Making spaces: arts policy and pedagogy in the UK

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National context

In 2003, the UK government published its national strategy for primary schools. The title of the document was *Excellence and Enjoyment*. In the context of the electioneering at that time, which was to see New Labour returned for a third term of office in May 2005, the title of the document caused something of a stir. The idea that enjoyment might be officially sanctioned surprised and pleased many commentators.

Investigation of the document beyond the title page reveals that, whilst the strategy promotes enjoyment as the “birthright” of a child, the “excellence” in the title refers to the teachers’ performance. The government’s view was that children’s enjoyment of school depends upon excellent teaching. The emphasis on standards, on basic skills, and on testing – an emphasis that had dominated New Labour educational policy-making since they took up office in 1997 - was to remain.

Nevertheless, *Excellence and Enjoyment* did signify a shift in policy. Keen to attract and retain support from former Conservative voters, when it came to power in 1997 New Labour had accepted and even promoted much of the educational inheritance it had received from its predecessors. The policy emphasis was on centralisation, privatisation, forms of managerialism and values adopted from the business sector (Brehony, 2005; Gewirtz, 2002; Gleeson et al, 2001). Within the school curriculum, there was a strong push to reinstate subjects and create a hierarchy, with Literacy and Numeracy (formerly English and Mathematics) at the pinnacle. Pre-service teacher education was encouraged to produce subject specialists rather than generalists. Brehony (2005:31) describes the project as a movement from child-centred to "society-centred" education, in which preparation for employment became a key determinant of the curriculum, even in primary schools, and the emphasis moved from learning to teaching.

The critique of these policies built steadily. By 2001, Tom Bentley the director of Demos, a think tank highly influential with New Labour, was warning that “the test mania of recent education reforms” ran the risk of “throwing the creative baby out with the trendy teaching bath water” (Bentley et al, 2001). By 2002, both the official inspectorate and the National Union of Teachers were reporting that the arts were being marginalised in the primary school curriculum (Ofsted, 2002; Galton and MacBeath, 2002). Earl and colleagues reported that the national literacy and numeracy strategies had increased the amount of whole class teaching, made planning more oriented towards objectives rather than activities, and that teachers were broadly complying with the recommended lesson formats. However, that they found it “more difficult to draw conclusions about the effect of the Strategies on pupil learning” (Earl et al, 2003:3). Concerns about the joylesness and lack of creativity in children’s educational experiences,
which had been bubbling since the publication of a report on young people’s creative and cultural education in 1999, surfaced in a series of inquiries and reports (NACCCE, 1999; IDES, 2001 and 2004; Ofsted, 2003; QCA, 2002 and 2005).

The publication of Excellence and Enjoyment can therefore be understood as signifying what has variously been called a “new discursive turn” (Brehony, 2005:40) and a “cultural turn” (Buckingham and Jones, 2001) in policy making. Buckingham and Jones argue that this cultural turn builds upon utilitarian and vocational discourses, as well as concerns about creativity and the marginalisation of the arts in school, to promote the economic importance of cultural activity and an emphasis on the contribution it might make to social inclusion and regeneration. The apparent contradictions inherent in these policy objectives - in which “the emotion of enjoyment is being grafted on to the discourse of standards and performance” (Hartley, 2006:8) - continue to be strongly critiqued (for example: Alexander, 2004; Brehony, 2005; Hall, Thomson and Russell, 2005 and in press; Hartley, 2006).

These contradictions and ambiguities provide the policy context for the research reported and discussed in this paper. There is, as Hartley (quoting Nancy Fraser) puts it, a degree of “pseudoautonomy” available to English primary schools: “a personalised pick and mix of pedagogy and curriculum, but only from the standard menu, which is drawn up by the government” (Hartley, 2006:13).

