Imagination and the adolescent lifeworld: Encounters in the secondary school curriculum

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Abstract

The national secondary review promises new possibilities for innovation in curriculum design and the learner experience in Key Stage Three. With its emphasis on flexible curriculum frameworks and active pupil learning, this may create new avenues for the promotion of a frequently neglected area of the secondary pupil experience – the creative imagination. In the context of these developments, this paper reports the findings of a twelve-month study conducted in six secondary schools in the West Midlands as part of a broader inquiry into pupil perceptions of imagination. Using descriptive phenomenological methodology, group discussions were conducted with Year 10 and 11 pupils in a range of secondary school settings. The findings reveal an elaborate and sophisticated account of imagination amongst pupils that does not readily align with the version of entrepreneurial creativity emerging in education policy in England. From the pupil perspective, opportunities for imaginative experience in the official curriculum were facilitated by, and restricted to, the subjects of History and those within the domain of the creative arts.
Introduction

In the past decade state education in England has seen a resurgence of interest in creativity in the school curriculum. Amongst the contributing factors it is possible to trace the following: the National Advisory Committee on Creativity, Culture and Education (NACCCE) report *All Our Futures* (1999); the adoption of ‘creativity’ as a government response to public anxiety around the negative effects of statutory testing (Ward, 2003, 11); the alignment of creativity with economic imperatives, e.g. the Roberts Report, (2006); and the promotion of risk-taking by employer groups as part of an ‘enterprise culture’ for schools (Jones, 2007, 26). Consequently, pupil creativity has now become a distinct feature of the National Secondary Review of the key stage three curriculum.

In much of the contemporary research around creativity, imagination consistently emerges as an essential precursor to the creative process (Craft, 2005; Fisher and Williams, 2004). Yet emphasis on the development of pupil imagination remains, at best, a marginal feature of curriculum provision and educational practice in secondary phase education. What follows is an account of Year 11 pupil responses to the idea of imagination, in which they were invited to construct their own definitions of imagination and consider its place within their experiences of secondary school education.

Participants and methodology

Five secondary schools from across four Local Authorities in the West Midlands agreed to participate in the twelve month project. Fieldwork sites were identified using Local Authority school data-bases and socio-economic indicators. Access negotiations, the identification of school-based convenors, and protocols for the selection of participants were completed during the spring term of 2006.

The methodology of the study followed the principles of descriptive phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Braud and Anderson, 1998). The purpose of which can be broadly described as an attempt to ‘disclose the essential meaning of human endeavours’ by describing these objects and events as one experiences them (Hammond and Howarth 1991, 1). This involves returning to reflective intuition to describe and clarify
experience as it is lived and constituted in consciousness’ (Ray, 1994, 118). With a necessary emphasis on the pupil lifeworld, subjectivity, description, interpretation and agency (Denscombe, 2003) the research design incorporated semi-structured discussion, pictorial image making and elements of creative writing.

Group discussions were convened across the participating schools with each pupil group comprising six Year 10 pupils of mixed ability, gender and ethnicity. The project began in the Spring term of 2006 with further validatory meetings being held in the subsequent academic year following the pupils’ entry into Year 11. Discussions were recorded using a dictaphone and field notes which were then transcribed for the follow-up discussions. In these discussions pupils were invited to comment on their earlier contributions and to make a personal response through a preferred two-dimensional visual or written medium. The research concluded with the circulation of the draft outcomes to each school focus group via the convening member of staff.

**Defining the adolescent imagination**

The introductory episodes of the first pupil discussions focused on the construction of personal definitions of imagination without recourse to existing literature or examples. Pupils in each focus group were quickly able to offer their own standpoints, constructing a range of consensual interpretations of imagination.

DT: OK, perhaps we can start by deciding what our own definition of imagination might be.

Emma: I think it’s when you switch off; when something gets a bit boring and you go into your own world.

