



Re-discovering the arts: The impact of engagement in a natural environment upon pre-service teacher perceptions of creativity

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 May 2010

Received in revised form 5 March 2012

Accepted 28 August 2012

Available online 5 September 2012

Keywords:

Teacher education

Arts

Creativity

Thinking skills

Natural environments

Dialogic learning

Group processes for learning

ABSTRACT

Australian national statements describing a quality 21st century education prioritize creativity and sustainability as essentials for global and economic survival and for individual wellbeing. However, data gathered from 114 pre-service teachers commencing undergraduate study indicates their limited experience and skills in the arts, and lack of confidence in their personal creativity. 88 of the group experienced 3 weeks' of arts workshops in a safe natural context, a Japanese Garden. Groups used the natural environment as a stimulus and resource for group problem solving. The study findings indicate that many respondents had experienced a lack of contact with nature during their formal years of schooling (Jones, 2011), and that immersive learning experience in safe natural environments had positive impacts upon their wellbeing and perceptions of personal creativity. Respondents reported deep absorption and 'flow' experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), more positive perceptions of their personal creativity, the removal of barriers to group problem solving and enhanced confidence in the arts.

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1. Introduction—the study context

"I found working outdoors beneficial. Everyone felt that we were equal. In classroom environments clever brainy people dominate. It was fun and relaxing for learning" [Participant 44].

A challenge faced by 21st century teacher education is that formal schooling should create "successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens" (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 8). In Australia, the newly developed national curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010) seeks to develop lifelong learners who can thrive in the information age, attaining a balance between global sustainability and economic competitiveness. Where 20th century research focused on creativity as an aspect of unique personal psychology (Gardner, 1993a), a 21st century re-alignment situates creativity as a resource for competition in the global market (Jones, 2011, p. 18) has informed a reconsideration of the relationship between the individual and the group, dormancy time for creative processes, and the pressure of delivery schedules for learner outputs: Zampetakis, Bouranta, and Moustakis report that in the 21st century creativity has become "fundamentally social and necessarily collective" (2010, p. 2). Jones (2011) is in accord with the findings of Zampetakis et al. in her observation that "Pre-service teachers express their awareness that playful learning may be supportive of personal and professional creativity and transformation ... a sense of belonging also appears to be generated through extended and playful learning with peers" (Jones, 2011, p. 167). A dialogic approach to knowledge construction, according

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to Wegerif (2010), creates space for “expanding mindfulness . . . to help ensure that the world of the future is a place worth thriving in” (p. 140).

In the United Kingdom, the adoption of a national curriculum in England and Wales with government mandated benchmarking and high-stakes testing has been critically reviewed by researchers (Hall & Ozerk, 2007; West, 2012) on the grounds of its potential to restrict what was taught, and how learners perceived and experienced high-stakes testing. Lauder, Lowe, and Chawla-Duggan (2008) support this observation, noting that an intensified focus upon literacy, numeracy and science may impact negatively upon ‘learning to learn’ (p. 6). In the early stages of a move toward government control of curricula, school Principals in Australia voiced concerns that policies for education were being influenced by narrow “understandings of the nature of schooling in the 21st century” (Cranston, Mulford, Keating, & Reid, 2010, p. 17). Their concern was that an audit culture had already constrained pedagogy and curriculum in Australian schools.

Research into the personal habitus of pre-service teachers (Jones, 2011) indicates that school leavers entering pre-service teacher education have been enculturated into exchange systems of capital during their school experience. Thus they bring to study a habitus that is, according to Biesta (2007, p. 20) increasingly informed by epistemologies and practices that position education in terms of evidence-based measures of quality. While it may seem logical that future teachers should be successful in the systems where they seek a future career, this study questions whether pre-service teachers’ prior experience of schooling may negatively impact the socially constructed and life-wide creativity that Kalantzis and Cope (2008) and Zampetakis et al. (2010), perceive as critical to 21st century sustainability. Further, it suggests that engagement in natural environments may disrupt personal habitus so as to allow the interpolation of a more creative space for learning (Pack, 2011).

From April 2012, the Queensland State Government (2011) has sought to institute mandatory pre-registration tests in literacy, numeracy and science for teachers graduating from 4 year Bachelor of Education programs. Success in the tests will be a pre-condition of acceptance into the profession for primary or early years (grades P-7) educators. The tests focused upon skills in literacy, numeracy and science. In response, university programs since 2010 have offered a greater number of electives focusing upon the subjects tested. Hence, for universities, according to Giroux (2011) market pressure has become a factor determining curriculum. This re-focusing of teacher education presents what Kalantzis and Cope (2008) consider to be a “crisis of relevance” (p. 7). The nexus between a narrowing curriculum in school and university and a counteractive rhetoric of transformative praxis is the focus of this study which explores practices by which pre-service teachers may become the creative and transformative educators that are essential to the 21st century.

2. Purpose of the study

This article reports on early findings from a 3 year project within a 7 year longitudinal study managed and funded by the University of Southern Queensland. The study commenced in 2009. It continues to gather data into beginning-teacher hopes and self-perceptions as future professionals at the outset of their undergraduate program. A sub-project within that broader study inquired into commencing pre-service teachers’ skills and experience in the arts, their self perceptions as creative individuals and their response to engagement in learning in natural environments. It sought to answer the following questions:

1. What beliefs about the place of creativity and the arts in education do pre-service teachers bring to undergraduate study?
2. What is their prior experience of the arts, on commencing study at university?
3. How far does engagement in arts experiences in a natural environment impact on pre-service teacher feelings of wellbeing and self-perceptions of creativity?
4. What are the implications of these findings for undergraduate programs for teacher professional preparation?

The longitudinal study commenced in 2009. It has been continued in 2010–2012 with the support of a University of Southern Queensland Learning and Teaching Project Fund (LTPF). This sub-project gathers data upon pre-service teachers’ prior experience in the arts, their perceptions of personal creativity on commencing study at university, and how or whether engagement in natural environment impacts upon their perceptions of creativity and group problem solving. Data under discussion in this paper were gathered in 2010–2011.

3. Method

The study was approved by the University of Southern Queensland Office of Research and Higher Degrees code: HO9REA22. Participants in the study gave informed consent, were aware that participation was optional, and were advised that they could exit the study at any time without prejudice.

4. Background to the study

The first year of a 7 year longitudinal study, commencing in 2009, surveyed a cohort of 139 pre-service teachers in their first weeks of experience in an undergraduate program: it captured data from both on-campus and online enrolments. The 2010–2011 study reports on a subsection of data gathered from 114 undergraduate pre-service teachers studying across 3

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