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Creativity and Wellbeing in Education: Possibilities, Tensions and Personal Journeys

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between creativity and wellbeing as educational aims, with a particular focus on whether these are mutually supportive, or exist in a state of tension. It starts with some observations on the importance attached to the two concepts in current policy discourse and the expectation that teachers and teacher educators should seek to promote them. It is argued that both should be regarded as contested terms which need to be subjected to critical interrogation. The extent to which schools as institutions are really open to creativity is questioned, and the limitations of a 'soft' psychological approach to wellbeing are highlighted. As part of this argument, some reservations about the extent to which learning should be regarded as a social rather than an individual experience are expressed. The paper concludes with brief reflections on the implications for teacher educators.

Keywords

Discourse; creativity; wellbeing; curriculum; conformity

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Introduction

Much of my recent work has used a simple form of discourse analysis to examine the meaning and significance of terms that have come to the fore in educational policy – terms like ‘social capital’, ‘global citizenship’ and ‘inter-agency collaboration’ (see, for example, Humes 2008; 2009; 2011, in press). My approach has drawn particularly on the work of the linguist Norman Fairclough (Fairclough, 1993; 1995; 2000; 2003) but has also been influenced by a number of specifically educational writers (Ball, 1990, 1994; Walford, 1994; Maclure, 2003). The purpose is to explore the relationship between knowledge, language and power and, towards this end I use a series of simple questions as a way of approaching the task of conceptual clarification:

- Where has the discourse come from?
- Whose interests does it serve – policy makers, managers, teachers, pupils, parents?
- How has it been promoted?
- What is its knowledge base?
- How does it shape professional thinking and practice?

I want to apply this technique to the concepts of creativity and wellbeing, though I shall not attempt to go through each of the questions systematically. Creativity as a favoured term in education has been around for some time (see, for example, Craft et al., 2001; Cropley, 2001; Robinson, 2001; Fisher & Williams, 2005), while wellbeing is a relatively recent addition to the educational lexicon, implying a concern for young people’s welfare in the broadest sense, not just their physical health (Burrell & Riley, 2007; Collins & Foley, 2008; Wyn, 2009; Chapman & West-Burnham, 2009). The relationship between the two concepts is not usually addressed explicitly, though there is often an unstated assumption that pupils’ motivation will increase if ‘creative’ approaches to teaching and learning are adopted and this, in turn, will enhance their sense of personal ‘wellbeing’.

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Creativity

Howard Gibson has stated, with reference to creativity, that 'it's a term now widely used, full of promise, a tonic for some after a decade of national over-governance of the school curriculum, a glimmer of hope and a word with which everyone can agree' (Gibson, 2005: 149). However, he goes on to suggest that its precise meaning is often not at all clear and certainly not consistent. 'Some use it to attack the centralising tendencies of government. Some see it in terms of personal identity and self-expression. Others use it to describe a sort of life-style. Politicians talk of it in terms of the future needs of the economy, while management consultants use it to sell seminars that promise businesses the ultimate competitive advantage' (ibid:153). The power of the last two interpretations is reflected in the renaming by some universities of academic units previously described using traditional terms such as art, music, dance, drama and film: these are now embraced collectively under the title 'Creative Industries' – a revealing semantic shift.

The discourse of creativity now features prominently in curricular guidance for teachers. For example, the website of the national curriculum body in Scotland, Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS), contains a section entitled 'What is creativity?' It states that 'Pupils who are encouraged to think creatively become:

- more interested in discovering things for themselves;
- more open to new ideas and challenges;
- more able to solve problems;
- more able to work well with others;
- and more effective learners.

(<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/creativity/aboutcreativity>: accessed August 6, 2010)

A strong link between creativity and employment is made: 'Most employers want to recruit people who see connections, have bright ideas, are innovative, communicate and work well with others, and are able to solve problems. Confident, creative individuals will always be in demand' (ibid). It is interesting

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to note in passing that some accounts make a similar link in the case of wellbeing, with a strong emphasis being given to *economic* wellbeing: a search for wellbeing on England's Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency's website produces more hits for economic wellbeing than for any other interpretation (<http://www.qcda.gov.uk>).

