

# Tornadoes, transformers and time to imagine

## Increasing opportunities for creative thinking with a class of young children

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### **Abstract**

This article looks at a specific intervention carried out with forty young children over the course of an academic year. The aim of the intervention was to give opportunities for creative thinking, with the ultimate goal of promoting learning free from preconceptions and judgements of ability. The intervention resulted in learning through co-agency, opportunities for the teacher to deepen their understanding of the pupils and their learning and, ultimately, it empowered pupils to become better learners.

**Keywords:** Learning without Limits, primary pupils, reflective practitioner

This article contributes to research around ‘Learning without Limits’ and is rooted in a specific intervention carried out in class over an academic year. Fundamentally, the aim was to create learning uninfluenced by judgements of ability (Hart, Dixon, Drummond, & McIntyre, 2004). In *Learning without Limits*, Hart et al. (2004) identify practices that are characteristic of teaching and learning free from concepts of ability and traditions stemming from the ability-based model. The book makes multiple references to the value of giving thinking time within the classroom as a way of enhancing learning capacity. I wanted to explore how to offer children opportunities for thinking time with the ultimate goal of developing opportunities for learning without predetermined limits.

My setting is a bilingual French/English school in an affluent area of France. To give context, children in the school are almost exclusively from French-speaking homes. They start school in the year they turn three-years-old and are in an English immersion class for the first three years of their schooling. From the fourth year (CP) and onwards, the children spend half of their day with a teacher who is a native speaker of English, and the other half with a French native speaker. I carried out the intervention with forty CP children aged between five and seven years old.

In order to proceed, it is necessary to explore the meaning of thinking within the classroom. Kelly (2004) describes deep thinking as purposeful, listing the purposes as ‘searching for meaning, making critical judgements, being creative, problem-solving

and decision-making' (p5). Of these purposes, the creative purpose seems to arise less frequently and is given less value in the classroom (Gregory, Hardiman, Yarmolinskaya, Rinne & Limb, 2013). I wanted to make space for this kind of thinking, giving learners the opportunity to 'explore, describe and explain the world' (Kelly, 2004, p24) on their own terms.

I therefore looked away from the kind of thinking opportunities which are often present in the classroom, that is to say structured thinking about a problem posed by the teacher. Instead, I wanted to focus on giving opportunities for an opposite kind of thinking: playful, play-based and child-led thinking. In essence, this meant dedicating time to following children's imaginations.

## **The value of imagination**

Dewey wrote that, 'the engagement of the imagination is the only thing that makes any activity more than mechanical' (Boydston, 1980, p244). This assertion is fundamental to my own values as a teacher but is something I find practically difficult to uphold and give space to in the classroom. The ever-increasing emphasis on measurable outcomes in education devalues activities that have imagination at their heart. Cognition and imagination are not measurable entities, and, as a result, the data culture does not afford them the status they deserve (Gregory et al. 2013; Yarker, 2019), even if we know as pedagogues that they are what really 'drive learning forward' (Armstrong, 2019, p75).

Having previously worked exclusively in the state education system in the UK, I feel that in some respects, the education system in France affords more freedom to teachers to make space for imagination. For example, there is less emphasis on data tracking and teacher accountability. However, my anecdotal experience is that education in French society, and amongst the teaching body, is seen as a 'delivery' of knowledge. In some classes, children are tested at the end of each unit of work in each subject. '*Redoublement*' (being held back a year) and '*saut de classe*' (skipping an academic year) are common for children considered 'bright' or 'behind'. Having said this, this delivery-based model of education is perhaps balanced by the emphasis on culture, arts and sports in the French public sphere, as well as the culture of valuing leisure and family time, in my experience to a much greater degree than in the UK.

