Imagination & Education

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◇ Introduction

KIERAN EGAN and DAN NADANER

This book is about the roles and values of imagination in education and about the dangers of ignoring or depreciating them. Because we think our educational systems at present are profoundly influenced by conceptions of education that ignore or depreciate imagination, we have brought this collection of essays together. They have in common the conviction that imagination is not some desirable but dispensable frill, but that it is the heart of any truly educational experience; it is not something split off from "the basics" or disciplined thought or rational inquiry, but is the quality that can give them life and meaning; it is not something belonging properly to the arts, but is central to all areas of the curriculum; it is not something to ornament our recreational hours, but is the hard pragmatic center of all effective human thinking. Our concern is not to promote imagination at the expense of something else—say, rational inquiry or the foundational "3 Rs"; rather it is to show that any conception of rational inquiry or the foundations of education that depreciates imagination is impoverished and sure to be a practical failure. Stimulating the imagination is not an alternative educational activity to be argued for in competition with other claims; it is a prerequisite to making any activity educational.

That imagination does not occupy a firm niche in education will come as news to no one. The current era in education is one of prescribed objectives, testing, and technical emphases in the curriculum. David Elkind, in his book *The Hurried Child* (1981), has astutely reviewed the nexus of technocratic pressures that often makes school a barren experience. Elkind articulates what many parents see daily: kindergarten children coming home from their "jobs" at school, arithmetic exercises in hand, with stars or care-bear awards for their performance on accelerated reading and writing lessons (or hurt feelings if they did not perform so well). On Friday afternoons, perhaps, the children might cut amusing decorations from a stencil to round out

the "humanistic side" of their education. For parents worried by this kind of curriculum there may be an alternative public school or a private school (at great expense) that offers something more or at least something different. Or, more likely, there may be no alternative but to see the child through it. A leading social studies educator, now retired, recently observed that the classrooms of today remind her of the classrooms she first encountered 50 years ago, with their tired workbooks and their habit of replacing real child art with cute decorations. In these surroundings, the imagination is not finding hospitable treatment.

And yet the value of imagination in education remains brilliantly apparent, not only to concerned educators but to any parent or teacher interested in improving the quality of education. When we first set out to think with teachers and parents about imagination, in the form of the conference on "Imagination and Educational Development" sponsored by the Faculty of Education of Simon Fraser University, we were surprised by the depth of need that these parents and teachers brought to the subject. In spite of their own schools' push toward the academic "basics," the conference participants felt the need for a broader perspective in the curriculum as clearly as did the speakers. Teachers at the conference met ideas about imagery and narrative structuring in children's thinking with eagerness to find a place for imagination in education.

FINDING THE IMAGINATION

This book represents our effort to clarify the role of imagination in education. We are stepping aside, for a moment, from the analysis of societal pressures that constrain the curriculum, although this kind of study is also needed. We take the tack that, while curriculum development cannot proceed without efforts to redefine and enhance the role of the school in society, it also cannot proceed without leadership in conceptualizing the curriculum. A clear concept of the imagination is needed if the decline of imagination in the curriculum is to be halted. Assumptions about the imagination, left unexamined, can trivialize its role in education. Notions of fantasy and escape, for example, are often assumed to be part of imagination. Although these may be valid aspects of certain kinds of imagination, they can become meaningless stereotypes if accepted uncritically. Media packages, from Disney through *Star Wars*, can easily meet society's need for glossy fantasies. When imagination becomes a fantasy to be consumed and only a

diversion in the life of the individual, it is not perceived as a very important capacity to develop further, and certainly not to be developed during valuable school time.

Brian Sutton-Smith has observed that the idea of the imagination is not very old (it needed the era of rationalism and individualism to precede it), and so its association with education is even more recent. Historically, educators who have addressed the imagination have construed it in limited and specific ways. In its most influential forms, the imagination has been seen as a projection of the unconscious, as creative behavior, as a distracting flight of fancy, or as the imagistic side of cognition. The first extended attempts to discuss the imagination were byproducts of Freud's work. Depth psychology identified and gave significance to the child's unconscious life. In his book *Imagination* (1963), Harold Rugg spoke of the imagination as a way for children to overcome mental blocks and attain moments of spontaneous insight. Rugg's work began in the late 1920s, at the height of the child study movement. Similarly, Frances Wickes, a disciple of Jung, explored the value of projected fantasies and fears in *The Inner World of Childhood* (1927). This kind of imagination, the psychoanalytic version, was central to child-centered education and to the notion of free self-expression in art education.

As the reputations of Freud and Jung declined among educators, so did the status of fantasy in the curriculum. But a close relative of this school of thought, creative behavior, kept a strong following. Creativity was seen both as a state of mind and as a capacity that could accomplish something concrete—like inventing a better spaceship. Rather than an end in itself, creativity was a form of imagination that was attached to making things, especially new and useful things. The term "creative" became so popular in the 1950s and 1960s that it became interchangeable with imagination, and more often with art. The emphasis on creativity, itself a vague term, has left a legacy of vague thinking about the arts, and the inability to distinguish the arts from many other forms of purposeful production.

If writers on creative behavior have attributed only good results to imaginative thinking, philosophers like Gilbert Ryle have seen a darker side. Reacting against Freud and other noted introspectors, analytic philosophers have equated productive thinking with testable propositions, making it difficult to see the value of invisible mental events (that is, the imagination). For the hard-core analytic philosopher, the imagination is at best lovable and curious, and at worst a damaging intrusion upon logic. Ryle (1977) is one of the few of this school to see the role of imagination as a "vanguard of thought," but

he also points to its "silly" moments, calling it an intellectual "jaywalker." In this bias for strict order he follows a tradition begun by Hobbes (1881), who saw in dreams only the random crumbling of waking thought. Concepts like these have surely shaped current assumptions about the nature of thought and helped assign low status to nondiscursive forms of thought in education.

