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“We’re not building worker bees.” What has happened to creative practice in England since The Dartmouth Conference of 1966?

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Biography

Lorna Smith leads the PGCE English programme at the University of Bristol. Her main current research interest, and the field for her doctoral studies, is the impact of the latest national curriculum (2014) on creativity in the English classroom. Previous publications include exploring the impact of technology enhanced learning (particularly the contribution that ICT can make to an English classroom) and developing oracy through storytelling. She launched a successful local Teachers as Writers group in 2013 as part of the National Writing Project, which seeks to explore the impact of teachers' writing on their work with children in the classroom.

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Abstract

It is now five years since the introduction of the current National Curriculum for English in England (DfE, 2014); it is just over fifty years since the Dartmouth Conference drew together American and English educationalists. This paper reports on a hermeneutic study that presents voices from the field of English teaching in England. It asks questions of today's statutory instruments in the light of approaches highlighted at Dartmouth, with a focus on writing. It illustrates the challenges faced by English teachers from an examination-focused system, but suggests that ultimately the tradition exemplified by Dartmouth, which promotes creative pedagogies and the potential of writing to develop students' personal and social growth, survives. It concludes that it is important to promote creative approaches in English classrooms of today and education policy of tomorrow.

(131 words)

Keywords

Creativity, Writing, Dartmouth, Growth, Hermeneutic

Creativity and language

Creativity holds an ambiguous place in English education, with commentators 'unable to decide whether it is a good or bad thing' (Marshall, 2001 in Blamires and Peterson, 2014:148). Some detractors see 'creativity' as the antonym to 'accuracy' (Hodgson and Wilkin, 2014); others accuse creativity of preventing action, the opposite of 'performativity' (Elliot, 1998:7), possibly because the prime incentive to undertake creative work is not always financial. Perhaps this explains why the term 'creativity' (and any word containing the 'create' root) has been expurgated from the revised national curriculum (sic) in England (DfE, 2014), replaced by a focus on *knowledge* and *accuracy*, the result of erstwhile Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove's belief that students suffer from a 'knowledge deficit' (Hirsch, 2006).

Yet creativity has long been valued *by educationalists* as an essential element, not only of English teaching but education itself. To cite just a few famous representative voices, Aristotle saw imitation – replicating the world through the creation of art - as 'the highest form of learning' as it captures both 'the permanent and the necessary' (in Williams, 1961/2001:21). Bruner suggests knowledge is passed on through what we make or bring to bear, 'oeuvres' which are tangible records of our thoughts and the 'interactive process in which people learn from each other' (1996:22), while Craft shows that children develop personal, social, cultural and financial understanding through creative approaches (2001). Fleming challenges the idea that creativity in education is 'mere' entertainment; in contrast, it allows for 'sustaining, refreshing and deepening concentration' (2010:61) and ethical nourishment. Such is the complexity in the defining what creativity is and what it does that McCallum coined the term 'creativities' (2012:20) to suggest the range of range of possibilities. Broadly, it might be said that creativity enables us both to learn and grow as individuals *and* stand in each other's shoes; it offers opportunity and enables 'possibility thinking' (Jeffrey and Craft, 2004:81) – hence, it has political agency. At its best, creativity enables us better to understand each other, so enabling humanity to act together towards mending global divisions.

Exploring creativity in terms of classroom English depends upon awareness of the fundamental role of language in learning. Language is how we know the world - 'Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a *world* at all' (Gadamer, 1975/2012:440). The English classroom should be a space where children learn, through using language, to think and communicate with others. The process is dialogic and iterative, with meanings being constantly added to and built upon. A creative approach provides the conditions in which this can happen. It has been suggested that we should think not of how '*creativity and*

learning link to English', but how '*creativity and English* link to learning' (McCallum, 2012:32, emphasis original).

In English classrooms, the results of creative practice are often made manifest in written form. Whether this should be termed 'creative writing' is debatable - it is a slippery term. One perspective presents creative writing as that which is imaginative and novel, with 'a uniqueness of style' (Moslemi, 1975), and it is perhaps this definition – characterised as descriptive or 'literary' - that is widely understood. The contrary view sees *all* original writing as creative, however prosaic (reports, text messages, shopping lists…), since it is newly-coined. Yet such distinctions are misleading. An appreciation of the role of language in learning suggests that writing in any genre might be creative if it 'communicat[es] something that has really engaged [children's] minds' (Plowden, 1967:219). In terms of teaching writing, the importance lies as much in the creative process as the product; the genre of the writing is immaterial if the child has grown through so doing.

