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Using found poetry to explore creativity in the professional lives of English teachers

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ABSTRACT

This arts-based research considers creativity in the professional lives of English teachers in a school in England within the context of a progressively performative education system. In addition, it explores how found poetry can represent participants' voices in an illuminating and authentic manner. The teachers who participated in the study were able to scrutinise, reflect and comment upon the content of poems created from the words found in an initial interview transcript. This recursive process supports a credible way of seeing and knowing the teachers' voices in a representation that gives a deeper understanding of the participants' creative experiences. The construction, interrogation, and presentation of the found poems reveal that the teachers of English believe they have reduced freedom to be creative or to act with agency in their professional lives. The reduced freedom to be creative stems from the normalising practices of working within a culture of performance. The restrictions are both tangible and self-imposed by the participants.

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Introduction

Secondary education in England has been adjusting to high levels of change in recent years as the government has overhauled several aspects of the curriculum simultaneously (Torrance, 2018). Indeed, it seems that while education has been under constant reform and change throughout modern times, the pace of change and reform has increased in recent decades (Ball, 2013). These reforms have arguably led to an increased performative culture in education (Apple, 2005, 2006; Ball, 2013; Sullivan et al., 2021), and this paper is part of a larger study that aims to use found poetry to explore what effect these changes may have had on the creativity of English teachers. More specifically, this paper will interrogate how found poetry was used to represent and understand the views and experiences of four English teachers in a school in the north west of England. As such, it will aim to contribute to existing knowledge of arts-based methodologies, in particular found poetry, as a way to represent the participant's voice (; Xerri, 2017). As well as presenting an innovative

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approach to qualitative analysis, it will contribute new knowledge and understanding as to the place of creativity in the professional lives of English teachers.

The culture of change in English schools

The last few decades have seen sequential governments, from various political perspectives, demonstrate a need to be seen to be making changes and addressing problems whilst overhauling systems (Ball, 2013). Indeed, it is believed that since the Conservative-led coalition came to power in 2010, there has been an increase in how radical the reforms in education in England have become (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019). For example, the government has changed key performance indicators, through the introduction of the English Baccalaureate and Progress 8. Although not a qualification, the former was introduced in 2010 as a performance measure for schools. It places emphasis on success in so-called 'core' subjects while marginalising others, such as the arts, technology and sport (Long & Danechi, 2019). Similarly, in 2016, the government introduced Progress 8 to monitor a pupil's progress from the end of primary education to the end of secondary education (Department for Education, 2014). According to the DfE (2014), the performance measures used for Progress 8 are designed to inspire schools to offer a 'broad and balanced curriculum with a focus on an academic core at Key Stage 4' (DfE, 2014, p. 2). This development could be particularly relevant for the creativity of English teachers, as within Progress 8, English Language and Literature have double-weighting for pupils.

These changes, plus the implementation of more rigorous examinations with more challenging content, arguably sets a higher standard for pupils and also for their teachers in terms of accountability against pupil targets (Torrance, 2018). It can lead schools into becoming 'examination factories', where senior leaders are preoccupied with procedures linking to measurable attainment (Hutchings, 2015). Indeed, the focus on preparing pupils for high-stakes tests at the end of a course seemingly leads teachers to increasingly teach to the test. They have to prioritise finding ways to ensure pupils pass examinations rather than enriching their broader understanding of subjects and their place in the world (Perryman et al., 2018).

The English Baccalaureate and Progress 8 measures do outline what is valued within the field of education, and this will affect teachers as more demand is placed on measuring pupils' progress within an increasingly performance-based system (Gielen, 2013). That said, this paper is not attempting to argue the pros and cons of the English Baccalaureate or Progress 8 measures; it aims to understand how found poetry can allow researchers to investigate what effect these changes might have on creativity in the professional lives of English teachers.

