**Henry Caldwell Cook, Creativity and Democratic Learning**

**Introduction and Historiographical Context**

This article takes as its subject the educational philosophy of the writer and schoolmaster (Henry) Caldwell Cook (1886 – 1939) whose work on drama and the subsequent development of a practical system of dramatic learning for children was enshrined both within his key text of 1917 *The Play Way* but also through his widely-recognized practices at the Perse School in Cambridge, UK. In particular the paper will seek to locate and explore the distinctiveness of Cook’s work in relation to his contemporaries chiefly those others who used drama as a form of pedagogy. This will be achieved by emphasizing Cook’s focus upon ‘collective’ learning rather than the more individualized and idealistic philosophies of other contemporary progressives. In addition, and linked to this, it will attempt to situate his work in closer relation to those such as John Dewey who stressed the connection between schooling and later life. This connection included the explicit advocacy of moral virtues but also those attributes advanced through shared and active creative experience within the context of the classroom. Indeed, in commenting just after the First World War on the need for the development of democratic societies, Cook was to advocate for the “partial liberation from the classroom” (Cook, 1919, n.p.) and so, given their centrality to his thinking, some of Cook’s innovations in practice will therefore be explored. The article then concludes by briefly considering Cook’s importance within a contemporary context.

In striving to achieve these aims, the paper will mainly focus upon *The Play Way* however it will also make mention of Cook’s other published works which have to date been un-explored within any literature. In recent times, Cook’s work has been largely forgotten and he has been overshadowed by other dramatic educators including his contemporary Harriet Finlay-Johnson (see the work of Mary Bowmaker (2002) and Gavin Bolton (1998)) and the later Dorothy Heathcote. Nevertheless, when considering his case as an historical subject it should be noted that no less a figure than the drama advocate Marjorie Hourd was moved to comment that, “It would be difficult to overestimate the emancipating work which [Mr.] Cook did at the Perse School” (Hourd, 1949, p. 92). During the time in which Cook worked at the Perse School his classes, as we shall see, attracted international acclaim and coverage and *The Play Way*’s popularity meant that it went through a number of impressions. With the recent appointment of a Professor of Play at Cambridge University (the location of the Perse) which in itself coincided with the centenary of the publication of Cook’s seminal book, it seems the time is ripe for re-examining and re-appraising his small yet highly significant body of work. This significance, as shall be made clear, stems both from its popularity at the time and the influence it was able to exert on later thinkers and practitioners but also the way in which it posited an alternative understanding of progressivism rooted in a more democratic, as opposed to individualist, tradition.

As a subject of academic research there has been comparatively little written on Cook. Aside from two brief bibliographic entries by Peter Cunningham (2004) and Richard Aldrich and Peter Gordon (1989) only D.A. Beacock’s (1943) now long out of print and forgotten study of personal reminiscences devotes any significant space to the Cambridge-based schoolmaster. Although Manami Yoda’s unpublished thesis (2012) does have Cook as a named focus there is little attempt to delineate any historical aspects of his philosophy. Instead, of Yoda’s five chapters, one was concerned with Finlay-Johnson whilst three were more preoccupied with exploring the Theatre in Education (TIE) and Drama in Education (DIE) traditions. Furthermore, even within those works aimed at practitioners and pertaining to the teaching of drama and English such as Richard Courtney (1968), John Allen (1979) and Gavin Bolton (1984), Cook’s name has appeared only tangentially and, even there, has usually merited only a handful of pages of discussion. Despite therefore an implicit consensus that Cook, as David Hornbrook points out, can be considered as the, “first [person] to describe a comprehensive programme for what we now might recognise as drama-in-education” (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 8) no-where is the significance of this epithet properly justified and he remains a shadowy and eccentric figure confined to the margins of educational and historical thought.

Why though has Cook been so under-researched? The most obvious answer would be that his premature death (aged only 53) denied him the opportunity for any late flowering or the chance to comment publicly on the role and place of his own ideas in the modern age. More subtly however, the failure of *The Play Way* to reach a wider and more sympathetic audience could, as Sir John Adams (1928) long ago pointed out, have been a result of its title which clearly had the potential to lead to a grave misreading as to its author’s intentions with the ‘Play Way’ seen simply as an avoidance of hard work and any engagement with aspects of the real world. It might also be the case that any understanding of Cook has been prevented through the slightly sprawling nature of his modest written outputs, published across a range of different settings and often all too hastily assembled. Although perhaps too harsh in his assessment, John Allen’s characterization of *The Play Way* as comprising elements of “naivety, dogma and repetitiousness” (Allen, 1979, p. 8) suggests something of the breathless, spontaneous and intermittently disordered style of its author.

More significantly however, Gavin Bolton has seen fit to contend that, “the key notion of ‘collaboration within a group’ of a class as a ‘body of workers’ and of inter-dependence in learning has not, it seems, been given much practical attention” (Bolton, 1998, p. 31). By focusing therefore more upon notions such as ‘individuality’, ‘freedom’ and ‘growth’ important foundational texts concerned with progressivism such as those by R.J.W. Selleck (1972) and W.A.C. Stewart (1972 and 1967) have tended to downplay what could be understood as the ethic of group collaboration found in those such as Cook. Perhaps this paucity of focus has, in addition, to do with the continued attachment to earlier progressives such as Rousseau and Froebel whose child-centred philosophies were driven by forms of learning and pedagogy which were underpinned by a sense of the individual child, growing and developing at their own pace in their own world. Rousseau, in particular, has been taken by many more recent writers such as John Darling (1994) and Blenkin and Kelly (1981) as the ‘founding father’ of progressivism derived from a particular teleological understanding. Drama too has fallen under that aspect with key progressive thinkers such as A.S. Neill and Susan Isaacs seeing drama and ‘the dramatic’ as a way of externalizing individual feelings and emotions, in the latter’s case using the subject as a means of, “lessening inner tension through dramatic representation” (Isaacs, 1933, p. 210).

