

Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education

Submission: Considerate, convivial, capacious? Capturing 'creative' school ethos

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Abstract

Concepts of school ‘ethos’, ‘climate’ or ‘culture’ have been significant points of reference in educational debates since the 1980s. This is partly as a consequence of marketisation and because school ethos has been identified as an expedient (low-cost) route to school improvement. In the UK, prevailing political and media discourses have promoted corporate, authoritarian and most recently ‘military’ models of ethos in this respect, with little attention to how students might experience them. Another significant strand of educational thinking, however, has emphasised ethos *for* and *as* learning: how the school might prefigure and potentially bring into being alternative, more socially just, social worlds. This article argues that accounting for such divergent notions of ethos demands greater attention to the intellectual resources mobilized in interpreting educational processes. It discusses a number of schools that used their work with the English creative learning programme, Creative Partnerships, to develop what we describe as ‘considerate, convivial and capacious’ school ethos. We aim thereby to value the achievements of such schools; provide tools to contest dominant discourses around ethos; and advocate more critical and reflexive approaches to researching the practices, orientations and social relationships of the ‘worlds’ enacted by and within schools.

Keywords: school ethos; post-structuralism; creative learning; creativity, Creative Partnerships

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DfE grants £4.8 million to projects led by ex-armed forces personnel to tackle underachievement by disengaged pupils.... Education Minister Elizabeth Truss said: “The lives of thousands of disengaged children have been turned around thanks to these projects which instil our wonderful armed forces’ values of hard work and discipline.” The projects instil teamwork, discipline and leadership in pupils through mentoring, outward bound activities and other group exercises focused on improving attainment and behaviour.
(Department for Education press release, 2013)

On arrival, a member of staff shows us to the room where a group of 12 children, two from each of years 1-6 [ages 6 – 11], are waiting for us. That is the last direct interaction we have with adults on our visit, which is otherwise entirely managed by these children. They invite us to sit down, fuss over whether my chair is comfortable, ask us what we would like to drink and later in the discussion notice before I do that my recorder’s batteries are running low.

Field notes, Delaunay primary

The two ‘scenes’ of education, above, speak to very different notions of schooling and indeed youth. In the first, children and young people figure as ‘risky’ subjects – at risk of school failure, indiscipline and idleness, the counter to which must be ‘instilled’ by outside (armed) forces. The second shows children being both trusted and trustworthy. As the researchers, we found it deeply affecting to be the recipient of primary age children’s care and concern in the ways our field notes describe, although this fitted with our sense of a school we had come to recognise as creating conditions of ‘liveability’ for and within its community (cf. Butler, 2015). This article attempts to articulate an analytical framework for school ethos that allows us to understand and value the everyday achievements of that school and of others like it. It does so by foregrounding and expanding the intellectual resources mobilised in analysing the practices, orientations and social relationships of schools.

Accounting for ethos

Concepts of school ‘ethos’, ‘climate’ or ‘culture’ have been much debated since the 1980s (Gavienas & White, 2008), for a number of reasons. To begin, market-oriented reforms of education have promoted competition between schools and created a perceived need to generate a distinct identity to attract ‘customers’. For this reason, many schools’ websites now include a statement of their ‘ethos’, mission or values. Second, ethos or culture has been identified as a contributor to improved performance, for instance by some in the School Effectiveness and School Improvement (SESI) movement or in Peterson and Deal’s work on school culture (e.g.: Peterson & Deal, 2009). Successive governments and policy-makers have been particularly interested in questions of its expediency (that is, effectiveness at potentially low cost) and of whether ‘failing’ schools in deprived areas that adopt aspects of the ethos of more ‘successful’ (including fee-paying and selective) schools might thereby improve individual and institutional outcomes, regardless of wider socio-economic circumstances, student intake or quality of facilities. Although evidence for this case remains highly contested and far from proven (Goldstein & Woodhouse, 2000; Slee, Weiner, & S, 1998; Thrupp, 2001a, 2001b), the prospect continues to appeal. The UK’s Coalition (2010-15) and current Conservative government ministers have made statements to this effect (see e.g.: Brogan, 2009) and praised schools with features such as competitive ‘houses’, strict uniform policies and deference to authority (requiring students to stand up when adults enter a room, for instance: see eg <http://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/599738>). Prime Minister David Cameron argued in a speech in 2007 that schools ‘should be places where the kids respect - and even fear - the teachers, not the other way around’ (<http://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/599817>). The government has since 2010 increased funding not only to organisations promoting military ethos but also to Teach First¹, an organisation modelled on Teach for America and that places successful graduates in schools in deprived areas for a two-year period. In 2010, Teach First published a PriceWaterhouseCooper-sponsored report on ‘Ethos and culture in schools in challenging circumstances’ which argues explicitly that a focus on ethos could provide ‘huge benefits for very little financial cost, and thus offers a way of improving schools even in an era of austerity’ (p.11). It conceives of ethos in largely corporate terms, advocating such devices as ‘motivational sayings’, mission statements, flags, crests and slogans such as ‘No Excuses’ alongside attention to ‘posture’ and correct uniform (Teach First,

