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Imagination: A Creative Tool to Achieve Meaningful Understanding of New Information

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Abstract

This paper discusses how imagination mediates children?s understanding of new knowledge. Through a theoretical framework based on Vygotsky?s concept of ?creative imagination?, this study looks at children?s imagination as a way to make new information meaningful. Verbal stimuli, a story about the world read by four Kindergarten teachers provide grounds to investigate how children?s imagination gives meaning to new information. The paper reports the findings of a research project that compares and analyses the use of reading groupwork in four kindergarten schools, two in Burgos, Spain and two in Tampico, México. We begin by providing the theoretical stance that supports the study. Next, we explain the methodology used in the study. The data is then discussed and interpreted. While Imagination appears to be a source of information, it seems to be a process generated between the teacher and the student stemming from teacher?s requests.

Index terms— cognitive processes, preschool education, information management, imagination, joint construction of knowledge, narratives.

1 Introduction

n this paper we will discuss how imagination mediates children's understanding of new knowledge. Through a theoretical framework based on Vygotsky's concept of "creative imagination", this study looks at children's imagination as a way to make new information meaningful. Verbal stimuli, a story about the world read by four Kindergarten teachers provide grounds to investigate how children's imagination gives meaning to new information. The paper reports the findings of a research project that compares and analyses the use of reading group-work in four kindergarten schools, two in Burgos, Spain and two in Tampico, México. We begin by providing the theoretical stance that supports the study. Next, we explain the methodology used in the study. The data is then discussed and interpreted. While the study suggests that Imagination is a source of information, this appears to be a process generated between the teacher and the student; stemming from teacher's requests.

2 II.

3 Theoretical Stance

Author : Avda Cantabria 51, 2nd F2 CP: 09006 Burgos. E-mail : jr2000x@yahoo.es Human activity does not limit itself to reproduce facts or lived events. It creates new images and actions. The amalgamation of imagination and language allows for a new kind of dialogue which accepts exchange and the collection of a series of situations that are imaginable, "the distant past and future, the magic and impossible" **??**Harris, 2005:209).

The brain has the capacity of re-developing and creating new forms and approaches to newly encountered events which we interpret and understand based on past experiences. An example of this would be when we pretend to ride a horse using a broom. Imagination constitutes a "specifically human form of conscious activity". Like all other functions of knowledge, it originally stems from "action" (Vygotsky, 1989:141) and it can be discovered

”while thinking creatively, because other people push us to do so” **??**Tough, 1989:205). The ”combinative” capacity exercised when one gives form to the figments of imagination together with technical knowledge and traditions are the ”models of creation that influence human beings reflecting the creative work which constitutes a ”consecutive historical process where each new form is supported by previous ones”. ”Creative-combinatory” activity does not happen suddenly. It appears slowly and gradually, growing from simple and elemental forms to more complex ones. Vygotsky (1990) explains ”the mechanism of creative imagination” as four stages in the process of creation: a mixture of elements taken from previous experiences; products developed from fantasy and certain complex phenomena from reality; those stemming from emotions; and those that arise from images that crystallize as a form of reality.

Imagination is one of the main forms children use to make things meaningful and to express information. It is their way of making new knowledge meaningful; story reading and discussion become stimuli for new experiences, as is the case in this investigation. If we want to stimulate a ”sense of signifying and interest in relation to reality”, we must explore why fantasy worlds are ”so significant and interesting”; we also need to find how to use ”what we learn for educational purposes” **??**Egan, 1994:53).

episodes may incorporate images from other stories, films or television series. An emotional subtext **??**Gonzalez, 2006 **??**Gonzalez, , 2007)) emerges from the interpretation of the story's central conflict and the emotional association of an individual's previous experiences. Imagination constitutes a ”new psychological process” for the child. It represents a ”specifically human form of conscious activity”. Like all other forms of knowledge, it stems originally from ”action” **??**Vygotsky, 1989:141). The use of imagination can be discovered ”when thinking creatively because other people push you to do so” allowing the individual to live experiences that help them to discover new ways and the satisfaction of using creative expressions.