Jack: Day dreaming, you’re awake but not awake; you’re kind of just staring out of the window…when things are boring…when your brain’s not being challenged, when you’re not working.

Christina: Normally your imagination is kind of the fun things that you think of in your mind.

Rob: It’s the way your mind interprets things. It’s the way you wish things could be.
Laura: Dreams as well; that’s part of your imagination, because you’re switching off, and that’s when your mind gets into gear and you can get ideas from that. Your body’s not in action, it’s just your mind because you are at rest.

Ross: Imagination is how you want to see things. Your interests get put into that.

Jack: A separate world where you’d like to be.

Christina: And how you express yourself.

Pete: Fictional subjects that are in your mind.

Emma: I think sometimes it can be mistakes put together. You learn from your mistakes, so then it comes in your mind and you can evolve something new out of it.

Christina: I think it’s doing stuff, things, outside the box. It’s like thinking but you don’t have any restrictions on your thoughts.

Pete: Estimating the future.

Emma: Creativity is kind of how you transform the idea, what the end product is, what you’ve made; whereas imagination is the first ideas, what you’ve come up with yourself.

These initial commentaries identify imagination with the idea of ‘switching off’, free will, personal interpretation and expression. Emma makes a connection between imagination and creativity - initial ideas and the personal project. Christina’s identification of imagination with personal enjoyment (the ‘fun things that you think of in your mind’), Laura’s ‘mind in gear’ and Ross’ ideas around the projection of personal interests hints at some of the contemporary thinking around the idea of ‘flow’:

‘a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something…what we feel when we read a well-crafted novel or play a good game of squash or take part in a stimulating conversation. The depth of involvement is something we find enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding’

(Csikszentmihalyi and Whalen, 1993, 14).

At Chain Technology College and Lakeside Secondary School, pupil interpretations introduced the relationship of imagination to the unique personal identity.
Tarandeep: I think imagination reflects your personality.

Vaidehi: It’s unique to that one person. It changes from person to person. Your imagination is your own imagination.

Josie: It offers the chance to escape; to really express yourself in a way you’re not normally allowed to do. It’s very personal isn’t it.

Jessica: It’s your individual way of doing things.

Vaidehi: It makes you, imagination.

Nathan: It’s between you and yourself and no one can really take your imagination from you.

Samira: Daydreaming. You’re kind of in control of it yourself.

Josey: Dreaming and daydreaming is like the imagination in your own world, and like imagination in school work, and then the real world. So it’s like dreaming and stuff is personal and is like different to real world imagination.

Darshan: Having your own imagination, your own thoughts, despite everybody else. You can be unique and that.

Reece: It’s the kind of the true you. You haven’t got to worry about what other people are thinking or what you’ve got to show them. You just imagine what you want to imagine and no one needs to know. It’s just you.

Tarandeep was amongst many pupils who associated imagination closely with their unique identity, and for Reece it was a matter of personal privacy. From these initial commentaries pupils began to develop an increasingly sophisticated model of imagination; first, as an abstract concept, and then in relation to their experiences of school and the official curriculum. What emerges from this is a reciprocity between imagination, identity, privacy and a privileged ownership of personal original thought; the latter being something that is not amenable to public scrutiny or external judgement.

Christina: It’s exploration of the mind I suppose. You can go to places where you wouldn’t be able to in reality.

Jessica: There’s like two types. There’s imagination where you’re in your own world and that’s your escape, and then there’s like imagination within the real world which is like stepping into other people’s shoes and like imagining the world that way.
Samira: I think there’s three different types of imagination. You’ve got your irrational imagination like when you’re dreaming, and then the rational like daydreaming, and then you’ve got your real world kind of thing.

Reece: There’s creative imagination and there’s perceptive imagination. Creative imagination is when you are thinking of things or imagining things that you know aren’t going to happen but you want to think of anyway. Perceptive imagination is that you are imagining it even though you know it’s going to happen.

