Creativity in Children's Lives
An Unconditional Good for Whom?

Lene Tanggaard, Vlad Glveanu

Abstract

This article addresses the question of whether and how creativity is important in children's lives in relation to creative expression in school, with a focus on the Danish educational system. It starts by outlining different conceptions of creativity: the first generation view considers it largely innate and specific for a selected few; the second generation perspective 'democratizes' creativity and emphasizes the fact that we can both teach and learn it. On the background of this latter approach, we analyze the common claim that schools can 'kill' creativity and the implications of this assertion. This leads to a consideration of the implicit and explicit epistemological and ontological assumptions behind creativity theories and the realization that adopting a 'romantic' view of what it means to create can actually be counterproductive in a school setting, at least for some students. An invitation to engage with creativity critically and reflectively in education is offered towards the end.

Keywords: Perspectives on creativity; teaching roles and responsibility; creativity and children; Danish educational system; educational innovation.

> *Creativity as a term and concept, is one of the most prized commodities of capitalism, just as it is one of the most cherished benefits of democracy* (Rob Pope, 2005, p. 29)

Creativity is one of the most debated topics today in science and in society. While psychological research into creativity increased considerably in the past decades (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010), there is still much to be understood in relation to the nature of creative expression and our possibilities to assess and foster it. At a societal level, these concerns are reflected in the explicit, collective effort to find new ways of using creativity as a resource for growth and social transformation. For this purpose, for example, the European Union declared 2009 as the European Year of Creativity and Innovation.

One of the greatest concerns for governments and scientists alike has always been related to creativity in schools and the key question of how we can help children develop their creativity within present day 'cultures of conformity' (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). This is all the more important in the context of current worries over the negative impact school environments can have on creativity (Runco, 2003; Saracho, 2012). Creativity is also one of the top priorities of the educational system in Denmark, our focus in this paper. A recent chronicle in Politiken (one of Denmark's biggest daily newspapers) stated for instance that "Kreativitet skal på skoleskemaet" [Creativity needs to be on the agenda in school] (Sørensen & Austring, 2012) and the main point was that teaching students music, sports, dance, artwork, handicraft, and design will not only develop skills transferable to the other more 'traditional' subjects, i.e. language and mathematics, but also be of more general importance, enhancing the overall personal and social education and thus adding to the "buildung" (general education) of the child.

The fact that there is a need to write such a chronicle is interesting; on the one hand, it points to creativity as something celebrated and talked about in the current society but, on the other hand, it might also be a sign of the poor conditions for creativity to actually thrive in the school system. In Denmark, while creativity is celebrated in the public sphere, as reflected in chronicles and political statements, school curricula has an increased focus on more functional skills like reading, writing, and mathematics (Kamp, 2010). This is partially a response to the discontentment with recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)-measurements placing Danish children in the middle ranges compared with other Western countries and Asia. While research related to the possible relation between functional skills and creativity (Cropley, 2005) has been extensive within creativity studies,

in this paper we will raise the more fundamental question of whether creativity is always to be regarded as an unconditional good in children's lives and, importantly, for whom? In light of the introductory quotation from Rob Pope, highlighting creativity as a good in people's lives, made possible by increased participation in societies characterized by democratic citizenship and capitalism, it is indeed necessary to treat the phenomena of creativity both constructively, critically, and reflectively. The key question here is undeniably what happens to creativity, and to children, when we make explicit the intention to find, foster, and develop creativity in children's lives – in school and beyond.

