Carving Space and Negotiating 'Your Place': Redrawing Teaching Practices in an 'Entrepreneurial Academy'

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In order to establish ‘a culture of ambition, to replace the poverty of aspiration’ we have seen an increasing promotion of enterprise culture within educational policy and reform, where it seems to have become common sense- or ‘doxic’ to incorporate private sector principles in schools (Cuban, 2004: 13; Adonis, 2008: 15). Although not a new phenomenon, but one regenerated in discourses of ‘entrepreneurship’; such enterprising initiatives have been positioned as a dominant socio-economic framing in which it is claimed that ‘solutions’ to ‘blocked’ social mobility and a ‘low aspirations’ in ‘failing’ schools are to be founded.

This paper draws on ethnographic research within (and outside) a secondary academy championing such an ‘entrepreneurial specialism’ where ‘entrepreneurship’ is found to be embedded across the whole academy; from ethos to curriculum.

In this paper I would like to consider how teachers at the academy interact with and practice under these ‘enterprising’ conditions. In particular, I will look at how some teachers narrated their ‘aspirations’ for their own teaching practices, as well as documenting some of the ways in which these ‘aspirations’ were said to have changed over time. Using the example of the art department, I will show how a recent shift towards the notion of ‘collective teaching practice’ transformed the ways in which not only art is taught in the classroom, but also how the art teachers conceived of themselves as ‘more free’ to practice ‘alternatively’.

Although current ‘neo-liberal’ policies are regularly documented as encroaching and heavily imposing on teachers' practices (which is something findings didn’t entirely contest), it also felt important in this paper, to note the ways in which teachers regularly and strategically found space to practice ‘alternatively’, firstly in the ‘margins’ and then in the mainstream. It is hoped that by providing evidence for these ‘alternative’ practices we might consider theoretically, these teachers as ‘reflexive’ and ‘pragmatic’ even within a ‘confined’ context.