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# A PEDAGOGY OF FREEDOM: WHY PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS SHOULD EMBRACE EDUCATIONAL EMANCIPATION

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## Abstract

Rich stories of learning journeys that arose from a Life History Research Project resulted in the development of a growing awareness on the part of the author in the role that freedom can productively play within the primary school classroom. The stories that adults told of their most memorable learning experiences almost exclusively occurred outside of the classroom within play and social situations where they were free to engage in a meaningful and personalised learning experience. Learning stories involving risk and even danger, conflict and resolution, freedom from supervision and responsibility as a self-regulated mantle of growing maturity were common themes within the stories. The learning, when scrutinised, revealed deep learning within the domains of problem solving, inventiveness, innovation, creativity, coping skills, processing skills, emotional intelligence, personal happiness, belonging, identity, confidence, political ideology, ethical formation, interpersonal communication and many others. These domains are highly valued within the adult population. However, social change within modern childhood has resulted in many societies espousing social norms that result in children growing up within highly controlled environments with high levels of adult input, supervision, watchfulness, involvement and interference. The level of time spent indoors as opposed to outdoors has also increased dramatically between the last two generations (O'Connor, McCormack, Angus & MacLaughlin 2012). The consequences of this social change are largely unknown as of yet, however, it is surmisable that the impact on the development of skills that require freedom within childhood to flourish is at least a strong possibility. What will this mean for future generations? Who will lead? Who will innovate? Who will be happy?

The role of primary school is more than the development of academic skills such as numeracy and literacy; it is also preparation for life. The broader skillset that can be developed within child led activities has a role within the primary classroom. Educators who embrace a pedagogy of freedom will be well rewarded in many ways. They will enjoy rich integrated teaching experiences and will also experience the joy of seeing children reach their true potential in a supportive learning environment which the children and their teacher have created together within a partnership approach to childhood education that is based on mutual respect for the innate wisdom of all learners.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Freedom, Primary School, Teachers, Creativity, Holistic Education, Student Empowerment, Life History, Learning Stories.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The function of education can be considered as fostering the growth of what is individual in each human being. Herbert Read (1949) believed that this was mainly possible through enabling students to engage with creative processes that are unique to them through the provision of an enabling environment and empowering teacher. Wood and Atfield (2005) agree with Read and write that creative learning occurs when students are provided with freedom to express their ideas and their feelings through exploration and experimentation. So freedom is an intrinsic part of a pedagogy that supports creative development, but is creativity that important?

## **2 CREATIVITY**

Creativity can be described as divergent thinking, a cognitive skill that is different to general intelligence (Sheaffer 2005). It is the ability to identify a solution to an issue or problem that is innovative and novel in its essence but also of value, either to the individual creator or to society in general. Creativity is often viewed within the artistic domain. It is true that within artistic expression, creativity must be present. Within this context, the issue is internal to the artist and solved by the creation of a unique expression in the form of the creative product. However, creativity is the vehicle; art is merely the creative output. Creativity is equally possible in any genre. In many disciplines, creativity is called innovation, probably because of the association of creativity as artisticness. Smolucha and Smolucha (1986) see creativity as the collaboration of imagination and the ability to tenaciously think out and follow the steps involved in expressing imagination in a form of reality. Application of this definition to science, technology, industry, social issues and so on infinitum demonstrates endless possibilities for creative output.

Creativity has the power to change societies in fields as wide ranging as economics, medicine, science and culture. It is inherently valued by the human race. It is founded within an individual's ability to play and to explore (Boden, 2001). Within the ability to explore, a high degree of natural playfulness is necessary. Can playfulness be developed without the magical experience of childhood play? Many, including the author, believe not (Piers & Landaue, 1980). True play requires a level of freedom that results in it traditionally being an 'out of school' activity. However with modern childhood being so structured within the confines of adult supervision (O'Connor, McCormack, Angus & MacLaughlin 2012), it is time that teachers reflect on freedom as a vehicle for creative learning and consider its expansion within the classroom. Because of the value of all levels of creative development for both individuals and society, it is imperative that our educational systems meet the creativity challenge.