As a result of these development, Caldwell Cook is no longer perceived as significant in the wider progressive narrative which gives greater primacy to the development of an *individualised* form of education. In a similar vein, *philosophical* works such as that by Peter Gordon and John White (1979) have given pre-eminence to those more idealistic and esoteric elements of the thinking and writing of contemporary progressives (such as those influenced by Rudolf Steiner), aspects which seem distant to the work of Cook whose concerns lay more with exploring and observing the *practical* activities and choices of his boys. This wider neglect of Cook and the need therefore to re-integrate him into the story of progressive education through understanding his concerns with creativity and democracy, forms an additional important justification of this paper.

**Cook and his Contemporaries**

Such early biographical information as we have on Cook is sketchy however we know he was born in Liverpool, the fourth son of William Cook, a merchant with considerable business interests in Argentina. Following the family's move to London, Cook was educated at a preparatory school in St John's Wood, then as a boarder at Highgate School before entering Lincoln College, Oxford, in 1905. He took second-class honours in English language and literature in 1909, followed by the Oxford diploma in education, with distinction, in 1911. It was during his final year of study that Cook approached William Henry Denham (W.H.D.) Rouse, the pioneering headmaster of the Perse School in Cambridge who had recently (1902) been put in charge of the institution after a successful career teaching at Bedford, Cheltenham and Rugby schools. Like those institutions, the Perse at the time was a fee-paying institution catering for boys between the ages of 11-18. Part of the initial attraction for Cook, whose private means meant that he was prepared to work initially in an unsalaried position, derived from his enthusiasm for Rouse’s radical educational agenda in particular his support for the *direct-method* of learning languages as pioneered by the German linguist Wilhelm Viëtor. The direct-method of learning language was innovative as it refrained from using the speaker’s native language (in this case English) and used only the target language. At the Perse, Latin and Greek were taught through this method by Rouse and his colleagues W. H. S. Jones and R. B. Appleton, whilst French and German were also similarly treated. It was a result of the novelty and success of these techniques which led to an increase in school enrolment, helped too by the setting up of the first boarding houses which begun therefore to diversify its hithertofore parochial composition. On that point, as the school’s official historian points out, “The appointment of Dr. Rouse heralded the greatest age of the Perse, in which it became internationally famous” (Mitchell, 1976, p. 96).

Rouse was immediately taken with Cook’s spirit and he was soon offered a permanent job at the Perse as a teacher of both English and drama. Working alongside those such as Appleton, it is possible therefore to view him as one part of a short-lived yet vibrant community of progressive educators creating and applying a range of innovative methods and theories. Cook, however, remained *primus inter pares* not just for the innovative nature of his teaching techniques but also, crucially, through the ways in which these were roundly theorised within his *written* output. Most important of these was *The Play Way, an Essay in Educational Method* (1917), a large book composed in the trenches of the First World War when Cook was serving in the Artist’s Rifles and in which was distilled the essence of his educational thinking. Furthermore, he also produced a small number of miscellaneous pieces including the *Littleman's Book of Courtesy* published in 1914 (a children’s tale written in verse), a series of contemporary articles in the *New Age* magazine (which became integrated into *The Play Way*) and, finally, the brief essays he wrote to introduce the *Perse Playbooks*. These *Playbooks* were annual anthologies of pupil work, structured around a particular theme – plays, poems or stories – and came complete with an introductory essay by Cook himself.

Following Rouse’s retirement in 1928, the new school regime quickly showed itself as unsympathetic to his progressive ideas and Cook was to have a nervous breakdown, resigning in 1933 and dying soon after in alcoholic poverty or, according to Rouse, of “a broken heart” (Rouse in Mitchell, 1976, p. 166). The date of his death – May 1939 – is in itself symbolic as the Second World War which began a mere four months later brought to an end that fertile inter-War period in which many of the earlier critiques of the established conventions of teaching had more fully coalesced into *practice* with a whole slew of experimental schools emerging that sought to question through practical example long-held assumptions about the capabilities and capacities of the child. Whilst Cook himself did not himself found such an institution, given that all of his teaching career was spent at the Perse, like Neill of Summerhill, Cecil Reddie at Abottsholme, Norman Macmunn at Tiptree Hall or even Susan Isaacs at the Malting House (also in Cambridge) he is very much located in the specifics of place, a link solidified by the archive the school still holds in relation to his time there. [1]

