Literacy and the lost world of the imagination

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Summary

This paper examines English teachers’ understanding of the imagination and how they think it is developed in the classroom. A small sample of Heads of English from East and West Sussex secondary comprehensive schools in the south-east of England were interviewed. Findings are analysed in light of relevant approaches to English teaching over the past century. A complex picture emerges. Teachers’ descriptions of the imagination are clearly redolent of Romantic ideas and development of the imagination was expressed as crucial in English teaching. Yet, paradoxically, developing the imagination is no longer seen as a central pedagogic concern. Other influences dominate classroom practice. Assessment of National Curriculum requirements, English teaching conceived as a series of discrete skills and the changing status of the mass media in the curriculum have, it is argued, all contributed to a shift of emphasis. Developing the imagination has been sidelined. Furthermore, innovative approaches from a tradition of English teaching have been occluded. A school culture conducive to imaginative work, together with a clear pedagogy, are now imperative. Additionally, professional insecurity is one of the consequences for teachers dislocated from the subject’s history by other demands. The paper concludes that a re-examination of an earlier tradition of English teaching is needed, but one that recasts that tradition to find new understandings for developing the imagination in the classroom.

Keywords: imagination, literacy, pedagogy, tradition, English teaching

Introduction

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower,
Drives my green age. (Dylan Thomas)

A mist envelops the landscape of the imagination in English teaching – one that is so dense in places that teachers may no longer see clearly how to extend the
imagination in the practical teaching of their subject. In our postmodern era, has this mist become so thick that it obscures developing imagination in English altogether?

In this paper, I examine a small sample of English teachers’ responses to questions about the imagination and explore how it relates to the place of imagination in the history of English teaching. Over a decade since the introduction of the National Curriculum and other government interventions, culminating in the National Literacy Strategy in primary schools, what do English teachers believe about developing the imagination?

The imagination: a tradition for teaching English

First, what is the imagination? An adequate answer is obviously far too broad for the scope of this paper. Here, I simply wish to point to a few key figures whose ideas ignited a force driving through the green fuse of English teaching over the last century.

Hume (1711–1776) believed the imagination links perception to memory. Ideas were, he felt, actually ‘images’. Images, he argued, enable us to think about things in their absence; we can, for example, recall what a table looks like even if there is not one in front of us. Kant (1724–1804) made a distinction between the transcendental imagination and the empirical one. The transcendental imagination was the power of the mind on which we all depend for our understanding of the world and, without it, Kant felt we could not make meanings at all. Creating an image by the power of the imagination (Einbildungskraft) of something in its absence was the work of the empirical imagination and very important in Kant’s thinking. According to Kant we all possess imagination, for it is the connecting and unifying force of the mind relating perception to feeling and memory. However, he believed the imagination’s fiction-making power varies from person to person depending on their psychological type and life experience.

From his reading of Kant and other German philosophers, Coleridge (1772–1834) arrived at his famous definition of the imagination. The primary imagination was: ‘The living Power and prime Agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.’ Coleridge rejected a notion of the imagination as passive. Not only is the imagination active, but also images the mind makes are symbolic, carrying a meaning beyond them. Indeed, as well as creating images, the imagination could, for Coleridge, attribute images with universal significance and induce profound emotional responses in us. English pedagogy in the last century, or, at least one influential branch of it, blossomed from these Romantic roots.

Imagination in English teaching (1900–1999)

The very title of the book by Marjorie Hound The Education of the Poetic Spirit (1949) conveys the influence of the Romantics in English teaching. ‘Felt experience’, ‘imagination’, ‘uniqueness’, ‘personal response’ and ‘creativity’ were key terms for pedagogy originating from the work of Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth, Keats and Coleridge. Coleridge’s belief in the unifying power of imagination especially, and his famous distinction between Fancy and Imagination, are a clear source of inspiration for Hound:
When Coleridge suddenly realized... that fancy and imagination were: ‘Two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being, according to general belief, either two names with one meaning or, at furthest, the lowest and the highest degree of the same power’, he had come upon something profoundly important not only in poetic and philosophical thought, but of great significance for education (p. 87).

