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Pupils' Views of creativity and the Learning Process

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Creativity in Education is a concept that is used essentially as a metaphor. It stands of open-mindedness, exploration, the celebration of difference and originality, for humour and the pleasures of learning, for anything that is opposed to the prevailing mood of utilitarianism. Creativity is an automatic opposition to the language of accountability, of instrumental skills, the measurement of outcomes and the dogmas of evidence based policy. It is a signal of an alternative, and that is its strength and limitation. As a symbol of reaction to the mechanistic language that has reappeared so forcefully one hundred and fifty years since Dickens satirised it in <u>Hard Times</u>, it is both attractive and easily dismissed.

Creativity is a term that is associated with the vague and the ill-defined, even if well meaning, with the insubstantial and self-indulgent, even if celebratory.

Teachers invoke the term and yet have great difficulty in pinning it down or explaining exactly what it means. Philosophers point out that creativity, like imagination, is not a concept that can really be substantiated with any precise meaning (White 2003). The very fact that it has become a symbol for alternative strategies and a different outlook has led to weakness and vulnerability.

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 makes the term problematic, something potentially dangerous rather than useful. When children are asked to define what is meant by creativity they immediately think of two things. One is the idea of the product, the outcome of creativity rather than the act, the work of art. The other is the painful distinction between the ability and the application, a dichotomy that so oppresses them. The realisation that no 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 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 age 7)

The understanding that children present of the notion of creativity, inspiration or palpable outcome is, however, quickly undermined by their further definitions and analysis of it. Whilst linguistic philosophers might doubt its claims to valid meaning, the concept of imagination has a long history and a parallel one of attempting to explain something that is hard to measure and anything but utilitarian. The history of the ideal, of inspiration, of some force that goes beyond the power of pure reason is a long one that was most powerful in the nineteenth century, from Kant to Herder, even if its political apotheosis came later (Kerdourie 1967). The most influential Anglophone distinction was that made by Coleridge between fancy and imagination. The importance of this lies in the fact that however convoluted his philosophy and however influenced by German transandentalism, with unacknowledged borrowings that infuse <u>Biographica Literaria</u>, Coleridge was essentially a poet. Writers have few qualms in discussing creativity for they know the processes of making something unique so well that they become down to earth about it. Coleridge knows 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.

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 journeyman's' approach to learning (1817) Auden famously reiterated the importance of learning a craft, making the overlap between aptitude and application clear:

"As a rule, the sign that a beginner has a genuine and original talent is that he is more interested in playing with words than in saying something original" *(1954 p31)*

And

"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"* *(ibid p23)*

We come down to earth with a bump. 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 and it is very important to understand the similarities of experience. The urge to be creative, inventive, to take risks, to explore, is constantly before us, but so are the concomitant restraints. Creativity is a metaphor but it is easier to understand what it is not than to grasp what is consists of. Those who are constrained by convention, averse to originality and who wish to follow the prevailing norms will never be accused of being creative. For children, the constraints are more obviously external. The everyday experience of school and the dictates of the education system are based on the power of; norms and expectations.

Creativity is easily seen as any alternative to conventional schooling. Schooling rests on the delivery of a set curriculum, on the development of instrumental skills, on the measurement of performance and the testing of standardised knowledge. If we explore pupils' experience of school we will find a consistency of analysis that makes the homogeneity of the experience, in most of the world,

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).

The expectations of schooling, as laid out by the National Curriculum, for example, are clear and constantly reinforced by policy statements (DFES 2006). The emphasis on skills and quality assurance through testing, dominated by literacy and numeracy, is felt to be justified by the demands of globalisation and competition. The pupils who enter the system are aware of 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 interactions with the environment (Ridley 2000 Rose 2005).

Young children's' styles of learning, which we should already be signalling, are the same as those employed by creative artists, start very early and can be summarised 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 are mainly 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 2003). Association, therefore, are not merely connections of ideas but are discriminating. Some are clearly preferred to others so that whole system of sounds and a tuning to the meaning of language are already set up. The ideas that lie beyond the conventional powers of logic are the powers 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 and 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 organising material: the connections are significant. This links with the second attribution of learning, that of imaging (Bruner). 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 mature of language, with words conveying concepts that

involve one object, like a chair, that remains that concept whatever its particular shape, colour , texture, size or use, or from whatever angle it s seen. Whilst associations start by being based on sound, imaging is essentially visual, a way 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. As we get older we continue to tell apart the faces of different people; babies can discriminate individually between a host of similar furry animals, like possums, when to us they all look the same.