Research context and project

This paper draws upon the findings of The Self Portrait Project, a research and development initiative funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, a UK charitable trust, to promote teachers’ understanding of arts pedagogies in English primary school settings. The project involved ten primary schools in scattered locations from the south coast to the northern border of England; approximately 300 year 5 (9/10 year old) pupils; ten student teachers; ten experienced teachers; a consultant artist; a pair of university researchers, and a documentary team of pupil researchers. It involved the creation of 300+ pupil self portraits, 20+ teacher self portraits, a documentary made by pupils from three schools other than those involved in the portrait work, and the staging of ten public art exhibitions. The objectives of the research were:

- To develop understanding of inclusive and effective arts pedagogies
- To evaluate strategies for promoting teachers’ confidence, skill and enjoyment in teaching the arts
- To identify the implications of the research for initial teacher education and for teachers’ continuing professional development.

The Self Portrait Project arises from (and overlaps with) a study called Promoting Social and Educational Inclusion through the Creative Arts, an ethnographic study of a primary school with a strong commitment to the arts. As part of this project, the work of an Artist in Residence at the school was systematically tracked and analysed. The first theoretical framework for analysing the artist’s pedagogy was drawn from the late work of Basil Bernstein (Bernstein, 1996; Hall and Thomson, in press). A second theoretical framework draws upon the multimodal, semiotic perspectives used by Kress et al (2005) in their analysis of English in urban classrooms. The artist was interviewed and responded to the

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1 For pupils aged between 5 and 11.
2 Promoting Social and Educational Inclusion through the Creative Arts, conducted by Pat Thomson, Christine Hall and Lisa Russell, funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council from 2004-6, and piloted from 2003.
analyses; pupils who worked with the artist were also interviewed in focus groups and individually, and in relation to the artwork they produced. By the end of 2004, we had therefore documented – and felt we knew – a great deal about this particular artist's pedagogy, its relation to the wider literature on arts pedagogies and its very positive reception by the children the artist worked with.

The *Self Portrait Project*, which ran from September 2005 – July 2006, was an attempt to build on and share this knowledge with a cohort of new and experienced teachers, working collaboratively in pairs, through a structured and supportive programme which simultaneously built knowledge of the key areas of inquiry in a wider range of schools. This second project – the one being reported here – is, therefore, primarily teacher education research, whereas the original research project is about the arts, social inclusion and pedagogy. The complications of this background relate to our desire to utilise our research findings in our teacher education practice.

Neither the experienced teachers nor the beginning teachers in the *Self Portrait Project* were selected on the basis of their skill in art practice or pedagogy. All of the 45 schools in the teacher education scheme3 were invited to bid to join the project; ten schools opted in and the student teachers assigned to those schools automatically joined the project. Dorothy, the Artist in Residence we had observed so closely in the earlier research, conducted an intensive workshop with all of the teachers at the start of the academic year and she was available for coaching and consultancy sessions as the project developed. The agreement was that:

- the teachers would team-teach a self portrait project to the year 5 children in their schools in weekly half day sessions from October to April
- the teachers would work alongside the pupils to produce their own self portraits
- local public exhibitions would be held during the summer term
- each school would hold a Critics’ Forum to encourage pupils to discuss and critique the school’s exhibition
- a team of pupil researchers would produce a documentary DVD about the work of the project
- the pupils’ DVD and the university researchers’ findings would be used to develop teacher education resources for subsequent cohorts of pre-service student teachers.

The reasons for establishing *The Self Portrait Project* in this way related to the findings from the ethnographic research conducted at Holly Tree School (the ESRC sponsored project, op cit). We had first observed Dorothy working as an Artist in Residence in 2003, during the pilot year of our project. Dorothy's work was considered highly successful by the children themselves, by the school and by us. In 2004-5 money was available to maintain her residency from a national policy initiative called *Creative Partnerships*, which responded to growing concerns (outlined above) about the lack of creativity in schools. By the following year, however, official rhetorics of creativity had shifted and Dorothy's work was judged to be just 'good art teaching' (a negative) by the regional arts workers charged with distributing the *Creative Partnerships* funds. These funds were to be used instead for a series of one-off arts projects while the school found the money to continue Dorothy's residency (an example of "pseudoautonomy"). Our project tracked the shift in the school discourse from one about the creative arts to a more generalised and less focused notion of creativity. This latter was a

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3 The work took place within the National SCITT for Outstanding Primary Schools, a school centred initial teacher training route which works in partnership with the University of Nottingham, in England.
creativity which was ubiquitous - everywhere but nowhere tangible, reduced to ‘learning styles’ and ‘thinking skills’.

