

Culture, Politics and Drama Education: The Creative Agenda 1997-2015

Abstract

In the years following New Labour's election victory (1997) the creative agenda was a visible concern for schools and teachers. A number of influential documents and policy documents were launched to promote creativity in schools. New funding opportunities had been made available to support teachers and classroom learning, most notably the Arts Council initiative Creative Partnerships (2002). Buckingham and Jones (2001) describe the period as the "Cultural Turn" towards the creative and cultural industries. Paradoxically, the creative agenda emerged at a time when teachers experienced unprecedented levels of control over, and public scrutiny of, their everyday working lives; it was a period of time dominated by a 'bureaucratisation' of education. For Stronach et al. (2002) it was a rise of a performativity discourse in response to the audit culture. Post 2010, the introduction of school performance measures, such as the compulsory English Baccalaureate (2015), offers another kind of performativity discourse, but from a perspective other than creativity. The long-term outlook for creative subjects appears bleak, particularly for dance and drama. This article examines the period 1997-2015 with reference to Neelands and Choe's (2010) assertion that creativity is a cultural and political idea.

Introduction

A belief in the potential for theatre to be a "humanising force" (Wertebaker 1990), and a catalyst for social change is central to my practice as a theatre director, drama tutor in higher education and academic researcher. In 2005 I initiated a practice-based PhD of drama in the primary school curriculum and over the duration of the study: 2005-2012, sought opportunities to explore the social and emotional potential of theatre. By way of illustrative example, the playwright Timberlake Wertebaker expresses the possibilities afforded to us when we engage in theatrical activity. The following is taken from her seminal work, *Our Country's Good*:

Dawe	We're wiling away precious hours now. Put the play on, don't put it on, it won't change the shape of the universe.
Ralph	But it could change the nature of our little society.
Faddy	Second Lieutenant Clark change society!
Phillip	William!
Tench	My dear Ralph, a bunch of convicts making fools of themselves, mouthing words written no doubt by some London ass, will hardly change our society (1988: 24).

To echo the character Ralph, albeit in a wholly different context, I am interested in the nature of education and the place for drama in the modern day primary curriculum, particularly for disadvantaged and marginalised children. I am not suggesting a link between British schools and the UK penal system, however (and the reader should not infer otherwise). My interest in the play and the reason for its inclusion here is quite simple. *Our Country's Good*, set against the backdrop of seventeenth-century England, the shadow of colonial imperialism and late twentieth-century sensibilities towards discipline and punishment, reminds us that theatre is culturally and politically imbued. In the imaginary world of the play participation is not value neutral and has far-reaching consequences for those involved. This idea resonates through the text, but is perhaps expressed best in the concluding lines of the play. Here, the characters are discussing whether or not to include the specially written prologue for their performance of *The Recruiting Officer*:

Ralph	When Major Ross hears that, he'll have an apoplectic fit.
Mary	I think it's very good.
Dabby	So do I. And true.
Sideway	But not theatrical.
Ralph	It is very good, Wisehammer, it's very well written, but it's too – too political. It will be considered provocative.
Wisehammer	You don't want me to say it.
Ralph	Not tonight. We have many people against us.
Wisehammer	I could tone it down. I could omit 'We left our country for our country's good' (1988: 53).

The idea that we approach theatre through a cultural and political lens is, of course, not a new idea. Of the relationship to theatre Fortier writes, 'theatre is more complexly intertwined with the outside world than many literary and other artistic activities' (1997: 102). He points out that post 1960, the emergence of cultural theory has dominated academic scholarship and cultural production, citing: materialist, postmodern and post-colonial theory; the latter being of particular relevance to *Our Country's Good*. Buse for example, observes that critical responses to the play differ considerably and that Australian productions lean towards post-colonial interpretations (perhaps not surprising given its history), whilst the UK tends to privilege the socio-redemptive qualities of the text (2001).