Cognitive psychology is the most recent discipline to take an interest in the imagination. A growing breed of cognitivists is finding a place for imagery within thought and is beginning to examine the manifestations of imagery in dreams, daydreams, memory, and perception. Psychologists like Peter McKellar (1957) and Roger Shepard (1978) have been instrumental in the reentry of imagery into psychology, an area where it had been effectively banished since John Watson wrote his behaviorist manifesto in 1914. Watson's legacy remains very influential, however, rendering the implications of behaviorism and experimental psychology the dominant assumptions for education. After a 50-year gap in scholarship, the discussion of imagery in psychology is still a catch-up affair, focusing mainly on ontological questions (for example, does imagery exist, or is it an epiphenomenon of propositional thinking?). A full-bodied description of the imagination, in its diverse narrative and cultural forms, remains far off on the horizon, as does the derivation (from this field) of implications for education.

Sutton-Smith has contributed to this volume an extended and incisive analysis of the several ways the imagination has been construed in Western culture. (We have preserved his essay as spoken at the conference from which the idea for this book began, because the narrative tone enhances his point.) Beyond his effort to clarify meanings, however, what is remarkable in Sutton-Smith's essay is his ability to suggest concretely what the imagination *is*. The same can be said for the essays by Ted Hughes, Maxine Greene, Gareth Matthews, Robin Barrow, and others in this volume. The behaviorists and analytic philosophers were right about one thing, and that is that the imagination is an inner experience, difficult to observe and therefore difficult to describe. Yet methods do exist. Ted Hughes is a poet and classical scholar, a practitioner of the kind of world-integrating thinking he describes. Maxine Greene is an educational philosopher whose phenomenological orientation has been a crucial point of resistance to the more sterile trends in the field. Brian Sutton-Smith has long been known as an authority on children's play, and has achieved prominence not only for his theoretical insights but also for his rich anecdotal knowledge of the subject. The imagination will never be adequately known through laboratory methods or purely dispassionate analysis. It is a cultural

event, with a cultural history (or many cultural histories, as Degenhardt's and McKay's essay reminds us). It is the kind of mental event that can be best known through active identification with it, whether as poet, phenomenologist, teacher, or playroom supervisor. In reviewing these essays, we find ourselves both enchanted and illuminated by the variety of ways in which the authors have combined clear scholarship with an engaged attitude toward their subject.

KINDS OF IMAGINATION

The material in this volume is rich in images, and it would be pointless to try to compress them into a single definition of the imagination and its place in education. It would be fair to conclude, however, that the imagination is diverse. Sutton-Smith, in discussing the relationship of imagination to thinking, argues that that relationship probably takes several strong forms. The imagination may be a thing of narrative, of pure visual imagery, or of abstract relations.

The imagination may also be good or evil. In the context of Maxine Greene's argument, the imagination is an instrument of liberation. It is a way to "become different . . . to choose against things as they are . . . [to live] forward a little." For Ted Hughes, this positive, liberating concept of imagination is also the kind worth incorporating in education, giving the chance to open new roads of understanding and organize reality within a "large, flexible grasp." Without the continued practice of an adequate imagination, Hughes suggests, a kind of intellectual paralysis sets in, making a person susceptible to mass-media definitions of reality and to other demons. Sutton-Smith takes a less value-oriented approach, observing that imagination and liberation, or imagination and romanticism, are not always partners. Dictators, too, have had their imaginations. When we speak of what the role of imagination in education *should* be, then, we have a problem of both defining the imagination and identifying the value of its several different forms.

IMAGINATION AND EDUCATION

Efforts to give imagination a place in education in this century have been sporadic, beginning with Kirkpatrick (1957) and Rugg (1963), and continuing through to Margaret Sutherland's (1971) work on imagery and problem solving in the schools. Significant also have been Ruth Mock's book (1970) and Mary Warnock's impressive *Imagination*

(1976). What has not been accomplished to date is a clear description of the connection between the values of imagination and the nature of education. With the resources that the authors in this book bring to the subject, we feel optimistic that that connection can be seen much more clearly. For Barrow, the imagination is not an entity in itself, but a quality of "unusual and effective" conception, a quality that contributes directly to the educational goals of understanding and critical thought. Sutton-Smith has stated the case for the imagination in education most dramatically, suggesting that the imagination is the very source of thought. More than a "link up" with thinking, the imagination is a unique form of intelligence.

The question, then, of how the imagination can be related to the school curriculum is rich and potent. We feel fortunate that the contributors to this volume have created connections between imagination and education that are strong and specific enough to speak directly to educational practice. Combining conceptual clarity with practical experience in the several subject areas, the chapters in Part III help flesh out the more specific side of the imagination's place in the school. Roger Shepard, for example, offers a provocative look at the role of imagination in scientific discovery, challenging the simplistic notions that science is a matter only of logic and verification. In a delightful and original essay, Gareth Matthews demonstrates the rich store of philosophical thought in children's stories, urging that we see them for the provocative communications that they are, rather than as charming but meaningless tales. Claire Golomb, similarly, identifies the symbolic aspect of young children's artistic efforts, which makes their artwork more than imitation and gives it strong significance in cognitive development.

The imagination takes diverse forms, and in each of its incarnations it is a distinct quality of thought and feeling, a unique human activity. Through the practice of imagination, meanings are given to appearances, emotions intertwine with thoughts, and the mind finds a satisfying occupation. The examples of imagination given throughout the book will, we hope, not only establish the logical links between imagination and education, but also help refurnish the collective vision of what education itself is about.

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◇ Contents

Part III Imagination across the Curriculum

PART I

In Search of the Imagination