

Imagination and Transformation in Teacher Education

Mark Fettes

Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University

In the work of our research group with teachers and teacher-candidates in British Columbia, Canada, imagination is central in every sense. What began as a set of theoretical ideas about learning (e.g. Egan, 1979) has become a lens through which we view the process of becoming a teacher, and an ideal that we hope our students will strive towards. Imagination, in the way we have come to think of it, is what enables people to see (and hear, and feel) beyond the visible world, the world as it is “given” by experience. It is the same capacity that underlies our use of words and other symbols to reflect back, magnify and extend various aspects of this vision. As such, it is fundamental to our becoming fully human. Where imagination has died, education cannot live.

It follows that teacher education, the process of becoming a teacher and aiding others to become teachers, is in part a journey of imaginative development. Students come to imagine teaching, and themselves as teachers, in new ways. This way of describing the process holds out an exciting possibility. It may be that explicit attention to imagination in the course of a teacher education program could facilitate that profound transformation that many teacher educators seek: the discovery of a vocation in both inner and outer worlds simultaneously. That is, attending to imagination may both aid the process of personal reflection and help students come to a deeper understanding of pedagogy and curriculum.

Together with two faculty associates (seconded teacher-instructors) in the one-year professional certification program at Simon Fraser University, we recently tried out these ideas with a cohort of 32 students in the Fraser Valley region of British Columbia. The SFU program allows considerable flexibility in the design of the first semester. Its four guiding “dispositions” – reflective capacity, critical mindedness, other-directedness and pedagogical sensitivity – are closely allied to the ways we think about imagination in

teaching and learning. This article reflects on our experiences with the cohort and the potential of this approach for other teacher education programs.

The Struggle for Imagination

Many of our student teachers, especially those who are recent university graduates, come to the program with a fairly narrow set of ideas about teaching. These students see it as their task to “deliver” the curriculum while relating well to their students at a personal level. Plausibly, this is an internalized image of their experience of teachers in high school and university – that is, their last 8-10 years of education. To students with this perspective, the task of teaching does not appear especially problematic. In one sense, they hold extremely high ideals of what “being a teacher” entails, and their self-confidence and enthusiasm are invaluable assets in the early weeks of the program. At the same time, this image of teaching can foster something of a “know-it-all” attitude, perhaps reinforced by a natural defensiveness in the face of the unknown: “So what’s to learn?”

There are exceptions, of course. Older students with a variety of life experiences behind them rarely share this viewpoint, although they may experience greater difficulties in adapting to the structured world of the classroom and curriculum. And some young students seem to retain an instinctive pedagogical flexibility and sensitivity that only needs encouragement to develop. Nonetheless, the majority of our students come to the program lacking resources, both imaginative and experiential, to help them understand what teaching is or could be. It is the development of these resources that we have come to see as the primary task of teacher education, and the forming of dynamic, powerful connections between them – between imagination and lived reality – as its greatest challenge.

There can be little doubt of the intensity of students’ experiences in the first semester. Since its inception nearly four decades ago, the SFU program has tried to immerse teacher-candidates as early as possible in the world of the school and classroom. In current practice, this means that a cohort group, or “module,” spends about six weeks of their first term in schools, and the remaining time in an kaleidoscopic whirl of group

discussions, readings, journal writing, and other activities designed to help them make sense of these experiences and begin to develop a sense of themselves as teachers. The challenge, as anyone familiar with teacher education will know, is to integrate depth of experience with breadth of vision. As we have come to realize, this requires the development of the very same imaginative resources that can transform teaching from the mundane into the magical.

This idea was reflected in the theme we chose for our module, “the world in the Valley”. We hoped that, over the course of the program, the teachers, most of whom will be living and working in B.C.’s Fraser Valley, would come to see how the immediate world of the children’s (and their) experience is connected to the vaster world beyond, and begin to discover ways of making these connections accessible and engaging through their classroom teaching. To this end we included a variety of field trips in the program, as well as several sessions focused on the concept of imagination and its role in learning and teaching.

As we expected, the students found this approach quite challenging. To many, at least at the outset, imagination appeared as something that might be used as a “hook” to get children’s attention, but had little to do with “real” learning. Their tacit belief (formed, we believe, in response to high school and university curricula and teaching practices) seemed to be that knowledge consists in arranging words and other symbols in a one-to-one correspondence with reality. There was simply no room for imagination except on the fringes. One need not look far, of course, to see this belief reflected in many institutions and practices in our culture; but our work with these teacher-candidates heightened our awareness of how deep its influence runs.

Here are two illustrations of this dismaying literal-mindedness in action. On the second day of the program, we asked the students to come up with ways of using local objects and places to engage children across the curriculum. “They could make a map,” someone suggested. “What would they learn?” we asked. “Where things are and how to represent them accurately,” was the gist of the answer. No one had any other suggestions. Maps were representations of a singular, known world.