Scottish initiatives in relation to creativity have been informed by developments elsewhere in the United Kingdom as the 2006 document 'Promoting Creativity in Education: Overview of Key National Policy Developments Across the UK' clearly shows (Scottish Executive, 2006a). It traces the various projects stimulated by the highly influential report of the National Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999), chaired by Ken Robinson, up to and including Paul Roberts' report to the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in 2006 designed to inform future policy (Roberts, 2006). The election of a Conservative government in May 2010 is leading education in England in a significantly different direction from education in Scotland but the discourse of creativity remains prominent in policy documents and ministerial statements in both countries (often linked to enterprise and innovation). How credible is this appeal to creativity? And how honest is it? Do schools and universities really want to produce creative people? Is all the scrutiny and validation of courses, the checking of assessment systems, the monitoring of outcomes, designed to produce learners who will be genuinely independent and creative? Let me introduce a few notes of scepticism.

Many of the pressures that bear most heavily on educational systems are essentially conformist in character – they derive from powerful global forces of an economic kind (thus the stress on entrepreneurship in much policy discourse) or from managerialist imperatives (which impose uniform structures and bureaucratic procedures on professionals). There is often an attempt to soften the effect of these pressures by an appeal to a different kind of rhetoric – one which stresses such things as collegiality, teamwork and the human

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dimension of work in the public services. But some writers – such as David Hartley – see this as merely a new form of management, the management of emotion and feeling (Hartley, 2004). And in many ways it is a much more effective form of management than external constraints on behaviour. Old authoritarian styles of management are likely to meet with resistance in modern society. It is more subtle to persuade people that what they are engaged in is a joint project, with social aims that most professionals would be happy to subscribe to. Thus we have the invocation of terms like empowerment, ownership and distributed leadership – all designed to secure agreement to a collective set of corporate aims, effectively imposed from above but presented as the freely-chosen commitments of staff.

The same pattern can be detected in relation to pupils and creativity. There is a range of *permitted* creativity, the boundaries of which are not clearly defined but may suddenly appear if youngsters show signs of straying beyond what is considered acceptable. Many years ago the psychologist Liam Hudson drew attention to the difference between convergent and divergent thinkers (in his 1966 book, 'Contrary Imaginations'). Most of the time schools promote convergence, which is marked by literalness and predictability. Divergence is marked by leaps of imagination, metaphorical inventiveness and an ability to see unusual connections. A certain degree of divergence is permitted – perhaps as a kind of therapeutic release from the tedium of much school work – but soon there is a gentle, or not so gentle, steer back to the path of convergence.

Creativity has come a long way from earlier romantic interpretations associated, for example, with vague notions of self-expression in the primary school. Sometimes it is invoked as part of political rhetoric designed to assure both teachers and pupils that schooling is not all about centrally-prescribed curriculum content and assessment regimes. At other times, in a more calculated way, it is presented as a key driver of economic growth, linked to job opportunities in expanding fields such as media and computing. It is one element in a discursive field that includes concepts such as innovation,

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originality, enterprise and flair - a set of positive, upbeat, 'can do' terms that often rest uneasily with the constraints of schooling, to which both pupils and teachers are subject.

Wellbeing

Let me now turn to wellbeing. Why has it come to the fore at this time? It has a number of diverse origins, not all of which are entirely compatible. Three in particular merit attention. First, it represents recognition of the importance of the affective dimension of learning. Learning is not purely a cognitive matter. A child's capacity to learn is affected by physical and mental health, by relationships, by family support, and by attitudes to schooling within the wider community. This acknowledgement of the affective as well as the cognitive has been influenced by the work of people like Daniel Goleman on emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and Howard Gardner on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). It can also be seen as a vindication of A. S. Neill's belief that if you look after the heart the head will look after itself (Neill, 1970).

A second strand which has been influential in bringing wellbeing to the fore might be described as a form of moral panic operating at political levels. There has been growing concern about a range of indicators which seem to suggest a *lack* of wellbeing: teenage pregnancy rates; childhood obesity; levels of alcohol and drug consumption among the young; anorexia; self-harm; levels of mental illness. All of these, it is argued, are likely to lead to educational underachievement. Add to this, studies such as that reported by UNICEF in 2007 that young people in the UK are generally less happy than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe (UNICEF, 2007). Taken together, these concerns have led politicians to introduce initiatives which seek to promote a greater sense of the factors which enhance wellbeing – and so, it is hoped, lead to more effective engagement with what schooling has to offer.