1. Children's creativity

Most people would immediately, if asked, say that they regard children as creative beings. In her doctoral dissertation from 2008, the Swedish creativity researcher, Cecilia Levin, states that most people (researchers included) think that children are most creative until they reach 10 years of age; thereafter, school and adults are typically blamed for smothering creativity in the attempt to teach children to answer questions correctly rather than discovering and creating new ones. In light of this, Glăveanu (2011) writes that the Western conception of creativity, and not least the conception of children's creativity, is often romantic. We regard the playing, dancing, singing, and drawing child as the utmost and most precise sign of creativity in general, in a Western cultural context. According to Howard Gardner (1982), it is "our romantic tradition, remolded in terms of a modernist ethos, [that] has made us responsive to the notion of the child as artist, and the child in every artist". (p. 92)

That is, some scientific understandings of creativity, including modern-day ones, support the unquestionable belief in children's' creativity or artistic talent. The counter-argument is formulated in light of research results indicating that children's creativity is not simply "there", but needs to be recognized, cultivated, and trained to lead to eventual creativity in the context of the demands of a future adult life; children's creativity is maybe only the first of many steps in their lives. How are we to conceive of this possible, currently changing conception of creativity moving away or sideways with a more romantic conception? What do these changes mean in relation to our idea of creativity among children? Ultimately, how are creative dimensions to be identified and fostered?

1.1. From first to second generation creativity

Has creativity become 'open' and available to everybody as the above section might indicate? Some researchers, and politicians and managers alike, currently point to the fact that creativity, as well as human imagination and fantasy, is vital for developing new products, new technologies, and new and sustainable solutions to global, societal, and economic challenges in an increasing open and globalized knowledge-based, creative world economy (Peters, 2010). This belief is indeed a requirement for opening up the possibility of becoming creative to many more than the selected few within specific domains of life. Definitely many researchers have contributed to loosening the close and exclusive connection between creativity and art or design by arguing that creativity can be found within many other fields, such as architecture and literature. They argue that creativity can be taught and learned and that creativity is much more collectively achieved than hitherto considered in a Western context (Craft, 2005; Glăveanu, 2010, 2011; McWilliam, Dawson & Pei-ling Tan, 2011). In the words of Csikszentmihalyi, "Creativity is no longer a luxury for the few, but a necessity for all" (2006, p. xviii). One could say that we are moving from a first generation to a second generation conception of creativity challenging the exclusive, romantic conception.

According to McWilliam (2011), there is globally on the work market, an increased tendency to recognize and seek creative and relational capabilities rather than more restrictive and functional, instrumental skills. From seeing creativity in a romantic key, as largely individual and inborn, many now conceive of creativity as pluralistic, manifold, and as something we learn while living. This second generation conception of creativity has been growing for the last 20 years, and it does suggest that the schools and institutions (and families) in which children spend their lives can actually do something to promote the much sought after creativity.

Rather than considering creativity as inborn and only available for a few, carefully selected and exceptionally gifted talents, a second generation conception would rather look for the possible

interplay between a child's disposition or signs of creativity and the carefully, designed, stimulating environment promoting creativity. Children can indeed have many different dispositions to act creativity. For example, as evidenced by Howard Gardner's research on multiple intelligences (1993), some children are extremely good with words, others with using their bodies in sports, and still others with dancing, singing, using their imagination, playing with others, and creating events or engaging in arts and painting. For some children these different abilities cross different domains. Moreover, if children live in a more simulating environment, with fewer barriers blocking their development, their intrinsic ability to act creatively within their respective fields of mastery will eventually thrive. In this view creativity is to be thought of as a general human capacity rather than as something exclusively connected with the arts, even if arts may still be, for good reasons, the archetype of creativity. That is: all people can be creative to achieve a more fulfilling life, but barriers stand in the way. Supporting the above pluralistic and domain-specific conception of creativity, a literature review concerning texts on creativity and innovation within the EU has suggested a distinction between creative learning and innovative teaching, and pointed to the fact that innovative teachers are required to help students develop their creative abilities and engage in creative learning (Ferrari, Romina & Punie, 2009), a distinction which is also supported by empirical studies in a Danish context (Tanggaard, 2008; 2010; 2011a).

