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Creative and Performativity Policies in Primary Schools

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Introduction

Policies supportive of creative teaching and learning and the importance of creativity in general have been reintroduced into a situation in which there is a dominant discourse of performance and performativity. We make a tentative distinction between the former as contributing to an institution's culture with the latter more focused on the process of progressing along a target led trail. It is discourse underpinned by a major policy to improve economic status and social well being, a market based approach that encourages performance-based activities and the generation of a culture of performativity (Lyotard 1979; Ball 1998; Ball 2000).

Methodology

Discourses are about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when and with what authority. They embody meaning and social relationships and they constitute both subjectivity and power relations (Foucault 1980; Ball 1990). However, for Foucault power at the micro level is neither a force for good or evil, it doesn't weigh on us but it produces things – pleasure, knowledge and discourse. It is a network of activity. The domination of one over the other is not, as he sees it a relation but it is fixed in the rituals and procedures. Nevertheless, he believes we create ourselves as a work of art and that we should relate the kind of relation we have to oneself as a creative activity rather than oneself as author. Power is an element circulating through the social body that can be used for dominance, resistance and other positive outcomes. However, the function of disciplinary power was to train, levy, select, to bind together a group and use them and to separate them into separate units, to make an individual as an object and instrument.

Just as power can be used at the micro level for resistance and positive outcomes so performativity has its advantages and possibilities, particularly when employed in the policy of raising achievement. It is also a force that is intimately intertwined with the seductive possibilities of 'autonomy' (ibid). To quote Lyotard performativity

excludes in principle adherence to the metaphysical discourse, it requires the renunciation of fables, it demands clear minds and cold wills; it replaces the definition of essences with the calculation of interactions; it makes the players assume responsibility only for the statements they propose, but also for the

rules to which they submit their statements in order to render them acceptable. It brings the pragmatic functions of knowledge clearly to light, to the extent that they seemed to relate to the criterion of efficiency: the pragmatics of argumentation, of production of proof, of the transmission of learning, and the apprenticeship of the imagination (Lyotard 1984)

Our ethnographic approach assisted the process of examining policy discourses through research into how primary teachers experienced the revitalisation of a creativity discourse in a context heavily influenced by performativity

The research was based in six primary schools across five Local Education Authorities. We judged this the maximum possible given the depth of fine detail we sought but large enough to afford a comparative basis for research and to ensure some significant contrast between the research schools (inner city, rural) in terms of size and socio-economic status. We ensured a balance of learner age range and teacher experience in terms of career status, positions, and roles. However, unfortunately we lost our main researcher to illness halfway through the research period and consequently our original aims were not fully met in terms of data collection or meeting analytical timetables for the second half of any research project, when the researcher was unavailable, is usually the most productive.

We have managed to transcribe 52 days observational fieldnotes, 30 conversations with teachers and other significant adults and 32 conversations with learners but enough progressive focusing as we anticipated. The research probed the following areas:

- Perceived tensions between the creativity and performativity policies and the dilemmas and opportunities this creates for teachers, pupils.
- Coping strategies used to ameliorate these tensions and dilemmas
- The educational identities being constructed in the context of the two policy imperatives.

This paper addresses the first of these objectives and the others will be dealt with in later papers.

Creative performance in primary schools

The schools we researched reflected a market approach that emphasised the necessity to provide a school identity for an open and competitive market place, an identity that aspired to improve the performance and status of the school and that valued cooperation and team work

Open and inclusive cultures

Primary school's values, aims and objectives, policies, activities, performance, physical structure and location, staff events, ethnic makeup, poverty indicators and learners are all open to scrutiny across the world and their websites provide information about the school year, student performance and the quality of learner's work as well as carefully selected images to represent the school's ethos just as secondary schools have done in the scramble to attract customers (Gewirtz, Ball et al. 1995).

There always have been public performances by the school or a specific class during the school year such as such as the Christmas nativity, the end of year show often involving those leaving the school, sports day and depending on the culture/religious nature of the school one or two other festivals during the year and these still take place today. In the past private performances took place in teacher's classrooms, a domain of their own in which control and ownership was theirs and only the head teacher dared comment critically on anything going on within them and learner's developed strong connections with these classrooms, albeit reacting differently to the varied regimes within them.