The capacity that children have to see themselves as the protagonist of a story in their own context is a function of how the child transfers previous knowledge to a new context; for that, they need to begin with minimum ”direct and relevant experiences”. The process begins through the creative use of language transcending mechanistic levels, ”signaling and emission” **??**Tough, 1989:205). Some children, a minority though, work with words in symbolic and playful ways enabling the understanding of metaphors. Previous knowledge and tales' messages enable children to project themselves over the main acts of the protagonists. To understand new information, children do not seem to retrieve information from existing memory models because they have never come across those events; therefore, they construct and update previous models for new situations. At school, this seems to happen when their teachers guide them through their assertions.

The situational model (Harris, 2005) establishes a complementary and collaborative relationship between simulation and language. Swan (1999) suggests the same for narratives showing that when adults process a fictional story, they construct, in their imagination, a mental model of the narrative. As the narrative develops, they up date that situational model maintaining a good level of understanding of the main arguments. When listeners or readers construct a situational model, they usually imagine a developing scene from a particular spatial-temporal locus. This ”deictic centre” is usually selected based on the actions of the main protagonist. Objects or other characters in the story, close to the protagonist, are found at the front. Actions that attract the listener and which were either heard or about to happen, are accessed while previous information is retrieved. Finally, adults insert causal conations between actions and successive episodes even if conations are not explicit in the narrative. Children exhibit similar cognitive processes when they are engaged in simulation games.

According to Harris (2005) the similarities between the way an adult processes a narrative and the way children compromise an imaginative situation is not a coincidence. During the process of linguistic development, children need to build a situational model not only when they listen to a narrative, but also when they encounter connected discourses like deictic centers, the here and now. These include fairy tales and conversations which may involve collective discussions of events observed by children. To understand new information in those conversations, children cannot retrieve existing situational models. There is not a situational model because the child has never encountered the event being described. Thus, the child has to construct and update a situational model guided by the assertions of the interlocutor (Egan, 1994;Rodari, 1980Rodari, , 2000)). The capacity to set aside objective reality and construct a situational model that is accessible, suggest that children's comprehension is a displayed narrative chain within the context of the simulation. Apparently, conversation is one of the most complex and transparent vehicles through which others can learn about our thoughts.

4 III.

5 The Study

To help us establish if imagination can act as the source of children's comprehension of stories, we first draw on a qualitative description of several didactic sequences that show the process of communication in the classroom. Using a quantitative approach, we analyzed and compared the evolution of the strategies children used to make sense of the story.

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Imagination: A Creative Tool to Achieve Meaningful Understanding of New Information Research was carried out in two periods of time, **??**002-2003 and 2005-2006. We observed and recorded classes three times along these two periods. The objective was to uncover the evolution of existing scaffolding processes between teachers and students. The study took place in four classrooms; two urban public schools in Burgos, Spain and two public schools in Tampico, Mexico. A common characteristic among these schools is that they foster reading programs. These four schools were located in medium to low class suburbs where most of the population is young couples (average age 30). Several research studies suggest that social class may be an influence in the level of reading comprehension (Boron, 2005), a variable also highlighted by **??**onzalez (2006 **??**onzalez (, 2009)).

Classroom observations focused on six groups of three children each. Participants were chosen at random by classroom teachers. Recorded sessions (72) involved 11,614 conversational turns during classroom reading sessions, four weeks before the end of term.

Teachers used the same activity. The activity involved reading a suggested story; reading was followed by a discussion with each group. The teacher divided the class in groups of three, read the selected text and established the objective of the discussion process. Teachers read for about three or four minutes ( ) G (this part was not considered for the analysis). The component considered for this study took place after that when the teacher initiated the discussion. To observe children's reactions to words and voice resources that teachers drew on, the story's drawings and frames were not taken into consideration. To select narratives we chose Van Dijk and Kitsch's (1983) criteria: the stories' macrostructure clarity, degree of redundancy, theme, source quality, style, novelty, ethical pertinence, lexis and length.

