Creativity
In Schools:
A Maltese Perspective

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The knowledge and skills needed in the future may not even be known at the time a person attends school or university. As a result, these institutions cannot limit themselves to the transmission of set contents, techniques and values, since these will soon be useless or even detrimental to living a full life.

(Cropley, 2006, p. 136)

Introduction

In this paper I attempt to provide some insight about the teaching of thinking and creativity in schools by drawing parallels between what is found on this subject in the literature, my experience as a teacher of thinking skills in Primary schools in Malta and from findings that emerge from a questionnaire that I conducted with Maltese Primary and Secondary school teachers to analyse their perceptions on the teaching and learning of creativity, compatible with the educational values of current pedagogical practices.

Facing today’s challenges

Educators are being increasingly faced with the ever-growing call for entrepreneurial citizens who value openness, diversity and creativity, who are able to design the future in all areas of their life. This demands that a school’s curriculum must be open and flexible enough to accommodate these new perspectives. This paper focuses on the need for a holistic approach to creativity in education, an approach that takes into account all the aspects of creativity where education is concerned. Promoting creativity in education has to take into account the evident conflicting factors included in creativity such as divergent and convergent thinking,

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intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, or the benefits of an environment that tolerates non-conformity and at the same time requires the exercise of discipline.

Creativity in education is concerned with the definition of creativity as a skill that is within every person’s reach, a skill that can be fostered and that is required in every activity that we engage in. For many involved in education, the promotion of creativity is of fundamental importance. With regards to creative learners, schools’ curricular choices can suppress creativity. A curriculum which is predetermined, compulsory and which is predominantly focused on the acquisition of knowledge and rote learning, poses challenges to the promotion of creativity. Creativity in education involves a balance between teaching knowledge and skills, and encouraging innovation.

One of the challenges we face today is unprecedented rapid change. Schools should therefore promote thinking that is flexible, the ability to adapt, and risk-taking in the face of an uncertain future. Unlike facts and knowledge, that can become obsolete with time, these skills, intricately linked to creativity, will most likely continue to be important throughout one’s lifetime. What I have often witnessed in schools is teachers’ lack of appreciation of, stemming from a lack of knowledge about such skills. It is no wonder that there are still several misconceptions about the role of creativity in education. Writing about teachers, Prentice (2000) states that

there is a need to make explicit the range of skills, knowledge and understanding required to ground ideas about creativity in educational practice.

(Prentice, 2000: 147)²


A holistic approach

An important distinction needs to be made when dealing with creativity in schools, that is the difference between teaching creatively and teaching for creativity. Teaching creatively refers to ‘teachers using imaginative approaches to make learning more interesting, exciting and effective.’ (NACCCE Report, 1999: 102). Teachers often need to be highly creative in order to capture learners’ interest and attention. Teaching for creativity refers to ‘forms of teaching that are intended to develop young people’s own creative thinking or behaviour.’ (NACCCE Report, 1999: 103). The way I see it, teaching creatively is a tool in the hands of the teacher who wants to make any learning experience meaningful, creative teaching as a means to better teaching, whereas teaching for creativity implies the inclusion of creativity as a learning objective in teacher’s planning of lesson material. Teaching for creativity must acknowledge a multi-faceted approach to creativity, an approach that takes into account all the aspects of creativity where education is concerned (Prentice, 2000)³.

Creativity may be considered as one of the most important targets that education should aim for. When a teacher aims to stimulate learners’ creativity, this

\[ can\ be\ fostered\ in\ a\ variety\ of\ ways,\ amongst\ which\ there\ is\ the\ strategy\ of\ regarding\ students\ as\ active\ consumers\ of\ knowledge\ by\ letting\ them\ explore,\ predict\ and\ discover\ new\ information\ in\ their\ own\ ways,\ (Q:\ M,\ 136,\ 20-29,\ State-Secondary).\]

\[ We\ should\ leave\ more\ space\ for\ kids\ and\ try\ to\ be\ less\ of\ ‘teachers’\ (Q:\ F,\ 002,\ 40-49,\ Non-State\ Primary).\]

Perhaps what this respondent suggests is a move away from the traditional role of teachers, by “letting [the pupils] discover things on their own – don’t just give them the answer but help them to get the answer by asking what why where who etc.” (Q: F, 006, 50-59, Post-Secondary).