However, the performance of the teacher is now a daily public affair and its qualitative nature has changed. This kind of open performance makes the teacher more conscious of their public image and how they present themselves (Goffman 1959). Parents and the community are invited into the school more often and they see more of the school's work and the way teachers teach as the classrooms is more open. Reports to parents are now virtually open with every parent knowing the school statistics on its SATs performance, Ofsted assessments and children and parents talk openly with each other about the child's 'level' both in and outside the staffroom, the classroom and the school grounds, Meetings now often take place in public not in the head's office, which in one of our schools was only used to house her two dogs, with

the door open of course. One such meeting we noted was in the school café and included a DfCSF person and another meeting constituted six local headteachers.

Whole school spaces have been opened up to children who have no fear about entry to any part of the school and indeed colonise it as their own (Jeffrey and Woods 2003). The staffroom role as a 'back region' (Goffman 1959) appears to have been dissolved. Children come in now and again to look for things or people and staffroom doors are often left open and they freely address the staff within in this open staffroom. Visitors, once admitted are given free reign to roam and scrutinise policies and programmes. In brief, primary schools are today the complete opposite to the 'siege mentality' (Woods 1993) of the 1990s.

They are also becoming community schools following the Every Child Matters policy programme as they seek to combine welfare provision. Although their objectives are to improve children's learning capacities they also aim to achieve other social objectives as part of their commitment to the local community as partners and the development of an open culture. Breaking down barriers and creating a sense of community is not just related to formal programmes, eg: more informal structures such as breakfast clubs. Members of the community, often parents, assist in classrooms voluntarily helping with maths or science in groups and reading.

Internally professional psychologists, welfare workers and inspectors or advisors and even researchers are often sat at the back of a class making notes about what is going on. Teachers are regularly formally observed by senior staff, who monitor some aspect of the teacher's work and in some schools teachers observe each other in a form of professional reciprocity.

These open cultures exhibit a tension between information giving and impression management (Ball 1998) but in the more locally embedded communities of primary schools there is also a great deal of satisfaction to be gained from involving and developing local relationships. A creative positive culture of aspiration and team work has developed to promote and ensure the establishment of a dynamic institution.

Aspiring cultures

Members held personal aspirations for career, for the learners, for their school and community and the values underpinning these aspirations were at the same time meritocratic, egalitarian and humanist. Our schools were littered with cultural and

educational homilies exhorting its members to think and act positively, to see learning as a comfortable but challenging journey made easier through self assessment and through co-operation with others, identifying mistakes as learning points and generally celebrating the joy of learning and education and downplaying authoritative power relations. Professional life is hard but the aspirational culture has its satisfiers. Encouraging young people to develop the institution is part of an aspiring culture that seeks to speed up change. New initiatives developed by the schools themselves are part of the branding of the school as they seek to enhance teacher's careers and interests, create innovative programmes that go to develop a public school identity. Promotion and challenges are daunting but they are welcome in this new 'can do' culture. Continuous improvement is a major feature of school's and teacher's work and challenges are a central part of the aspiring school cultures and we identified an educational entrepreneurialism (Woods 2007), an energy to be innovative, to drive along new initiatives and to develop original strategies and activities. A performative culture of awards and rewards also exists in all schools, for example: a Healthy Award Status for 2006-9, International Award for Cross Cultural Projects and 'Investor in People awards.

Team cultures

Team cultures have also spread across schools reconstituting the professional as a corporate member (Ball 1998). Today's professional primary school teacher is a team player who contributes to the presentation of the school as a unified, creative, inclusive and effective managerial organisation. Belonging to a team, the opposite of the lone professional of Lortie's (Lortie 1975) study or those in Jennifer Nias's (Nias 1989) study, is the major way in which a primary teacher's identity is now constructed (Woods and Jeffrey 2002). The team approach is manifest in the usual portrayal of photographs of all the school staff including support staff, kitchen and cleaning staff. These corporate teams reflect the modern commercial organisation in which everyone plays a part in the development and promotion of the cultural institution (Mentor, Muschamp et al. 1997).

Flattened hierarchies have been more prevalent in primary schools since the late 1980s (Nias, Southworth et al. 1989) through forms of distributed leadership (Woods 2004) in which teachers have taken specific responsibility for curriculum areas or

other specific responsibilities and teachers today relish these new opportunities to become part of the management of the institution.

The loss of trust (Troman 1999) engendered by the reforms at a national professional level has been replaced by trust at team level and is a central element that this time ensures that teachers identify with the institution. The team approach and distributed management enables class teachers to assist other teacher's professional practice, specifically in performative practices.

We can see that these schools, by being more open and inclusive, by endorsing and supporting an enterprise, aspiring creative culture are addressing the tension highlighted by Stephen Ball (1998) between how education plays its part in the enterprise culture and how it responds to a political agenda of concerns about the decline of community. Recent policies incorporate a support for creativity to enhance status and performance in its widest sense and we can see how the merging of the two discourses of performance and creativity are attempting to resolve that tension.

