represented a range of UK-wide and international contexts, genders and ages. Some had won more than one prize in different years.

Each poet was interviewed twice over an 18-month period. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded using Nvivo software. Our initial choice of codes was piloted, reviewed and revised to ensure both researchers were in close agreement about how they were using the codes. Additional codes were developed along the way as new areas of interest began to reveal themselves in the data. We then analysed the interviews thematically.

Those young people under the age of 18 took part with permission from their parents or carers, some of whom chose to sit in on the interviews. During both Sue’s and Anthony’s interviews the poets discussed their work in progress and reflections on their prize-winning poems or works previously shared; their writing development and influences on that development; writing friendships, networks and sharing work; mentors, family and /or other sources of support; their feelings and views about poetry. We also went on to interview a small group of poet mentors and young writers who had taken part in a residential at the Hurst in summer 2021. The findings from these interviews will be reported separately.

Now we would like to turn our attention to some key findings to date on two particular themes: poetry and young people’s mental health and the mentoring of young writers. All names used in this article are pseudonyms and the writers have given their consent for use of their words.

### Poetry and young people’s mental health

As stated above, the interviews with young people took place during the two years that Covid-19 unleashed itself on the world. The first set of interviews were held during April–July 2020 when people were experiencing the full force of lockdown and quarantine measures across the world. A UK report from this period states ‘Young people who reported that their well-being was being affected were much more likely than either those aged 30 to 59 years or those aged 60 years and over to report being bored (76%) and lonely (51%); they were also much more likely to say the lockdown was making their mental health worse (42%)’ (Office of National Statistics, 2021).

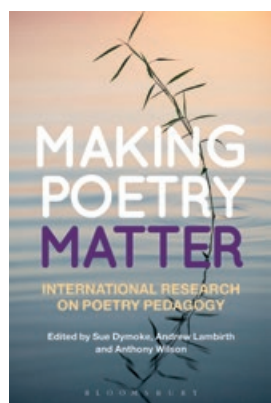
The pandemic and its impact on state of mind came up frequently in discussions with young poets from India, Nigeria, the US and the UK, many of whom were at key turning points in their lives. For example: they were taking exams (or being assessed in ways that they had not been expecting); some were uncertain if they might be able to continue into higher education; others had found their degree course experiences radically changed; many were missing friends, family or contacts with other people and feeling removed from their real lives.

### Making sense of experience

The interviews with us appeared to be a welcome distraction which perhaps helped them to find a focus on their writing when so much else about their lives had changed. Writing poetry was, therefore, seen by many of them as a means of capturing, processing and responding to feelings which enabled the young writers to make sense of their own experiences or the world around them – especially during pandemic.

Indi summed this up very neatly in saying that her poetry was ‘a pretty solid time capsule of my emotion.’ But not all the young poets thought this way. Lia recognized that a poem ‘can share a state of mind.’ However, she added ‘for me personally, I wouldn’t say that my poetry is necessarily about how I feel.’

During the first set of interviews, Ewan said that it was ‘easier to see what the problems [were], what’s worrying me, when I really write about some stuff.’ Bridie stated poetry was ‘a way of processing my emotions’. In a similar





vein, Brigid talked of a shift in focus: 'my poetry's become very like personal.... I think it's now become more of like a way of dealing with how I experience the world, rather than like the way I see the world'.

Winter, who had been in lockdown for around four months when we first spoke to her, said: 'I think, at some point, I had to go through the ritual of writing a quarantine poem. I think everyone I know has written one at this point. And I feel like a bit... I feel a bit bad about it. Like, oh my god, another quarantine poem to add to the bunch. But I think you know, you kind of have to process your feelings at some point.'

### A place of escape

The meditative nature of writing process was an aspect explored by several young poets including Billy who described composing poetry as being: 'meditative... like an introspection. And so, if I'm feeling a certain way, and I want to detach from that feeling, and you know, see what effect that has on my way of being, I'll try and put that down into a poem. And that's a good way for me to reflect on that I guess.'

Although others did not make such a direct link with meditation they certainly saw it as a means of securing distance from something, 'a constructive release,' as Indi saw it or, in Lara's view 'a source of outlet ... that strikes me in very awkward time spaces, particularly when I'm especially emotional or, especially late at night'.

Allied to this, the act of writing a poem was viewed as calming and a place of escape by many. 85% of our sample group were juggling demanding courses and/or specialist training. Nevertheless, poetry reading and writing was an important part of their daily routine. In his second interview, Ewan told us that he believed in 'using a poetry as a sort of, like a way to break up the studying and to unwind from all the work. So, it's been sort of like how would I describe this? Like a place to escape and to write without feeling pressure to do work.'

