Introduction

I conducted my PhD research project at the University of Birmingham, UK, between 2017-2021. The project took place in Iceland, where I, first, performed quantitative analysis in 2 schools, at the lower secondary level, and, second – because of the limitations of the quantitative data collected – I interviewed teachers and specialists in poetry teaching, in order to gain insights into using poetry in teaching, the phenomenon of classroom teaching. The research question is: ‘Is it possible to use poetry to cultivate virtue, in an Icelandic secondary-school context?’

The outcomes that emerge from the finding can be categorized with respect to four overarching themes that identify the role and possibilities for utilizing poetry for character education in the Icelandic school system. These four themes are *Freedom*, *Creativity*, *Wonderment*, and *Time*. In a practical sense, the Icelandic curriculum poses some obstacles, but can also be seen as offering opportunities.

My position is that there needs to be a more thorough explanation of the role of character education when running a poetry programme in the context of the Icelandic language subject within Icelandic schools. This finding carries general implications for the use of poetry to stimulate virtues in other countries as well, especially when this is done within subjects that are not pre-designed or designated as ‘character-educational’ historically.

In this paper, I provide a discussion of the overarching themes, themes and sub-themes that were developed from the thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews with 10 subject experts (Guttesen & Kristjánsson, 2023). As it turned out, this proved to be the stage of the research that yielded the most informative, nuanced, and salutary data and basically rescued the empirical part of the whole PhD project. The following is a visual map of the overarching

Creativity

Freedom

*Freedom of the Teacher*

Wonderment

*Freedom of Students*

*from the Teacher‘s Perspective*

*Poetry Learning Materials*

*Slow Learning*

*Passion for Learning*

*from the Students‘ Perspective*

*Vocation of Being a Role Model*

Time

*Lesson*

*Icelandic Curriculum*

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themes, themes and sub-themes that were developed from the coded data. The overarching themes are represented by blue boxes, the themes are represented by white boxes, and the sub-themes are represented by black boxes (Guttesen & Kristjánsson, 2023).

Figure 1 Visual Map of the Thematic Analysis of the Data

The Coding Themes were identified as arranging themselves around three conceptual layers (Guttesen & Kristjánsson, 2023), ranging from the most general (overarching themes), to the most specific (sub-themes). *Overarching themes* refer to the interviewees’ ideals of how the Icelandic school system should be designed and how it should operate. *Themes* refer, more specifically, to actual characterisations of the Icelandic school system, and finally *sub-themes* refer, even more specifically, to the actual state of play in the Icelandic school system, according to the participants.

*Freedom*

To illuminate the general contours of the first overarching theme, freedom, and its two themes, freedom of the teacher and freedom of students, the common thread running through all of them is the emphasis on *action*. It is a term used to describe how one brings a practical and positive difference to others and the learning environment as a whole (oneself included) if one is given leeway to do so. Here, I use the term in the context of educational action, but the same context can be (and has been) applied in other spheres such as that of social action (The Linking Network, 2020). To put this in the context of educational research, this notion is perhaps best elaborated upon through a comparison made by Toulmin between Dewey and Wittgenstein: ‘Toulmin recognizes that in various “areas of research…John Dewey’s insistence on the *active* character of human knowledge is now bearing fruit, and the combined heritage of Dewey and Wittgenstein is giving us a new command over psychology and social theory”’ (Toulmin, 1984, p. xiv; here, quoted from Andersson et al., 2018, p. 3). Toulmin also observes:

Whereas Dewey spoke in rather broad terms of knowledge as rooted in ‘action,’ and did not give us a technique for analyzing action in any systematic way, the ideas of the later Wittgenstein have stimulated a great deal of thought about the *taxonomy* of human actions (Toulmin, 1984, p. xiii; here, quoted from Andersson et al., 2018, p. 3).

In simple terms, this difference could be conveyed by saying that whereas Dewey idealised ‘free action’ as such in school contexts, Wittgenstein problematised the notion of action by differentiating between different action categories depending on how the action is seen by the actors (‘seeing X as a type of Y’). My interviewees did not follow Dewey in seeing freedom as an unalloyed good in school contexts, but rather seemed to come closer to Wittgenstein’s position by aligning valuable free action in school contexts with actions *seen as* the manifestation of creativity.

Thus, in the context of what the interviewees said about freedom and action, the joy of being in school – of being a learner – was expressed *in* freedom *through* creativity; being free to create amounted to what can be seen as the contrast to school boredom. Therefore, elements like *action* and the *active* character of human knowledge are encapsulated in the spheres of freedom and creativity.

