Can Creative Learning be explored in a Performative Teaching Culture?

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Introduction

This paper reports on the experience of undertaking ethnographic fieldwork in a Scottish secondary school. The research is being conducted as part of the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) Schools and Social Capital project and builds on earlier work by Smyth (2002, 2005,2006 a, b and c) in the CLASP project. This work had reported on the creative ways in which pupils from a refugee background, often with limited English were accessing the curriculum.   Further analysis of these strategies unearthed a number of social capital building techniques being used by both staff and pupils to enable integration of the pupils into the mainstream school. The aim of the investigation discussed in this paper was to understand the processes by which refugee pupils and their teachers build, use and extend their social capital in the school setting. The researcher undertook ethnographic research in the school, utilising observation, field notes, interviews with staff and pupils as wel as digital photography to access pupils perspectives from young people who do not have a great deal of English at this time. (Catts et al, 2007).

Significant changes had been introduced into Scottish education between the time of the CLASP research and the current research.   These included the introduction of a new curriculum and of newly developed standards for teachers.   Alongside these macro changes were micro changes in management structure and demography at the research site.

The conducting of the research revealed the ways in which the researchers' own social capital can inform the data collection and how the professional social capital of the teachers can have an impact on the potential for creative pedagogy.

Scottish Educational context 2008

Scottish schools are facing another change in the Curriculum with the Curriculum for Excellence being introduced across the age range 3-18.   This curriculum indicates the child or young person as the starting point rather than the subject areas previously highlighted in the 5-14 National Guidelines.   The stated aim of the Curriculum for Excellence is to enable children and young people to have the capacity to be confident individuals, successful learners, responsible citizens and effective contributors.   A significant challenge of this new Curriculum is a move towards more cross-curricular work in the Secondary school, providing some secondary teachers with concern.

Scottish teachers initially qualify based on their successful meeting of Standards for Initial Registration.   Following a year's induction in school they

are judged against the Standards for Full Registration. Promotion for classroom teachers is based on the achievement of further standards, these standards generally being assessed by promoted staff in schools.

Further schools themselves are being assessed both by HMI visits and reports and through self-assessment procedures; How Good is Our School?

Creativity and Social Capital
Within the Applied Educational Research Scheme Schools and Social Capital Network a case study of educational provision for refugee pupils in Glasgow schools was conducted. The focus was on learners within schools, and the extent to which their formal and informal learning networks are, or can be, used to build social capital. Previous studies of social capital among young people have been concerned with what they bring to school and have measured these by means of a narrow range of indicators, such as family structure, parent-teen discussion, or interaction with adults outside the family (Furstenberg and Hughes 1995, Yan 1999). These studies ignore the potential of schools as sites for the production of social capital among learners. These studies also ignore the active role that learners play in forming their own social capital. Finally, they ignore opportunities to form social capital and to learn beyond the school. In the CLASP project it had appeared that teachers were using pedagogies, which developed bonding, bridging and linking social capital. Pupils from refugee families were engaging with new educational and language systems by building social capital. This appeared to have clear connections with creative learning as the children and young people found relevance in the new learning situations, took ownership and control and subsequently innovated in the new language.

The research site
The secondary school chosen for the research was in a working class area of Glasgow where, until recently the majority of housing was owned by the City Council but has now been transferred to a Housing Association. The area could be seen as one of multiple deprivations with high levels of unemployment, single parent families, drug and alcohol abuse and crime. However the area is also one of community cohesion and action. Following the Immigration and Dispersal Legislation of 2000 the school became a host school for large numbers of pupils from newly arrived asylum seeking families. A bilingual unit was established at the school with additional staff funded through the National Asylum Support Scheme. Pupils at the school subsequently became actively engaged in anti-detention campaigns and won awards for political activity. The staff at the site were keen for the research to be undertaken.

Between original negotiations and entrance to the site however a number of significant changes occurred including a poor HMI report, a fall in pupil numbers largely due to the changed housing situation of the refugee pupils and also the retrial of the Head Teacher. Coupled with the macro changes in Scottish education described earlier this led to an increased focus on

performativity among staff and pupils and increased difficulties for researching in the field.

Performativity or Creativity

Is the differentiation inevitable and can the researcher in the field actually see what they want to see, or do the restrictions of the school structure and teaching practices limit the research into the frame of what is seen as permissible by the school staff? The results from an initial analysis of fieldwork in a Scottish secondary school shows some of the issues teachers as well as researchers encounter in a performative school culture as described above.

