Professional Cultures of Creativity and Care in Performative Primary Schools

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Abstract
The research team has undertaken sustained ‘involved’ observation in six contrasting English primary schools located in contrasting Local Education Authorities. A main focus was how the headteachers and teachers implement performativity policies in the schools and the impact of this on their professional and personal ‘selves’ as they also attempt to implement creativity policies. In this paper, we focus on the experience and perspectives of teachers working in professional cultures of creativity and care in very contrasting economic and social situations. English primary schools were noted for their creative pedagogic approaches and professional cultures of care (Nias, 1989). However, owing to reform agendas introduced for social justice reasons but also aimed at improving educational standards for increasing international competitiveness, both creativity and cultures of care have come under attack in performative primary schools (Troman et al., 2007). At the same time as performative policies are being introduced there is increasing advocacy for the adoption of creativity policies within English primary education. The research reported in this paper has been conducted over two school years in order to analyse the effects of new initiatives in terms of their impact on teacher identity and changing experience of their roles in these work cultures. The paper concludes by arguing that teachers are managing the conflicts involved in implementing these forms of policy but professional cultures of care and creativity, while creating spaces for resistance to performative pressures, also serve performative ends.
**Introduction**

It is now twenty years since the introduction of the Education Reform Act in 1988. This introduced a mandated curriculum and testing system. These years have seen an intensification of performativity in the English primary school with the proliferation of performative policies and legislation. These measures while being introduced to raise educational achievement have constituted a serious threat to professional cultures of the primary school. Intensive testing and targeting regimes have in many ways potentially undermined the former culture of care in primary schooling. This culture stressed the importance and maintenance of human educative and professional relationships amongst children, teachers, headteachers and teaching assistants. Our research in primary schools throughout this period shows that despite performative pressures the cultures of care described by Jenny Nias still exist in the primary school. More recently there has been an upsurge of policies promoting creativity in the primary school. While these policies are not compulsory schools have responded enthusiastically to the initiative and incorporated creative practices into their curricula. These practices have created creativity spaces in primary schooling. We argue in this paper that creativity policies reinforce a professional culture of care thus reviving some aspects central to the professional culture of the past. They are also, potentially, empowering for teachers and children alike. However, a more worrying indication is that creative cultures and notions of the ‘creative professional’ which are derived from industrial and commercial contexts are being promoted by influential members of the policy-making community. These latter moves seem designed to be more harmonious with performative policies and to reinforce the threat to cultures of care.

**Performativity**

Performativity is a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, and bringing about change – based on rewards and sanctions. The value of an individual is measured within that field of
judgement. The reforms of the 1990s introduced performative regimes into English primary schools. Legislated changes have resulted in the introduction of assessment regimes linked to accountability systems, each teacher being set measurable performance objectives which are systematically reviewed. Performance management systems are advocated in official policy throughout all phases of the education system (Strathern, 2000). These have been accompanied, of course, by a mandated curriculum, national pupil tests (Standard Assessment Tasks - SATs) at end of Key Stages (KS) school league tables, and Office for Standards in Education privatised inspections (Ofsted). The drive for standards through improving curriculum, pedagogy and assessment was seen to be achievable through the prescription of the National Literacy (NLS) and Numeracy (NMS) Strategies.

**Creativity**

Creative teaching and learning has a threefold heritage. The first is one, derived from progressive philosophies and sometimes described as ‘Plowdenesque’ in which older teachers have maintained its principles and values throughout the imposition of prescriptive curriculum’s and pedagogies and the rise of performativity. The second is from the influences and realisation of many parts of the new industries that the creativity of the worker is the new resource of labour power to be tapped for increased performance and prosperity in the 21st Century. The third influence has been a rise in the part played by the arts in policy, partly legitimated by the forward looking industrial imperatives.

