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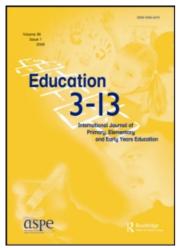
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Creativity and pupils' experience of school

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Based on the analysis of interviews with children, this article links what we know about the way in which they learn with their views of creativity. Whilst pupils have a crisp view of the nature of creativity, which links them to well-established philosophical views, this contrasts both with the vaguer notions of the term and with their experience of school.

Introduction

In education, creativity is a concept that is used essentially as a metaphor. It signifies open-mindedness, exploration, the celebration of difference and originality. It stands for humour and the pleasures of learning, for anything that is opposed to the prevailing policy of utilitarianism. Creativity is taken to be an automatic opposition to the language of targets, to instrumental skills, the measurement of outcomes and the dogmas of accountability. It signals an alternative to the emphasis on skills, and that is its strength and limitation. As a symbol of reaction to the mechanistic language that has reappeared so forcefully in the 150 years since Dickens satirized it in *Hard times*, creativity is both attractive and easily dismissed.

Teachers invoke the term and yet have great difficulty in pinning it down or explaining exactly what it means (Craft, 2005). Philosophers point out that creativity, like imagination, is not a concept that can really be given any precise meaning (White, 2003). The very fact that it has become a symbol for alternative strategies and a different outlook has enabled policy makers to dismiss it as insubstantial and self-indulgent.

The problem is that creativity is associated in peoples' minds with something nebulous, like inspiration, some natural gift, indeed an alternative to the hard work of acquiring knowledge and skills. This is illustrated when children define what is meant by creativity. They immediately think of two things. One is the idea of a product, the outcome of creativity rather than the act itself. The other is the distinction between ability and application, a dichotomy that so oppresses them. The realization that no

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amount of hard work can overcome the natural aptitude of the gifted is a constant source of anguish in school, when so much depends on competition. Creativity can then be associated with looking for some external force for help, like seeking inspiration by looking out of the window or at other people rather than concentrating on the task in hand:

... and then when I was trying to learn something the dinner bell would go and I'd get so upset at the dinner break because I thought I might get kept in. Once I was trying to read a word and I couldn't find out what this word was and I went to Miss. It was 'the' and because I couldn't read it I was ever so frightened because she kept going on and on and on ... (Boy, 7-years-old)

When children think more deeply about the notion of creativity, they reveal an intelligent analysis that connects them with the philosophical traditions of the past. The concept of imagination and creativity has a long history. The concept was most powerful in the nineteenth century, in the philosophy of Kant and Herder, even if its political apotheosis came later (Kerdourie, 1968). The most influential Anglophone distinction was that made by Coleridge between 'fancy' and 'imagination'. For him, 'fancy' denoted all the self-indulgent whimsy of speculation, the hope for some instant enlightenment. 'Imagination', however, was hard work, going to the core of understanding. Writers have few qualms in discussing creativity for they know the processes of making something unique so well that they are down to earth about what it entails. Coleridge knew that whatever trance he was in before being interrupted by the gentleman from Porlock, creativity is rooted in the real. To create anything is the result of hard work. It is this link of hard work to outcome that children understand and which they also find unrewarded.

From Coleridge to the present day, when writers have discussed the notions of creativity they have rooted it in an understanding of the deeper sense of the real. Keats, comparing sensations to thought, talks of the imagination as 'truth' and demonstrates the importance of the journeymans' approach to learning (1817). Auden (1954) famously reiterated the importance of learning a craft, making the overlap between aptitude and application clear: 'To say that a work is inspired means that, in the judgment of its authors or his readers, it is better than they could reasonably hope it would be, and nothing else' (p. 23).

We come down from external and mysterious forces to reality. What looks like inspiration is hard work and what appears like creativity is endless experiment.

