

Practising empathy: enacting alternative perspectives through imaginative play

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This article reports on a collaborative study using an innovative methodology, based on ‘insiders’ who are Steiner practitioners knowledgeable and practised in Steiner philosophy and ‘outsiders’ from UK mainstream early years and primary perspectives. Although the study as a whole focused on assessment and observation used in Steiner kindergartens, it yielded a rich data source on imaginative play that offers practice in empathy. We contextualise the data presented from a Steiner perspective in the wider literature on the imagination and affect in order to theorise how such play develops empathy through its links to feelings and prosocial behaviour. We critically examine how empathy and the imagination are nurtured in the context of eight kindergarten classes in five Steiner schools in England in order to illustrate how these conditions might also help other early years and primary schooling to foster long-term benefits for ethical and fulfilling lives through encouraging empathic understanding.

Keywords: empathy; imagination; ethical; Steiner; early years; play

Introduction

Rationalist views of education often take precedence over emotional and imaginative aspects of learning in mainstream education, even in the early years (Noddings, 2002). There has been a tendency towards separation of emotional aspects of learning into discrete programmes in England, such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) and Penn Resiliency programmes, which are characterised by behavioural modification principles. While government funding has been withdrawn for SEAL, support for the discourse of ‘character building’ still continues (Lexmond & Grist, 2011). Some commentators (e.g. Ecclestone, 2012) have argued that therapeutic education implies a conceptualisation of the child as diminished, deficient and vulnerable. Perhaps what therapeutic education fails to acknowledge is the agency of young children to build such capabilities themselves given the right conditions; it places the deficit in the individual rather than seeing it as part of a structural societal and political problem. However, Dunn (1993) suggests that the majority of children can and do develop effective ways to live harmoniously in a social group provided they are given the opportunity to develop an empathic understanding of others. Being able to *imagine* another’s perspective, to ‘stand in someone else’s shoes’, builds empathy; how then might early years and primary education support this imaginative capacity?

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In this article, we draw on data from empirical work in Steiner kindergartens, where imaginative play is given a high priority, but we argue that the features identified in this study have relevance for mainstream contexts. Our purpose in this paper is to broaden theorisation of the value and purpose of imaginative play beyond Steiner philosophy that underpins the presented data. We think that juxtaposition of alternative theoretical perspectives may assist other early years educators to reflect on how similar pedagogical approaches, resources and environmental features might work in their own settings and support children's imaginative play. Although there are tensions associated with maintaining parallel theorisations when the data we share is based in Steiner settings, we think this may enable the feasibility of greater promotion of imaginative play to be more widely recognised. Furthermore, the different perspectives reflect the composition of the research team bringing together 'inside' Steiner and 'outside' mainstream viewpoints.

Both Steiner philosophy and sociocultural perspectives emphasise affective benefits from imaginative play that provide a foundation for learning how to live well with others. In our research, young children are shown to be capable beings that appreciate alternative viewpoints and are caring and considerate of others without adult instruction. Later 'character-building interventions' might be superfluous if moral reasoning and ethical identity shaping were fully supported early on by providing children with a rich environment for deeply imaginative play (Edmiston, 2010). Children's empathic understanding is illustrated through critical examination of observed imaginative play in eight kindergarten classes in five Steiner schools in England. We consider how the Steiner kindergarten teachers scaffold children's imagination and empathy by being authentic, respectful and sensitive to others, weaving subtle influences through ways to be and behave, and by creating clear spaces for free play in which children *practise* empathy. We use the word 'practise' deliberately to refer to the situated learning that occurs in this community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and to denote not only the embodied enactment of empathy in children's play but also their *trailing* of different ethical identities (Edmiston, 2010). Environmental aspects of the kindergartens that appear to encourage extended imaginative play are also outlined and implications for mainstream settings considered. Referring back to the literature, we theorise how imaginative play episodes arise and what social purposes they might fulfil.

In the next section, we consider the imagination from a Steiner perspective and explore the pedagogical rationale in the Steiner system for placing such emphasis on nurturing children's imagination during the early years and beyond. We then propose alternative psychological and sociological views of the imagination to facilitate critical assessment of how the practice in Steiner kindergartens might be theorised by those working outside that philosophy.

Views of and values for imagination

The Steiner kindergarten teacher works to support the development of the imagination by enabling children to enter a more dreamy state of consciousness, distanced from the concrete, rational and analytic thinking of everyday life. Parents are encouraged to limit their children's exposure to television, media and technological gadgets and toys, in order to support the teacher's work developing the imagination in the kindergarten. For Steiner (1996),

What forms human intellectuality has a strong tendency to become slow and lazy, and it becomes most lazy when people constantly feed it with materialistic ideas. However, it will take flight when we feed it ideas received from the spirit, but we receive these directly into our souls only through the indirect path of imagination. (p. 211)

What is unusual about Steiner early years practice, alongside the scarcity of direction, instruction and absence of questioning of the children, is the deliberate lack of intervention by the teacher in imaginative play; all these aspects are seen to 'awaken' the child from her dream consciousness. Introducing cognitive awareness at this early stage of the children's development is seen as counterproductive to long-term intellectual development. Steiner educators believe that free thinking emerges when the needs of body, soul and spirit are met in childhood at distinct stages or realms. Feeling and imagining are viewed as necessary precursors to intellectual thought, rather than imagining and thinking being mutually constituted. According to Vygotsky (1978), creating and sustaining an imaginary situation 'can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought' (p. 103).