Teaching within a culture of performativity opens up the possibility that teachers' practices conflict with their beliefs about the teacher they thought they would become (Ball, 2013; Sullivan et al., 2021). Creativity within this study depends on the willingness of people to query perceived expectations and develop the capacity to see their role in a fresh way (Goleman et al., 1993). Craft (2010) and Leavy (2015) use the terms little c and big C creativity to recognise smaller commonplace acts of imagination and originality. Little c creativity being everyday acts of creativity and big C being extra ordinary acts of creativity produced by great writers, artists or composers. The interrogation of

participants' voices within this paper is focused on what Jeffrey and Craft (2010, p. 2) refer to as the universal reach of creativity in the lives of 'ordinary people in the education system'.

Methods

This research used found poetry to explore English teachers' perceptions of creativity within their own professional lives. The four teachers involved in the study all worked in the same secondary school in the north west of England and ranged in experience from a recently qualified teacher to one with over thirty years of experience in the classroom. Found poetry was chosen as a research method to honour the participants' voices. The poems represented the teachers' own words in the process of generating meaning (Faulkner, 2019; Lee, 2021) whilst also negotiating the researcher's voice as they analysed and presented each teacher's story in poetic form (Lincoln et al., 2011). The first author conducted interviews in the school where the participants and researcher worked. This allowed the participants' stories to be represented faithfully as the researcher was both immersed in the activity of the school and immersed in the activity of the enquirer, experiencing the research *with* the participants. The study started with dialogical interviews, which provided the stimulus for the construction of the found poems. The second interview elicited the participants' responses to the initial draft of the poems constructed from their own words. The iterative process of researching the teachers' stories, from interview to poem to second interview to representation and analysis of the poems, allowed both the participants and the interviewer to interrogate their own assumptions about creativity in their lives as teachers of English.

When interviewing people, Macqueen and Patterson (2020) note that individuals may need thinking time to reflect on their initial responses and develop new ideas. As such, the teachers were interviewed twice, individually, with a gap of approximately two months between interviews. Interviews began with an open question: 'what is creativity?' The rationale was to keep the interviews more dialogical and to allow participants to lead the conversation, determine the duration, and discuss what creativity meant to them (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007; Hooks, 2019). Before the second meeting, the teachers were also provided with a transcript of the first interview and a series of found poems created by the interviewer directly from the transcript. It was hoped that presenting the teachers with their own ideas in a novel manner would stimulate further reflection and allow them to develop their responses in the follow-up interview (Xerri, 2017).

The transcribed interview recordings were analysed to locate the key themes in the participants' interviews. The interrogation of data and construction of the found poem involves selection in the same manner as conventional forms of narrative thematic analysis (Denzin, 2016). In this study, found poetry was used as a creative form of thematic analysis that allowed for the identification of patterns of significance within a qualitative dataset (Braun et al., 2019). Thematic analysis is not rooted in a specific theoretical framework and lacks set notions or methodological requirements in how to sample data. Indeed, Braun et al. (2019) welcome creative usages of thematic analysis as long as they are completed in a thoughtful and deliberate manner, as this is a signifier of an important field of exploration. Data from the interviews were presented in the

form of found poetry to represent the participants' voices and to elicit new data through subsequent interviews (Xerri, 2017). The use of found poetry in the second interview was a way to make the familiar strange and provoke a new response from the participants, as they were offered a new way of seeing their own voices (Faulkner, 2019; Lee, 2021; Martin et al., 2018). That said, the interview is not a neutral device; it is there for at least two people to create the reality of the interview situation. The researcher has the power to come close to capturing the participants' social worlds from the data that they interpret; however, there will inevitably be a subjective aspect to any interpretation (Denzin, 2016). Braun et al. (2019) acknowledge that themes are generated by those engaged in the data analysis and cannot exist in isolation from the researcher. To represent the teachers' ways of knowing and seeing creativity in their lives, the researcher must be aware of how their assumptions might shape and limit the representation of the participants' voices in the found poem. In order to express the underlying meaning of the participants' words, researchers must be aware that they are 'interpreting data through the lens of their own cultural membership and social positionings, their theoretical assumptions and ideological commitments, as well as their scholarly knowledge' (Braun et al., 2019, p. 8).