“Suppose you used maps to help your students explore the concept of scale?” we suggested. “What is the smallest thing they could map: the school, the classroom, their

desk, the palm of their hand? What is the largest mappable object: Canada, the world, the solar system, the galaxy? What does each map tell you about your place in the world, and the ways you are connected to it? What does each leave out?” Around the room we could see intent expressions as our students grappled with a very different image of what a map is and what it can teach.

“Or,” we continued, “what about connections within the community itself? What would a two-year-old’s map look like? A bird’s? A salmon’s? An earthworm’s? What did the country here look like before a town was built on it? What about mapping the invisible networks of cables and pipes that connect each house and building into a single interdependent whole? Suppose you had children accompany their map with a story, imagining their way into new understandings of familiar territory, coming to perceive the wonderful in the everyday?”

When we took the lead in this way, many students responded with enthusiasm. Yet even after a few such experiences, they found it enormously difficult to generate possibilities themselves. When a group discussing the art curriculum suggested collecting leaves and incorporating them in classroom projects, we probed a little deeper. Leaves, it became clear, were just things to them; the aesthetics of the extraordinary dance of water, air, sunlight and carbon, or their fine-grained architecture, or their myriad shades of colour, or the music of their rustling, were not in their imaginative scope. The students knew *of* these things, of course; they just didn’t see them as relevant to what they were supposed to do as teachers. The leaves for their projects might as well have been scraps of paper, or anything else found lying around the school.

Interspersed with the sessions on classroom practice, we wanted to expose students to unfamiliar aspects of their familiar world, hoping that this too would help them to see new possibilities for themselves and the children they would teach. One field trip took them to an art gallery; another to a heron nesting ground; another to a cultural centre of the Stolo First Nation, the aboriginal people of the lower Fraser River. We included non-traditional schools among the sites they visited early in the semester, before they began their teaching assignments with particular classroom teachers in what were usually mainstream schools. We tried to set the scene for these visits in ways that would encourage them to reflect on their experiences and their lessons for teaching –

particularly teaching in *this* community, more diverse, complex, and interconnected with others than they may have realized.

By and large, however, we do not feel that the field trips were very successful. It is not that the students did not enjoy them, or perceive them as a relevant part of the program. It is just that their notions of relevance remained literal and immediate. The art gallery was a place to look at pictures; the Stolo centre, a place to do crafts; the heronry, a nice place for a walk. And schools... were just schools. In retrospect, we think that we needed to work a lot harder at setting up and debriefing these experiences if we wanted them to contribute to expanding our students' imaginations. There seems to be little in experience itself, at least the transient experience of a half-day field trip, to disrupt old habits of thinking. Even talking and writing about experience is not enough. For transformation to take place, students' images of teaching, and of themselves as teachers, may have to be brought into conscious *opposition* with experience.

A Theoretical Context

Our thinking about imagination has been strongly influenced by Kieran Egan, a professor of education at Simon Fraser University. In a series of books stretching over more than two decades (e.g. Egan 1979; 1983; 1992; 1997), Egan has argued for a very different picture of intellectual development than the Piagetian orthodoxy. Most thinking, he argues, involves the appropriation of cultural tools such as language, rather than trying to puzzle out the world in isolation, as Piaget imagined. Different cultural tools – for instance, those associated with the oral language of a community, with popular literacy, or with disciplinary thinking – engender somewhat distinct ways of understanding the world, which are not always easily reconciled. Yet the greater the range of tools we have at our disposal, the more flexible and powerful our thinking is likely to be; therefore the proper goal of education is to attempt a reconciliation, to cultivate the best of each kind of understanding and avoid reliance on any single way of relating to the world.

Often associated with the phrase “teaching as storytelling,” Egan’s vision of effective classroom practice is in fact quite complex and difficult to convey in a condensed fashion. For not just any story will do; nor does the story do the teaching on its

own. Rather, the teacher sets up an affectively engaging narrative framework based on her knowledge of the topic and of her co-narrators, the children in her class, who then infuse the narrative with the colour, detail and ideas that make it meaningful and memorable. Teachers experienced in using this approach in elementary and middle schools prefer to work with units stretching over a semester or more, incorporating many elements of the curriculum in the children's research, discussions, role playing, artwork, and other activities. This is more difficult to accomplish in high schools, but there too the general approach, even within a single subject, is to create a narrative framework that provides an affectively engaging context for the topic of study.