Creativity discourse is now in the ascendant in national education policy. The 1999 Government report into culture and creativity in education was the first indicator of this development. Following this the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority began to generate the discourse of creativity across the curriculum from 2000 and is now promoting creativity initiatives with publications and online support for these initiatives. **Creative Partnerships** was established in 2001 to generate arts creativity in education and communities and has since spent over £120m in doing so. In 2003 we saw the publication by the DfES of *Excellence and Enjoyment* which called for a rich, varied
and exciting curriculum. In 2003 Ofsted produced a report entitled *Expecting the Unexpected* detailing good practice of creativity in schools and in the same year an initiative to follow up the *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education arose from a seminar in which the then schools’ minister emphasised that creativity was a crucial element in driving up standards. The 2006 Robert’s Report published by both the DfES and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport *Nurturing Creativity in Young People* has eight themes covering a wide range of educational opportunity and provision. All these initiatives aim to inject creativity into teaching and learning – thus, increasing the motivation and commitment of teachers and pupils alike.

Prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum, Assessment and Testing a widespread form of curriculum organization was around topics or projects. In the English primary school, classroom organization was often in the form of groups following different activities and although streaming had been widespread in the days of 11+ testing, it had largely died out prior to 1988. Subject setting of pupils was also extremely rare. Far more popular was grouping by ‘ability’ within the class. While progressive practices were nowhere as common (Galton et al., 1980) as often claimed, child-centredness was evident in the widespread espousal and practice of stressing relevance in learning through the teacher spontaneously using opportunities to base lessons around the children’s interests.

The introduction of the *Primary National Strategy* (PNS) with its stress on excellence and enjoyment through the creative integrated topics must have seemed like things had ‘come full circle’ (Webb and Vulliamy, 2006) and this view was supported by our sample. The PNS, unlike some of the performativity policies described above, is not mandatory. However, it seems to be one of those policies where although they are not compulsory, woebetide any school not implementing them once the inspectors arrive (Webb and Vulliamy, 2006). The PNS policy although indicating a more creative approach to teaching and learning was certainly not advocating any departure from the rigours on the NNS and NLS. As Webb and Vulliamy point out:

much of the text of *Excellence and Enjoyment* is devoted to reiterating the familiar messages of the standards agenda because ‘testing, targets and tables are here to
stay’ (p.20). In the foreword Charles Clarke, the then Secretary of State for Education, claims that ‘enjoyment’ derived from ‘excellent teaching’ is the birthright of every child’. However, for him excellent teaching means the achievement of high standards in literacy and numeracy which ‘gives children the life chances they deserve’. Thus, the intention of the PNS is to enrich the curriculum but not at the expense of the standards agenda. The focus on literacy and numeracy should remain and gains be built on by ‘developing the Strategies still further, and not losing sight of the most important fundamentals like the value of discrete literacy and mathematics teaching through the literacy hour and daily mathematics lesson’ (p.27).

(Webb and Vulliamy, 2006, p.96)

Creativity spaces

How then did our research schools seek to implement creativity policies? In addition to those previously mentioned, the measures adopted had a short time-scale (though one school project lasted six weeks – see below) and whole-class, teacher-centred models were the norm. And it must be remembered that these are preferred pedagogies in the NNS and NLS. These activities, although involving the whole school, invariably, but not always, tended to take place after the Y2 and Y6 Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) in June of each year. The curriculum activities engaged in focused strongly on areas which had been marginalised by the NNS and NLS, for example, History, Geography, Art, Dance, Religious Education, Sports and Health. All the schools in the research held ‘creative’ weeks in which the normal timetable was suspended. These were variously called: Curriculum Week – Project Week – Topic Week – Focus Week.

It was usual to give these weeks an integrating theme, for example, Patterns - Multicultural Week – Whole-World Week, World Awareness Week.

The types of activities engaged in during these weeks were as follows:

Visits to Art Galleries and Museums – involving sessions with education officers at these sites.

Costume Show – parade of different national costumes


Overnight stay in school

Country dancing

Construction – problem solving and teamwork.