The demonstrations of creativity in writers and in young children are similar. The urge to be creative, inventive and take risks, to explore, is constantly before us, but so are the concomitant restraints. Creativity is a metaphor that is easier to understand in opposition to the routines of school than to grasp what it represents. Those who are constrained by convention, averse to originality and who wish to follow the prevailing norms will never feel accused of being creative. For children, the constraints are more obviously external. They take creativity as essential to learning but the everyday experience of school and the dictates of the education system are based on quite different conceptions of work.

Children's experience of creativity

Simply asking children to define creativity will not do. They will try to guess what you want them to say. They will look for standard formulae. The only way to explore these kinds of issues is to listen to what they say about a range of experiences, to listen to them discuss with each other and define to you their experiences of learning and the processes of discovery. In listening to children talk it is also important to remember that any analysis of experience is going to be complex. There are no simple statements that can summarize everything. What children say is both complex, subtle and many layered. They work by inference just as they learn through context and association. To take an example; if they are asked to say whether a particular advertisement seen on television were true or false they would not be able to say one thing or the other; their reply would have to have more than one level. They know, as well as we do, that an advertisement that depicts a car turning into a robot is impossible, and thus untrue. They also know that the car depicted is available for purchase; it exists and thus, in the most basic commercial terms, the advertisement is true.

Real insight is, therefore, complex and listening to what children say is a matter of great sensitivity, given them time to elaborate and follow their own paths of thought rather than reminding them of closed questions and the factual answers that constrain real thinking. Simply listening to children talking to each other gives clear indications of the styles of thought employed, demonstrating, rather than defining, their notions of creativity.

The empirical data on which this paper is based is a series of semi-structured interviews, as well as recordings, taken over a number of years. The total number of interviews is well over 900, but the subject in question is never directly defined; instead the ostensible subject is the experience of school and the experience of learning, in the home and anywhere it takes place. Children love to talk and do not enquire what you want to know, although they are free to do so if they want.

If we explore pupils' experience of school we will find a consistency of analysis that makes the homogeneity of the experience perfectly clear (Cullingford, 2001). Pupils are taught to submit to what is taught, to avoid asking too many questions, to perceive the expected modes of conduct, to be quiet and to understand what it is that teachers want them to say. Such an outline of schooling would generally be perceived as being a fair summary, whether with approval or not (Elliott, 1998). At the same time children express a longing for more powerful modes of learning; those associated with writers, artists and musicians.

The expectations of schooling, as laid out by the National Curriculum, are clear and constantly reinforced by policy statements. The emphasis on skills and quality assurance through testing, dominated by literacy and numeracy, is felt to be justified by the demands of globalization and competition. The pupils who enter the system are aware of this policy. They also are aware of a deep clash between their own systems of thought and values and those that face them in formal schooling (Sammons *et al.*, 2004).

The contrast between children's early learning experiences and what takes place in school could hardly be greater. This has long been acknowledged by those working with small children (Pugh, 1996). But the significance has only been brought out by advances in neurocognitive and genetic experiments that demonstrate the differences as not being due simply to emotional needs or sentimental interpretation (Demasio, 2001). The critical scrutiny that young people bring to the world they are in is not a simple matter of a developmental accumulation of fact but a forensic analysis and interpretation of experience. Genetics has brought back to our attention the crucial effect of interactions with the environment (Ridley, 2000; Rose, 2005).

Children's preferred modes of learning

Young childrens' styles of learning are the same as those employed by creative artists. They develop early and can be summarized as resting on three modes of thought. The first is the power of associations. Babies in the womb are constantly interacting with their surroundings which, in those conditions, consist of sound and sensation. Certain familiar sounds are not only preferred, like the voices of the family, but even particular languages are responded to more favourably than others (Pinker, 1998). Already the sense of the importance of music, as a way of conveying timbre and meaning is established (Lowther, 2001). Associations, therefore, are not merely connections of ideas but are a form of discrimination. Some are clearly preferred to others so that whole system of sounds and tuning to the meaning of language are already started. The ideas that lie beyond the conventional powers of logic are the powerful ideas that generate the new and the unexpected.

The importance of associations can be underlined in adult experience by the way in which sounds, and smells, can trigger a sense of place or nostalgia. Below the surface of conventional thought there is a whole mass of previous experiences that a memory will suddenly bring to the surface through a connexion that links closely with the underused parts of the brain.