The years of Cook’s intellectual activity came at a time when, through initiatives such as the New Ideals in Education conferences and the later New Education Fellowship, a strong progressive opposition was emerging which sought to challenge more obviously didactic teaching methods. Although as R.J.W. Selleck points out, “they [the reformers] were often as eager to criticize each other as to condemn the traditional educationalists” (Selleck, 1972, p. 23) there nevertheless existed a loose consensus which, in the words of the President of the New Ideals group, sought, “to welcome all ideas that represent the substitution of the freedom and self-expression of the pupil for the imposed authority of the teacher” (Lytton, 1917, p. 2). Cook however was not directly connected to either of these groups - he is not listed in their records as attending their meetings – an attitude that was perhaps the basis for a contemporary newspaper review suggesting that he “does not seem to be a very keen candidate for popularity” (Adams, 1917, p. 61). Whilst his work can therefore be understood as fitting in with those broad moves towards encouraging child freedom in the classroom it did so by predicating itself less upon the development of individual growth and more through adumbrating concerns around collective educational *democracy.*

This last aspect is of particular note given that much contemporary progressivism, certainly within Cook’s native Britain, was derived from such a belief in *individual* development. As one of the leading champions of the New Ideals movement, the former Chief Inspector of Elementary Schools and influential figure Edmond Holmes was to speak of “the particular lines [along] which he [the child], being what he is and having the various tendencies and capacities with which nature has endowed him, is predestined to grow” (Holmes, 1921, p. 64). This view was further supported by the increasing importance attached to the work of those such as Maria Montessori whose system – based around her work in the *casa dei bambini* (Trans: children’s house) and the Apparatus found therein – was tailored strongly toward the specific progress of each child. It was no surprise, perhaps, that the aforementioned Holmes was to be a fulsome supporter of her work, visiting her schools and publishing a pamphlet on her work, whilst the first New Ideals conference of 1914 was designed to celebrate the founding of the Montessori Society of Great Britain.

However, when exploring the particular contribution of Cook within this context it is possible to view his work as more attenuated to a particular understanding of democracy and democratic living than that of his immediate British contemporaries. In that respect, his thinking seems more closely aligned to the work of the American John Dewey and those others of his land whose emphasis instead was on the school as a *democratic* entity. This idea had been first laid down in *The* *School and Society* (1899) and involved active student experience stemming, initially, from physical bodily activity. As Dewey put it, “if we were to introduce into educational processes the activities which appeal to those whose dominant intertest is to do and to make, we should find the hold of the school upon its members to be more vital” (Dewey, 1899, p. 26). Elsewhere within America, other similar experiments were taking place that sought to more specifically integrate forms of *drama* within the curriculum. Flora White’s Home School in Concord, Massachusetts for example entailed, “a great deal of acting out in whatever we [the pupils] were learning” (Morice, 2017, p. 121). Similarly, as Jack Campbell (1967) points out, the work of Francis Parker – itself an inspiration to Dewey – was designed to allow students the opportunity to present curricular material through a range of different physical modes of expression including gesture, voice, speech, music making and writing.

What many of these experiments had in common, and which was to be found too in Cook, was on the one hand an emphasis upon developing a “newfound social consciousness” (Hauser, 2006, p. 12) which was seen as a way to counter some of the emerging inequalities found in urban America. Such pre-occupations with developing a better world through collective thinking and action were part of Cook’s agenda, especially as he had seen the devastation wrought by the Great War, an event which later caused him shellshock. However, these reforming efforts were also to be both mediated and considered through an awareness of “individual effort. Individuals could make a change through their participation in democracy” (Ibid). It was this view which therefore meant that many of these democratic schools had, as a real concern, development of the *individual child* through creative activity. One pertinent example of this was in the work of Caroline Pratt whose City and Country School was founded in 1914 and which was to develop children’s creativity through the explicit use of their imaginative powers. Much as Cook was to encourage his boys to construct the products of their imaginations in actual physical spaces and through found objects, so too was Pratt to contend that no limits should be placed on children’s thinking and that ‘acting out’ in play was conducive to a healthy upbringing: “I would make toys which could be used in dramatic play…play which would reproduce the children’s experience with their own environment” (Pratt, 1970, p. 20). There was clearly a strong sense in Pratt’s school of the development both of the individual and the community. It was perhaps this which led it to be considered in John and Evelyn Dewey’s *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915), a work which, in describing examples of progressive contemporary schooling, referred to the ideas of Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel as being antecedents to this way of thinking. As we shall also see, there was much in the spirit of these Romantic thinkers which influenced Cook.

It is uncertain if Cook himself was aware of these experiments, however in referring for example to individual pupils as a “body of workers collaborating” (Cook, 1917, p. 37) he was consciously downplaying the more idealistic aspects of Fellowship thinking at the expense not just of actual practice but also the self-government of students as a group and collective entity. We have already noted earlier one instance of this other approach in relation to Holmes and his philosophy of education which was designed to foster individual spiritual growth. More specifically, Holmes understood the purpose of education as being to develop “*self-realization”* (Holmes, 1911, p. 151) on the part of the child which was his term for the full growth and expansion of the individual soul*.* Whilst Holmes’ thinking – as for many of his contemporaries - was thereby driven by a particular esoteric teleology, for Cook the real value of education lay in the steps chosen and taken rather than in any final and indistinct (spiritual) destination.

