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# Reading Differences

## Teaching sequence for *A Nest Full of Stars*

written by James Berry, illustrated by Rachel Merriman  
Macmillan Children's Books, 2002

### About the book

In this collection of poems by James Berry, about half of the poems relate to Caribbean settings and subjects and the rest are poems set in the UK. This teaching sequence focuses both on poems relating to familiar childhood themes (such as friendship and family) and on themes special to the Caribbean. Berry dwells on his childhood experiences in Jamaica, especially in a lyrical sequence of thoughtful poems entitled 'From My Sister's Secret Notebook', which reveals his qualities as a nature poet. He also demonstrates the energy and style of Caribbean dialect speech, and the raps and chants he includes in this collection lend themselves to performance.

### Structure of the teaching sequence

There are 16 sessions in this teaching sequence. They involve whole-class and shared reading as well as individual reading and writing poetry. The whole class takes part in performing chants and raps and investigates differences between standard English and Jamaican dialect.

The work is planned over a three week period: sessions 1-5 in week one; sessions 6-11 in week two; sessions 12-16 in week three. Sessions may be adapted and different poems chosen according to the interest of the class, but the aim should be to ensure an in-depth engagement with the range and variety of James Berry's poems.

### Links to the national curriculum and the primary national strategy (PNS)

The work relates to the requirement in the English national curriculum programme of study for reading: *a range of literature drawn from a variety of cultures and traditions; myths, legends and traditional stories* (8e and 8f).

It also connects with specific teaching objectives in the *PNS Framework for Teaching* for years 3 and 4 to do with reading and responding to texts from different cultures.

### Anticipated outcomes

As a result of reading and discussing Berry's poetry and its basis in observation of the world, children will:

- learn more about writing poems (as a class and individually) based on observation and experience
- identify dialect features in the poems written in a Caribbean voice and discuss differences between dialect and standard English, especially in poetry
- learn how to bring out the meaning of a poem through performance
- develop generalisations about the main themes and features in the work of an individual poet.

### Resources and preparation

- Information about James Berry is available in the 'Authors and books' section of Channel 4's *BookBox* website ([www.channel4.com/bookbox](http://www.channel4.com/bookbox)).
- Other poetry anthologies for reading aloud, for example *You Tell Me* by Roger McGough and Michael Rosen or *Under the Moon and Over the Sea* by John Agard and Grace Nichols.
- Small notebooks made from seven pages of folded and stapled A4 sheets, one for each child.
- Copies of at least some of the poems of rural life, village life and the title poem.

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# Teaching sequence

## Session 1: Hearing, remembering, noticing

Read 'Hearing' and 'Sly Force Waiting' with the class joining in. Discuss similar experiences that the children in the class remember. Ask the children to pick out lines or phrases that make the experiences come alive. Discuss how the poems are made: each has three verses corresponding to three experiences.

Read 'People Equal', with the class joining in the last line of each verse (the refrain). The title ('People Equal', not 'People are Equal') reflects Caribbean dialect speech. Ask the children to suggest other differences between people. This poem can be performed as a rap or chant: invite groups of five or six children to rehearse performances of it.

## Session 2: Shared writing and individual writing

Read 'A Particular Time at Our House'. This six-line poem gives a picture of a whole houseful of things going on simultaneously. Through shared writing, compose a similarly short poem to give an impression of activities going on in a school.

Revisit 'Hearing' and 'Sly Force Waiting' and invite the class to write their own individual poems about three linked memories, one per verse, making the memories brief but vivid. At the end of the session, listen to some of the poems.

## Sessions 3, 4 and 5: Friends and family

Invite the children, in groups of four, to read through four poems about friendship ('The Quarrel', 'Together', 'Singing with Recordings' and 'Ball Gone Dialogue for Five'). Ask them to make lists of the best things and the worst things that these poems show about friendship. Groups prepare readings of one of these poems for the class. They go on to write their own friendship poems for two or four voices, and then perform them.

As a class, read together four poems about families ('Dad's Night Voice', 'Mum? Who is my Mum?', 'Not Sharing' and 'Right Mix Like Water'). Analyse what each poem shows about how people behave in a family. Invite children to list details of the behaviour of real or imaginary members of a family, then to work their lists up into poems.

Read 'He Loved Override Fruits' to the class, and discuss the picture this poem gives of a child's life in the Caribbean, conveyed through a list of the things in grandpa's pockets and boots. Through shared writing, make a poem based on a child's exploration of the contents of a grandparent's pockets or handbag.