¹ Teach First recruits successful graduates who commit to spend two years working in schools in disadvantaged areas. They receive some teacher education but also training in ‘leadership’ skills. After their period of ‘service’ they may stay in schools (possibly progressing rapidly into management) or continue into other careers. It is built on the ‘Teach for America’ programme which began to recruit graduates to work in leadership roles in low income schools in the US in 1990. ‘Teach for All’ is the globally expanding version of these programmes.

2010: pp. 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 31, 33, 35, 38). In much of this work, ethos is construed at once as somehow ineffable – a mysterious force able to transcend mundane materialities and inequalities – and at the same time in positivist terms as a controllable variable that an organisation ‘has’ and that can be ‘managed’ (Thrupp, 2001a).

Nonetheless, alternative if less prominent positions on ethos exist. The term has also been used with reference to the pre-conditions or prerequisites for learning, often within the context of progressive educators justifying creative curricula, inclusion, or emphasising the affective and social aspects of learning (Munn, 2008; Thomson, 2007). Mortimore (2006) argues that countries that do particularly well educationally – Finland, Norway, Denmark and Scotland – reject the idea of market competition in schools and focus instead on equity and cooperation in building a supportive school ethos. He cites Laukkanen, writing about Finnish schools, who is clear that, ‘The whole ethos of schools is important to support a feeling of safety... If students are not relaxed, they do not learn well’ (Laukkanen, 2006). Others discuss ethos *as* learning particularly about citizenship and democracy, arguing that how a school is organized and run constitutes a form of learning in itself about the nature of society and young people’s citizenship and agency within it (McLaughlin, 2005). These positions have been advanced by advocates of reform towards more egalitarian, democratic, school cultures, variously described as ‘human scale’ (Davies, 2005), ‘sociable’ (Thomson, Hall, Jones, & Green, 2012) and cooperative / Co-operative (Facer, Thorpe, & Shaw, 2012). Michael Fielding has developed a typology contrasting the ‘person-centred learning community’ to the ‘affective community’, the ‘impersonal’ and the ‘high performance’ learning organization (2006). The latter he depicts as involving ‘tough targets, a usurious discourse of “user” engagement’, and an ‘emotionally intelligent’ articulation of economic purposes in a ‘dissembling language of social justice and human fulfilment’ (ibid. 300). While such ‘high-performance’ schools might be popular with current conservative politicians, Fielding perceptively observes that how students experience such institutions is under-researched. Against this, he argues for a ‘dialogic’ ethos, reclaiming ‘a commitment to education as an holistic undertaking, and also as an alternative account of wider human flourishing in a democratic society’, in which ‘personal, communal and educational ends should be transformed by the moral and interpersonal character of what we are trying to do’ (ibid. 300). In his work and that of the other authors cited above, schools are posited as able to ‘prefigure’ practices that might bring a better society into existence in the future (Schostak & Goodson, 2012). Contemporary politicians advocating more authoritarian school ethos tend to be less explicit about the kinds of ‘worlds’ it would prefigure, although these can easily be imagined.

Ethos in poststructuralist perspective: engaging with and through theory

Ethos can be mobilized in the conflicting ways outlined above because even in the academic literature, it is often atheoretical, what might be termed an ‘empty signifier’, filled with meanings to suit different contexts, purposes and speakers. One might therefore question whether it is a useful concept for educational inquiry at all. To use the term may imply that it has relevance and substance as a way to capture something tangible and singular about a school as a whole. As Finn argues (Finn, 2015), it might be more accurate to refer to ‘moments’, pockets and ‘atmospheres’ within classrooms and schools, which are dynamic, changeable and fleeting (such as the moment with which we opened the article).