The cultural significance of theatre (and by extension drama) is a key theme. In this article, I have explored the relationship between culture, politics and drama education (I conclude, however, with the social and emotional potential of drama). To extend the debate across the cultural field and because drama is a creative activity, I have focused on the “Creative Agenda” in the period 1997 - 2015. Of the creative agenda, Craft (2005) asserts that post-millennium creativity experienced a resurgence of popularity. Buckingham and Jones (2001) see this as a “cultural turn” towards the creative industries in the wake of New Labour gaining electoral power in 1997. As a consequence, a number of initiatives were launched to promote creativity in schools, notably: The National Strategy for Creativity across the Curriculum (2003) and Creative Partnerships (2002). The creative agenda emerged at a time when teachers experienced unprecedented levels of control over, and public scrutiny of, their everyday working lives; it was a period of time dominated by a ‘bureaucratisation’ of education. For Stronach et al. (2002) it was a rise of a performativity discourse in response to the audit culture.

I am interested in the creative agenda because my PhD was undertaken in this period of time. To echo Buckingham and Jones, I experienced the “cultural turn” in the moment(s) of turning and as such I am tied inextricably into the fabric of educational policy, rhetoric and practice. It is only now, post-completion, I am able to look back with a sense of clarity. One reason is because the political, economic and cultural climate for the UK has shifted emphasis. Under the last two governments (2010; 2015) the creative agenda appears to have lost some of its momentum. As of the Comprehensive Spending Review (2010) there have been significant cuts to Arts Council funding, including support for Creative Partnerships and *A Night Less Ordinary*, a scheme, which offered free theatre tickets to the under 26. In education, STEM subjects appear dominant: science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The introduction of school performance and accountability measures, such as the compulsory English Baccalaureate (2015) and Progress 8 and Attainment 8 (2016), is in essence another kind of performativity discourse, but from a perspective other than creativity.

I begin then, with an account of the creative agenda. Given that the period spans almost two decades, I have divided the article into three sections. First, I consider

“lifewide” attitudes towards creativity (Craft 2005) as part of the cultural turn. I have also examined creativity against the backdrop of the bureaucratisation of education and 2000s concerns of professional identity. Next, I take up the economic rationale for creativity with reference to changing work patterns and the articulation of creativity within the audit culture (Strathern 2000a). Post 2010, I move onto Neelands and Choe’s (2010) assertion that creativity is a cultural and political idea. To conclude, I return to the social and emotional potential for drama education.

The Creative Agenda

In the years following New Labour’s election victory (1997) the creative agenda was a visible and debated concern for schools and teachers. A number of influential documents and policy documents were launched to promote creativity in schools. New funding opportunities had been made available to support teachers and classroom learning, most notably the Arts Council initiative Creative Partnerships (2002). The cultural landscape for primary education underwent rapid change, characterized by periods of uncertainty and unrest. As Hartley points out, ‘[t]he last two decades have seen a search for certainty and standards in education. But now there emerges a quest for creativity... the impetus now is education for creativity’ (2003: 8). Belfiore similarly finds, ‘[r]eferences to the alleged social impact of the arts still remain an important tool in the advocacy strategy, followed by UK cultural institutions today [and have] pride of place in the current cultural policy discourse’ (2006: 22-3). Buckingham and Jones (2001) describe the period as the “cultural turn” towards the arts and creative industries.

A number of key reports and documents were launched and include: *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* (NACCE 1999); *Artsmark* (2001); *The Excellence and Enjoyment Strategy for Primary Schools* (2003); *The Roberts Report* (2006), *The National Curriculum in Action, Creativity: find it, promote it* (2007). Craft finds similarly, ‘a matched growth in interest within the research community... the last part of the century saw a burgeoning of interest in creativity research as applied to education’ (2003: 116).

Critically though, creativity was re-conceptualised in a very different way to the Plowden years of the 1960s and ‘70s. Woods puts it this way: ‘[t]he revolution in

curriculum ushered in by the 1988 Reform Act is being followed by an attempted revolution in pedagogy. The child-centred ideology associated with the Plowden Report (1967) has come under strong attack' (1993: 355). Craft suggests that the re-emergence of creative learning created a subtle shift of emphasis towards a "life-wide" attitude to creativity. Consequently, creativity was more commonly associated with its "participatory" and "transformational" potential than excellence in the arts per se. For educators, creativity manifested as a cross-curricular and interdisciplinary discourse and practice. This did not mean a ground swell of creative subjects (such as art, dance, drama and music); teachers were encouraged to adopt creative strategies to promote learning. For example, Cowley proposes '[o]ur learning in science, maths, history, geography, and so on, will benefit from creative activities and approaches, and both from teacher and children getting into a creative frame of mind' (2005: 2). In this context, creativity was viewed as a teaching and learning methodology rather than a definition of practice. Hall and Thompson adopt Belfiore's (2004) argument that under the cultural turn, [t]he arts represented a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves' (2007: 317).