In that sense, Cook’s method was more overtly concerned with wider social and moral imperatives thereby linking him to those disciples of Dewey who, as Susan Semel has pointed out, were preoccupied with “the development of a more just, humane and egalitarian society” (Semel, 1999, p. 10). In the last and most speculative chapter of *The Play Way* – entitled ‘The Subject Teacher’ – Cook similarly made the case for the importance of linking schooling with aspects of the outside world: “education must recognise a closer connexion between the life and work of the Littlemen [pupils] at their desks and the life and work of their fathers in offices and behind counters, and in fields, factories and workshops” (Cook, 1917, p. 356). Nor was Cook’s understanding of democracy solely constructed through reference to the shape of wider society. As Gavin Bolton again makes clear, “any *classroom* dramatization [of Cook’s] had to submit to rules of procedure, election of officials, a system of rewards and punishments, and the right of free speech” (Bolton, 1998, p. 32). In other words, the classroom and its rules and practices had too to be imitative of a democratic society. Perhaps, in that vein, Cook’s thinking can best be understood as being inflected both with aspects of American democratic thinking but also more explicitly older Romantic forms of progressive education including the philosophies of Pestalozzi and Froebel. As scholars such as Kate Silber (1960) and Joachim Liebschner (1992) have shown these older ideas, established within model communities and kindergartens, were as much concerned with the education of the group as with the individuality of the child.

Even in cases where other contemporary practitioners had demonstrated an understanding of the need for collaborative activity in the classroom and the co-production of enquiry between teacher and learner there were still fundamental differences in relation to Cook. This, once more, lends weight when considering the distinctiveness of his approach. His fellow drama educator Harriet Finlay-Johnson serves as a case in point; whereas she was to see students working together as a way of simply sharing substantive knowledge, Cook understood this process as instead contributing more widely to, “the promotion of collaboration and group responsibility” (Yoda, 2012, p. 39). Democracy for Cook was, after that fashion, always to be a “continuous independent identity” (Ibid, 32) which in itself suggests something of the Deweyian view of a “mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey, 1916, p. 101). Furthermore, Finlay-Johnson also saw learning through drama as an activity which should pervade across the whole of the curriculum in a more universal quest for knowledge. Once again this contrasts with Cook whose understanding of dramatic Play (deliberately capitalized so as to emphasize its importance) was the very basis of his system of democratic self-government. As he pithily put it, “the free, self-government kind of discipline is simply a necessary condition of Play” (Cook, 1917, p. 59).

***The Play Way*, Democracy and Moral Conduct**

Cook’s *Play Way* was conceived by its author as being a philosophy that sought to offer an explicit alternative to many of the problems of contemporary teaching. At its heart lay the guiding principle that, “with young boys *the method of study is quite as important as the matter studied*”(Cook, 1917, p. 24) and, after that fashion, his thinking can be broadly understood as a form of progressivism concerned as much with *process* than with any extrinsic or idealist ends. In perpetrating a greater focus on these processes of education Cook’s vision thus rejected approaches to learning whose purpose was seen simply as preparing a subject or lesson for a class to learn either passively or, in extreme cases, by rote and repetition. Indeed, his denunciation of “spoon-feeding”(Cook, 1917, p. 72) carried out amid the “gigantic humbug” (Cook, 1917, p. 55) of much mainstream education served as a more straightforward equivalent of Edmond Holmes’ notion of “mechanical obedience”(Holmes, 1911, p. 3) which similarly saw the detrimental effects of approaches toward classroom learning entrenched in rigid examination and rote-learning. Unlike Holmes however, much of whose opposition was rooted in an abstruse and complex form of Buddhism which he had earlier outlined in *The Creed of Buddha*, Cook’s conception of education was one that was more focussed upon his experiences of *practice* and which understood that the composition and direction of lessons could and would change according to the whims and fancies of the pupils.

This latter point is important to note as to understand Cook’s sense of educational democracy and the ‘collective’ it is necessary to appreciate how this was constructed through first addressing and, then, giving reign to the creative impulsesof the *individual* child. Although convinced that, “the springs of human action lie not in the reasoned intention of the individual, but….in the gathered energy of….communicative desire” (Cook, 1917, p. 53) the heart of Cook’s philosophy, as Margaret Mathieson (1990) has indicated, lay in adumbrating a method that could encourage *self-expression* amongst children. This self-expression was frequently to take the form of practical activity and, in the early chapters of his seminal work which are those devoted to theory, Cook outlines its various elements through a series of readily absorbable maxims. Most important of these were his diktat that “The basis of educational method must be a regard for the pupil’s interests” (Cook, 1917, p. 45) and, following from that, were implications for the form and structure of the lessons within the classroom. Many of Cook’s lessons at the Perse took the form of using a single subject or object as the basis for a series of explorations into a range of cognate fields dictated by the interests and desires of the child. One example, cited at length within *The Play Way*, stems from the simple daffodil which Cook’s pupils could use as the basis for a nature study (Biology), the singing of songs about flowers (Music), the drawing of plant life (Art) as well as providing the basis for an exploration of Wordsworth’s famous eponymous poem (Literature). As he was to write,

“it is obvious that the whole value of the lessons lies in what the children have done in reading, singing, painting, and dancing, and in the way all this activity is bound up with the beauty of flowers, the joy of spring-time, the feeling for music, and the glad experience of rhythmical movement” (Cook, 1917, p. 25).

