Imagination, Education, and Guided Fantasy:

Research and Theory in Imagination in the Classroom

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Opening up one’s mind to possibilities, alternative outcomes and consequences, and the idea that not everything has to be based in reality to find truth in something is the result of cultivating an expansive and flexible imagination. Imagination in the educational setting allows for children, both younger and older, to explore different aspects of their thoughts, ideas, and solutions. Whether the imagination is an intrapersonal experience (solitary, solely in one’s mind) or a social moment (group collaboration, combining of different imaginative ideas), it brings with it a rejuvenation of thought and problem solving. Encouraging imagination and creative thought in the classroom permits the students to think more abstractly; emboldens them to take more innovative academic and intellectual risks; and fosters a better understanding of their environments and the world. Imagination is integral to the classroom for both the teacher and students as it is the basis for creativity, educational capabilities, and social connectivity. This paper will discuss two research papers and one anecdotal article, in conjunction with an educational theory and my personal views, to communicate the importance of educational imagination.

Amy Rosoff’s article (2007) for *The English Journal* uses anecdotal stories and research findings to communicate the power of imagination in the classroom for both the students and the teacher. Rosoff writes about how imagination allows for more freedom in thinking and “encourages students to take risks and experiment” (p. 59). Additionally, imagination lessens the stress of producing a right answer through the “task (focusing) on inventing and expressing wild ideas, rather than on producing the right words or structure” (p. 59). With her in-classroom examples, Rosoff provides the opportunity for teachers to see how enriching imagination can be in a lesson and how it can open students up to newer thoughts or a better understanding of a concept. She also discusses how imaginative-play can help children both “escape from reality” and prepare for it (p. 62). Rosoff’s article makes clear the critical role education can have in the classroom and the importance of it for understanding the students.

Angela Eckhoff and Jennifer Urbach (2008) choose to “illuminate on (Lev) Vygotsky’s theoretical conceptions of imagination” (p. 2) and the usefulness of teaching students creative thinking in their paper. The authors discuss that “imagination is not isolated from our daily experiences; it involves our daily activities and is a complex process that depends on experience” (p. 3) and that imagination changes as people age and mature. Eckhoff and Urbach state that teachers should prepare students to be problem-solvers who have “capabilities to explore difficult problems and issues in new and innovative ways” (p. 7) through nurturing the students’ imagination and thoughts. Vygotsky’s four laws of imagination are majorly emphasized in the paper and explained through observed examples that exemplify each law. The paper ultimately leads to using imagination in practice and using it to “empower children to develop … a contributing part of their repertoire for understanding and contributing to their worlds” (p. 7).

Lev Vygotsky’s four laws of imagination are, as cited by Eckhoff and Urbach, rooted in the complex relationship between imagination and reality (p. 3). The first law is that the created products of imagination always come from some basis of one’s life experiences (p. 3). The main point of the first law is that imagination combines different experiences rather than replicating reality. The second law is that social experiences of others can be used in imagination, meaning that group experiences or hearing about someone’s experience can influence one’s imagination (p. 3). The third law is the connection of emotions to both reality and imagination, with the connection being a mutual dependence (p. 4). The final law dictates that imagination is a building block for a new product or invention, or “how imagination becomes reality” (p. 4). These four laws solidify a basic understanding and approach to imagination in relation to educational theory and practice. Knowing that imagination comes from experience, both personal and social, is dependent on emotion, and ultimately results in something new allows for the teachers to see how imagination can help them better understand a student or to encourage a student to be innovative.

In his paper (n.d.), Gadi Alexander analyzes the importance of understanding both the individual thinker and the availability for imagination to be a group experience. Alexander proposes the idea that philosophers and psychologist focus too much on the belief that imagination is a “faculty of process that is confined to within the mind of the individual thinker” (p. 1) and do not allow for more social imagination. His research indicates that imagination is not a wholly individual process as it is influenced by “social denotations and connotations” (p. 5) and one cannot imagine in a “vacuum” (p. 3) with no outside stimulus. Alexander views imagination as a profound tool for “making sense of the world and recreating it” (p. 10), but as a sensitive resource as “imaginative thoughts of an individual tend to disappear if social climate is not ripe enough” (p. 4). He also mentions the two types imagination intersection: guided fantasy and brainstorming, with his overall emphasis being on guided fantasy.

Guided fantasy is a fantastic way to get one’s students to relax and think deeply. Guided fantasy consists of setting parameters for the students’ imagination, not in a way to limit them, but to better focus and guide them in a thought. An example would be having one’s students imagine they are running and telling them they come across an animal during their run. By asking the students where they were running (in the park, on a treadmill, in the woods) and which animal they saw (a dog, a squirrel, a mountain lion), one can help the students analyze some thoughts that may have come from their imagination (What could the setting mean for the student? What does the animal symbolize to him or her?).

If a teacher tells the students that what the students see will remain private, he or she allows the students to truly let themselves embrace the fantasy and discover something through their imagination- whether that is something relating to their stresses, their desires, or their goals. As Alexander states, “…openness to listening, examining, accepting, and relating to [the student’s] ideas will play a part in the kinds of thoughts that will be generated” (p. 3), meaning that the teacher can effectively guide the students in their imagination to reach relevant conclusions. The guided fantasy technique shows that “the most imaginative and original ideas can be generated within the mind of each of the participants” (p. 7). While guided fantasy cannot be consistently used in the classroom, as it could become something the students no longer considered seriously, it could be used occasionally to help students come to conclusions and solutions about situations. This flexible imagination tool could easily be applied to leading students to problem solve and become creative thinkers.

While curriculum and stringent educational goals are positives in organizing a classroom and creating lesson plans, imagination gives more accessibility to lessons and more room for students to grow in learning, experimenting, and communicating. Whether students can express their imagination through words, movement, art, or any other medium, the importance is that the students are able to create something from their imagination. Using imaginative play to help students feel more comfortable to express their ideas in “safe” pretend format enables them freedom to answer without fear of judgment or being wrong because they are “pretending”. Through imagination, both the practice and discussion of it, come better teacher-student relationships and more engagement and participation from students. With imagination in the educational setting, the teachers can foster more innovative ways to teach, illustrate, or explain a lesson. Furthermore, imagination connects to something more internal to the student, which gives students a more concrete, and yet abstract, way of thinking of things, situations, and reality. Imagination may not hold all the answers to improving students’ performances or motivating students to learn, but it does give both the teacher and the student a way of thinking outside of the classroom and reality- a way of thinking that allows for imagination to reveal a reality and to better understand and learn from it.

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