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‘What you risk reveals what you value’: fostering creativity in primary physical education

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Creativity has become a buzzword in UK culture in the twenty-first century and is in increasing demand across many spheres. In education, its usage is often generic and has become ever more widespread as it has found its way into a plethora of government documentation pertaining to primary schools over the last decade. However, with a continued focus upon a performativity discourse, creativity continues to be underdeveloped in primary schools, even in areas such as Physical Education (PE), which has great potential for fostering creativity due to an endless range of movement possibilities. Using Nicholson’s model (Enhancing creativity, in R. J. Sternberg, Ed., *Handbook of creativity*; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999) for creative enhancement, this paper examines key issues that concern the development of creativity within primary PE and seeks to construct some ‘real’ recommendations for how this could manifest itself in practice.

Keywords: creativity; primary physical education

Introduction

Creativity has become a buzzword in contemporary education and is in increasing demand across many spheres (Bailin 1994). Historically it has been a multifaceted term and continues to have a wide variety of definitions in different disciplines, though in education its usage is often generic and ever more widespread (Maisuria 2005). Indeed the OCC (2007, 2) indicate that ‘creativity is seen as a defining characteristic of UK culture in the twenty first century’ which has manifested itself in a plethora of government documentation over the last decade (Craft 2006), most notably for primary schools in *Creativity and cultural education: all our futures* (NACCCE 1999), *National Curriculum in England and Wales* (DfEE/QCA 1999a), *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* (QCA/DfES 2000) and *Excellence and enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools* (DfES 2003a).

Yet despite such an overt commitment to the development of creativity, the realities within primary schools appear somewhat different, with teachers delivering a narrow focus within any given programme of study (Compton 2007), as ‘most head

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teachers and subject leaders have concentrated on the raising standards agenda' (Ofsted 2005a, 2) leading to creativity being underdeveloped in primary schools (Ofsted 2004). With a heightened awareness of a results and outcomes driven system, it is perhaps not surprising that measurable performance has been given greater value (Ball 2003) to the point where 'performativity' can be seen to be 'hijacking the creativity discourse' (Turner-Bisset 2007, 201).

Nowhere has this impact been more sharply felt than in foundation subjects such as Physical Education (PE), which have become increasingly marginalised within curriculum time, as a greater emphasis has been placed upon the teaching of core subjects such as English (Literacy), Mathematics (Numeracy) and Science for which annual results are published for all primary schools (Speednet 2000; Warburton 2001; Ofsted 2005b). Within this environment, PE in a number of schools has been reduced to something of a second-class subject (Griggs 2007a), taught at the end of a school day or as a 'break' from focused, class-based learning and as a consequence there continues to be low expectations of primary PE (Ofsted 2005b). In addition, an uneven and an imbalanced PE curriculum (often dominated by games) delivered in many schools (Ofsted 1999; Capel 2000) often by poorly prepared teachers (Williams 1985; Morgan 1997; Caldecott, Warburton, and Waring 2006a) does little to develop the subject or develop pupils' 'higher-order' thinking associated with concepts such as creativity.

Though Chedzoy (2006, 4) argues that PE continues to have many avenues to foster creativity often because it allows pupils the opportunity to make up their own games or their own sequences in gymnastics or dance, this aspect alone is insufficient. In a learning environment not conducive to creativity, such a task could easily be reduced to pupils reproducing 'safe', 'taught' choices so 'not to get it wrong' (Davis 2000) or simply floundering because they do not have the knowledge and understanding or confidence to cope. The environment created by schools and by the teachers within them is therefore key (Wyse and Spendlove 2007) and while it is not expected that practitioners should feel an obligation to develop anything approaching 'sublime' creativity (Cropley 2001), they can do much to encourage what Craft (2000) describes as 'small c' creativity.

Among the most useful of suggested models to be found for the practical application of developing creativity in schools is that of Nicholson (1999, 409), who identified the following seven key points:

- (1) support domain-specific knowledge: pupils need to understand as much as possible about the domain (often subject area) that they are doing the creative work in;
- (2) reward curiosity and exploration;
- (3) build motivation, particularly internal motivation;
- (4) encourage risk taking;
- (5) have high expectations/beliefs about creative potential of students: this applies to both teachers' views and students' self-image;
- (6) give opportunities for choice and discovery;
- (7) develop students self-management skills.

The purpose of this paper therefore is to explore each of Nicholson's key points listed above, in order to examine key issues and construct some 'real' recommendations for how this could manifest itself within primary PE.

