What More Needs Saying about Imagination?
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SPECIAL ADDRESS

What more needs saying about imagination?

MARGARET MEEK SPENCER

The 19th World Congress on Reading, hosted by the International Reading Association with the support of the United Kingdom Reading Association, was held July 29–August 1, 2002, in Edinburgh, Scotland. Margaret Meek Spencer was the featured speaker in the opening plenary session of the Congress. The Association is honored to publish Dr. Spencer’s address in its journals—The Reading Teacher, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, Reading Research Quarterly, Lectura y Vida, Thinking Classroom, and Peremena. Through publication of this address in our journals, we are able to bring an inspiring message to the Association’s entire readership.

There is no limit to the human imagination—to our ability to redescribe an object, and thereby contextualize it. A descriptive vocabulary is a way of relating one object to other objects—putting it in a new context. There is no limit to the number of relations that language can capture, of contexts that descriptive vocabularies can create. (Rorty, 2000, p. 23)

This article was originally prepared as a paper for the opening plenary session of the International Reading Association World Congress held in Edinburgh, Scotland, in July 2002. On that occasion, the participants were looking forward to a variety of encounters with others who shared their interest in promoting children’s literacy. There were to be four days of stimulating, collaborative work on many aspects of reading, especially with regard to the progress of young people as readers. My charge was to offer the members of the audience a short prompt, a kind of memorandum that would encourage them to reconsider what Margaret Donaldson, a famous Edinburgh psychologist of reading, called ‘the features of the starting point’ (1978, p. 15). Having considered some of the background knowledge and understandings we held in common, we would then move to new explorations of our individual special interests.

At conferences, I have in my mind’s eye a recurring image of old-fashioned country fairs, where people met to exchange good gossip and cheerfully danced around the traditional maypole, skipping in and out, holding ribbons of different colors.
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colours attached to the top of the pole. Dancing around a maypole was part of my early childhood. (The *locus classicus* for this in children's books is Randolph Caldecott's illustration of *Come Lasses and Lads*, 1884). As the dancers concentrated on their steps and movements, above their heads an intricate pattern appeared on the pole as the circling movements of the dancers plaited the ribbons. The dancers didn't see the pattern until the dancing stopped. As my share in this conference dance, my ribbon was to introduce a consideration of imagination, the aspect of the human condition most taken for granted in the learning and teaching of reading and writing. My concern was to set in motion a studied awareness—a filière—of this topic that might thread its way through our interactions in the days that followed.

The text I held nervously in my hand had been prepared as 'sounded writing' to be read aloud to listeners who would recognize the rhetoric that was to convey the seriousness of the subject with the friendly familiarity of a welcome. This is a revision of that text. It now has the inevitable signs of a greater distance between the writer and the unseen individual reader. The maypole has been put away with the patterned ribbons still entwined, but the dancers have gone.

I chose imagination as a core issue in children's learning to read and write for these reasons. First, we know, as Richard Rorty (2000) said, human imagination has no limits. It cannot be fully accounted for in words. Instead it creates and renews all experiences, hopes, wishes, feelings and thoughts. In my schema for children learning to read and in their continuance as readers and writers, imagination is not something separate or extra that their teachers add to their learning. Making texts mean is the way by which readers, at each stage of growth, 'orchestrate' different kinds of knowledge of life and language text. Imagination is at the heart of this process. As Anne Bussis and her colleagues said, 'Reading is the act of orchestrating diverse knowledge in order to construct meaning from text while maintaining reasonable fluency and reasonable accountability to the information contained in writing' (Bussis, Chittenden, Amarel, & Klausner, 1985, p. 67).

Second, it is impossible to keep thinking and imagination apart, especially in the 'firstness' of children's early encounters with the world they have to learn to make sense of. Creativity is cognitive consciousness and imagination. The child who sees stars for the first time and says they are 'holes in the sky' makes the case exactly. Caught up in immediate classroom realities of helping children learn to read, we may put poetry and storytelling on one side until we have dealt with letter sounds. But when children have their first reading lessons, at home or at school, their imaginations are already up and running as the fulcrum of their views of the world and how it works. Their language is already at work on the process.