When teaching for creativity the teacher facilitates knowledge rather than presents it for the learner to take it all in passively:

Rather than providing the student with ready-made knowledge, the teacher must guide and encourage students attentively in order to elicit their response and help them find fulfilment in what they do. (Q: M, 064, 20-29, State Secondary).

Creativity should be fostered across the board. Its purpose is to give pupils the tools to be able to express themselves in different ways. (Q: F, 112, 30-39, State Primary).

On the other hand, some respondents advocate teaching creativity directly:

Teaching students how to think (de bono exercises) accepting ideas from students who work differently of course as long as the end result tallies with objective and be reached. Encourage diversity (Q: F, 069, 50-59, State Secondary).

Other ways of encouraging creativity in the classroom include “encouragement, reinforcement and fostering pupils to think ‘outside the box’ during the syllabus” (Q: M, 169, 30-39, State Secondary).

The definition of creativity is beset with different interpretations, and some misconceptions often derive from the fact that the definition offered is too broad or too limited and focuses on only one aspect of such a multi-faceted term. Creativity has been linked to a lack of discipline in
Another popular misconception is the association of creativity as pertaining solely to the creative Arts (de Bono, 1993)\(^4\).

This misconception was revealed in the responses to the questionnaire. Less than 7% of respondents associated training in creativity with training in thinking. The strong focus on creativity (taken as being associated with the creative Arts) which emerged reveals that respondents’ perspectives on teacher training in creativity are far off the mark when the present international focus on creativity in education is considered. The findings that result reveal that teachers perceive of a weak link between creativity and thinking, as revealed in the views of authors like de Bono (1993) who claim that indeed a popular misconception is the association of creativity as pertaining solely to the creative Arts.

*Creativity is both a matter of nature and nurture: a person should have certain personality traits (certain people are more creative than others) but this potential has to be developed* (M, 166, 30-39, State Primary).

**Promoting creativity – a balancing act**

Promoting creativity in education has to take into account the apparently conflicting factors included in creativity. Creativity is said to involve both divergent and convergent thinking. Divergent thinking, what de Bono (1995\(^5\)) has defined as lateral thinking, is ‘thinking from “what if”, association, intuition and possibility; beginning from questions – why? how else? instead of

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thinking in a linear fashion’ (Craft, 2002: 32). Convergent thinking implies narrowing down a list of possibilities to reach a decision or solve a problem.

A significant contribution by Csikszentmihalyi (1997) is the concept of flow. Similar to Amabile’s notion of intrinsic motivation, flow is what keeps creative persons motivated in their domain, namely the quality of the experience when they are involved in a creative activity. According to Cropley, (2001) intrinsic motivation should be encouraged in the classroom, as opposed to extrinsic motivation, which results in producing quite the opposite results to creativity. Hennessey and Amabile propose an ‘intrinsic motivation principle of creativity’ (1987: 6), stating that intrinsic motivation is conducive to creativity whereas extrinsic motivation undermines creativity. Fasko (2000-2001) draws attention to an interesting link between education and intrinsic motivation as he states:

> Basically, creative people are intrinsically motivated to complete a task. The major difficulty is with the grading system in schools, which is a form of extrinsic motivation…. Thus, schools will need to improve their capacity for improving students’ intrinsic motivation.

(Fasko, 2000-2001: 323)

Comments from Maltese teachers reveal similar ideas:

> a creative person sees things above certain limits. His mind thinks and creates sometimes instinctively where others behave by the book. A creative person dresses and furnishes his environment according to what he thinks and is often

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original in his ideas. Achievement for a creative person is not money or exams (M, 114, 50-59, State Primary).

offers him a high level of intrinsic satisfaction even when faced by opposition/discouragement by others, (M, 189, 30-39 Post Secondary teacher).