Holly Tree teachers generally thought about creativity as something in which they themselves were lacking, although they believed that all of the children they taught had creative potential. They were thus positioned in accord with the official discourse, which cast doubt on teachers’ creative capacities, but paradoxically their very lack of self belief also led them to believe that, because they were not creative people, they could not learn a lot from artists. The Holly Tree teachers were predominantly concerned with literacy and numeracy as mainstream policy documents dictated: the arts were relatively marginal to their classroom activities, though they were happy to know they were being covered in the projects and the residency. When the policy shifted to a more general view of creativity, this appeared to the teachers to have more bearing on their own roles. It sat comfortably too with the idea of the arts as a conduit, a means towards the achievement of other goals, for example social inclusion, rather than an end in its own right. We understood this as the impact of the “cultural turn” building on utilitarian discourses; “enjoyment” being “grafted on to the discourse of standards and performance” (Buckingham and Jones, 2001; Hartley, 2006, op cit).

The arts pedagogies likely to be deemed most successful by Creative Partnerships and the school were those which produced a tangible product and/or performance, fitted within the boundaries of ‘niceness’, were marketable, and produced a good image of the school. Our analysis of a critical incident (Thomson, Hall and Russell, 2006), in which the product of a writing workshop was designated a failure and censored, highlighted the ways in which unfamiliar genres, funds of knowledge external to school and a critical stance were problematic to both Holly Tree and Creative Partnerships.

Mobilising Bernstein (Hall and Thomson, in press), we argued that most of the artists working on the officially approved arts projects at Holly Tree School were constrained by the same performance pedagogies which dominated classrooms. The arts activities which were intended to focus on growth, self expression and critical reflection were limited by their framing as ‘projects’, which meant that they were short-lived in terms of time and funding, with accountability requirements to both Creative Partnerships and the school. A pedagogy in which children’s inherent competence and potential were taken as starting points was continually compromised by the pressures of producing outputs and demonstrating skills. Because of the short timescales and the conception of the work as projects, the performance or product tended to mark the end of the teaching sequence, after which the teachers changed direction. The tendency, therefore, was that the assessment of outcomes was neither formal nor rigorous; they thus had little impact on the children’s ongoing learning or the teaching that supported it. Products/performances were judged primarily on their benefits for the school (which were assumed to be the same as for the child): they thus did not contribute as fully as they might have done to a formative understanding of the child’s individual learning.

However, Dorothy’s work as the artist in residence, although constrained by many of the contextual pressures experienced by the other artists, seemed to us to offer an example of a responsive arts pedagogy which circumvented some of the problems inherent in the other projects. Dorothy worked with the stable, relatively small groups (10-12) of year 5 children developing self portraits over the whole year. She taught collaboratively with Shelley, a teaching assistant. The sessions with Dorothy and Shelley extended for a full half day. Through modelling, discussion of reproductions and visits to galleries, the pedagogy
enabled children to experiment with new materials and media and learn about the links between their own and other artists’ work. The pace in the sessions was unhurried; the atmosphere was concentrated and reflective; the mode of working was ‘bricolage’ - building through sketching, practising and trying things out. And the scale of the project was big: in the size of the portraits, and in ambition (to produce a piece of work worthy of representing yourself in a public exhibition).

Our evidence suggested that the ambitious nature of the work with Dorothy and Shelley contributed to the sense of efficacy and agency that the children derived from the project. They saw themselves as capable, clever and talented. This was demonstrated in the public arena and reinforced by audience appreciation. Their identities as students were new: in contrast to normal lessons where one could be wrong, in the art work children experienced provisionality - ie you didn’t make a mistake, you merely worked more until you ‘got it right’. Judgements were arrived at in negotiation with Dorothy and Shelley: there were no imposed targets, rather children were encouraged to develop an internalised sense of the ‘standard’.