However, as we have noted, the term ‘ethos’ has long had currency in educational debate and appears to have some intuitive appeal, not least as a shorthand for identifying the affective aspects of schooling. In this way it might move beyond standards and outcomes-focused agendas. Rather than either dispensing with it altogether or reifying it, then, our response here is to contest its use and to re-infect its meanings, away from the over-simplified ‘recipes’ suggested by much mainstream media and political debate. We aim to evolve a more reflective analytical frame for considering what the term ethos might designate and achieve. We hope to encourage debate rather than make assertions about issues such as: how one might assign schools to different categories; from whose perspective and values ethos is defined; or whose opinions are to count. We also acknowledge that the policy contexts and external inspection pressures to which schools must respond, further constrain what they are able to do. Our position rejects behaviourist and positivist assumptions that ethos is objectively observable and measurable. As Fielding acknowledges, while the ‘felt realities’ of different kinds of schools may be ‘worlds apart’, many of their actual practices may closely resemble each other (2007: 398). Our approach favours post-modern, sociomaterial and poststructural approaches foregrounding how ‘thinking with theory’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) and focusing on sociomaterial aspects of school life can direct attention to these ‘felt realities’ including schools’ everyday practices, embodied processes, and social relationships. These highlight researcher reflexivity about the basis on which interpretations are made, what is included and excluded, and the provisionality of these analyses. They view qualitative analysis as an entangled practice occurring throughout the research process (Ringrose and Renold, 2014). They also encourage a nuanced

understanding of power relations, building (for instance) on the work of Foucault (see e.g.: Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996; Gulson, Clarke, & Petersen, 2015). Our approach is closer to what Karen Barad has described as a ‘diffractive methodology’:

[A] method of diffractively reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement. Diffractive readings bring inventive provocations; they are good to think with. They are respectful, detailed, ethical engagements.

(Barad, interviewed in Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012: 50)

Revisiting ethos through creativity

This article results from a research project into Creative Partnerships, the ‘flagship creative learning programme’ in England funded by the New Labour government between 2002 and 2011. Creative Partnerships aimed to foster long-term partnerships between schools and creative professionals to ‘inspire, open minds and harness the potential of creative learning’ (www.creativepartnerships.com). It worked with just over 1 million children, and over 90,000 teachers in more than 8,000 projects in England during its existence. It supported a substantial body of critical research and analysis addressing both its programmes and key themes in current thinking about creativity, the arts, education, school change, student participation and culture. It was tasked to tackle the dual (and sometimes contradictory) challenge of encouraging cultural shifts in educational institutions towards creativity and innovation whilst also responding to the standards agenda (Jones & Thomson, 2008). . Broadly speaking, Creative Partnerships differed from more traditionalist or corporate school improvement models, fostering local autonomy among its 38 regional offices in ways that enabled grassroots adaptations and appropriations of policy, and emphasising student-centredness in its rhetoric and practice (Bragg & Manchester, 2012; Thomson, Jones, & Hall, 2009).

Creative Partnerships (CP) appointed us to ‘evaluate the impact of the Creative Partnerships programme on school ethos’. Its tender resulted from anecdotal evidence that through its projects and practices CP improved relationships, increased motivation, enhanced local reputation and affected a range of other issues often related to ethos. The research built on and re-analysed data from earlier projects on youth voice and creative school change (Bragg,

Manchester, & Faulkner, 2009; Thomson et al., 2009). . It also gathered new qualitative data from five schools across sectors, all pseudonymised here. Two were secondary for ages 11-16 (Sherman, Warhol), one primary for 4 - 11 (Delaunay), one 11 – 18 special school for young people with disabilities (Matisse) and one a nursery school for 2-4 year olds (Lange). All were in disadvantaged urban areas in different locations around England. They were purposively selected in dialogue with Creative Partnerships staff as representing ‘best practice’ in terms of creativity; three were designated ‘Schools of Creativity’ by Creative Partnerships, meaning that they were considered to exemplify ‘outstanding practice’ and engaged in outreach with other schools. Warhol’s overall ethos was however in our view closer to that of a ‘high-performance’ school than to the others we studied, and we found the contrast was particularly generative of insights. We refer primarily to these schools below, but occasionally bring in examples from elsewhere.

Our qualitative approach responded to our critical conceptualisations of ethos (McLaughlin, 2005; Smith, 2003). Defining ethos as both official and unofficial (Donnelly, 2000, 2004) meant that it required perspectives from all members of the school community, conceived of as active agents in (re)defining ethos. Recognising that ethos relates to that which is taken for granted meant that it might not easily be articulated and thus required an outsider’s perspective. Seeing ethos as emerging from everyday, shared processes of relationships and interactions, and concerning norms rather than exceptions, required extended immersion to build nuanced contextual understandings.