Associations are also a way of organizing material: the connections are significant. This links with the second attribution of learning, that of imaging (Bruner, 1996). Imaging is the essential means of putting things into categories, of understanding the clues which connect and make sense of things. Imaging is understanding the nature of language, with words conveying concepts that involve an object, like a chair, which remains that concept whatever its particular shape, colour, texture, size or use, or from whatever angle it is seen. Whilst associations start by being based on sound, imaging is essentially visual, a way of storing information in the brain and by understanding it through context. One of the most important matters that young children must learn is to be able to simplify what they experience into categories. This is, in a sense, a process of unlearning, of deconstruction, of taking in only those clues that are of significance. Babies can discriminate individually between a host of similar furry animals which to adults all look the same. As we get older we continue to recognize the faces of many different people, but no longer those creatures, like squirrels, between which we do not need to discriminate.

The imaging of a child's world is imaginative reconstruction, the 'picturing' of the environment as a means of understanding it. The reading of a text is inevitably accompanied by a visual reconstruction of a scene; it means drawing on memory to make sense of a story, as a reflection on the world (Cullingford, 1998). A sentence like 'Then with a scowl he turned and opened the door' will, even with such a small clue, give an idea of an individual figure and suggest whether the door is on his left or his right. Imaging and association are two of the main ingredients in reading (and creating) stories (Winkley, 1975).

The third element in the creative process is the self-consciousness of criticism. Nothing is completely taken for granted, or without self-awareness. For young children this critical scrutiny is applied to people. Relationships are essential. Just as we know that children are aware of numeracy almost from the beginning, so we know how sophisticated they are in terms of relationships. This means both emotional empathy and social understanding (Dunn, 1987). It does not mean simply responding to other people but understanding them. As early as can be detected, for example, children are aware of that most sophisticated of social abilities, the difference between truth and falsehood (Flavell *et al.*, 1993). This means that they understand the concept of the point of view. They not only have a mental identity of their own but realize that everyone has their own, that all individuals have their own interpretation of the world. Relationships, therefore, are intellectual as well as emotional, iterative rather than submissive.

These three modes of learning, associations, imaging and the critical scrutiny of relationships, demonstrate the way in which young children experience the world they are in. The importance of this lies firstly in the need to learn in context. Everything is absorbed, weighed and explored. No one explains or defines things for them. Children have to do all their learning by themselves without being taught. They have to guess and experiment; they make mistakes, they interpret and they pick out of the context all those clues that seem to them of significance.

Children's learning and their schooling

All this would not be of any significance did it not contrast so clearly with the subsequent experience of schooling. Young children have a clear subject to study. It is the world they are in and the people in it, no more nor less. Their styles of thinking, with associations and imagery, are all fused into a forensic critical analysis of the real. This is no 'fancy', no simple escape into the fey and the ephemeral. It is the crucial engagement with the big questions of life, of meaning and puzzlement. It is why children ask such impossible questions, like is there a God? Why? How can one have a 'big bang theory' and the concept of eternity at the same time? These are the unanswerable questions that schooling teaches them not to ask.

When we understand the processes of the brain, its growth and its analysis of events, and when we understand what children are talking about and are puzzled by, there is one central subject that is of the utmost significance as it is for creative artists. From the beginning, based on their awareness of different points of view, of truth and

falsehood, of emotional manipulation, the two great puzzles for children are why people behave as they do, and what are the influences that make them do so? These are the same questions that fuel literature, based on the same observation and reflection that we experience (or ignore) everyday. Why do some people become civilized, kind and unselfish and others behave with cruelty, as a bully, even as a killer? Why are individuals so good, ask children, and groups so bad?

This 'creativity' in young children implies an intense concentration on learning. The big issues that concern them are not only relationships with people but the meaning of these relationships, not only in categorizing the world but in understanding it. This level of scrutiny continues until the point at which it becomes muted through discouragement. The 'chains' that Rousseau romantically described are the education systems.