This quotation is important for a number of reasons and not just because it alludes to the range of activities taking place at the Perse School driven by the interests of the children. On the one hand, it indicates how Cook sought to integrate together various branches of knowledge in the classroom and break down the barriers between discrete subject areas. For Cook, as indeed for Dewey, this served as a key plank of a broad democratic education underpinned by the need to bring it “more into relation with the activities of daily life”(Cook, 1917, p. 25). By so doing, Cook was consciously departing from those contemporaries whose deployment of creativity was “primarily moral and religious...introduced...in the confident expectation that they would raise pupils’ achievements and their powers of self realisation” (Mathieson, 1990, pp. 365-366).

Second, it also suggests something of Cook’s conception of *self-government* which was another way in which the desires of the individual child were to intermesh within the context of a larger group. Cook referred to this as “one of the cardinal tenets…of educational method”(Cook, 1917, p. 54) and it was designed explicitly to place children in charge of not merely their own but *each other’s* learning. Cook was evidently aware of similar schemes and he cites the examples of Homer Lane’s Little Commonwealth in Dorset as well as the Junior Republics in America which were also experimenting with autonomous governance. However, whilst these were either conducted out of “real social necessity” (Cook, 1917, p. 54) or devised as political constructs, for Cook group cohesion was to be facilitated through the aggregate creative and playful desires of the individual child. There was thus to be a reciprocal relationship between play and notions of democracy as one was to ultimately drive the other; children became self-governing when there was a lack of external imposition in the classroom and a lack of imposition was to only originate when dramatic play deriving from self-interest was the chief motivator to learn.

By thereby giving primacy to a method of instruction that was based around free activity and *collective* activity at that, Cook was indicating that education was as much about fostering those elements beyond the merely academic and he was vociferous in critiquing that view which sought to equate growth and development solely with an increase of factual knowledge within a substantive subject. His teaching was underscored by a conviction that, “nine-tenths of the growth of a boy’s experience is going on without any influence from them [the schoolmaster]” (Cook, 1917, p. 44). In that vein, the role of the teacher was seen as one always being present by appearing to be absent, or as he better put it, “an influence continuously operative, though not constantly assertive” (Cook, 1917, p.31). This certainly contrasts with other progressive conceptions of the teacher, for instance those in charge of running Montessori’s schools and Froebel’s kindergartens, who were more ‘hands on’ in directing and guiding the pupils towards various activities and apparatus. It also stands in opposition to the view of Finlay-Johnson who, inspired by Froebel, has been identified by some commentators as being “an enthusiastic team-manager, coaching from the sidelines, as it were, as pupils engaged in their endeavours” (Bolton, 1998, p. 15).

Cook therefore saw his role as the schoolmaster as one of balancing the two polls of individualism and collective responsibility: “He [the teacher] must so order his method that the group of boys under his guidance may act as a corporate body, influenced by communal ideas; and at the same time he must see that scope is given to the development of individual personality” (Cook, 1917, pp. 36-37). One important strategy used to achieve this was through convening the so-called Littleman Lectures in which individual boys were required to present to the class on a topic of their choosing. This was not however simply a passive form of delivery but involved the whole group adopting roles such as chairman, discussant and timekeeper with marks being apportioned by a show of hands amongst the boys. Within this, the place of the teacher was to observe and Cook was keen to stress that to be most effective they should “Let well alone” (Cook, 1917, p. 108). By thus organizing the lectures to include a variety of changing parts, and with the teacher’s voice and input carrying as much weight as that of the pupils, there was much to this that pre-dated later attempts within a school such as A.S. Neill’s Summerhill (founded in 1921 and explored further in Ray Hemmings (1972) and Jonathan Croall (1983)) to likewise found truly democratic systems of governance. However, once again, we must be careful to distinguish between those later experiments and Cook’s work. Often the former, as John Howlett (2013) has alluded, were expressions of a wider political ideology or, in the case of Summerhill, a neo-Freudian view of human relations than they were of a conscious attempt to encourage democracy through dynamic creative practice and the propagation of individual interest.

Indeed, Cook’s commitment to a democratic form of child-centeredness ran deeper and encompassed explicitly fraternal forms of association between pupils and the teacher. This was apparent through the idiosyncratic and childlike language and nomenclature he used when describing his classes. Not only were the boys, as we have mentioned, known as Littlemen but their lessons to each other were called lectures (of which there were different types) all of which were overseen by a ‘mister’ who was the designated boy in charge of the time-keeping and chairing. Equally, an innocence emerges within his use of terms such as ‘sitstillery’ as well as some of his classroom practices which insisted, as one example, on the group chanting of folk song to percussion accompaniment.

Further key evidence for this relationship comes from within the Perse archive’s voluminous and neatly catalogued photograph albums containing Cook’s personal collection of images of the boys in which they are pictured engaging in either drama, dancing or outdoor activities often in the company of Cook himself. After that fashion, we know that Cook liked to drive his pupils into the countryside and accompany them on outings and, according to Beacock, Cook liked “to take out members of his Form in his car…on Sunday morning expeditions to local places of interest” (Beacock, 1943, p. 82).

This understanding of the innocent child was reinforced by Cook’s love of, and support for, pursuits such as swimming (of which he was one of the Masters), Scouting and Folk Dance all of which he introduced into his lessons as part of the boys’ outdoor regimen.

