Enacting ‘creativity’ in a performative school context: interim findings from an ethnographic case study

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This paper focuses on English primary teachers’ perspectives on ‘creativity’ within the performative policy context in which their school is operating, considering the implications for children’s learning.

Significant reforms of the English education system over the past three decades have brought teaching and learning largely under the control of the government. Measures including prescriptive curriculum initiatives, national pupil tests at end of Key Stages, school league tables, performance management systems and a rigorous system of school inspection have all contributed to a culture of performativity and surveillance. At the same time, policy-makers have called for ‘creativity’ in learning and teaching. Commonly, policy definitions of ‘creativity’ have been market-driven, in terms of calls for original thinking and innovation and the development of a flexible workforce able to respond to technological change. This situation presents problems, not least because there are tensions between policies that call for innovation and those that require teachers and children to ‘perform’ in very specific and measured ways but also because the notion of ‘creativity’ is more complex than it is often presented in policy.

This paper draws on interim findings from an in-depth ethnographic case study of policy enactment in a primary school situated in a relatively affluent, suburban area in the South-East of England. I am documenting the views and experiences of the head teacher, three teachers and children in Reception (age 4-5), Year Two (age 6-7) and Year Six (age 10-11) over the course of an academic year. Methods comprise document analysis and different types of observation and interview. My approach is underpinned by qualitative interpretivism and symbolic interactionism therefore my analytic strategy has been primarily inductive, following the constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The data indicate that individual teacher interpretations of ‘creative teaching’ and ‘creative learning’ are highly relevant to children’s understandings of learning and their learner identities. In my research, children who regularly engage in collaborative, dialogic learning processes with their teacher and with each other appear to be in a better position to contribute to democratic debate, demonstrating more positive dispositions to learning than children who have fewer opportunities to engage in joint problem-solving and divergent thinking. I argue that valuable learning opportunities may be missed if teacher-directed, basic skills-oriented learning is prioritised at the expense of such processes.