On the other hand, Eisenberger and Armeli (1997)\textsuperscript{11} demonstrate how external rewards can help to foster creativity. They show that extrinsic rewards lead to lasting improvements even in a creative area such as music when children are rewarded for specific ‘creative’ activities such as integrating unexpected elements or producing alternative possibilities. From my experience, different strategies work with different learners and the strategy adopted needs to seen in the context within which it is applied. An extrinsic reward could be seen by learners as a tangible positive reward for their achievement. The danger, however, is that learners become too dependent on the extrinsic rewards.

The teacher’s role

Creativity can be ‘taught’.... The roles of teachers are to recognise young people’s creative capacities; and to provide the particular conditions in which they can be realised.

(NACCCE Report, 1999: 11)\textsuperscript{12}

The definition of creativity is at times steeped in broad and ambiguous terms, to the detriment of teachers willing to promote it in the classroom. Westby and Dawson claim that research has consistently indicated that teachers ‘prefer traits in pupils that seem to run counter to


\textsuperscript{12} National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) (1999). All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education. London: DFEE.
creativity, such as conformity and unquestioning acceptance of authority’ (1995: 1). However, Westby and Dawson go on to state that ‘despite the long history of research indicating that teachers do not value creative traits in students, teachers report that they value creativity in [the] classroom’ (1995: 2). A conclusion that could be drawn from this is that since teachers are aware that creativity might be an important objective, they are merely giving what they perceive to be the correct answer as opposed to the actual one. If one were to draw conclusions from these findings, an implication would be that schools do not actually value creativity and for the sake of conformity, learners stifle their creativity in order to be accepted by the teacher.

When it comes to teachers’ attitudes towards creativity, research has revealed that teachers often label creative learners with unfavourably. Fryer summaries the gist of what the research revealed:

> Although there have not been many studies of teachers’ views about creativity in general, ... teachers generally attach too much importance to characteristics which make pupils easy to teach, but undervalue many typically creative attributes such as guessing/hypothesizing, being courageous in convictions, intuitive thinking and unwilling to accept assertions without evidence.

(Fryer, 1996: 62)

A different picture emerges from a research project entitled *Creativity Counts*, (that included the participation of 27 Scottish schools) funded by the Scottish Executive and managed by the IDES Network in association with LT (Learning+Teaching) Scotland. The project revealed

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evidence that ‘supports the view that many teachers find creativity a positive experience for pupils, for themselves and their schools.’ (NACCCE Report, 1999: 25).

The classroom is, of course, one of the most important environments in which learners spend a great deal of their time. Some teachers are particularly good at organising this environment in a way that promotes learners’ creativity. They provide a model of creative behaviour, reinforce such behaviour when learners display it, protect creative learners from pressure to conform applied by their peers and by the system, and establish a classroom climate that permits alternative solutions, tolerates constructive errors, encourages effective surprise and does not isolate non-conformers. James et al. (2004) list several ways in which the teacher can encourage learners, including offering feedback, boosting a learner’s confidence, or providing structure to a learner struggling with the task in order to help learners to move forward. They claim that creativity develops when teachers encourage curiosity, exploration, confidence, risk-taking, and balance.

Central role in education

Creativity is possible in all areas of human activity, including the arts, sciences, at work, at play and in all other areas of daily life. All people have creative abilities and we all have them differently. When individuals find their creative strengths, it can have an enormous impact on self-esteem and on overall achievement.

(NACCCE report, 1999: 7)

Creativity pertains to every aspect of the curriculum, to any subject taught in schools. Craft raises a challenge and asks how the curriculum could be organised to stimulate creativity:
A curriculum which is fixed, compulsory, which involves a great deal of propositional knowledge, and which takes up a great deal of learning time, may pose challenges to stimulating creativity – possibly more so than a curriculum which is more flexible.

(Craft, 2003: 123)\(^{14}\)

Nevertheless, the NACCCE report (1999) states that in order to be creative, information and knowledge are necessary. However, the reality in schools is that ‘creative tasks are often perceived to be of lesser importance than reading, writing and number work. The 3Rs dominate classroom time.’ (Beetlestone, 1998: 24)\(^{15}\).