In Foucauldian terms (Foucault 1980) disciplinary power has been exercised under the permanent gaze of performance. However, how does this work in relation to pedagogy?

Creative teaching, learning and performativity

Creative teaching and learning was never a ubiquitous pedagogy in primary schools in the UK in spite of support for it in the Plowden Report (Plowden 1967) and a supportive educational literature from the 1970s. It was marginalised by the influence of Ofsted inspections and testing during the 1990s but nevertheless was held up as an antidote to this instrumental approach with specific schools maintaining its approach (Jeffrey and Woods 2003). This support, along with the rise of the creativity discourse and a global economic interest in creativity prompted the incorporation into government policy of creative teaching and learning as a valued pedagogic strategy valuing the creative person and creativity in general. Approval now exists and primary teachers have seized upon this approval to renew their interests in it.

These opportunities are seen as challenges and opportunities to review a school's curriculum provision from a creative perspective, incorporating creative teaching and learning approaches and for teachers to develop their own creativity, to take ownership and control over some aspects of curriculum and pedagogy. Digital

resources are adding much to creative teaching and learning as well as acting as a relay (Bernstein 1999) for government curriculum values through, for example, the new literacy framework. At best, we found some examples of how schools had integrated performativity and creative teaching and learning through what one teacher described as smart teaching.

Smart teaching

Smart teaching is an ingenious manipulation of both discourses for the benefit of their learners, their school policies and their own professionalism. It involves using some assessment criteria such as problem based approaches that have been part of the national curriculum for some time and they have easily been incorporated into creative approaches. Structure, appropriate resources and creative teaching makes for smart teaching. Active engagement with a 'hands on' approach aids the physical aspect of creative learning and problem solving aids the cognitive aspects of it.

In some cases teachers are becoming quite sophisticated at the integration of subjects and assessment, however, teachers need to be very familiar with the curriculum objectives and level descriptors to integrate assessments and creative work. It appears to be a combination of not being too constrained by the targets, but knowing them well and allowing for spontaneous investigations and knowing how to take advantage of this development in terms of specific assessments.

This is creative teaching used as a vehicle or a tool to deliver successfully the established National Curriculum objectives in skills, knowledge and understanding. It is what the NACCCE report (Education 1999) identified as teaching creatively but the report's preferred option of teaching for creativity has a more difficult path to tread for the performativity discourse is entrenched and influential.

Performative consolidation

Performativity works in at least three ways according to Ball (1998). First it works as a disciplinary system of judgements, classifications and targets towards which schools and teachers must strive and against and through which they are evaluated. We will call this strong performativity underpinned by a status narrative. Secondly, as a part of the transformation of education and schooling performativity provides sign systems which represent education as self-referential and reified for consumption. We will call

this weak performativity underpinned by a progression narrative that teachers and learners celebrate as they travel inexorably from one symbolic grade or level to the next. Performativity is a principle of governance which establishes strictly functional relations between an institution and its inside and outside environs – weak and strong performativity (Ball 1998). The linguistic discourse used to describe learning in these terms by teachers and learners alike becomes the norm and therefore exemplifies the third way in which performativity works. An utterance is performative in so far as ‘its effect upon the referent coincides with the utterance’ (Lyotard 1984, p.9). Lyotard suggested that grand narratives were being replaced by underground narratives although our own status and progression narratives are clearly not very deep. They manifest themselves through the way the surface level league table achievements signify the status narrative and ladder of learner progression in the assessment section of the National Curriculum guidelines represents the progression narrative.

The Status Narrative – strong performativity

In the strong performative operation schools and teachers are measured through SATs level assessments, eg: what percentage are at the ‘norm’ for that Key Stage and the results compared with other schools or classes or they are compared with how much percentage progress they have made from one year to the next. (Most of these comparisons ignore the fact that these measurements are taken with different cohorts). The consequences of failure in the strong performative situations are made clear to both teachers and learners, eg: starting at a lower level in Year 7 at secondary school will mean having to make up more ground. The implications of a failure of the school to improve or a dip in results is also made clear – an Ofsted inspection or loss of funding or the withholding of a head teacher’s increment or for teachers the removal of a post of responsibility or closure and an increase in identifying underperforming teachers has recently been announced by the Secretary of State for Education. Targets are also set for schools and teachers to assist this process of performativity.