Christina: I suppose imagination is a bit of a distraction from the real world. It can be used to disappear into...you can imagine anything.

Josey: It is an escape. You can become something else, like stepping into peoples’ shoes. It’s a relief from being yourself a bit isn’t it? From all the stresses and everything; if you go into imagination it is like a release.

Tammy: I made a little poem up.

    Imagination means to me
    To go beyond reality
    To think of things that other don’t
    To create your world like others won’t

    Your imagination is totally different to the person next to you. That’s why I said ‘beyond reality’ because it isn’t real, it’s just what you’re thinking in your head.

In the second of our meetings, pupils reaffirmed their emerging model of imagination in which three key aspects were present. Firstly, the idea of imagination as a private interior world characterised by the unconscious imagery of the dream state. Secondly, the private world of free-will, imagined worlds and fantasy. Thirdly, a world ‘other’ to this anchored in the ontology of ‘real’ worldliness and characterised by adolescent realities, parental and school preoccupations and future adult possibilities.

From the pupil perspective, their perceptions challenge any notion of imagination as a universalised, all-embracing human trait; revealing, instead, a multi-dimensional phenomenon to which current educational practices might make only partial claim, e.g. imagination as a thinking skill, imagination as philosophical inquiry, imagination as an empathic feature of emotional intelligence and so on. These perspectives have resonance with those aspects identified within much of the literature on imagination, particularly in relation to supposition, hypothesising, empathy, play, mystery, areas of exploration and the ascription of imagination to meaning in day-to-day lived experience. For example, White (1990) describes imagination as ‘a thought of the
possible rather than the actual, of what might or could be so rather than of what is or must be so’ (White, 1990, 184). Passmore (1980 quoted in Craft, 2005, 18) makes a useful distinction between imaging, imagery and imagination. Imaging takes place through various forms of mental representation, involving visual, auditory, olfactory, kinaesthetic, gustatory and other forms of sense data. Imagining involves such things as pretence, supposition, hypothesising and empathy, whilst being imaginative implies the generation of a novel outcome. In the field of imaginative education, Egan’s work is extensive (1988, 1992, 2005). Drawing on Vygotskian theoretical approaches, Egan turns to cognitive tools as a basis for developing aspects of the imagination such as metaphor, mental imagery, play, mystery and humour. Warnock (1976), in her discussion of Imagination, draws extensively upon the European philosophical traditions of Hume, Kant, Schelling, Sartre and Wittgenstein to ascertain whether certain features of imagination emerge as essential and universal (Warnock, 1976, 9). Warnock's contention is that meanings arise in parallel with the immediacy of our consciousness and that it is the imagination which ascribes these meanings. In day-to-day lived experience we use imagination to apply concepts to things. This, she argues, is the way in which the world is made familiar and subsequently manageable (Warnock, 1976, 207). Furthermore, she suggests that we may also 'render our experience unfamiliar and mysterious', speculating that below the level of consciousness our imagination is at work 'tidying up the chaos of sense experience' yet, at a different level, it may also 'untidy it again'. This leads us to consider the existence of 'unexplored areas, huge spaces of which we may only get an occasional awe-inspiring glimpse, questions raised by experience about whose answers we can only with hesitation speculate' (Warnock, 1976, 208). In England, the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education report All Our Futures (1999) has been widely adopted by government departments as the benchmark for defining creative processes and imagination (see Ofsted, 2003a):

Creative processes have four characteristics. First, they always involve thinking or behaving imaginatively. Second, overall this imaginative activity is purposeful: that is it is directed to achieve an objective. Third, these processes must generate something original. Fourth, the outcome must be of value in relation to the objective. We therefore define creativity as;
Imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value

Imaginative activity is the process of generating something original...