Craft (2005) cites the distinction made between teaching creatively and teaching for creativity as a useful illustration of the perceived benefits of a broad, cross-curricular approach. In an examination of the differences between "high creativity" and "little c creativity" Craft writes:

'Little c creativity has been suggested to be the ordinary but lifewide attitude life that is driven by "possibility thinking" but is about acting effectively with flexibility, intelligence in the everyday rather than the extraordinary' (2005: 19).

There is a suggestion here that creativity, as a concept (at least in the context of New Labour), had shifted emphasis. No longer perceived as within the sole domain of the arts, creativity is a way of thinking, of dealing with problems and engaging with the world we live in. Key to this argument is the notion that all children (and teachers) are capable of being creative, '[e]very person has it within themselves to be creative, and we as teachers can play a key part in helping our students to map out their own individual journeys' (Cowley 2005: 20). Hence, there is an explicit relationship between everyday creativity and personal, social development. The DFES national initiative, *Creativity: find it, promote it* (2007) is another example of the widespread

belief that creativity is applicable to all subjects in the curriculum and that creative learning is central to success and achievement:

‘By providing rich and varied contexts for pupils to acquire, develop and apply a broad range of knowledge, understanding and skills, the curriculum should enable pupils to think creatively and critically, to solve problems and to make a difference for the better. It should give them the opportunity to become creative, innovative, enterprising and capable of leadership to equip them for their future lives as workers and citizens’ (QCA 2007: 1).

But, as teachers were encouraged to embrace creativity another kind of educational agenda emerged, which was seemingly at odds with the creative agenda. Commentators identified a widespread sense of instability and anxiety, which had more to do with a crisis of professionalism and teacher identity. Woods and Jeffrey note:

‘In the years immediately preceding the re-structuring of recent years, there seemed to be a great deal of consistency of social identity and self-concept among the majority of English primary schools teachers. Much of the literature of this period speaks of teachers seeing their selves and social identities as isomorphic’ (2002: 90).

For Woods and Jeffrey, teacher accounts of personal and social selves were caught up in global, late twentieth century discourses concerning accountability, targets, standards and achievement. The Reform Act was a critical turning point for the teaching profession, ‘since the late 1980s, education structures, organisations, programmes, curriculum, pedagogies, accountabilities, conditions of teachers’ work and their professional status have all been reconstructed’ (Woods and Jeffrey 1996; cited in Craft 2005: 7). Teachers experienced unprecedented levels of control and direct state intervention into all aspects of their working lives. It was a period of time dominated by a bureaucratisation of education, described by Strathern (2000a) as the emergence of the audit culture. New Labour’s election victory did little to change this trajectory. A series of highly significant initiatives were launched (and extended), under the banner of improving and raising standards of achievement in English schools, particularly:

- The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) 2000
- The Common Inspection Framework 2001

- The Children’s Act and Every Child Matters 2004; 2003
- National Testings (SATs) 1991; 1995
- National Literacy and Number Hour 1998; 1999

Under New Labour, the push towards creativity had been a highly visible exercise. Moreover, the persuasiveness of arguments found in reports, like the QCA, rest in the assumption that creativity is both universally positive and economically valuable (Craft 2003; Belfiore 2004; Neelands and Choe 2010). Of the period, Frost notes, ‘[c]entral government is becoming mildly schizophrenic about direction and policy. One minute targets are in, then they’re out; testing suppresses innovation, then it is staunchly defended’ (2004; cited in Gibson 2005: 150). The creative agenda impacted at a time when teachers were dealing with concerns of professional identity, increased visibility, targets and standards. The following, taken from online teachers’ chat rooms offers a useful illustration of this idea. Here, the respondents are discussing creativity:

- A:** “Creativity is the biggest push at the moment (along with the other latest ideas). The head has spent a fortune on buying in an advisor to do Inset and plan with us, and lo and behold so have all the other local schools so this just means that everyone is planning the same topics as each other ... Teachers have always tried to be creative and inspire their classes – but some people are getting very, very rich by regurgitating plans for topic teaching that were around 10 years ago ... It is extremely emotive subject in my neck of the woods – especially when the planning has to stay the same as before the creative lesson – talk about fitting a round peg into a square hole. Now most of my teaching friends are doing as requested when observed and cobbling together the rest of the time” (2007).
- B:** “I think that creativity has a lot to do with opportunity. Too much of our curriculum is exam focused; the goal constantly in mind is the holy grail of an exam result” (2007).
- C:** “The creative curriculum title can be unhelpful as it almost infers that those who do not teach thematically are not creative. This is something that we have battled with at our school where the cross-curricular approach is at the heart of our work but we have not moved to a completely thematic approach” (2008).
- D:** “At our school we are trying to be more topic-based, or at least block subjects in an effort to make teaching and learning more creative, which I believe makes the experience for the kids much more meaningful and exciting” (2007).

In the 2000s, creativity was a frequent topic for online discussion and it is interesting to see the differing kinds of attitudes and assumptions. At times, there is a perception that creativity has been imposed on teachers. We might see this as an “economies of performance” perspective of the creative agenda. Stronach et al. write:

‘Rejecting the somewhat static apparatus of types, stages and conditions that has generally been bought to bear on professional work, we propose a different reading of the professional as caught between what we call an “economy of performance” (manifestations broadly of the audit culture) and various “ecologies of practice” (professional dispositions and commitments individually and collectively engendered’ (2002: 109).

At other times, the creativity is simple a return to topic based teaching. Creativity either promotes freedom and choice (ecologies of practice) or conversely restricts classroom practice. I have sympathy with the conflicts presented here. One-to-one interviews with teachers, taken for my PhD, revealed conflicted interests, particularly against the backdrop of the audit culture. For example, a year 6 Teacher said, “creativity is all very well, but it doesn’t help children pass their SATs” (2005). Another teacher described the relationship between creativity and national testing as a dichotomy.

Hall and Thompson suggest that that the relationship between creativity and accountability was far from equal. In essence, creativity supported rather than reduced the impact of the audit culture. With specific reference to the Arts Council flagship Creative Partnerships, Hall and Thompson propose: ‘[t]he aim of the curriculum should be transformed by the vigour, creativity and innovation of the partnership... a treat and a pick-me-up for the teachers and children’ (2007: 319). Similarly, I was asked by a Head Teacher to schedule drama activity for my PhD in the May term and after the year 6 SATs. Notwithstanding arguments for an integrated approach to creativity, national testing was (and is) an important milestone in the academic calendar and not just for children. It would be misleading to infer, however, that the Head Teacher did not value creativity, far from it. Over the duration of my study, I encountered many examples of creative practice in and across the curriculum.

To understand the conflicts in play, Stronach et al. suggest that teachers are caught between what they would like to teach (ecologies of practice) and professional

demands and necessities (economies of performance). In my experience, teachers tend to mobilise these accounts at the same time. For example, a teacher described the experience of getting her class through SATs as, “like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole”. But, in the same conversation the teacher also said that tests give children and teachers a direction and a focus to work towards. This attitude seems less conflicted when taking into account the economic demographic of the school. At the time of the interview, the school was in an area of economic and social need. According to Ofsted (2006), children began school with below-average entry standards and national testing, whilst prescriptive (and often impossible to realise) give children and teachers something concrete to work towards.

The Economic Rationale for Creativity

So far, I have considered the emergence of the creative agenda in the midst of the audit culture. The next step is to examine the economic rationale for creativity, leading up to and after the global economic recession (2008). Craft proposes that the purpose of education ‘[is] to make education systems more effective in assisting the nation state to secure higher employment and maintain economic performance’ (2005: 7). Alexander argues that post 1988 governments and administrative bodies re-marketed existing strategies and agendas to schools, teachers and parents in the pretext of improving standards. Educational reforms were re-designed to meet shifting and unstable political agendas, which had economic imperatives.