Data from recorded classroom dialogues was transcribed keeping track of prosodic and paralinguistic components: pauses and intonation, negative and affirmative gestures, finger and arm signals, head and body movements. Emerging categories became unit of analysis. We followed the same process for each story read to the groups. The defined categories are exhaustive and exclusive (Anguera, 1992), flexible and defined.

To discriminate categories that were not relevant, it was necessary to analyze again the conversations. To have excluding categories, we considered categories belonging to only one dimension of analysis. This allowed us to observe multiple combinations among categories which enabled a multifunctional categorization. We then codified every recorded session. This was done by the main researcher and two psychologists who were not part of the study; the role of these psychologists was to obtain a more objective view. As we analyzed data, we found that there was a 98% agreement between the main researcher and the two psychologists.

To compare data from the observations we interviewed each teacher during the last week of the school term. Our purpose was to confirm the objectives set by each teacher at the beginning of the investigation and gather information about their teaching style. The interview was divided in three parts. In the first part we analyzed their teaching style and how this was enacted while narrating and discussing. For the second part we gathered information about the objectives teachers had previously set. In the last part teachers explained their views about the events (see Appendix).

IV.

8 Defining Categories

The categorization process involved a progressive systematization of emerging items to define flexible, exhaustive and exclusive categories (Angora, 1990). To achieve this aim, we inductively generated the observation criteria of the recorded sessions we Considered relevant and which rendered dimensions of analysis we used. Once the dimensions of analysis were defined, we returned to the conversations to analyze their internal variation. This approach allowed us to discriminate the categories that constituted them. After defining the categories to be used, we codified each of the recorded sessions.

9 a) Imagination as source of information

We found that when imagination is seen as a source of information used by children which may enable them to project themselves in an action or a conflict stemming from the narrative, the process usually involves a teacher's request: "Imagine that you are the main character, what would you have done in this situation?"

To find connections with Vygotsky's (1990) "mechanism of creative imagination" we analyzed four links. The first refers to the connections between previous experience and creativity, assuming that creativity processes are construed over elements of previous experiences. When children project themselves as the main character, they reveal previously lived events (Turns 1671 and 1675) as Table 1 The second link refers to the connection between complex elements from reality and products of fantasy. Children apparently generate products from fantasy and complex phenomena from reality. Table 2 shows a sequence where children first make an analogy with their school and then they imagine the story's school. The third connection consists of two laws. One where feelings influence imagination and a second one where imagination influences feelings. They are the Law of common emotional sign and the Law of emotional representation of reality.

For the Law of common emotional sign, every emotion tends to manifest itself in agreement with certain images and ideas which are consistent with the individual's mood. The best way to observe changes and reasons behind the actions taken by a character is through the mood that dominates it. Perceiving their mood is a way

of discovering what pushes the character to do something. Remembering a dream may provide material to be used by our memory when linking emotions and images as data in Table 3 suggests. Year 2013

According to the Law of emotional representation of reality, all forms of creative representation involve affective elements. This emotional implication is provoked by the children's animism of their interpretation of the world which gives color, movement and life to everything they imagine as data provided in Table 4 seems to imply. Finally, the fourth link refers to fantasy. Fantasy can create something completely new that has not been part of human experience. When the image is transformed into an object, it begins to exist in the world and influences other objects. This is the most elaborated form of a creative process. Data (Turns 761, 773) shows how Fernando creates a magic narrative parallel to the story he has just listened to. The parallel narrative involves the teacher who tries to get involved in the magical interpretation providing more details (Table 5). Furthermore, it involves the rest of the group (Turns 781 and 787). ( )G

