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Thinking Skills and Creativity 3 (2008) 82–83
Thinking Skills and Creativity
http://elsevier.com/locate/tsc

Book review

Creative Learning Practices: European Experiences, B. Jeffrey (Ed.). The Tufnell Press, London (2006)

This book, which emerged from the Socrates funded Creative Learning and Students' Perspectives research project, portrays creative learning practices across nine European countries. The chapters are all rooted in classroom practice, which makes the style a very accessible breath of fresh air, not burdened by over-theorising, yet grounded in solid pedagogical and creative learning roots, e.g. Vygotsky, Piaget, Freinet and Woods.

A rich variety of pan-European contexts for creative learning are represented, covering all ages of learning from early years to adult education, different subject disciplines, e.g. science, ICT, mathematics and management, as well as different learning contexts, e.g. for asylum seeker bilingual learners and settings for students with special education needs. As a result the book would be of limited interest to anyone interested in creativity in only one specific context, but it would be very informative to practitioners interested in exploring the range of possible settings for creative learning or to scholars of creativity in education. At times it feels as if creative learning is not the primary focus, but merely tagged on to other projects (probably a product of the EU funding regime that requires matched funding from each of the universities involved). The upshot is that this leads to some interesting and diverse settings, but potentially creativity becomes the convenient handmaiden to serve other purposes, ranging from arts education to asylum seekers, from a research focus on living spaces to an exploration of creative constructivist policies.

An unfortunate missed opportunity is the lack of any direct comparison of the creative learning practices across the countries. The book contains wonderful snapshots of creative learning practice across Europe (a benefit of the ethnographic approach that gives us real in-depth in situ insights, often just based on one class in one school), but there is no indication of how representative these examples are. In the end we know that we all do creativity, which is important in itself, but we still do not know how differently we do creativity across Europe. The editorial chapter contains a very interesting description of the national policy contexts, containing exciting glimpses of some national policies enabling creativity, e.g. project pedagogy principles, including elements like problem solving, which are defined nationally in Denmark and designated curriculum time for cross-curricular and team-based project work in Portugal. Occasionally the authority of some of the assertions made are questionable, e.g. the expressed view that England (alongside Ireland, Scotland and Portugal) has succeeded in incorporating creative teaching and learning programmes alongside testing and competitive regimes without overloading teachers, would probably be contested by many practitioners in England. In many instances it is therefore not clear whose views are represented in the discussion on national policies: the government, practitioner or researcher view?

It is evident that the Woods and Jeffrey (1996) description of the elements of creative learning – relevance, control of learning processes, ownership of knowledge and innovation – acted as a very cohesive guiding philosophy on creative learning across the whole project. Herein lays the biggest binding factor, but also the biggest conceptual weakness of the book: in most chapters each of these elements is regarded as evidence of creative learning practice in isolation, rather than jointly. As a result many chapters focus only on relevance or pupil agency (pupil voice) or choice and freedom, but there is often no evidence of the innovation element, which is at the heart of other definitions of creative teaching and/or learning where one would expect to at least see some evidence of application of original thinking, hopefully on the part of the learner. Is it creative learning whenever learners have choice or freedom without any innovation? Even in the editorial chapter creative learning is equated with flexibility in terms of curriculum management and design without any evidence of original thinking by the learners. Student voice and choice is an important current policy theme, but the valuable contributions on this topic contained in this book may be

1871-1871/$ – see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.tsc.2007.08.001

overlooked since it is hidden as a subset or alternative description of creative learning, rather than a discreet theoretical concept.

Two definite highlights are the chapter on creative learning in an early years setting from Spain, documenting some exceptional practice in facilitating young people in constructing and articulating their own learning on a daily basis; and the chapter from Scotland on creativity in bi-lingual learners, containing insightful reflections, e.g. on how play can sometimes constrain creativity and collaboration, since it can be too structured and children can rely too much on the rules and thus not think for themselves.

In summary, this is a worthwhile international validation of the importance and variety of creative learning practices across education settings in Europe.

Reference

Woods, P., & Jeffrey, B. (1996). Teachable Moments: the art of creative teaching in primary schools. In *Buckingham*. Open University Press.

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30 July 2007
Available online 8 September 2007