

## **Imagination in the Classroom: Honouring the Creative Potential of Each Child**

*Through the arts, I see the imagination of children at work. They draw upon their inner landscapes and create worlds that allow them to make sense of what is real in their own. Through poetry, they are amused and touched. Visualization enables children to see, share, and feel safe. Through story, they relate and recall. Imaginary and real worlds are interwoven in their drawings. They embrace the aesthetic adventure of painting.*

Egan and Nadaner (1988), Greene (1988, 1995), May (1975), Warnock (1976), and Phillips (2001), contend that the imagination is not cultivated in education, nor seen as an essential thread that runs through all areas of the curriculum. Discussions of child development are situated solely in the realm of the cognitive and social-emotional domains. Despite the literature in this area, teachers have not internalized the importance of the imagination as an essential part of learning.

When children imagine and draw, paint, dance, and write or talk about it, they are reflecting on a process that is viable and visible. The unfolding of the imagination transforms into a tangible view of how the child thinks and sees the world, making “thought more personal and gives the individual a more authentic kind of participation, in his or her environment” (Nadaner, 1988, p. 206).

My visualization work (Binder, 1998) is supported by, and at a practical level substantiates the literature on imagination. Though I have linked visualization practices to spiritual literacy, the depth of the children’s responses reflect what Rollo May calls “the outreaching of the mind” (1975, p. 120). When I invited the children to represent their visualization experiences pictorially, another layer of their world was revealed. Those who perhaps had not chosen to verbally express their images felt security in drawing their experiences. Building on their experiences, the children were giving new meaning to their world of possibilities (Eisner, 1998; Goldberg, 1997).

Poetry cultivates a wealth of creative and imaginative activities in the classroom. Booth and Moore (1988) write: “Poetry uses especially concentrated and connotative language. The words mean more than the words mean, because the meaning and form are wound together” (p. 18). The inventive images the children create to interpret the poems illustrate how meaning and form are entwined. Chukovsky (1971) discusses the importance of poetry as a painting of words, linking this to how children think in images. Livingston (1984) discusses the qualities the child and the poet have in common. What is significant is the “ability to think in concrete imagery, to make pictures, and to glory in the use of imagination” (p. 299).

The use of quality picture books is an aesthetic and creative endeavour that nurtures the growth of imaginative capabilities. Mem Fox (1993) advocates for the use of good literature and looks at the significance of illustration. “Books that delight the eye first may later delight the ear, the heart, and the mind- but it is the eye first” (p.55). Each child has a unique response to picture books. Picture books provide the interconnection between storytelling, drama, and the visual arts, allowing the child to learn not only language skills but also how to think creatively, imaginatively, and take risks. The “I wonder” and “what ifs” are awakened through the beauty of illustration and text.

In our educational world of standardized curriculum and tests, imagination work in the classroom has been ignored. Part of the beauty of working with children is that we, the adults, are allowed to explore our creative processes as well. Isn’t this what education should be about? Thinking in images is a shared venture in the classroom where the teacher and child can both shape and enlighten their imaginative visions.

## Classroom Activities for Developing Imaginative Work

### Questions that can be used for discussion, writing, and artwork

Imagine you were stranded on a desert island and you had only three things with you. What would those things be?

Close your eyes and imagine what things would make the world a perfect place for you to live in. What would you change?

Close your eyes, tense all the muscles in your body and then slowly release them. Try to clear your mind. In your relaxed state, what is the first thing you see? Draw a picture of it.

Close your eyes and be extremely quiet. What sounds do you hear?

### Poetry

Do a poem a day with your students. On the fifth day, vote on the favourite poem. Xerox the poem for each child's poetry book. In these books have the children illustrate the poem. At the end of the year they have a wonderful collection of poetry and pictures to take home.

Have them reflect on poetry done as a class (written or oral). How does this poem make you feel? What words do you like? What pictures or images does it create for you?

Writing biopoems- using the first letters of the names- like an acrostic.

Using the senses- colour poems, taste poems, sound poems (you can link this to other areas of the curriculum.

Shape poems- these can reflect everyday objects in their environment or imaginary worlds- planets, the stars.

Cut and Paste book using a poem- each child gets a line from the poem and has to make a cut and paste picture. Type the line of the poem and identify the illustrator of the line. A class book can be made for all to enjoy.

### Visualization

Use the books in the bibliography section. They provide wealth of journeys to take the children on as well, *200 Ways to Use Imagery in the Classroom* links to curriculum areas. You can also make up your own guided imagery journeys. These can be wonderful sensory experiences for the children.

Below is an example of one I wrote to use with a theme on trees/plants/the urban forest.