## Session 6: 'From My Sister's Secret Notebook'

At the beginning of this week give the children small notebooks, each made of seven pages of A4, folded and stapled. These are 'secret notebooks' for them to write poems in. Children use the left-hand pages of the notebook to make notes for possible poems, and the right-hand pages to write drafts of poems. Drawing on James Berry's poems, help the class identify the kinds of details that make a good poem. Remind the children that they will need to be particularly sharp observers of life around them this week. They should try to be aware of weather, of the people and animals that they meet, and of the details of the place they live in. At the beginning of the first three sessions this week, allow twenty minutes for the children to share some of the things they've observed with the rest of the class and to work on their drafts.

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## Session 7: Poems of rural life

Read aloud 'Seashell', 'Spider Ropes', 'Water-Carrying', 'Trapped', and 'In the Hills, at Puppah's Food Cultivation Land'. Children should have copies of the poems. Discuss the picture of rural Caribbean life that the poems build up and ask the children, in pairs, to highlight or underline details that give a vivid impression of the landscape. Ask the children to share their observations and make a chart of them. This chart can be added to during the week.

## Session 8: Poems of village life

Read aloud 'Village Character', 'Estate Cowman' and 'Everyday Music' and discuss the picture of Caribbean village life they convey. Pairs of children annotate copies of the poems, commenting on the impressions that the poems give and underlining phrases and words that they particularly like.

## Session 9: 'A Nest Full of Stars'

Read aloud 'A Nest Full of Stars', the title poem. Go back to the foreword, where Berry describes how this poem came about, and then reread the poem. Ask the class why they think the phrase 'All were mine' is in italics. Why is the last verse different and what picture does it give? Reread the poem aloud together.

Add any new details to the chart of the class's impressions of Caribbean life and landscape. Through shared writing, put together an introduction to this part of the book, saying how it gives a picture of a particular way of life.

## Sessions 10 and 11: Secret notebooks

Give time in sessions 10 and 11 for children to work in their secret notebooks and to complete two or three poems to contribute to a class anthology. Working with writing partners, children discuss their poems and improve them. Compile the class anthology in a scrapbook and invite children to read their poems aloud.

## Session 12: Poems in dialect

Read aloud 'Doubtful Sayings' and ask the children to underline, on an interactive whiteboard or an enlarged copy of the poem, words they don't understand. Make a shared glossary, like the one below the poem, with the dialect words and spellings explained. Read 'Smooth Skippin' and annotate it in the same way.

Use a shared writing session to make a version of one of these poems in standard English. Discuss which version the children like better and what is lost in the standard English version.

## Session 13: Chants and raps

Read 'Caribbean Playground Song' and discuss how it is like or unlike playground rhymes and skipping rhymes that children know. Look at the dialect language in the poem and make sure everyone understands it.

Ask the children to work in groups of four and write down some British playground rhymes that they remember. Organise group performances of 'Caribbean Playground Song' and some British playground songs.

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## Session 14: Chants and raps

Read 'Getting Bigger Rap' and 'Gobble-Gobble Rap'. Explore with children how Berry makes these poems about familiar subjects into rhythmical chants, and discuss some other subjects that could be treated in this way.

Discuss how rap poems are performed; some children might give a demonstration. Divide the class into groups and give half the groups copies of 'Getting Bigger Rap' and the other half copies of 'Gobble-Gobble Rap'. Groups should rehearse the poems in preparation for a performance.

## Session 15: A Nest Full of Stars

Ask the children to choose one poem they like from the book and write a personal introduction to it, saying why they think other children should read it. They should be prepared to read their introduction and the poem to the class.

Discuss what the children have learnt, from studying this book, about:

- Caribbean landscape and culture
- Caribbean language and dialect
- what makes a good poem
- how to write poetry.

Put these headings up on a chart and record interesting remarks. Ask the class to write up this discussion in pairs, heading their work 'What we have learnt from James Berry's poetry.'

## Session 16: Grand finale

Finally, organise a grand finale reading from *A Nest Full of Stars*. This could include:

- a reading of the shared writing the class did about 'From My Sister's Secret Notebook'
- children reading poems from the book, accompanied by their own introductions
- pairs of children using their notes to describe what they have learnt from Berry's poetry
- children performing raps and chants from the book
- children reading their own poems.