In Steiner thinking, the feeling realm begins to emerge between three and five years old when imagination and memory appear in children's repertoire. Nielsen (2011) talks of the imagination from Steiner's perspective as being:

a metamorphosis of the feeling nature, the soul-aesthetic part of the human being thus constituting a link between the ends of human existence, one that brings together thought and action, theory and practice. (p. 26)

Vygotsky also posits a valuable link between intellectual and emotional functions whereby it is regarded as fundamental to meaning-making and culture (Gajdamaschko, 2005). He views it as the root of culture.

In everyday life, fantasy or imagination refer to what is not actually true; what does not correspond to reality, and what, thus, could not have any serious practical significance. But in actuality, imagination, as the basis of all creative activity, is an important component of absolutely all aspects of cultural life. (Vygotsky, 2003, p. 9)

However, an apparent divergence from Steiner perspectives lies in the role of the adult or more experienced other in supporting that development. Steiner practitioners would refrain from intervening in children's play to extend their thinking as they believe that they should not be awakened from the dreamy state of imaginative play. Thus, adults rarely actively participate in children's play. Adults in many other English early years settings are encouraged to participate in children's play through recommendations to engage in mutually directed play and 'sustained shared thinking' stimulated by research such as the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) studies (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004) and the guidance contained in the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education, 2012). Yet other research, focused on outdoor play, has called attention to the fragility of play and the need for highly sensitive contingent adult responses to maintain flow (Waite, Rogers, & Evans, 2013). Edmiston (2010), in his longitudinal study of play with his own son, argues that emotional control and competence in moral reasoning occurs as children co-author ethical identities in play, so is essentially a social phenomenon beginning at an early age. He suggests:

Dramatic playing can be significant in shaping identities because it relies on past experience and anticipation of future actions and relationships, thus establishing a liminal space in which possibilities – rather than certainties – for being and identifying can be explored. (Edmiston, 2010, p. 200)

He explains his role through Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. His greater experience extends the range of ethical identities to be explored by his son. In the mixed age group of the Steiner kindergarten where children may remain for three or more years, this range may also arise amongst peers within a mixed community of children of different ages and experience but the adult would not generally enter the children's play.

The challenges to freedom for child-directed play in mainstream contexts are discussed by Waite (2013), who suggests that where the expectations and norms of practice are heavily inscribed by a dominant power, there is less room for creativity. She puts forward a concept of cultural density that structures the learning and activities possible in places, derived from Bourdieusian ideas of habitus. She theorises that where norms are less defined, such as outside the classroom, a space is opened for self-direction and imaginative responses. Steiner kindergarten teachers' prioritisation of space and time for children's play is an example of creating an environment where the exercise of the children's will allows them to practise ways of being rather than them conforming through institutional habitus or overt instruction. The cultural lightness of adult involvement during their play is a deliberate part of the Steiner kindergarten pattern alternating structure and freedom. However, this culturally light institutional context can be rich with individual habitus and the cultures of other places enabling children to experience deeply felt emotions through imaginative play.

Links between imagination, affect and empathy

Psychological and sociocultural theory suggests that encounters in play and the imagination can touch the emotions as powerfully as real events (Harris, 2000; Vygotsky, 2003) and therefore exercise of imagination can allow an exploration of emotional responses. Together emotion and imagination provide the roots for appreciation of others as non-self and enable us to understand that others may experience feelings that differ from our own – the combination of imagination and emotion thus contributes to the development of empathic understanding. Harwood (2009, p. 363) argues, 'What imagination actualises in thought is the plurality of our common world'. While we cannot assume that imagination allows us to 'know' the experience of another, it does increase our awareness of 'other', and so helps us to think about and consider other perspectives. Maxine Greene (1995) further suggests that imagination 'permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions' (p. 3).

For Steiner educators, feeling through the imagination is necessary to support children becoming well-functioning adults with creative, intellectual and caring capabilities but is a precursor to intellectual thinking in later stages of childhood. Its importance is affirmed by Peter Hobson's (2002) work with children with autism, which shows that without the imaginative capacity to appreciate others' emotional states, the capacity to *use* intelligence is severely limited. Egan and

Nadaner (1988) go further in their seminal work *Imagination and Education*, arguing that: ‘Stimulating the imagination is not an alternative educational activity to be argued for in competition with other claims; it is a prerequisite to making any activity educational’ (p. ix).

Other writers claim it fulfils a basic social purpose:

Human association depends on imagination: the capacity to see in others beings like ourselves. It is thus through imagination that we render others sufficiently like ourselves for them to become subjects of tolerance and respect, sometimes even affection. Democracy is not a natural form of association; it is an extraordinary and rare contrivance of cultivated imagination. (Barber, 1992, p. 5)

Juurväri, Myyry, and Pessa (2010, p. 485) have also found that being able to take the perspective of another was essential for both care-based and justice-based moral reasoning.