Giving time and space for imagination and play in class seemed a good way to embrace the Learning without Limits philosophy. Indeed, any space or time given to imagination in the classroom has the ethics of Learning without Limits at its centre: co-agency, everybody and trust (Hart et al., 2004). If we consider play to be the physical manifestation of a child's imagination, it becomes clear that imagination is not an individual activity. Paley, in her book documenting her attempts to break into the fantasy world of children, states 'the individual imagination plays host to all the stimulation in

the environment and causes ripples of ideas to encircle the listeners' (Paley, 1991, p21). The imagination both influences and is influenced by the environment and audience. Research on the Reggio Emilia approach, an approach which has creative thinking, or imagination at its heart, often points to the value given to collaboration (Hong, Shaffer, & Han, 2017; Kang, 2007). This unarguably concurs with the learning without limits description of co-agency as implying both teacher and learners operating as active agents (Hart et al., 2004). Equally, it concurs with the ethic of everybody by 'constructing learning as a collective experience' (p189).

Fundamentally, allowing children to imagine also puts trust in them. Hart et al. describe the ethic of trust as trusting learners to 'make meaning of what they encounter in school and out of it' (p191). Dewey saw imagination as a vital component in the reconstruction of experience (1907). As Paley explains eloquently, pretend is 'the child's real and serious world' (1991, p7); to enter the world of the child is essentially to trust them.

## **The Intervention**

At the start of the school year, I gave the children an A4 exercise book containing lined and blank pages. I presented the exercise book to the children as an 'imagination book'. Children were given time to use their imagination once or twice per day, for up to fifteen minutes at a time. I did not give any direction on how the children should use their book. Instead I emphasised to them that this was their book, and that they could choose how to use it. The timing of the use of the books varied. The children often used the books after break or lunchtime, but sometimes it was following a class discussion or a focused activity.

Once a week, one learner had the opportunity to present something in their imagination book that they wanted to share with the class. All children had an opportunity to present throughout the school term, but it was not obligatory. Following the presentation, the whole class was invited to what we called 'the conversation', where they discussed the work and questions arising from it. I participated in the conversation with the children.

My goal was explicitly to give time for creative activity within the class, without this activity being dictated or instructed by the teacher (Vygotsky, 2004). The impact of giving this time was evaluated through analysis of the children's productions and observation of the conversation, taking into account prior knowledge I had gathered about the children whilst working with them throughout the year.

The intervention encompassed all the ethics of Learning without Limits: everybody, trust and co-agency (Hart et al. 2004). Everybody was invited to participate on an equal level. The task was open and offered joint control by teachers and learners, ensuring co-

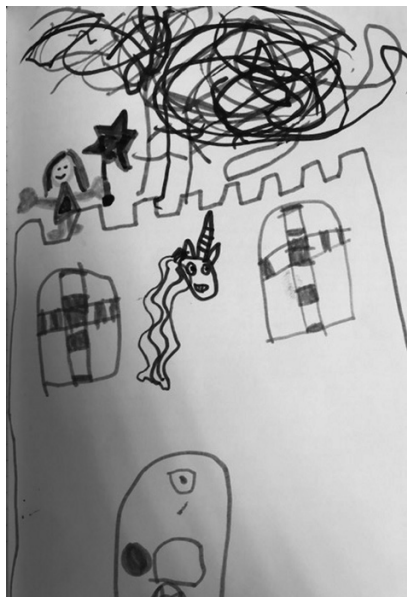
agency. Finally, children were trusted to make meaning, to find relevance and purpose, to contribute to each other's learning through the conversation and trusted to take away and contribute something worthwhile.