The context is a changing and volatile UK labour market. The last thirty years or so have seen a decline in traditional “heavy” industries in steel and coal mining, textiles, car manufacturing and shipbuilding, particularly in the Midlands, the north of England, South Wales and Northern Ireland. At the same time there has been a rapid acceleration of the service industries, call-centres and Internet-driven global communications. This is a phenomenon well documented. At the cusp of the developments, Bedarida observes that between 1979-1986, ‘the manufacturing sector lost 1.7 million jobs; exactly the same number of jobs were created in the service industries from 1983-1987’ (1991: 303). By 2012, the combined service industries accounted for 78% of GDP (Jones 2013). These developments have been rapid and have radically altered the workplace and with it, a rejection of the notion that a job was for life, Craft remarks, ‘the “till death do us part” analogy from marriage [is no

longer appropriate] except in the sense that marriage and partnership, too, have changed to become more itinerant, transient and network-based' (2005: 6).

These changes have contributed towards a re-thinking of the nature of work itself and according to Beck, 'one that was characterized by risk and uncertainty in a number of spheres' (1992; cited in Allen and Henry 1996: 67). At the forefront of this uncertainty is the rise in part-time work and contract service work. Grant et al. (2006) noted in the early years of the 2000s that part-time workers constituted 31% of the working population, of which 48% accounted for all female employment. As of 2013, the picture was roughly similar. A report by the *Equality and Human Rights Commission* shows that women make up the vast majority of part-time working and a 3 percent increase in part-time work for their male counterparts (2013: np).

It is reasonable to suggest that the increase in part-time work and subcontracting has contributed to new employment patterns. Shifts in how and where we work, alongside other factors such as an aging population, single parent families, part-time workers, women in the workplace and migrant workers have significantly altered the economic landscape for the UK and with it our understanding of working life. For example, government legislation for Flexible Working (2002; 2004; 2006) and the Equality Act and Children's Act (2014) aimed to support working families with young children, disabled children and long term carers. The legislation, potentially, enables workers the legal right to request flexible working patterns to fit around family life. Even notwithstanding the complexity of the Acts, the introduction in 2002 indicates a shift in attitude towards employment. It suggests a need for a greater understanding of how and to what extent working life can be *creatively* managed than in previous decade.

For Miles, the changes to the UK labour market have contributed to a re-thinking of relationship between education and the workplace. Of the early 2000s, he notes 'emphasis on the acquisition of market capital. [He goes on to say], the future for many young people appears less than bright, not least considering the nature of an increasingly polarized and insecure job market' (2005: 506). The creative agenda was in part a response to a perceived crisis of confidence for schools to equip young people with the skills needed for future employment. Neeland and Choe suggest,

‘creativity is now at the service of the economy’ (2010: 298). A perception voiced earlier in the decade by Paul Collard, the director for Creative Partnerships:

‘Creativity is now at the top of the political agenda and recognised to be of fundamental importance to the future of this country. Creative skills are increasingly identified by employers as key to kinds of skills needed for young people to operate in the twenty-first century’ (Collard; cited in Bailey 2005: 10).

Collard’s rationale for creativity is stated unambiguously: creativity is linked explicitly to the “needs of the economy” (Gibson 2005). The positioning of creativity to reflect the rhetoric of industry suggests an “outside-in” application of policy discourse (Dawson 1994), where the “economies of performance” are prominent (Stronach et al. 2002). Neelands and Choe assert, ‘[t]he most distinctive characteristic of the English model of creativity is that it is paradigmatic of New Labour’s Social-market political position’ (2010: 293). From this perspective, the creative agenda operates within Strathern’s description of the audit culture. The National External Evaluative Audit Report for Creative Partnerships (2008) offers a useful illustration of this argument.

The audit aims to consider the evaluative process for Creative Partnerships under the New Evaluation Framework. A guiding principle had been to secure accountability and consistency. This was shown in two ways: (1) in the terminology used to infer meaning and (2), in the types of methodologies used to gather evidence. Words like “standards”, “objectives” and “outcomes” were frequently employed to denote a sense of objectivity and authority: for example, ‘[t]he planning form prompts teachers and creative practitioners to anticipate and plan impacts and state *what will count* as evidence of impact and *how* they will collect it’ (Wood et al. 2008: 9; *original emphasis*). At a later point in the report there is a concern, voiced by the authors, that schools’ evaluation outcomes are too descriptive and broad in nature:

‘A confusion between documentation and evaluation persists, despite the training and support we have offered... in order to get to the heart of the learning, a skilled questioner needs to lead partners through the process, bringing an objective point of view and consistency of approach, and making sure that conversations are focused and probed to an appropriate depth. We plan to use an evaluation partner in the next academic year to support the creative agents in the delivery of the

evaluation framework interviews, in order to achieve this objectivity and consistency, and to benefit from the expertise of a skilled evaluator' (2008: 17).

