

## Dispelling the fog of myth

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Imagination is a term which induces strongly approving reactions from many people, perhaps especially in the field of education. However, upon closer scrutiny, most people's idea of imaginations' role in education is vague or confused. One of the reasons lies in the vagueness and complexity of the concept of imagination itself. As a brief review of modern intellectual history will show, we have inherited a few particularly misleading ideas on the nature of imagination and its significance in education. In this presentation, I will examine these myths and misunderstandings, and present a better way of understanding the connection between imagination and education.

### 1. Enlightenment vs. Idealism/Romanticism

#### 1-a. the Enlightenment – Locke, Helvetius

- Education is omnipotent and also necessary for social reformation (a fight against irrationality, e.g. instinct, mere habit, custom, and dogmatic belief).
- the conception of the mind as *tabula rasa*
- **Imagination is a hindrance to rationality; imagination is miseducative.**
- **serious intellectual work vs. recreation and play**

"...the best way to come to truths being to examine things as really they are, and not to conclude they are as we fancy of ourselves, or have been taught by others to imagine." (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. II, Ch. XI, 15)

"...He that hath imagined to himself substances such as never have been, and filled his head with ideas which have not any correspondence with the real nature of things, to which yet he gives settled and defined names, may fill his discourse, and perhaps another man's head, with the fantastical imaginations of his own brain, but will be very far from advancing thereby one jot in real and true knowledge." (Locke, *Essay*, Bk. III, Ch. X, 30)

"That which parents should take care of here is to distinguish between the wants of fancy and those of nature..." (Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, section 107)

"However strict a hand is to be kept upon all desires of fancy, yet there is one case wherein fancy must be permitted to speak, and be hearkened to also. *Recreation* is as necessary as labor or food. But because there can be no *recreation* without delight, which depends not always on reason but oftener on fancy, it must be permitted children not only to divert themselves, but to do it after their own

fashion provided it be innocently and without prejudice to their health; and therefore in this case they should not be denied if they propose any particular kind of *recreation*." (Locke, *Thoughts*, section 108)

"One of the greatest of educational fallacies is that the student only learns what he is being taught." (Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 1938, quoted in Eisner, *The Educational Imagination*, p.199)

### 1-b. Idealism/Romanticism – Rousseau, Kant, Froebel

- Rousseau's "nature", Kant's "apperception", Froebel's "creativity"
- **Imagination is an ally of Reason (Wordsworth); imagination is an educational value.**
- **Imagination as an ally of Reason (or is it an educational end by itself?)**
- Imagination – willed imagination

"Ideas of imagination cannot be called up by *mere* association, nor by mere likeness to one another or to what is seen. The imagination is not merely passive; it is an active combining power which *brings* ideas together, and which is at work to create the forms of things which seem to speak to us of the universal, and which at the same time necessarily cause in us feelings of love and awe." (Warnock, *Imagination*, p.84)

"To the romantic critic, on the other hand, though poetry may be ideal, what marks it off from fact is, primarily, that it incorporates objects of sense which have already been acted on and transformed by the feeling of the poet." (Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p.53)

"The Copernican revolution in epistemology – [...] the general concept that the perceiving mind discovers what it has itself partly made – was effected in England by poets and critics before it manifested itself in academic philosophy." (Abrams, p.58)

- "self-activity" (*Selbsttätigkeit*) – Pestalozzi, Froebel

Kantian influence on Pestalozzi (and Leibnizian theory of perception, too): Pestalozzi uses such terms as "intuition" and even "imagination", and "[b]y this he envisages an active power of the human mind which spontaneously brings into play the logical principles." (Silber, *Pestalozzi*, p.138)

"self-activity": "Because man's structure contains moral, intellectual, and physical potentialities, he is a self-active being. This self-activity is a motivating force that compels him to act in certain ways." (Gutek, *Pestalozzi*, pp.55-6)

"The most important and essentially new principle for his time is that of spontaneity or self-activity." (Silber, p.140)

(4) Progressive (child-centered) education: How may teachers respond to the "self-activity" and "imagination" which children bring with them to classrooms?

"It was not enough for progressive teachers to throw out everything the old schools had done, to replace discipline by chaos, a rigid syllabus with no syllabus. And Dewey was inclined to think that many schools had done exactly that and had used his name to justify it. The difficulty was to give an account of the educational experience that would elicit a kind of discipline, an approach to the syllabus and to the authority of the teacher in the classroom that would grow out of experience itself. This, too, needed some further analysis. Not every experience was educational; many experiences had bad effects on those who had them: They might make pupils dislike intellectual work; they might make them less attentive rather than more." (Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, p.282)

"Romantic progressivism was, in effect, a celebration of negative freedom, in this case freedom from the restrictions of the traditional classroom. But it offered children little guidance and left them at the mercy of their spontaneous impulses (a failing of progressive schools nicely captured in a famous *New Yorker* cartoon in which a gloomy child in such a school asks her teacher: "Do we have to do what we want today?"). For Dewey, here as elsewhere, negative freedom was to be valued not in itself but as an opportunity to develop "effective freedom."" (Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, p.503)

- Then, what to do with children's imaginations?

"We are more likely to uncover or be able to interpret what we are experiencing if we can at times recapture some of our own lost spontaneity and some awareness of our own backgrounds, either through communication with children, psychotherapy, or engagement with works of art..." (Greene, p.52)

"This insight surely points to the importance of our freeing children to tell their stories, not only so that we can hear them but so that they can make meaningful the birth of their own rationality. (Greene, p.54)

An awareness that children has spontaneity that is rarely accessible to adults and that children has stories to tell should be different from a conception of education as a matter of spontaneous expressions, having fun, or merely getting excited.