The diverting of motivation away from learning and curiosity to submitting to being taught is not a deliberate policy but a self-perpetuating accident that is partly the result of good intentions:

The last temptation is the greatest treason.
To do the wrong thing for the right reason.
(T. S. Eliot)

But it is not the educational system which is the subject of this paper. The experience of children demonstrates how aware they are that they are faced with the need to learn facts, to recognize the boundaries of subjects and to prepare for tests (Cullingford, 2002). All questions are 'closed' or interpreted as 'closed' (Barnes *et al.*, 1969; Elliott, 1998). There are only right or wrong answers, only responses to measurement. This is the inadvertent result of the educational system.

The contrast between the desire to learn and the prevailing system of controlling what is being taught can be encapsulated in the teaching of reading. In 'literacy hours' and other interventions the intention is to emphasize the methods employed to teach children how to decode texts. The official literature talks about the 'skills' involved in reading, with subtle changes of emphasis according to what seems to be the latest technique, currently 'synthetic phonics'. The English language is uniquely awkward in the way that graphemes and phonemes are phonetically connected, for historical reasons, and one can understand that children should receive all the help they can get (Cullingford, 2002). When we study how children learn to read it is clear, however, that the processes involved are more complex, so much so that some have even denied that children can be taught (Smith, 1971; Goodman, 1982).

Whilst there are means of both encouragement and support, the learning of reading depends primarily on children's perception of the purpose for doing do; the motivation is essential. If reading is seen as an essentially mechanical skill, in which recognition of shape and the understanding of phonemes are paramount, it is bound to be dull and even meaningless. If it is recognized as a pleasurable activity, not a mere exercise, understood as giving rewards for those who enjoy it, that is a different matter. Those children who learn to read easily are those who have been read to from

an early age. It is the stories that count, because of their imaginative engagement in the real world. In contrast, mechanical rote learning of synthetic phonics might result in good memory, but it has little to do with learning in the real sense (Rosowsky, 2005).

Children who thirst for story, their first symbolic creative act, do so for a number of reasons. Stories demonstrate the individuality of human beings. The same events, reflected in daily life, that children experience are shared by others. Stories, however anthropomorphic their characters, are a shared reflection of the real world. Children not only associate their own experiences with those of the story but can develop the imaging that the words and illustrations depend on. It is significant that children want the same story repeated and that they will detect a mistake in the pattern of words even before they can technically 'read'.

By following stories, and by developing a taste for them, children also learn the rudiments of reading. They cannot fail to detect the movement of left to right, the shapes of letters and words, and the connection of all this with the sounds. A long time before they develop language children deliberately practice the phonetic abilities to produce meaningful sounds; their 'babbling' is not just incoherent mutterings but the patterning of communicative abilities. The immersion in the patterning of printed stories is like the detection of what is meaningful.

Reading is a creative act of learning. Stories are essentially social. They connect people to each other with the fascination that even rumour provides (Kapferer, 1987). Stories are the way in which even without being immersed in fiction, we understand ourselves and each other. Stories are what pupils crave, and stories are at the heart of teaching (Egan, 1986).

Children's love of stories gives us a clue to the nature of creativity. What stories do is to present a parody of the world. They reflect in their idiosyncratic way what is the daily experience as felt, and not just analysed. The creative act always includes an element of parody. It is not pure imitation or pastiche but depends on building on what has gone before. Every great artist is influenced, and we see the evolution of styles in all the arts. This undermines any limp notions of originality or inspiration. All art is culturally and socially based and, as Auden points out, depends on both understanding what others have said already and on the desire to explore what is still missing, what nobody has yet found the means to express. Artists are driven by the context they are in. It is only in reading, looking and listening that they become aware of what they feel is missing.

If the creative act were chance inspiration very few people would be deemed 'gifted'. The creative act is an engagement with the world, the attempt to make sense of it, to connect with it. It is the curiosity of finding out what is real rather than an escape from it. It is what children are naturally good at. It is also what they need.

