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Playing with Text: Creativity, Literacy and Accountability

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Background

In many other western countries, there is a tension between the expressed desire within national curriculum documents for creativity, innovation, inquiry, critical analysis and collaborative skills (Learning and Teaching in Scotland, 2008; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007; EU 2006) and increasing emphasis on what are sometimes called the basics or fundamentals in initial teacher education.

The pressure of PISA, PIRLS and other programmes for competitive international assessment, and the squeezing of educational funding during recent economic downturns, have led governments to prioritise competency in literacy and numeracy in school outcomes and in funding for professional development of teachers (Kemmis & Smith, 2007; Mattsson, Johansson & Sandström 2008; Greenwood, Fletcher, Parkhill, Grimley & Bridges, S 2009). In times of cutback to university budgets such government priorities and perceived economies of delivery are influencing decisions about the retention, development and severance of initial teacher education courses. Yet are the rich goals in the curriculum documents cited above really a divergence from the acquisition of basic skills? Or is creative and contextually embodied pathway potentially a stronger way of achieving fundamental skills?

This paper examines a theoretical framework in which interactive, creative and aesthetic approaches to teaching and learning are adapted to a range of different subjects, to cross-curricular teaching, and particularly to the development and improvement of reading and writing competencies. In addition, it reports the parts of the first stage of a cross-national research project that investigates the use of creative and interactive methodologies in the teaching of reading and writing. This full first stage consists of fieldwork in Norway and New Zealand, first scoping, through survey, the existing practices and conceptualisations of teachers and schools, then reporting a number of cases studies in which drama processes have been used to motivate reading and writing and to develop specific literacy strategies and competencies. Finally it relates both part of this initial study to a discussion of initial teacher education.

E. U. (2006). Key competencies for lifelong learning.

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Kemmis, S. & Smith, T. (Eds.) (2007). *Enabling praxis: challenges for education*. Rotterdam; Sense Publishers

Learning and Teaching in Scotland (2008) *Curriculum for Excellence*.
<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/curriculumforexcellence/index.asp>

Mattsson, M., Johansson, I. & Sandström, B. (Eds.) (2008). *Assessment and knowledge construction in teacher education*. Rotterdam; Sense Publishers

New Zealand Ministry of Education (2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media

Research Questions

The research question that focuses the study is twofold:

How can creative, interactive and aesthetic-based processes be used to develop literacy?

What knowledge, skills and experience do beginning teachers need in order to effectively teach literacy?

Methods

The first part of the paper is a theoretical alignment between the competencies and dispositions involved in effective teaching and learning of literacy and the processes and strategies used in interactive and creative learning, with particular emphasis to those of process drama.

The second part of the paper reports research with both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. The quantitative component involved a survey of a regional cluster of schools and a University that provides initial teacher education., and asked teachers and programme and school leaders to identify practices, resources and expectations within their context. The qualitative component involved several case studies, again in the two countries, in which process drama and other action based interventions were used to motivate learning in literacy and teach specific competencies.

Frame

The wider conceptual framework of this study draws on conceptualisations of

- curriculum founded on understandings of knowledge as socially and collectively constructed and characterised by complexity, multiplicity and resistance to closure (Andreotti, 2007),
- of learning through the aesthetic as holistic, complex, and engaging body and emotion as well as cognition (Greenwood 2010; Sæbo 2009),
- of literacy as socially related set of skills (DeZutter, 2007),
- and of the interactive strategies of process drama, particularly the use of role and framing (Greenwood & Sæbo 2009; Greenwood, 2005).

Andreotti, V. (2009). Shifting conceptualisations of knowledge and learning in the integration of the new New Zealand curriculum in initial and continuing teacher education. Paper presented at BERA Conference. Manchester.

DeZutter, S. (2007). Play as Group Improvement. In O. Saracho & B. Spodek (Eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives On Social Learning in Early Childhood Education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing

Greenwood, J. & Sæbo, A. (2009). Bringing the textbook to life: Using creative group processes in the classroom. Paper presented at ECER Conference. Vienna.

Greenwood, J. (2010 in press). Aesthetic learning, and learning through the aesthetic. In S. Shonmann (Ed). *Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Greenwood, J. (2005). *Playing with Curriculum*. Invercargill: Essential Resources.

Research findings

Overall it was found that when students learned in and through drama processes it created engagement and motivation, but continuation of that motivation depended on the structure of the teaching plan and the skill of creative teacher interventions.

Teachers need knowledge about subject matter, pedagogy and creative strategies. Initial teacher education needs to integrate creative and aesthetic learning strategies across the curriculum, but particularly in literacy, and enable teachers to structure, carry out and evaluate creative schemes that motivate students and build knowledge and skills.