The productions in the imagination books and my observations of the ensuing 'conversation' were multifaceted and rich. For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to look at the project through the lens of three of my reflective findings, which seem most pertinent and important. Firstly, that the activity in itself taught the children something, that the children took away something that may have been on my agenda as a teacher on another day, or through another activity. This is discussed in detail below, as there are important distinctions to make between this and other teaching moments. Secondly, the project offered me as a teacher, an increased understanding of teaching and learning processes, and indeed of the children as individuals. Finally, the process of working in the imagination books and having the conversation, the essence of this being increased co-agency, empowered learners and had positive effects which I saw elsewhere in the classroom environment

### **Learning outcomes without learning objectives**

The most discernible and immediate observation to be made was that the children learnt something from each conversation, without being taught in the passive model of the teacher having a specific objective, and imparting knowledge to the children with the goal of them reaching the objective. When discussing the ethic of co-agency, Hart et al. state that 'what young people will learn from any particular set of tasks or activities

cannot be tightly prespecified, because it will reflect not just what the teacher has prepared and anticipated for their learning but also what they put in, what they bring and what they make of the opportunities that the teacher provides' (2004, p182). My observations substantiated this claim, as is illustrated in the following image and the ensuing conversation.



Marie (not her real name) presented her work as 'a school of magic, of magic and unicorns' (see figure one). She explained how the princess in her picture was making 'a tornado of colours'. It is evident to the audience that Marie has taken many classic elements of the fairy tale tradition (unicorns, castles, princesses and spells).

*Figure one: a school of magic and unicorns*

However, at the same time, her own imaginings and interpretation of the tropes of fairy tales is evident. This is not any castle, simply a setting for the princess; it is a school. Perhaps Marie is highlighting here a discrepancy she feels when identifying with female characters in traditional fairy tales. In Marie's reinterpretation of the fairy tale genre, she has given the princess a purpose and agency, as opposed to the traditional role where the princess is acted upon by other more powerful characters, i.e. saved by a prince or cursed by a witch. It was noticeable that Marie also made no reference to the princess's appearance (a typical feature of traditional fairy tales). Instead, she talks about what the princess was doing. Her princess is valued for her actions and agency, and her power to act on and steer the narrative by casting a spell.

In her presentation, Marie has reimagined the word tornado and enlarged its meaning. To quote Michael Armstrong, 'the word itself has taken on a revolutionary new life' (2009, p48). Giving Marie the opportunity to live what Calvino describes as the 'imaginative process' (as cited in Armstrong, 2009, p44) has, in itself, expanded her vocabulary and those of her listening peers. She has had to find the words to describe her imaginings, to make links with what she already knows. She has selected a word which perfectly contains the concept she describes and is understandable to the listener.

To repurpose a phrase used in UK national policy and curriculum documents which are pervaded by a passive model of learning (Hart et al., 2004, p169), the learning outcomes of this activity for Marie are apparent. Expanding vocabulary, making links between texts and their own personal experience and using prediction in stories by engaging prior knowledge of genre, are all objectives of primary school teaching.

This activity has resulted in these outcomes for Marie. The act of creating her work and sharing it has allowed her to learn and develop these skills and more. The skills were not prescribed by the teacher, but the co-agency of the activity allowed for her to explore the skills on her own terms. Marie has gone further in her exploration of vocabulary than the regurgitation prescribed in National Curriculum documents. She has explored the word 'tornado' in a literary sense, as a metaphor, simultaneously demonstrating her nuanced understanding of the word and developing her understanding further.

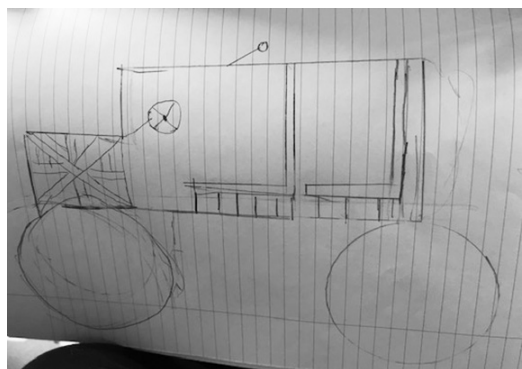
The effects for the other children were also visible. In the conversation that followed, facilitated but not led by the teacher, the children debated whether magic was always colourful, whether we make things beautiful for our own pleasure or for the pleasure of others, and whether magic is real. The final contribution to the conversation was 'magic is real because it's when we love someone'. This deep exploration of the vocabulary attached to Marie's image is something I feel would be difficult to achieve in a top-down, teacher-directed activity. It was achieved because the activity was led by the children and their engagement with 'the conversation'. In other words, it was an authentic situation which is difficult (if not impossible) to replicate in teacher prescribed activities.