Research furthermore suggests that the development of imagination and empathy is fundamental for the establishment of critical thinking (Vygotsky, 2003), nuanced care-based moral judgements (Harris, 2000; Juurväri et al., 2010) and envisaging a better world (Barber, 1992; Drummond & Jenkinson, 2009; Greene, 2000). It follows that the public good is supported by helping children to picture alternative ways of being and to develop a better appreciation of what others may feel in a variety of circumstances within and beyond their actual first-hand experience.

Methods

Our study included ‘insiders’ who were well versed in the philosophy and practice of Steiner kindergartens and ‘outsiders’ whose experience lay principally in mainstream UK provision (Bartunek & Louis, 1996). We wanted to explore what underpinned Steiner kindergarten teachers’ approach to observation and assessment, but we found that it was impossible to isolate assessment from how Steiner kindergarten teachers worked and our study necessarily included an account of their whole approach to practice (Drummond & Jenkinson, 2009). Five Steiner schools in England took part with eight kindergarten classes observed. In addition, 10 teachers were interviewed, using a semi-structured interview schedule. In accordance with a negotiated ethics protocol, observers were required to occupy themselves with a craft activity and, where possible, not engage directly with the children. It was an ‘ecological approach’ which tried to take into account the child’s usual habitat: ‘the location, other people present and the expectations and rules under which the child is operating’ (Fawcett, 1996, p. 13). This negotiated passive role for the researcher respected Steiner Early Years practice which seeks to support day-dreaming and awaken fantasy in the child by leaving the conscious mind ‘to sleep’. Our method departed from more common current research practice which acknowledges children’s agency and seeks to elicit perspectives from young children themselves (see, for example, Alderson, 2005; Waite, Rogers, & Evans, 2013). We employed a form of ethnography involving participation that attempted to disturb the usual patterns of behaviour as little as possible (Fielding, 2008). Through subsequent reflection on the observations made, we wanted to ‘observe *and trouble* such everyday practices, the ordinary and habitual moments in given cultures’ (Gallagher & Fusco, 2006, p. 5, emphasis added). Despite not engaging in dialogue with the

children about their play in the research, their ‘voice’ comes through very strongly in their actions and words in managing and directing their play. Morson and Emerson (1990, p. 221) claim that ‘selfhood is not a particular voice within, but a particular way of combining many voices within’. We suggest these many internal voices are made visible in their imaginative play.

The apparent passivity of the observer was only in terms of proactive engagement with the children; we actively brought subjectivity to our detailed field notes, which incorporated lively reflective commentary. As we do not believe that there is an objective ‘truth’ waiting to be captured out there (Coffey, 1999), we accept, indeed revel in, the presence of reflective subjective interpretations and puzzlements within our naturalistic observations. Nussbaum (1990, p. 78) insists that ‘emotions are themselves modes of vision, or recognition’. Thus our research method also drew on the researchers’ imagination, not in the sense of fictionalising data but in recognition of the fact that, although we cannot ‘know’ what the children were thinking and feeling, we can use our empathic skills to imagine their possible motivations, reasoning and emotions. Questions about practice stimulated by observation were included and identified as such within the text. These and transcribed teacher interviews comprised the data sets that were discussed in our collaborative research team meetings which were held regularly over a period of two and a half years. The kindergartens and their teachers were actively involved in our interpretations and wished to have their real names used in publications. The rich narrative field notes that we discussed in this forum encouraged imaginative responses, allowing a ‘break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions’ (Greene, 1995, p. 3). The outsider/insider composition of our research team helped us to question and reflect upon assumptions from both perspectives and served both to make the familiar strange and the strange, familiar (Barbour, 2008) to both groups of researchers. The questions that arose through this interactive process also formed the framework for analysis for an initial report (Drummond & Jenkinson, 2009). Members of the team then adopted different foci to probe within the data further, resulting in an edited text (Parker-Rees, 2011) with a chapter by the authors on imagination in Steiner kindergartens (Waite & Rees, 2011). Our aim in this article has been to introduce a further layer of reflexivity and rigour to our interpretation of the data through the lens of other theoretical perspectives. This does not mean we have necessarily ‘distanced’ ourselves as we are deeply implicated in the data through our methodology, but we have ‘put ourselves in other shoes’ to illuminate how Steiner practices might be understood from different vantage points.

In the following sections, examples from the data are used to critically evaluate how development of empathy is supported in Steiner kindergartens. Although wider views of intelligence, emotional literacy and creativity have enjoyed some increased recognition over the last 20 years (e.g. Gardner, 1993; Goleman, 1996), relatively little empirical evidence exists about the imagination *per se*, its potential for social and emotional aspects of learning, and ways in which it might be fostered in schools. Despite imagination’s roots within social and cultural events (Claxton, 2006), the internal generation of this phenomenon makes it somewhat problematic to study empirically. For this reason, research on imagination has often used self-report (e.g. about imaginary worlds; Cohen & Mackeith, 1991), and thus studied *post hoc descriptions* of imagination. Vygotsky (1987), however, argues that ‘If we consider the products of this creativity in drawing or storytelling, it quickly becomes apparent that this imagination has a directed nature. It is not a

subconscious activity' (p. 346). Thus, our data consist of the naturally occurring observable behaviours in play as the *products* of children's imagination. Through our reflective observational and interviews research methods, we have documented the cultural and social contexts for imaginative play, which help us to understand how it might be nurtured in schools.