2. Where do we go from here?

There are at least two interesting tendencies concerning creativity in children's lives that need further reflection. One tendency is for the discourse on creativity to act as a kind of counter-culture in an age where functional, instrumental skills are accounted for and tested to a higher extent than ever in schools. As seen in the above, we tend to celebrate creativity in the EU and elsewhere, but it might be so because we actually do discourage it along the way. The other aspect to think about is that literature and research on creativity seems to point to particular conceptions of what it means to be human or what "buildung" (general education) and good education consist of and this does have significant implications for our understandings of children and youth. Overall, creativity appears as good, something to care for and develop in children, something that control societies, like bulldozers, can drive over and 'flatten'. As follows, an elaboration of these two tendencies in light of our own research experiences regarding creativity is presented.

2.1. Creativity as counter-culture

One of the authors of the present paper recently conducted an interview-study concerning the conceptions of creativity among school teachers in Denmark (Tanggaard, 2010). It was very clear from analyzing the interviews that teachers were worried about the increased weight placed on the control of pupils, on standard, national tests, and the various accountability measures set in place to compare the performance of schools. They saw this as lowering their motivation to experiment with innovative teaching practices. These teachers feared the likely consequences of innovation when knowing that manual-based, "teaching to the test" techniques would make pupils score higher on tests. If teachers, on the other hand, spent too much time experimenting, not knowing the exact results their actions can have on learning, they would risk being blamed by parents and the school principal for not achieving appropriate results. Even if they believed in the beneficial effect of innovative teaching practices in relation to the development of pupils' skills, they felt less motivation towards being creative in their teaching.

Another tendency in the interviews was for teachers to recognize the creativity of learners who try to avoid school-work or homework. They pointed to the most unorthodox behavior and unexpected attitudes among their pupils as a result of creativity. Viewed in light of other results in this area, these observations are recurrent. In a study conducted by Andiliou & Murphy (2010), teachers say that they would like to promote creativity, but they feel that greater political ambitions and goals are contributing to hinder this. However, it seems that the difficulties to develop creativity in schools are what is mostly touched upon in the literature concerning creativity in school. Levin (2010) is cited for her concern about the lack of ability among school actors to recognize and develop children's creativity. According to Levin, many teachers respond when asked about their opinion concerning creativity that they would like to see more creativity in their classes, but they find it

hard in practice to actually include and to find the appropriate space and room for the most creative children (Karwowski, 2010). There is, as such, a disconnection between intention and behavior. Creative children are potentially seen as being day-dreamers, not always concentrating on the given task and being reluctant to follow the proposals put forward by teachers in class. Indeed, creativity is often associated with stubbornness and non-conformism, and it is seldom the case that teachers actually celebrate behaviors associated with this (Sternberg & Lubert, 1995; Sawyer, 2012).

Turning towards research on creativity among recognized creative actors in Western societies, many of them report not having liked school, dropping out of high school or having been taught at home (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Tanggaard & Stadil, 2012). So even if we are used to feeling acknowledged if somebody praises us for our creativity, there are likely undercurrents of counter-culture connected to the phenomena of and discourse about creativity as it is used and practiced in everyday life. This might be the reason why some people prefer to talk about innovation rather than creativity. However, it is indeed a fact that many people who eventually make a living from their own creativity do not always feel that school contributed to this, but does this indicate that schools need to change? Or is it the existing structures of school that actually invite these people into a creative life trajectory? One way to address these questions is to look more closely at the conception of human life celebrated, more or less explicitly, through the current optimism concerning creativity.

2.2. Creativity and conceptions of human life

In order to further our critical study of dominant creativity discourses, we need to study more carefully the implicit idea of human life celebrated within them. Sawyer (2012) claims that early studies on creativity had an obvious talent focus. There was an explicit interest in finding the true, creative talents and finding ways in which to care for their flourishing. As pointed out by various sources, there is thus a remarkable similarity between themes and topics in the 'genius' research from the 19th century and contemporary 'creativity' research (Albert, 1969; Becker, 1995: Runco & Albert, 2010). The current interest in creativity differs from earlier

approaches to 'genius' in one important respect, however. Creativity is today thought of as indispensable for the future prosperity of the knowledge economies. Creative skills and processes may be extraordinary, but it seems of great political and economical importance that not only specially gifted persons start acting creatively. As argued above, creativity is more or less thought of as a general competence requirement by those who want to "make it" on the global labor market. While creativity was formerly closely tied to the elite, it is currently being democratized, at least in relation to the ways in which creativity is talked about. In this regard, schools do play a great role.