There seems to be tension, between the ideal teachers have of their teaching, and the realities of day-to-day school life. When conducting interviews or having informal chats with teachers the curriculum was used as one of the issues that restricts their time and possibilities for creative teaching. Closely linked with the perceived restrictions of the curriculum was the pressure assessments have on the teacher and teaching. The English as Additional Language (EAL) teachers in the school have all previously been mainstream teachers and contrast their experience in the EAL unit with the experiences of their mainstream peers. The EAL teachers appeared to feel that the meeting of assessment aims prohibits creativity and restricts the freedom of mainstream teachers.

> […] We are more able to identify pupils' needs
> We are flexible in terms of curriculum … no exams and deadlines
> Smaller class …
> We are more relaxed as teachers …
> Our timetable plan is changeable because of new arrivals circumstances we expect pupils coming all the time and leaving maybe to mainstream class maybe … (EAL Teacher, Research Diary, 13th May 2008)

When going into the English as Additional Language Unit (EAL) the teaching (and learning) climate was of a very different kind to the mainstream classroom. In the conversation above one of the teachers told me that they have more freedom, because they don't have the restrictions of the

curriculum. Gesturing around the room she further indicated that they have the freedom to move here and work in different places.

The latter I had observed in both mainstream classes I attended. Both rooms were equally richly equipped and the students could move (if the teacher would permit this) so I was not sure where the feeling of restriction comes from within the mainstream class and if the actual space is really one issue that influences the way of teaching.

Admittedly the EAL Unit layout fostered an impression of more special possibilities since there were two computers the children could use at any time, as well as learning games. However the English room was full of books, dictionaries and posters, the tables arranged so that they permitted interaction between the children although they all were directed towards the front of the room where the 'teacher corner', whiteboard and screen were.

Maybe the teacher being able to feel more relaxed also provides a better teaching and learning climate. There will need to be more exploration in terms of the use of space within school.

> Spaces:
> EAL vs Mainstream … two different universes […]
> School is not inclusive … it creates achievement niches, which support the 'you have to be bad' culture
> … But does it actually foster the negative behaviour? (Research Diary)

An In-exclusive Niche … like non-exclusive, inclusive or exclusive or all of the above? The school seems to provide achievement and within the EAL Unit safe spaces. With particular reference to the refugee children this has some advantages such as providing a refuge where they can speak their mother tongue. However despite the efforts of some EAL staff to reach out into mainstream school, inclusion seems to be problematic.

A problem concerning the whole school is the potential removal of the children from the school. While I was in the field one of the children was taken into a detention centre. This was very unexpected and therefore caused quite a stir in school. Particularly Mr G from the EAL unit was involved with calling up lawyers and trying to get the family out of detention again.

> When they where gone and I asked Mr G about interviews with two girls I had planned, he said […] he has urgent news, and that I have to be

> strong. […] One of the girls is in detention centre with her sister and her family, they got dawn raided and detained on Friday … this is why she was not in school on Friday! … (Fieldnotes, Pilot)
>
> The teacher came to me because she did not know if I knew about the girl in detention and told me about the issues as well as another boy who is missing for weeks now and is said to be in hiding with his family. When she talked about the detention centre the word had slipped her mind and she said concentration camp … (Fieldnotes, Pilot)

Particularly the conversation with the teacher who used the words concentration camp made it clear to me that not only the children but also the staff are very uncomfortable with the realities for the children from asylum seeking families.

Researcher Tensions - *Who am I, and if yes how many?*

My position in field and the roles I got attached to me were significant for access to the field. This asks for more discussion of the researcher's professional as well as social capital. One reaction I kept getting when introducing myself is very often: 'So, you are not a teacher then?', followed by a long significant and implicative pause. So, am I not to judge and evaluate then? Am I not understanding 'real' teachers issues and teaching then? What am I doing in the field then?

In addition to the tensions of my, sometimes questionable, position in the field, research appeared to be seen by school staff as an additional stress to their daily chores.

> My contact teacher instantaneously went to see one of his colleagues of whom he thought she would let me into her class since they have such a good relationship. But she said no; she had so much to take care of; she does not want another stress in her class. (Fieldnotes, Pilot)

Not only the mainstream teachers were reluctant to permit me access to their classes, also the new headteacher was worried about me being in school. With her it was more a matter of anticipating even more workload with research going on. When we met her the first time she complained how much she has to take care of, such as meetings with the fire department, and

named all the meetings she already went through in the morning. Just after a meeting with her, where I could clarify safe permission for access and that she would not need to be involved in the research at all, she was at ease with the situation. She was afraid of having to be actively involved in the research but also seemed to lack understanding of what the research in her school actually meant.

When the project started out the head teacher had just left school and the school was in a kind of a limbo waiting for a new head teacher to arrive. Once during a conversation with a teacher when I inquired after the use of the Curriculum for Excellence the teacher told me that they are not using it but want to see what the approach of the new headteacher would be.

