Imagining the Possible: Imagination and Educational Disadvantage.

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The thesis of this paper is that imagination is a key ingredient in tackling educational disadvantage. To reflect on this thesis the presentation will commence with a video titled 'Messages from the Children'.(Zappone 2002) The children in the video were part of a National Research Project, where over a period of 18 months, using qualitative research methodologies, we asked parents and teachers throughout Ireland the following question:

> 'What would it take so that every child has an equal chance to learn to achieve?'

As part of the design of this national research project we were committed to including children in the dialogue about achieving equality for them. We wanted to design a model of 'hearing the voices of children' (Devine 1999, 2000), that would enable them to critically reflect on their experiences and to apply their imaginations.

We chose 'Process Drama' as the method of research and designed the basic episodes of a drama to elicit the views of children on how to deal with the problem of a young boy Timothy, who is at risk of leaving school early. The children were invited to take on the roles of Timmy's teachers, principal and friends and within these roles to resolve what needed to happen so that Timmy would perform better and stay in school. Over 230 children throughout Ireland – in urban, rural and island settings – entered and recreated Timothy's world.

The context:

As you watch the video it is important to realise that these children, living in areas of disadvantage, are representative of the:

- 1 in every 5 children who live in poverty in Ireland today (CPA 2002)[1]
- 1 in 4 who never finish formal schooling
- 600 twelve-year-olds who drop out in the transition from primary to post primary school
- 2,400 who leave school with no qualifications and before the legal age of 16
- 13,000 who drop out without completing their final exams

[1] Combat Poverty Agency. Annual Report 2002

Furthermore the children represented in this video are growing up in is *post* 'celtic tiger' Ireland. The years of economic growth are over and the gap between the rich and poor in our land is getting wider. Living in these post-modern times in Ireland also challenges us in very new ways to appreciate and celebrate difference. Nowhere is this more pertinent that in classrooms today. In some Irish classrooms, especially in areas of designated disadvantage, up to 20% of the pupils are children of non- nationals, asylum-seekers and economic immigrants. This is new for this Island that had grown accustomed to sameness and homogeneity of culture. Furthermore, the ethnic minority of travelling people have always been treated as strangers in their land.
Today, difference is presenting in a variety of ways. The educational policy seeks to integrate children with special needs into the general classroom. This is an excellent idea if properly resourced. However teachers at times find they are coping in large classrooms with a vast range of abilities, both intellectual and emotional. Differences of class, of race, of sexual orientation and ability are all present in general classrooms in Ireland today, the challenge is how to respond.

Play Video:

In dialogue with these 'Messages from the Children' I will present some key understandings of imagination from four different philosophical traditions. The connection between the failure of our education system to embrace these capacities of imagination and the exit of so many of our young people from our schools can be made, especially if we listen to the voices of 'our young'.

The final section of the paper will focus on the positive recommendations that were made in the research in response to the question – 'what would it take for every child to learn and to achieve'. Here again the children's images, their dreams for a time when the injustice of educational disadvantage will be overcome, remind us that imagination is an essential ingredient if systematic change in education is to be realized.

The four key aspects of imagination that I will examine are:

- The creative imagination

- The empathetic imagination
- The semantic imagination
- The female imagination

I will propose that a developed imagination is a core competency for educators who are committed to tackling educational disadvantage. It is clear form the findings of our national research project that teachers who are creative, empathetic, communicators of living language, and loving in their respect for difference, can re-engage the most disenfranchised youth.

Imagination – What is it?

Imagination is a notoriously obstinate concept refusing definition. Such recalcitrance is healthy as it challenges those of us who detect potential in this faculty, to keep mining it for further understandings.

A philosophy of imagination today must pay due respect to the history of this idea from Plato – when it was first muted – to our present time. Many such histories have been written – I refer you to Kearney '88, Brann '91. As mentioned, in this presentation I will be selective in highlighting understanding of the imagination which could inspire a new liaison with this creative faculty as we act towards the possibility of ending Educational Disadvantage.