Freedom is a reoccurring theme in creativity literature. Freedom and space, both physical and meta physical, are essential elements of the creative process. Freedom allows all the described elements of creativity to flourish – discovery, investigation, communication, fluency, imagination, flexibility and originality (Lowenfeld & Brittain 1987, Larkin 1981, Luquet 2001). Gardner (1990) describes creativity as a process of perception, production and reflection and also stresses the need for freedom to explore the concept of meaningful projects in education that enable students to engage with their own creativity and develop processes and products that were never envisaged by the educator.

## **3 LEARNING STORIES**

During Life History interviews with creative people, learning stories emerged that captured the essence of what depth of learning can occur when children are free to learn. One question asked of participants was what their favourite thing about school was. One participant, not even attempting to be funny, answered after a period of thought with furrowed brow, 'Saturdays'. When asked why Saturdays were so good, she went on to describe a feeling of 'adventure', a sense of 'not knowing what would happen' and that 'anything could happen'. This excitement triggered by an element of risk or uncertainty about the immediate future is a key element of any creativity supporting educational experience. That this participant remembered it as almost exclusively an out of school activity is a great pity for creativity development through the integration of risk and uncertainty has a place within a pedagogical approach that appreciates the key role that freedom plays within such a learning experience. When asked to describe her favourite Saturday experience, the participant told a very rich story of getting trapped in a five foot deep ravine and her friends making a human chain to rescue her. She described the memory as infused with the smell of the soil as her hands dug in and the feeling that her heart would burst with joy that she had such friends. The sense of identity and belonging that are central to this learning story are a crucial milestone in the development of the self confidence that allows her to express herself within creative mediums, an activity that always incorporates risk and as such can only easily be embraced by confident people. When asked if she could ever remember having feelings like these within the classroom, she recounted the story of a substitute teacher who took the class for one week while their normal teacher was absent. She was eight years of age at that

time. She spoke of that week as 'fun', something that school was often not. She remembered a week long project on dinosaurs.

'My class was mostly boys and I remember thinking that they would love it but that myself and the other girls were being a bit short changed but as the project evolved it became something I had never experienced before at school, it was engrossing, I dreamt about it at night and couldn't wait to get to school each morning'.

What she is describing is the process of flow as identified by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi. Flow is true engagement to the point where the learner is absorbed in the activity, stimulated by it and completely in tune with their own learning. It is a magic space where creativity is at its most potent and it is marked by a feeling of *loving* the activity. What did the dinosaur activity involve?

'It started with drawing and painting different types of dinosaurs, diplodocus, tyrannosaurus rex, you know, the usual [laugh]. Then we made mesh and paper mache sculptures of them all. I remember we wrote the story of their lives as if they were like us, we gave them nicknames and families and hobbies [laughs]. We took it in that direction but it was all encouraged by the teacher or at least he didn't seem to mind. In the process, of course we learned lots of natural history about what type of world each dinosaur lived in. I also remember being fascinated by the paper mache. It was so gooey but went hard all by itself, I loved all the painting too and having the freedom to do things your own way. Of course there were little arguments in the group about things like what shade of green or brown was right but we worked all those out ourselves. It felt great when the class listened to me. Like I was a knowledgeable person. I remember liking some of the kids in my class that I hadn't really liked before [pause] God, it was a great week. Do you know what we did at the end of it? We choose a charity by looking at loads of them and talking about who deserved help more and why, I remember we all wanted to help children in poor countries get access to school [laughs] what were we like? Most of us spent most of our time dying to be out of school [laughs]. We sold raffle tickets all through the community with the dinosaur sculptures as the prizes and raised lots of money for those school-less children [laughs]. I suppose that the community just supported it to help out, I don't suppose anyone really wanted a dinosaur sculpture made by eight year olds [laughs].'

What the participant is describing is unified learning through project work. A wonderful medium for developing creativity. The dinosaur project taught the children natural history, science through material change, maths through working with dimensions, language and vocabulary development as well as negotiation and interpersonal skills through group led activity, self-esteem through team esteem, social conscience development and philosophical debate through the identification of people in need discussions, social entrepreneurship and planning through the execution of the fundraising and a deepening sense of belonging through the involvement of the community. What a great teacher that substitute was and what a wonderful pedagogy of freedom he espoused.