Support domain-specific knowledge

In order for children to realise their creative potential in the physical domain, it is imperative that they are equipped with the basic skills with which to be creative. However, this is considerably more problematic than it may first appear. Literature over the last decade including Evans, Penney, and Davies (1996), Gilbert (1998), Harrison (1998), Oxley (1998), Davies (1999), Revell (2000), Speednet (2000), Warburton (2001) and Wright (2004) have all served to highlight that the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) in England and Wales (DfEE/QCA 1999b) is being delivered ineffectively in primary schools. The root of the problem has been identified repeatedly as the lack of preparedness of wave after wave of primary and junior school teachers to teach PE (Williams 1985; Morgan 1997; Caldecott, Warburton, and Waring 2006b), with a lack of time given to the subject during teacher training (PEA 1984; Williams 1985; Carney and Armstrong 1996; Morgan 1997; Clay 1999; Warburton 2001), which has reduced significantly as a greater focus has been placed upon the training of core subjects (Ofsted 1998).

As a direct result of such concerns, much of the recent literature within primary PE has focused upon both conceptual and practical ways to improve children's key developmental movements (see Pickup, Haydn-Davies, and Jess 2007, for a summary). 'physical literacy' (Whitehead 2001), 'basic moves' (Jess and Dewar 2004) and 'fundamental movement skills' (STEPS PD 2007) all seek to wrap the essence of what children need to learn in the physical domain in order to have 'the basic building blocks' (Haydn-Davies 2005, 48) and a secure foundation for lifelong physical activity. The newly formed Association for Physical Education (afPE) has also taken steps to bolster the training of existing teachers by launching the National College for Continuing Professional Development in July 2006 (afPE 2007). What is imperative is that whichever approach emerges as the 'chosen' vehicle for primary PE is that practitioners embrace it whole heartedly and feel secure, empowered and self-confident in themselves to deliver the programme to their pupils. Ofsted (2005b, 3) identified 'weak subject knowledge' as the major limitation to developing the more challenging and creative aspects of learning, so it is vital this is addressed quickly.

One possible way forward would be to build on the foundations already laid down in the early years. Sure start (DfES 2003b), a framework that aims to support a child from birth to three years of age, places a strong emphasis on a young child's health and physical well being as well as fostering their creative processes. The foundation stage, introduced as a distinct phase of education for children aged three to five, has both 'Physical development' and 'Creative development' as two of its seven Early Learning Goals (QCA/DfES 2000). What is clear from such structures is that both the physicality and the creativity of the child are valued here, evident in their embedment. This is not matched in the existing National Curriculum where discrete subjects are taught, such as PE, and creativity is little more than an interesting sideshow. This current situation is perhaps best summed up by Compton (2007, 115) commenting that 'it is ironic that the youngest children are given the greatest responsibility for their own learning but tragic that this is gradually eroded as the children journey through school'. In this respect, a curriculum review is desperately needed, so that a re-evaluation of priorities can be addressed.

Reward curiosity and exploration

Amongst the repeated references made to creativity in government documentation already outlined, there can be found a recurring theme of focusing upon objectives and outcomes (Turner-Bisset 2007). No clearer example can be found than on the QCA website set up to promote and guide creativity in the classroom where an exemplar of good practice is entitled, 'A teacher talks about going with the flow while maintaining the focus on learning objectives' (QCA 2007a, 4). Such statements appear somewhat paradoxical when to many, creativity represents 'open mindedness, exploration, the celebration of difference and ... is taken to be an automatic opposition to the language of targets, to instrumental skills, the measurement of outcomes and the dogmas of accountability' (Cullingford 2007, 133).

This state of affairs serves as a barometer of the current climate where politicians and the media alike associate notions of creativity as progressive, woolly and equated with a fall in standards (Marshall 2001). Indeed, Maisuria (2005, 145) warns that presently, 'a teacher who is creative and celebrates creativity from pupils is a teacher who is willing to risk a great deal'. PE is not immune to such pressures and in many respects falls victim to an outcome driven curriculum not just through its educational association but through its association with sport. There is arguably little room for creativity for those teaching discrete skills such as swimming strokes within PE to give but one example. Though those within sport may wax lyrical about moments of creativity performed by its heroes, where a player is beaten or a shot or a delivery is brilliant because of its unorthodoxy, its 'coaching' preaches a discourse of performance and practice and continues to impose this upon PE curricula (Capel 2000). Indeed, with the increasing trend of utilising sports coaches in primary school to deliver PE lessons (Ward 2005; Talbot 2006; Griggs 2007a) there is a danger that PE experiences may be reduced to repetitive game related skill practices (drills) learned on National Governing Body (NGB) coaching courses.

In a bid to offset the irresistible drift towards a product and outcomes focused PE curriculum, it is essential that the process of learning be also given value. If during the teaching of gymnastics, only polished sequences of prescribed movements are celebrated then there is little incentive for a child to explore what other movements their body is capable of. That is not to say that a movement such as a 'textbook' forward roll is not a desirable skill to acquire but ideally this would have been selected by the child as one of a dozen different rolls at their disposal, after repeated exploration. In addition, some such lessons may not always have an observable outcome (Pullman 2003; Turner-Bisset 2007). Within the classroom, Claxton (2006) advocates the celebration of the creative process by keeping and showing 'drafts' together with 'best' work. In a practical sense, this is less obvious though an equivalent may be to record and showcase the different movements tried, along with an explanation of the choices made which were involved in the creation of the final sequence.