Identity was also the subject matter of the self portraits. Children were encouraged to experiment with multiple identities and make choices about representations – which family members, possessions and versions of home to include or exclude, for example. We found instances where the portraits allowed children to express things in their portraits that normally were not permissible or possible in school.

Broadly, then, our view was that the findings from the Promoting Social and Educational Inclusion through the Creative Arts project had significant implications for teacher education. We had observed arts pedagogy that 
- allowed children to develop their sense of efficacy, agency and self
- opened up different modes of expression
- introduced new materials and media, modelled their use, scaffolded tasks through practice and rehearsal
- explicated links between the children’s work and other artists’ work
- set achievable challenges and created a sense of possibility and safety within which risks could be taken
- established a group and collective purpose in which individual effort was understood and valued
- paced activities so that children had to work hard enough to complete but not so fast that they were frustrated
- negotiated about pacing, topic, medium
- ensured that the physical resources were sufficient and the organisation of the space was seamless
- continually reinforced key messages, eg ‘you can’t make a mistake’
- drew on the skills and knowledge of family and friends through the use of sketchbooks
- maintained conversation throughout the activity – a mix of explication and narrative
- created a boundaried space in which the activity occurred, separated off from other school activities
- integrated knowledge of children’s interests and youth cultures into the projects but also brought in cultural knowledge
- introduced metalanguage

But the local and national context for these findings was one in which teachers were considered, and considered themselves, uncreative, unskilled and too pressed for time to engage in teaching the arts. In the local context of the study, the teachers felt unable to benefit in their own professional development from
artists working in school. They equated critique with being negative, so neglected the postproduction stage of the projects and were hesitant about the language they should use to talk about the art, rather than the effort, the child had made. They lacked confidence in both formative and summative assessment processes.

The Self Portrait Project was therefore set up with a strong teacher education focus as an intervention project which aimed to disseminate, consolidate and test out some of the findings from the earlier research. As the project ran its course, the researchers engaged in participant observation at the launch workshop, in school based sessions and at exhibitions; interviewed the student teachers and their teacher mentors; held focus groups with pupils; made a digital record of the portraits produced; briefed and tracked the progress of the pupil researchers. The discussion which follows arises from our analysis of these data.

Making spaces

The teachers and the children involved in the Self Portrait Project were, according to their own reports, overwhelmingly enthusiastic and positive about it. This response could, in part, be attributed to the element of novelty and the fact that the schools received extra resources. The teachers said that they benefited greatly from the artist’s workshop and access to ongoing support.

However, a closer look at the evidence suggested that in fact very few of the schools had conducted the project according to the format agreed in advance. In one school, because the student teacher had given up the course, the head and a class teacher had undertaken a similar (but distinctly different) portrait project which built upon the head’s own philosophy of learning and teaching art. The rationale for this project was explicitly about social cohesion within the class:

We were interested in the project because it was this particular class and they needed to gel and they needed some help to do this. [Class teacher]

In two other schools, the class teacher had preferred to go ahead by her/himself rather than involve the student teacher. In four schools the teachers and the student teachers had split the class between them and worked separately, in parallel. In the other three schools the beginning and experienced teachers had worked together collaboratively with the class. None of the schools had actually used the available funds to buy in extra staffing to improve the staff/pupil ratio and work collaboratively with a small group of children as had been agreed. The issue for the schools was not the problem of finding supply cover; it was, we suggest, related to the educational climate, their own pedagogical contexts and their confidence levels.

A very important part of the current English climate and context relates to the use of time. The national strategies, launched in 1996 with the image of a clock, all but mandated daily literacy and numeracy hours. Furthermore, the hours were subdivided into segments in which particular types of teaching activity should occur. This represented an understanding of teaching and learning at the temporal level of the lesson which has been heavily promoted. Learning is understood to occur through an aggregation of the activities of a sequence of lessons, each with distinct and demonstrable objectives. ‘Good lessons’ are considered to have a particular three part structure: starter, main activity, plenary (though four parts are considered desirable in English teaching: starter, introduction, development, plenary) (eg DfES, Standards website, accessed 17.5.06). There is an emphasis on pace and on progression within the timeframe of a single lesson: Ofsted, the national inspection agency, for example, make judgements on both of these temporal aspects and expect to be able to note evidence of progression in learning within the space of observing a single lesson.
The effect of this emphasis is, often, to inject a sense of busyness and urgency about task completion; lessons have become familiar in shape and children have become accustomed to hearing teachers reciting the learning objectives at the beginning of the lesson and declaring how they have been achieved at the end. In these ways the lesson is demarcated as the most significant temporal pedagogic unit.