The data were first content analysed across the whole data set of observations into key themes, which included imaginative development. A similar content analysis of interview data summarised responses across the kindergartens regarding their support for imaginative play. A further analysis looked for commonalities and differences across the kindergartens. These analyses were repeatedly discussed and refined within the research team and sections of the data grouped under the emergent themes. The data presented are illustrative of the sorts of activity, environment, resources and dialogue across the range of imaginative play observed.

The following sections describe the cultural context of Steiner kindergartens and consider the role of the adult and environment in developing children's imagination and empathy through modelling an ideal world and how open-ended resources might promote resourceful imaginative thinking. Rhythms of Steiner kindergarten practice of 'breathing in' (the structure and the security of rituals and routines) and 'breathing out' (providing physical and temporal space for the children to play freely) are then evaluated in relation to the ways that these might help develop empathy. This leads to a consideration of the balance between imagination as 'feeling' and 'thinking' in the play episodes and how the combination of the two within the embodied practice of empathy might support social purposes. Finally, we suggest implications for wider early years and primary practice.

The Steiner cultural context: creating 'an ideal and beautiful world'

The teacher's work in a Steiner kindergarten is to offer a role model for purposeful activity as an implicit scaffold for the children's development of will and she busies herself with mending, craftwork and other 'homely' activities. But the children's work is different from the teacher's. At their age, play is their work and their play is accorded as much respect as the teacher's work activities. The respect for their different roles is supported by being part of a 'community of regard' (Greene, 1995, p. 39). Through her own demonstration of purpose and children's mimetic tendency, the kindergarten teacher expects children to engage their will and mind in their own endeavours. The recent emergence in neuroscience of 'mirror neuron theory' has brought the phenomenon of 'imitation' and its potential significance to the development of empathy to the centre of discourse in this field (Iacoboni, 2008; Keysers, 2011; Kilner, Neal, Weiskopf, Friston, & Frith, 2009). Steiner (1975) spoke about the power of imitation, referring to the child under seven years of age as 'wholly sense organ' and highly receptive 'to all impressions of the outside world' (p. 16). Steiner kindergarten teachers are thus trained to be 'role models worthy of imitation' (Waite & Rees, 2011, p. 57); they follow the principle that it is 'what you *are*' (Steiner, 2005, p. 17) that matters, not 'what you *say*'. Conceptualising the Steiner kindergarten as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the child joining the kindergarten enters as an apprentice. Younger children, through the authentic behaviour of the older children and staff, move from legitimate peripheral participation to practising the norms of the community over time. Learning is implicit through behaving increasingly within the sets of usual practices of the com-

munity; there are few direct instructions about ways to behave. Learning in the Steiner kindergartens consists more of experimenting with identity (imaginative play and authoring selves; Edmiston, 2010), becoming part of the community through shared experiences and practising (doing what has been implicitly learned; Wenger, 1998) than in explicit adult instruction.

According to Steiner (2005), 'Everything and everybody the child is exposed to, is transformed in his childish organism into spirit, soul and body' (p. 17). Hence the reason that great attention is paid to the creation of an ordered and beautiful kindergarten environment. The most striking point of contrast from many other early years' settings in a Steiner kindergarten is the lack of manufactured, artificial materials. Most of the items in the room are created out of natural substances and toys or decorations that have been carefully hand crafted. There are no letters of the alphabet, numbers, pictures or displays of children's work. The walls are painted in a soft pastel pink and the indoor lighting is kept fairly dim in winter, often the room only being lit by lanterns to create a soft and cosy atmosphere; whilst during summer the windows and curtains remain open to let in sunlight and fresh air. The purpose of this attention to detail is to form a 'mantle' to protect and nourish the young child's senses.

The kindergarten teacher employs her own empathic ability to value the child's experience whilst also being a role model for the children 'worthy of imitation' (Karen Fielding, teacher interview, 4 March 2008: 4). Thus empathy is partly encouraged by the teacher modelling a capacity to appreciate the feelings of others. It is important in the Steiner approach that this empathic understanding is not brought into the child's consciousness explicitly. The Steiner approach to education is intended to work from the 'inside out'. It is important to bear this Steiner pedagogical point in mind as we move through the examples of play. However, this might also be interpreted as a sociocultural transformation. Edmiston (2010, pp. 200–202) refers to Holland et al.'s sociocultural framing of identities through shared cultural norms, practices and narratives, and the positioning in terms of power and authority of individuals within that, which has implications for the context within which imagination is or can be exercised. Thus notions of 'unadult-erated' play as implied by Steiner philosophy need to be tempered by an awareness of wider sociocultural contexts which shape and are shaped by the interactions within them.

Resources for resourcefulness

Children's imagination in the Steiner kindergartens was also stimulated by unformed play materials such as pine cones, conkers, ropes of wool, pebbles, sticks and blankets. The play we observed was full of metaphoric objects that children are familiar with outside the kindergarten or through stories; shells might stand for mobile phones, pine cones for feeding bottles, conkers for money. Kieran Egan (1988, p. 105) refers to the idea that 'metaphor ... is not a later embellishment of language but is one of its fundamental modes – a primary form of discursive thought (Levi-Strauss, 1962, p. 102)'. Metaphoric use of objects, so that they stand for something else, reinforces a capacity to entertain possibility thinking and problem solving, and supported by richly imaginative role play (Vygotsky, 2003). The use of symbols suggest that children are not unconscious of their imaginative narrative but use objects deliberately and symbolically to stand for other things.