It seems that children's capacity to imagine is influenced by their stage of mental evolution. Vygotsky (1990) describes an infant's syncretism as a characteristic of their thoughts with which they invent and imagine, particularly everything they say. In the transcription, Alva constructs a narrative based on images and experiences (Turn 762, 773). Using conditional linguistic structures, the teacher mediates the children's construction of the main character (Turn 761). The teacher exhorts the children to situate themselves in the tale's store. They do so remembering experiences or previously lived knowledge within the classroom, or relying on anecdotes or personal events. These become new imagined situations which could happen. Having described our understanding of imagination, we will introduce a brief description of its developmental process which was a useful tool to interpret the data. b) Imagination's developmental process: strategies and formats Imagination's developmental process is formed by two sub-dimensions. The first one is strategies, actions that refer to the individual who provides the information; the second sub-dimension is developmental formats or levels of development or abstraction of the information. Both sub-dimensions respond to the questions: Does the statement contribute to the development of the conversation? How is the discourse constructed? Developmental strategies are actions taken to elaborate on information from each conversational turn. They tend to complement information already given; each action taken by an interlocutor influences what follows. These strategies or actions are categorized as two processes:

? What is given or the strategies that support previously known information. This is done through repetition which is a strategy used to reiterate information already given in a conversation. A second strategy is reproduction which involves recovering information from the reading, or from previous experiences. It is information from memory. Complex developmental formats involve Episodes which link two or more sequences. They make reference to time and the logical sequencing of a story.

The second developmental formal is Main meaning. This is the message or moral. It connects the author's purpose when writing the story with the teacher's objective while reading and discussing the story.

At another level, there are developmental request formats. These are the complete narrative which refers to the story's global evaluation. The second is a Call for information. This refers to the process of open elicitation of information about aspects that the children liked the most.

We begin this section with the global percentages for each group observed. After that, we analyze the results for all categories; then, we look at percentages of kinds of information which contributed more to the discourse. We explain the distribution of the turns comparing between groups A and B (Spain) and groups C and D (Mexico).

After categorizing and contrasting interview data, we carried out a quantitative analysis and a comparison of the evolution of the information sources from the four groups observed during the reconstruction of the story. To do that, we used SPSS. Keeping in mind that the objective of the study was exploratory and not experimental, we compared groups and did not have control groups. Future research would necessarily call for a rigorous replication of the study following the interventions and the children's development through frequent evaluation.

To present the results of this study we will first look at the Evolution of the use of imagination. Table 6 presents percentages of how the two groups of Spanish children used imagination as a source of information.

V. Regarding the Mexican groups of children, their evolution was different as Table 7 suggests. Percentage of imagination used as a form of information within these groups is lower than that of the Spanish children in group B (Table 6). When looking at the result from the analysis of the Mexican groups we found that groups C and D displayed a wider range of strategies as Table 9 demonstrates. For their teachers, the children's imagination appears to stem from previous knowledge rather than re-elaboration. There was a smaller percentage of the use of imagination stemming from the children's constructions. The discourse seemed to be superficial, less developed and children played more with the information given in the text. 10 and 11).

10 Data Analysis and Results

11 IMAGINATION

While Group A used episodes, in group B we found that the dominant format was the sequence; however, it is not possible to reach a conclusion given that there were few events. Of all the events based on imagination, only 24.5% focused on details. The teacher would stop at any point in the story and elicited details with little or no relationship to the story's messages. However, only the most fluent children were able of elaborating episodes, chains of sequences where they could let their imagination act. The use of episodes involved rich and elaborated turns; the child added important quantities of new information to the discussion. In groups C and D we observed

that children focused more on details than the Spanish children in groups A and B. Sequences were the preferred formats for the groups of children who did not tend to develop episodes. In fact, Mexican children seldom participated in a conversation with more than a few phrases per turn. The resulting formats were the product of the strategies used and thus closely related; simple formats appear to correlate with the use of strategies based on text information.

12 DEVELOPMENTAL

13 VI. Conclusion

Imagination as a source of information appears to be a process generated between the teacher and the child; the process seems to be based on requests made by the teacher. It is a projection rooted on meaningful conflicts experienced by the protagonist. This type of information helps unravel the children's interests about the story as they talk about topics that catch their attention. To see how children at a lower level of evolution develop this particular ability, it seems necessary to carry a longitudinal study to observe children throughout their six years of basic education. Data from group B demonstrate that at this age children can generate information based on the persons' projection based on new situations. An understanding of the children's capacity to respond in a discussion, informs the teacher on the kind of support children might need to project or to imagine themselves in a narrative's conflictive situations. We have discussed the meaning of values based on children's universal rights: family and adoption, identity and belonging, parental care and attention. Through events narrowly linked to the children's realities, concealed within colorful and dynamic magical moments that capture the children's attention and more importantly provide grounds to develop the capacity to sequence interdependent events present in the narrative, Teacher B managed to promote the children's ability to project around other people's experiences, feelings, characters' 1-5). This teacher apparently enhanced the children's ability to imagine actions rooted in real life situations as well as imagined ones without explicit reference to personal experiences.