Consider the following:

Brenda Casey in BBC Education Online states that "the magical world of the imagination" is at the center of childhood. Since "imagination is not something

that children are born with," it should be nourished by "imaginative play". By "imaginative play" she means pretend play, active, physical play, finger puppets, etc. She writes, "Very very young children are fascinated by their fingers and toes. Old favourites like 'Two Little Dickey Birds', 'Round and Round the Garden', and 'This Little Piggy' are guaranteed ways of engaging the imagination." She concludes the article by saying, "Remember, the child whose imagination is fulfilled will grow to be resourceful and creative adult." (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/grownups/articles/geneducation/letsplay/printable.html>)

- Some critiques

Sutton-Smith points out that a "keep innocent, be bright and lively, optimistic and wonderful" notion of the imagination is a predominant force in much modern adult control of child life (in Egan and Nadaner, pp.14-5).

"The human mind is naturally and largely given to fantasy. Vanity (a prime human motive) is composed of fantasy. Neurotic or vengeful fantasies, erotic fantasies, delusions of grandeur, dreams of power, can imprison the mind, impeding new understanding, new interests and affections, possibilities of fruitful and virtuous action." (Murdoch, "Imagination" in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*)

## 2. What is imagination?

(1) A capacity to think of something that is not here-and-now through what is here-and-now. Cf. Reproductive and Productive Imaginations

(2) Egan – flexibility and vividness; imagination and emotion

"This essay argues for the acceptance of a richer conception of imagination, which sees it not as some particular intellectual function largely distinct from rationality, but rather as a flexibility, energy, and vividness of mind that imbues rational activity with life and richer meaning. This conception is largely what we have inherited from Romanticism, with some modern influences." (See Kieran's article, <http://www.ierg.net>)

(3) Barrow – unusual and effective; concrete content and context

"The criteria of imagination are, I suggest, unusualness and effectiveness. To be imaginative is to have the inclination and ability consciously to conceive of the unusual and effective in particular contexts." (1988, in Egan and Nadaner, p.84)

## (4) Developing or Engaging the imagination?

Cf. Why is it important? – from Soul to mind/imagination

"The historical phenomenon that engages our attention is the enormous acceleration, beginning in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, of the sense of imagination's importance. We may boldly present an answer in its largest outline: imagination became so important because soul had been so important and because soul could no longer carry its burden of significance. That significance was an assurance that there was meaning in life. No soul, no meaning. But even if soul wilted under the onslaught of science and skepticism, so long as there was imagination as secondary validator then at least there remained the possibility of meaning." (McFarland, *Originality and Imagination*, p.151)

Cf. Froebel's appreciation of creativity as a symbol of divine nature in us.

**Developing:** "Once we can see our givens as contingencies, then we may have an opportunity to posit alternative ways of living and valuing and to make choices." (Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, p.23)

**Engaging:** "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." (Egan and Nadaner, *Imagination and Education*, introduction, p.ix)

"We hear much nowadays about the cultivation of the child's imagination." Then we undo much of our own talk and work by a belief that the imagination is some special part of the child that finds its satisfaction in some one particular direction – generally speaking, that of the unreal and make-believe, of the myth and made-up story. Why are we so hard of heart and so slow to believe? The imagination is the medium in which the child lives. To him there is everywhere and in everything which occupies his mind and activity at all a surplusage of value and significance. The question of the relation of the school to the child's life is at bottom simply this: Shall we ignore this native setting and tendency, dealing, not with the living child at all, but with the dead image we have erected, or shall we give it play and satisfaction? If we once believe in life and in the life of the child, then will all the occupations and uses spoken of, then will all history and science, become instruments of appeal and materials of culture to his imagination, and through that to the richness and orderliness of his life. [...] Unless culture be a superficial polish, a veneering of mahogany over common wood, it surely is this – the growth of the imagination in flexibility, in scope, and in sympathy, till the life which the individual lives is informed with the life of nature and of society." (Dewey, *The School and Society*, pp.60-2)

## (5) educability of the imagination

Although the development of imagination is not a direct function of intention and control (not a product simply of instructional input, personal effort, or amount of information), it is not totally outside our control (not simply a matter of divine gift, genius, or natural unfolding), either. In order for the development of imagination to be a justifiable educational concern, it must be shown, first, that imagination is a worthy and necessary part of educational values, and second, that it is possible for instructional processes and activities to influence its development.

**3. What do we mean by developing the imagination?**

(1) Can we train the imagination in art and transfer to other areas?

(2) knowledge, skill, and imagination

**4. What do we mean by engaging the imagination?**

(1) appreciating children's "self-activity", "imagination",  
= children's "self-expression", "creative activity", "play", "spontaneity", etc?

(2) How can we engage students' imaginations? Is it a matter of getting rid of the methods and contents that once occupied classrooms and lecture halls?

(3) being excited and being engaged

**5. Very common observations**

(1) cramming, rote memorization, training in the basics, etc. vs.  
imagination, creativity, kids' spontaneity, etc.

(2) school subjects vs. arts and sports

(3) What is missing? Why are students' imaginations not engaged in ordinary classrooms? What should "taking imagination seriously" imply?