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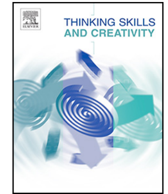

Playing it safe: Teachers' views of creativity in poetry writing

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ABSTRACT

Discourses of creativity in education vary from the highly theoretical to more pragmatic views, based on observations of 'what works' in practice. This is especially true in the current global economic climate, where, in Anglophone countries, there is both a premium placed on creativity at the same time as there is a tendency towards high-stakes accountability. This has resulted in a discourse of 'barriers' to creativity (Sahlberg, 2011) in our schools. Unsurprisingly, teachers' views of creativity are concomitantly variable (Kampylis, Berki, & Saariluoma, 2009). In this context it is interesting to study the views of teachers who teach subjects, such as poetry, with an established tradition of creative endeavour, but which are nevertheless marginalised (Ofsted, 2007; Locke, 2010). This paper reports on the beliefs, attitudes and values revealed by a large scale study of English teachers in England. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining a randomised controlled trial (RCT) with lesson observations, teacher interviews and student interviews in the form of writing conversations. Underpinned by a socio-constructivist model of play as a vital precursor to creativity and mastery of language (Vygotsky, 1962) this paper finds that, while these teachers are enthusiastic about teaching poetry, their conceptualisations of creativity are not fully theorised. This is especially true of their views of about poetry as freedom from the constraints of 'normal' writing. This includes a stated reluctance towards evaluating the poetry written by pupils. We argue that these teachers are inculcating their pupils in a schooled version of creative language use, one which is divorced from the model of creativity as theorised by writers and creative writing practitioners alike.

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1. Introduction

Internationally, there is a tendency towards a common consensus in western educational jurisdictions that a curriculum which encourages creativity is 'a good thing' (Gibson, 2005; NESTA, 2002); and increasingly the same discourse is being taken up in eastern jurisdictions (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Vong, 2008). In England, public and professional debate about creativity was re-ignited by the Robinson Report (*All Our Futures:* NACCCE, 1999). The emphasis in the report on the benefits of the cultural sector in terms of 'economic prosperity' (NACCCE, p. 4) was not lost on commentators (Banaji et al., 2007; Craft, 2003; Maisuria, 2005). Craft (2003) traces the development of the discourse of creativity in education to the 'globalisation of economic activity' and increased competition in the same. As Seltzer and Bentley argue (1999), small countries such as the UK, with finite natural resources, will increasingly depend in this globalised context on 'weightless' economic activity (e.g. service industries, e-commerce and communications). It follows that a 'well-educated' workforce will be judged on its ability to respond quickly to global market needs, for example creating new products which are both innovative and not at risk of obsolescence (Craft, 2003). It would be wrong, however, to categorise the Robinson Report as utilitarian in its view of

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creativity and of culture. Maisuria (2005) has argued that it is critical of a National Curriculum which serves children poorly in respect of developing their creativity and instead promotes a 'system that is in favour of conformity and standardisation' (Maisuria, 2005, p. 146).

Standardisation, which Maisuria (2005) is both anxious about and critical of, is now synonymous with the subject of English and the field of literacy in post-industrial English speaking nations (DfEE, 1998; No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002; NAPLAN, 2011). Furthermore, and in spite of critiques which range from statistical examinations of data for reading improvement (Loveless, 2012; Tymms & Merrell, 2007) to critiques of testing as a limited and negative agent of change (Dulfer, Polesel, & Rice, 2012; Polesel, Dulfer, & Turnnbull, 2012; Ravitch, 2011; Reese, 2013), many jurisdictions are increasing the testing of literacy (Common Core Standards, 2012; DfE, 2013; NAPLAN, 2011). The explicit rationales behind these interventions are increased public accountability on state funded education, and the need for an educated workforce who can respond to the pressures of a globalised economy (NAPLAN, 2011). Yet at the same time, literacy (also English or the Language Arts) is often also seen as a subject which provides a creative space in which learners can find their 'voice' (Dymoke and Hughes, 2009; Fraser, 2006; Misson & Sumara, 2006; Morgan, 2006; Obied, 2007; Schwalb, 2006; Sumara & Davis, 2006). Within this the writing of poetry is seen as a 'natural' activity for learners (Koch, 1970; Skelton, 2006; Styles, 1992), affording it an almost totemic position as a creative enterprise. Drawing on a large national study, this paper seeks to illustrate how, when considering the writing of poetry, teachers describe poetry writing as a creative endeavour but nevertheless promote it as a 'schooled' and therefore safe version of the real thing.