In speaking positively of imagination I do not wish to blur the fact that not all theorists embraced this faculty positively. Plato in the Republic, the earliest of this dialogues (382BCE), relegated imagination to the lowest form of knowledge, he uses an image of a line divided into four parts; he places imagination and its sole capacity to imitate and often to deceive at the opposite end of the line to reason. In a different time and place Blaise Pascal (1670/1973) agreed, he characterised imagination as "that mistress of error and falsehood," an "arrogant faculty, and the enemy of reason"

The Creative Imagination:

While aware of this negative tradition my own work will on the more positive dimensions of this faculty and this positive tradition I designate as the 'creative imagination'.

While we might question the dichotomy between creative imagination and discursive reason

in the classic Greek period, it is interesting to note that the Romantic movement in the 19th Century sustained the dualism but inversed the weighting. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, J. Keats and Shelly, all contributed to this very positive tradition.

For Wordsworth (1850/971) imagination is 'Reason in her most exulted mood'.
In his lengthy autobiographical poem, "The Prelude"[2] Wordsworth examines the origin of poetry and the imagination, he described both as "underagents of the divine".
"The Prelude" could be interpreted as an epic statement of Wordsworth's childhood and adolescent journey towards reconciliation with his imagination. Imagination is redeemed at the end of the journey. If, as Wallace Stevens remarks, "God and the imagination are one"[3] then for Wordsworth, the imagination is equivalent to the spirit operating in human affairs. Towards the end of the poem he identifies the imagination with the spirit:

> Imagination having been our theme
> So also hath that intellectual Love
> For they are each in each, and cannot stand
> Dividually. [Book xiv. 208-210][4]

Gradually the poet recognises the autonomy of his imagination, for now he has "track'd the main essential Power, Imagination up her way sublime." [5]
In the conclusion of this poem Wordsworth communes with what Coleridge terms the "primary imagination", which is the "prime agent of all human perceptions"[6] As he meanders through highly imaginative recollections of childhood, Wordsworth clarifies his understanding, awe and respect for imagination itself.

For Blake "the human imagination … is the Divine Vision and fruition in which man lives eternally" (Milton written 1804-1808)
For Shelly, reason is attributed with the "principle of analysis" but in imagination resides the "principle of synthesis" essential to all creative progression.

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[2] I will use J.C. Maxwell's edition of Wordsworth's "The Prelude" (Penguin Books 1971)
[3] Wallace Stevens, as quoted by Carl Raschke and Donna Gregory in their article, "Revelation and the Archaeology of the Femininem," in The Archaeology of the Imagination. ed. Charles E. Winquist, JAAR Vol. XL VIII, no 2, p. 94
[4] Wordsworth, "The Prelude," p. 521
[5] Ibid p. 189
[6] For a description of similarities and dissimilarities of these two poets' treatment of the imagination see Stephen Prickett, "Wordsworth Un-Coleridgian Imagination" in Critics on Wordworth, ed. Raymond Cowell, (London: George Allen and Unwin 1973) pp. 102-110

Coleridge in the *Biographia Literania* (1817) goes to great lengths to clarify his understanding of imagination. Distinguishing between the primary and the secondary imagination he concludes that it is the latter which has true creative potential. In this sense imagination "is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are fixed and dead"[7]

Elsewhere (The Statemanis Manual) he speaks of imagination as that which "gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves…"[8]

The imagination for these Romantic Poets bridged the divine and the human, heaven and earth. A post-modern reading could offer a metaphoric interpretation and suggest that imagination is the human faculty that calls us 'to god' in the world.

While one might critique this over inflated view of the creative imagination or the extravagance of this perception if a unitary faculty singularly engaged in image production, the emphasis on the importance of the link between imagination and creativity should be noted.

Creativity allows us to see things in new ways – the creative imagination allows us to image reality beyond the given, to see "otherwise". Thus the Romantic movement from the latter part of the 18th Century stresses imagination's role in creative thinking. While we may wish to tone down the hyperbole, the praise lavished on this faculty reinstated the association of certain concepts with imagination such as originality and creativity.