There is a third strand involved in the elevation of wellbeing to policy priority status. We live in an increasingly confessional and therapeutic culture

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(Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008). Emotional restraint is no longer seen as a valued characteristic. It is construed as unhealthy repression. People are encouraged to be open about fears and feelings, to reveal their innermost thoughts. Numerous TV programmes encourage this openness, which in extreme forms can sometimes appear to be a form of emotional incontinence. This cultural trend has encouraged the emergence of various professional groups who claim, with varying degrees of credibility, to be able to assist people in the exploration of their fears and repressions – psychologists, counsellors, therapists of various kinds. These groups, often motivated for the best of reasons (though sometimes for crude financial gain), have been able to expand their sphere of operation in the receptive therapeutic culture that has developed. A negative interpretation of their activities in some cases might be that they are encouraging an individualistic, even solipsistic, view of living, one which gives too much prominence to the self and not enough attention to others. It will be suggested later that while creativity necessarily involves individualism, the self is often not the primary object of creative endeavour. Indeed, some writers, such as T. S. Eliot, have written about the need to eliminate the self from the creative process (Eliot, 1950).

It can be seen, therefore, that the origins of wellbeing discourse are varied: some reflect the general culture; some are a genuine attempt to address real problems; some take account of research evidence; and all see education as having an important part to play in promoting greater wellbeing.

How is the discourse of wellbeing reflected in the school curriculum? Let me refer to Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, the major reform programme currently being introduced and covering the age range from 3 to 18. Central to the programme is the idea that all children should develop four 'capacities' which will enable them to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens. Along with literacy and numeracy, wellbeing is seen as a key element in the programme, to which all teachers are expected to contribute: 'it is the responsibility of every teacher to

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contribute to learning and development in this area' (Scottish Executive, 2006b:10). Wellbeing is subdivided into three components: mental and emotional wellbeing; physical wellbeing; social wellbeing. A number of claims are made about the benefits of learning through health and wellbeing. It is said to promote 'confidence, independent thinking and positive attitudes and dispositions' (ibid:10). Again, in the final Curriculum for Excellence document, setting out experiences and outcomes for all curricular areas (Scottish Government, 2009) it is stated that 'Good health and wellbeing is central to effective learning and preparation for successful independent living' (Section on Health and wellbeing across learning:1). Children and young people should enjoy open, positive, supportive relationships and 'should feel happy, safe, respected and included in the school environment' (ibid:1).

All this sounds a bit like motherhood and apple pie but the Curriculum for Excellence documents go on to offer more specific recommendations. The importance of having clear policies on child protection, anti-discrimination, anti-bullying, and of an effective pastoral care system in place is stressed. In addition, eight indicators of wellbeing, linked to the four capacities, are specified. Children should be: healthy; achieving; nurtured; active; respected; responsible; included; and safe. These are described as the basic requirement for all children to develop and reach their full potential.

The indicators are reflected in experiences and outcomes which youngsters should achieve as they progress through school. Interestingly, unlike other areas of the curriculum, these experiences and outcomes are uniform across the various stages of schooling. All outcomes in Curriculum for Excellence are expressed (rather artificially, some might argue) in the first person, from the perspective of the learner. Examples of health and wellbeing outcomes include the following:

- I am aware of and able to express my feelings and am developing the ability to talk about them.
- I know we all experience a variety of thoughts and emotions that affect how we feel and behave and I am learning ways of managing them.

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- I understand that there are people I can talk to and that there are a number of ways in which I can gain access to practical and emotional support to help me and others in a range of circumstances.
- I understand that my feelings and reactions can change depending on what is happening within and around me. This helps me to understand my own behaviour and how others behave.
- I know that friendship, caring, sharing, fairness, equality and love are important in building positive relationships. As I develop and value relationships, I care and show respect for myself and others (ibid:2).

It is legitimate to ask whether the self-confidence embodied in these statements is something that can be instilled in its own right, as distinct from being a side-effect of something more substantive. Rather like happiness, the attempt to express it as a specific aim may well lead to disappointment. Happiness, confidence and wellbeing are likely to be by-products of other activities rather than qualities which are themselves the object being pursued. A child who achieves in sport, does well in mathematics or acquires skill in playing a musical instrument is likely to gain in confidence but that is a secondary effect of the primary activity (sport, maths, music). This suggests that perhaps the most effective contribution teachers can make to the welfare and development of their pupils might be to impart as much competence as possible in their own area of specialism, rather than seek to promote the rather nebulous quality of wellbeing.