Craft has drawn attention to a number of problems with regard to the fostering of creativity in education, such as difficulties of terminology, conflicts between policy and practice, limitations in curriculum organisation, limitations stemming from a centrally controlled pedagogy, and social, environmental and ethical specificity. (Craft, 2003). Epstein (1996)\(^{16}\) writes that the reasons why creativity seems to be in short supply are the myths about creativity that are deeply ingrained in our culture. He challenges the ideas that only artists are creative and that creativity is rare; that creativity is mysterious and magical and divine. In *Serious Creativity*, de Bono explains how creativity should not be considered as something mysterious. He suggests looking ‘directly at the behaviour of self-organizing information systems.’ (de Bono, 1993: 4)\(^{17}\).

The analysis of the actual and potential behaviour of the brain can give a very clear idea of the


nature of creativity and thus lead to the development of techniques to increase the possible generation of new ideas (de Bono, *ibid*).

**Schools stifling creativity**

With regards to creative learners, a school’s choice of curriculum can stifle creativity. A curriculum which is predetermined, compulsory and which is predominantly focused on the acquisition of knowledge and rote learning, poses challenges to the promotion of creativity. Nevertheless, creativity does not imply a matter of letting go. The NACCCE report emphasises three principles in order to promote creativity through the curriculum. The first principle is that there must be a balance in the curriculum between different fields of creativity ‘particularly the sciences, arts, humanities, physical education and technological education.’ (1991: 59). The second principle is that there must be a balance within the teaching of all disciplines between tradition and innovation. This links the need to be aware of past achievements in order to enable the production of new products and knowledge. This also implies the need for students to learn not only to dig deeper into a subject but to generate new ideas and widen their perceptions. Finally, the NACCCE report emphasises the need for a balance between the teaching of different cultural values and traditions, reflecting the multicultural society students live in.

A school’s curriculum should aim at creating the conditions in which creativity can be cultivated more effectively, since ‘creativity is enhanced where there is trust, and where there is freedom
to act and to challenge within a variety of situations’ (Hartley, 2003: 85). Furthermore, teachers’ pedagogical strategies should require students to think creatively by assigning appropriate work while offering practical support and guidance in the processes of creativity.

Equipping learners with a curriculum that allows them to develop their creativity means equipping learners with ‘those human capabilities appropriate for adaptation to conditions of radical and enduring uncertainty, unpredictability, challengability and contestability.’ (Barnett and Hallam, 1999: 142). Action research which I carried out during the implementation of the Thinking Skills Programme in Maltese Primary schools, (which consists of 14 forty-five minute thinking skills lessons) gives evidence of acquisition of such skills:

Children’s performance during the post-test consistently showed an improved ability in the pupils interaction with each other and with the teacher, better verbal and listening skills, a broader and deeper perspective when confronted with problems, a higher level of autonomy in their thought and actions and an increased awareness of their thinking processes.

(Pulis Xerxen, 2007, p. 101)

**Can Creativity be Tested?**

One of the major exponents of the assessment of creativity is Torrance (1966) who designed creativity tests based on four components by which he claimed individual creativity could be assessed, namely, fluency, flexibility, elaboration and originality. Fluency refers to the ability to produce a large number of ideas; flexibility is the ability to produce a variety of ideas;

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elaboration is the ability to develop ideas and originality refers to the ability to produce ideas that are unusual as opposed to obvious. It would be interesting to question to what extent assessment in schools reflects such components or indeed whether creativity is taken into consideration at all when modes of assessment are taken into consideration or adopted by the school or by the class teacher.

Assessment in the form of testing could also have a negative impact on learners’ motivation, although research seems to be divided on this point. Harlen and Deakin Crick (2003) write that:

> Based on the growing international research evidence, particularly from the USA and UK, where assessment for summative purposes has burgeoned in the past decade, the use of tests not only inhibits the practice of formative assessment but has a negative impact on motivation for learning... The association of testing with a negative impact on motivation contrasts with the view, widely held among politicians, parents and some of the education community, that testing pupils raises standards.