Creative practice before Dartmouth

In England, this tradition can be traced as far back as 1905, when the Board of Education's 'Blue Books'[1] stated the role of the teacher was to promote 'active curiosity' (1912:11). Dialogue is seen as fundamental in developing a child's ideas, in the child's *own* language – children should have the 'liberty of free expression' (1912:22) rather than be constrained by expectations of formal classroomese. The teacher should be sympathetic to a child's experience of the world: 'each lesson must be a renewal and an increase of that connected store of experience which becomes knowledge' (ibid). Writing is presented as a means of capturing and promoting thought. Accordingly, writing should be judged not for accuracy or presentation but for:

> *'… truthfulness in the widest sense – the truthfulness with which they record their experiences and impressions; the accuracy with which they describe things or scenes; and the honesty that they show in stating, when called upon to do so, what they really think or feel.' (BoE, 1937:396).*

The focus on experiences, impressions and real feeling here suggests an awareness that writing in the classroom should provide opportunities to promote a child's personal growth, develop their identity and foster their 'imaginative sympathy' (Hourd, 1949 in Bolton, 1997:163). The quotation speaks to a twenty-first-century audience: without the chance to practice using language in today's climate of fake news and alternative facts, how will children be challenged to question 'truth'?

[1] The Blue Books series was more formally but less catchily entitled 'Suggestions for the consideration of teachers and others in the work of the public elementary schools.' They were published at regular intervals from 1905 - 1959; from the start, they foregrounded child-led learning (Smith, 2018).

History indicates, however, that much of the advice in the earliest Blue Books was apparently largely ignored at the time – English teaching in England before the 1960s was, according to a school inspector, characterised by grammatical exercises, 'largely stagnant… competent but dull' (Medway et al, 2014:3/38), perhaps because, as Plowden suggests, the 11 plus exam (which creamed off the more able children to grammar school) was the 'taskmaster' (1967:2). Dixon notes that secondary teaching before the 1960s was either skills-based or fixated on knowledge of the literary canon (1967). Nonetheless, interest in creative teaching and learning approaches was revived through the grass-roots London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE) established in 1947 (Gibbons, 2017). Perhaps rekindling the spirit of the Blue Books, LATE members advocated child-centred practice. They explored the relationship between language and thought; they dared to teach modern as well as nineteenth century novels, and began to publish student-friendly text books to replace the stuffy grammar books (Medway et al, 2014). Such was LATE's reach that a sister organisation was formed in 1963, the National Association for the Teaching of English (the equivalent of the US National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)). Members included James Britton, John Dixon, David Holbrook and Geoffrey Summerfield.

Britton was a lecturer at the Institute of Education in London. His research focused on the language of lived experience, and the relationship between language and thought. He was interested in how we use language to make sense of both our own private worlds and the world beyond. Dixon was the Head of English of experimental comprehensive, Walworth School, from 1959-65 (taking over the role from Harold Rosen) and was among the first to run a department in which English teachers collaborated with each other, shared ideas and co-developed the curriculum (Medway et al, 2014). Holbrook was a Cambridge graduate (and student of FR Leavis) who taught in a secondary modern in a seaside town and tutored for the Workers' Educational Association in the 1950s before being appointed to one of the innovative Village Colleges in Cambridgeshire and given the bottom stream. Told he could do what he liked with them (anon: 2011), he encouraged children to write, drawing connections between language and feeling – and achieved more than his colleagues had ever thought possible. He used his experience to write two books that were immediately popular: *English for Maturity* (1961) and *English for the Rejected* (1964). Summerfield was the editor of the ground-breaking series of poetry anthologies for children, *Voices*, first published in the early 1960s.

So it is not surprising that when the Dartmouth Conference invitation went out – triggered by the concern of the Dean of the University of Dartmouth in New Hampshire, USA, that 'independent learning and depth' was lacking in freshmen (Donahue, 2015, n.p.) - these practitioners were among those who were keen to attend. Together with colleagues keen to revive the use of creative

classrooms (Medway et al, 2014; Gibbons, 2017), Britton, Dixon, Holbrook and Summerfield were mouthpieces of the 'febrile activity' that was beginning to replace years of 'suspended animation' in English teaching (Allen, 1973 *in* Medway et al, 2014:42).