#### **4 THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER**

The role that the teacher plays in the development of student creativity is one of guidance rather than control (Epstein 2009). They can guide the creative process in a positive way through numerous actions and attitudes. They can create a creativity fostering environment and atmosphere of openness and sharing. They can supply access to space and time and materials that allow creative projects to flourish. They can also adopt an appropriate approach to observation, to facilitation and even, when necessary or systematically required, to assessment. . It is important that the teacher is aware of these creative processes, can recognise them and limits their verbal input to open-ended questions that will help the students to understand the process rather than be interpreted as a judgment of the product. Any non-questioning comment can be interpreted as a judgment and thus destroy the

students' spontaneous enjoyment of the creative process, thereby damaging their innate motivation to engage in creation and damaging their creative development (Luquet 2001).

Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) explain that in an educational setting, art and creativity are not synonymous. While all art outputs are intrinsically creative not all art experiences are creative and not all creative processes are experienced through art. Instead creativity in an educational art process can be stifled by an overly involved or directive teacher just as creativity can be developed through many mediums and many subjects given the correct environment and a creativity empowering and facilitative teacher. Eglington (2003) elaborates on this by describing this type of teacher as one who encourages investigation, communication and discovery. These are skills that could relate to almost any conceivable educational project. When a student is engaged in a quality creative process and is demonstrating these skills, the teacher should not interrupt but instead provide silent but empathetic support for the student and the process (Matthews 1999, 2003, Gallagher 2004, Lowenfeld & Brittain 1987)

## **5 UNIFIED LEARNING**

Within a primary school setting, the opportunities for creative development are influenced by both the curriculum and by the teachers approach to learning (Craft, 2005). A classroom where unified learning such as the dinosaur project in section 3 are embraced are better for creativity development than compartmentalised learning which occurs when focusing on one subject at a time. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning both offer opportunities for unified learning and classroom where they are encouraged will offer more opportunities for creativity (Craft, 2005). Interdisciplinary learning is where two or more disciplines are brought together to form new knowledge (Boix-Mansilla & Gardner, 2003). An example is studying evolution through a variety of mediums, such as archaeology, paleontology, biology, theology and so on (Craft, 2005). Transdisciplinary learning is where closely related subjects can be used together to learn new knowledge (Nikitina & Mansilla, 2003). Examples include science and maths, history and geography, language and literacy and so on. This approach is very achievable within primary schools as each class has one teacher rather than a team of subject teachers as exists within later educational structures. One teacher working with a group of children can build interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning approaches within their group.

## **6 A PEDAGOGY OF FREEDOM**

Teaching in order to develop creativity within the individuals of a primary school class is centered within an ideology of learner empowerment that is the central axis of a pedagogy of freedom. There are ten things a teacher can do to engender creative development within their classroom. The ten are represented within figure 1. The themes emerging from this list are student encouragement, value, respect and empowerment.

**Figure 1**

Ten things a primary school teacher can do to engender creative development within their classroom.

1. Pass control to the learner
2. Encourage co participation between students and teacher in the development of learning strategies
3. Encourage innovative contributions
4. Encourage questioning, inquisitiveness, issue and problem identification.
5. Encourage creative learning on both an individual and group basis.
6. Be learner considerate, see students as individuals and respect them as individuals.
7. Ensure all students contribute
8. Place value on their ownership and control of the learning processes as well as on their individual and group contributions.
9. Build interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning into their session plans
10. Commit to regular reflection on freedom levels within their classroom and how this is impacting on student empowerment to enter their creative flow

In order to take this empowerment approach to freedom within their classroom, the teacher themselves must be an open and confident person, ideally one who is engaged on some expressive level with their own creative and free self (Gale 2001, NACCCE 1999:90).

## **7 THE STEPS WITHIN EDUCATIONAL EMANCIPATION THAT FORM A PEDAGOGY OF FREEDOM**

Many theorists have written on the theme of pedagogical approaches that foster children's creativity in primary school (Balke 1997, Beetlestone 1998, Craft 2000, Edwards & Springate 1995, Fryer 1996, Halliwell 1993, Hubbard 19996, Jeffrey & Wood 2009, Kesler 2000, Shallcross 1981, Torrance 1984, Woods 1990, 1993, 1995, 2005, Woods & Jeffrey 1996, Woods, Jeffrey and Liebling 2001, Jeffrey & Craft 2004a, 2004b). They combine to give a clear and consistent message on pedagogical approaches for creative development in the primary school classroom.