Accordingly, we collected official expressions of school ethos, from prospectuses, websites and interviews with senior managers (heads and / or deputy heads), who were interviewed at least once. We also sought out understandings ‘from below’, and different ‘insider’ accounts from key creative practitioners and classroom teachers, who were interviewed at least once individually and once in as a group. We elicited student perceptions through ‘walk and talk’ methodologies in which we were given guided tours of the school, and through focus groups in which we used creative methods such as photovoice (asking students to take photos of favourite and least favourite places in the school), and ‘metaphorical thinking’ exercises in which we asked students to tell us ‘if my school were an animal, what kind of animal’ it would be. Our aims here were to try to understand how the spatial, temporal and bodily practices of each school were experienced. Rather than taking official discourse and interview data at face value, we only cite them here if corroborated by our own observations or by more junior and peripheral members of the school community.

The ethnographic-style research involved repeated visits throughout an academic year, observing key points in cycles of creative learning projects where possible. All schools were visited at least three times, with the researchers observing and participating in creative practices and making time to talk to staff and students involved during this time, as well as observing staff meetings, student breaktimes and whole school events such as assemblies. Thus in addition to some 60 hours of interview material our data included extensive fieldnotes. We read and re-read these data in an extended hermeneutic process, in dialogue with the academic literature that we saw as relevant or generative of insight. In ‘describing’ a school’s ethos, research inevitably draws on particular interpretive and evaluative frameworks: our concern is to be as clear as is possible about the theoretical, conceptual and political influences on these frameworks, even if we acknowledge that our actual citations are nonetheless selective, and moreover that much will inevitably remain implicit (Taylor, 1999).

While our theoretical orientation led us to be wary of ‘evaluating’ ethos and ‘impact’ as our research brief requested (cf. Nind, Benjamin, Sheehy, Collins, & Hall, 2004), our schools too generally rejected the idea that Creative Partnerships alone could be said to have a distinctive impact. Staff argued that Creative Partnerships reinforced a pre-existing interest in creativity rather than introducing new elements; also that it would be misleading to isolate Creative Partnerships’ role from multiple other initiatives in which they were simultaneously engaged. Instead, we draw attention here to the additionality of the Creative Partnerships programme - how it enhanced practice, where and why its contribution might have been most strongly felt.

Considerate, convivial and capacious: elements of ‘creative’ school ethos

Although we describe our schools as ‘creative’ in our title, this is a convenient shorthand to indicate that we are discussing schools associated with the Creative Partnerships programme. We do not mean that these schools were essentially ‘creative’ as if this term can be unproblematically defined (Banaji & Burn, 2010) nor that they all shared similar qualities; still less that other schools lack these qualities. They might equally be described as ‘sociable’, ‘human scale’, ‘democratic’ or some of the other terms used by writers mentioned above. They, like many other schools, draw on rich resources of progressive and democratic thinking about education that persist, albeit perhaps in increasingly marginalized ways, in the English school system (cf. Drummond & Yarker, 2013; Michael Fielding & Moss, 2010). However, we did observe repeatedly that practitioners were sometimes too modest to recognize themselves in the

elevated rhetoric of radical progressivism, or too embedded in their contexts fully to appreciate what we as outsiders saw as significant accomplishments. Thus our research aimed to develop a language with which to capture aspects of these achievements, to ‘reflect back’ (Ellsworth, 1997) to practitioners what they were doing and thereby recognize and value them. In doing so, we came to use the terms ‘considerate, convivial and capacious’. These single words are intended as ‘inventive provocations’ as Barad has it; each carries several meanings, providing a way to discuss issues from different angles, appreciating that they are multi-dimensional, overlapping, complex, and inevitably partial. Some may be uncontroversial and common concerns, rather than unique to Creative Partnerships schools. But there are intricate and necessary relationships between different elements; and even minor variations in practice, we would argue, can mark important differences in values.

Considerate

The idea of ‘considerate’ ethos is informed primarily by literature on ‘positive’ and ‘inclusive’ school environments (Hall, Collins, Benjamin, Nind, & Sheehy, 2004). It draws attention to the role of courtesy and concern for the feelings, well-being and circumstances of others; discipline policies that are consistent, inclusive and flexible as a manifestation of a concern for the position of the other; also ‘taking into account’ such as, fairness and transparency in the use of resources and in decision-making.

While ‘good’ discipline is universally recognised as important, and as better promoted through positive and mutually agreed than punitive approaches, this principle is not always put into practice (Munn, 2008). At Sherman secondary school, we noted how rarely we heard raised voices and the norm of courteous modes of address between adults and young people (particularly in comparison to Warhol). Sherman students remarked that boundaries were clear, that they knew ‘where the line is’, while a strong pastoral system provided, for instance, friendship and bereavement groups where students were ‘encouraged to be mutually supportive of each other’ (head teacher).