Third, we now have a deal of evidence, chiefly from studies of children's early experiences, that convinces me that metaphor is at the heart of children's learning. They explain things to themselves in terms of sameness and difference. When this happens in language they are not only extending their vocabularies, they are also working out meanings. Much of this understanding has been available for some time. But the pressure to provide new insights about children's early behaviour, especially in specialized cases of deprivation, loss, exile and exclusion, has led to a tendency to take for granted some things that contributed to our current state of awareness (Neuman & Roskos, 1998).

Take children's play and storytelling, for example. Go back to Sigmund Freud. Imagine him watching a child playing with a cotton reel tied to a piece of string. The child throws away the reel, saying 'fort' (gone), sternly. Then, as he pulls the reel back he says 'da' (there), in a different tone of voice. Freud interprets the child's delight in bringing back the reel as his way of coping with his father's absence. Jean Piaget explained how children come to understand that objects have 'permanence'. They continue to exist even when they can't be seen. Jacques Lacan said that the difference between 'fort' and 'da' is a linguistic difference. Each of these explanations is an imaginative interpretation of both the words, and more than the words. How then would you respond to a question posed by a young child who, watching his mother holding his baby brother, asks, 'Does his head come off?' The deep structures of metaphoric activity are part of what we interpret as imagination. Where do children think their parents go when they disappear? Will they come back? The nature of imagination is not always benign.

Nevertheless, imagination is one of the good words for what Terry Eagleton called 'the global reach of the mind' (2000, p. 45). Most people speak well of it, adding adjectives such as vivid and active. In terms of literary criticism its use is generally positive. Sometimes, however, imaginative has been linked with lies and deceit. Many grown-ups are still anxious about the 'truth' value of narrative fiction. Others have created the notion of 'imaginative accountancy' to describe ways of cheating tax collectors.
Imagination joins cognition and affect, thinking and feeling, especially when we praise something. As there is no all-encompassing definition of imagination, we tend to look for examples and appearances of it where it serves as a form of approval: in chess moves, golf, cooking, patterns of design and engineering, as well as in more usual examples in art, music and poetry. Just before the IRA World Congress, a series of news broadcasts repeated the accusation that the British security services had failed to engage with the likelihood of a terrorist attack with 'sufficient imagination', the implication being that terrorists were already in the processes of imaginative planning for another one.

My initial rereading for this topic included poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, some of his notebooks and lectures, and volume II of his biography by Richard Holmes (1998), who wrote that 'At the heart of Coleridge's thesis would emerge a concept of the poetic imagination which acted as a single unifying force within all creative acts' (p. 108). Holmes also showed in detail how Coleridge's idea 'may well have been partly triggered by [Sir Humphry] Davy's own scientific theories about the nature of energy and matter.' He added that this was an early premonition of the modern physicist's search for a "Grand Unified Theory" applicable to the entire cosmos' (p. 108). The modernity of Coleridge's thinking is a recurrent emphasis in the biography.

When I was engrossed in these ideas, I went to a colloquium that brought together the scientists of the Royal Society (founded in 1660) with Richard Holmes and members of the Royal Society of Literature on the topic of 'Coleridge among the Scientists'. Imagination was at the heart of the discussions as was Holmes's conviction that 'Coleridge did not write like a traditional philosopher at all, but closer to a modern existentialist viewpoint, in which the actual experience of moral choice and the creative act are invoked as formative events' (1998, pp. 410–412). In this discussion we meet again the remnants of an old argument that confines imagination to art and reason to science. The coming together of the two Royal Societies is to blur the boundaries that keep science and the humanities apart. Part of this endeavour has been supported by the attention paid to imaginative literature for children.