There are a number of key assumptions running through the evaluation. First, there is an attempt to pin down language in order to find certainty in the spoken and written word. Related to this, there is a concern that despite training and support, the conversations lack consistency and objectivity. Underpinning this view is a belief that the correct methodologies should be followed and the right questions are to be asked. In other words, to make visible what previously had been hidden from view. For Strathern, transparency, 'rests in the proposition that if procedures and methods are open to scrutiny, then the organisation is open to critique and ultimately to improvement... We might say that audit is transparency made durable; it is also transparency made visible' (2000b: 313). This is an important argument to establish because it positions Creative Partnerships squarely within an economy of performance perspective. In this context, creativity is paradoxically confined and constrained within the very discourses that seek to validate its practice.

Creativity: 2010 - 2015

In October 2010 the Conservative Lib-Dem Coalition government announced the withdrawal of funding for Creative Partnerships, as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review (2010). The decision to cut funding from the scheme provoked a storm of protest and debate. Collard writes:

'We are obviously very disappointed with the decision to withdraw funding from the Creative Partnerships creative learning programme, which has benefited over 1 million young people and thousands of schools across the country. Whilst we know that the arts should not be exempt from the difficult decisions facing the country in this tough economic climate, it is disappointing that a programme which is expected to generate nearly £4 billion net positive benefit for the UK economy – the equivalent of £15.30 of economic benefits for every £1 of investment in the programme – is bearing the brunt of the cuts in funding. Since its launch in 2002, Creative Partnerships has had a positive impact on the attendance, aspirations and attainment of children and young people, particularly in schools with challenging circumstances' (2010: np).

Funding has also been withdrawn from *A Night Less Ordinary* (an ACE initiative, which offered free theatre to the under 26) and *Find Your Talent* (CCE). The future of many frontline organisations is uncertain, despite assurances from the Arts Council.

The cultural turn, as described by Buckingham and Jones, appears to have reached an impasse. For example: in an article posted in the TES online, '[t]he future of hundreds of arts and cultural projects in schools is hanging in the balance as major theatres, orchestras and museums look to make huge savings in the face of Government cuts' (2010: np). In 2010, the creative agenda appeared to struggle in the new funding regime. ACE pointed out that 'this is a real term cut of £457m over four year' (2010: np). Under New Labour, creativity was an important part of the UK economic strategy. Post 2010, the *raison d'être* for Creative Partnerships no longer appears relevant, or to paraphrase the ACE, "sustainable". For Collard, the outlook is bleak, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds:

'What characterised Creative Partnerships and Find Your Talent was the way in which these programmes reached out across the country to provide opportunities for young people in some of the most disadvantaged communities ... The children and young people we have worked with will have nowhere else to turn, particularly when the impact of cuts elsewhere filter down through local authorities and other programmes. As a result a whole generation of young people will grow up without having access to the arts and this is not something that can be fixed once public finances are restored' (Collard 2010: np).

Post 2010, the long-term stability of creative education is deeply uncertain. It is fair to say that the introduction of school accountability measures, such as the English Baccalaureate and Progress 8 and Attainment 8, have impacted negatively on the arts curriculum and in particular for dance and drama. I do not wish to infer, however, a halcyon re-reading of creativity under New Labour. It is simply not the case that creativity flourished, without constraint, only to reach an impasse in 2010. This article has shown that creativity emerged at time when teachers were dealing with more widespread concerns of accountability and public transparency. Over a thirteen-year period, the creative agenda dominated policy and curricular discourse. But, as Neelands and Choe find, creativity is a culturally specific construct:

'Creativity is not a natural phenomenon like a sunset or osmosis. It is a culturally specific construction, which is defined so as to serve the interests of particular positions in the field of cultural production. Because it is a cultural concept rather than a natural phenomenon, it can mean whatever it is given to mean. Which of these given meanings comes to be accepted as the authoritative and dominant definition is a matter of contest between different positions respectively seeking to shape cultural, educational and social policy' (2010: 7).