Pupils are rarely asked about what they really think. When that does happen it tends to be about the formalities of the school experience (Pollard *et al.*, 2000) or the questions are geared to seeing how pupils can be helped to conform (Colley, 2003; Flutter & Ruddock, 2004). The desire to talk and the ability to analyse are there but the pupils voices are rarely attended to (Pugh, 1996). There used to be a tradition of

celebrating the lore and language of school children (Opie & Opie, 1959) and earlier celebrations of their surprisingly analytic minds (Labov, 1971) but this tradition seems to have been lost. Instead there is an instrumental contempt for pupils, as the titles of series of books (*Little buggers*) for example, makes clear.

Schools are symbolic of the real world and presented as a proper preparation for it. What children actually learn are not only the vital skills of the work place but the attitudes to life that go with them. The problem is that children in their acute observation are interpreting what they see in creative and forensic ways. Let us take the example of inspection. When the school hears of the coming inspection everything changes. The teachers are clearly under stress. They change their styles. There is a tense atmosphere. As the inspection approaches there are practice lessons, and the carpets and wall displays replaced and tidied up, and every bit of written evidence is collected. The ideas of an inspection, since so much depends on it (teachers 'named and shamed', schools threatened with 'special measures') that everything is naturally done to present the best picture possible.

What do pupils learn from this? They learn firstly that bullying is not confined to the playground; but is official policy. The inspectors might justify the effects on teachers as a necessary rigour, but the effects are well known (Winkley, 1999). The pupils also clearly learn that success depends on presentation. It is not what you are really like that counts but how you can project yourself. 'Spin' matters. The saddest message for pupils is the fact that the creative relationship with teachers is damaged. The pupils see the effects of inspection on their teachers and conclude that any interest shown in their work and achievement is not personal but the result of the fear of the outcomes of inspection and the 'league tables'. Knowing the political atmosphere they see themselves as mere pawns for other peoples ambitions or fears.

Pupils learn many things inadvertently. The actual effects of the years of schooling are not those that are necessarily expected. The resilience of the children means that they learn despite what they are taught and despite the clamping of imagination. Schools are also inadvertent in the traumas they unleash, a series of humiliations that are kept psychologically hidden. Schools are also contradictory places, with conflicting purposes with which both teachers and pupils have to cope (Egan, 1997).

Teachers have to learn to deal with all this. How do they do so, knowing that so much is against them and that their ideal conditions and the ideal conditions for learning would be very different? They do so, often unaware of their own creative techniques, in several ways. One is by making their classes into safe places, where open questions can be asked, the kinds of questions pupils ask each other, the kinds of conversations that can be overheard when pupils talk to each other; the kinds of conversations that show how imaginatively they engage with the real world. Teachers also instinctively realize that it is the real world, not that of subjects and exams, that interests children. The only point of the curriculum is the bearing it has on the real events of living and working, of understanding why things should be so. There is nothing in the science or arts subjects that does not have a bearing on why the world is as it is and particularly why people behave as they do.

Teachers therefore use open questions and teach their children to answer openly, not merely guessing the right answer. Teachers deal constantly with how what is learned relates to real life, and use only those techniques that would be used in normal life. This means that stories are central. Anything interesting has a story. The teacher has his or her own interests; all have stories to tell, to make a point and to share curiosity.

Teachers also realize that the closest engagement in the real world is not through distant criticism, and not through theory but through parody. Like writers, the craft of understanding depends on the flattery of imitation, not copying but understanding how things are done. This is, after all, the essential practice of creative work, whether in design studios, engineering, or in the development of policy. The engagement in work includes the understanding of what has gone before and the integrity of trying to do something new as honestly and well as possible.

It is in this sense and for these reasons that the concept of creativity is so important. It is not a vague escape from reality but the only possible engagement with it. It is not an alternative to work but the basis of it. Creativity has a moral as well as intellectual edge. It has to survive in difficult environments like school. It speaks a lot for the human condition that such endeavours to understand continue in the face of almost implacable oppositions. What could the world be like if this were recognized?

Notes on contributor

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