Children's fantasy at this age seems to be one of the most significant and active parts of their mental life. Through the analysis of the children's verbal imagination, we confirmed within the limits of our study, how Vygotsky's (1990) "mechanism of creative imagination" functions. If we compare an adult's fantasy with that of a child, their products differ; for instance, the low number of possible combinations between experiences and previous knowledge. Children appear to believe more in the product of their fantasy (Vygotsky, 1990(Vygotsky, , 2005)).

Many classroom activities cannot begin with an observation task; tasks require that children imagine unknown people, places and activities. These may be real, like when they have to discover the environment; they can be part of history; or they might be functioned as in literature. However, to project in new situations, children use as support, relevant direct experience. This should be one of the teacher's roles; the teacher should offer children adequate information using books and maybe other information resources. Dialogues and narratives may also be used, depending on the children's needs. The latter acts as scaffolding while children explore experiences that otherwise would not be accessible to them (Tough, 1989). As made evident in the transcribed examples (Tables 1-5) and the results (Tables 7-11) only teacher B opted for imagination as a resource.

Teacher A does not perceive this type of information part of the activity's objectives. Results from group B suggest a progressive percentile fall in the use of imagination as source of information or as type of information (Tables 6 and 7). The reason might be that as the activity evolves, the focus is more on previous reading and on the fact that children have acquired a larger number of experiences that allow them to associate the story's events; it also increases the need to retell a previous event as initial inhibition decreases (Bruner, 2004).

The main difference between the Spanish and Mexican groups when elaborating information rooted in the children's imagination is that Spanish groups used strategies supported by new knowledge; these were teachers' re-developments and children's contributions. It seems that only Spanish children were able to elaborate episodes; that is, several phrases in one conversational turn (Tables 7-11). Apparently, the dominant way of developing imagination among these 5-6 year old groups of children is through the re-elaboration of previous experiences. With the teacher's support, children developed the capacity to project a situation described by the story's author that stemmed from real experiences.

We also observed a relationship between experiences and imagination. They appear to feed each other (Bruner, 2004). Through the use of imagination and previous experiences it seems possible to help children develop scenes of life happening in places and times that are not theirs. This could offer a new role of their experiences: new situations emerge when experiences are combined with text information. This type of information may also be considered new: imagination, which may be real or imaginary.

In the representation model described by Harris (2005) simulations are said to be a good path to access and develop the imagination of children between 5 and 6 years of age. It could be said that teacher B managed to establish such a path. She requests each child to take the place of the main character. In this manner, she establishes a verbal simulation game. The latter initiates an exploration of possible worlds; it is a way to search for coherent and consequential alternatives. At this age, stage simulations appear to be suitable to access and develop children's imagination. Simulation establishes possibilities to search for life's alternatives (Harris, 2005).

The evolution of the explicit and the implicit suggests an exercise of autonomy when work is based on evidence allowing us to work on suppositions. This opens spaces to develop and exercise our imagination and memory to

create and construct a part of reality that is still manifesting itself. This evolving step may open spaces to other possible worlds beyond repetition and reproduction of the same models.

New questions arise. The first one is to think if one of the causes of failure in the classroom relates to a disconnection between the children's habitual activity and the school's curricular content. Future research should question if the teacher really becomes "a dynamic educator, mediator and intercommunication tactician who provokes situations" **??**Rosary, 1980). We should also ask if the teacher actually presents artistic material to stimulate the children's capacity to be amazed or astonished. The critical question would be if material can generate multiple didactic approaches (Egan, 1991(Egan, , 1994)) or if it is just another exercise to reproduce the same question-evaluation scheme (Mercer, 1997).