Build motivation, particularly internal motivation

Research undertaken by Jeffrey (2006) served to highlight characteristics that were common to creativity practice across a wide variety of teaching and learning environments. The project entitled 'Creative Learning and Student Perspectives' (CLASP) identified four common themes namely innovation, ownership, control and

relevance. What became apparent within these four themes was how creativity developed as pupils saw their learning as meaningful, took greater ownership and felt in control. What results as pupils internalised the process is that they appeared ‘self-motivated, not governed by extrinsic factors, or purely task-oriented exercises’ (Jeffrey 2006, 401).

PE is in an ideal position to capture and capitalise upon what appears to be a child’s desire to move (Bailey, Doherty, and Pickup 2007), but rather than to continue to inculcate a legacy of failure and dropping out of physical activity, so prevalent among adolescents (Sport England 2003), a new direction must be sought that has greater relevance to children’s worlds and interests so they are more equipped to engage in a range of activities throughout their lives. If this can be addressed through imaginative curriculum design and delivery, then Woods (2002, 7) suggests then the likelihood of developing creative individuals is enhanced, explaining that ‘relevance aids identification, motivation, excitement and enthusiasm. Control, in turn, leads to ownership of the knowledge that results. If relevance, control and ownership apply, the greater the chance of creative learning resulting’.

Encourage risk taking

Although the publication of *Excellence and enjoyment: A strategy for primary schools* (DfES 2003a, 33) sought to invigorate the wider curriculum with its repeated references to creativity and making ‘learning vivid and real’, Alexander (2004, 14) indicated that these intentions were more ‘contradictory than at first sight they seem’. Closer attention to detail reveals that a truer aim was to spread the pedagogy of the literacy and numeracy strategies across the curriculum (Turner-Bissett 2007), ‘identifying the key teaching and learning approaches that the strategies have promoted and transfer them more widely’ (DfES 2003a, 1). Ball (2003) suggests that as a consequence of valuing the fast paced and interactive approaches advocated by such strategies, that this has indeed become the dominant pedagogy within the primary curriculum to the detriment of all others, stifling creativity (Davis 2000; Turner-Bissett 2007) and encouraging teachers to avoid taking risks and to ‘stay within the box, and keep the pupils there too’ (Maisuria 2005, 143).

In many ways, this has physically occurred within PE as schools have leaned toward the delivery of a narrow and imbalanced curriculum (Ofsted 1999; Capel 2000), focusing on more indoor activities of gymnastics and dance and a foray outside for some games. Far less attention (and in some cases little or none) is given to swimming (TES/CCPR 2003), athletics or Outdoor and Adventurous Activities (OAA) (Ofsted 1999, 2005b; Warburton 2001). In the case of the latter, risks have sought to be eliminated all together as teaching unions have recommended that children should not be taken outside the school perimeter due to the compensation culture and fear of litigation faced by staff should an accident occur (Clare 2004).

The realities are of course that risks are everywhere both perceived and real and what is needed is a sense of perspective and a good dose of risk awareness and risk management. This is as applicable to unions, as it is to school, teachers and even children. If children are educated in an environment that is risk averse, this severely restricts their creative potential, so modelling an approach that is prepared to consider the broadest range of options is so very important (Craft 2005).

Have high expectations

Though Ofsted (2005b) report that the quality of teaching and of pupil achievement in PE has improved steadily over the past decade, compared to core subjects, which are externally tested and monitored, there continue to be low expectations of and within PE that have remained unchanged for sometime. According to Casbon (2006, 15), 'a few schools are beginning to explore how they can realistically expect higher levels of achievement from a greater proportion of pupils, but this culture is proving slow to change'. In a bid to give guidance as to what high expectations might look like documents entitled *High quality in PE and sport for young people* (DfES 2004) and *Do you have high quality PE and sport in your school?* (DfES 2005) were published, though as yet the impact of these remains unclear.

What is clear, however, is the link between weak subject knowledge discussed previously and low expectations (Ofsted 2005b), and the ability of teachers to transmit their own insecurities. 'If for instance we teach in a less than enthusiastic manner, with closed body language and fail to change into appropriate clothing (just putting trainers on instead of shoes is not enough), then this sends a clear message of what our expectations are of this lesson' (Griggs 2007b, 3). If practitioners are capable of both encouragement and modelling of good practice in the physical domain, then they will move children beyond mere participation or simply being 'busy, happy, and good' (Placek 1983) and open up the possibilities of higher learning.