## Understanding learners

Hart et al. (2004) state that an ability-based view ‘deprives teachers of the chance to base and develop their practice upon a more complex, multifaceted and infinitely more empowering understanding of teaching and learning processes, and of the influences, internal and external to the school, that impinge on learning and achievement’ (p17). My analysis of the imagination books, as well as of the ensuing conversation, gave me an insight into the children as individuals, and often into the factors impinging on their learning.

An example of this is the image below. The image was produced (and presented) by a boy whom we will call Benjamin. My French counterpart and I had some concerns for Benjamin. We had both noticed that he often copied his peers, seemed very reluctant to ask his peers or teachers questions or for clarification, and was displaying some low-level resistant behaviour.

His drawing is composed of regular shapes and mainly straight lines, squares,



rectangles and circles (see figure two). This echoes the prescriptive presentation expected in the French education system. Children are expected to follow strict rules governing how to set out their work, which includes counting the number of squares to know where to write a heading and changing pen colour depending on the subject.

Benjamin described his drawing as a ‘four by four bus transformer’ and talked about its features – its four big wheels, the antenna for the radio and the flag.

*Figure two: four by four bus transformer*

One of the other children asked, ‘why can it transform?’ Benjamin answered, ‘It was too hard to draw a four by four, so I did a transformer’. The conversation continued, and later another child asked, ‘why are there no people?’ Benjamin responded, ‘because they were too hard to draw’.

Benjamin clearly articulated his fear of getting this wrong, of trying something that he was not sure he would succeed in. Even within his imaginings, he held on firmly to the idea that he could get things wrong. His drawing was rooted in things within his own experience that were safe and achievable for him. This experience was highly valuable for me as Benjamin’s teacher, as it allowed me to understand the inner and external factors that were affecting his learning capacity.

Another example where analysis of the imagination books allowed me a view of the

factors affecting learning capacity, was with regards to a pupil who I will refer to as Julie. At the start of the year, I would have described Julie as confident and secure in her role in the class. Julie was appreciated by her peers and played with a range of children. However, I quickly noticed that Julie would regularly have days where she would be tearful and less emotionally resilient to the social events typical of seven-year-old life, for example, another pupil taking control of a game or taking her place in the line.

When I looked at Julie's imagination book, I noticed that multiple pages were dedicated to her parents and her sister (see figures three and four). The pages typically featured hearts, stars, and labelled drawings of her family in bright colours. I knew that Julie had a positive and happy relationship with her family, as she often talked about them in class. It seemed that she was using her imagination time to think of the place where she felt happy and secure, that is, with her family. This observation led me to reflect on Julie's perceived (by herself and by her peers) social position in the class community. Although Julie played happily with lots of children in the class, she had not formed the kind of close mutual friendships that other children had, and I wondered whether this resulted in feelings of insecurity about her place in the class. The insight gained from analysis of her imagination book prompted me to pay special attention to Julie's social interactions and to try to and understand and facilitate the forming of friendships.

It is impossible to say conclusively whether my instincts were correct. However, after acting on my interpretations, the subsequent work in Julie's imagination book contained only one reference to her family, drawn on her mum's birthday (see figure five). Instead, there was one reference to me, her teacher, as shown in figure six. This was followed a few pages later by a page which read 'je t'aim' (I love you) followed by the name of one of her classmates. I suggest that this indicates that Julie had begun to form close and meaningful relationships within the class. School had become a place where she felt secure and happy, a place she chose to have in