The argument can be taken further. Even if a state of wellbeing could be achieved for all or most pupils, would it be an entirely desirable outcome and would it provide the motivation to learn? It might readily be conceded that children who are in a state of extreme unhappiness are likely to find the demands of schooling difficult to cope with, but it might also be argued that the motivation to learn may not be best advanced by too comfortable a sense of self and others: the psychological state known as cognitive dissonance provides an example of an uncomfortable stimulus to resolve intellectual

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confusion. Similarly, the striving to achieve, to improve, to learn new things may actually be encouraged by a sense of incompleteness, of something missing, of a realisation that life is a journey, sometimes difficult, and that the best we can do is keep striving. This leads me to question another current educational orthodoxy, one which has its origins in social constructivism - namely the belief that both creativity and wellbeing necessarily require a 'cooperative' approach to teaching and learning.

Individuals, Creativity and Wellbeing

Relationships are generally seen to be central to wellbeing – the social isolate is usually perceived to be in an unhealthy state. I recently heard of an episode in which a teacher set her class a task, which they could undertake either in pairs or on their own. Trying to be helpful to a rather shy, withdrawn child, she said to him: *'You don't need to do this with a partner. I know you prefer working on your own and are a bit of a loner.'* The other pupils were outraged and said that she should apologise to the boy concerned. 'Loner' for them was a term of abuse, a social state to be avoided at all costs, perhaps even a prelude to psychopathic symptoms.

There is a related assumption, often very explicit in policy documents, that children working together are likely to be more 'creative' than those working alone – they can share insights, spark ideas off against each other, and come up with something better than if they were working on their own. This may sometimes be the case but it seems to fly in the face of a large body of evidence about the creative imagination. The psychiatrist Anthony Storr has written:

Current wisdom, especially that propagated by the various schools of psycho-analysis, assumes that man is a social being who needs the companionship and affection of other human beings from cradle to grave. It is widely believed that interpersonal relationships of an intimate kind are the chief, if not the only, source of human happiness.

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Yet the lives of creative individuals often seem to run counter to this assumption (Storr, 1997: ix).

Storr goes on to show that many creative people were not good at forming close personal relationships. That did not necessarily mean that they were disturbed or even unhappy: he starts his book by citing the historian Edward Gibbon as an example of someone who never formed intimate relationships but who was 'a more than commonly happy and successful human being' (ibid.: xii). It is also true, of course, that many great writers and artists have been driven by personal demons, which have sometimes cast them into deep despair, and that some have gone through life in a tangle of turbulent and sometimes destructive relationships. My point is not to argue for a single view of either wellbeing or creativity, but to suggest that both are highly elusive concepts, not amenable to a simple, single interpretation. They are, in this sense, expressive of the complexity of the human condition – its resistance to reductionist attempts to draw up checklists, criteria and performance indicators. But, of course, the Gradgrinds who devise curriculum guidelines, cannot resist the temptation to produce soulless, bureaucratic models. They insist on what might be called a 'health and safety', 'risk averse' approach to some of the deepest human impulses – and in the process help to destroy them.

One of the reasons why the arts are so important in education is that they recognise the unique character of every human being. Many aspects of formal schooling push youngsters in the direction of conformity - whether through uniforms, school rules, standardised tests or rigid timetables. For much of the time uniqueness is suppressed, rather than given scope for expression. Through art, music, drama, dance and literature (and many other forms of human activity) individuality can find ways of expressing itself and celebrating those distinctive qualities of the person. It is regrettable that too often the arts are pushed to the margins of the curriculum in order to ensure that more obviously utilitarian subjects have pride of place. I sometimes think

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in education there is a fear of the arts because they might allow too many people to find their individual voices – and that might be seen as disruptive and dangerous, a threat to the security of the school as an institution and of society as a whole. That may be why we have so much emphasis nowadays on group activities, teamwork, and collective approaches to learning. While there are some good arguments in favour of these approaches, they also serve as control mechanisms, as ways of making the individual voice subservient to some notion of the collective good.