(NACCCE, 1999, 29)

With regard to the definition of imagination proffered by All Our Futures, and Ofsted’s (2003a) subsequent adoption of this, student participants in this study did not accentuate the idea of originality (DCMS, 1999, p.29). Whilst not constituting a rebuttal of or disregard for the place of originality in imagination (individual, relative and historic - as defined by All Our Futures, p.30), their convictions regarding the sanctity of the interior, private, free-willed imaginative lifeworld is at variance with the emphasis given to this aspect in the report’s terms of reference for imagination. The implication of imaginative activity as a purposeful process ‘directed to achieving an objective… generating something original: providing an alternative to the expected, the conventional, the routine…’ (p29) implies the presence of external criteria for judgement and critique. Whilst in certain contexts of ‘creative work’ this may be wholly appropriate, it does not align well with the nurturing of imagination of the sort described by the pupils in this study. Observed from a different standpoint, their definitions also gives credence to those who have challenged an adult portrayal of imagination, particularly with regard to younger children, where ‘imagination’ has come to be regarded as a largely insulated world of innocence, make-believe and fairytale (Machin and Messenger Davies, 2003). These pupil responses suggest that the lifeworld of young people involves different dispositions to imagination in a multiplicity of personal and inter-subjective contexts.

**Freedom and control**

A recurring theme amongst pupils across all the participating schools was a powerful association of imagination with personal freedom.

Laura: You can use your imagination loads more out of school.

Christina: It’s more constricted in school because you have always got to follow the set things.

Christina: I think imagination is all about freedom isn’t it?
Laura: It’s freedom of the mind.

Emma: It’s being able to wander isn’t it. It’s kind of following different routes isn’t it. There’s one school route and then there’s your own kind of different ways of doing things.

Pete: Without imagination no one would take risks, and that’s what makes the world go round.

Christina: It’s like when you imagine something, it’s what you want to imagine.

Laura: It’s how you want to do things.

Vaidehi: We tend not to use it.

Jossie: Yeah. You’re not allowed. You don’t get time to use it.

Josie: The only subjects I feel free to use my imagination is art and drama.

Jessica: Whereas in all the other subjects you have to follow a certain plan

Jessica: You’re not allowed to work out of a set way.

Josie: You’re told what your outcome is, you’re not allowed to try different things.

Vaidehi: There’s a rule. You follow that rule; there’s no imagination. It’s not going to go some mad place. It’s always the same way, there’s no imagination involved, you’ve got to learn it, you’ve got to write it out and that’s it. That’s all there is to it.

Jessica: I suppose in English you can write stories.

Vaidehi: Like drama. Drama’s just like imagination heaven; you can do whatever. Like improvisation, you can be whoever you want. It’s like you said, it’s like an escape isn’t it.

Many of the pupil accounts of their school experiences correspond with Bernstein’s (1971; 1975) classification and framing of educational knowledge and the pedagogic discourse. Bernstein (1971) discusses two types of curricula: those where curriculum contents are insulated from one another through strong disciplinary delineation or boundary (strong classification), and those where boundaries are blurred with subjects or disciplines standing in open relationship to one another. ‘Classification thus refers to the degree of boundary maintenance between contents’ (op.cit p.49). ‘Framing’
refers to the context of the learner experience and, crucially, the strength of the boundary between what ‘may and may not be transmitted’ on the part of the teacher. Strong framing reduces pedagogical and participant possibilities, whilst weak framing increases them (op.cit p.50): ‘this frame refers to the degree of control teacher and pupil posses over the selection, organization and pacing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship’ (op.cit p. 50). What follows is Bernstein’s unique aesthetic visualisation of classification:

Imagine four lavatories. The first is stark, bare, pristine, the walls are painted a sharp white; the wash bowl is like the apparatus, a gleaming white. A square block of soap sits cleanly in an indentation in the sink. A white towel (or perhaps pink) is folded neatly on a chrome rail or hangs from a chrome ring. The lavatory paper is hidden in a cover and peeps through its slit. In the second lavatory there are books on a shelf and some relaxing of the rigours of the first. In the third there are books on the shelf, pictures on the wall and perhaps a scattering of tiny objects. In the fourth lavatory the rigour is totally relaxed. The walls are covered with a motley array of postcards, there is a various assortment of reading matter and curios. The lavatory roll is likely to be uncovered and the holder may well fall apart in use. We can say that as we move from the first to the fourth lavatory we are moving from a strongly classified to weakly classified space, by a space regulated by strong rules of exclusion to a space regulated by weak rules of exclusion.