Adopting a recursive and reflexive approach by sharing the found poetry in the second interview meant that meanings were more negotiated between the researcher and the participants within the research process (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007; Hooks, 2019). Returning to a second interview, after time to reflect on the content of the found poems, helped capture the participants' voices as accurately as possible as it allowed for the initial interpretation of the data to be reviewed and challenged (Faulkner, 2019; Lee, 2021; Macqueen & Patterson, 2020). Although this method is founded on a democratic partnership between the researcher and the participants, it is not without risks because the found poems may misrepresent, alter or constrain the participants' voices. The iterative design of the poems, alongside the use of the participants' own words, was intended to support the production of found poems that can be trusted to allow for faithful representation of the teachers' stories.

Researchers are infrequently separate from their research focus. There is always an element of the researchers' personal views in any project, to the point that the researchers and the research are always tangled (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007; Richardson, 1990). Thus, it is important to demonstrate a clear, rational and reflexive association between research queries in the collection of data. Being reflexive 'not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced' (Pillow, 2003, p. 178). The voices of the teachers explored in this research tell a story of English teachers in a secondary school in England. The researchers adopted a reflexive approach and always aimed to be aware of their own position and history and how this could affect the exploration of narratives (Denzin, 2016). As one of the researchers was employed in the school as a teacher of English, their unique insight allowed for a deeper, more negotiated understanding of the participants' responses. Equally, a journal was kept where the researcher's reflections on the process were stored to strengthen the later considerations of the interviews. Maintaining a reflexive awareness helped to limit misrepresentation and build confidence in the findings, particularly as the found

poems were constructed with the participants' own words. They distilled the meaning of the participants' beliefs and lived experiences and allowed each participant to interrogate and respond to their construction.

Poetry in research

Found poems are created from words found in current and ordinary places, such as novels, newspapers, and text messages (Baker, 2014). Poets search for key ideas or themes and piece together a poem directly from the words in the source material. Found poetry in research works in a similar way, with the researcher returning to the data several times to search for key themes and ideas in transcripts of interviews (Butler-Kisber, 2002). The researcher is not obliged to find the 'perfect' word but can experiment with existing words in ways that represent a specific story. Rhythms, pauses and emphasis are then added as the poetry is reshaped and structured over time to ensure that the essence of the story has been captured (Butler-Kisber, 2002).

In this study, found poetry was created from a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. The words and punctuation were not changed, but they were arranged into a form recognisable as poetry. Selected words that did not seem to further meaning were omitted, while the ones that were kept were arranged in a certain stanza or line order (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Richardson, 1990). The success of any research project is linked to how well the methodology facilitated set objectives and communicated research findings. This research aimed to explore creativity in the professional lives of English teachers in a secondary school. The poems aimed to capture the participants' voices from the interviews and present them in an unfamiliar way that could also provoke enlightening discussion of key themes and ideas (Lee, 2021; Xerri, 2017). Found poems were used to tell the participants' stories and elicit more information from them.

All participants provided appropriate informed consent, and ethical approval for the study was gained from the University of Chester Faculty of Education and Children's Services Ethics Committee on the 26th of November, 2018. The following discussion of results is arranged around a sample of the found poems created in response to the interviews with each of the teachers.

Laura

At the time of the first interview, Laura had taught English for twelve years and was also a middle manager in the English Department. During the initial conversation, Laura discussed change within education and how she had experienced it as a teacher. Her thoughts were captured in this found poem:

I remember

When I was training in 2006,
creativity in English
was a huge focus.
We were constantly being
encouraged to approach English
through dramatic devices.
I remember we had to do some
visualisation activities;

we had to paint pictures;
we had to write poems.
When I first started, quite a lot of
my English lessons were creative;
we basically

had
 freedom
 of
 choice.

There was no such thing
as any set texts; we could do
any assessment that we wanted
in any way we saw fit.