We made these ideas the centerpiece of two half-day sessions, provided readings on them, and referred to them frequently throughout the semester. But it was clear that the students found this conception of teaching and learning problematic, for several reasons. First, they had not been exposed to it themselves, nor could we supply model classrooms or videos to help them gain an embodied, concrete sense of how such a classroom looks and feels. Second, the method requires that the teacher herself be imaginatively engaged in the topic, retaining a sense of wonder and intellectual excitement that few of our students associated with the curriculum. Third, the teacher needs to know the topic well enough, and have sufficient confidence in her classroom management abilities, to allow considerable freedom of exploration to the children. Even for experienced teachers, these characteristics might well prove challenging.

The dilemma, from our point of view, is that schools consistently model a very different approach to knowledge. The tendency is to regard each step towards factual literacy as an advance on whatever came before; thus the powerful emotional currents of early oral language and the romantic splendor of pre-academic literacy are excluded from many classrooms, as unnecessary and distracting. Egan asserts, and we concur, that this has disastrous consequences for most children. A curriculum without emotional relevance tends to become an exercise in rote learning and regurgitation. But one cannot simply tell teachers to make their classes emotionally compelling, or prescribe a foolproof procedure for doing so. Rather, teachers need to perceive possibilities beyond the factual, literal and mundane, and willingly embrace them as part of their professional identity. Thus we see ourselves as embarking, in part, on a campaign to liberate our teacher-candidates from

their restricted sense of possibility – of themselves, of the curriculum, and of the children they teach. And this brings us back to the point made in the previous section: that it is when teachers are confronted by a mismatch between their imagination and their experience that transformation is most likely to occur.

The question, of course, is whether our focus on imagination in the module actually aided this process of transformation, as we had hoped it would. The only answer we can offer at the moment is “perhaps”. When asked to reflect on the first semester, many students commented that they found the idea of “teaching for the imagination” inspiring and challenging, and many referred to the exploration of educational ideas as a valuable contribution to the development of their teaching credo. Yet it was clear that only a few felt any confidence in using the notion of imagination to reflect on and improve their classroom practice, or to investigate and expand their philosophy of teaching. Within the restrictions of a one-year program, with its manifold challenges to students’ conception of themselves and their working lives, it may be illusory to hope for more.

Looking for Transformation

We remain optimistic, however, that more can be done. This precious single year establishes a foundation for a lifetime of working with children. While we will never be able to provide a thorough grounding in all of the myriad issues that will surface in our students’ initial years of practice, we still think that we can cultivate a particular kind of attunement to the work of teaching. One way of thinking about the task is as a reshaping of the four “dispositions” of the Professional Development Program mentioned earlier: reflective capacity, critical mindedness, other-directedness and pedagogical sensitivity. As characteristics of thoughtful, caring teachers, these qualities should emerge from a module focused on imagination, but we might expect them to be subtly altered in light of the latter’s distinctive philosophy. Conversely, thinking about each of these dispositions in turn may help us identify key pedagogical features of such a module.

Imagination and other-directedness. So much of schools’ failure to engage children in learning seems to stem from our unwillingness to accept the *otherness* of their

ways of thinking. Having spent twenty years or more learning to think and talk in the culturally sanctioned ways of educated middle-class adults, we hasten to induct new generations into the same routines, turning a blind eye to all the losses this entails. What would happen if, instead, we saw teaching as a chance to revive imaginative encounters with the world that have long lain dormant under the weight of “literal” thinking? What if being a teacher meant focusing on the ways children think most energetically and vividly at particular stages in their development? What we have in mind here is not the Piagetian notion of a biologically-driven unfolding of systematic thinking, but a more Vygotskian picture of children acquiring and mastering sets of “thinking tools” from their culture, as suggested by Kieran Egan. The primarily oral child thinks differently about the world than the newly literate one, and the young adult developing a mastery of disciplinary thinking is acquiring yet another imaginative perspective on reality. Perhaps real other-directedness implies taking these differences seriously, and not simply regarding earlier stages as immature precursors of later ones.

We suggest, therefore, that teacher-candidates spend some time finding out what really does engage children of different ages and backgrounds in listening, talking, thinking, doing. What kinds of stories engage children, and why? What kinds of images? What kinds of games? What kinds of roles? Let them imagine themselves in the place of children again: how does the world look and feel? What hopes and fears accompany one through the day? What does one look forward to at school, what does one dread? How does one experience a lesson in mathematics, or English, or social studies, or science, or art? What is the surrounding culture telling us about these things, and about ourselves as learners? Even a few days spent on such questions may do as much to develop students’ pedagogical imaginations as weeks spent in the classroom teacher’s role.