American philosopher Maxine Greene's work on 'releasing imagination' as a significant feature of good teaching has something of Coleridge's intensity. For her, 'imagination is seeing anew'. As we see anew, we share perspectives offered by knowledge and understanding' (2000, p. 90). To exemplify this she has drawn on her early reading experiences, mostly of English canonical texts:

It struck me early in my life that the languages of imaginative literature disclosed alternative ways of being in and thinking about the world. I read not only the fairy stories, but also Charles Kingsley’s *Water Babies* (which I did not originally realize was the work of someone outraged by the mistreatment of child laborers) and Kenneth Graeme’s *Wind in the Willows*. Before I entered into Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, James Barrie’s *Peter Pan* was a climactic discovery for me. The metaphor of flight through an open window towards Never-Never Land gave me some hint of what imagination could do before I ever learned the word. (p. 90, copyright 2000. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)

Just how hard children work to make sense of the world is evinced in their play and in research analyses of it over decades. Lately, however, the acknowledged link between symbolic play and interactions with storybooks has moved out of focus. The drive to maintain structured learning has resulted in less continuous reading of complete texts, such as books where the pictures and the words enhance and extend each other, or short novels in which the reader learns to distinguish the author from the narrator. I'm inclined to believe, however, that, in their contacts with new media, children run ahead of adults in their ability to derive meaning from pictures. The emphasis on 'visual literacy' will surely offer a series of new descriptions of imagination in this context (Arizpe & Styles, 2003).

The international audience at the opening ceremony in Edinburgh reminded us all that imagination is likely to be culturally and historically specific. According to Raymond Williams (1983), *culture* is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. Beyond its attachment to the artistic skills and gifts of the few, it also refers to common social and intellectual interests. As Williams's disciple, Terry Eagleton, tells us, culture isn't just what we live by, the day-to-day, taken-for-granted of what is familiar, but it's also what we live for, global extensions of our thinking and feeling, joy and peace in continuing. For children, reading is a dialogue with their future: their anticipations of 'what will happen next?' and 'shall I be able to cope with it?' (Eagleton, 2000, p. 131).

History is more than the narrative of our past that we learned at school or picked up afterwards. Instead, it is the affective relationships we have with places, times and beginnings; our origins, memories, kinship and communities; more good words. Equally, we know that, whatever language we speak,
any person with whom we can communicate is not an alien. Culture and history are part of our imagination; they constitute the Big Narrative, the story we are all part of.

Young people sometimes take longer than we think to understand the otherness of others, hence the importance of Coleridge's notion of displacement: his idea of how we understand their interior landscape. I'm fairly sure I learned to do this by reading. It was easier to see why book characters acted as they did before I tried to understand why the adults I knew were less predictable. I used to ask student teachers where they were when they read a novel or a poem, and was there any difference when they read a newspaper. They always saw the point quickly. They knew the world of the newspaper, or bits of it, as 'real'. With the poet or the novelist they were both in the 'real' world and, at the same time, in the world the novelist or the poet had taken great pains to create for them.

Now hear the words of Nobel poet Seamus Heaney, who shows how 'poetry earns its keep' as the mainspring of imagination and language: 'Consciousness can be alive to two different and contradictory dimensions of reality, and still find a way of negotiating between them' (1995, p. xiii). I both think and feel this to be true. Such awareness as we have when we read, look, or hear helps the growth of what we can envisage. I also believe imagination shrivels and shrinks if it is not nourished by these 'negotiations'. Those who create literature for young people offer them worlds of possibilities.

Lately, adults have also entered the same territories, with interest and satisfaction. For example, adult readers of Harry Potter stories have narrowed the perceived gap between narratives for older and younger readers. Over the last two years or so, I've seen adults reading the stories of Harry Potter in the London Underground. Some fully engrossed readers have gone past their destinations. One day, when I went to get a train from Kings Cross to Cambridge, there was a notice painted in white on the platform (the surface of the walkway): 'No Broomsticks to Be Parked Here'. A little farther along were 'Owls Must Be Kept in Cages' and 'New Boys Queue Here'. A notice on a solid brick wall said 'Platform 9½'. A banner above my head announced 'Hogwarts School'.

These announcements constituted a move from the actuality of the train to Cambridge to the invented world of J.K. Rowling and back again. As the first film of Harry Potter's exploits was being shown in London at that time, most of my fellow passengers were contemplating Heaney's (1995) two dimensions of reality. The reality that they may have been avoiding by means of a temporary imaginative absence was the fact that this was the railway line where there had been a recent devastating train crash.