Looking at children’s poems from this perspective was, for Houd, ‘to gain a glimpse of the startling completeness of the foetus of the poetic imagination’. Interestingly too, Houd’s work, like Herbert Read’s highly influential *Education through Art*, drew on Freud’s and Jung’s revelations of the unconscious.

Preceded by educators such as Edward Holmes (1911) and Caldwell Cook (1917), both of whom were fired by thinkers and educationalists such as Froebel, Montessori and, in particular, Rousseau, the Progressive movement (as this school of English teaching became known) began in the 1940s to draw on psychoanalysis. Cook had linked English to drama and emphasized ‘enactment’, ‘embodiment’ and ‘expressive’ presentation. Holmes emphasized the ‘unfolding and elaboration of the self’ without a ‘mechanistic’ examination system. Developing the imagination with respect to the conscious and unconscious mind would lead, it was believed, to psychic integration; an approach which ploughed a furrow for the seminal work of David Holbrook in the early 1960s. His writing, which included *English for Maturity* (1961) and *English for the Rejected* (1964), attempted to synthesize the best of F. R. Leavis’s practical criticism with ‘the education of the poetic spirit’ and psychoanalysis.

In contrast, the National Curriculum defines learning English as the accretion of skills and, principally, ones which can easily be measured. In particular, the teaching of literacy skills has been highly emphasized, culminating in the Literacy Strategy (1997) at primary level. Yet Holbrook too, believed it was crucial that pupils were literate. ‘This book is about ways of helping to make these children literate’, is the clear statement in the introduction of *English for the Rejected*. But for Holbrook, ‘these children’, the then lower streams of secondary schools, were also being given a ‘means towards self-expression, self-knowledge, imaginative order, understanding of the world, the possession of values and a guide to conduct’. Holbrook believed imaginative engagement would, if anything could, help children mature as literate adults, particularly, those for whom graphical literacy skills were minimal. Drawing on psychoanalytic work, especially the writing of Melanie Klein, Holbrook argued for the use of free imaginative methods for teaching the ‘whole child’, while simultaneously developing basic skills of reading, writing, spelling and punctuation.

To leap forward to Bernard Harrison’s *The Literate Imagination* (1994) is to stride across the work of many others, for example, Sybil Marshall’s *Creative Writing* (1974), John Dixon’s *Growth through English* (1975), and Peter Abbs’ *English within the Arts* (1982), all of which built on the work of Holbrook and Houd. Abbs argues for a synthesis of the three dominant schools of English teaching in which children’s creativity is released through a continuous engagement with the wider literary culture. More recently, and in distinction to all his predecessors, Nick Peim’s *Critical Theory and the English Teacher* (1993) challenges the imagination’s place as the centre of English teaching. Like Holbrook in the 1960s, Peim identifies how the subject has failed too many students. In over 30 years the problems of teaching English are, it would seem, depressingly similar. But according to Peim: ‘the identity of English has been founded on premises
and practices that are no longer really viable’ (p. 4). English teaching should, he believes, induct children into the approaches of different critical theories, for example, structuralism and phenomenology: ‘The practice of reading stories – the heart of the English curriculum – must enter the post-structural world.’ It would seem that the development of the imagination is now out of date.

However, as Ted Hughes eloquently reminds us:

The story is old, but as human biology is old... The story might be called a unit of imagination... attending to the world of the story is the beginning of imaginative and mental control... it is an acquisition, a kind of wealth (Winter Pollen, 1994, p. 139).

In sparkingly lucid and provocative prose, Hughes restates the unifying power of imagination. Present in all our thinking, we ignore it at our peril: ‘The inner and outer world are interdependent at every moment.’