(Bernstein, 1975 quoted in Halsey et al, 1997, p76)

From the accounts of many of the pupils their experiences of subject framing was characteristically strong, in which they have only limited control over the direction of their activity. Despite some critical indictments of the secondary school curriculum and its associated pedagogy, pupils were also emphatic in their identification of those subjects where imaginative freedom was celebrated and sustained (weak framing); most notably in art, creative writing, dance, drama, history and music.

Rob: I find History another one. It’s like if you are reading about like battles or something you read it as if like you’re actually there in your head, but each person sees it differently in their different way.

Jessica: Like you can go back and you can imagine what happened in the past. I love history it’s just really good for the imagination because you can think about: ‘it must have been like this’. There are cases in history when you don’t know the answer and ‘it could have been this, it could have been that’. You have to imagine it because you just don’t know.
Jessica - on the subject of Dance: That’s brilliant for imagination, it’s like you put a piece of music on and I imagine all these pictures in my head, and then I try and like put them into the dance.

Oliver - on the subject of Drama: you can be someone you’re not, you can visualise yourself in that part.

Samira - on reading: I think through reading you see somebody else’s imagination and see what they see in their minds, see their thoughts and see what they feel, and step into their shoes, and see what they feel… by stepping into their shoes you can like go into their mind to see how they see things and use your imagination to see their imagination.

**Transition and change**

In the final phase of the validation discussions the theme of transition and change in imaginative development was introduced by Rob.

DT: Rob, the last time we met you talked about imagination being personal. Do you want to say any more about that or is that the end of it?

Rob: It’s not something you generally think about is it? It changes as you get older, I’ve got to say that; it tends to fade away as you get older, I do know that.

DT: Can you tell me what it is that fades away?

Rob: The ability to imagine things. When you’re a kid everything’s so vibrant in your head, you’ll see like a chair, and you can make it into a thousand things. You make it into the most amazing things but as you get older you begin to realise that it’s just a chair but when you’re a kid it could be a mountain, it could be anything, you dawn to reality, you come to accept it’s not anything fascinating, it’s just a chair.

DT: Is that just one of those natural things?

Rob: You don’t realise it until you’re asked and you think ‘that’s gone, where is it?’ you know. You realise you can still do it but you really have to think about it. It’s not just so fluent as it is when you’re a child.

Josie: I think the older you get the less imagination you’re allowed to have.

Vaidehi: It’s like little kids have really good imagination. The older you get you kind of stray away from imagination. You just come to the harsh reality of the world; it’s not really that imaginative. When you’re little you have all these ideas in your head, you think you’re going to conquer the world and be the first man on the moon, and when you get older it’s
more like if you write a story. When you’re little you tend to have magical creatures, when you get older it’s more like a novel.

Jessica: I don’t think you lose your imagination, it’s just changed. It’s like grown with you but it’s still there. I think you still have the ability to be as creative and imaginative as if you were a child.

Darshan: I agree actually because like when you read books and things you use a lot of imagination there as well.

Josie: It’s not so much that you lose it, it’s more like…

Vaidehi: We tend not to use it.

Josie: Yeah, you’re not allowed. You don’t get time to use it.

Vaidehi: That’s why I brought up the point about when you get older, because you become more rational. I just think because you’ve got so much responsibility that sometimes imagination doesn’t help that responsibility. It’s more like that you’ve got to do rational thinking and think for yourself and think of others as well.

Jessica: When you were little it was all to do with fairy tales but then you start moving into peer groups.

