

The Great School Framework

Bishops Stortford performance poetry competition – fun, passion and skill

Case study – inter-school poetry competition

This initiative involved children from Bishop's Stortford schools performing poems they had learned by heart, in competition with their peers. It was planned by Sarah Wood, Assistant Headteacher at Windhill21.

The atmosphere was not tense – it was electric. Sarah knew the benefits it would reap, having staged a similar event when working in London. She knew that, first and foremost, the children would be left with three poems to cherish for life. Those of us lucky enough to have had teachers who helped us learn poetry by heart know the lifelong pride this gives us. On that note – 'by heart'. This phrase doesn't suggest the kind of memory skill that can be demonstrated by learning the prime numbers, flags of the world or train stations of Great Britain. 'By heart' suggests something much more personal and ingrained within our very being.

The aims of the competition were to help children become more confident and expressive speakers and to provide them with the opportunity to read and respond to quality literature.

Fifteen children were selected by participating teachers to recite three poems and were judged on the following criteria: physical presence, body language and voice.

Windhill21, the host school, were also the winners of the 2019 competition. Sarah Wood explained that, to begin with, the children read the chosen poems a few times but they were not really bringing the poems to life. She then guided them through some close reading and analysis which gave the children a much deeper understanding and ownership and allowed them to add their own ideas e.g. intonation, rhythm, speed, body language.

With regard to the free choice poem, Sarah choose it for the children. Her rationale for this was that if she was passionate about the poem, she would be able to communicate that passion to the children. This was indeed the case. She knew that the range of poems selected would push the children outside of their comfort zone and felt that this, in part, added to their success.

The impact of this competition has threaded throughout the school. It was great fun and the children have clearly found a love of poetry. The children taking part developed their understanding of how to express poetry and deepened their reading comprehension skills within a context that provided a real purpose for the study. Metaphor was brought to life and the children did catch the teacher's passion for poetry. On that note, Sarah understands that not everyone is passionate about poetry but it has been said that within every good teacher is an even better actor. Her advice is 'fake it until you make it'.