Research Review: Children's Imagination

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1. The importance of a child's imagination and the need to challenge it

Children's imagination knows no bounds, but can become constrained as their knowledge and understanding of the world increases. For a young child, flying to the moon seems just as possible as a trip to the shops.

It is this imagination that is responsible for many of the great discoveries and inventions of the world. Heckscher (1966:98)[1] states "in every great discovery there has always been somewhere along the line a creative act, a leap of imagination". It's therefore important to cherish and nurture children's imagination, both for its own ends and its correlation with cognitive development.

It is crucial to challenge children's imagination in order to educate the youth of today on how to use their imagination effectively. Educating children promotes "children's ability to explore and comprehend their world and increases their opportunities to make new connections and reach new understanding… they are freed from the world of immediate sensations" (Duffy 2006:9)[2].

Boredom is one way of challenging a child's imagination. Children who are sometimes allowed to get bored are forced to use their innate imagination in order to find their own entertainment. This develops logical thinking, allowing children to analyse, evaluate and create for themselves. This can be achieved by providing children with opportunities to use and develop their imagination in play. Children who use their imagination effectively will be able to role play better and at a young age, will use their imagination as a way to escape from, as well as making sense of their reality.

"Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand." (Albert Einstein).[3]

There are two known types of imagination: Imitative imagination and creative imagination. Imitative imagination is when people use the information they have experienced to recreate

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[1] Heckscher, A. (1966). 'The Child's world: today and tomorrow'. IN Lewis, S. (ed). Child Art at the
[2] Duffey, B. (2006). Supporting Creativity and Imagination in Early Years. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education. Open University Press.
[3] Available at: http://www.imaginalinstitute.com/imaginequotes.htm.

roles or events but they add their own personal views. On the other hand creative imagination involves mental imagery or photos which children use to construct events that they have never experienced. E.g. thinking about going to the moon, most of us have not been to the moon, so using photographs of the moon, space, astronauts help construct the event of rocketing up to the moon.

Imagination can help us make sense of the real world. Imagining what the other side of a wall might look like can help us to predict what is around the corner, and thus be prepared for whatever we encounter. Imagining ourselves in a happy, successful place can help identify issues with our current situation. Imagining what it would be like to be in someone else's position develops empathy. As Paul Harris explains, "The imagination is absolutely vital for contemplating reality, not just those things we take to be mere fantasy."[4]

Challenging children's imagination and encouraging them to 'use it or lose it' can help develop resilience and act as a buffer to mental health issues in later life.

2. The effects that imagination has on a child in their later years

The primary Strategy, Excellence and Enjoyment states that "promoting creativity is a powerful way of engaging pupils with their learning" (Dress 2003:3.27)[5]. We need to allow children to use their imagination otherwise they will not develop into wise, smart adults. Imagination "comes from the human ability to play, and civilisation rests on this ability" (Duffy 2006: 13). If we do not allow children to be imaginative then we will not be able to cope with new ideas and there will be no progression in life and in ideas.

Zhao (2009)[6] looked at the impact of imagination-focused visualisation on the evaluation of new products. It was concluded that participants who were in the imagination-focused conditions came up with more usage for the product than those participants in the memory-focused group. The findings are in line with the expectation that the imaginative-focused group rely on previous experiences in order to help formulate new ideas.

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[4] Paul Harris- Harvard Graduate School of Education. from Wang, S. (2009). 'The power of magic thinking'. The Wall Street Journal. Last Accessed 12/03/14.
http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703344704574610002061841322
[5] Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2003) Excellence and Enjoyment: A Strategy for Primary Schools. London: DfES.
[6] Zhao, M. & Hoeffler, S. & Darren, D. (2009). 'The Role of Imagination-Focused Visualisation on New Product Evaluation'. Journal of Marketing Research.46 (1). pp 45-55.

Allowing children to use their imagination at an early age will equip them with skills that they can use in adult life, making them flexible and successful. (Thomson 1994)[7]. Additionally, Berman (2009:255)[8] found that there is a strong link between reliance and creative imagination, suggesting that imagination helps transform aspirations into goals for change. Thus if children learn to use their imagination at a young age then they can transfer this skill in later life and when faced with any problems then can 'bounce' back. Moreover, Cohler (1987)[9] found that creative exploration leads to more resilient people as they can think in alternative ways.

The long-term effects of not engaging in imaginative or free play can be far reaching. High-quality pretend play is an important facilitator of perspective taking and later abstract thought[10]and so absence of such play would be expected to negatively impact these abilities and compromise the development of a Theory of Mind

Research in this field advanced rapidly in the early 1970s but the complexity of the subject has made it difficult to identify causal links. However, various researchers have linked a lack of imaginative play to long term impairments such as empathy and social development, cognitive reasoning and problem solving, abstract thought and even communication skills.