The Dartmouth Conference

The Dartmouth Conference, more properly the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English, was convened in 1966. Attended by the 'top people in the teaching of English' (Jensen, n.d. in Donahue, 2015: n.p.), it was to come to define school English in both countries in the years following. The US delegation consisted almost entirely of academics - only two US teachers were offered places, nominated by the NCTE, one of whom was James Moffett, a high-school teacher from New Hampshire (see below) - while many of the English group were practising teachers (included those noted above). There were tensions, as the Americans brought to the table a focus on subject content which did not mesh well with the English personal growth perspective (Harris, 1991; Trimbur, 2008), but perhaps *because* the English delegation included teachers, who were able to draw directly on their experience of creative teaching and learning, its influence was strongly felt. After the conference, creative, child-centred approaches gained traction in classrooms in both countries, requiring a 'sizeable shift and reorientation of [American teachers'] educational philosophy' (Perry, 1974:6).

Publications arising from Dartmouth were highly influential in developing educational thinking about such approaches and about writing pedagogy. Their content is not wholly original, and there was never full consensus between the English and American positions (which Trimbur indicates may be in part because American native English had a different history to English native English (2008)). But they caught the mood of the time. Their shared philosophy is humane and child-centred., leading to renewed focus on personal and expressive forms of writing (Harris, 1991). I discuss briefly some representative examples here.

Britton mooted that we should ask not what school English *is* but what it *does*. He remade the case (see BoE 1912 above) that the language of the classroom should be the children's own. In *Language and Learning* he presents language as integral to thinking and learning, arguing teachers needed to be conscious of language in their work: 'what children use language for in school must be "operations" and not "dummy runs"' (1970:130), with language 'practiced' in the sense of being applied or implemented to forge understandings. Dixon similarly suggests that creative approaches that build on what the child brings to the classroom, their *own* language and life experiences, strengthens what is innate in that individual. Students should be placed at the heart of their own

learning, with the curriculum developed accordingly: the title of Dixon's *Growth through English* (1967) echoes the imagery used decades previously by Matthew Arnold (1869: n.p.) when he talks of our 'growing and… becoming' through cultural activity. Dixon presents a view of doing English that combines 'artist, critic, teacher and student' (Harris, 1991: 638). In the US, Moffett's *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1968) also champions personal growth through active uses of language: he argues that language is learnt through interaction, not imitation, so speech and drama are central (where drama is an opportunity to experiment rather than perform plays) (Spalding et al, 2012). Dixon (2010) describes how Moffett inspired teachers to reconsider their approach to questioning to inspire dynamic thought – for instance, asking what a poem is *saying* instead of asking what it is *about.*

Creativity in the English Programme (Holbrook, 1968) positions creativity as the starting point, the '*basis* of our approach to English teaching as an art' (1968:1, my emphasis), suggesting that creativity and language are co-dependent; since language is the medium of communication with others, creativity provides our social identity and is a pre-requisite of our very humanity. While Holbrook acknowledges that some have a greater capacity for creativity than others, he suggests that it is fear of or hostility to being creative that holds people back (rather than a *lack* of creativity), and it is an 'ordinary good English teacher' (1968:9) who can nurture its development.

In *Creativity in English* (1967), Summerfield reinforces this view, emphasising the importance of creativity in personal development *and* society. He clarifies the role of 'creative English' in the classroom: it is not about cultivating poets, but forming 'more articulate, more effectively human people' (1967:40). Summerfield's vision combines teaching creatively and creative learning; like Holbrook, he emphasises the importance of the teacher:

> *"Creative English" is not for me a matter of simply eliciting verse or worse, but rather of establishing a relationship and an ethos which will promote experiment, talk, enquiry, amusement, vivacity, bouts of intense concentration, seriousness, collaboration, and a clearer and more adequate self-knowledge… And the teacher's sense of his (sic) role is crucial. If he is prescriptive - knowing what he wants, knowing all the answers beforehand - he will be less effective than if he is prepared to allow the pupils' awareness of criteria to grow for itself in the business of making, modifying, and so on* (1967:44).