In the Holly Tree portrait project, children had experienced time in the art sessions very differently. They commented on the “peacefulness” of the sessions; they liked the fact that they did not feel they had to compete to find a correct answer; they contrasted how they felt in art with the stress levels they felt at other times of the day. They enjoyed the sense of working steadily on a big project, making their own decisions in their own time, concentrating and reflecting on what they had done (Hall and Thomson, 2005). One of our aims in the Esmée Fairbairn Self Portrait Project was to “buy” this kind of time for recursive, reflective, creative working in the ten schools; a significant part of the intervention we had envisaged was the encouragement of teachers to experience working within different – less regimented, more open - timeframes than those that predominate in current pedagogic orthodoxies.

This was a naïve assumption in several respects. Firstly, it took insufficient account of the metaphorical understanding of time as money – something to be spent, invested, saved – which underpins current hegemonic pedagogic discourses. Secondly, although the Holly Tree children experienced the time of art lessons as relaxed and exploratory, our analysis of the resident artist’s pedagogy had in fact demonstrated that time was strongly classified (separated and bounded) in the school (ie the session was held on a specified half day throughout the school year) and strongly framed within the lessons (Bernstein, 1996). Dorothy retained a high degree of control over the selection, organisation, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship. The lessons were segmented and very carefully sequenced. Homework, using sketchbooks, was built in to the sequence; it operated cumulatively as a record of the children’s research and practice, and encouraged them to bring images from home into the classroom. The overall teaching sequence was finely staged to develop children’s skills and attitudes. The children’s attitudes to and experience of the art sessions as relaxed and exploratory were, of course, partial testimony to the success of the pedagogic strategies adopted.

Generally, at the workshop that launched the project, the teachers and student teachers focussed on issues of skill development and organisation. They were impressed by the Dorothy’s skills, and their confidence and self esteem as artists grew as they produced their own work, just as the children’s had. They were highly attentive to issues of timing, sequence and technique in Dorothy’s teaching. They made notes about different paints and papers and implements. They asked questions about finding public exhibition sites and admired one another’s work.

However, later interviews revealed considerable differences in the ways the various participants had understood the purpose of the workshop and of the project itself. In initiating the project with the artist, our focus as researchers and as teacher educators had been on representing and exploring identities. Some of the teachers interpreted the project in terms similar to our own, focussing on self expression, the shifting nature of identity and understanding how portraits represent different aspects of identity:

We just wanted to give them some freedom to do what they want. We didn’t want to handcuff them into having to produce. They want to now, but we did have a whole week of art which discussed
identity: who we are and why we’ve become this and who we want to become and then we started - we focussed on the ‘I’ for about three days and then they created

We laid some foundations down and we said we were investigating what identity is in order to scaffold the whole process. So we started off with things like this: you have a healthy apple; you think you are going to eat something healthy and you end up with a pizza or ice-cream or chips...

We thought we couldn’t just say that we were doing a portrait project without any homework on what is a portrait. Because they all thought that a portrait was just a face and a face would tell a story. So we looked at different portraits and asked questions about it; about what they meant

We’ve had one child who has said that that they wanted to do a big face-like shape and things that have influenced them, like poetry, in the face. And use their skills... And they are really identifying not an inner self but a future self and a kind of previous self.

I think that is the main thing that we’ve tried to do: let them express themselves by doing it themselves and just giving them pointers on certain areas that they are all finding it difficult to do rather than saying: ‘This is how I want it’. And that’s what art is really, isn’t it? Self expression.