But the creative impulse is difficult to suppress completely and there are many inspiring stories of youngsters who overcome obstacles to enable them to pursue their heart's desire. Too much of education is about closing off dreams, shutting down options, steering youngsters in the direction of safe choices. Of course, not everyone will realise their dreams but that is not a reason for dismissing them prematurely or telling them to take a reality check. How many adults wish they had not followed the sensible advice of their parents or teachers to settle for a secure but dull job? Life is a journey which, for most people, is marked by progress and setbacks, rites of passage negotiated with more or less success, relationships which succeed and some which don't, times of happiness and times of sadness and regret. In an important sense, it is about learning to cope with the emotional highs and lows that we encounter on our personal journeys. It is rarely, if ever, a continuous story of wellbeing.

Anthony Storr suggests an important connection between the lives of exceptional creative individuals and those of more ordinary people struggling to make sense of their personal journeys. First, he observes:

The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates. He finds this a valuable integrating process which . . . has little to do with other people, but which has its own separate

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validity. His most significant moments are those in which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and those moments are chiefly, if not invariably, those in which he is alone (Storr,1997:xiv).

Then he adds:

Perhaps the need of the creative person for solitude, and his preoccupation with internal processes of integration, can reveal something about the needs of the less gifted, more ordinary human being which are, at the time of writing, neglected (ibid.: xv).

There is an important difference between the process Storr is describing and the self-regarding character of some manifestations of the therapeutic culture which I described earlier. Although the creative person may be driven by some impulse towards personal integration, he or she is pursuing this by constructing something external to him or herself – whether an art object, a performance, a piece of writing, a musical composition. The personal journey is both outward and inward – and it is a journey that eludes neat classifications of either wellbeing or creativity.

Implications for Teacher Education

There are several implications to be drawn from the preceding analysis as far as teacher educators are concerned. Firstly, even if were possible to reach a common understanding of creativity and wellbeing, there would remain pedagogical questions relating to the areas of the curriculum that are involved and the classroom strategies that might be most effective. Do all teachers have equal responsibility for promoting creativity and wellbeing, as some policy documents seem to suggest, or is there variable potential across different subject areas? How does the role of the teacher need to change if the aim is to give less emphasis to knowledge and skills, traditionally conceived, and more emphasis to active learning, problem solving and critical thinking? What should the balance be between individual and group work,

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bearing in mind the reservations expressed above about the danger of conformity if too much weight is given to 'cooperative' forms of learning?

Secondly, there are serious political and ideological implications arising from the account offered here. Schools and teachers are subject to many different, often conflicting, political imperatives – to raise standards of achievement, to prepare for employment, to ensure discipline and order, to promote child welfare, to encourage independent learning, to act as a community resource, to develop enterprise and flair, and so on. Is it reasonable to expect them to do all of these things with any hope of success? With particular reference to creativity and wellbeing, how realistic is it that these qualities will be developed within formal institutional settings that have been compared to prisons, factories and asylums (Hargreaves, 1994: 43)? Politicians tend to have a frame of reference that is short-term, constrained by election dates and the need either to launch initiative after initiative (in the case of the government) or to make ambitious promises for the future (in the case of the opposition). Teacher educators should take a longer-term view, constantly revisiting the big questions about the aims of education, the principles which should underpin it, and the relationship between schooling and society. The concepts of creativity and wellbeing provide useful entry points for such questioning.

Thirdly, teacher educators need to adopt a critical, questioning stance in relation to the changing policy discourse to which they are subject and which they are expected to pass on to their students. Both creativity and wellbeing are malleable terms which can be mobilised for different purposes, some benign, others less so. The appropriation of both creativity and wellbeing to support a particular view of the economy, noted above, is a case in point. In this sense the discourse is contested and students should be encouraged to reflect on the nature of the contestation. This involves hard conceptual work for both academics and students. At a time when there are strong pressures from policy makers to focus on 'best practice' and 'what works', and evidence of anti-intellectualism within the teaching profession itself, it will not be easy to

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insist on the importance of theoretical insights and analytic deconstruction of official narratives of educational priorities. But if teacher educators are not prepared to take up this challenge, the next generation of teachers will lack the ability and the inclination to think deeply about the personal and social consequences of the policies they are being asked to implement.

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