Give opportunities for choice and discovery

PE literature continues to celebrate its ability to offer opportunities to make choices and engage in episodes of discovery (Chedzoy 2006; QCA 2007b). Upon examination of examples given in guidance for practitioners, many opportunities point towards examples of 'guided discovery', which is designed to lead pupils to a planned, predetermined response (Katone 1949). 'This structure gets the learner to the target with maximum efficiency' (Mosston and Ashworth 2002, 220) and is consistent with performativity discourses, which specify both objectives and outcomes and is the basis for much of the structure found in QCA planning (QCA 2000), prevalent in planning for primary school PE. As a method of discovery, however, this approach has its limits, not least because cognitively it is allied to memory recall and practice (Bruner 1961). Indeed recent research in primary education by both Alexander (2004) and Moyles et al. (2003) found that dominant pedagogical strategies have reduced teacher–pupil interaction to be 'dominated by closed questions, brief answers which teachers do not build upon, phatic praise rather than diagnostic feedback, and an emphasis on recalling information rather than on speculating and problem solving' (Alexander 2004, 21).

PE must clearly have great creative potential, as there is an endless range of movement possibilities that can be combined and recombined but unlocking this potential requires the right tool. One possible solution is to employ a divergent discovery approach, where the learner makes most the key decisions and is engaged cognitively throughout in a process of designing and evaluation. According to Mosston and Ashworth (2002, 248), 'without experiences in divergent discovery, learners' experiences are limited to replication of the known movements, basic skills and fundamental strategies in the different activities and sports'. To employ this

approach successfully, a less constrained learning environment and the use of precise language are key. For example, gymnastic sequencing must go beyond the practice pedagogy and vocabulary of ‘show or find three ways to ...’ to a more open ‘create five different movements from a stimulus and connect using ...’, where the teacher merely specifies guiding parameters.

Develop students self-management skills

With risk-averse practitioners who have weak subject knowledge, as already discussed, it is no surprise that Ofsted (2005b, 3) should report that within primary PE ‘many lack confidence in allowing pupils the freedom to explore’. As a result, lessons can quickly fall into the habit of being command-style affairs where teachers seek to maximise control, talk a lot and pupils follow their instructions (Mosston and Ashworth 2002). Though Chedzoy (2006, 4) argues that PE continues to have many avenues to foster creativity through self-management, as it allows opportunity to make up games or sequences, this aspect must be handled carefully. For example, in a learning environment in which only performance and high quality outcomes are celebrated, pupils will readily producing ‘safe’, ‘taught’ choices so ‘not to get it wrong’ (Davis 2000).

The creation of an inclusive learning environment where children are truly empowered to make their own choices is paramount (Jeffrey and Craft 2004). Such an ethos takes a real commitment and the patience and confidence to let children manage their own time, resources and wider learning rather than feel the need to prescribe it all for them because of what has been planned for this week and next on a scheme of work.

Conclusion

With creativity having such prominence in twenty-first century primary education and with policy makers showing no sign of abating (Craft 2006), it is imperative that PE maximises its potential as an ideal vehicle for exploration and self-expression. Though the effectiveness and implementation of *Excellence and enjoyment: A strategy for primary schools* (DfES 2003a) is hotly contested as a means by which to foster creativity, recent research does at least suggest schools are seeking greater connectivity between subjects, as 80% have now moved towards theme-based teaching (Ward and Bloom 2007, 1). However, such evidence also reveals the disconnectedness of PE within the primary curriculum as ‘only 6% taught PE this way’ (Ward 2007, 14).

As Craft (2005) indicates, it is problematic for practitioners to grasp what is really meant by creativity in practice, so models such as Nicholson’s (1999), which set out to support domain-specific knowledge, reward curiosity and exploration, build motivation, encourage risk taking, have high expectations, give opportunities for choice and discovery, and develop students self-management skills, can serve as a useful structure from which to work.

However, in a climate where the dominant discourse in practice remains that of ‘performativity’, its effectiveness is still at the mercy of the practitioners who actually develop the planning, deliver the lessons and create the learning environment. Turner-Bisset (2007) warns that presently current pedagogy has a tendency to reduce such models to a checklist mentality, where ‘the concern becomes not ‘what do I

want my pupils to learn, and how best will they learn it?’ but ‘have I got creativity covered in my planning?’ This also remains a very real concern too for the future implementation in practice of ‘physical literacy’ (Whitehead 2001), ‘basic moves’ (Jess and Dewar 2004) or ‘fundamental movement skills’ (STEPS PD 2007).

If creativity is to truly manifest itself and have value within PE, then far greater risks have to be taken at all levels within education ‘in an atmosphere in which the teacher’s creative abilities are properly engaged’ (NACCCE 1999, 90). This would model to children the very values so fervently espoused by guiding documentation and would provide a very real opportunity for both ‘excellence and enjoyment’ to actually occur.

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