*Close your eyes. Imagine that you are standing on the floor of a giant forest where the trees tower over you, as tall or taller than Lord Dufferin. It is dark because the leaves of the tall trees touch each other, forming an umbrella that lets little sunlight in. It is warm, even though the sun doesn't reach you. Look around you. All you see is green everywhere.*

*Look at the colours of the butterflies. Look at the colours of the other plants and flowers that you see. Can you see any birds? What do you see? Hear the bees as they fly among the flowers in search of sweet nectar and pollen. Hear the squirrels chatter on the branches of the trees. You are quiet. You are listening to the sounds of the forest. What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you see? Stay in the forest for a while. When I count back from 5 to 1, you will open your eyes slowly and return to the classroom.*

When the children have opened their eyes, ask them what they saw, heard, and smelled. Ask them if they have ever been in a forest. Have them share their stories. You can start by sharing your own personal stories.

This opens up a discussion on trees. Ask them what they know about trees etc...

The children could also draw, paint, and write about their experiences in the forest from the imagery session.

### **Using Picture Books**

Quality picture books are a gift to the world of the imagination for teachers and children. The sessions I had with the Grade 3 class demonstrated the depth of perception and understanding children have.

On the first day, I began by asking them what is the imagination. We listed the ideas on chart paper. I read them *Willy and the Dreamer*. I then asked them if there was anything else to add to the list. This session took about 45-50 minutes.

On the second day, I read *Imagine a Night* without showing them the pictures. I had quiet music playing. We talked about what they envisioned from the words. I then reread the book showing them the pictures. We discussed the artwork and what the artist was trying to with his paintings. This moved into ideas for their own class book - *Imagine a...* the teacher extended this after I left and the class came up with their idea. The book was to be done in watercolours. Each child would do a picture and write the accompanying text. This session went almost an hour.

The Grade 3 teacher worked with the children on the watercolours. She had a Grade 8 student who was skilled in art assist with small groups, showing them how to use the watercolours. The children first experimented with them before doing their pictures. The text emerged from the paintings, very much like the Gonsales' book.

Once the book was finished I returned to the classroom. I read *Imagine a Night* once more. Following this I read their book. Their eyes were filled with wonder and pride over the work they had done.

There are many different ways one could use picture books. My experiences has taught me that using the arts to allow children to retell, reinvent, or express their own vision of a book becomes deeply personal and meaningful They really begin to see the "I wonder" and "the what ifs."

## Mixed-Up School

X. J. Kennedy

We have a crazy mixed-up school.  
Our teacher Mrs. Cheetah  
Makes us talk backwards. Nicer cat  
You wouldn't want to meet a.

To start the day we eat our lunch,  
Then do some heavy dome-work.  
The boys' and girls' room go to us,  
The hamster marks our homework.

At recess time we race outside  
To put on diving goggles,  
Play pin-the-donkey-on the-tail,  
Ball-foot or ap-for-bobbles.

Old cheetah, with a chunk of chalk,  
Writes right across two blackbirds,  
And when she says, "Go home!" we walk  
The whole way barefoot backwards.

## "I," Says the Poem

Eve Merriam

"I," says the poem matter-of-factly,  
"I am a cloud,  
I am a tree.

I am a city,  
I am the sea,

I am a golden  
Mystery."

*But, adds the poem silently,  
I cannot speak until you come.  
Reader, come, come with me.*

## **The Universe**

**Mary Britton Miller**

There is the moon, there is the sun  
Round which we circle every year,  
And there are all the stars we see  
On starry nights when skies are clear,  
And all the countless stars that lie  
Beyond the reach of human eye.  
If every bud on every tree,  
All birds and fireflies and bees  
And all the flowers that bloom and die  
Upon the earth were counted up  
The number of the stars would be  
greater, they say, than all of these.

## **I'd Like to Squeeze**

**John Agard**

I'd like to squeeze this round world  
into a new shape

I'd like to squeeze this round world  
like a tube of toothpaste

I'd like to squeeze this round world  
fair and square

I'd like to squeeze it and squeeze it  
till everybody had an equal share.

Butterflies dancing through falling snow!  
What a wonderful sight it would be!

Haiku, Demaru

### **The Question**

**Karla Kuskin**

People always say to me  
"What do you think you'd like to be  
When you grow up?"  
And I say "Why,  
I think I'd like to be the sky  
Or be a plane or train or mouse  
Or maybe be a haunted house  
Or something furry, rough and wild...  
Or maybe I will stay a child."

### **The Voice**

**Shel Silverstein**

There is a voice inside of you  
That whispers all day long,  
"I feel that this is right for me.  
I know that *this* is wrong."  
No teacher, preacher, parent, friend  
Or wise man can decide  
What's right for you- just listen to  
The voice that speaks inside.

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