I remember getting into the hall and
 we had drums and
we had musical instruments –

I remember doing
 Victorian literature
with my class, dressing up as a
 Victorian teacher –
making students wear dunce
caps, inspecting their finger nails,

doing a kind of an
 immersive
 lesson.

It felt genuinely creative back
in those days. There was

more time to do everything

and the teachers were given
 far more autonomy.

It felt like we were encouraged to

approach the lessons in a more
 unconventional way.

There seems to be so much
more focus now on the need to
memorise this,
memorise that.

I don't feel I am as creative now;
I feel like I'm more formulaic –

that it is because the exams are
far more formulaic.

(Laura, 2019)

Laura remembers the ‘huge focus’ on creativity when she trained as an English teacher and speaks fondly of creative acts such as using dramatic devices, painting pictures and writing poems with her classes. There is also a sense of agency in Laura’s reflections as she highlights that she had the space to engage with the subject in a manner that offered her freedom to explore the topics she was teaching. The structuring of the sixth stanza, where the key words sit diagonally across to the right, descending through the stanza stresses Laura’s emphasis at the time of the interview: ‘we had freedom of choice’. Brady (2009) argues that poetry sets out to make sense of endless things that are then ‘filled with the rhythms of breathing, the music of life itself, albeit sometimes broken and off-key’ (Brady, 2009, xv). Laura’s reflections were often disjointed as people often are when articulating their thoughts and this has been presented through the discordant nature of the structure of the poem, but equally the excitement that she spoke with when reflecting on the past, compared to the rigid ending, which supports a stronger representation of her voice.

The freedom of choice that Laura refers to is important in teaching as Adams and Owens (2016) consider that in a culture dominated by neoliberal thinking, freedom can be replaced by deceptions of autonomy. Laura’s use of ‘had’ implies that there has been a loss of freedom for her and, therefore a reduction or loss of creativity. As the poem moves on, the freedom from earlier seems to be drained away as the tone changes and becomes more negative; contemporary teaching becomes more about transferring and measuring knowledge in a formulaic way. It seems that Laura’s lessons are influenced by a stricter regime of assessment that lends itself to measurement (Perryman et al., 2018). Where schools themselves are measured in terms of exam results, aspects of learning that are not tested become less important than those that are (Eisner, 1985). Indeed, Adams and Owens (2016) argue that for this reason, the testing regime of neoliberalism has had a corrosive effect on creative education.

Rachel

At the time the interviews took place Rachel was in her second full year of English teaching. She had previously worked in creative industries. When asked about how students are assessed, Rachel made points that allowed for the creation of the following poem.

Mark scheme

I have a few students who
write absolutely beautifully
and the mark scheme makes
me. . .
pause
tell them they have to
change the way that
they write in order to
fit the mark scheme fully.

I’ve got two boys who
write very, very nicely;

naturally, like amazingly,
like you know when you think

you would struggle to
write like that and yet
you have to go to them and
say 'you must

use a variety of punctuation' -
which can be quite restrictive.
(Rachel, 2019)

In the positive introduction to this poem, Rachel notes that she has pupils who write 'beautifully'. This suggests that they can produce something special that stands out as being a thing to admire. The pause was important in this poem as Rachel reflected on the examination's mark scheme and its impact on the pupils. She notes that pupils that write 'naturally' have to sometimes change in order to fit in with the examination, even though she says that she herself 'would struggle to write like that'. She then argues how the mark scheme is restrictive as it forces the pupils to comply with the assessment criteria if they are to attain higher marks. The pupils need to change to fit the examination systems.

The requirement to assess punctuation and grammar, leads Rachel to a less creative teaching approach (Marshall, 2010). To ensure that pupils get better marks she must challenge their own style and replace it with set, regulated sentences that she considers will fit a mark scheme. Creativity is perhaps not always valued in England as selected politicians and writers refer to accurate grammar as being more important than creative writing when discussing academic standards. Indeed, those teachers who comment on the imaginative qualities of a pupils' writing without first highlighting errors in spelling and punctuation are often portrayed in the media as being negligent in their work or guilty of failing to uphold standards (Marshall, 2010).