Other teachers focussed more on their own skill development:

I can use pencils now – it sounds stupid but I did some art work with them [my class] yesterday and I was able to talk a bit more confidently about how to shade and things. Not just necessarily on the work I did on the day but since then because it’s encouraged me a bit. Since then I’ve bought my own pencils and I’ve done a bit of sketching at home with paints and stuff.

One pair of teachers considered the identity aspects of the project as an after-thought:

I must admit I was a little surprised that that was where the project was going. The day that we did in Nottingham was spent learning all the skills and then this was kind of dropped in at the last minute: oh, this is actually what the portrait is about. And I’m thinking: ‘Oh, right, ok’. But up till that point it had all been about developing your skills as an artist. And I think that sort of mirrors what we’ve done really. We are just about to do the same to the children and to drop it on them.

The teachers’ apprehensions of the overall purpose of the project obviously influenced the pedagogic decisions they made when they set up the self portrait work in their own schools. Inevitably, issues of values and philosophy are bound up with pedagogic practice: our point here is to identify some of the ways in which currently dominant educational discourses and cultures produced very different pedagogic experiences of the arts even within this one project. ‘Creativity’, ‘excellence’ in teaching and ‘enjoyment’ are understood very differently in the different school contexts. For the individual child and for the individual teacher the development and expression of identity takes on very different meanings in the different institutional contexts.

Time was an issue in all of the projects. None of the schools felt comfortable with the original notion of ‘buying’ time for the teachers and children to work alongside one another on their portraits. Several schools seemed to see a virtue in early completion of the project and had established a pace which cut short the teaching time. These were the schools where experienced teachers worked independently of the student teachers. The teachers’ conceptual time economies led them to see efficiencies in working independently or in parallel, rather than collaboratively. Probably influential in this respect was the fact that the self portrait work was, itself, a ‘project’, one of many for most of the schools, with all the attendant bureaucracy, accountability and reporting requirements that accompany short term funding in the public sector.

One teacher explicitly reframed the self portrait project to comply with the language of monitoring and objectives led performance. He ‘set the standard’ for the children by showing them the Holly Tree portraits at the start of their work together:
This is my medium term plan and I’ve tried to explain to them [the children] what I want as the end result... We started off by explaining the idea to them first of all and I got some PowerPoint pictures of some previous ones from another school. So I showed them on the whiteboard to give them an idea of what the final outcome was so that they could actually see and we talked about what the children had done and how they produced it... Yes, I thought that would give them a good idea of what sort of work they were aiming at.

Like others, he took pleasure in buying new equipment and materials and used this to motivate the pupils:

I showed them [the pupils] all the new stuff. I bought brand new stuff – palettes and sketchbooks – and they were quite taken with that.

We’ve probably spent about two hundred quid on materials to give them [the pupils] some feeling of how important it was really. So it had that impact.

Because they were working with whole classes or parallel groups, most of the teachers in the project considered that they did not have the time to work alongside the children to produce their own portraits. Their teaching kept them too busy.

Because we’ve been doing it as a class I’ve not had a go at the full portrait because, to be honest, it’s all hands to the pump, isn’t it?

I know it was suggested that we should have done the final portrait at the same time as them but I don’t really think I could have helped them.

I wanted to do it …but it’s not been possible with all the things that have been going on.

In all of the schools the teachers were happy to show the children the work they had produced on the workshop day with the artist. The teachers generally saw the value of demonstrating and modelling, a technique strongly promoted in the National Literacy Strategy [NLS] within the four part lesson structure. On the whole, though, this modelling was related to specific tasks and skills, not to the role of artist. In earlier eras, teacher role modelling had been one of the orthodoxies of English primary school teaching, particularly in relation to reading, and there had been widespread adoption of practices with pet names like USSR and ERIC (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading; Everyone Reads in Class) in which the teacher and the children spent class time in silent individual reading. This practice had been discouraged as inefficient within the NLS and the emphasis had been placed instead on a more interventionist and skills focussed pedagogic strategy of demonstration and modelling, particularly of writing processes. The teachers enjoyed showing their own work to the children and to other staff:

It was really useful that we had ours ready first. That really started it off.