In engaging the boys in such activities, Cook was clearly recognizing the importance of the outdoors for learning which was, of course, a long-held Romantic precept dating back to Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762). More than this however, he was rooting his pupils – literally and metaphorically – within the structures of the wider world. This is important to understand as, once again, it moves understanding of Cook away from just a theorist concerned with the creative arts and drama, but as equally important to that way of thinking about progressive education which saw it as consisting of, “not only the classroom but outside the school community itself, into the world of real problems” (Skidelsky, 1969, p. 22). Although other schools who were to be part of the New Education Fellowship such as the aforementioned Summerhill, Abbotsholme and Bedales were to show a similar interest and embody a tradition in which they “accepted the role of elite schooling in shaping models of citizenship and national leadership” (Watkins, 2007, p. 315) they did not do so in ways underscored either by the development of novel creative practice, still less as that practice itself was used to engender forms of democratic and communal thinking.

What therefore makes Cook unique is his particular articulation of a philosophy of progressive learning which sought to be democratic in the context of the classroom but yet was mediated through creative self-expression. Cook furthered this understanding of democracy – a la Dewey - to include an acute appreciation of the needs of wider society; indeed, the *Play Way* was seen as a means of merging these two aspects through, “making pleasurable pursuits valuable [and] an endeavour to achieve *right conduct*” (Cook, 1917, pp. 8-15, italics added). Learning ‘correct’ ways to behave (a key aspect of entering the wider world and of democratic living) were therefore innate to Cook’s beliefs around the curriculum and individualized creativity. Borrowing a metaphor from his beloved drama, Cook was to argue that free-play of the sort encouraged in his classes should be seen as the best possible preparation for adult life: “It would not be wise to send a child innocent into the big world...But it is possible to hold rehearsals, to try our strength in a make-believe big world” (Cook, 1917, p. 1).

This desire to encourage pupils’ behaviour and personal attributes found an outlet in Cook’s other full-length published work, the *Litttleman’s Book of Courtesy* (1920) which, in the manner of a conduct book(publications designed to transmit a moral message), saw its author writing so as remind its readership – the Littlemen of the title – of the need to “know the virtue of lovely dealing; being both earnest in a true regard for the study of seemly conduct, and active in a fair address upon the several occasions of his daily behaviour” (Cook, 1920, p. 7). This was further supported by the various verse chapters of the book which were titled Of Governance, Of Walking Abroad, Of Table Manners, Of Address and Of Comely Person and whose verses encouraged the boys to, “be of good grace in all manners becoming a demeanour of Civility, nice in the handsome fashion of his bearing, and perfect in all comely ways” (Cook, 1920, p. 59).

Such ‘preparation for life’ was to be found too in Cook’s *intellectual tastes*; as noted by Beacock, Cook shared with Rouse (himself a noted translator) a conviction “that a boy should learn his mother tongue properly” (Beacock, 1943, p. 16) and there is much in his *oeuvre* that celebrated the joy to be found in more fundamental aspects of ‘high’ culture which were themselves designed to prepare children for the wider world. This point is particularly well illustrated in Cook’s reverence for Shakespeare who he believed provided not merely the best way into understanding the subject of drama but whose works more broadly provided “the medium of much learning in literature and in life” (Cook, 1917, p. 221). More widely within the classroom Cook was to be discerning about the sorts of literature that his children were to study: “The Play Way, while giving scope to the natural interests of the boys, insists upon a good standard of literature in their playmaking” (Cook, 1917, p. 271). By therefore making explicit the purpose of particular activities, that is to be of benefit when engaging in active participation in the wider world, Cook was consciously developing the classroom as a democratic entity yet still allowing, in that space, for forms of individualised learning.

However, beyond consideration of his utterances within that more theoretical book, it is equally important to understand Cook’s distinctive philosophy of progressivism and democratic learning through exploring how this was put more directly into practice. In many ways, his efforts prefigured Dewey’s own notion of ‘creative democracy’ in which he emphasized the need for “inventive effort and creative activity” (Dewey, 2008, p. 225) as a basis for the foundation of truly democratic conditions within schools and society. To therefore appreciate how this was also fostered by Cook it is necessary now to look briefly at his own experiments in educational innovation.

**Perse Playbooks and Dramatic Activity**

Although previously unmentioned within any literature, the *Perse Playbooks* (see above) represented one of Cook’s most significant achievements. These were anthologies of poems and plays which were compiled, as a shared endeavour, from the efforts of individual students within his classes. As well as a showcase for the compositions of his pupils these books also contained prefaces written by Cook in which he sought to promote – in his distinct and enthusiastic manner – his vision as to what the teaching of, particularly, English as a subject could become. Significantly, the *Playbooks* were published by the Cambridge publishers Heffers as anthologies to be sold on the open market which, as David Shayer (1972) points out, was in itself noteworthy for it indicated their value, very much in their own right, as *bona fide* works of literature in the process suggesting something of the importance of the efforts of the young.

Good as many of the pupil’s efforts were (and they involved contributions from the film-maker Humphrey Jennings and the jazz musician Spike Hughes), the real significance of the *Playbooks* lay in the manner in which they served as distinctive embodiments of Cook’s own educational philosophy which revolved around the need to foster creativity, story-telling and, above all, *action* within the creative arts. In the introduction to the first *Playbook* for example Cook asserts that, “Proficiency and learning come not from reading and listening, but from action, from *doing* and from experience” (Cook, 1912a, p. 1). Similarly, in the second publication he makes the point more specifically in relation to poetry that in order to understand the discipline it is first necessary to practice it: “If then a boy is to gain a thorough appreciation of poetry, to understand its worth…he must himself try and be a poet” (Cook,1912b, p. 3).