These steps form the basis of a pedagogy of freedom which embraces student empowerment and thereby nurtures creativity. The first step a teacher must take is to create a holistic learning environment and atmosphere where the children are comfortable, happy and at ease. Including the

children in the environmental design so that they are empowered to impact on their physical learning space can also be an effective method of creativity pedagogy (QCA, 2005a, 2005b).

The attitude of the teacher and how they communicate this to the children is of paramount importance. Creating an awareness in the group that the children can go to far reaching places within their imagination and within their work is part of this attitude. Nurturing the motivation to be creative by supporting children to find personal relevance in their learning activities. Identifying with children what their strengths and interests are and providing hands on opportunities to approach them creatively will most likely result in those opportunities being utilised by the children in effective and meaningful ways (NACCCE 1999). Encouragement and reward are important themes within creativity pedagogy. Encouraging divergent thinking, celebrating difference and rewarding expression and courage will all contribute to the development of creativity for this age group (QCA, 2005a, 2005b).

Teacher reflection on the sense of time rather than hurriedness afforded the children and a resultant time attitude based on patience and the communication of a sense of time and space will be beneficial for student processing creative concepts. This is essential even if the teacher is under curricular coverage pressure. Reflection on how to achieve curricular goals and maintain a sense of unhurriedness within the classroom is a key task for the teacher who wishes to support developing creativity.

The integration of the curriculum within a interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach as outlined by previously discussed (Boix-Mansilla & Gardner, 2003, Nikitina & Mansilla, 2003) is upheld as an important aspect of a pedagogical approach underpinned by the principle of freedom. When integrating learning across disciplinary lines it is also important to integrate the senses to ensure sensory integration as an aspect of interdisciplinary learning. An example of this is using art as visual stimulation while teaching history and integrating time and place scents that incorporate a geographical as well as a historical and potentially a scientific context. This integration is also another way of bringing learning alive for the children, a recommendation of all who study developing creativity. Alive learning motivates and stimulates the children, helping them to find personal relevance and meaning in their learning which opens up vast vista of creative potential. Using pedagogical approaches that seek to integrate subjects and bring learning alive also results in greater depth of learning and deeper knowledge acquisition, both inherently important aspects of creative development. Expanding the creativity horizons of the children to include access to working with other creative people both in and out of the classroom also stimulates interest and curiosity as well as providing unique educational experiences which are beyond the limits of the teacher.

The final theme within pedagogical literature reiterates the central role of empowerment. Involving the children in decision making about how collectively the class should or could approach certain learning goals will increase their motivation, levels of commitment, engagement and enjoyment. The pleasure principle that underpins early childhood learning, is still very much part of primary school learning and as such, its incorporation into ones pedagogical approach is vital. Principles of democratic education are evident within this theme. This is founded on a principle of respect for child as an individual and as part of the group. Elevation of the children to co-participant rather than student, where they are fully engaged in the design of the curricular approach is the essence of this respect. This offers vast opportunities to excite and structure learners and references the universal principle of freedom within all creativity development regardless of age. The more a child's will is present in any activity, the richer and deeper the emergent learning.

## **8 CONCLUSION**

This holistic and involved pedagogical approach requires a great deal of skill on the part of the teacher (Steiner 2000, Sawyer 2004, Wegerif 2004). As such it has repercussions for teacher training programmes as well as in-service and professional development measures for primary school teachers. However the holistic and integrated empowerment model of learning is indisputably a contributor of creative development (William & Young 1999, Csikszentmihalyi 1988,1994,1999, Nicol

1998,2003, Bohm 1989). As the basis of the skill needed for this pedagogical approach is first and foremost based on the attitude of the teacher and their commitment to creativity as well as an openness to student empowerment, it also has implications for student teacher selection procedures. In addition, the policy implications are clear. At present we operate within a primary school pedagogical approach that prioritises teacher autonomy. While this has its strengths, it also means that that some children will have creativity developing educational experiences and some will not. Without significant policy change and additional teacher training, the opportunities for creative development within primary schools will remain a matter of chance.

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