Yes, so we only expected them to do things that we had had a go at as well. And we weren’t perfect either

Yes, they [the staff at school] are so impressed with the pictures that there have been many comments such as: ‘How did you do that? How did you get that colour? They are wonderful. I wouldn’t know how to teach it.’ So we said that we would have a staff workshop where we all paint and everybody can have the input that we had in Nottingham.

But the learning at the workshop had also been important in out-of-school contexts: several teachers had been inspired to take up art activities in their own time. It was notable that generally these were not the aspects of educational impact on enjoyment and creativity that the teachers considered it important to share with their classes.

I: Do either of you do any drawing or painting in your own time?
T: Yes, loads.
I: And did you do any before you started this project?
T: Never.
ST: I did a little before but now I really think that I can do it. Before I was just messing around but now I feel it has some worth.

In two schools, where the teachers worked collaboratively on the project, the pedagogic emphases were different. Both schools linked the self portrait work with views of other people and other people’s views, instantiating in the process the notion of a socially constructed identity:

ST: They had homework every night. They couldn’t wait to get it in.
T: And they got their parents involved as well. They would come in the next day and say: ‘This is mine. This is dad’s. This is mum’s’. So they involved lots of the family, didn’t they?

T: And it helped having those two work experience lads in – Ben and Sam – I think the class thought: ‘Oh, they’ve brought in special models for us’.
ST: Yes, they said to me: ‘Thank you for bringing Sam in to model for us’.
T: And also to draw a teenage boy they really did have to look because if they didn’t have older siblings then it was something new to them.
ST: And I think they thought they were quite cool.

Both of these sets of teachers gave extended amounts of time to the self portrait work, in one case by gaining permission to suspend the timetable and run an intensive art week. These teachers were attentive to the atmosphere and ethos of the sessions: they spoke of “our various experiments” in the teaching (such as asking the children to match colours to feelings and moods); they used music, physical proximity and movement to “do things differently” and encourage self expression.

Lots of them [the children] in the beginning were scared to make a mistake and wanted it to look pretty and on the wall. So, with chalks and crayons, we did a session of music: we put mellow music on, and stronger music, and the children responded with their sketches. And lots of girls especially don’t like to make a mess so it took them about five times before they realised that it could just be scribbles.

So we all sit with our groups – it’s the whole class but we each have our own group. We split our children into three groups and they watch us do a demo. I’ll do it one week and [other teacher] will do it another week and our TA just joins in, doesn’t she? And then we will sit and do it with them. Because I’m dreadful – my art is dreadful, but the children - and we have music playing and their voices can’t be louder than the music, which is really low, so they have to whisper… they sit and whisper to each other. It’s not controlled but it seems very controlled… And it’s because you are sat so close to them that they will just look up to you and say: ‘Is that ok?’

In the classroom at times one of them [the children] would come up and ask if we could just hold their painting for them while they stood back and looked. And when I came into the class I immediately wanted to go and have a close-up look but they explained to me that I should stand back. They told me exactly how I should view them and why. And that was really good fun.

The relative freedom of their approach seemed to contribute to the teachers being sensitised to the symbolic aspects of representing self. There was, for example, a conversation about skin colour:

ST: And that’s another interesting aspect, isn’t it? You are getting to that level where you are talking about how you represent skin tone and the mixing that goes into that. And each child will do it slightly differently and that will be of interest to them to see how other children will come up with different skin tones.
T: Definitely. And some of them yesterday, even though they’ve got quite light skins, they were mixing quite dark colours.
ST: All the white skinned children thought it would be white and pink, didn’t they?
T: When you look at Alan’s portrait there is pink and white but also this whole range of other different colours and it looks right.
ST: And it’s that realisation that your skin is all of these different colours.
T: And they used mirrors a lot. And it was only in the second week that they were using white
It was notable that there was most evidence of critique and ongoing, formative assessment in the one school where the teachers did draw and paint alongside the children.

I: I’m very interested in the fact that this is a slightly different situation where you are doing work alongside them and you aren’t necessarily any better than them either.