The imaging of a child's world is the 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 an undeliberate drawing on memory to make sense of a story, as a reflection on the world (Cullingford 1999). 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 1985). It does not mean simply responding to other people's approaches, 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 realise that everyone has their own, that all individuals are a new 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 taken in and weighed and explored. No one explains or defines. The 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.

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 style 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 pointedly impossible

questions, like is there a God? Why? How can one have a 'big bang theory' and the concept of the immortal at the same time? And how do both fit the theory of evolution? 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 it, there is one central subject that is of the utmost significance. From the beginning, and based on their awareness of point of view, of truth and falsehood, of emotional manipulation, the great twin puzzles for children are why people behave as they do, and what are the influences that make them do so? These are the same puzzling questions that fuel literature, and equally based on the same observation and reflection that we experience or ignore everyday. Why does a seemingly civilised, kind and unselfish human being behave with cruelty, as a bully, even as a killer? Why are individuals so good and groups so bad?

Young children apply their puzzlement to the home and school as well s the wider world. Adults tend to think these questions are more general ones and tend to suffer them rather than think about them in the work place.

The 'creativity' of 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 categorising 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)

The explanation lies in the way in which institutions are controlled and for the human tendency to follow the prevailing norm even as it changes according to fashion. 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 recognise 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.

The contrast between the desire to learn and the prevailing system of controlling what is being taught- in the National curriculum pupils are 'entitled' to exposure to a range of subjects, mostly maths and English- can be encapsulated in the teaching of reading. In 'Literacy hours' and earlier interventions the intention is the push academic achievement ever earlier, with the emphasis on 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 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 recognised 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, that imaginative engagement in the real world.

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.

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 following of printed stories is like the response to conversation, the detection of what is meaningful.

Reading is a creative act of learning. Reading is also at the heart of creativity since it is an art that children relish, like music and pictures, and their need for it is like a need for gossip: trying to understand people and their behaviour. 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 it does depend 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 fey 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 till 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.

The evidence for the clash between the creative learning styles and the educational system that has been in place for 150 years is clear. There are many studies that conclude that the way in which the system operates does not fulfil its own promises, that is based on a dated model and that is satisfies neither the demands of personal conduct nor the spirit of enterprise. The problem is that the system is so deeply imbued in the experience of people that it is only questioned on a token basis. So many people are employed and so much money spent on the infrastructure, and more importantly, the mental habits of the system. This means that questioning the system, however politely, is taken as absurd or an offence.

There are many debates about the education system, but these, evidence based or not, are mostly about power and control; who should manage schools and what

should be in the curriculum. When one hears debates about the possible changes to school inspection, which questions about the frequency of visits or wither it should be a lighter touch, it is like hearing people talk about the slave trade: should we beat them less frequently, or tie them more loosely… the main point is so stark that balancing the number of slaves one can fit into a ship against the number who would survive the voyage, seems to be only of concern to those who profit be the trade.

The evidence is there but it is denied. This is partly because of what is interpreted as "evidence". The funded research is about outcomes and does not challenge the basic premecies. The pupils themselves are not usually taken into account and if they are they are approached with closed questions. Children are polite so they will confirm what they think you want them to say. The problem is that there is no such simple version of truth; there are many more levels. Let us take an example. If we ask the question about whether an advertisement seen on television is 'true' the answer can be an immediate 'No! Of course not'.   What is presented, like a car turning into a dancing robot, is obviously untrue. But when it is pointed out that the car exists and can be bought, that then is true enough. Adults tend to reject the truth of advertisements first before accepting that marketing has a very stringent reality. Younger people tend to point out the availability of the product before making fun of the absurdity of the advert. The order is not important. What is important is the complex nature of truth; the true, the creative 'insight into reality clarifies the deeper nature of the case.

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 (Flutter and Ruddock 2004 Colley 2003). 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 and 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 the place of pupils, as the titles of series of books published by Continuum, for example, makes clear.

More subtle than the denial of evidence is the acceptance of the truth about the position of children and the assertions that such a system is necessary to toughen them up and to help them conform. 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 tidies up, and every bit of 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 interested 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 cope 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 be 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 realise 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.

Teachers therefore use open questions and teach their children to answer openly. There are not threat s of giving the wrong answer. They deal constantly with how what is learned relates to real like, 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 realise that the closest engagement in the real world is not through distant criticism, and not through theory abut 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 conditions. It speaks a lot for the human condition that such endeavours to understand continue in the face of almost implacable oppositions. What would the world be like if this were recognised?

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