Rob: It’s like imaginary friends. One day they’re there and the next day they’re not. You just grow out of it.

Tammy: I drew a flower as a sign of growth and how your imagination grows. A sign and symbol of something. The way your imagination grows is the same as how a flower grows.

Jessica: It could be like spiritual because you’re like thinking beyond every day things in a way.

These responses reveal something of the pupils’ maturation into adulthood: the attendant demands of personal responsibility, peer influence, evolving self-identity and there impact on the pupil imaginative lifeworld. In Jessica and Samira’s accounts, imagination finds particular form: in the social dilemma and its possible relationship with spirituality and the empathic response. Of equal significance are the pupils’ reflections on the changes and transition points in imaginative development: Rob’s out-growing of the childhood imaginary friend, the dawning to reality, rational thinking, ‘thinking for yourself’. These responses invite further reflection on transition and change in the imaginative powers of young people, and, moreover,
challenge educators to reappraise what it means to be imaginative in the context of the child-adult lifecourse.

Imagination and the official curriculum

A first observation to be made in relation to the official curriculum is that for the pupil respondents imagination continues to be predominantly represented in creative arts subjects. Art and drama were frequently cited as subjects where pupils had the opportunity to engage in imaginative exploration. Dance and music were also acknowledged as affording imaginative possibilities, depending upon the pedagogic framing of the content. Similarly, creative writing was regarded by a number of pupils as a powerful vehicle for imaginative expression. Given the pivotal role that imagination occupies in the creative process, these responses are not entirely surprising. History was the only exception to this pattern with a number of pupils elaborating upon the ways in which the subject promoted imaginative inquiry (something also revealed in earlier research conducted in primary schools; Trotman, 2005).

Turning to the revised programmes of studies for art, English, history, geography, maths, modern foreign languages and physical education, imagination makes appearances in a range of disparate guises - as visual imagery, in the creation of moods and settings, as a basis for constructing new knowledge, as a mode of personal expression and as a visualisation of other times and places. Although creativity is identified as a key concept in design and technology and music, these subjects do not explicitly identify the role of imagination. With the addition of science’s key stage 3 programmes of study linking creativity with innovation and enterprise, a number of further observations can be made.

The various and idiosyncratic ways in which imagination has been selectively applied to subject aims and key concepts reflects something of the inevitable ideological and cultural tensions that surround the theme of creativity (Craft, 2005) and, by association, imagination. It also mirrors the political expediency that continues to impinge upon matters of curriculum design in English state education. The discontinuities between imagination and creativity that surface within subject specifications are, however, more troubling. If imagination in its various forms is a
critical antecedent to meaningful creative endeavour, then it would seem necessary to give proper recognition of this interrelationship. In the secondary review it falls to the subjects of art and design, English, maths, modern foreign languages and physical education to establish an albeit tentative connection between imagination and creativity: inviting pupils to produce ‘imaginative images, artefacts and other outcomes that are both original and of value’ (art); ‘use imagination to convey themes, ideas and arguments, solve problems, and create settings, moods and characters’ (English); combine ‘understanding, experiences, imagination and reasoning to construct new knowledge’ (maths); use ‘imagination to express thoughts, ideas, experiences and feelings’ (modern foreign languages); and as a means to ‘express and communicate ideas, solve problems and overcome challenges’ (physical education), (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007).

The identification of imagination in these programmes of study is to be welcomed, and when pieced together they may begin to offer a partial glimpse of the extent of the imaginative field. However, even within the limitations of this study, the pupil participants reveal a much richer and deeper landscape of imaginative possibility:

- the reflective personal and private world;
- the unconscious and playful imaginings of dreaming and daydreaming (arguably a necessary pre-requisite for any creative endeavour);
- affectively-centred imaging such as empathy in drama and history, moral dilemmas and forms of pretence;
- imagination as a vision of the possible; and personal reflection.