(Harlen and Deakin Crick, 2003: 170)

Despite the apparent pitfalls of testing, there are a number of possible positive reasons for assessing creativity. Assessment helps to recognise and support the strengths of individuals as well as helping individuals to recognise their own strengths. Creativity assessment is crucial in facilitating the planning of activities that are appropriate and challenging, taking into consideration the different abilities of learners. If teachers were able to assess creativity in a reliable manner, it would help them to evaluate the relevance and efficacy of strategies or programmes they may adopt to nurture creativity in the classroom.

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Fryer (1996) reveals that teachers use a variety of means to assess creativity including pupils’ products, behaviour and speech. Many teachers participating in her research suggested they preferred to assess a learner’s work against his or her past performance regardless of whether the work submitted was something totally original for the learner or an improvement on previous work. Fryer encourages self-assessment in the case of assessing school learners’ creativity. A further area of difficulty in the assessment of creativity highlighted by Fryer’s study concerns teachers’ definition of creativity. Her research revealed some interesting gender differences: female teachers seem to emphasise the personal factors of creativity (such as depth of feeling or depth of thought) more than male teachers who place higher value on the elegance of the outcome, and this, in turn, affects their assessment of learner creativity.

**Transfer**

Another important aspect concerned with the assessment of learners’ creative thinking skills is often omitted from the literature. A crucial development in learners’ thinking is the element of transfer, that is the extent to which learners are able to transfer the skills learnt in the classroom to other domains. The concept of transfer is relevant not only where creativity is concerned but also in relation to all subjects within a school’s curriculum. What is the point of learning if the content or process learnt is only used within the classroom and not applied to appropriate situations elsewhere? Transfer helps learners to establish links between information, and such transfer of knowledge and skills poses a special challenge to the teacher. Nickerson et al. clearly state that ‘it is hoped that skills of reasoning learned in a philosophical

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setting will later find use in writing an essay, deciding for whom to vote, or pondering where to live’ (1985: 335).  

An encouraging result that emerges from the questionnaire is the overwhelming percentage of respondents who believe that creativity can be transferred, in spite of the fact that respondents seem to associate their training in creativity mostly with the creative Arts and with drawing, crafts and writing. This finding reveals that teaching creativity is not necessarily domain-specific and if learners are encouraged to develop their creativity, the benefits are transferable to different subjects within the curriculum. The fact that 89.9% of respondents acknowledge that creativity can be transferred implies that there is more possibility that learners will be encouraged to be creative within and outside school. 

The issue of transfer relates not only to the teaching of thinking but also to other subjects like English, Social Studies and Mathematics. Teachers need to include transfer as one of the educational objectives of their teaching strategy. The challenge of achieving transfer should be addressed directly by helping learners to become explicitly aware of the importance of transfer and to do their utmost to achieve it rather than expect it to happen as a natural consequence of being engaged in learning any subject.

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Conclusion

Creativity in education involves a balance between teaching knowledge and skills, and encouraging innovation. Creativity exists in all areas of human activity and everyone has the potential to be creative. Stimulating and developing this potential involves a balance between transmitting content, encouraging understanding and cultivating a culture that promotes creativity. One can link this to the role that teachers play in the classroom. All learners have the potential to be creative and it is up to the schools to help foster creativity by striking a balance between subject content and creativity. This paper has clearly indicated the need for an approach that takes into account all the aspects of creativity where education is concerned. More specifically, such an approach should specify the factors that are involved in the development of learners’ capacity to be creative (their abilities, skills, knowledge, motives and personal properties), the components of the creative process (e.g., divergent thinking, convergent thinking), the creative climate, that is the characteristic environment or context enables the facilitation of creativity, and finally the nature of the interactions among these factors.

\footnote{September 2000 saw the start of a new project in Maltese State Schools. This was the beginning of the Thinking Skills Programme (TSP). In its first year, three teachers, including myself, were employed as Thinking Skills peripatetic teachers within the Personal and Social Department of the Education Division to implement the Programme. We were not only expected to teach thinking but also develop the material based on Prof de Bono’s CoRT 1 and the Six Thinking Hats and carry out Action Research on the effects of teaching thinking directly. In its first year the Programme was implemented in all six years of Primary.}