Daniel

At the time the interviews took place, Daniel had been teaching English for four years. He spent approximately a decade after completing his English degree working in a different public sector role before retraining as a teacher. When asked specifically about the mark scheme for the GCSE English Language course, Daniel picked out one of the key points: students' work should be 'compelling' (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance, 2020). The word itself is problematic; Daniel's reflections on the mark scheme were captured in the following poem.

Compelling

In order to access
this mark scheme I'm
handing them creative
things to kind of replicate -

'writing is compelling' -
you have to be creative
to make it compelling.

People that are critical
 of modern art say
 'my child could have
 done that' –
 even if you can't explain it,

even if the brush strokes
 aren't as technically
 amazing as Turner -
 there's still something

about it you can't take
 your eyes off.
 That's what compelling
 is. I try to teach

things that are compelling
 rather than allow them
 to be compelling themselves.
 I guess that's the pressure -

trying to get a certain
 amount of students passed
 a certain level. You
 think:

'I can't just leave
 you to your own devices'.

I think I've
 stifled
 creativity –

which is a shame.
 (Daniel, 2019)

Craft (2010) discussed how individuals feel they are not creative as they often compare themselves to creative greats from history. Daniel focusses on the creative greats in literature but avoids the importance of creativity in his students and himself. He discusses 'the pressure -trying to get a certain amount of students passed a certain level'. This is another reminder of the forces Daniel is subject to, as he knows he will be judged on how his students perform in an examination, so reduces creativity in his classroom as he is concerned about leaving students to 'their own devices'. The final lines of Daniel's poem highlight how current teaching expectations are not supportive of creative practices: 'I think I've stifled creativity—which is a shame'.

Teachers are under pressure to be seen to teach in a normalised manner (Ball, 2003) that consists of them working within increasingly rigid formats with less space to be creative. The way in which a teacher is considered within a field of judgement is based on their performances that can be measured and then their worth can be calculated. Daniel knows that he will need to present displays of quality for appraisal purposes, but more

than that there is the pressure of conformity of the group and Daniel's own self surveillance. It is not easy to teach pupils to be compelling in their writing. It is easier to mark a grammar test as it has been reduced to a series of emphatic right and wrong answers. It is easier to measure the measurable. Creativity is perhaps not measurable and therefore its worth is diminished within the field of judgement that the teachers are working within (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Ball, 2003; Gielen, 2013).

Dawn

Dawn has been teaching since she left university and is about to retire. She has taught English across the secondary school age range in a number of schools and spent time in more senior roles on school leadership teams. At the time of the interviews she was working as a part-time English teacher. Dawn's concerns over a reduction in creativity in English was explored.

Creativity

In an ideal world we don't
crush that.

It's there.
It is there.

I think it's something
that is intrinsic that
we have and
we develop.

I do feel,
sadly,
that that's not happened
for a number of years

in the way we approach
English. I worry that
actually what we've
done is we've

restricted their creativity
and now they just
don't know where
to find it.
(Dawn, 2019)

The use of 'crush' is a powerful verb leaving an implication of creativity being squashed or reduced beyond repair. Dawn almost repeated herself when she said, 'It's there. It is there'. The 'it' is creativity. This appears to be a statement of hope, as she insists it is there; underneath all of the performative measures in schools, individuals are being creative or are at least capable of being (Boden, 2004).

Dawn argues that creativity is something that human beings develop over time and teachers are responsible for supporting its development. 'I do feel, sadly, that that's not

happened for a number of years in the way we approach English'. This reiterates how curriculum changes and the expectations of a performative culture can restrict creativity in both teachers and pupils (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Ball, 2003; Eisner, 1985). The poem ends with 'I worry that actually what we've done is we've restricted their creativity and now they just don't know where to find it'. 'They' is most likely a nod to the pupils, although perhaps teachers no longer know where to find creativity either. Pupils often do not want to undertake creative acts; they want to pass the examination (Apple, 2006). Children have become engrained in performative, neoliberal practices, they are children of the marketplace (Keddie, 2016). Children of the marketplace have expectations that support performative practices and restrict the creative practice of the teacher; Dawn's use of 'They' can apply to us all.