The Empathetic Imagination:

If the Romantic period is credited with highlighting the creative aspect of imagination, David Hume (1711-1776) must surely be attributed with linking imagination and emotion. Returning to a consideration of the place of imagination in epistemology rather that within aesthetic theory, Hume states "nothing is more free than that faculty".[9] Furthermore, the freedom of imagination gives it its moral impulse – what is "plainly possible for the imagination, is possible to be".[10] Imagination has the capacity to contemplate pure possibility. Hume sees imagination as the linking faculty between impressions and ideas. Furthermore he adds that passion or emotion is aroused depending on the vividness of the imagery that translates an impression into an idea, "it is remarkable that the imagination and affections have a close union together, and that nothing which affects the former can be entirely in indifferent to the latter."[11] In other words, Hume posits that "those who image vividly feel

[7] Vol. 1 p202
[8] See RJ White p.28
[9] David Hume. A Treatise of Human Nature, Book 1, Part 1, sec iv; p.10.
[10] IBID. p89
[11] David Hume, Treatise (of the Passions) book 2, part III, Sec. 6

deeply." The strength of one's thought or feeling on any matter is dependent in the vivacity of the image that shaped the thought or evoked the feeling in the first place.

There exists a significant moral implication that Hume draws from this relationship between emotion and imagination. This is in the area of sympathy. Without imagination our capacity to feel with the other is sadly bereft. Sympathy implies an interpretative ability, which not only enables understanding of how another feels but which opens up the creative possibility to feel within oneself what the other is experiencing.

Hume writes 'Sympathy is the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination'.[12] Such identification is key to moral motivation. This involvement of the self in the feelings of another is due to a great effort of imagination. This weaving of emotion with thought, this placing of imagination as central to both, is a new phenomenon within the philosophical history of imagination to quote Hume again, "The memory, senses and understandings are therefore all of them founded on imagination or the vivacity of our ideas".[13]

It is important, however, not to overstate Hume's appreciation of imagination. While on the one hand he acclaimed imagination's attributes, on the other he expressed reserve. Although claims of the freedom and the centrality of the faculty punctuate his work, the freedom of the faculty is bound by the 'order and form of the original impression.'[14]

The Semantic Imagination:

It may seem like a leap in history from Hume to Ricoeur but the third theme I would like to mention is the connection between imagination and language.

The work of Paul Ricoeur in the 20th Century brought a new insight into the nature and activity of imagination. Weaned on the link between imagination and imagery, Ricoeur's later philosophical works broke with this tradition.

Starting in *La Metaphor Vivre* he writes:

> Are we not ready to recognise in the power of imagination, no longer the faculty of deriving "images from our sensory experience", but the capacity for letting new

[12] David Hume, Treatise of Human Nature, p427
[13] IBID. p.9
[14] IBID p.9.

worlds shape our understanding of ourselves? This power would not be conveyed by images, but by the emergent meanings in our language. Imagination would thus be treated as a dimension of language.[15]

Imagination is now understood as a fulcrum in the creation of living language. When Ricoeur speaks of the 'semantic role of imagination',[16] he is not referring to language in general but rather to that capacity that we as humans have to create new meaning. We are surrounded by dead words, or words that sustain status quo existence. Every now and then however we are confronted by living language often in the discourse of the poets and prophets in society. Such language sparks new insights and can motivate new commitment to act for transformation. The central ingredient of such language is metaphor and it's imagination that allows both the creation and understanding of metaphor. Ricoeur describes metaphor as an 'overture of language towards the other than itself'.[17]

One could elaborate this point starting with the Greek root of the word– metaphereis – which indicates change or involvement and further examine the metaphoric process which comprises a moment of deviation, a semantic clash followed by the emergence of new meaning – but time here does not allow for such development. Enough to indicate a resource to examine further the important links between imagination and language.