There was no sense that this poetry was to be forced; in various cases the boys derived inspiration from either their own imaginations, suggestions from the teacher or else the material elaborated upon by other students in their aforementioned ‘lectures’. By integrating together the different subjects of his lessons, each boy was offered the opportunity to prepare a talk and discussion piece for his peers. Examples of these are listed in *The* *Play Way* and cover a wide range of topics from military tactics to fishing to toys to the correct handling of firearms. In many ways such examples – which are reproduced in full within the book - serve to compliment the work of the *Playbooks* in that they showcased the intellectual and creative engagement of the young when being asked to absorb themselves in topics they themselves had chosen and been allowed to explore either through independent research or in imaginative spaces which Cook called, in his characteristic play-language, *ilonds*. These ilonds were areas (either physical or mental) in which children were given free rein to create stories, draw maps, describe fantasy images or write poetry, the products of which were often collected in *chap-books*, another Cook invention designed to show-case the work of the children. Both of these are discussed in Chapter V of *The Play Way* in addition to Playtown which was an out-of-school piece of land used by the pupils to build and develop according to their imaginative impulses. Underpinning all of these endeavours however was a *shared* sense of creative endeavour with boys borrowing ideas from others and working together on the construction of stories and narratives.

Although Cook’s language when describing such activities is, once again, typically idiosyncratic it should not be seen to obscure a more fundamentally serious point which is that in attempting to generate creativity amongst the group he was to propose an educational scheme built around the use of the imagination and genuine freedom of expression: “poetry is the outcome of play and not of work. You cannot produce poetry by direct instruction, but only induce it by creating the conditions by which poetry is born” (Cook, 1921, p. vi). The same point was to be equally applied within other forms of activity, many of which such as drawing were seen as innate to the child and which were therefore to be encouraged as part of a ‘natural’ upbringing in keeping with the inclinations of Nature.

Whilst much of the success and productivity of his class could be attributed to the natural enthusiasm and demographic of his pupils, Cook’s thinking on creativity is nevertheless important as it betrayed an early understanding that such work defied the simple quantification which state education was increasingly desiring to place upon pupil endeavour: “Marks are of slight importance in the poetry side of this work. You may assess for correctness, neatness, obedience to instructions, and so on; but who shall classify poems in a scale of percentage?” (Cook, 1912b, p. 10). Whilst such an attitude chimed broadly with that of his contemporaries – particularly those grouped under the New Ideals banner – who sought within schools, “an atmosphere of freedom, in which the self-expression of [children’s] individuality [can] have as free play as possible” (Lytton, 1917, p. 2) Cook’s experiments went beyond this in that they represented a grander vision which sought to provide a solid grounding for later social understanding and integration. It was his hope for example that individual composition activities - particularly as such work often invoked universal themes like love or comradeship - would be an opportunity for students to develop not just a substantive awareness of how such issues had been tackled within other canonical literature but more importantly the way in which they related to aspects of the wider world.

Even more famously then his experiments in poetry and creative writing however, Cook was also to implement his democratic principles in relation to *drama*. At the heart of his teaching lay the precept that the best way toward understanding plays (particularly those of his beloved Shakespeare) was through acting them: “A man or a boy who has acted through a play of Shakespeare will not require any bidding to listen to a learned discourse upon that play, its characters, its plot, and its illustrations of the of the dramatist’s skill in the use of stage conventions” (Cook, 1917, p. 187). There is of course very little to differentiate this precept from his similar ideas relating to writing which, as we have seen, suggested that boys should fully *immerse* themselves in and *enact* the form of creative endeavour in which they were engaged. However, whilst the *Playbooks* were to have a limited circulation (Heffers remained ostensibly a Cambridge publisher), Cook’s endeavours in terms of the teaching of drama were to have a more long-lasting and permanent effect.

This longevity was a result of the formation of the group known as the Perse Players which consisted of a select group of (usually older) boys who would write and devise plays for production within the school. To support this work, Cook was also behind the development of a theatre called the Mummery, designs and plans for which are within the Perse archival collection. These documents indicate Cook’s original intentions to construct both a large permanent theatre as well as a number of workshops in which could be practised a range of crafts including the carpentry for stage furniture, metal and leather work for props and printing for the programs and Playbooks which contained the original scripts. This fusion of artistic skills represented a sort of *Gesamtkundstwerk* that embodied Cook’s larger vision of a utopian community in which the interaction of various forms of individual creativity could be seen to serve the highest concepts of both play and self-expression. Emphasizing once again the democratic configuration of the group, one of Cook’s students was to record that such lessons were a “happening in which we were all involved…Some of us acted, some stage-managed; some looked after the lighting, some provided music; some coped with costumes, and one boy in each group was elected leader” (Parry, 1972, p. 3).

Limited funds were to reduce the scope of Cook’s ambitions however in 1914 the Perse Governors purchased Pendene House, a three-storey building adjacent to the School, part of which was turned into a stage and auditorium. Although then this may have been on a much smaller scale than originally intended - and involved Cook and the boys performing much of the upkeep to ensure costs remained at a minimum – it still served to illustrate his own educational philosophy and set of principles. It was here that the boys performed those plays written and devised by members of the Players. Again, involving the children in the design, construction and production of the plays was, for Cook, not just a way toward substantive understanding but a means of developing and promoting his belief in a creative democratic community.