Conclusion

English teachers' perception of creativity in their working lives

The teachers that featured in this study demonstrated an appreciation of the importance of creativity, but also claimed that they have less time and fewer opportunities to participate in creative acts in their working lives. In part, this is due to a belief that creativity needs to be a clear display of overt creativity as opposed to teaching whilst utilising little c creativity (Craft, 2010). The teachers were often reticent or self-deprecating when talking about their own practice and frequently did not seem to see smaller acts of creativity in their own professional lives. The more seasoned teachers in this study reflected sentimentally on the past, arguing they had more creative freedom then. This change was largely attributed to various reforms, centred in neoliberal performative approaches to education, that have normalised what it is to be an English teacher. They felt that their creative freedom was restricted by assessment, monitoring and other performative processes (Adams & Owens, 2016; Ball, 2013).

Performative processes and the pressures of conformity reduced chances for the English teachers to be creative, deviate or display difference. There seemed to be little resistance to these pressures in the daily lives of the teachers. Ball's (2003) assertion that a performative culture has the potential to change teachers not just as teachers but as people has particular resonance in this study. Boden (2004) also claimed that restrictions can breed creativity in the form of resistance. What is clear in this focussed study, however, is that teachers do not tend to resist the pressures of performativity and the normalising structures they work within. In fact, they are often complicit in the monitoring of themselves and maintaining the status quo even if they are not happy. This has a detrimental effect on English teachers' chances to engage in creative practices and seemingly impacts their general happiness in regard to teaching.

For the teachers in this study, a performative culture left little room for deviation or creativity in their working lives (Goleman et al., 1993) within their school context. The restrictions to the creativity of the English teachers were partly due to the performative system in which they work, but they were also complicit in that system and, as a consequence, restricted their own creativity. Ball and Olmedo (2013) argue that a neoliberal, market-driven way of thinking presses teachers to define themselves as that which they do not want to be. The more teachers work within a performative culture, the

more they start to use the language of performativity with colleagues. The teachers are formed by the performative structures around them.

Found poetry: an illuminating method

When utilising arts-based methods, Leavy (2015) argued there is no definitive way to evaluate the ideas and knowledge that come from qualitative methods. Whether a method is successful or not is down to whether it facilitates the objectives of the research and supports communication of the findings. The purpose of this research was to explore the place of creativity in the professional lives of English teachers. Found poetry was used to aid the communication of meaning and also to provoke further discussion within semi-structured interviews (Xerri, 2017). Poetry was a representational form that could move an audience emotionally and intellectually whilst managing a variety of issues that tied into the domain of the experiential (Murphy, 2010). Presenting the participants' voices to them in poetic form provoked a new level of response in the second interviews and encouraged new discussions. The creative act of poetry captured the voices of the participants and also allowed for further insights into their lives (Lee, 2021; Martin et al., 2018).

The poetry that has been presented is not big C creativity (Craft, 2010), nor is it an outstanding example of poetry. However, it functions as an illuminating means to capture the participants' voices as it provoked discussion in the interview process and uncovered thoughts and feelings that would arguably have otherwise remained hidden (Xerri, 2017). It also offers a reader of this work the chance to see the participants' voices in an illuminating manner that allows for their own interpretation. Leavy (2015) argued that arts-based research can evoke emotional responses from an audience and generate discussion that could act as a validity check and a data source. The discussions with the participants revealed a feeling that their voices were captured and, at best, were a true reflection of the self. They responded to both the prose of the transcript and the verse of the poetry. Equally, the poetry could transport a reader to new ways of thinking or seeing the experience of the participants. The English teachers' voices seemingly took on a new life through the manner of representing them through found poetry.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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