Contingency and restraint

Hanson (1988) suggests that teachers need to be circumspect about how they interact with children engaged in pretend play. Indeed, the teachers in our study were extremely careful to let the children simply 'be', showing great respect for the play and only intervening for safety reasons. Greene (1995, p. 22) refers to 'a space of freedom ... [where] she or he feels what it signifies to be an initiator and an agent, existing among others but with the power to choose for herself or himself'. Carolyn from Kindergarten 3 of The Hereford Waldorf School speaks of this notion in her practice:

I think having a very clear palette, a very clear simple landscape in which they can be, so simple unformed materials that they can then use – because it is like an act of will to reach down inside themselves and find that inner picture and turn it into something ... the teacher again is this witness who doesn't interfere with the play but knows where to step in when it needs redirecting. (Carolyn Bond, teacher interview, 27 May 2008)

Such sensitivity to the child's agenda echoes how Edmiston (2010) made space for his son to direct him within play. In this Steiner kindergarten, whilst the teacher regards it as important to stand back from imaginative play, her use of the word 'witness' suggests whilst standing back, she also carefully observes the scene in order to understand the child and to respond contingently. Within Steiner practice, it is unusual for the adult to co-create imaginary worlds, but, as we see in the following excerpt, the child's liminal space is respected and the teacher may 'step in and out of' that by taking up a role within the game in order to achieve a necessary outcome for the kindergarten group as a whole:

Would you like to bring your 'horse' (a large lump of wood attached to the child by a piece of string) over here and tie him up? I need a helper ... would you be my helper? ... The teacher took great care in ensuring the 'horse' was tied up securely to a chair before enlisting the girl's help to tidy away the paints. (Field notes, Hereford Waldorf School in Parker-Rees, 2011, p. 49)

This sensitive re-direction of play from within the children's narrative exemplifies the contingency described by Edmiston, 2010, p. 208) as 'ethical in-the-moment responses'.

Breathing in: structure and security

In the Steiner kindergartens, lively periods of diverse play contrast markedly with the quiet calm of other moments which are dominated by well-established routines and rituals, culturally dense with Steiner principles of the 'way we do things here' (Waite, 2013). It is daily practice to have ring time (similar to circle time) and traditional stories which are told rather than read by the teacher. Picture books are also rarely used 'so that children can make up their own mental pictures' (Jan Coles, teacher interview, 18 December 2007: 16), thereby encouraging the children's powers of the imagination. The stories are often used therapeutically or contain marked moral messages about how people should behave towards one other and are repeated each day usually for one week so that their moral may be gradually absorbed.

This oblique inferential approach towards encouraging respect and kindness allows children to come to their own conclusions and decisions about their own behaviour. The teacher refrains from imposing particular rules about it but sows the seed for rules to develop ‘from within’. However, empathy, we argue, cannot be taught simply through instruction or by hearing about it. It is a subjective felt emotion more than an objective cognitive position (Zak, 2011). Thus while SEAL and Penn interventions may cognitively train behavioural responses or the stories in Steiner kindergartens imply ways to behave, underlying ‘character’ is not necessarily affected. We suggest that it is the *practice* of empathy through imaginative play that forms a necessary adjunct to messages delivered implicitly through stories and modelling in other parts of the Steiner kindergarten day. In the same way, adult admonitions and control of behaviour may not be internalised without practice of the messages received (Waite, Evans, Rogers, Simmons, & Spalding, 2011).

There are elements of ‘training’ in the Steiner kindergarten, although as we have discussed this occurs implicitly through the strong community of practice in modelling the ‘way we do things here’ by staff and older children. The mixed age classes from three to six years mean that older children are constantly reinforcing the ‘culture’ of the kindergarten that the teacher and her care for its environment instil. Regular switches in pace between kindergarten customs and free play are made during the day, punctuated by carefully managed transitions. Sometimes referred to as ‘breathing in’ and ‘breathing out’, these different phases of the morning provide a framework of structure and clear expectations for the child. Yet, if the whole session were ordered and ritualised, there would be no room for children to try out what being different is like and develop self-control. Its cultural density and control would encourage conformation but perhaps only within that context as it would not be internalised or ‘owned’ by the children. By reaching into the ‘world of make-believe’ and bringing diverse cultural contexts during the free play phases, children try out different imaginary roles and learn self-control; the possibilities of learning *experientially* about empathy are extended. In empathic role play intuition is integrated with imagination, logical thought, memory and feeling; cognitive and emotional aspects of learning are thus combined unconsciously. The value of imaginative play lies in the fact that, since it has similar effects on the emotions as reality (Harris, 2000), it can offer a safe place to trial different possibilities. Even the cooperation and duty associated with tidying up can become an imaginative adventure.