Structure, reliability and consistency may be the building blocks for a creative ethos, enabling the riskier work we discuss below. A well-disciplined school however could also be authoritarian and hierarchical, since consistency only demands that patterns of relating do not vary. We emphasise in contrast civility and the notion of care extended regardless of status – for instance, when routine but symbolic courtesies of holding a door open were as likely to be performed by senior teachers for students as the other way around. ‘Traditional’ forms of deference, such as

routinely standing up for an adult, were less in evidence. At Sherman senior managers described the school as having ‘an ethos of mutual respect and treating people with dignity.’

Consideration in the sense of the care the school has for its members could also be expressed in the environment. Warhol school, for instance, was awaiting a rebuild, and many areas were so crowded as to seem overwhelming, even to us. Students were highly sensitive to this: their photovoice exercises - outlined above - showed that they interpreted colourful, clean and comfortable places (like the library) as a sign that they were cared for, and dirty or smelly areas (changing rooms and toilets) as showing the opposite.

‘Safety’ or security involves a familiar physical and emotional geography. A Year 11 boy at Sherman described ‘always feel[ing] we can go to somebody’ with problems or concerns; many students could name a favourite place in the school where they felt they could ‘socialise with friends’, rest and relax. At Delaunay primary children described the help available from others: ‘cause if you fall over in the playground someone will actually come and pick you up and take you to a teacher’. At Lange nursery, the day had a clear structure and regular, logical rhythm. Children participated willingly in quieter or more sedentary sessions, because they knew that they would have opportunities to play more exuberantly at other times. Before lunch, calming music was played and children gave each other massages. The attention to bodily and emotional needs was striking, particularly in contrast to secondary schools where they are often ignored (for instance, by reducing the time available for lunch or rest breaks).

Consideration suggests that everyone is a community member by right; it invites affiliation based on mutual interdependence and mattering, rather than tribal loyalty. At Delaunay primary school new children arrived throughout the school year, but settled in quickly through being buddied up with other children and being allowed ‘time for quietness, for them to bond, get to know others and to find things out’ (deputy head). Regard for others could be expressed representationally: Delaunay prominently displayed photos of children in the entrance, linked to a world map showing their countries of origin. At Lange photos of children’s families and of the week’s activities were displayed at a height where children as well as adults could easily see them.

A school’s overall provision can convey consideration, since offering a wide range of activities caters for different interests and capabilities - even if only in extra-curricular provision. This was often enabled by Creative Partnerships, for instance funding an open orchestra at Matisse special school, where no previous experience of playing an instrument was necessary and adults entered the project as learners alongside young people.

Being 'considerate' also invokes the extensive literature on teachers as reflective professionals (e.g. Schon, 1991) and reflection featured significantly in our research sites. Lange nursery set time aside at the end of every day for informal staff discussions. A weekly staff meeting discussed issues in more depth and we noted that every single member of staff contributed ideas to the one we observed. In another primary school, staff had a 'something good to share' slot each week, subsequently communicated more widely through photos and other artefacts on a noticeboard.

Convivial

Cultural critic Paul Gilroy (2004) refers to 'convivial cultures' in theorising post-colonial multiculturalism, instancing the role of the arts and culture in enabling 'unruly, untidy and convivial modes of interaction' in which differences are actively negotiated but not necessarily resolved, and which hold out some hope of achieving mutual, imperfect cohabitation in civic life. Ivan Illich's emphasis in his 'Tools for Conviviality' (1975) was on sociability and co-feeling, conviviality as 'individual freedom realized in personal interdependence', valuing intercourse 'among persons, and ... with their environment'.

The dimensions of being convivial thus include inter-relationships; recognizing the role of enjoyment and inspiration within learning; mutual support in rigorous, disciplined work; celebrating a range of achievements, not only academic or competitive sporting ones. It could extend to taking pleasure in each others' company, interest in each others' lives, across hierarchies and differences; collegiality, appreciation, moving away from learning as individual gain and advantage. Our schools provided many examples of mutual interest and 'emotional engagement' between teachers and students; lessons in which everyone contributed or asked questions without fear of mockery; confident teaching, flexibly adapting to students' responses. These could be contrasted with popular media discourses representing teachers and students as hostile groups with antagonistic interests, with what Wexler (1992) describes as a 'contagious' lack of caring or Bibby (2009) as 'blocking' relationships, where a teacher is emotionally absent from the classroom.

We also observed what one practitioner described as a more 'democratic perspective on the child's acquisition of knowledge and learning'. At Lange nursery, children had freedom of movement and made their own choices about how and when to participate in activities from a range of options. Staff there drew on the Reggio Emilia approach to the '100 languages' of children, which was popular among many Creative Partnerships schools and early years settings.