Summerfield cites the American poet May Swenson who describes both creating and reading a poem as *play* rather than work. He discusses the misapprehension that creative English is seen as 'play' and serious English is 'work', concluding that *all* English work is creative.

In terms of the teaching of writing, a creative approach is promoted capitalising on children's developing use of language, whether spoken or read. Britton argued that artificial stimuli are

unnecessary: 'The world about the child waits to be written about' (1972 in 1982:110) – writing being an opportunity to discover and understand themselves and their context. The resultant writing moulds to its form, being 'transactional' or 'poetic' according to the purpose and audience. Moffett too emphasises the importance of writing for genuine audiences for a variety of authentic purposes; he recommends that students write frequently, in a range of genres, to develop confidence and competence (Spalding et al, 2012; Burgess et al, 2010).

These arguments for creative teaching in classrooms encouraging independence, risk-taking and exploration by both teachers and pupils were influential well into the next decade, at least in spirit. Creativity was seen as a means to develop rounded individuals and a democratic society. For instance, Kitshaber positions creative work as 'a way to self-realization' (1972, in McKenzie, 2017:92), while Perry describes Miller's position similarly: 'The truly human being is the creative man' (1974:12). McKenzie (op cit) highlights how themes of tolerance and humanity run through articles published in the *English Journal* in the US throughout the 1970s, with the social justice agenda implicit. Moffett's work was said to be what American teachers 'instinctively sought' (Spalding, 2012:28).

Yet despite the popularity of Dartmouth's legacy in the field of English pedagogy, there were perhaps inevitable tensions between academics, and battles for English between creatives and anti-creatives remained. Harris (1991) provides numerous examples of those who preferred a skills-based and/or cultural heritage model of English. In England, establishment reaction against creative approaches was one factor leading to the publication of the first National Curriculum (Cox, 1989) by the Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in a bid to control what was seen as the 'climate of unchecked creativity' (Bullock, 1975:6).

And debate around the National Curriculum for English has continued ever since: there have been six iterations to date. Noting the conservatism of President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher had similar impacts on education in their respective countries, Britton bemoaned the 'lack of influence' (1991:5) education experts had on government policy, a complaint echoed loudly today. Accordingly, my question is how do English teaching professionals report shifts in creative practice? Fifty years after Dartmouth, what has been gained, what has been lost?

Research methodology

My research takes a hermeneutic approach. Hermeneutics is the branch of philosophy concerning the interpretation of language. It recognises that language *alone* is not enough: for *communication*

to take place, language needs to be *understood*. It has 'human communication, language and discourse at its centre' (Gardner, 2010:39) – we might say the same of English. Hermeneutics, too, is a creative paradigm, actively involving imagination, reflecting and risk-taking through the process of interpreting and forming ideas.

For this paper I interviewed 11 experts active in the field of secondary English in England. The 'theory-based' sample (Patton, 1990 in Miles and Huberman, 1994:28) includes writers, academics, teacher educators, Head Teachers, Heads of Department and recently-qualified teachers. They were selected according to their role and experience, not their perspective on the theme. I sought to discover their understanding of creativity (or creativities), how this shapes their practice within the present curriculum, and whether approaches valued in the past are valued today.

I use the term 'colloquy' in preference to 'interview.' The interviewer and interviewee are both 'colloquists': the term recognises the equality inherent between the two participants engaged in dialogic conversation. In addition, the word 'colloquy' represents both interview and transcript, thereby recognising the importance of the conversations themselves and their written record.

In tune with the creative spirit of the research I resisted a traditional interview method, adopting the idea that interviewing is an *art*, and thus embracing the notion that it involves 'intuition, creativity, improvisation, and breaking the rules' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009:86). Thus, rather than asking direct questions, I provided prompts for conversation, based on Marshall's use of scenarios to understand English teachers' educational philosophies (2000). Colloquists were presented with eight quotations selected from a hermeneutic review of the literature, then invited to respond to any number of the quotations in any way they saw fit. The quotations offer a provocative range of opinions, historical context and political stances on education, creativity, the English curriculum and writing pedagogy. They include, for instance, excerpts from a speech by Schools Minister Nick Gibb beginning 'Education is the engine of our economy' (2015, n.p.), Sternberg's definition of creativity as 'as much as decision about and an attitude toward life as it is a matter of ability' (2003:84), an explanation of creativity from the NC 2007, 'Pupils show creativity when they make unexpected connections, use striking and original phrases or images, approach tasks from a variety of starting points, or change forms to surprise and engage the reader' (n.p) and the Summerfield statement cited above. Through the ensuing discussions, the colloquists and I co-created 'an event of truth' (Gadamer 2004:484).