The separation of subjectivity and objectivity, where the latter is perceived as ‘true’, or as ‘the real world’ is, for Hughes, catastrophic for our age. Symbolized by the camera, our modern focus on objectivity has, he says, imprisoned us in its lens. It is the imagination that connects or unifies ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ experiences; yet classrooms, Hughes contends, have done little to release its awesome powers. And, equally as alarming, it is ‘The imaginative life [that] is most at stake in the National Curriculum debate’ (Harrison, 1994, p. 12). Recognizing the focus on literacy of the last ten years, Harrison restates the place of imagination to include the practical and everyday:

Crucial to any programme of education that truly aims to promote energy, resourcefulness and effective thinking. Moreover, it is essential to all areas – not least, material aspects – of human well-being (loc. cit.).

The Labour Government’s most recent intervention (although the Conservatives were in power when Harrison was writing) has extended to a National Literacy Strategy (1997), as well as an emphasis on Information and Communications Technology. Have these together with the National Curriculum, in all its guises, poured assessable skills across the country and drowned the imagination?

Method

This small-scale pilot study involved a sample of teachers, all of whom had 12 or more years’ teaching experience. In semi-structured interviews, five Heads of English Departments in secondary comprehensive schools (11–18 and 11–16) in East and West Sussex were asked about their understanding of the imagination and how to develop it in the classroom. Two females (referred to here as Ann and Beatrice) and three males (Brian, Philip and Chris) were interviewed for half an hour and the interviews were recorded. These interviews covered:

- What they saw as evidence of the imagination.
- Whether some children have little or no imagination.
- What they saw as influences on their thinking about imagination.
Results

Definitions of imagination

Everyone saw engaging the imagination as a crucial aspect of English teaching. Although how the imagination was perceived elicited some variety in response:

Ann: ‘Imagination is human emotional engagement with the world as far as I’m concerned. A bit woolly, though, isn’t it?’

Beatrice: ‘The imagination is really about empathy – it’s about wearing someone else’s clothes . . . it’s thinking about what it is to be human . . .’

Brian: ‘In terms of creativity it’s got to be the capacity to be original, able to invent, to project, able to identify, able to anticipate. Able to transfer situations and put oneself in the place of the other.’

Chris: ‘I suppose there are different kinds of imagination. One I would think about a lot is visual imagination. It’s the ability to clear an image, a mental picture and that would relate to English in things like poetry or descriptive writing. I don’t think imagination is simply to do with imagining things which aren’t true . . . you can use your imagination to manipulate the real, the tactile.’

Philip: ‘The ability to create pictures for your words that sum up . . . explore the limits of your experience.’

Empathy, the creation of imagery from one’s own experience or from literature, which can then be turned into words, as well as the ability to invent, create and be original, were all seen as aspects of the imagination. More broadly, these teachers saw imagination as making sense of emotion and experience.

However, the centrality of creativity and extending the imagination in English teaching had, for these teachers, been seriously undermined. As Chris explained:

‘Twenty or even ten years ago, I would have said that it [developing the imagination] was absolutely fundamental, crucial, central. Because that’s the way I always conceived of English teaching, really stimulating the imagination . . . probably what we were about more than anything else. When English was thought as more to do with creativity, as it was for a long time. I’ve got a horrible feeling that imperceptibly my idea of what English is all about has changed. But English has less of that now. It’s had to change.’

The changes that these teachers identified included: the teaching of discrete skills geared to National Curriculum attainment levels, and an overall emphasis on functional and ‘graphical’ literacy. Developing the imagination and ‘imaginative’ writing, in particular, had declined in value. Nor were the teachers themselves convinced about the centrality of the imagination within the jaws of a skills-based curriculum. Such doubts influenced classroom practice detrimentally. Chris, for example, put less of his own imagination into his teaching. However, when he did, he noted a change in pupil response:
'I put the book down and got them to imagine this scene... I described it as I saw it in my imagination... flat wasteland, poplar trees, the figure and house. When I stopped treating the poem as a kind of exercise and started conveying my own response to it, they started to do the same thing... It's a lot to do with personalizing things. By that, I mean the imagination is something that can be communicated, you can spark off an imaginative response.'

Imaginative engagement in the teacher, it seems, engenders a similar response from pupils. ‘Putting yourself’ into your teaching is vital, then, for developing children’s imaginative powers.