*Creativity*

What is creativity and what is its connection with education? According to Cropley, in discussions about creativity and its meaning, especially in an educational (or psychological) context, there is a common core containing three elements:

1. *novelty* (a creative product, course of action or idea necessarily departs from the familiar);
2. *effectiveness* (it works, in the sense that it achieves some end – this may be aesthetic, artistic or spiritual, but may also be material such as winning or making a profit);
3. *ethicality* (the term ‘creative’ is not usually used to describe selfish of destructive behaviour, crimes, warmongering and the like) (Cropley, 2005, p. 6)

These three elements represent cause, effect and interaction. The first element indicates that what is being produced is unlikely to be produced by anyone else. The second element indicates that first the environment (or circumstances) must facilitate creative behaviour and then that as an interaction, creativity involves psychological traits. The environment:

includes the resources that it makes available (both human and material), the degree of divergence or risk taking that will be tolerated, or the kinds of rewards (or punishments) that it offers people who diverge from the unusual. (Cropley, 2005, p. 7)

The third element refers to a rule or habit of conduct with regard to right and wrong (or a body of such rules and habits). *Creativity as an interaction* is akin to a restriction of the kind that these psychological traits ‘do not express themselves in isolation but within the framework offered by the particular person’s environment (Cropley, 2005). More importantly, the ‘quality, quantity and timing of these factors affect acquisition (or not) of knowledge and skills needed for creativity, as well as of favourable (or unfavourable) attitudes’ (Cropley, 2005, p. 7). At the core of all this, Cropley holds, is the human element. Creativity is a human conduct. He proposes that, for a discussion about creativity in education and psychology, it will be most helpful to single out five of six facets in Sternberg’s (1988) person-centred approach to creativity: ‘knowledge, insightful thinking, intrinsic motivation, self-confidence and facilitatory aspects of personality such as flexibility or willingness to take risks’ (Cropley, 2005, p. 9).

*Time*

According to Compton-Lilly, time acts as ‘a constitutive dimension of people’s experiences that significantly affects how people make sense of themselves and their worlds’ (Compton-Lilly, 2020, p. 27). Time, she holds, must be understood as *context*, but not as a backdrop to people’s moving through a linear trajectory along with which experiences are picked up. Rather, she explores:

time as entailing multiple and overlapping dimensions that significantly affect how people make sense of themselves and their worlds. Adam (1989; 2000) situates time and space within ‘timescapes’ (2000, p. 125) in which phenomena are encountered, processes are enacted, and events are experienced […]. As Adam notes, ‘A focus on time highlights multiple realities that all bear on social life simultaneously’ (Adam, 1989, p. 458). (Compton-Lilly, 2020, p. 29)

We can express the notion of *timescape* as we understand the word landscape, and moving through this map of our lives (drawing on Lemke’s notion of *timescales* (2000)) ‘people experience time in recursive and non-linear ways as they draw on lived events and timescales to make sense of their worlds. Individual voices are fashioned out of available social resources from across time as people appropriate various discourses to serve their own purposes’ (Compton-Lilly, 2020, p. 40). From the point of view of education, we see that time is an essential ingredient for flourishing. It is the foundation on which students can build their character and their knowledge. In other words, ‘students draw upon multiple timescales to make sense of themselves and school’ (Lemke, 2000, p. 40). To that effect, Compton-Lilly draws on Bakhtin (1981; 1986) to explain:

how meanings are understood within complex social fields involving dialogic negotiations and unequal power dynamics. Bakhtin applied the construct of *chronotope*, which literally means *timespace*, to refer to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and special relationships’ (Bakhtin, 1981). (Compton-Lilly, 2020, p. 45)

Bakhtin uses *chronotope* as a metaphor for how literary genres come to be defined. These genres are ‘by the chronotopic motifs, or narrative tropes, that authors use and readers understand. These tropes might involve characters traveling along roads or paths as they move through narratives […] These chronotopic motifs are meaningful because of the past literate and life experiences that readers bring to the novels’ (Compton-Lilly, 2020, p. 46). In other words, motifs are created from associated meanings, as we pass ‘through the “gates of the chronotope” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 258) [… we conceptualise possible meanings from stories, by] drawing on pre-existing meanings to make sense of new experiences’ (Compton-Lilly, 2020, p. 46).

To put this into an educational context:

Chronotopic motifs also operate in schools, carry meaning, and have real life significance […]. Promotion and retention carry meanings related to student’ abilities. Being in third grade is embedded with the temporal expectations for being eight-years-old. (Compton-Lilly, 2020, p. 47)

What has been said in the above can be placed within the thoughts expressed the interviewees about the overarching theme of *Time.* For example, the concept of ‘chronotope’ tallies well with the following quoted by one of the interviewees:

I have used poems that bring to light the individuals’ personal experience, erm, of events that they have either participated in or an incident that they have subjected to. (Interviewee 3)

If students are engaged with the time, and learn to understand how it affects the way in which they make sense out of their experiences, poetry can be a medium for understanding how time acts as ‘a constitutive dimension of people’s experiences that significantly affects how people make sense of themselves and their worlds’ (Compton-Lilly, 2020, p. 27).