There are two important points to reiterate here: first, creativity is not a practice but a cultural concept. In other words, creativity is an *idea*. Second to this, cultural discourse, ergo creativity, is politically biased. According to Neelands and Choe, in the period of New Labour creativity supported a neo-liberal, pro Social-market agenda. In many respects this suited drama in schools because it appealed to a universal democratic concept of cultural engagement. For the presiding government, the rationale for creativity appears to have shifted ground. This is not to say that cultural education is absent, but rather its definition has changed to suit a Conservative political agenda:

‘Children in England can lay claim to one of the richest cultural heritages available to any generation, anywhere. Our aim is to ensure that all of them have the opportunity to rejoice in it. We will encourage universal access to high-quality cultural education and demonstrate a stronger commitment to excellence in music, film and the arts. These commitments will be backed by £292 million of funding for cultural education activity over three years to March 2015. This funding sits alongside investment by individual schools, local authorities and arm’s length bodies, as well as support from other sources’ (DFE 2013: 9).

The above extract is taken from the government’s Cultural Education plan (2013). Here, emphasis leans towards a particular perception of cultural heritage: “high-quality” education and “excellence” in music and the arts. In a foreword written by Michael Gove (the former Secretary of State for Education), British heritage is a key theme: ‘we teach children to use, and enjoy, the English language because it is the medium of Shakespeare and Dickens, Derek Walcott and Arundhati Roy, Robert Burns and Elvis Costello’ (2013: 3). The plan suggests that to be creative is to engage with ideas of excellence and quality; from this perspective, creativity is aspirational. This is very different to a universal concept of creativity, characteristic of New Labour:

‘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’ (Robinson 1999: 6).

I do not wish to enter into a debate between competing discourses, but to reinforce Neeland and Choe’s assertion that creativity, at least from the perspective of

education, is culturally and politically imbued. The Cultural Education plan is a threat to drama because a universal and cross-curricular approach to creativity, which dominated the 2000s, does not fit a Conservative idea of *what counts* as high-quality education. Similarly, in the 2000s a perception prevailed that creativity is central to economic prosperity and growth. For the presiding government, economic stability is linked to achievement in STEM subjects and international standing in education league tables: PISA, NCEE. The articulation of creativity within an economic discourse then, may, or may not, suit a particular moment of time. For now, creative education is no longer central to economic growth, even though the GVA (Gross Value Added) for the Creative Industries exceeded £79b in 2013, accounting for ‘1.71m jobs in 2013 [and] 5.6 per cent of total UK jobs’ (DCMS 2015: 7).

Conclusion

In the introduction to this article, I referred to social and emotional potential of theatre, drawing attention to Wertenbaker’s view of theatre as a “humanising force”. My own PhD practice was preoccupied with a desire to create learning spaces through drama, which embraced qualities of ownership and subjectivity within imaginative, participatory and dreamlike contexts. For Ken Robinson, imagination is a unique gift that we have, as humans, to make a difference to our lives. He writes the power of imagination, ‘we take it totally for granted. This capacity to bring into mind things that aren’t present and, on that basis, to hypothesise about things that have never been’ (2008: 4). The transformative potential for drama is the reason why, as a practitioner, I create performance work and I am not alone here. My PhD contributes in a small way to a wealth of literature and practice (see: Adams and Owens 2015; O’Neill 2014; Nicolson 2014; Baldwin 2012, Bolton 2007).

The history of drama education is rich and diverse, spanning over the twentieth century, into the twenty-first and across countries and continents (UK, Scandinavia, Australia, USA and Canada). It is a long history and not without its own conflicts and tensions. Bolton (1997) a pioneer for drama education, recounts a historical narrative full of competing philosophies, pedagogies of practice, ideological imperatives and competing visions. But, nonetheless, common to all is a need to connect our lives and experiences with others. Whether this occurs in the form of applied theatre, process drama, role-play, Forum theatre, improvisation (and so on), is not of importance here.

What matters is that we, as an invested community, find ways to reposition drama within the current political agenda. The cross-curricular and “lifewide” potential for drama is important and so too, our engagement with Shakespeare and other British icons. The creative industries contribute hugely to the UK economy and its value is not understated. But, we also need to remind policy makers, those in power and with political influence that drama matters and has the potential to change lives.

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