Teachers also looked for evidence that children had ‘put themselves’ into their writing. Ann commented:

‘I look for personal engagement... and you can see in their writing a great deal of themselves in it. Not just their experiences which are rather limited, but themselves, pushing out to the world through their writing.’

Personal engagement, though not sought in the formal assessment in the National Curriculum, was apparent in children’s written work across the defined ‘attainment’ levels. Chris, for example, identified this and spoke at length about a piece of personal writing a ‘low-ability’ child had done. The child was exploring a difficult personal dilemma in her writing. He had read out her work at a parents’ evening:

‘She had obviously got a lot out of writing this, and I was very pleased with it because she had put so much of herself into it.’

Significantly, however, Chris comments:

‘I wouldn’t do that now... say “this is very good because she’s put a lot of herself into it...”’ Because this is not what I’m being paid to do. I’m being paid to equip these children with literacy skills, rather than helping them to make sense of their lives and grow-up.’

This experienced teacher and Head of Department has clearly perceived a shift in the curriculum. But without a firm conviction about the centrality of the imagination, informed by effective pedagogy, it is hard to see how a teacher can put him/herself into their teaching. Yet, surely this is the very quality necessary for inspirational classroom teaching?

**Evidence of imagination**

**Originality**

‘Originality’ was a criterion seen by all respondents as evidence of the imagination at work, for example:

Brian: ‘Originality... certainly when you look at the difference between an “A” and a “B” at GCSE, between an “A star” and an “A”, they begin to use criteria like originality.’

Ann: ‘I’d look for originality of response... originality and unexpected responses.’
Philip: ‘If...there’s a certain amount of originality...some of the things described you’ve never thought of before...a sort of haunting thing or description that really builds in my head.’

But how best do teachers enable their pupils to be ‘original’?

**Creativity/imaginative writing**

Encouraging independence and taking risks might help, it was felt, produce originality. Ann commented on her advice to pupils:

‘I say things like, “try to be unexpected” or “look at a variety of possibilities – always consider the next possibility, even if it sounds incredible”.

How children perceive and work with this kind of advice within a curriculum that does not assess imagination (Cremin, 1998) needs further investigation. Such advice, without a context in which pupils feel ‘free’ to experiment, and one in which other skills are continually assessed and hence perceived as more important, may have little real influence on children’s ability to ‘be unexpected’, or take risks. Furthermore, opportunities for the kind of writing in which children might take risks, or allow the ‘play of mind over experience’, have, these teachers suggested, been significantly reduced.

Not only was there less scope to do imaginative writing, these interviewees suggested the quality of work produced was, in general, inferior:

Brian: ‘I was getting stuff that I regarded as original, which I’m not getting now. In fact, I’ve reached the stage when I’m reluctant to do it. I feel that there’s less evidence of the imagination, in the way that I perceive it than there once was. Because what they tend to do now is to produce this scenario of a film or a TV programme or even a computer game. I think we run away from it rather than putting up with the sub-standard work.’

Chris: ‘Well, I can only speak from my own experience, but I think children do less and less good creative writing now than they used to do.’

Ann: ‘I don’t think that there’s as much creative writing around as there used to be.’

The influence of government policies was seen as a major reason for a changing emphasis in classroom practice. Disappointment in the quality of writing produced also meant some were reluctant to attempt it. They also identified a prevalent ‘literalism’ in children’s work, especially among the less able, attributing it tentatively, though not surprisingly, to the impact of the media:

Beatrice: ‘I set some of my weaker boys up with a final original writing assignment; it came from something in the literature...and they had to develop it into a story and the boys almost inevitably still at Year 11 went for action adventure.’

Ann: ‘I do think there’s a literalism about, and that’s quite marked at the weaker end, that precludes development in an imaginative way.’
Was this perceived drop in the quality of work because some pupils had no imagination?

Chris: ‘There are pupils who seem to have very little imagination, pupils who cannot see beyond their immediate, their personal, the literal.’

Philip: ‘I don’t think there is anyone without an imagination. But there again, there are students who no matter how much you plug them with guidelines, they’re just so prosaic in their thinking. . . There are students like that, but I think it’s probably because we can’t tap the imagination that’s in there.’