In analysing the written colloquies, Kinsella's three-tier model for hermeneutic research was adopted. This involved i) holistic analysis (reading for a sense of a whole), ii) selective analysis (identifying important parts) and iii) detailed analysis (identification of meaningful words and

phrases) (Kinsella and Bidinosti, 2016). Ideas were grouped for comparison and contrast. I quote generously from the colloquies in the discussion below to enable the reader to appreciate their voice and tone.

So where do teachers in England think we are now?

A strong theme was the challenge of the advent of a statutory curriculum. Some colloquists report the death of creative freedom of the teacher and with it, professional autonomy. A teacher since the mid-1980s (now headteacher), Gary[2] notes the 'de-professionalisation'[3] that has occurred since the advent of the National Curriculum in 1989 and the resultant 'policy overload' (Ball, 2013:3), with teachers being told not only *what* to teach but *how:* 'we've lost… our… vocation in a way.' Doug reflects that the very language we use to talk about English has become constrained:

> *I'd like to think of English teaching as… an organic thing, [like] creating a greenhouse in which the climatic conditions are such that things can spring to life and grow, [but] … lots of metaphorical models for teaching these days are much more mechanical or technological.*

Leon blames the heavily-structured National Literacy Strategy, introduced in 2002, for bringing in 'rather deadly… teacher-led rather fast-paced episodic lesson[s]' while Doug reports the Strategy made him 'run for the hills' – he moved into the unregulated private sector.

The de-professionalisation and 'deadliness' are largely a result of education policies which conflate 'values, rigour, discipline and freedom' with 'excellence, competition and prosperity' (Ball, 2013:4). With the National Curriculum came national testing and the ability to compare one school's results with another's at regular intervals. This system privileges parent choice (despite arguments that such an approach is unequitable and undemocratic (Whitty n.d, n.p in Tores, 1998)); a school's roll – and therefore its viability – is therefore largely dependent on its examination success. Teachers' careers depend on their students' exam results, so teaching to the test has become the norm, with some colloquists reporting they are required to begin explicit preparations for their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams[4] five years in advance. While Leon feels the revised specifications (first sat in 2017) develop students' intellectual, analytical and comparative skills better than their predecessors, there is a danger that a body of teachers de-professionalised by what preceded the

[2] All names have been changed.
[3] Quotations taken from colloquies 2016-17
[4] Statutory exams taken by all 15/16 year olds.

latest changes will not be able to capitalise on the opportunity to take risks and teach creatively beyond the test.

Assessment practice has changed alongside changes to the NC. Dartmouth reminded teachers to *respond* to children's work rather than judge it (in the same vein as the Blue Books), but today's accountability culture encourages a more calculated approach, which can lead to a mechanical, less creative pedagogy – however uncomfortable teachers feel about the process:

Ruth: *[Children] are not writing for themselves as such, are they? They're writing it for a specific audience and for the purpose of… an assessment, which [is]… difficult.*

Prescriptive examination mark schemes which restrict opportunities for students to write with individual flair are problematic:

Doug: *I remember the [introduction of] more clear emphasis upon assessment objectives… [and] the gradual atomising of that [so]… an essay that was otherwise brilliant and insightful and beautifully structured and cogent, and… <u>should</u> be getting a top grade, might not get a top grade... This has been a source of some frustration because sometimes that mode of assessment does penalise the more creative and the more gifted students in English.*

The pressure felt by teachers feeds down to students. Experienced and younger colloquists alike report children's increased fear of failure; their enjoyment and confidence in writing has concomitantly decreased. Expressive writing is particularly vulnerable in a test-laden regime, as students cannot learn the 'formula' in the way they might for other assessed genres. Otherwise successful students are limited and lack confidence in such tasks, showing reluctance even with encouragement and space to write freely:

Paul: *… those very bright students you get at GCSE, who get fantastic A grades, they can do the analytical essay in the dark with their hands tied behind their back… but when it comes to actually telling a story and writing convincingly about <u>feelings</u> or creating a sincere relationship, not a clue!*

Similarly, Anne, a teacher in 3 schools over her 15-year career, notes children have become more hesitant:

Anne: *I teach lots of children – mainly boys – who won't write things down because they're frightened of it being wrong, but they'll <u>say</u> it to me… and then I'll say, 'Yeah that's brilliant, that's a really good idea, go and write that down,' and only <u>then</u> will they write it.*

Sara has four years' teaching experience and even she sees anxiety has increased since the introduction of 2014 curriculum and the accompanying grammar-focused tests for Year 6 pupils (10-11-year olds). Herself a writer, she describes how hard she finds it to inspire her students:

Sara: *What I find often with Year Sevens is that they're almost afraid of creativity… There's a real noticeable difference in Year Sevens this year[i] than previous groups… This year it's much more, 'Would it be all right if I did this?... Will I still get the marks?'… they <u>want</u> to do the creative thing, but… they understand what the expectations are of a school and they don't see a school as necessarily being a place where creativity should thrive.*

Colloquists further suggest that the wrong things are privileged in an exam-driven system, such as writing at speed, which further stymies effective writing:

Paul: *A lot of kids think that their first attempt at a piece of writing is [sufficient] … Especially with poetry. I'll say, 'OK, so you've got fifteen minutes to get some ideas down, a first draft,' and you get a child in five minutes saying, 'I've done!' as though it's a time-related task, which is what I suppose our academic system… is pushing kids towards… whereas actually taking time and mulling things over, being self-critical, fashioning your creativity is really important.*

The irony is that despite (or because of) the testing regime, outcomes by some measures remain obstinately static. While GCSE scores in England apparently show a marked improvement (22% gaining 5 or more A*-C passes in 1975, compared to 81% in 2012 (Smith, 2017)) there is little evidence of improvement in global terms. International comparative data for writing is difficult to come by but, if PISA rankings for <u>reading</u> can be taken as proxy indicator of success, we see outcomes for the UK have plateaued at around the OECD average [Table 1].

As a teacher educator, it is the impact of restrictive, exam-focused practice experienced in some schools on newcomers to the profession that most concerns me. This concern is shared by teacher-educator colloquists:

Judy: *… the notion of experiment… comes first, really, in thinking about what creative English might be... but I'm not sure it's something that we're seeing in in schools. I don't think there's the space and capacity for that for that to happen.*

Gill: *There are huge possibilities for being very <u>un</u>creative right now and I fear that. Most of the time I spend in classrooms I am observing my own trainees teach and they are having to be in line… they are having to fit in.*

How can we be confident that student teachers of English will have the integrity and vision to take use creative approaches when they are experiencing rigid, uninspiring, formulaic approaches in placement schools?

No path is wholly rough: reasons to be tentatively cheerful

However, all this notwithstanding, a robust interest in creative pedagogy survives. In terms of writing, McKenzie (2017:93) notes the 'Dartmouth tradition' in America led to a renewed focus on

Rosenblatt's work, with a movement towards the writing process rather than product. And it is surely no accident that the 'global renaissance… in writing studies at *all* levels on *every* continent' (Bazerman, 2007: n.p. my emphasis) began shortly after Dartmouth, given the reach and influence of US and UK education policy (Ball, 2013:1).

The strength of this movement is illustrated in America through the National Writing Project (nwp.org), founded at the University of California in 1974, now a network of over 200 sites representing every state. Its mission is to 'provide professional development, develop resources, generate research, and act on knowledge to improve the teaching of writing and learning in schools and communities' (https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/about.csp). NWP programs are shown to have a positive statistically-significant impact (Gallagher et al, 2015) on student outcomes. Its success inspired the creation of a similar movement in England: in 2009 a grass-roots research project was established that aims to 'explore writing and find out further answers to the question, 'What happens when teachers gather together to write and share their writing?' (http://www.nwp.org.uk). Although unfunded, it is growing steadily, with over 20 groups established nationwide. Several colloquists are actively involved and value both sharing their writing and their experiences of teaching writing:

Sara: *We write creatively as an outlet for ourselves. It might be that's our way of dealing with something that we didn't even really know that we needed to deal with, [or] exploring an idea from a different angle, so giving ourselves the opportunity to really think, use empathy, to see what's its limit. It's to help us work through things [and] understand things, and if you can do that in a beautiful way, then more's the better*.