Many of the pupils also saw a role for imagination in support of their perceived learning styles and strategies; a means of transcending the division between their own fanciful imaginings and the ‘otherness’ of a ‘real world’. This was often typified by adult demands and adolescent responsibilities, e.g. addressing a given ‘moral dilemma’ or undertaking a particular form of problem solving in such areas as ‘thinking skills’ or ‘philosophy for children’. This, in turn, invites further inquiry into the interrelationships between particular aspects of imaginative phenomena that are beyond the initial scope of this study.
Pupil reflections also intimate something about the ways in which purposeful imaginative endeavour (in the terms they describe) can be either nourished or distorted when coupled with the framing of educational knowledge and practice. Their discussions and representations created a picture (in some instances quite literally) of a unique interior world in which external agents should be mindful not to trespass. Tammy’s floral representation of growth, for example (p.13), contrasts strongly with pupil accounts of curriculum experiences characterised by the strong framing of curriculum contents. This calls for consideration to be given to those spaces where imaginative growth might be created beyond the ambit of official curriculum and pedagogy. These spaces might well be within the fabric of the school institution, but, to follow Machin and Messenger Davies (2003), require bracketing from an adult framing of adolescent imagination.

The Latin root word for curriculum, currere (to run the racecourse), resonates with many of the pupil aspirations - where the unanticipated, the ambiguous and the complex take precedence over the static and the pre-specified (Pinar, 1998, 84). For some of the pupil participants the introduction of activities under the aegis of ‘Extended Schools’ has enabled the creation of new spaces in which imagination can flourish: the pottery class, aromatherapy, yoga, gymnastics. For other pupils these spaces were literally physical spaces such as personal ‘time-out’ and communal areas, offering alternative places and moments for relaxation and reflection. Such spaces were often identified by pupils as an antidote to forms of adolescent stress – the latter being regarded by many participants as a major impediment to imagination.

Josie: ‘It’s a relief from being yourself a bit isn’t it? From all the stresses and everything. If you go into imagination it is like a release’.

Jack: To let it [imagination] run free and like think about new things, you can’t be under pressure and you can’t be ‘working’.

John: You’ve got to be relaxed.

Transition and progression
Having established imagination as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, pupil discussions revealed something of the problematic nature of transition in imagination
from childhood to adolescence. Despite the view of Machin and Messenger-Davies (op. cit.) that imagination has suffered from an adult mythologisation of childhood, pupils were of the view that imagination was subject to change in transition – from the vibrant imaginary lifeworld of imagined friends and the pretence of pirate ships to ‘real world’ adolescent concerns. This was regarded by many pupils as something of a natural progression.

Jack: When you’re a little kid you dream about flying and stuff but you never think about it anymore because reality comes at you.

More optimistic reflections were to emerge from Nathan and John.

Nathan: It depends, because some people have good imagination and it helps them to invent something. Like what Jack was saying; a jet pack, you could dream about flying, but not actually flying like superman. So you can build up on your imagination even though it’s not real, you can make it real.

John: And develop it like adult understanding.

Jack: There’s another part of your imagination that makes you achieve your dreams.

In her review of Vygotsky’s writing on imagination, Gajdamaschko’s (2005, 18) observations are of some importance with regard to this. Gajdamaschko discusses Vygotsky’s conception of imaginative growth; from its most elementary and simpler forms to the more complex in which imaginative growth is contingent upon other forms of human activity and the accrual of experience. Emotional development and imagination are also regarded as closely related to child play, with the ability to create and sustain imaginary situations leading to the development of abstract thought (Gajdamaschko, 2005, 19). Critical to the Vygotskian view of imaginative development is recognition of psychological and cultural tools:

‘Imaginative activities develop through the interiorization of correspondent cultural forms that serve as psychological tools. Imagination, which in early childhood appears as a function of play activity, is gradually developed and appropriates new cultural tools in learning activities, and as it changes, it gradually turns into the imagination of adolescence and then into the productive imagination of the adult.’