Tidy up time had arrived, yet I was almost unaware of it because it was simply a continuation of play. The teacher asked if the ‘collecting machine’ had visited the village yet. The children immediately created a clever construction using two long poles held by four members of the group. On the poles hung several baskets that were to be filled with the play items now scattered around the room. The boys, it seemed, particularly enjoyed the organisational side of the process and quickly formed a team of helpers. A ‘shop’ was set up displaying all the ‘wares’ that the ‘machine was to collect, and so items were gathered. ‘Shopkeepers’ helped to fill the machine’s baskets. The teacher exclaimed: ‘This collection machine has been *so busy*; it has already been around the village twice today!’ Each tidying task was somehow immersed in the game and soon the Kindergarten was tidy without any sign of argument or hints of complaints from the children. (Field notes, Kindergarten 3, The Hereford Waldorf School, 11 October 2007)

The imaginative play periods we observed gave rise to chaotic scenes with perilously balanced chairs, unravelled ropes, and scattered conkers, blankets and

furniture. Yet structure and imagination go hand in hand to re-establish the shared norms of the community. The teachers also create a shared social imagination of the way the world is in the kindergarten which may not be like the outside world. Indeed, the idealistic nature of the kindergarten community norms are criticised at times for being unrealistic when children's home lives may be touched by trouble and conflict. However, Steiner educators suggest that it is through providing a vision of a world that is 'good and beautiful and true' (Jill Taplin, teacher interview, 2 July 2008: 2) and stimulating imaginings of better worlds that the possibility of alternative ways of being (Greene, 1995) can be sustained and hope for change and improvement can be encouraged. As Jill explained:

We want to give positive pictures of how we can make the world wonderful each in our own individual way. Everybody has their place in it, and cooperation, all the good things, all the things that we wish that everybody would do, be nice to each other. (Jill Taplin, teacher interview, 2 July 2008)

The examples of play given below suggest how alternative visions may be valuable as a resource for trying different ways of being.

Breathing out: freedom and time to play

In the Steiner kindergarten groups that we observed, children lost in imagination through self-initiated and self-directed active play are allowed space and time to construct elaborate scenarios. Their flow of thought is rarely interrupted, whether they are engaged in creative play, work activity or a day dream. Indeed, the following extract, from observations of Karen's group at the Hereford Waldorf School on their 'walk day', not only demonstrates the freedom that children in the Steiner kindergarten are given to take small risks and try out different 'ways of being' (Edmiston, 2010), but it also shows how they are afforded the space and time to simply dream.

One group of children moved down to the banks of the stream and began splashing their sticks in the water. They were 'catching fish'. 'I'm going to jump across! Are you?!' An energetic looking boy asked of a tiny girl, who was sitting on the banks beside him. 'I am only four and a half...' she told him. 'This is a secret place – look, I'm going there!' he called. The girl looked admiring of the boy's bravery and more than a little tempted by the challenge. She cautiously stretched out a foot down the bank and began to slip, catching quickly onto a nearby branch. 'WHOA ... that was scary! I fell in the river Rowan!' she called gleefully. Clearly she enjoyed the thrill of the slip. The teacher was constantly near to the children playing in the stream, but always quietly working, today clearing fallen branches from the bank. The bank was not steep and the water very shallow so the girl had been in no real danger. It was noticeable that the teacher did not interfere with the children's play on the bank unless any of them took up particularly daring positions. The two children, now 'fishermen', sat side by side on the bank, gazing into the water and musing dreamily over 'who might have the longest hands' and therefore 'might be able to reach the fish that lived on the far side of the stream' ... A few quiet minutes passed before their wistful interchange continued: 'I want to stay here ... I want to live in the river ... do you Rowan?' the four year old asked her brave companion. 'Yeah ... live and be fish...' he replied distantly, his eyes still fixed on the water's gentle flow. (Field notes, The Hereford Waldorf School, 12 November 2007)

In this extract, it is clear that the children themselves are in charge of their time and learning while the teacher is present but engaged in other tasks. The older boy

and younger girl share reflections; and the ‘tiny girl’ impressed by competence in jumping is inspired to try herself, assessing for herself the risks in ‘being fisherman’.

Such extended periods of undisturbed imaginative play are not commonly afforded to children nowadays. Children frequently express disappointment that they are called away to fulfil adult agenda (Waite, Rogers, & Evans, 2013). To allow children to ‘nourish themselves through their imagination’ we were told by one teacher is ‘one of the best gifts you can give to the children’ (Donatella Lecci, teacher interview, 26 February 2008). Her use of ‘nourishment’ suggests that imagination is seen as essential to the child’s survival. The mixed age group of the children enables peers to introduce challenge or sustain shared thinking without the need for adult intervention that might have interrupted the flow.

Imagining you and me: developing empathy through imaginative play

Extended periods of self-initiated, imitative role play (‘pretend play in which the child temporarily acts out the part of someone other than the self, using pretend actions and utterances’ Harris, 2000, p. 30) in Steiner kindergartens provide many opportunities for children to unconsciously ‘practise’ their understanding of the world and other human beings (Papadopoulou, 2012). Children who engage in lots of role play have been shown to do better in tests that demand an awareness that people in identical situations may differ in their emotional response to them (Harris, 2000). In the imaginative play we observed how children garnered models of social behaviour to be played out and tested either in solitary or social play and how not all of this is mythic or fantastic but often grounded in real-life experiences. Although the experience may not be analysed metacognitively, the imaginative play represents embodied alternative viewpoints through the children adopting different roles in play and the children exercise control over the positions of power. Far from encouraging metacognitive awareness to extend the learning potential of their play, Steiner practitioners’ deliberately stand back from the children’s play. However, their unobtrusive observations might inform their support for the child’s development in other ways. In this example from our study, the child continued acting appropriately for her imagined role of a harassed multi-tasking mother for about half an hour.