Several poets went further than this to describe the therapeutic nature of the writing process. They made very direct links to mental health. For example, Grace saw it as 'quite a mindful exercise ... I find it definitely is good for the mental health.' Laurence noted 'It's definitely a way for me to explore my state of mind but it's also a way for me to combat negative feelings and to move into healthier frames of mind as well. The actual writing process is itself healing but then the idea of then releasing that. It's like therapy. No matter how many times you might think about something to yourself, once you actually go and tell somebody that's when it becomes real and then you can tackle things.'

Given the rapidly changing pandemic context in which the interviews were conducted, it seemed inevitable that we might find differences between the two interviews in how some young poets viewed poetry and their mental state. However, these differences were very rare.

Only one poet perceived a marked change in their view. In their first interview Grant described themselves as 'almost entirely motivated by expressing my state of mind.' One year later they stated: 'now I see it less as an extension of myself and my emotions and something to be protected and more as a form that I am learning and trying to get to grips with.' Through increasing maturity, coupled with their changing perception or grasp of their own Covid-19 situation, Grant was perhaps able to assert a greater level of control over the form and its uses.

### Poetry, experience, reflection

The interviewees' reflections, of which we can only represent a small snapshot in this article, undoubtedly have implications for practice and research. They are leading us to raise some significant questions about the relationship between poetry and mental health.

If writing is such an important way of making sense of personal experiences, where are the spaces in the day, in routines or student/work timetables for young people to write freely? If they are not there, how can these spaces be created? In a similar vein, where and when are young people given opportunities to reflect on their experiences, to write and use poetry as a potential means of unravelling how they feel?

Finally, and this is something that we particularly want to follow up on in future discussions, how often do young writers have the chance to share or to explore what they have written in depth, how and why they have written it with 'a.n.other' who is able to support them in their further creative work? This question leads us on to consider mentoring.

### Mentoring of young writers

Support for creative writers and artists from their experienced peers has existed in a variety of non-formalised ways for centuries but only in recent decades has research been published in this area. Far less evident, either in research or grey literature, is a shared understanding of what it means to be mentored as a young writer. Opportunities for young people to be assigned a mentor are also highly variable in terms of scope and desired outcomes.

In discussing mentoring with our sample young poets we did not offer them a particular definition as we were interested to learn what mentoring meant for them and what/how they might perceive as valuable sources of support for their writing. Some of the key sub-themes developing from our analysis of the interviews include:

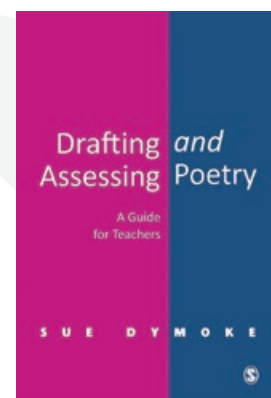
#### What the mentoring involves

Lia talked us through a mentoring session she had had which focused on one specific poem: 'I also had like a personal session with X, where we sort of squared it up a bit. Because some of the line lengths were a bit irregular. And we kind of moved the structure to make it a little bit more regular. And changed a few, took a line out here, and changed a few things there to make it what it is now. So it really does owe a lot to them.' This close focus on a particular poem was one example. Other poets spoke of gaining advice on particular poetic forms, use of cliché, journal submissions, routes to poetry publication or guidance about assembling a first pamphlet of poems.

Many poets had no experiences of mentors but spoke extensively about their own reading and listening. They drew on a wide range of writers and lyricists whom they regarded as key influences on what they saw it was possible to achieve with poetry. (Such figures included Geet Chaturvedi, Wanda Coleman, Leonard Cohen, e.e. cummings, Ilya Kaminsky, Sylvia Plath and Ocean Vuong.) We have interpreted this as a type of self-mentoring and want to explore this idea further.

#### Opportunities to be mentored and barriers to mentoring

For example, Ewan recognized the inequities in the systems of support available. In his first interview he



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stated: ‘I don’t think like there’s enough young people who’ve got that sort of... external validation. You don’t get, unless you ... like win a mentor, a mentorship or have lots of family who are interested in reading them. But you don’t get that encouragement, you don’t get that confidence. And I think some people; they just give it up after a while.’

Very few of the poets we interviewed had extensive opportunities to be mentored in a sustained way even among those who had won a ‘top 15’ prize. Marked contrasts appeared between young poets who were able to find mentors through networks they already belonged to or were in the process of joining and those young poets who were trying to gain access to mentors solely through further competitive submissions.

### **A hunger for feedback**

It became evident to us that our sample group exhibited a hunger to receive detailed feedback and, for some of them, the possibility of mentoring, or at least receiving feedback, was an incentive for them to enter poetry competitions. Mentoring is still, however, rarely offered as a prize in many competitions.

Young poets were eager to talk about their experiences and their creative development as writers, and the isolation they still feel during this stage of their writing lives. In their second research interview, all of the young poets commented on value of the dialogue they had had with either Sue or Anthony.

At times during these interviews we both found it hard to resist the temptation to intervene or to offer advice about their writing. Nevertheless, it was essential that, as researchers, we maintained our distance rather than fall into the roles of fellow poets or tutors. The poets considered that our discussions had enabled them to reflect in depth on their own development and to move forward creatively with particular projects, or poems during what was a time of considerable isolation for some of them.