T: No, poorer most of the time. They quite like that. When I make a mistake they love it. ST: It’s like they will try and correct our errors. They will say things like: ‘Why don’t you try …’ And one child can be separating a face into thirds and one child’s forehead was literally this big – Thomas – and then he did it on his picture but it took him about three months to see what he had done even though people had been telling him. And then we did the evaluations of each other’s work and they are fairly critical of each other’s work – but not negatively – and I think they take their own criticisms better than our’s.

Conclusions

All of the teachers and a huge majority of the pupils said they enjoyed the Self Portrait project. They agreed that they had been involved in creative activity. The teachers generally felt they had taught well and sometimes, perhaps, excellently. But these notions, central to national education policy, were understood and enacted very differently in the different school contexts, even within the limited confines of a single project.

It has been argued extensively that, at a national level, the schools operate within a performative educational culture (Ball, 1998; Broadfoot, 1998; Elliot, 2001; Seddon, 1997; Woods et al, 1997; Woods and Jeffrey, 2002). Ball defines performativity as

a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. (Ball, 2003: 216)

Within the sample of teachers, the relative influence of performativity was discernible in the differing understandings of the project’s purpose and the pedagogies the teachers adopted. Performativity provides a lens through which to understand the heavy emphasis some teachers placed on skills, on speed and the ‘efficient’ use of time, and on providing new materials and resources. The emphasis within a performative culture on individual performance contributing to institutional success militates against collaborative teaching and, in part, explains why so few of the projects were conducted as genuine collaborations. In pedagogic terms, the “child centred” strategies (role modelling the lifelong value and pleasure to be gained from engagement with the arts; developing formative and peer assessment to democratise judgement and increase involvement) give way to “society centred” strategies (demonstrating performance, identifying outcomes, setting an external standard) (Brehony, 2005). As Ball points out, it is not that performativity gets in the way of ‘proper’ learning: performativity is a vehicle for changing what learning actually is (Ball, 2003: 226). The learning for the children whose teacher motivated them by showing them new school palettes and brushes and digital images of unknown children’s portraits, to set the standard, was different to the learning of the children whose family members contributed to their homework sketchbooks to help them see how others saw them.

The impact of current ‘policy technologies’ is not, therefore, limited to technical or structural change in schools: performativity actually changes what it means to be a teacher, practically, socially and ethically (Ball, 2003: 217; Beck and Young,
2005; Bernstein, 1996). As Ball points out, the use of language is fundamental: “we learn to talk about ourselves and the relationships purposes and motivations in...new ways. The new vocabulary of performance renders old ways of thinking and relating dated or redundant or even obstructive” (Ball, 2003: 218). Reformulating the portrait work as a 'medium term plan’, for example, helps situate it within a defined, skills focussed, objectives-led pedagogy rather than an exploratory frame which seeks to create permeable boundaries between home and school. This contributes to the construction of the teacher's identity in and through his engagement with the curriculum; it also helps constitute the ‘pupil’ identity of the children in the school.

Clearly, these are very important issues for the professional education of both pre-service and in-service teachers. The opportunities to critique policy and practice are limited by the performativity of the culture of teacher training, which is tightly regulated, packed with content and policed by national agencies. Beck and Young point out that “all but the most instrumentally relevant forms of educational theory” have been largely excised from pre-service teacher education in England: they see this as a "process of silencing – by denying 'trainees' access to the forms of knowledge that permit alternative possibilities to be thought – thereby reproducing imaginary concepts of work and life that abstract real experiences from the power relations of their lived conditions and negate the possibilities of understanding and criticism” (Beck and Young, 2005: 193).

But both the Self Portrait Project and the original artist's residency at Holly Tree School also demonstrate the potential for opening up more responsive spaces for arts practices in schools. The 'official' discourses of creativity, excellence and enjoyment could and sometimes does provide opportunities for social learning in the arts, and for sharing pedagogies that promote engagement, practical involvement and a real, rather than spurious, sense of achievement. A student teacher in one of the collaborative art projects described the self portrait sessions in this way:

Sometimes we have, like, streams of questions. It’s like: 'Can we do this? Can we do this? Can we do this?' And we always just say: 'Yes, you can do anything'.

The experience of working in this school environment left her with a very clear sense of who she wanted to be as a teacher.

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