Ann: ‘I would prefer to say that they’ve got imagination that hadn’t been developed . . . that it had somehow been squashed.’

Perceptions of imaginative capability in the classroom ranged from informed knowledge of a particular condition, as in the case of Asperger’s syndrome,\(^5\) to those who, it was felt, found it hard to move beyond the literal, despite intelligence displayed in other areas of English work. (At this stage of interviewing, not enough data were collected about the context in which these children were deemed without imagination. I suggest that the ‘squashing’ of children’s imagination may well have an emotional root,\(^6\) although clearly there is much research to be done here.)

Even so, it was generally felt children who showed little or no imagination did, nevertheless, have an imagination that could be developed. Either some had lost the capacity to express it or, more significantly, these teachers believed their teaching methods had failed.

**Words into pictures**
The way teachers talked about the imagination to pupils revealed assumptions about the imagination in English teaching. In particular, three of the five talked very explicitly about the mind’s eye image and its relationship to verbal competence. Pictures in the mind and their relationship to words was clear:

Chris: ‘There are different kinds of imagination. You would hope that children would be able to conjure up some kind of image in their mind . . . turning verbal images into mental ones.’

Philip: ‘. . . Basically to create pictures . . . to explore the limits of your experience . . . to be able to create in your own imagination a picture.’

Philip also saw evidence of children’s imagination at work, if they had written something that:

‘Created in my own head, a good picture . . . you know, you look for something you can empathize with . . . something that you can picture in your own mind.’

Beatrice, for example, in an attempt to help children create mental images, said:

Beatrice: ‘I use the analogy with the children of a video camera on the shoulder, if they’re writing or describing something . . . they’ve got to focus their
camera on what they want the reader to look at. They’ve got to draw that picture, so that when I’m reading their story, I’m picturing it in my head.’

Hence a circle of picture-making is created: one that is valued in the English classroom as evidence of the imagination at work. Nevertheless, despite its importance, creating pictures and their relationship to words was not wholly straightforward. As Philip pointed out:

‘I think there are a lot of children who’ve got a good imagination probably, in terms of what they think of, but English can hamper them. Or they can be hampered in English – it’s not always in the right order – through their lack of vocabulary.’

The implication here is the picture in the mind might be vivid, but children’s vocabulary is the inhibiting factor. Brian, too, suggested imagination might not be the problem, but more the mode of expressing it; for example, children could not always write well, despite, as he perceived it, real imaginative engagement in drama lessons. Significantly, it is not clear what is the best way of developing imagination where language is concerned.

Chris, very aware of the influence of the media, described a lesson intended to exploit children’s assumed visual literacy. The lesson concentrated solely on images to develop imagination. The task was not to turn images into words or vice versa, but merely to use the imagination to create images:

‘The children were asked to make a short film, just a few shots... Now, I was actually disappointed... some of them came up with interesting images which I would say were imaginative, but a lot of them found it very hard to do. And most of the interesting stuff I got was fairly derivative.’

In contrast, Chris described how a lesson on haiku poetry had been more successful in his eyes because:

‘Haiku images are very concentrated and you’re not calling on such high-order, well, some high-order writing skills – but you’re not asking them to structure something very complex. It was very sharply focused and we actually talked about some of the methods... some of the possible metaphors that we could use to plan it.’

Using existent images, in this case, the visual ones in a film and those created in language as in haiku, appears to be making quite different imaginative demands on pupils, and ones which need greater pedagogical understanding.

Structuring a task was considered important by two interviewees for engendering imaginative response, as illustrated above; allowing children lots of scope was felt by some to be ineffective. However, for those with ‘imagination’ a structured task was felt by Brian to be inhibiting. Brian did not mind children using someone else’s idea, whatever its source, ‘because that wouldn’t be the first time a writer has taken somebody else’s idea’; but he felt too often children were not able to develop and enhance the starting-point. Instead, they merely produced a synopsis. Others expressed similar sentiments.