The waiting for the new headteacher was one of the reasons why I could not gain access before the New Year and attend the Christmas activities. Another reason for not being able to attend the Christmas activities, which was the original plan, was that the mainstream teachers would not like me to be there since they felt stressed and apologetic because they don't do 'real' teaching during this time.

This again leads to a further issue teachers seem to have with a researcher in the field: every time when there were discipline issues or the teachers let the class a little loose and did not work strictly they seemed to feel it necessary to explain or apologize for this 'not real teaching'.

> The next period Mr G came back to take over the teaching, he told me in late periods they tend to do something easy and enjoyable with the children because it is quite exhausting for the children to listen and speak the whole day in a different language.
> So he was asking the children about their most favourite place, let the children get papers and pens to draw these places. (Fieldnotes, Pilot)
> Mr J ended the class at little early because the kids had tried but were not focussed today. He said well it is Friday afternoon and the only thing you can do is be very strict with them or just let them goof off a bit. He had decided on the goofing off. (Fieldnotes, Pilot)
> Mention in the following writing up of the fieldnotes about Julie's reaction as I mentioned that we want to look into creativity I got the feeling that she internally totally blocked against this in a sense of me being critical about her way of teaching or even in the sense of what is creative learning I am teaching maths we don't do this. But this as well might just be a misinterpretation of mine. (Research Diary)

One further issue with this particular teacher was, that going through the fieldnotes I realised not having written down any after class conversation I had with her. Thinking why this was the case I remembered that she always apologized for the bad behaviour in class but in a way that blamed the children and that I got so fed up with it that I decided to ignore these conversations.

There clearly seems to be an idea of what 'real' teaching is and what teachers think is expected from them. Interestingly, this idea does not quite match with the requirements of the new curriculum. So where is this idea coming from and why do teachers feel the need to apologise and explain what they are doing to me?

<u>A return to Social Capital to consider these tensions</u>

There is a clear relationship between concepts of social capital and concepts of professional capital. This phrase includes personal and professional relationships among teachers, promoted and unpromoted. It appeared, that promoted staff, may use their enhanced professional capital to control what happens in the school and how it is perceived. The researcher's own professional capital was limited in this context.

While schools can provide opportunities for sharing *professional* capital through such means as well-planned cooperative teaching and discussion of the learning of individual pupils, the evidence from the case study school suggests that these could well be further developed. Opportunities to work with colleagues outwith the school are rare and opportunities within the school are hard to arrange. It was therefore also difficult for the researcher to share findings with the staff.

For refugee pupils the language units provide a close and intimate community trust is established and close friendships flourish, with the aim of helping the pupils to gain confidence to participate in and contribute to the wider school community. In addition children are introduced to a pedagogy, which regards pupils as active agents in their own learning.   This closely relates to the

critical factors for creative learning to occur yet within the mainstream classroom, were the performative culture takes over.

The diversity of cultural heritage is acknowledged in the language units, which play a leading role in sharing cultural knowledge and values. According to the age and emotional security of the pupils, events such as religious festivals and celebrations, children's traditional games, music, and discussion of country of origin and asylum issues, were organised. These events and activities all act as forms of enabling bonding social capital between the pupils, which in turn allowed the pupils to take control of their learning. Some instances were observed of successful formal procedures, which promoted linking social capital, by providing pupils with access to organisations and structures outwith the school, e.g. introduction to the world of work. In addition some informal arrangements to support the development of linking social capital were reported, e.g. assistance to access support agencies.

Due to the particular circumstances of the refugee families, as a result of their reasons for arrival in the UK and the subsequent complex demands on the children from these families, social capital was not the only form of capital with which the project became concerned.

While no assumptions can be made about the economic status of any refugee family, it is reasonable to state that in general the economic capital of some of the asylum seeker families is very low since they are not permitted to work and they live on a low weekly allowance.

Acculturation and socialisation both into the school and the local community is a strong focus within the EAL units of the case study school. Observed forms of this included explicit teaching about appropriate behaviour in the class room and school and explicit life skills development,

In the case study school, the EAL unit created a space, which enabled the children to feel safe and secure, and establish bonding social capital with each other as well as with members of staff. This has advantages particularly given the traumatic experiences of some of the children. However staff in the EAL unit and mainstream classes appeared to find structured co-operation

difficult despite the effort of the teachers involved. This seemed to be mirrored in the possibilities for co-operation between teachers, pupils and researcher.

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A return to the question posed in the title may initially suggest a negative response. However, despite the difficulties the researcher has gathered a volume of useful data for further analysis. This could not have been done without the tenacity of the researcher working in an uncertain, unconfident and performative environment. Only the long term engagement enabled the relationships to be built which allowed the data to be collected and only the combination of a detailed narrative research diary, honest filed notes and records of conversations in addition to the more traditional methods of qualitative research (observation and interview) allowed for the data to be robust enough to provide material for analysis.

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