This was in part thanks to Creative Partnerships funding for staff development, including visits to schools in the Reggio Emilia region of Italy. The Reggio Emilia philosophy provided a rationale for ‘creativity’, fostered confident professional identities (according a central role to co-participation and observation in informing ongoing work and practices) and encouraged collaborations between teachers and artists (Fawcett & Hay, 2004). Some other schools that were engaged with Creative Partnerships were committed to ‘learning without limits’ approaches, which explicitly resist ability labeling practices in primary schools (see the work of Hart, Dixon, Drummond, & McIntyre, 2004; Swann, Peacock, Hart, & Drummond, 2012). Such approaches are incompatible with divisive practices more typical of secondary schools, such as setting and streaming, or with traditional classroom layouts of individual desks in rows.

A more complex notion of conviviality refers to our reliance on others to be able to act, to become somebody (Wexler, 1992), because identity and agency are fundamentally social and interdependent (Butler, 2010). The ethical consequences of this notion were particularly clear in Delaunay, which regularly took on pupils excluded from other schools. Some were on their ‘last chance’ for mainstream education, such as an eight-year-old boy described as ‘feral, lazy and difficult to control’ by his previous head teacher, or a ten-year-old boy who was the youngest recipient, locally, of an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO)². Yet the school successfully integrated them, the second even participating in a residential trip. Only senior managers and class teachers read their files, to avoid others pre-judging them. The school was reflective about how its own practices enabled or limited children; it redefined the ‘feral’ boy as someone who hated to sit and listen, but could cope well given enough time to be active. In other words, ‘who’ he could be depended on others, on context, on how his actions were interpreted - not on him alone. Unlike the previous head who disavowed responsibility for his own role in labeling the child, Delaunay acknowledged that teachers and students become who they are through interacting with each other.

‘Conviviality’ could also refer to the inter-relationships of knowledge: an integrated curriculum rather than a series of unrelated subjects, one that connects with and absorbs the surrounding world, individual past histories and personal experiences, and is thus personally meaningful and motivating. While achieving such integration was undoubtedly challenging in the current curricular context, students to whom we talked at Sherman argued that they had a say in their learning and that they felt ‘responsible’ for it. Although this is a somewhat hackneyed

² ASBO: ‘a court order ... which places restrictions on the movements or actions of a person who persistently engages in anti-social behaviour... first applied in 1999’ (Oxford English Dictionary online, accessed 31/03/11)

term, an incident from a class when the teacher was absent and the supply instructions were to 'carry on with coursework' showed how the school's consistent attribution of capability to students seemed to generate agency:

Most of the students have finished their assignments but instead of mucking about they decide to swap papers for peer assessment. Someone says that the teacher likes to see evidence that others have checked their work. However many students seem motivated by interest and to believe that they can learn with and from each other. Two students near me spend the rest of the lesson talking about their reading, swapping vocabulary, discussing it and writing it in their vocabulary books.

Field notes - October 2009

Our convivial schools rejected deficit discourses about disadvantaged families and were positive about students' cultures and experiences: Lange nursery developed and worked with children's interest in superheroes and violence, for instance, something with which many early years settings are uncomfortable (Holland, 2003). Asked during a training day about what inspired them, one group of Delaunay teachers brought their students, and another group brought 'each other'. In Delaunay's playground redesign project, a child who had previously been to school in Thailand told peers how it was organized and why it had no playground at all.

Creative Partnerships' work could challenge traditional hierarchies and role allocations. For instance, the resident visual artist at Delaunay trained teaching assistants (who are generally lower paid and lower status within schools) in techniques of creative documentation. This gave them a pivotal role in recording the children's learning and development, and in transmitting their skills to classroom teachers. A project exploring 'community' and 'care' asked Year 5 and Year 1 children (10-11 and 5-6 year olds respectively) to work in mixed groups to produce collaborative body sculptures. Initially the Year 5s felt the younger children had nothing to offer and were aggrieved that they had to work with them as equals. The artists asked them to reflect on the assumptions that this work unsettled, and eventually they came to value each other and working together.

A convivial atmosphere also helped staff retention and professional dialogue and practice, creating reflective spaces as discussed above. Staff rooms were frequently the site for animated exchanges and at Matisse teachers commented that they were 'not expected to fit into a mould', but could build on their own interests and develop, in one teacher's words, a 'conscious competence' in designing learning.