How much scope to give pupils in imaginative work has traditionally been an area of debate. ‘Free’ writing has often been seen as too open-ended for the focus
necessary for imaginative engagement. Additionally, Brian suggested children’s exposure to ‘good’ literature alienated them from their own creativity as they progressed up the school. Exposure to ‘good literature’, or at least how it is done in Brian’s school, seems to contradict Abbs’ belief of releasing children’s creativity through contact with a living literary tradition. Certainly responses like these demand more research into pedagogy, as well as an examination of what cultural education for the twenty-first century might be. (I return to this later.) While some children do appear to respond well to very open-ended work, others, perhaps the majority, clearly need very focused constraints for imaginative engagement.

Clearly developing the imagination in the classroom is complicated. We need precise pedagogy for such vital work. A re-examination of the philosophy of the imagination could inform this pedagogy. Likewise, a finely focused examination of the experimental approach of the first half of the twentieth century, now largely ignored, could illuminate today’s impoverished practice.

**Discussion**

The emergent picture is a complex one. Three areas for discussion emerge:

- The cultural climate necessary for developing the imagination.
- Teachers’ conceptual understanding of the imagination and related pedagogy.
- The reclamation of a tradition of English teaching predicated on the imagination.

I examine each area in turn.

**Cultural climate necessary for developing the imagination**

Teacher and pupil perceptions about the imagination will inevitably influence the kind of work produced in the classroom. Requests to ‘be imaginative, take a risk or try an alternative’ or write ‘an exciting story, with plenty of action and good ideas’, will fall on stony ground when readily assessable skills are in fact more highly valued (see e.g. *Effective Teachers of Literacy*). A climate where approaches of ‘play’, ‘experiment’ and ‘risk-taking’ which, it is well recognized, often leads to creative outcomes, needs to be established and valued. Such views have already begun to be recorded elsewhere, most notably in the report, *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* (GB. DfEE, 1999). The report recognizes the need for an approach that widens the remit of both Numeracy and Literacy strategies: one that focuses on development of the creative potential of individuals, namely, that develops the power of the imagination in its broadest sense. References to why this might not be happening in schools today pervade the report. For example, the balance of the curriculum may be wrong, the overly tight assessment structures may inhibit (pp. 10–11), the prescribed content and timing of delivery may occlude other activities (p. 79), and so on. The report hints too, very quietly, that ‘the raising of standards’, which we all applaud, might, as in a game of Chinese Whispers, be in danger of becoming ‘the praising of standardisation’: the very antithesis of originality and creativity! In addition, the report recommends that: ‘teachers and other professionals are encouraged and trained to use methods and materials that facilitate the development of young people’s creative abilities and cultural understanding’ (p. 12).
So, it would seem, the ethos of our schools must change. Quite right, but the wide-ranging definitions of culture in the report, laudable as they sound, ignore any cultural tension that may manifest itself as ‘culture clash’. Even if they agree with such aims, what do teachers do, faced with irreconcilable cultural difference in the classroom? If the aims of the report are to be fulfilled, they must, at the very least, be underpinned by subject pedagogy grounded in new research, as well as in an existing tradition (see below).

The National Literacy Strategy itself serves as a symbol of the pervasive emphasis in today’s secondary English, as well as primary, curriculum. The acquisition of easily measurable skills is highly valued, not least for political gain (Dombey, 1998). Other things, such as developing imagination, are harder to assess and, consequently, seen as less important. Although the Literacy Strategy is aimed at primary schools, as a document written out of dogma (*ibid.*) rather than research, it sets an ethos for the narrow focus on basic skills secondary teachers, too, commented on. Chris, for example, sees today’s pedagogic approach as starkly divided: either secondary English was about literacy skills or it was about developing the imagination. Furthermore, he like the others, felt the latter had been significantly devalued. Yet, as Dombey asks in a cogent attack on the Government’s approach to literacy,

Why do we read and write? In addition to more mundane purposes, we read to enlarge our understanding of the world and our place in it, to explore other lives, to take pleasure in the virtual reality which we conspire with the author to create, and the language which gives it life. We write to shape our thoughts, to put them in a form which makes them communicable to others, to put our mark on the world. Such conceptions do not inform the Literacy Framework: formalism rules (p. 39).

