



Pre-service teachers' conceptions of creativity in elementary school English

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ABSTRACT

Widely thought to be something worth encouraging in young learners, creativity has popularly been associated more with music and art than with other areas of the curriculum. There have been many studies of creativity but few that focus explicitly on what counts as creative thinking in specific subject areas. The aim of the research reported here was to determine pre-service teachers' conceptions of creativity within the curriculum for English. The study involved analyses of primary school trainee teachers' responses to questionnaires and follow-up focus group discussion to identify their conceptions. A group of 48 trainees in the final year of an undergraduate degree in primary education leading to qualified teacher status in England completed the questionnaire. Of these, eight volunteered to participate in a follow-up focus group discussion to further explore ideas. Responses were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Conceptions of creativity in English were found to be limited, focused mainly on naïve views of story writing and dramatic activity. Responses indicated that they were often unable to distinguish clearly between the concept of creativity, an example of its occurrence in the classroom, and what feature of that example made it creative. Consequently, their limited constructions of creativity were confused. It is important that teachers in schools as well as those responsible for training teachers in universities are advised that trainees' conceptions of creativity in English may be inadequate in several respects and that they may not recognise opportunities for creativity. Pre-service training programmes could well benefit from structured courses on the forms and applications of creativity.

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1. Introduction

Studies on creativity usually agree that it is a process involving some form of activity resulting in something of worth and novelty, at least to the person creating it. NACCCE (1999, item 29) captured the essence of this in its definition of creativity as: *Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value*. Thurstone (1952) argued that even if an outcome has already been 'discovered', if it is new to the individual then it is a creative act. He suggested that for children, since they do not have the same experiences, knowledge-base or technical expertise as adults, they can have novel ideas and produce creative products that are new to them. This is Eysenck's (1996) private novelty, Boden's (1996) personal creativity and Craft's (2002) 'small c' creativity. Discussing teaching for creativity, Persaud (2006) suggested that the criterion of novelty is not enough. He argued that to focus on the production of something novel neglects the process by which the creative products are critically evaluated, selected and altered, or rejected by the creator. He proposed that any

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judgement of creativity must also involve confirmation of value or worth by experts. For children, of course, the expert is usually the teacher.

Compton (2007) provided a detailed review of definitions of creativity in various documents and identified the key skills underpinning creative thinking as: enquiry; evaluation; ideation; imagination; innovation; and problem solving. These are skills accessible to most people, thus reinforcing the notion that everyone can be creative to some degree (Boden, 2004; Torrance, 1975), and seem to us to be context-independent skills.

If, as Piaget argued, the principal goal of education is to produce creative people (Fisher, 1990, p. 30), then this in itself would seem to make teaching for creativity in any subject in the school curriculum worthwhile. An improvement in social skills, motivation, achievement, self-esteem and behaviour have all been reported in classrooms where creative thinking is encouraged (OFSTED, 2006; QCA, 2003/2005). It can contribute to an individual's ability to cope in new situations, act autonomously and be independent (Craft, 2002). The potential of someone who can think creatively to contribute to culture and society is also emphasised by, for example, NACCCE (1999). Creativity is increasingly on the agenda of education policy makers and one of the OECD's broad goals for educational policy is to foster creativity (Knight, 2002). Consequently, there are calls for a transformation of standards-driven, prescribed curricula to ones in which creativity is valued and encouraged (Burke Hensley, 2004; Hall & Thomson, 2005). Yet, despite teachers being urged to foster creativity, there is evidence that schools tend to ignore it (Craft, 2002; Fisher, 1990; Garner, 2007). Why might this be?

Being creative is something pupils must do for themselves but teachers can scaffold the process by providing conditions likely to increase the possibility that pupils will be creative (D.P. Newton, 2012; Nickerson, 1999; Weisberg, 1988). However, pupils must also be able to be creative in the absence of a teacher. Therefore, we should be helping them to develop abilities which increase the likelihood that they will be creative unaided. Skills and behaviours need to be established which support future independent creative thinking. Can teachers do this? While there have been many studies of creativity, few have focused explicitly on creative thinking in subject areas. The aim of this study was to determine some conceptions of creativity within the curriculum for English.

2. Creativity and English in the elementary school classroom

In the UK at least, teaching for creative thinking has barely featured in government documents setting out requirements or guidelines for curricular policies. Over the last two decades there has been a series of government-led initiatives aimed at raising standards in language skills, especially those of reading and writing. It may be that the political desirability of raising standards of literacy overshadowed the development of the teaching of creativity in English. Some foresaw the problem. Woods (2001), discussing the government's National Literacy Strategy [NLS] to raise literacy standards, argued that the skills to develop creativity:

... are in danger of becoming lost in the demands made on teachers to teach grammar, punctuation, parts of speech and to deconstruct texts in the so called 'literacy hour'. (p. 63)

The NLS was replaced by the Primary National Strategy [PNS] (DfES, 2003), a document that appeared to encourage creativity. Yet little was to change. The PNS stressed the importance of raising literacy standards, emphasising the teaching of reading, and providing resources for both pre-service and in-service teacher training to meet that priority. A further name change in 2008, to the National Strategies (see NS Online), did nothing to alter the status quo. The report on the impact of the NSs by OFSTED (2010) contained no mention of the words *creativity*, *creative* or *imagination*, and used the word *imaginative* only once. The NSs ended in June 2011. Raising standards had remained the government top priority for primary education for over 20 years. Creativity in English had a very low profile.

Yet within professional and academic circles in the last decade different aspects of English as a curriculum subject have been explored for their creative potential. For example, Wilson, Jones, and Wyse (2007) advocated developing pupils' creative expression through poetry-writing. Fisher (2006) studied creativity and control in the teaching of writing, while Fraser (2006) explored the creative potential of metaphorical writing at elementary school level. Discussing writing, crafting and creativity, Myhill (2001) emphasised the writer's voice and writing for meaning and a thread can be traced from Myhill to Rojas-Drummond, Albarrán, and Littleton (2008), who considered the co-construction of oral and written texts through collaborative activity. Speaking and listening were also the focus of attention by Rojas-Drummond, Mazón, Fernández, & Wegerif (2006) in a project exploring reasoning and productive talk, although this was with slightly older pupils (11–12 year olds). Explorations of the nature of paired talk and the role of friendship and peer pairing in collaborative creative writing tasks were carried out by Vass (2002, 2007). Verbal creativity versus explicit verbal reasoning and exploratory talk (the use of conversations as learning tools) was investigated by Wegerif (2005) in a study of reason, creativity and classroom dialogue.

At the more general level of creativity and literacy skills, research has looked more into creativity's applications and uses, rather than its nature or defining qualities within pedagogy. Whitely (2002) focused on the relationship between literacy and creativity by exploring children's writing and the genre of fables. Similarly, there have been studies of language development through creative arts projects. For example Safford and Barrs (2007) carried out two studies of children's language and literacy development in the context of their work in a school-based creative arts project. They were interested in how creative partnerships with artists, poets and writers can foster children's language development.

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