Capacious

Oxford English Dictionary's definitions of capacious refer to being able to hold much, roomy, spacious, wide; having the capacity of; adapted or disposed for the reception of. ... qualified to do something. This term thus helps us refer to the space-making aspects of creative school ethos, which allow more range or room for manoeuvre; also to increasing the capacity or capability of both teachers and students, a taking-out to a further horizon. Being capacious does not necessarily imply schools can expand their physical environments, but it does involve attention to the space and aesthetics of the school.

We use the term particularly to capture the insights of psychoanalytic perspectives on learning (Bibby, 2010, 2015; Britzman, 1998), about the necessity of 'holding doubt', of acknowledging but also managing negative emotions and fear of failure (being able to contain, in an expansive rather than restricting sense). In this sense, being capacious involves allowing for difference, for struggle and difficulty; for a wider range of identities; a greater fluidity in roles; an openness to the world, a sense of being in process, dynamic, changing, even where this involves discomfort or incompleteness.

Many of these dimensions were encapsulated in Lange nursery's decision to restructure its indoor layout dramatically, knocking down walls to create a more free flowing space, soon after receiving an 'outstanding' Ofsted (inspection) report. The capacity to risk what already worked well and to tolerate the uncertainty that change brought was enabled by a number of factors, including staff's professional confidence, collegiality and support, and the presence of a resident artist whose practice demonstrated the benefits of experimentation. The latter also described children's confidence: "They move around the whole building, inside and outside. They approach adults, they're curious, they'll ask questions and they're all engaged in something even if it's just watching."

Delaunay's 'capaciousness' was particularly unusual, for instance acknowledging issues like war, racism and poverty through displays in their entrance and main hall, which to us represented a more expansive and complex view of children than as 'innocents' to be protected from realities (Manchester & Bragg, 2013). Global linking projects with schoolchildren in Pakistan and the Lebanon engaged them as fellow citizens, not objects of charity. They swapped ideas about what they would change if they were world leader, hence exploring 'some of the big question about how to be active global citizens who can effect change in a responsible way' (deputy head).

We noted where schools, rather than demanding conformity and limiting the identities available to students (Wexler, 1992), consciously encouraged difference and taking on roles against gender or age expectation. Examples included boys joining textile or dance projects, students replacing adults as camera operators for official events, or as treasurer in a cross-generation committee. Delaunay's gay, black male dance artist was chosen in part to contribute to its ethos of acknowledging difference; he commented that he enjoyed working there because the children were 'allowed to be eccentric, they don't have to be standardized'. Difference and even conflict was seen as a positive force for change, rather than something to be avoided. Delaunay's students devised posters vividly denouncing how 'boring' and 'terrible' their playground was, as part of planning its redesign, and such criticism was accepted. One popular Delaunay teacher was a firm advocate of competitive games and sports. When we first researched the school, the deputy head was trying unsuccessfully to convert him to creative and collaborative approaches. By the end of our research, four years later, she acknowledged with good humour that she had come to understand and value his approach, while he too had become less unbending about alternatives.

Lange's head teacher suggested that openness to where learning might take children could itself foster capacity, that really 'tuning into children' and allowing them 'to be curious' helped them 'find their own route and their own way', develop independence, confidence and also diverse practice since it became 'quite natural for some children not to like some things as much as others'. When children began playing with and looking through cardboard tubes, staff developed their interest into 'different ways of seeing', introducing artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and Yann Arthus-Bertrand and arranging trips to the city's tallest buildings to take bird's-eye photographs.

Capacious schools focus their gaze outwards, seeing school boundaries as permeable rather than walled-in, not being insular but rather, porous, open to other influences. This understanding has much in common with a 'funds of knowledge' approach to local communities (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2013). Such openness might involve practices such as cross-school projects or working with professionals from outside school; an emphasis on applying learning in different contexts and real-life situations; inviting people in to experience the school and share their expertise; making different kinds of connections with parents (beyond parents' evenings) and with wider (including global) communities outside of school. Sharing practice requires staff to articulate it, boosting their capacity to reflect on and (re)-consider it (Michael Fielding et al., 2005). For instance, when members of the student media crew at Matisse trained children and

staff from a partner primary school, they took their knowledge into a different environment and reinforced it. An external review of Matisse pointed to teachers' willingness to take risks, their frank and rigorous self-evaluation (including the extensive use of student voice), and the mutual support amongst staff and young people, which helped partner organizations feel 'confident and trusted enough to be open about their own fears or lack of confidence when embarking on new territory'.

At Warhol, unlike our other research sites, the general school culture was much more regimented, laddish and uncollegial, with its all-black uniform rigidly policed to clamp down on (for instance) a trend for Muslim girls to wear decorated rather than plain headscarves. Participants in a Creative Partnerships 'creative clinic' developed rituals to show that it was a freer space where they could expand their identities: on arrival, the young men put on pink fingerless gloves and elaborately designed name badges that they had made, and spontaneously began working together cooperatively.