Young imaginations often move into a mental space that they recognize from what they read. Authors of children's books and makers of new computer software help their readers to appreciate the possibility of parallel worlds. But it takes the matching imagination of the reader to complete the process. Teachers follow the trails of philosophers, poets, artists, psychologists and literary theorists who explore imagination as the global reach of the mind and how it may be developed. The trouble is, education seems bound to concentrate on the outer realities of learning—information—and so there is less time for the imaginative possibilities of different kinds of reading and thinking. Music and art should not be optional extras in the curriculum.

Lev Vygotsky was clear about imagination. He linked its development to language, which lets children think about what they don't see and may not encounter in play. They use imaginative language as they make worlds of play and stories. These are not subconscious fantasies. Instead they are various kinds of internal drama, directed behaviour that becomes utopian constructions (1978).

This idea brings us to a central point in children's imagining. Before they go to school they seem to keep the inner and the outer realities close together. In some children they are never fully separated. Ted Hughes, in a paper that strongly influenced a whole decade and more of writing for children, said that a child takes possession of a story as what might be called a unit of imagination. In attending to the world of such a story there is the beginning of imaginative and mental control. There is the beginning of a form of contemplation.... The story itself is a kind of wealth. (1976, p. 80)

In Carol Fox's explorations of early oral narratives, children

invent worlds peopled by lions, bears, rabbits, witches, giants, robbers, policemen, heartless mothers or small children. They make liberal use of magic and coincidence, extreme forms of punishment, a great deal of violence and much fear and suspense. To tell their stories, the children use their knowledge, knowledge they are not aware they have, of the ways narratives get told. (1993, p. 25)

What was clear from the start of Fox's impressively detailed account of pre-school children's storytelling and world making was their imaginative
narrative competences. They were often reworking stories they had heard read, but these were not simple repetitions. The transformations became ‘a space where children can work out emergent subjectivities in the medium of language’ (1993, p. 34). Even so, making a new story from the parts of others and the incidents of everyday life needs the power of directed imagination.

Alice, aged 4, offers a simpler example. Like other children of her age and culture she knows the story of Cinderella and spends much time reworking it. (There are more than 200 collected versions already. My favourite is that of James Britton’s daughter who summed up the whole tale as ‘a bit sad book about two ugly sisters and the girl they were ugly to’. This gave her father the idea that children ‘may possess a highly general sense of form’.)

Alice has been to see a fairly straightforward production of ‘Cinderella’ at the Youth Theatre. For weeks afterwards she insists on re-creating the play with her parents, grandparents and other consenting adults. Alice is both the producer and the protagonist. Before each performance the others wait to be allotted their parts, although the cast list remains the same. Father and grandfather are the Ugly Sisters. (It is not clear whether Alice thinks this is a description of their appearance, or of their characters). Grandmother becomes the fairy godmother. (Godmothers in Alice’s family are associated with presents). We are all involved in transformations. First we have to change our voices to indicate who we are. This foregrounds the play of voices that children practise with telephones, and the dialogic monologues they perform with their toys. It is the dialogic imagination externalised.

Alice has created four scenes: the arrival of the invitations and the decision that Cinderella will stay at home; the transformations made by the good fairy; the dramatic return at midnight; the arrival of the prince with the slipper. The actors are not allowed to improvise. Throughout, as Vygotsky (1978) said, consciousness departs from reality. Alice’s running commentary on the performances of the adults makes this clear. At the same time, it is also evident that she is aware of her family as themselves as well as the characters they portray.

In Vygotsky’s (1978) scheme of things, to imagine other realities is important. Imagination has the capacity to enrich realistic thinking by liberating it from too close a dependence on immediate perception. Myra Barrs, who has studied this topic in depth, sees imaginative thinking as ‘the paradigm of advanced thinking generally, and necessary for its development’ (1998, personal communication).

Alice has some way to go. Meanwhile she dramatizes other stories and enjoys the feelings that come with the recitation of lines like ‘Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are’. Wonder is a word she practises; she gives it additional awe in a sequence of recitative tones. She will come to know it as an abstract noun. Meanwhile she is learning from pictures in books the words for the things she hasn’t yet encountered.