*Wonderment*

Out of the four overarching themes that were portrayed by the respondents, wonderment, tied everything together, and therefore plays an important role for understanding (and potentially answering) the main research question: ‘Is it possible to use poetry to cultivate virtue, in an Icelandic secondary-school context?’ Wonderment has a unique position concerning poetry and art in human cultures, and therefore also directly in an educational context. According to Laura D’Olimpio:

[T]he arts are likely to give rise to a sense of wonder because artworks invite those engaging with them to view things (including objects, ideas, concepts and images) in ways that would not usually occur to us as we go about our daily lives in a pragmatic fashion. This may be the case because we are usually time poor and/or goal oriented as we go about our daily tasks. Artists often convey, transcribe, render and transform ideas they express in creative ways that present the familiar (and unfamiliar) to viewers in new forms. In this way, artworks invite and encourage viewers to adopt a […] a way of seeing that is open and receptive, which is likely to result in the experience of wonder. (D'Olimpio, 2020, p. 257)

It is interesting, here, that D’Olimpio emphasises the time restraints of everyday life, which we have seen in the previous section and throughout the Findings chapter, above, are also (and always) looming in the classroom. Moreover, D’Olimpio ties the experience of wonder together with creativity, which has also been stressed by the respondents. This is exemplified in a remark made by one interviewee on the use of poetry in the classroom:

It is very difficult to put all poems under one hat, but …, but if we take, if we take, you know, poems that often appeal to teenagers, for instance Steinn Steinarr[[1]](#footnote-1) often appeals to teenagers. And then they [the poems] often leave people with questions that people can see are good questions. But are… And people often realise how extremely hard it is to come up with answers. So, they [the poems] might disturb people in a similar fashion to philosophical questions. Get people to realise that…, even though you may score high on all kinds of exams, then…, there is… [laughs], you are still just like, just like an ignorant child in the face of the mysteries of existence. (Interviewee 5)

When I use the term ‘sense of wonder’ I use it as *Wonderment* in the following way. As a brief point of information, there is a fine and delicate distinction between *awe* and the type of wonder that is referred to as *contemplative wonder* (Guttesen & Kristjánsson, 2023). *Awe* is the emotion of being momentarily captivated by the experiencing of something inspiring, as if being struck by a lightning, and through that experience one feels one’s smallness in the face of the vastness of existence (Schinkel, 2021, pp. 44-45; Kristjánsson, 2018, pp. 144-151), while *contemplative wonder* refers to a philosophical attitude of a kind that is not confined to philosophers. It is aptly described as being ‘on the other side’ of *awe*, as it is all about experiencing the grandeur of existence and the position of Man in it – in such a way that one wants to experience more. Another kind of wonder is what is called *inquisitive wonder* (Schinkel, 2021, p. 45), which is another term for curiosity (and an important element for character education). To state my claim: In an educational context, *wonderment* combines awe and *contemplative wonder*.

Andrew Gilbert proposes that ‘the utilisation of wonder and wonder-based pedagogical approaches is one means to connect learners to content by engaging their emotions and desires to learn’ (Gilbert, 2020, p. 213). As was mentioned by some respondents, this type of education needs to be open to the possibility of some unpredicted occurrences or unexpected (but applicable) suggestions by the students, and that the teacher has the freedom to engage with such occurrences (Interviewee 5). If successful:

These aesthetic connections to content can trigger an intrinsic desire to engage with school content. This process is transactional, as it moves beyond simply trying to pour facts into children or conversely an approach that expects children to build completely on their own, but rather one where the teacher designs experiences connected to beauty and emotion. (Gilbert, 2020, p. 213)

Most of my respondents chose to pitch their answers to my questions at a fairly high level of abstraction rather than addressing directly the nuts and bolts of a successful poetry intervention. A solution suggested by some respondents revolved around the confinements of the overarching theme of *Time*, and how the use of poetry can mitigate those confinements. However, this solution is hindered by considerations identified in a sub-theme, namely that of the *Icelandic Curriculum*.

Conclusion

According to Guðmundur Heiðar Frímannsson, the ‘basic issue in the relation between virtues and education is how best to form young people and enabling them to live a good life suitable to a modern society’ (Frímannsson, 2021, p. 1). For successful education to take place, Frímannsson emphasises an active contribution from the learner (Frímannsson, 2021, pp. 1-2). In other words, teachers interact with (rather than simply one-sidedly mould) their students with a view to shape them morally and cognitively (Frímannsson, 2021, p. 15). This is done by educating the virtues and developing the emotions, which form constituent parts of the virtues (Frímannsson, 2021, p. 8) and Frímannsson argues that best models for doing so have been presented by Aristotle and Kant. I would argue that the learning materials provided with the present poetry programme, although only drawing an Aristotle rather than Kant, aim to achieve exactly the aforementioned goals of cultivating virtues through the development of the emotions (Guttesen & Kristjánsson, 2022).

Out of the four coding themes identified, freedom, creativity, and wonderment are positive. In most aspects, when time was mentioned it was in a negative sense and associated with a lack of time. However, it was also pointed out that time itself was not the problem but the speed at which we approach things. The curriculum poses some obstacles, but can also, in a certain way, be seen as offering opportunities.

In and of itself, exploring other art and literature forms can draw upon and expand the strengths identified through character education in the present project, while exploring character education in an online learning environment has potential for tackling some of the barriers and elements that lead to school boredom.

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1. Icelandic poet (1908-1958), famous for writing poems of existential depth and lyrical beauty. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)