Sawyer (2012) and Tanggaard (2008) note that it takes about 10 years to really master a domain or a skill, e.g. playing the piano, and schools are quite good at teaching children basic material to be used for future creative achievements; however, what schools are less good at is allowing children to play creatively with these materials. What should schools do? Are they to celebrate and support the ability to always turn things upside down, to think radically different? What kinds of consequences would this approach have? Is what follows also endorsing a view of human life as having to always question everything and be ready to fight others for one's views? Many assessments of creativity measure the ability of individuals to think divergently. However, the obvious critique of this is that such measures are not always an indicator of what it means to be creative in real life, outside of the testing situation (Tanggaard, 2008; 2010; Zeng, Proctor & Salvendy, 2011). Real life creativity does not rely exclusively on divergent thinking, nor on the ability to act appropriately in relation to the practices in which the creative is to be recognized as such. Accordingly, some people might need to be very good at divergent thinking, while others might need to be good at analyzing the practicalities of acting creatively.

The observation above is central in relation to didactical and educational practices because it directs teachers and other educational actors' attention towards particular aspects of creativity, maybe at the expense of others. Sometimes it might be divergent thinking that needs attention while, at other points in time, it may be the ability to actually recognize what is creative. Some new products are actually only old wine in new bottles and the ability to

recognize this is central to creative action. Above all, every kind of creativity theory or learning theory follows particular epistemological and ontological assumptions (Greeno, 1997). If the discourse of creativity is meant to imply that everybody must learn to turn everything upside down (a view that has romantic overtones), some children risk exclusion. It might even be those who are excellent in relation to finding out what would be relevant to turn upside down. While school in the form known for centuries in the Western context has been focused on teaching children to be quiet and patient, answering questions correctly, having maybe contributed to problems for those who like to take action and to find their own questions, the opposite would just marginalize other children. Indeed, this is where didactical competence is vital among teachers to avoid bringing forth too many new problems while changing educational ideals, which is what is currently going on in relation to creativity. To turn back to the initial quote, creativity as norm-breaking is not necessarily good for everybody at all times, even if we sometimes we tend to forget this (Pedersen, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper started with a quote from Rob Pope, reminding us of creativity's ties with both democracy and capitalism. This points to an interesting double aspect of the concept which indicates that creativity is indeed good for somebody, but not necessarily for everybody. We discussed how the concept of creativity has gone through some interesting changes in the last decades, from being tied to specific talents, often within the arts, to being something for everybody, to be discovered in its diverse forms, trained and learned. One of these current forms was then analyzed, focusing on the possible counter-culture elements of the discourse of creativity (which might also be the reason why some politicians prefer to talk about innovation). Lastly, some implicit and/or explicit epistemological and ontological assumptions "hiding" within creativity theories were highlighted not least in relation to the point that while schools may have difficulties with finding and supporting creativity among pupils, they would face new problems if they really decided to go down the road of creativity. Despite having passed to a second generation view of creativity and believing in the universality and educability of creative expression, we also tend to operate with counterproductive assumptions associated with the more romantic view. Accordingly, reflexivity and didactical sensitivity are necessary if creativity is to be placed at the top of the school agenda in order to avoid one-sided competence ideals, either favoring creativity or not. At the very least, a strategy emphasizing the need for more creativity would need to be followed by a careful educational reflection concerning the likely consequences associated with how we define creativity, conceive of "creative students" and innovative teaching.

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