Skilled authors and artists are extending Alice’s play as they encourage her to enjoy reading. Would You Rather by John Burningham (1978) depicts imagined situations that could occur in the life of a young reader who is being asked to consider possibilities and make choices (e.g., Would you rather be lost...in the fog, at sea, in a desert, in a forest, or in a crowd?). There are no marks of punctuation on the pages. After the question form, the words act as captions to the pictures. The pictures evoke frissons of disgust, swallowing a dead frog; of fear, being lost; of shame, mum having a row in a café. There is also an implicit challenge of ‘I dare you’ from the artist-author to the reader.

In the later stages, when young readers and viewers are more experienced and independent, authors and artists introduce growing points, instances in a story where the reader moves to a more mature understanding of cause and effect, understanding feelings and the greater vocabularies of description and abstraction. These epiphanies are features of current writing, complex often, but books for older readers seem to offer their reader ways of confronting what the world could be like, for better or worse. In terms of imagination, we are bound to take account of more than what young people read. They are bombarded on all sides by seductive possibilities of what life could be like if only....

What more needs to be said about imagination? I leave the answer open, having drawn on those whose words seem to suggest ideas to be explored. One thing seems certain. Imagination is the ultimate freedom. It lets all of us realize how things might, or could, be otherwise. But after that, we are bound to be responsible for what we help to bring about, especially in the education of children.

The imaginative transformation of human life is the means by which we can most truly grasp and comprehend it’ (Heaney, 1995, p. xv). This quotation comes from Seamus Heaney’s commentary on a poem by Robert Frost. He was writing about what poetry is good for. Like many things best begun in childhood, discovering something of the poetic imagination is one of the most significant. Thus play, narrative stories and poems are ways by which
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children's imagination grows together with their increasing grasp on the world and their more general paradigms of advanced thinking.

It seemed right at the time to finish with a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson (1885), one of Edinburgh's best-known writers of poetry for children, as an example of the best kind of answer to the question we began with.

The Land of Nod

From breakfast on through all the day
At home among my friends I stay,
But every night I go abroad
Afar into the land of Nod.

All by myself I have to go,
With none to tell me what to do—
All alone beside the streams
And up the mountain-sides of dreams.

The strangest things are there for me,
Both things to eat and things to see,
And many frightening sights abroad
Till morning in the land of Nod.

Try as I like to find the way,
I never can get back by day,
Nor can remember plain and clear
The curious music that I hear.

MARGARET MEEK SPENCER has an international reputation in the fields of children's literature and literacy. Over more than 40 years she has worked with significant effect to promote a wider recognition of the importance of literature of quality for children and of the benefits that can accrue from its serious study. For this she is respected and honoured by authors, publishers, librarians, parents, teachers, and academics.

Her broad conception of literature embraces not only picture books, stories, novels, and poetry but also information texts and electronic texts. In all these categories Spencer has viewed texts intended for children not as a lesser branch of adult literature but as part of the larger enterprise of literature for all. She has used the same critical apparatus to examine it, with illuminating results. Her work is animated by a constant concern to offer children texts rich in meaning, realised through images and words that delight and challenge young readers.

Spencer has helped teachers and others who work with children to observe with a more intelligent and perceptive eye how children make sense of texts and the ways in which they weave them together with their other experiences of life. In this way she has been a major influence on the thinking and the practice of many teachers and academics working in education and has significantly deepened our conception of literacy. Through her writing and speeches she has markedly affected the education of very many children, throughout and beyond the English-speaking world. She has substantially enriched the understanding of teachers about what it is to be literate and how the very youngest children can be challenged and nourished by their encounters with texts.

The many books by Spencer on different aspects of literature for children and on literacy are memorable for their conceptual subtlety, breadth of reference and scholarly attention to detail. Several of these texts have become classics of their genres (e.g., Meek, 1993, 1998a, 1998b). Indeed, through her writing Spencer has raised the level of understanding of many thousands of parents, teachers, and academics about the role texts play in children's success as readers and writers.

References