### **Access to mentoring**

Some of those we interviewed in Year 2 were beginning to informally mentor younger poets in recognition of the benefits that they had experienced themselves or wanted others to experience. While this is extremely gratifying to hear, it is already evident to us that the extent of access to the world of poetry is extremely variable. Many young poets we spoke to conveyed a sense of isolation and not belonging to the world of poetry. Mentoring and networking opportunities remain limited, even for those who have had the poetry door already partly opened for them through their early success and have the confidence (or the support) to enter prestigious writing competitions.

The young poets’ stories are prompting us to ask many questions about mentoring, including:

- at what point in their writing lives could or should young writers benefit from mentoring?
- could there be different routes to accessing mentoring opportunities rather than through achieving competition success?
- could mentoring take different forms or develop in different ways which might make this opportunity more accessible by a greater proportion of writers?

Clearly, further research is needed to explore these

issues and to interview mentors working in a range of different contexts.

### **Becoming a poet**

In carrying out *Young Poets’ Stories* research we hoped to inform poetry writing and mentoring practices for the benefit and inclusion of many more young people including those who may well be unaware of the significant creative development that the Foyle Young Poets’ Award and other mentoring opportunities could offer them to engage with poetry.

We have begun to develop resources and guidance for young poets and mentors including *Becoming a Poet: Young Poets’ Stories of composition and creative development* (to be published by Bloomsbury in 2024). This will include chapters written by young poets about their composition processes and draft work and in dialogue with each other’s views about poetry. On the *Young Poets’ Stories* website (<https://youngpoetsstories.com/>) we are currently introducing new poems by young poets from UNESCO Cities of Literature including Durban, Melbourne and Reykjavik.

### **Learning about poetry writing**

An important aim for both researchers was that we wanted to continue to make a contribution to poetry writing theory. We have learned so much about the significance of poetry in these young people’s lives and for their mental health, the influences and sources of support that they draw on and how they might network with other writers – if they are able to do so – as well as the many different ways in which young people go about writing their poetry. We have a great deal that we want to say and it will take us a while before we are able to share all of our findings.

All writing can be a struggle and, in spite of what we have learned so far, it is clear that the path of becoming a poet is nearly always non-linear and marked by obstacles that are not always outwardly visible. The poet and teacher Stephen Dunn gives us much to think about in that respect:

*‘The good poet always surmounts circumstances, both the circumstances of his or her life and the circumstances of his or her poem. This is why mere competence is the enemy of good poetry. Every good poem is evidence of a step taken into the unknown or the vaguely known ... Much apprenticeship and practice are needed to get to the point where such a step can be taken ... The act of getting there cannot be taught or willed.’*

Stephen Dunn (2001) *Walking Light*, p. 142

We have a further two years in which to discuss, share and collaborate with many young writers and creative organisations. In this time we intend to build further on what we have uncovered through *Young Poets’ Stories* to support writers in the early stages of their development. We will be unpicking more around the themes of poetic identity, networking and the writing processes that the young poets have shared with us.

Major dissemination events will be happening in November–December 2023 in Nottingham, Manchester and Exeter. Please look out for further information about these from May 2023 and contact us if you would like to know more about our research or future plans ([sue.dymoke@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:sue.dymoke@ntu.ac.uk), [a.c.wilson@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:a.c.wilson@exeter.ac.uk)).



# Young Poets' Stories

Poetry writing development research

Young Poets' Stories  
research project

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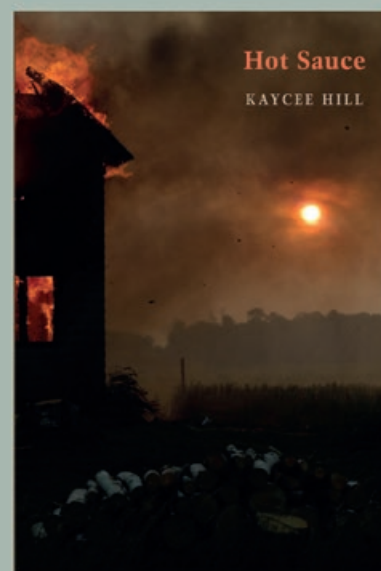


## Introducing Young Poet Efe Imoyin-Omene from Norwich

Our next young poet is Emoefeoghene Imoyin-Omene from Norwich who tells us, "because you're cool, you can call me Efe..."



## Young Poets from around the world: introducing Ekta Somera from Durban



## Introducing Kaycee Hill

This week we have another terrific new young poet to share with you. Kaycee Hill is based in Bristol where...

We would like to thank all the young poets who gave their time to be interviewed and wish them well with their future creative lives. We would also like to thank The Foyle Foundation, The Poetry Society and members of the Young Poets' Stories Advisory Board for supporting our research.

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