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[7] Thomson, J. (1994). Natural Childhood. New York: Simon and Schuster.
[8] Berman, K.S. (2009). Agency, imagination and resilience; facilitating social change through the usual arts in South Africa'. Johannesburg. pp 1-316.
[9] Cohler, B.J. (1987). Adversity, resilience and the study on lives. IN Anthony, E.J. & Cohler, B.J. The Vulnerable Child. pp 363-424. New York: Guilford Press.
[10] The Role of Pretend Play in Children's Cognitive Development. **Doris Bergen** Miami University as seen at http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/bergen.html

3. The role of parents and guardians with a child's imagination

Parents can model play with children by demonstrating what do, this enhances children's creative and imaginative skills. Parents can ask open-ended questions to give children a chance to think about what they are doing.

There are two different approaches that parents can take. Non-Interventionists hold the view that parents should not be directly involved in children's imaginative processes, whilst Interventionists believe that parents should interact with children and develop their learning process. However, Richardson believed that children needed to be self-expressive and they cannot exercise this right if parents are hindering their imaginative development. It was concluded that adults intervening in children's imaginative processes could destroy children's aural creativity and imagination, as their views would be indoctrinated onto the children. (Duffy 2006).

Piaget is a firm believer that the adult role in children's imagination and creativity is supervisory rather than interactive. This can be achieved by providing a stimulating environment and identifying stages that the child has reached and thinking of ways that can challenge children, by providing a range of experiences. However, an opposing view is given by Kindler (1995) who observed children in a daycare setting. It was found that although a range of materials were presented and available children did not take advantage of these and it was only with the presence and interaction of an adult that children became engaged and started to explore. Kindler therefore concluded that adult input is essential.

Vygotsky (1978) stresses the importance of adults supporting children through scaffolding their communicative skills. When children have made up a play or made up a song they usually want to share their imaginative representations with caregivers. Children have their actual level of development and their potential level of development, which is the scaffolding process; the competent learner (adult) is supporting children in reaching the next level of their development. This is called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Parents or guardians need to be empathetic towards children and offer secure relationships with their children so a safe environment is created, enabling children to freely express themselves. The role of a parent or guardian is to be able to judge a situation and know when to intervene and when to take a step back and just encourage and inspire children. Parent/guardians can support a child's imagination by being a facilitator, letting children learn

through self-discovery rather than interfering and telling children what to do. The most important thing a parent or guardian can do is to be committed and available for children by appearing engaged and interested.

Parents can enhance children's imaginative development by not always giving them answers to everything they ask, instead, it's beneficial for children to try and think about their own answers. This is especially beneficial when discussing issues of faith or hypothetical situations where there is no absolute answer.

Parents can encourage imagination with joint story time - the parent can start a story and then each child can continue it - the game fortunately/unfortunately is a good introduction to this.

It's also good for children to hear their parents say they don't know the answers to something - they can then encourage their children to imagine an answer - even something simple as I wonder what Granny will have cooked us for tea when we get there can prompt an imaginative discussion that can be as plausible or as implausible as you like. It all still helps develop a child's imagination skills.

Using imaginative language can also help. Phrases such as "I wonder what…." or "Imagine if…" can help children think more imaginatively and incorporate hypothetical or fantasy ideas into their every day lives.

4. What the future holds in the world of a child's imagination

Due to the unpredictable nature of the world we live in, we need to be self-directed and to achieve this we need to be able to use our imagination effectively. Imagination allows society to deal with the unexpected events and situations, handle new information, think flexibly and produce new ideas (Craft 2001)[11], all of which is becoming increasingly relevant in this fast-paced, changeable world.

With many schools now recognising that they need to prepare students for jobs that have not yet been created, the role of imagination becomes increasingly important. Calouste Gulbenkian (1982)[12] explains that "Imagination provides opportunity to develop a full range of human

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Craft, A. (2001). 'Little creativity'. IN Craft, A. & Jeffery, B. & Leibling, M. (eds). Creativity in Education. London: Continuum.

[12]

potential: Improve capacity for thought, action and communication; Nurture feelings; Extend physical skills; Explore values; and Understand cultures."

Many people believe children's imagination is under threat from technology and the characteristics of modern family life. Gone are the halcyon days of going out after breakfast and playing freely outside until dinner. But it doesn't need to be all doom and gloom. When used effectively technology can enhance imagination, introducing children to new concepts in an interactive, engaging way. Children's imagination can be extended by understanding technology as they are able to develop apps and programmes that seem to be limited only by imagination. The digital world offers different, but not necessarily lesser opportunities for challenging children's imagination.

Concepts such as augmented reality and interactive apps can stimulate a child's imagination and engage him/her with ideas that they simply would not have thought about without the technological prompt. The seemingly limitless possibilities of technology also stimulate the imagination as children are encouraged, even in factual subjects such as science and engineering, to think of things that are not yet possible. Advances such as automatic cars, renewable energy, space tourism are all easily imaginable, but lead children to thinking about what else could be possible. Young children's imagination is much less constrained by reality and by nurturing this; we could be producing the next great inventors.

Calouste Gulbenkian. (1982). The Arts in School. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.