‘Hello? No, no ... mmm, no ... mmm, ok then yes’ ... the busy ‘mother’ from the home corner was multi-tasking as she held a ‘phone’ (in the form of a large shell) wedged between her cheek and her shoulder and carried three full baskets of shells and cones back to her ‘house’ ...

‘No, no, no, no ...’ she had now dropped off ‘her shopping’ and was hurrying off again, carrying a baby under one arm and a dress slung across the other shoulder, as well as the ‘phone’ to her ear. (Field notes, Kindergarten 1, The Hereford Waldorf School, 11 April 2008)

Through this, the teacher is also permitted insight into the child’s life outside the kindergarten and how the child perceives a busy home. This hurry and complexity contrasted markedly with the more focused singular activities upon which the whole attention is focused in the Steiner kindergarten daily rituals. Through imaginative play the child acts out their own observations and ‘tries out’ different ways of

being. Extending their experience through imagination, Greene (1995) suggests by 'Imagining what it is like where the road turns, where their fathers and mothers go in the early mornings, what the indistinct voices are really saying, what the darkness holds, they become gradually conscious of what it means to make connections in experience ... they find out something about *reading* the flickering and multiform world' (p. 55). This example of imaginative play may help the child to empathise with family members juggling responsibilities. This could be construed as imagination at an unconscious emotional level working through observations of tension and no attempt is made by the teacher to stimulate conscious thinking *about* her actions. The child's perceptive portrayal and grounding in 'real life' suggest that there may also be a cognitive aspect (*thinking* through) to her play.

Imagination and thinking

Perhaps one of the surprising features of the imaginative play observed in the Steiner kindergartens was the scarcity of fictional characters. The victims and heroes noted by Edmiston (2010) and often encountered in pre-schools and Foundation Stage classrooms are more often mothers, workers, tractors or lawnmowers in villages, but they still serve as test beds for identities. It may be that the Steiner kindergarten's insistence that character toys and media from the outside world are left at the door influences the children's imaginative play. In Papadopoulou's (2012) and Waite et al. (2011) studies, these media supply modern-day heroes and villains; their lack perhaps indicates the cultural framing by Steiner principles. In the analysis of the following extract from the data, we develop our idea that imagination is used purposefully by children to support their *own* narratives, the multiple authoring of selves (Edmiston, 2010). This observation from Kindergarten 1 at the Hereford Waldorf School shows how children in these settings might begin to develop an ability to be creative through their wide and varied imaginative play experiences, while respecting alternative perspectives.

One five year old boy carefully turned a chair upside down so that it fitted neatly inside another one. A four year old girl approached and asked respectfully: 'What are you doing?' 'It's a helicopter!' the boy answered gleefully. 'But ... you need spinning blades,' she said. There was silence for a moment before the girl repeated her comment: 'You need spinning blades for it to be a helicopter.' Still looking down and closely focusing on his construction, the boy calmly replied: 'I'm *pretending* I don't.' The girl appeared to be satisfied with this answer and moved away. Soon loud helicopter noises arose out of the boy and his 'machine,' as it seemingly 'took off' and began to move about the room. (Field notes, Kindergarten 1, The Hereford Waldorf School, 19 November 2007)

The 'Helicopter Pilot' here was not disconcerted by the girl's comment about his helicopter needing spinning blades; he exercised agency in choosing to pretend that it did not need them. He had a clear idea of what he wanted to create and was determined to follow his own plan. This accords with the view that the intellect and emotions are both at play in the imagination (Vygotsky, 2003). While the boy accepted the girl's right to an opinion, he had the freedom of imagination and confidence to decide the direction of his play, a helicopter without spinning blades. Why indeed would his imaginary helicopter need to be fettered by the limitations of reality? This extract illustrates that children who are supported to play imaginatively

not only learn the important ability to create ‘something out of nothing’, but they are also not held back by others’ expectations and act within their social and imagined worlds.

Wider sociocultural shaping of play is evident in the following extract, which documents a play sequence initiated by a small group of about five girls. They have transformed into small, rabbit-like creatures which they have named ‘Leebas’ and the scene opens with the birth of a baby to the Leeba family.

A baby ‘Leeba’ had been born and was lying on some blankets on the floor with four little girls crowded around her. The little girl playing the part of the baby, squirmed and mewed, stretching her arms and legs momentarily outwards and before drawing them back to foetal position in a manner absolutely true to that of a real new-born baby. Her eyes were half shut, her fingers tightly closed into fists and she responded to the Easter rabbit’s vigorous rubs along her back and sides with small whimpering noises ...

‘When you grow up you’ll be a very nice little girl’ ... the Easter rabbit told the ‘baby’.

‘You can have a nice drink of milk after.’ Another five year old girl began feeding the baby ‘Leeba’ ‘milk’ from a large pine cone. The ‘baby’ made loud sucking noises as she drank her fill ...

However, the atmosphere then changed as the situation suddenly became dangerous.

‘Pretend it wasn’t safe cos tractors were coming yeah?’ one little girl said.