Drama productions

Music – practical music making with a range of instruments

Cooking – Somalian food – Baking muffins (which contained readings and linked to a reading programme)

Maths – number patterns.

**Creativity Spaces and Cultures of Care**

Changes in curriculum policy advocating integrated ‘topics’ were perceived by some of the teachers as ‘back to the old days’. The ‘modernisation’ of teaching introduced planning and preparation (PPA) time and work/life balance policies being widely implemented in the research schools alongside the performativity measures, but within these and outside them there were the ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ of school life providing ‘satisfiers’ and dissatisfiers in their work.
The psychic rewards of teaching provided the main basis of commitment and professional work satisfaction. For example the satisfaction and reward seeing a child suddenly grasping a concept they had found difficult – or seeing the rapid cognitive, social or emotional development of children. Emotional highs of teaching were clearly positive reinforcers of teacher commitment. And a wide range of positive and negative factors relating to personal life also influenced commitment, including age, other commitments, family, relationships, interests, health etc.

Here teachers saw ‘real learning’ take place. Projects, out of school events and residential trips took time and effort to organise and tended to be before or after SATs week or at the end of terms. The teachers were often already exhausted and the creative events added to stress, but many spoke of the importance to them of ‘having’ or ‘liking a challenge’; that it is important ‘to have something you can get your teeth into’.

Creative projects provided important ‘breaks from the National Curriculum’ and opportunities for ‘exciting’ rather than ‘boring’ lessons.

In the ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ of school life a number of factors supported some of the teachers’ initial commitments, thus, providing ‘satisfiers’ in their work. However, there were also factors which impacted negatively on teacher commitment. For our teachers the psychic rewards of teaching provided the main basis of commitment and professional work satisfaction. Typical examples involved the teachers deriving satisfaction, pleasure and reward from seeing a child suddenly grasping something they had found difficult before – or seeing the sometimes rapid cognitive, social and emotional development (especially the case in the early years) of the children.

These teacher strategies in performative school cultures highlighted the impact and saliency of testing regimes. The negative influence of initiatives to standardise teaching approaches was pervasive. There was evidence, however, of teachers investing in a more creative professional identity in their involvement in nurturing programmes and creative projects. These were all extra, however, to their main tasks of meeting targets in the performative cultures. Whether the schools and teachers developed creative approaches to increase test scores or to ameliorate the worst effects of testing they demanded increased effort and commitment from the teachers. In terms of teacher
careers, some of the teachers were using the creative projects as school improvement strategies required for headteacher training schemes and subsequent promotion. Some of the younger teachers who had entered teaching from other occupations and professions had chosen teaching as a potential occupation for engaging in ‘more meaningful’ or ‘more creative’ work.

The theoretical and analytical single-policy focused writing in the area of performativity has been almost wholly negative (see, for example, Ball, 2000; Gleeson & Husbands, 2001; and Stronach et al., 2002). By way of contrast, empirical research on creativity policy initiatives has been almost wholly positive (see, for example, Jeffrey & Woods, 2003; Woods, 2004; Lance, forthcoming, 2006). Both these forms of analysis have, in our view, eschewed the complexity involved when the teachers are implementing creativity and performativity policies in the context of a range of other social/educational policies. The rise of creativity policy texts since the new millennium provides an opportunity to see how two valued and potentially contradictory government policies are implemented and experienced in primary schools and how their different perspectives are synthesised, tolerated or develop antagonistic relations. When new policy discourses move, spaces are created for ideologies to play, re-contextualisation takes place between official and pedagogic fields, and sites of compliance, resistance and counter movements take place (Ball, 1998). If the policy context is complex then we can expect teachers’ interpretations, reactions and responses to it to be as well. In the schools of our research the drive to raise pupil test scores involved both performative and creative strategies, and this critical mediation went beyond amelioration toward a more complex view of professional practice. In terms of the implications of this for teacher professional identities, Smyth argues that:

What is going on here is clearly to some degree at least, a process of re-inventing teacher identities—some of it is being driven by processes of external policy formation, but other aspects being contributed to in the way in which teachers themselves interpret, react to and adapt to the wider policy reform process. It is not a simple straightforward process of either ‘compliance’ or ‘resistance’. Moore and Edwards (Moore & Edwards, 2000) note that it is a much more complex process of understanding how teachers’ struggling against oppositional forces
‘construct preferred pedagogies’ that enable them to sustain and maintain ‘a refined and principled self’ (Convery, 1999, p. 135). In other words, the effects of policy imperatives … are not felt in universal ways. Teachers play a major role themselves in how they mediate conflicting views on what comprises good teaching, thus formulating responses to these reforms and in terms of pedagogic choices. (Smyth, 2002, p. 142)

This paper has indicated some of this development of the ‘policy imperatives’ of creativity and performativity. Our current and overlapping research project (ESRC—Creativity and Performativity in Teaching and Learning—CAPITAL) focuses specifically on this policy context and school culture and will reveal in greater detail, over the next year, more of the nature of these complex policy events.

Creativity Cultures and the Creative Professional – A Critique

This mode of creativity in schools has also been strongly advocated by David Hargreaves (a former ethnographer) who has recently argued that:

If we are serious about creating an educational transformation in this country, then we all have to play a part in moving towards a high trust, innovative culture in which constructive partnerships flourish ...


It was felt that "in an innovative school, the question of how much innovation is answered by the children and staff, in addition to the head. If the school climate encourages innovation, it becomes a way of working, rather than an entity to be discovered and encouraged”. Innovation was described as energising and essential to move schools forward. David Hargreaves stated "that the hidden curriculum is often more powerful in its impact on children than the official or formal curriculum... teachers who model the right attitudes and behaviour have a huge impact on students... when we walk the talk, we influence”. This was seen to be vital since "young people need to learn to be creative and innovative if they
are to be successful in work and in further and higher education, and they will not do this if teachers in schools are not creative and innovative too”.

(Becta Website)

Hargreaves’ pamphlet ‘Creative professionalism: The role of teachers in the knowledge society’ advocates a model of professionalism derived from industrial and commercial contexts and its widespread application to teaching recommended.

Conclusion

In an era of what Ben Aggers (1989) calls ‘fast capitalism’ – the primary school can learn to cope to situations of fast policy, fast practices and fast professionalism.

Nigel Thrift (2000) has said of such cultures that:

Firms now live in a permanent state of emergency, always bordering on the edge of chaos, and no longer concerned to exercise bureaucratic control. Indeed, through a variety of devices – cultivating knowledge workers, valuing teams, organizing through projects, making better use of information technology, and flattening hierarchies – they will generate just enough organizational stability to change in an orderly fashion while maintaining hair-trigger responsiveness to adapt to the expectedly unexpected. Firms will become faster and more agile. They will be able to live life in a blur of change. Such a turn towards the rule of emergency demands new disciplines and skills of managers. ‘Organization man’ is gone. In his stead, new subject positions must be invented. Managers must become ‘change agents’, able, through cultivation of new disciplines and skills, to become fastest and best.

Thrift argues that in industrial contexts managers have become part of Powers’ ‘audit explosion’ the rise of an orientation to constantly checking performance.

Furthermore:
Managers confront remorseless pressure toward the short-term; on the other hand, they face remorseless pressure to be creative, while also conforming to the rigours of the audit. Against this background, what is striking are the efforts to produce new kinds of ‘fast’ management subjects able to swim in this element. They must be calculating subjects, able to withstand the exigencies of faster and faster return.

Thrift argues that these processes are for:

A new regime of managerial governmentality centred on the creation of maximally creative ‘fast’ subjects.

Fast subjects, Thrift argues, ‘may well turn out to be fragile subjects held together only at a cost.’

References


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