2. Creativity, conformity and standardisation

Whilst early conceptualisations of creativity focused substantially upon the individual as a creative being, and upon identifying the traits of a creative person (Guilford, 1950; Torrance, 1998; Shallcross, 1981), more recent thinking has viewed creativity as a socio-culturally determined concept, framed by cultural values and specific social contexts (Craft, 2005; Kurtzberg & Amabile, 2001; Sternberg, 2006). Within this, socio-cultural pressures towards conformity and standardisation have been identified as 'barriers' to creativity in schools by more recent commentators (Au, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Sahlberg, 2011). To standardisation of teaching and learning, Sahlberg (2011) adds 'competition as the main driver of educational improvement' and 'tougher test-based accountability' as key drivers of a situation in which curricula are narrowing and rote learning is on the increase. Claxton (2008), Robinson (2010), Godin (2012) and Sahlberg (2011) have all argued that the two dominant models of education in the twentieth century, closely linked and operationally serving each other (Sahlberg, 2011), have failed. These have been codified as the industrial and intellectual models. The former values rationalism and efficiency, and is based on the notion that the purpose of education is to serve the marketplace which decides on a fixed number of products that it requires. The latter is driven by the notion that intelligence is best measured by the ability to recall and reproduce information. Claxton has argued that this privileges those learners who can demonstrate aptitude in 'clerical mind' thinking (2008, p. 1): punctuality, rapid and accurate retrieval of information and respect for authority. A consensus is therefore beginning to emerge that these models of schooling can no longer serve a world in which the challenges prompted by technological and economic change are deemed to be, by definition, ahead of the capacity of systems of education to predict or keep pace with them.

Sahlberg (2011) maintains that accuracy 'is not enough' of a goal of systems of schooling: other kinds of thinking and behaviour, such as collaboration, risk-taking and learning to be wrong are seen as habits of mind which foster the creativity of learners. This is not new. Robinson (NACCCE, 1999) prefigures Sahlberg's conclusion when he says, in the first paragraph of his report, that 'raising standards in literacy and numeracy. . .will not be enough to meet the challenges that face education' (NACCCE, 1999, p. 4). This is interesting because Robinson was responding to a New Labour government White Paper (DfEE, 1997) which seemed to come to exactly the same conclusion. Maisuria (2005) is forensic in his analysis of the same. He details how three successive Secretaries of State for Education from the same administration each went on record encouraging schools to 'take risks and innovate' (Morris, 2002, p. 21): this was reported as schools being given 'freedom' (Lightfoot, 2002) to value creativity.

As both Lightfoot (2002) and Maisuria (2005) note, however, while some of the terms of reference in the discourse of education appeared to change, the language of public accountability remained firmly in place. Charles Clarke, the then Secretary of State, in a speech to mark the tenth anniversary of Ofsted, the school inspection service of England, said that while schools would not be 'blamed' or 'punished' for taking risks 'accountability [was] not an optional extra' (Lightfoot, 2002). This is ironic in that schools' capacity for innovation itself became a matter for scrutiny in inspections by Ofsted as a result. This bifurcated discourse has continued under the coalition government, with a promise to remove the 'straitjacket' of the National Curriculum, giving teachers more 'freedom' to 'innovate and inspire' (Telegraph, 2010). Thus, politicians in England in the last decade and a half have tried to bridge what Brehony & Kevin, 2005 calls an 'irreconcilable' contradiction, on the one hand promoting a discourse of creativity and innovation in schools, while on the other remaining in thrall to 'top-down habits and electoral pressures' (Brehony & Kevin, 2005, p. 41). Both of these arguments are framed within a discourse of economic utility, and take place at a time of high-stakes accountability which does not show signs of becoming less risk-averse (Sainsbury, 2009). When discussing teachers' conceptualisations of creativity, it is important to bear these narratives and discourses in mind, for they help to shape and influence the context out of which such views are formed.

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