‘Quick, move her to safety!’ Loud gurgling sounds came from the ‘baby’ as she was dragged across the floor to safety. The whole group of girls, amounting now to five or six individuals, huddled around the baby, ensuring she was protected from the ‘fleet of tractors’ that were clearly now roaring at high speed down the road towards them. The girls all simultaneously looked nervously behind them, clearly experiencing the alarm that such a situation might evoke in a group of protective mothers. (Field notes, The Rowan Tree Kindergarten, Bristol, 29 February 2008)

Sarah’s assessment of the play as ‘absolutely true’ to a new-born baby reflects her observation of play that is not outlandish but firmly grounded in their own experience of baby siblings. The girls already appear able to control the emotional tenor of their imagination (Vygotsky, 2003). They enact highly gendered role playing of ‘very nice little girls’ and (re)produce nurturing that they may have seen in their own families. They practise care and try out mothering roles, suddenly switching from stereotypical ‘playing mums’ to ‘experience’ the alarm of mothers protecting their young. The play seems to blend reality and the imagination and thinking and feeling. Some mainstream early years teachers might question whether gender stereotypical play should be gently challenged, however at another point, a boy was seen to stuff a cushion up his jumper and demand care and consideration for his pregnant state. A full consideration of gender issues is beyond the scope of this paper.

Implications for other early years’ contexts

Reflecting on our observations of the Steiner kindergartens, some questioned whether they formed a bubble that separated children from harsher realities in their life outside the sessions. Steiner practitioners, on the other hand, argued that it was

rather a protective ‘mantle’ and showed them a beautiful possible world. Yet, as we have seen in the examples shared in this paper, the children themselves are agents that create risky situations to test themselves and others and burst any putative ‘bubbles’ by bringing the outside world into the kindergartens, reproducing dangers or pressures that they may see in other parts of their life. The cultural context of the Steiner kindergarten is therefore permeable and penetrated by wider socio-cultural patterns. Recognition of the habitus that children bring to the setting can help practitioners to work in partnership with parents and the communities in which they work. Steiner practitioners, however, try to provide a particular cultural milieu in their kindergartens underpinned by a strong set of shared values.

Our critical evaluation of imaginative play and associated features in Steiner kindergartens has offered an opportunity to reflect not only on its purpose within the terms of their philosophy and practice but also to consider the wider implications and social purposes that might be fulfilled if extended periods of imaginative play were supported in other educational contexts. For, despite strong arguments for fostering imaginative play in early years provision, Blatner, (1992) notes that ‘this approach is often neglected in the course of traditional education, because it addresses a different type of learning than that which can be easily tested on exams’ (p. 1). Yet, a narrow approach to education that fails to stimulate the imagination is detrimental even to those aspects that are currently privileged and measured. We are social creatures that need to use our knowledge and skills in relation to others. Perhaps, agreeing strong shared values in other early years contexts might mitigate competing influences, such as creating school readiness or meeting standards (Waite, 2011).

This study has also highlighted how Steiner kindergarten teachers provide varied cultural densities during the session for children (Waite, 2013) through the ‘breathing in’ and ‘breathing out’ rhythm of activities. Children learn to conform to routines but also to *practise* creativity, social interaction and capacity for empathy within their imaginative play. On one hand, the Steiner kindergarten is a carefully managed social and cultural context with a deliberately ordered environment and expectations of behaviour reinforced by staff and children’s modelling expectations of behaviour. On the other, the teachers show respect for children’s imagination by also providing a ‘clear palette’ within this, where the children’s agenda are paramount and continuities between their home and community experiences are permitted space and time. They deliberately relax control and allow children to decide the course of their play, according it equal importance to the more structured parts of the day. Mainstream settings might consider how their daily programme supports different activities through levels of cultural density and structure.

The respect that is accorded the ‘work’ of children, imaginative play, in Steiner kindergartens is notable. Providing a picture of a way of being that children and adults might aspire towards is important but it is seen as equally important to provide space for children to extend their feelings and experience through their imagination so that such alternative worlds can be realised. Playing together in mixed age groups, the children support each other in extending their imaginative thinking (Vygotsky, 1987). Edmiston’s (2010) critique of developmental approaches to moral development and deficit views of childhood is echoed by our own observations of the way in which the children actively think, talk and play to explore possible identities, authoring ethical and empathic selves (p. 199). Other settings might combine teaching social skills overtly (e.g. through rules for behaviour) with ensuring children have adequate opportunity to enact them independently in play.

Conceptualising imagination as having individual (Harris, 2000), social (Vygotsky, 2003) and moral (Edmiston, 2010) aspects, and both cognitive and affective content (Hobson, 2002), has helped us to understand imaginative play's role in developing empathy using data from Steiner kindergartens. A Steiner perspective provides one rationale for this provision but drawing on wider literature reveals alternative reasons to provide sufficient time and space for children to practise and experiment with ways of being. We are exploring these ideas further in other early years and primary school contexts (Waite, Rogers, & Evans, 2013).

There is much in the Steiner practices and cultural context described here that is supportive of children's agency in shaping the rich imaginative possibilities of play for developing empathy and social awareness. We hope that our exploration of associated factors and possible benefits through multiple theoretical lenses may provide a source of reflection in other contexts on practices that encourage the imagination of children to flourish and support the development of empathy and prosocial behaviour for ethical and fulfilling lives.

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