
The Power of Fantasy in Early Learning

Jenny Tyrrell

Illustrated by David Schofield



London and New York

**Also available as a printed book
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The Power of Fantasy in Early Learning

‘From the story of the fantasy life of this classroom, Jenny Tyrrell builds an even richer tale, which teaches all of us how effective we can be in extending children’s imagination, and ultimately in teaching them how to live. There can be no more important role of a teacher.’

Professor Colin Harrison, University of Nottingham

‘This is a book that every primary school teacher can read with delight and benefit.’

Kieran Egan, Simon Fraser University, British Columbia

The Power of Fantasy in Early Learning is Jenny Tyrrell’s absorbing and thought-provoking account of her success in using fantasy figures to develop literacy in her pupils. This unique book describes an alternative route to learning which harnessed and constantly stimulated the imaginations of young children; a sustained imaginative environment emerged in which learning flourished. Beautifully written by an experienced early years teacher, *The Power of Fantasy in Early Learning* is at the same time a guide to classroom practice, a challenge to conventional literacy techniques and an inspiring story.

Jenny Tyrrell was a primary school teacher for twenty years before becoming a teacher educator. She is the author, with Narinderjit Gill, of *Co-ordinating English at Key Stage One* (RoutledgeFalmer, 2000).

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Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart or in the head?
Where begot, how nourished?
Reply, Reply.

It is engender'd in the eyes,
With gazing fed; and fancy dies
In the cradle where it lies.
Let us all ring fancy's knell;
I'll begin it, Ding, dong, bell.

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*,
Act 3, Scene 2

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Preface

I am a teacher. Everything I say, everything I do, everything I write, is coloured by my professional beliefs based on who I am, what matters to me and why I think in this way. I believe that the central task of the teacher is to feed the learner's curiosity, to fire and then kindle the imagination, to nurture the self-esteem and to let each learner discover who they are as learners, thus enabling learning to be effective and lasting. I believe that when young children come to school they have a right to enjoy the experience. There should be enough space in our busy schooldays and often over-filled curriculum, for children to have fun, for we learn best at any age those things we enjoy doing. The skill for teachers is to weave this vitally strong thread into the fabric of daily school life in the realisation that it is an essential feature.

I have an overpowering need to tell this story, for this is what it is, the story of an experienced teacher and two groups of uniquely individual children. I write this for anyone who is interested in the way young children assimilate formal learning in institutionalised systems. I hope it will lead the reader to question what we do in the name of education and be open to the suggestion of alternative routes.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, to the children who made all this possible, it is dedicated to you all with love. Your names have been changed but I hope you can recognise yourselves if this book comes your way.

Introduction

‘Tell me where is fancy bred?’

To me, fantasy and the development of the imagination are an integral part of growing up. As teachers we are often heard to say, ‘capture their interest and you are away’, but for how long? I believe that I happened upon a way to harness this force to create a sustained imaginative environment in which deep learning flourished.

I have eighteen years teaching experience at primary level. I believe they were productive years for the children and myself. The last two years, however, teaching 6 year olds, were different from the rest. In those years my classroom was a place where fantasy became the main motivational element in the children’s learning. In the first year there was a large stuffed bear living in the corner of the classroom and during the second year, a small witch who came out of a storybook and caused havoc in the classroom for a full year.

The children became totally involved with these characters, as did I, as did everybody who came into contact with the children. The atmosphere in the classroom was noticeably different. There was an air of shared enjoyment, genuine happiness and pleasure in learning that I don’t think I had ever managed to make a permanent feature throughout a year before. Above all, the children worked consistently, totally absorbed in their learning. The heightened imagination seemed to permeate every aspect of the school day, in particular their literacy acquisition.

In order to contextualise what I am going to write, the reader