We read and write, then, to extend the relationship between the ‘inner’ or subjective world and the ‘outer’ or objective: to explore our being in the world. In short, to develop the imagination.

*Teachers’ conceptual understanding of imagination and related pedagogy*

Obviously, how teachers of all subjects conceive of the imagination is also central to how it is developed in their classrooms. These English teachers’ interviews illustrate one of the problems for effective teaching: the word imagination is used vaguely and denotes more than one concept. One respondent did distinguish clearly between different usage, citing, for example, visual imagination as different to empathy; others were less exact. Fantasy and imagination were also only partially differentiated and not in a way that related to children’s work. Here, Coleridge’s distinction between Fancy and Imagination may be a very useful one for honing pedagogy.

Three other areas emerged that highlighted difficulties of developing imagination in today’s classrooms.

*Literalism and derivative work*

All but blinded by the glare of images today, the media presents complexities for the development of the imagination. English, once conceived as a bulwark against the pernicious influence of the media, moved to the critical analysis of adverts and newspapers. Now it is in the National Curriculum and a sexy presence as a
Words into pictures

‘The picture in the mind’s eye’ is a much-used image in English teaching. Reading poems and stories to children, it is assumed, helps them (among other things) turn words into pictures in their mind and thereby develop the imagination. If children can create pictures in their minds, these can be put into words when children write. Presumably the better the picture, the better the writing.

However, while these teachers talked about the ‘picture in the mind’, it was not clear which children might be able to do this, nor under what circumstances. Exercises such as explicit visualizations from a drama lesson were not seen as productive for many. Yet the concentration of language in the haiku lesson was deemed much more successful in creating imagery.

The mind’s ability to create images, as well as the relationship between imagery and language, are clearly very complex processes. (Is Beatrice right when she hopes that looking at vocabulary actually helps the mind’s eye image?) If children engage imaginatively in drama, as Caldwell Cook proposed, are they actually working with images in the mind, even if they can’t then put them into words? How will we come to understand the phrase ‘the picture in the mind’s eye’ in English teaching as the power of visual images increases, with pupils learning more and more on computer and television screens? How can we best help children to understand the symbolic power of truly imaginative images? We need a twenty-first century pedagogy of the imaginative image. As it stands using the phrase ‘the picture in the mind’s eye’ in English classrooms, while seeming precise, may be just a way of talking about the imagination while failing to release its real charge.

Imaginative writing

On the basis of the interviews opportunities for imaginative writing, particularly poetry, have been significantly reduced in today’s classroom. Holbrook’s ‘free’ composition, or Abbs’ expressive art-making, may have all but disappeared. As
discussed above, the increasingly limited opportunities given to this ‘imaginative writing’ have produced work of poorer quality highly derived from the media.

Yet, Holbrook accepted that such ‘imaginative’ writing could be, and often was, derivative. But he also saw that even in the most seemingly banal writing there was evidence of the ‘squashed’ imagination striving for articulation. He drew on psychoanalysis to show how the self strove for emotional expression and how, as a consequence, literacy could be developed – however limited or immature the writing. Holbrook tackled literacy by encouraging children’s personal writing, an approach that united literacy and imaginative development.

A tradition of English teaching

The centrality of the imagination in English teaching was proclaimed unani-
mously in these interviews. Such responses chime with the tradition of English pedagogy on imagination. But suprisingly, none of the interviewees situated his/her remarks within the context of this tradition. Certainly the influence of the Romantics was present in these teachers’ conviction about imagination. For example, ‘creativity’, ‘the individual’, ‘personal response’, ‘originality’ – all key Romantic ideas – were cited as evidence of the imagination at work. But have these convictions become mere rhetoric? Chris actually interprets his job as giving pupils skills, not about helping them to make sense of their lives. Even ‘original-
ity’, a characteristic element of imaginative engagement, was valued mainly because it achieved a high grade in examinations. Otherwise, comments expressed the lack of originality in children’s work, despite the need for it in examinations at least. Originality, although highly valued, is clearly difficult to engender in today’s classrooms. Development of the individual’s creativity and personal response to experience has been displaced by explicit concentration on the mechanics of skills (Dombey, 1998).