Beyond the NWP, there is evidence of a strong will to retain a creative approach to children's writing, despite the limitations discussed – committed teachers are using their classrooms quasi-subversively to teach child-centred English alongside exam preparation. In fact, for Tony (a published poet and academic), a strictly-defined curriculum is not necessarily as limiting as some colloquists cited above suggest, as inspiration can be a product of restraint:

Tony: *It's like sonnet writing… I work better knowing there are constraints, which is why the exam is not necessarily the killer because that's the constraint I've got to work to and I have to interpret that creatively.*

Nonetheless, all reject curricula that focus on knowledge and technical accuracy at the expense of creative personal growth and there is, accordingly, a perceived need to work against the spirit of a knowledge-based national curriculum, despite the necessity for teachers to prepare students effectively for exams.

Anne: *What do we look for in our children? Well, we look for them to pass a lot of exams, [but] does that mean they've been educated in English? It doesn't, it means they've been trained to pass exams. Being educated [is] about teaching them skills and giving them the desire to find out more so that once they pass out of the teacher's hands they still carry on their education.*

Gill: *When you're teaching someone English, you're not just teaching them to navigate Of Mice and Men, you're teaching them something about themselves and self-expression*.

These teachers are still inspiring children to write for themselves, albeit not always in class:

Ruth: *There can be English going on in lots of different settings… I've got some students who absolutely [love] creative writing at home but don't necessarily want to be assessed on it. I understand that... It's not all about assessment; it's about enjoyment and expressing yourself*.

Colloquists recognise English as the key to emotional maturity, examination success apart:

Anne: *I have an A Level Creative Writing student who's autistic. His A Level subjects are Maths, Further Maths, Physics and Chemistry, and he comes to Creative Writing. In the first session we were writing poems and… he couldn't understand what I wanted him to do… [yet] by the end of the course he'd written some poems… He's not an able writer, but he [now] sees literature as something that is for him… He's made a decision. His poetry is original; whether it's of value… what do we mean by that? Is it of value to him...? Yes.*

Another colloquist, incensed by the Government's scrapping of the Creative Writing A level, has established a new qualification to replace it, the Apprentice of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. Recognised by UCAS (the body that oversees entry to British universities) it has been licenced since 2017. This practical, creative response illustrates the energy and determination of English professionals to counter the neoconservative orthodoxy that, as Ball (2013) suggests, *seems* to be encouraging freedom whilst imposing restraint.

One of the most hopeful signs is that even the recently-qualified colloquists – products themselves of a league-table and examination-laden regime – see creative approaches as just as valuable as experienced colloquists who have taught through decades of change. Sara recognises that creative work in English goes beyond personal growth to the growth of community and society as a whole:

Sara: *When we talk about creativity in schools we often think in terms of the Arts or sitting down and doing a nice piece of creative writing, but actually creativity is thinking, promoting that creativity of thinking that doesn't fit in at all with that model of building worker bees… who can follow rules and do what they're told. Creativity of thinking is something that can change a society for the better and it's something that can help people really feel that they're not disenfranchised any more*.

Sara's words emphasise that language is more than simply expression; it is a form of action that can advance a cause. One of the new generation of English teachers, she understands that creative

approaches in English are worth fighting for in classrooms now and in education policy for the future, as do her colleagues. I cannot claim that these 11 voices are representative of the profession in England as a whole, of course, but there is evidence that a tradition connecting language, creative practice and deep learning through English that can be traced to the Blue Books and was foregrounded at Dartmouth continues – even in arid soil - to grow.

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[i] This conversation took place in November; the first cohort of Y6 students had sat the revised Key Stage 2 tests the previous May, before joining Sara's school as Y7 students in September.

Table 1: Comparative rankings, PISA Reading scores:

Year of test	2015	2012	2009	2006

OECD average	493	496	493	n/a
UK	498	499	494	495

N.B. – 'UK' includes data for England, Scotland, Wales, N. Ireland; there is no data available for England only. 2006 is the first year for which data is available.