However, use of annual tests to provide comparisons for teacher assessments on progress and improvement were generally supported and some teachers and learners derived satisfaction from performative, instrumental teaching and learning.

The result of these comparisons is underpinned by a status narrative in which schools and teachers are constantly compared and what matters to them is their position *vis a*

vie other local schools and their label as a successful or coasting or failing school. Any favourable positioning is welcomed and celebrated, a mediocre one is met with relief and an unfavourable one creates anxiety to improve their status.

Inspections are now referred to as audits rather than inspections, implying that this is a technical exercise like good bookkeeping that can ensure success and they can appeal to teachers keen to develop a professional identity within the discourse, for example welcoming an inspection as a check on compliance.

Strong performativity creates abnormal practices such as SATS preparation but attempts are made to normalise them, for example with breakfasts and the importation of personal comfort supports such as teddy bears during final testing. It's a way of life and teachers are the major relay (Bernstein 1997) of the performativity habitus in spite of some disagreement with the process and the use that is made of the results publicly. The status narrative necessitates preparation for a performative event or act just as any performance requires. It involves aspirations, determination and commitment to achieving the necessary accolades to confirm status.

Weak performativity – a progression narrative

A progression narrative is a weaker performativity practice concerned with the progress of the individual as well as the class and the school. It is a continuous and daily aspect of educational life unlike the status narrative which is awarded for a particular length of time until the next annual assessment. The progression narrative is based mainly in the curriculum and assessment aspects. Specific assessment criteria for a range of curriculum objectives are used to assess a child's progress and it provide details of where to go next as well as defining an individual position on a continuous ladder of progression. This is assessment *of* learning unlike the more formative approach of assessment *for* learning. These specific assessment stages are then collapsed into subject levelling where children are described in numerical ciphers such as a 2a or a 4b.

There are over 200 progression aspects that can be used to level a learner across all the subjects averaging approximately 15 per subject for Key Stage 2 – Years 3-6 - averaging again about 3-4 per assessments per year per child for each of 15 subjects. So each class teacher will have to carry out an evaluation of each child's level via the 50-60 progression aspects in 15 subjects each year.

Teachers, engaged in weak performativity, construct the children in terms of levels and are constructed by the amount of progression they achieve with individuals and the class and targets are set for each teacher and child each year. To be successful is to have progressed along a track of competencies and rising up a level progression to the next one through the competencies required.

Teachers regard it as good to have targets and responsibilities for attaining them as it focuses a teacher's attention on those that need help to improve. It's good to have information about levels because, in a spirit of openness, parent and learner know what is expected, they can show teachers their improvement, which ensures further support and they are then not left feeling they have let themselves down. Tracking one's progress and travelling to new levels of achievement is considered self motivating and teachers and learners take up the challenge readily.

There are three pressures here:

- To show progression from one level or sub level, eg: from Level 2c to 2a in English
- To show progression of the individual to the appropriate level for their age
- To show the progression of the cohort to the appropriate level for their age.

Discourse language

Discourses are made up of language as well as practices and primary teachers find themselves incorporating the language of performativity into their practices and it then becomes the discourse of the school, the staff room and the classroom. Inevitably they reproduce the language of professional practice and the language of a target and assessment culture, the language of the team and of auditors. The language becomes a manifestation of their professional identity and the language is then reprocessed in the classroom. Parents like teachers find it difficult to resist the discourse and language through which it is relayed.

Disciplinary power (Foucault 1984) operates in the space that the law left behind, in the workshop, the school, and teacher training. At the heart of all disciplinary systems functions a small penal mechanism. In education it is the teacher's grading system of learners and the failing school's reconstruction either by closure and reopening or

through the reorganisation by special units. There is a penalty for non observance as well as transgression, ‘a pupil’s offence is not only a minor infraction but an inability to carry out his tasks’ (p194).

Fabrications (Ball 1998) are present in both forms of performativity, such as believing that the SATs tests are a test of a culmination of five years learning when they are clearly exam coached activities. However, raising the level of achievement for all learners is a value adopted by all schools and the necessary fabrications don’t totally obliterate the ways in which teachers attempt to maintain a constant struggle to ensure that the performative aspects of a school’s performance do not wholly represent their day to day set of work practices (Ball 1998) as they try to ensure the delivery of a wide range of educative experiences. They do this by acting creatively to introduce smart teaching and/or special creative events to offset the experience of strong performativity. However, this, along with the need to engage in a public performances leads to fast teaching.

Fast teaching for fast times.