Worryingly, these teachers’ beliefs about the imagination had been seriously undermined and they did not draw explicitly on a tradition at all. Ann, for example, who makes the bold statement about imagination as emotional engage-
ment, retracts it quickly: ‘A bit woolly, isn’t it?’ Is this professional insecurity in the face of clearly assessable targets in reading, writing, speaking and listening skills? Yet in spite of what they actually do in the classroom, these teachers espoused beliefs are those which All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education (GB. DfEE, 1999) seeks to reclaim and re-animate (pp. 30–1). But in the current ethos of education, beliefs are disassociated from practice.

Conclusion

What is the way forward? One move may be to go back: another paradox, but one where a return to a pedagogic tradition and, in particular, the work of Hol-brook may be very timely. The imagination, at work in all that pupils do, must be clearly recognized and fully engaged. All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education (GB. DfEE, 1999) proclaims a similar message. Inebriated with tech-nology and the delivery of assessable skills, the imagination, like an unstable pound on the currency markets, has been devalued in the eyes of both teachers and governments. Such devaluation has begun to be identified as serious. Yet it prompts the question: how precisely can English teachers best develop the power of imagination in today’s classrooms?
We need, as Harrison says, ‘a Newton on the imagination’,\(^\text{10}\) (or rather a Heisenberg). We also need to understand the demands imaginative engagement makes on a wide range of children. And to do so, we need a living pedagogy that recognizes the simultaneity of inner and outer experience in everything we do.

A re-examination and recasting of the pedagogic and philosophical tradition of the imagination is now required. For example, has the potentially highly valuable contribution of psychoanalysis (despite its own susceptibility to post-modern eclecticism) in Holbrook’s and his predecessors’ work been ‘lost’ to the profession? Also, how can we best use the philosophy of Kant, Coleridge and, more recently, Roger Scruton to extend professional understanding of the imagination? To merely restate the tradition is clearly not sufficient. But a recasting of seminal work such as Holbrook’s could also assist an integration of imagination and skills for a different and fuller definition of literacy: one which encompasses the whole self; a definition, as necessary for the twenty-first century as any other one.

For teachers and pupils alike, belief in the active and creative power of imagination (conscious and unconscious), once the force driving through the green fuse of English pedagogy, needs tending. Without it, where literalism prevails, and the teaching of English is no more than skill development, the flower of imagination may never open.

**Notes**

1. For a full definition of primary and secondary imagination, see Chapt. 13, *Biographia Literaria* (1817).
2. In *English for the Rejected* (1964, p. 60) Holbrook distinguishes between ‘graphical literacy’, i.e. setting words on the page, punctuation, spelling, etc., and the deeper aspects of literacy, i.e. the capacity to express experience in words.
3. For the description of the summary of the three main schools of English teaching see Chapt. 1 in *English within the Arts* (1982, p. 10 ff.).
4. For clarity, I distinguish here between creative writing and creativity in the broader sense, as described above, where ‘play’, ‘alternatives’ and ‘risk-taking’ is taken to be evidence of imagination. For the purposes of this discussion, ‘creative’ writing refers to writing that is often autobiographical in nature or ‘personal’, where children were encouraged to explore their experience through poetry and composition. To avoid confusion with other kinds of writing, and ideas about creativity more generally, I describe this kind of writing as ‘imaginative’ writing – although, in another sense, of course all writing might be seen as personal and imaginative.
5. Children with Asperger’s syndrome were unable to engage imaginatively. Everything is seen as literal.
6. For example, in *The Hands of the Living God* (1969, p. 40), the mentally ill woman Marion Milner treats cannot understand metaphor.
7. F. R. Leavis’s view of the mass media.
8. P. Abbs includes analysis of adverts as part of English work.
9. Chris describes a drama lesson where pupils are asked to imagine they are in the desert after a plane crash. Some pupils, he felt, found it impossible.
References