**Conclusion: The Legacy and Importance of Cook**

For an experiment in education that was essentially parochial in character, Cook’s efforts at the Perse were to receive widespread attention. As evidence for this, the school’s archive houses a large number of newspaper reviews and cuttings relating to this period which indicate the interest that the Mummery theatre and Cook’s experiments in democratic teaching had generated. Aside from curiosity within the domestic press, these files also include clippings from places as distant as Sweden and the United States in which much of the tone was one of praise and support for the work being done: “Can you imagine the boys in the “1”, “2” and “3” classes of an American secondary school…writing plays in blank verse, rehearsing them, making the costumes and finally acting their dramas with so much success so as to attract the attention of the whole country?” [2] Such international recognition - facilitated perhaps by the concurrent lectures given by Rouse who had embarked on a Transatlantic speaking tour including Harvard University - serve then to indicate that the Perse had become, much like Summerhill today, an object of curious fascination amongst the interested and a site of pilgrimage for the believer. Even an organ as august as *The Times* newspaper of London was moved to comment on the, “educative possibilities of the intelligent and human teaching of English composition.” [3] Much of this teaching, as the article has attempted to demonstrate, was based on the principles of individual creativity, self-government and communal activity.

Comparisons to the equally-famous Summerhill are quite apt as both establishments had *play* very much at their heart and it was clearly this which drew in many contemporary observers. However, for A.S. Neill, and indeed for many of Cook’s contemporaries, the concept of play was imbued with deep moral and spiritual connotations, Neill even going as far as to argue that “the evils of civilization are due to the fact that no child has ever had enough play” (Neill, 1960, p. 64). By contrast, for Cook, play represented instead an appropriate system or method by which the young could be properly schooled in social habits as well as being allowed to directly express themselves. Such a scheme of play was not therefore simply ethereal and independent of any *real-world* context and, through his discussion in particular of character virtues and his love of the literary ‘Greats’, Cook sought to ensure his readership were aware of the *practical* benefits of the type of schooling he proposed. In this, there are clear echoes of the work of John Dewey and Cook evidently had in mind a belief in the power of education to be made more relevant for children, not necessarily as this stemmed from the immediate context of a child’s gratification, but as it linked with the needs and demands of wider society. These were to be understood both in terms of aspects of personal character but also the need for a communal spirit impelled by individual self-expressions.

Nevertheless, despite the good notice and interest Cook’s experiments generated, their legacy was not to be carried on. As Gavin Bolton (2007) tells us, “Using this [Cook’s] approach remained isolated [with] many teachers experiencing failure” (Bolton, 2007, p. 48). Perhaps this was down to the unusual dynamism of Cook himself as a pedagogue; maybe it was a reflection of the beliefs of those such as the respected teacher of English W.S. Tomkinson (1921) who questioned the validity of using drama as a medium both for teaching other subjects and as a way to develop a wider sense of community. It was, after all, a result of this type of scepticism which forced Cook into a disillusioned retirement. And yet, despite the tensions within the subject of drama which relate to the difficulty of making ‘academic’ and ‘objective’ an essentially individual subject, Cook’s marriage of practice with an awareness of the need to develop wider skills seems to strike an appropriate balance. Equally fittingly lies his insistence on understanding the work of a canonical cornerstone such as Shakespeare not through textbooks but rather from practical performance and individual interpretation. Not merely was direct and active pupil engagement the best way to fulfil this – and in the process understanding something of the history and development of the theatre – but also as it provided a platform for learning more generally: “The study of Shakespeare to-day should be not only a means of encouraging self-expression but the medium of much learning in literature and in life” (Cook, 1917, p. 221).

Most significantly of all is the way in which Cook’s ideas seem, under these aspects, to have offered an alternative form of progressivism to the dominant individualized model propagated by those such as Edmond Holmes and Maria Montessori. Drawing – albeit perhaps unintentionally - upon the work of those such as Dewey and his followers, Cook advocated for and enacted a system of education in which, “the school was not merely seen as preparation for life but that it was a representation of life itself” (Howlett, 2013, p. 187). This was achieved both through the creation of democratic structures in the classroom but also as children were allowed to be imaginative and develop their creativity alongside their peers. It was this combination of both the collective and the individual that attaches Cook too to those more recent (often) American thinkers such as Maxine Greene (1995) whose desire to, “concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world” (Greene, 1995, p. 3) speaks powerfully to the work of her forebear. Greene’s fundamentally liberating philosophy - which seeks to allow children to express themselves through the full range of human talents (dance, music, drama and the like) - was likewise predicated on the purpose of schooling as being to create a just, caring and ultimately democratic community. Although Cook’s thinking was more naively Romantic in spirit and less explicitly political, his desire nevertheless to have the school become “a little State in itself” (Cook, 1917, p. 357) constructed from shared creative endeavour chimes with later models of thought and thereby perhaps provides a fitting justification for his re-consideration as a figure of historical importance.

Notes

[1] This includes the Perse Playbooks, Perse Players programmes, the school magazines, plans and photos of his specially constructed Mummery theatre, archival copies of *The Play Way*, newspaper testimonies as well as an extraordinary collection of twenty-seven photograph albums containing pictures taken by Cook which showcase the life and activity within the school*.*

[2] *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 30th, 1913.

[3] *The Times*, June 20th, 1912.

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