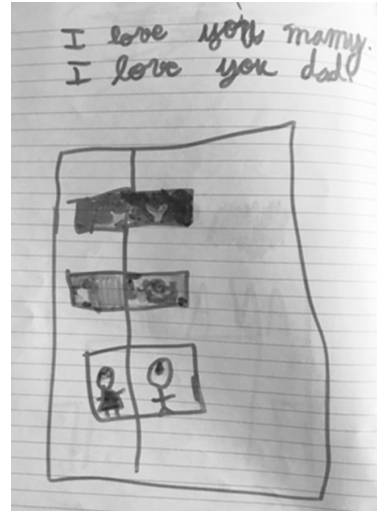


Figure three: I love you Mummy, I love you Dad

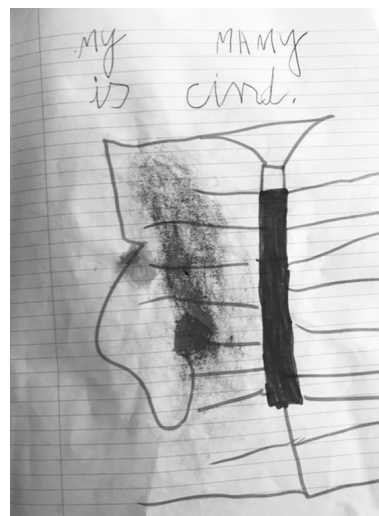


Figure four: My mummy is kind

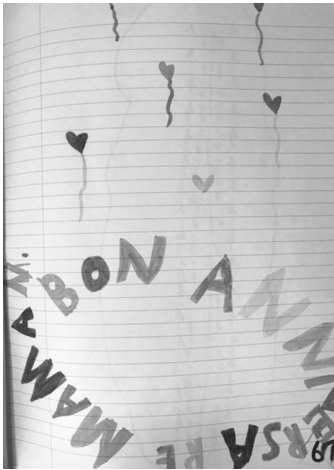
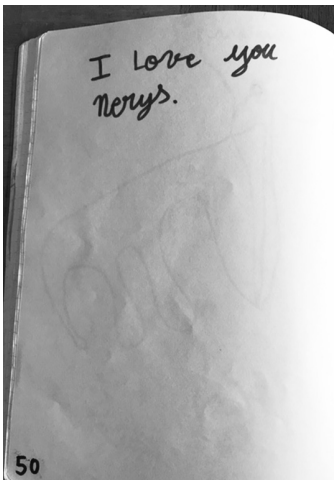


Figure five: Happy birthday Mum

Figure six: I love you Nerys



her mind when she had the opportunity to dream and imagine anywhere she wanted.

## Empowering learners

Hart et al. state that the pedagogy of Learning without Limits builds ‘the foundations that will continue to support and extend the possibilities for learning in the future’ (2004, p114). I observed that the open-ended and co-agent nature of the imagination book and the conversation empowered learners. I argue that the empowerment and increased agency that the activity afforded the children, expanded learning capacity both during the conversation and for the future.

The example of Benjamin, discussed earlier, illustrates this point. The previous section focused on how the conversation allowed me an insight into the external barriers affecting Benjamin’s learning capacity, specifically his fear of getting things wrong. As well as allowing me as a teacher to recognise these barriers, I observed that the experience of presenting and discussing his imagination book went some way towards alleviating the obstacles.

Firstly, I noticed that, when responding to questions about his drawing and justifying his choices, Benjamin repeatedly used the phrase ‘*je me suis dit que...*’ (I said to myself that...). This was not a phrase he commonly used and could be interpreted as an act of metacognition; he was recognising himself as the actor in creating the work and making the choices. In contrast to a purveying

sense of powerlessness which could be detected in his earlier responses discussed above, the phrase ‘I said to myself that...’ affirms his agency in his learning, positioning him as the actor and decision maker in the creative process.