The Female Imagination

Over the past twenty years Luce Irigaray, philosopher and psychoanalyst, has developed her thesis that the greatest challenge for the 21centuary is the recognition of sexual difference. The goal, Irigaray reminds us, is 'to be really two sexes each with its own imaginary and its own order.'[18]

The creation of a world of mutual relations, where differences are respected and appreciated, must begin by allowing the female imaginary to assume an identity that is not colonised by the male 'we must create our own space in the symbolic order'.[19] The practice of sexual difference seeks to shatter the sameness of how human nature has been imaged. The female imagination, an imagination that has been suppressed until now, will be the site for the birth

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[15] Paul Ricoeur, Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Essays on Language, Actions & Interpretation, trans and ed. by JB Thompson (Cambridge, Mass. Cambridge University Press, 1981) p.181

[16] Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process", in On Metaphor, ed. By Sheldon Sacks. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1978) pg.

[17] Paul Ricoeur, Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Essays on Language, Actions & Interpretation, trans and ed. by JB Thompson (Cambridge, Mass. Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 389

[18] Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader,* ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.,1991),p.87.

[19] Caroline Williams, Feminism, Subjectivity and Psychoanalysis: Towards a (Corpo)real Knowledge, ed. Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford (London: Routledge,1994),p.174

of women's subjectivity. In the mirror of patriarchy we've grown accustomed to the face of maleness as the only face that is given public representation in our society. To posit female subjectivity is to crack the mirror of sameness and allow us to reflect the multiplicity, the rich diversity that marks human being and human becoming.

In her more recent books *The Way of Love* and *Between East and West*, Irigaray expands her reflection on the importance of recognising sexual difference. She now sees this as foundational for the human project if differences in all their manifestations are to be respected. Furthermore if *the ultimate* human goal is to be achieved, namely to live relationships of mutual love, we must accept that human nature is not *one* but *two* and human imagination is richly diverse.

It is important to emphasise that Irigaray's position is not a reversion to biological essentialism that simply recognised the biological differences between the sexes. Biological essentialism only allowed the male sex to break its links with nature and take its place as a subject free to shape culture. The practice of sexual difference as proposed by Irigaray challenges both women and men to live into their own unique subjectivities and to give expression to the richly creative diversity that could shape our world.

To develop the thesis of this presentation it is my proposal that our failure to teach in a manner that sparks creativity, that integrates emotion and intellectual development, that communicates meaningfully and that honours difference in all its manifestations, leads to a disengagement by our students, especially the most vulnerable.

Scott Boldt(2000) researched at-risk teenagers in inner city schools in Ireland. In their response to questionnaires and interviews the students identified their lack of interest in school, their lack of relationship with the teacher, the disruption causes by other students 'messing in class' and the difficulty (irrelevancy) of subject areas, as key reasons for dropping out of the system. One could reformulate these responses by stating that the lack of creative imagination in the method and content of teaching means that certain students disengage and lose motivation to stay on at school. Furthermore, the lack of relationships that are mutually respectful and the failure to recognise and accept difference and diversity could also be interpreted as a 'manqué de l'imaginaire' in Luce Irigaray's understanding of that term.

As you have watched in the video, the 'Messages from the Children' concur with these views. The Primary School children we researched were clear that relationships are at the heart of the matter if those who are experiencing difficulty with their education are to be helped. Children constantly highlighted the importance of time spent with each child, listening to their difficulties and trying to understand their problems. One suggested: 'You need to spend time

with your son – take off work go fishing with him.' Another, you will recall stated quite plaintively, 'we need change'.
The development of the imaginative faculty is an integral part of that change and could contribute to an agenda to end Educational Disadvantage.

Imagining the Possible.

Starting as I did with the exposition from the Romantic period of the imagination as the fulcrum for creative expression, and placing this observation in dialogue with the reasons many young people give for leaving school, Scott Boldt(2000), for example, cites 'not motivated', 'not interested', tired of failing', 'irrelevant to my life', it is clear that imagination must be part of the solution to the crisis of educational disadvantage in Ireland.