Imagination and pedagogical sensitivity. As students’ perspectives on learning become more hospitable to imaginative diversity, it may become easier to change their thinking about teaching. What is the point, after all, of teaching in ways that make sense to you as an adult but are experienced as drudgery by your students? Thus an important dimension of our focus on imagination is the development of new ways of thinking about content and process, planning and assessment. We remarked above on students’ literal-mindedness: their sense of the teacher’s job as imparting authoritative knowledge of

reality. We believe we need to do more to challenge this conception, by exposing them to teachers and texts that model different understandings of teaching, and providing them with a language in which imagination and engagement play central roles. Since teaching this particular module, we have come across Virginia Jagla's invaluable book, *Teachers' Everyday Use of Intuition and Imagination* (1994), which provides a wealth of perceptive comments and anecdotes from practicing classroom teachers at a variety of grade levels. The key themes of this work, ranging from such personal traits as confidence and experience to more elusive characteristics of the teaching environment such as randomness and structure, provide a ready-made set of conceptual tools for viewing classroom experience through an imaginative lens.

Equally importantly, we believe our students need to experience the program itself as imaginative pedagogy, and to reflect explicitly on the philosophy behind it. In our first module, we suspect that our field trips, our imaginative exercises and discussions, were too independent of each other, rather than embedded in a coherent imaginative framework to which the students' attention was constantly redirected. One alternative, highlighted in Egan's work, would be to structure the term, or indeed the entire one-year program, as a kind of narrative. Teaching is an activity imbued with the affective contrasts that Egan sees as the foundations of all great narrative: connection and isolation, constraint and transcendence, security and risk, indifference and love. Yet so often we avoid these perilous waters, allowing our students to finish the year with little more than a sense of having "gotten through it," in much the same sense that they earlier "got through" high school. If they are to provide more than this for their own students, they need to acquire a mythic and romantic sense of themselves as teachers, imperfect heroes of the great story of education – a sense that *will not be acquired* if the program is not deliberately structured along narrative lines. This, we think, is perhaps the greatest gift this year of induction can give them.

Imagination and critical-mindedness. It is this sense of one's teaching in relation to a greater whole that, in our view, provides a foundation for the most important kind of critical awareness: an alertness to alternatives. The belief that there is only one best way to do things seems to us one of the most deadening in all of education. There are, certainly, better ways and worse ways, and we would want our students to leave the

program with a healthy appreciation of the value of a well-thought-out lesson, program, or textbook, among other things. But we also want them to absorb the much harder lesson, that sometimes the best class is one that tosses the textbook out the window.

This is not a stance towards teaching that is easily fostered in a teacher education program; yet we believe we can work towards it using the twin tools of a language that stresses intuition and responsiveness, and a narrative built upon the poles of limitation and transcendence. Critical-mindedness, in this context, means being aware both of the positive benefits of whatever one is doing in a classroom at any moment, and simultaneously of the price being paid, of what is not being done and said, not attended to. As a teacher gains experience, she or he should be developing an increasingly rich store of ideas and methods to inform this weighing of alternatives. In Jagla's work (1994), this dimension of imagination is labeled "resourcefulness," and we have come to see it as a crucial one: not merely in the familiar pragmatic sense of acquiring a "box of tricks," but in the more Vygotskian sense of mastering a range of psychological tools, from literature to game-playing to scientific techniques and concepts. This emphasis can be found in Egan (1997) as well, although its implications for teaching and teacher education are not explored in much detail.

Imagination and reflective capacity. It follows that we want our teachers to develop a kind of thoughtfulness that is deeply cultural in nature. There is a contemporary tendency to interpret "reflection" as a kind of monological activity, a contemplation of the shallow pool of private beliefs, values and desires. We, in contrast, have come to think of it as an outwardly directed gaze, seeking illumination in the inexhaustible depths of human history, literature, art, music, science, mathematics, and all other accomplishments of the human spirit. We want our students to see their teaching as connected to the things about which they are most passionate, and to pursue knowledge and understanding in these areas as an integral part of being a teacher. It may seem a stretch to suggest that being an avid novel reader, for instance, or becoming a better photographer, will help one teach mathematics to grade 5 students. Yet we have come to believe that something like this is true, or can be, if imagination is given its proper place in one's conception of teaching.

To this end, we now encourage our students to develop a personal metaphor of teaching that draws on a medium of expression close to their hearts: the teacher as improvisational artist, potter, musician, clown, gymnast, quarterback, equestrian. We find that, as students elaborate this metaphor, they discover unsuspected riches in themselves and in their teaching. They also find an identity for themselves in which the *otherness* so central to the pedagogical encounter can be embraced as enriching and thought-provoking, rather than disturbing and frustrating. In this way, the imaginative development of our teacher-candidates may indeed come full circle to mediate the imaginative development of the children in their care.

Alas, we are unable to supply proof that such is the case. All we can say for certain is that we have found a focus on imagination to be deeply rewarding in our work with beginning teachers, and that the insights it gives rise to seem to us of general relevance for the challenge of improving schools. We hope at length to provide a much more detailed description of the ideas, practices and outcomes of a teacher education program that takes imagination as a central theme. For now, we welcome contacts with others who have embarked upon parallel journeys.

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