Additionally, the questions posed by the other children such as ‘can it go on lava?’ or ‘can it go to the centre of the earth’ pushed him and his drawing into the world of the imaginary. The other children ‘scaffolded’ his learning (Hong et al., 2017). Their questions repositioned him as the authority, the one with the power to create the right answer. This position was in opposition to the way he initially came at the activity, afraid of getting it wrong. This echoes Paley’s affirmation that:



in play, the child says, 'I can do this well; I can be this effectively; I understand what is happening to me and to the other children'. (1991, p10)

This specific event confirmed for me a general impression I had about a change in learning behaviours in class which seemed to be linked with the imagination book project. The playful and imaginative nature of the activity removed the pressure of there being a right answer, known by the teacher, which can exist even in open-ended teacher led activities and can stifle open expression. Meek describes this as learners 'searching for clues as to what the teacher wants'. (2011, p362) In the conversation, the learners were not looking to the teacher because they were the only possible experts on the work that came from their imagination. Thus, they experienced feelings of security and empowerment. This was evident when children were working in their imagination books and also during the conversation.

When working in their books, even students who regularly needed to 'check in' with the teacher for other tasks were more independent and self-reliant, for example producing writing without asking for help spelling words (see figure seven). During the conversation, children who were often reluctant to contribute to class discussions were vocal, asking questions and asking to present their own work. Throughout the project, my general impression was that these learning behaviours seemed to become present more often in other activities. Hart et al. state 'young people can become better learners, if the subjective conditions needed to support and empower their learning are developed'. (2004, p192) My reflection was that, positioning the children as the experts in one part of their school life, empowered them and gave them the motivation and courage referenced by Swann, Peacock, Hart, & Drummond, M.J.. (2012, p4)

Although this observation is anecdotal and not measurable, it is significant. Independence, critical thought, and self-reliance are values too often missing from primary education (Moylett, 2014). To return to the kinds of thinking discussed in the introduction, structured, teacher-led thinking tasks can still position the teacher as the expert or, at the very least, the leader. As long as the teacher is the leader, some children will continue to internalise the idea that there is a correct response. In contrast, the teacher's role in the imagination book project was as a facilitator and an equal participant in creating learning in the classroom. This logically promotes the above values by empowering the children to take control of their own learning.

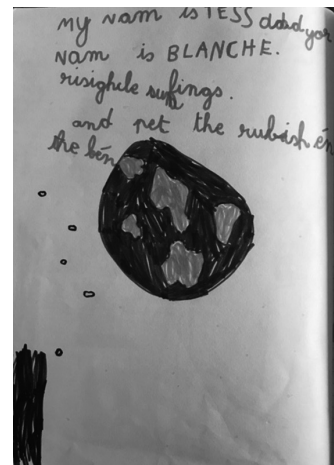


Figure seven. Recycle some things and put rubbish in the bin

## Moving forward

Armstrong states that ‘to talk about the imagination is to practise the art of describing (...) it’s the way in which we render children’s work its true value’. (2019, p75) The experience of using the imagination books allowed me to refine my understanding of the children as learners. It showed them that their work was valued by the whole class learning community and encouraged them to feel empowered as better learners.

The children who took part in the intervention gained from it in the immediate situation. Both the process of working in the imagination book and the conversation proved in themselves to be valuable learning experiences. Children used the opportunity to develop a range of skills. However, more importantly is what the intervention brought to their learning capacity for the future. Yarker states ‘the most important attitude that can be formed, is the desire to go on learning’ (2019, p38). Embracing the Learning without Limits philosophy reinforced their ‘active sense of their powers and competence as thinkers and learners’. (Hart et al., 2004, p185) The process of working in the imagination books and having the subsequent conversations developed conditions in the classroom to allow the children to feel empowered, valued and, fundamentally, to become better learners.

This intervention has revealed the impact of adopting the Learning without Limits philosophy and truly integrating it into practice. It has given me, as a teacher, an insight into children’s learning which could never have been achieved with a passive, top-down and teacher-led approach. Overall, seeing the impact of changing the power dynamic in the class and moving away from ability-based teaching and learning gives a clear insight into the damaging effects of this and the positive learning behaviours it suppresses and extinguishes. Learning without Limits offers an alternative to this, an alternative that promises to better serve all learners.

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