Imagination permits us to "give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted".[20] A developed faculty of imagination would allow each young person to give expression to their own unique creative talents and learn how to image the possible for their lives. What I have stressed here is that imagination is central rather than supplemental to rationality.
From David Hume I highlighted the interconnection between empathy and imagination. As I indicated imagination makes empathy possible. Many philosophers of education agree. Dewey reminded us if we engage passion and imagination the individual "does not remain a cold spectator".[21] The education of imagination primarily through the arts in the broadest sense of the term opens up sensibility and thereby moments of passionate engagement. Maxine Greene states so well "it is what enables us the cross the empathy spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called 'other' over the years". Nel Noddings claims that "(t)here is considerable evidence that a mature empathy – one that can reach into and feel with others, even those whose physical and moral conditions are very different from our own – may be our best protection against complete demoralisation".[22]

There is a dissonance that must be attended to between the social, economic and cultural background of those working as teachers and the social, economic and cultural background of those students in the education system who are most likely to leave school early or if they stay not reach their potential. It is surely moral empathy that can bridge the gap of understanding. But as I have indicated mature empathy is rooted in an educated and developed imagination.

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[20] Maxine Greene, Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, The Arts and Social Change, SF. Jossey-Bass 1995, Pg.3
[21] John Dewey, Art as Experience (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), pg. 5

It would seem to me that preservice and inservice formation of teachers at all levels should reflect on the importance of developing the capacity to truly appreciate the difference and diversity in our classrooms and lecture halls. However the development of imagination which is at the root of our capacity to empathise, is itself a complex task. Susan Verducci of Stanford University reminds us that moral empathy had a number of dimensions.

1. A moral empathiser (in our case the teacher) must experience resonating emotion of the same valence as the one being empathised with (the other).[23]
2. Moral empathy must be intersubjective – in other words moral empathy is <u>responsive</u> to the needs of others. It calls for a listening attentiveness to the other rather than a projection of what we perceive the needs to be.
3. Moral empathy calls for ‘dialogic conformation’ – in other words a direct verification by the other that the empathiser is “right”.

Finally let us reflect on Paul Ricoeur’s insistence that imagination is central to the creation of living language, which in turn is at the heart of making meaning.
Couple with this, the call of Nicholas Burbules that we should make the communicative virtues central to education. These are insights that would benefit further exploration. The term ‘communicative virtues’ is a very broad term.

The challenge to reinstate the communicative virtues at the heart of the educational task can bring us back to the age-old rivalry between the Platonist and the Sophist. As we know Plato won that debate and philosophy with knowledge and truth on its side, was rendered distinct from rhetoric. In these post-modern times such sharp dichotomies and dualism no longer hold and there is a new interest in philosophy of education on issues of language as contextual and socially constructed. In dealing with the development of talent and potential especially among children and young people who live with poverty and social exclusion, the issue of language is primary. There can be no presumption that the language of the formal sector of education finds resonance and meaning in the context of the ‘otherness’ of life many of our children come from. Far from carrying meaning, our words can sound strangely irrelevant to their ears. There is much need for imaginative development among students teachers and teachers to find new ways to communicate so that the virtue of communication can be developed in our students. I have watched 3rd year B.Ed. students on teaching practice who were initially appalled by the lack of literacy among 10-11 year-olds, However their

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[22] Nel Noddings, “Thinking, Feeling and Moral Imagination,” (In press)
[23] Susan Verducci, ‘Empathy: Emotional Knowledge or Knowing Emotion.’ Paper of Philosophy of Education Society, British Columbia 12th April 1997

determined to find imaginative teaching methodologies that would engage these children ended with unanticipated success - one class of eleven year boys whose standard of literacy was equivalent to 6 year olds, ended by being able to write their own books!

In our national research project (Zappone 2002) both children and parents, named 'flexibility' as vital, if we are to end educational disadvantage. Creativity, which is the expression of imagination, is a core ingredient of a flexible system of education. But creativity is also the core of the ethical imagination. Education towards releasing the ethical imagination enables the ongoing creation of art, meaning and political activity for a common life where we take responsibility for ourselves and one another.

At the end of one of the sessions with the children one ten year old suddenly stated 'we need change'. In another group a child reflected 'You just have to follow your dream'. For education to allow these children to follow their dreams, we as adults must be faithful to the 'ethical imagination'.

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