(Gajdamaschko, 2005, 20).
Examples of psychological tools would then include such things as language, writing, forms of numeration, symbols and signs, works of art, diagrammatic representations, maps and so on. Tammy’s account of her gaming with the computer simulation *The Sims* reveals something of this transition from imaginative free-play to more abstract adult imaginative interests and challenges:

I love *The Sims*. It’s like a simulation game that gets your mind thinking, and like you create your own character in the game and bring them up as if it’s you. You have your own life, as if you would have lived it really. *Sims* 2 is where you age in it as well, so you create a character and you can have kids in it.

You create your own businesses. I’ve got three businesses on it; you have to be the manager. You create your own house and you have to be really imaginative in the game to be able to create like every thing that’s in it; like, in your head. It gets your mind thinking of if that was really you, and you could be like that when you grow up; have your own nice house. And you can have children in it and everything. So it’s a game where I think it’s for the younger generation because when you grow older you’ll like learned from *The Sims* how things are; and if you haven’t got a job then you haven’t got nothing. If you have kids and they play up, which they do on there, they don’t go to school sometimes so they get took off you by the Social, which mine did, you are learning. I was very upset. On this one as well. they age, like an elderly person and then in the end they will die. So, really it is taking you through your life stages of when you grow up. Knowing how things are gonna go. It’s just really good, that’s why it’s called *The Sims* ‘cos it’s a simulation of your mind.

**Conclusions**

Much of the rhetoric around curriculum review in England lays claim to a particular conception of creativity. For the most part this is a mandated version of creativity that is in danger of becoming little more than an impoverished byword for ‘permission’, ‘opportunity’ or relaxation of regulation. Further, there is little in the official public policy discourse to add clarity to its meaning or to enable an appropriate reframing of curriculum and pedagogy.

This too has important ramifications for imagination. Studies of creativity consistently point to imagination as an essential antecedent. Yet the appropriation of creativity into the contemporary educational policy discourse in England threatens to obscure the scope of imaginative possibilities of the sort that have emerged in this
study whilst at the same time privileging particular configurations of imagination, creativity and educational outcome.

Tammy’s account of *The Sims* is but one example of a particular aspect of adult imaginative capacity that may be meaningfully nourished through activities (such as gaming), which are frequently regarded by adults as being inimical to pupil imaginative and creative development. Consideration, too, needs to be given to the tempo of pupil conscious and unconscious imaginative engagement in the context of the school experience. As the pupil accounts appear to illustrate, the opportunities presented by extended schools, although in their infancy, may give rise to new interrelationships in the classification of curriculum contents and the creation of new dynamics in the scope and meter of imaginative reflection. For the most part the conventions of the secondary school curriculum (in its hidden, informal and official manifestations) continue to exercise a powerful and emphatic framing of the pupil imaginative experience; any notion of imaginative experience transcending conventional subject boundaries failed to emerge in this study. Critically, those subjects traditionally associated with the creative and aesthetic experience (namely art, creative writing, dance, drama and music) continue to be the dominant vehicles for imaginative expression in secondary school settings. However, pupils were also very clear that this was contingent upon the framing of the teacher’s pedagogy.

In its claim to offer teachers a more flexible and less prescriptive framework for teaching, the national secondary review has placed great store on active pupil learning, creativity and learning beyond the confines of the traditional classroom setting. If the emergence of imagination as a multifaceted phenomenon in this study in any way accords with the rhetoric around ambitions for a more ‘creative approach’ to curriculum design in key stage Three, then it gives credence to a significant re-examination of the teaching and evaluation practices that frame much of the imaginative educational experiences of pupils in secondary school settings.

In my final visit to Lakeside School a poster on the wall of one classroom proclaimed:

*The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.*
Whilst the national secondary review may provide new possibilities and freedoms for pupil imaginative expression, findings from this study suggest that there is still much to do in enacting the beauty of those dreams.
References


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