Finally, we use 'capaciousness' to refer to the spaces of education, to the attention given to aesthetics and the material environment (Ellsworth, 2005) – features that are key throughout our analyses. Symbolically, Delaunay's school fences did not just enclose and exclude, but were adorned with plastic pipes for experiments with water, and with an interactive sound sculpture made from old pots, pans and pieces of wood. Creative Partnerships often contributed to an enriched visual and aesthetic environment – for instance, funding the transformation of a foyer into a gallery space with a sofa and four striking illuminated glass panels by Year 6 children. In classrooms and outdoor spaces, teacher- and child-produced artifacts featured more prominently than commercially-produced materials.

Conclusion: of poodles and tortoises, or, why 'creative school ethos' matters

In conclusion, we return to the political dimensions of ethos that we identified in the introduction. At various points we have suggested that the concept is problematic and over-used yet under-theorised critically, but we have acknowledged that ethos is likely to remain a significant focus of mainstream educational debates. Marketisation requires branding, and supposedly low-cost solutions will appeal in times of austerity despite their flimsy evidence base. In response, we have aimed to present alternative, complex understandings of ethos, attending to the 'felt realities' (Fielding 2007) of schools and their potential prefiguring of more socially just social arrangements beyond their gates.

Our methods and data were richly revealing of an embodied sense of what it was like for students, in particular, to inhabit different school cultures. Of all our study schools, Warhol was closer to a ‘high-performance’ institution as Fielding describes it, and furthest from developing an overall ethos corresponding to the elements described here. Some of the students to whom we talked powerfully expressed how a ‘high-performance’ institution felt to them. When we asked them to describe their school as if it were an animal, some Warhol students chose the metaphor of a (performing) ‘poodle’, relating how they were constantly being groomed for competition, exhorted to ‘do better’, aspire and achieve, smarten up. The relentless focus on extracting value from students to contribute to the school’s league table standing was experienced as an undervaluing of individuals and diversity. By contrast, a Sherman student affectionately described their school as a ‘tortoise’, depicting an institution protected (and protecting its students) from the slings and arrows of educational trends while proceeding steadily forwards. The realities of these schools as they were felt by young people were on these accounts far apart.

The vocabulary of ‘considerate, convivial and capacious’ that we developed here aimed to give such experiences the more central place we believe they deserve in educational debates, as well as to try to comprehend the achievements of schools that were resisting the aggressive language of ‘high performance’, entrepreneurial or authoritarian schooling. Changing language itself is not enough and is vulnerable to appropriation, of course. Moreover, the significance of the terms comes from the richness of the theoretical resources underpinning them and might not have the same resonance or power if extracted from this context. We have drawn on educationalists such as Ellsworth, Britzman, Bibby and others, whose writings are in turn informed by psychoanalytic understandings and by post-structuralist theorists such as those offered by Barad and Foucault. As we hope we have made clear, we found these ‘good to think with’ and read ‘diffractively’ through them to our empirical study, finding that they focused our attention in new ways or enabled us to make sense of elements that had seemed affectively significant.

We have tried not to over-romanticise the schools we researched; the rhetoric that emerged in our interviews with senior managers was not always endorsed by voices ‘from below’, such as those of junior staff and students. We also acknowledge that the schools and the students or staff we met in them were not necessarily representative or typical. Nonetheless, dominant educational trends, and indeed the withdrawal of funding from Creative Partnerships, make it important to record moments and places of alternative educational endeavour. So the

terms we evolved and offer here aim to contribute to the capacity of practitioners as well as academics to resist dominant discourses on ethos, and to articulate why and how particular aspects of their practices, orientations and social relationships matter.

One consequence of our analytical framework is that even mundane details come into sharper focus symbolically and politically. This is the case with the incident from the field notes with which we began. There, the adults in the school trusted the children to manage our visit, and the children demonstrated capacious, expansive identities and roles as a result. In attending to our comfort, the children replayed the convivial civility they had been shown by teachers, when for instance they had attended meetings in the staff room. They also expressed a substantive affiliation to the school, a sense that their belonging within it bestowed both the duty and the right to welcome and to consider the needs of others - even of adults in relation to whom children are more normally positioned as recipients of care. The appeal and the achievements of the schools we studied, for us, rest at least in part on the more humane and habitable 'worlds' they invoked and enacted - even or perhaps especially when they were articulated through the simplest acts, such as a child offering an adult something to drink.

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