14 Bibliografía

Figure 1:

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[Note: g]

Figure 2: Table 1 :

[1]

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Turn	Speaker	
2109	TEACHER	Yes, I think so. This way all the children would eat, wouldn't they, Daniel?
2110	ALEJANDRA	Otherwise, what a story.
2111	TEACHER	Yes, what a story. They would starve to death, right? And to sleep, where would the children sleep if they had to stay at school all the time?
2112	ALICIA	On the carpet.
2113	DANIEL	They could take a sleeping bag.
2114	ALICIA	And they would keep warm with something they had there.

Figure 3: Table 2 :

3

Turn	Speaker	
4471	ALEJANDRA	I had a really nice dream.
4472	TEACHER	Would you like to tell us your dream?
4473	ALEJANDRA	Yes well, I was playing with Jesus.
4474	ALICIA	Yes, Jesus doesn't have toys, kiddo.
4475	TEACHER	But she was playing without toys, can you play without toys?
4476	DANIEL	Yes, like hide and seek.
4477	ALEJANDRA	Yes, we were playing hide and seek in the clouds.

Figure 4: Table 3 :

4

Turn	Speaker	
3875	TEACHER	Esther, Esther, she hasn't told us anything, how would the invisible girl look like? Before becoming invisible, of course.
3876	ESTHER	Pause
3877	TEACHER	What color would her face be?
3878	ESTHER	Pink.

Figure 5: Table 4 :

5

Turn	Speaker	
767	TEACHER	And Fernando, how would you protect the child?
768	FERNANDO	Well,

[Note: I would find a magic tree, open the door and I would send him to another country.]

Figure 6: Table 5 :

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Figure 7: Table 6

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Figure 8: Table 7 :

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[Note: G]

Figure 9: Table 8 :

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Figure 10: Table 9

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Figure 11: Table 10 :

11

	Imagination's Developmental Strategies in Mexico					
	GROUP C				GROUP D	
STRATEGIES	Teacher	Children	Total	Teacher	Children	Total
REPETITION	54,5%	23,5%	49%	49,5%	26,2%	38,5%
REPRODUCTION	5,9%	12,1%	6%	7,8	9,8%	9,2%
WORKING THROUGH	34,6%	5,5%	23,4%	43,7%	7,2%	24,6%
CONTRIBUTION	4%	53,9%	23,6%		54,2%	30,7%
Total	100% (131)	100% (164)	100% (295)	100% (87)	100% (119)	100% (206)
	Imagination's Developmental Formats in Spain					
DETAILSOF		GROUP A			GROUP B	
DEVELOPMENTAL FORMATS	Teacher	Childre n	Total	Teacher	Children	Total
SEQUENCE				23%	25,7%	24,5%
EPISODES	16,7%		54,5%	62,4%	64,3%	63,5%
MAIN MEANING	83,3%	100%	45,5	14,6%	9,8%	11,9%
COMPLETE NARRATIVE						
CALL FOR INFOR-MATION.					0,2%	0,1%
DEVELOPMENTAL FORMAT						
Total	100% (6)	100% (5)	100% (11)	100% (479)	100% (614)	100% (1093)
DETAILSOF		GRUPO C			GRUPO D	
DEVELOPMENT FORMATS	Teacher	Children	Total	Teacher	Children	Total
SEQUENCE	37,1%	51,2%	46,1%	43%	37,3%	39,5%
EPISODES	17,7%	46,7%	34,3%	53,4%	61,2%	58,6%
MAIN MEANING	8,6%		4,3%	2,6%	0,6%	0,9%
COMPLETE NARRATIVE	2,7%	2,1%		1,1%	0,7%	
CALL FOR INFOR-MATION.						
DEVELOPMENT FORMATS	27,9%		13,9%			
Total	100% (131)	100% (164)	100% (295)	100% (87)	100% (119)	100% (206)

Figure 12: Table 11 :

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