The combination of open, aspiring and team cultures, opportunities for more creative teaching and learning and a major imperative to enforce the progression narrative has created primary schools that have to work at an intensified pace. The need to innovate and maintain a dynamic momentum, to integrate some creative practices and to maintain performativity intensifies the experience of time in a primary school. There was powerful energy flowing through these schools that reflected the urgency of a dynamic culture of busy organisations incorporating many active and exciting daily events and this fast education and fast teaching was supplemented by the fast tracking of careers. A wide range of National celebrations are taken up and week long creativity projects add to the ever changing experience of a fast education. There are a plethora of outings and school journeys, and they sometimes spread into the holidays. Fast policy churning (Jones, Pickard et al. 2008) adds to the intensification of teacher’s lives.

The dynamism of the institutions is structuring phenomenological time – subjective time – into a polychronic time frame spurred on by the dynamic culture (Hargreaves 1994). Teachers and schools are striving to be open, inclusive, caring, aspirational, entrepreneurial, creative, all embracing and performative. The difference between the

polychronic time of the primary school teacher prior to the reform programme in the UK was that the class teacher was in charge of time and now the desire to exhibit performance and to develop creative teaching and learning, to implement strong and weak performativity has recontextualised (Bernstein 1999) that control.

This fast pace is dynamic and exciting but it has an internal tension. Fast teaching leads to a fragmented education (Ball 1998) and a fragmented pedagogy and a polychronic time frame of what appears to be self intensification and there is sometimes a regretful tone as the next topic or initiative takes precedence. Primary schools' polychronic time frames today are both a mixture of management directed initiatives and creative endeavours that provide satisfaction and energy for the teacher, something akin to creative intensification.

Education policy in the UK at all levels displays a complex, fluctuating disarray of policy strategies, political projects and desires, which are popular and incoherent, totalising and individualising, homogenising and fragmenting (Ball 1998). These complex attributes are all recognisable in the description we have provided of primary schools attempting to continually develop their identities and to be seen as progressive, innovative institutions as well as taking on board a continual outpouring of government reforms and policies to create a dynamic institution that oozes action and development at a pace that is challenging, intensifying and wearisome.

Conclusion

Open and developing institutions are constantly on the move to enhance their image and performance. The schools were keen to show their creativity, their entrepreneurial activity, their ability to embrace any new initiative or idea and their willingness to institutionalise dynamism. The market context in which schools are placed means constant vigilance over local and national image and status with league table performances in national tests and from Ofsted inspections freely available. The need to show a good side of the school to the public is essential and schools act creatively to ensure their image is acceptable and applauded. Those schools in poorer areas work hard at both improving national test results and at showing their institution to be creative and entrepreneurial to go alongside their probable low scores in the national tests and those schools in high SES areas also have to continually show their generally privileged intake that they are an innovative learning institution providing a wide

range of activities and experiences for their learners and parents as well as high scores. Both types of schools created tensions within their institutions by intensifying their work and activities.

The primary schools in this research reflect the predominate national policies in that they are keen to raise achievement, keen to be creative about their school's and their own development, see work as challenging and rewarding, understand and accept the need to develop skills and to maintain a learning attitude, gradually improving learner's knowledge to cope with the uncertainty of the future. They like the opportunity to take part in the management of schools and the flattened hierarchies that go with new managerialism for they assist career development and provide opportunities for self development and creative endeavour which they value. They support the progression narrative and find a weak approach to performative learning as valuable in assisting development for themselves and their learners. The possibility of improving the achievement and progress of young children is a value they hold dear and where performativity can assist this process they support it providing people and schools are not pilloried for failure.

Consequently, any stark polarisation of the two discourses was not found to be prevalent in this research. They were heavily integrated through a school culture of performance and institutional positioning in an open market but less so in pedagogy. Where the merging of the two pedagogies took place in smart teaching, teaching creatively was the preferred form over teaching *for* creativity but the progression narrative dominated and in strong performativity agendas and situations creative teaching was marginalised to fun time slots. The creativity and a performativity discourses appear to be integrated at the level of performance, in a tenuous relationship at the mainstream pedagogic level and in opposition where strong performativity holds sway.

Three possible scenarios are possible.

- Creative teaching and learning acts to improve the effectiveness of the progression narrative which is underpinned by a weak performativity discourse, creative instrumentalism – teaching creatively

- Creative teaching and learning and performativity approaches are viewed as the means to develop the new creative, skilful, collaborative contributor to the national economy – the creative citizen – teaching for creativity
- Creative teaching and learning emerges as a challenge to performative and market strategies – the creative challenge.

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