



Managing creative teaching and performative practices



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ABSTRACT

Policy discourses are one of the main means whereby policy texts influence the value, the implementation and the embedding of policies in the settings in which they operate. However, a number of discourses operate at the same time in any given context and they also influence the interpretation and implementation of them through the way in which practitioners manage policy processes as mediators. This research, sponsored by the ESRC, focuses on two such discourses in education in England, that of performativity and creativity and investigated how primary teachers managed these policies and how they were influenced by them.

We found that performativity and creativity policies were mainly being developed in primary schools in parallel although we also found some examples of integration of them in what one teacher described as 'smart teaching'. The major finding was that teachers sought to ensure pedagogic and professional success for both these fields to the best of their ability and to maintain their professional wellbeing.

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1. Introduction

A creativity discourse has permeated primary schools for 50 years in England and was revived in the early 2000s after the publication of the NACCCE report (Education, 1999). It had been marginalised in the 1990s by the National Curriculum and by a performativity policy of testing and inspection to ensure a continual increase in student and teacher measurable outcomes. However, in the early 2000s it gained government and public education support from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (Ofsted, 2010; QCA, 2004) in England.

Creative teaching and learning in primary schools has a threefold heritage, influenced by a range of texts. The first is one in which older teachers maintained its principles and values throughout the imposition of prescriptive curricula and pedagogies and the rise of performativity (Jeffrey, 2003; Troman & Jeffrey, 2007; Troman, Jeffrey, & Raggl, 2007; Troman & Raggl, 2008; Woods, 2004). The second is from the influences and realisation of many parts of the new industries that the creativity of the worker is a new resource of labour power to be tapped for increased performance and prosperity (Buckingham & Jones, 2001; Jones, 2001). The third influence has been a rise in the part played by the arts in policy, partly legitimated by forward looking industrial imperatives (Jeffrey & Craft, 2004) and in particular Creative Partnerships (CP), a government funded organisation that encouraged the arts in schools.

This creativity discourse is, however, competing with a powerful pervasive discourse of performativity. The latter is underpinned by a major policy to improve economic status and social well-being, a market based approach that encourages performance-based activity – the generation of a culture of performativity (Ball, 1998, 2000; Lyotard, 1979). This is a different form of performativity from that of Butler which Youdell (2006) notes concerns the nature of language and its relationship

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to the world in which a person's performativity is 'that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names' (Butler, 1993, p. 13). The performativity focused upon in this research derives from the work of Lyotard (1979) where it is conceptualised as a technology, a culture and mode of regulation that employs judgements and comparisons and displays the performances of individual subjects or organisations to serve as measures of productivity. In the educational field Lyotard's (1979) performativity culture is being used by government to raise standards in schools through national inspections in England (Jeffrey & Woods, 1998; Perryman, 2006) and to raise the achievement of the mass of the population through target setting and testing. In setting targets for Local Authorities (LA) and schools, government hopes to develop a highly skilled workforce that can compete in a new global industry – the knowledge economy. The higher the skills base and the higher levels of excellence achieved in knowledge acquisition and the best use of that knowledge, the higher the economic return for the UK.

The research upon which this article is based took place between 2006 and 2008 and was funded by the ESRC (RES-000-23-1281). It focused on how teachers in six primary schools managed the dual policy discourses of performativity and creativity. We wished to discern in what ways schools and teachers absorbed, appropriated or resisted the performativity discourse and how it affected their interest in creative teaching and learning and how they used the latter in conjunction with performative practices. We also wished to ascertain the nature of any differences in practice.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Policy discourses

Central government educational policy texts in England have dominated schools in recent times, including the introduction of National Curriculum in 1989, national assessment testing, inspection reports (Ofsted), QCA guidelines, national reports and the publication of school standards. These texts are written documents but they also contain values and beliefs about the role of education in society and the economy. As Ball (2008) notes, policy discourses privilege certain ideas and topics and speakers and exclude others, organise their own specific rationalities, making particular sets of ideas obvious, common sense and 'true' (ibid., p. 5). They mobilise truth claims and constitute rather than simply reflect social reality, 'Language is deployed in the attempt to produce certain meanings and effects' (Edwards, Nicoll, & Tait, 1999, p. 620). Policies are very specific, practical regimes of truth and value and the ways in which policies are spoken about, their vocabularies, are part of the creation of their acceptance and enactment.

These discourses bring objects into being, they form the object of which they speak (Ball, 1993), such as policy texts, and they construct particular types of social relation through the relative strength of the practices they determine. The recognition of policy texts as discourses opens up greater possibilities of interpretation and action than a more prescriptive approach to policy analysis allows.

To the extent that relations of power are open or fluid, there is a degree of instability permitting the possibility of reversal or modification. Research into Ofsted inspections during the 1990s noted how, all strategies of control call forth counter-strategies on the part of subordinates, (Giddens, 1985), 'and teachers are very resilient' (Jeffrey & Woods, 1998, p. 141).

Discourses contain values or they are based upon values and the creativity and performativity discourses exhibit different values, in that the former focuses on process through the use of imagination, spontaneity, collaboration and joy (Jeffrey & Woods, 2009), whereas the performativity discourse highlights outcomes valuing aspiration, targets, competition and ends based achievements (Jeffrey & Troman, 2012). However, there is a public policy relationship between the two for capitalist economic policies are now focused on harnessing the creativity of labour through education to enhance our economic potential, while using performative practices to raise the level of achievement of that human potential. We have seen, in recent years in primary schools, the potential for a developing relationship between the two due to the professional interests of teachers to manage both discourses in a coherent fashion (Jeffrey & Woods, 2003). It is now clear that the two practices exist in many of our primary schools but the nature of that relationship is variable as is the power of each to dominate curriculum organisation and pedagogy. Discourses are also essentially made up of practices, in this case educational pedagogies.

Policies are contested, interpreted and enacted in a variety of arenas of practice and rhetorics; texts and meanings of policy makers do not always translate directly and obviously into institutional practices. They are inflected, mediated, resisted and misunderstood, or in some cases simply prove unworkable – messy, contradictory, confused and unclear (Ball, 2008). This research investigates the way teachers mediate these policies.

3. Methodology

Our theory of knowledge is based upon a sociological approach that derives from empirical studies. We try to get to know the culture of the classroom and school and take the view that people's personal realities and beliefs are embodied in speech and behaviours. The observations and analysis of the micro, we believe, is linked to macro discourses, policies and structures. We follow an interactionist sociology in which we ask: What problems do people face? How are they experienced? What meanings are given to them? What feelings are generated? Ethnography respects the empirical world, penetrates layers of meaning and facilitates taking the role of the other by the researcher, an empathetic understanding, defining situations, and grasping the sense of process (Woods, 1996).

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