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3. DEVELOPING CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION
BY ACCUMULATING LOTS OF USELESS
KNOWLEDGE

INTRODUCTION

Human experience in early childhood involves emotional vividness, openness to experience, and imaginative fertility. Children are then given into the care of school systems that were designed for an industrial age, and these systems, despite the heroic efforts of many teachers and administrators within them, tend to impose literalness, homogeneity, accumulation of much irrelevant knowledge, and desiccated forms of rationalism, which at least discourage and often stifle effective learning, imaginative engagement, and creativity. Children are raced through a curriculum which they sample only superficially, and rarely to the point that their imaginations become involved with the contents and the genuine wonders of knowledge.

That is too stark a way of putting it, of course, though the messy outlines of schooling practices do display prominent features that align with this simplification.

One troubling feature of that way of putting it, though, is that too many people see imagination and the accumulation of knowledge and development of reason as somewhat at odds with each other: we are encouraged to fight for greater success in mastering basic knowledge and skills, on the one hand, or greater creativity and freedom of expression and exploratory learning on the other. As though these can be represented as alternatives in any sane view of the world; as though developing one’s reasoning abilities infringes on or is inhibited by encouraging development of creativity and imagination.

It is useful to bear in mind that all the knowledge in the curriculum is a product of someone’s hopes, fears, passions, or ingenuity. If we want students to learn that knowledge in a manner that will make it meaningful and memorable, then we need to bring it to life for them in the context of those hopes, fears, passions, or ingenuity. The great agent that will allow us to achieve this routinely in everyday classrooms is the imagination, and the imagination is a great spur to creativity in any field.

Put this way we can see imagination as necessary for conveying knowledge meaningfully, and, reciprocally, accumulating knowledge as necessary for engaging the imagination. And while it is hard not to conclude that hopes, fears, passions and ingenuity are not very evident in most current teaching practice nor in programs that prepare teachers for work in classrooms, nevertheless this way of putting it aligns better with Wordsworth’s insight that “Imagination … is Reason in her most
exalted mood." So if we hope to bring richer meaning, and hopes, fears, passions, and ingenuity into the classroom, we need to have both accumulating knowledge and reason and imagination working together.

I have begun, then, by suggesting that a common, if somewhat subdued, assumption in educational thinking that influences daily practice is that there is a kind of tension between teaching to encourage creativity and imagination, on the one hand, and encouraging knowledge accumulation and rationality, on the other. We have inherited this division in educational thinking from a long history, a prominent part of which includes the Progressivist program, whose rhetoric emphasized a conflict between what they represented as the traditional emphasis on teaching irrelevant, ornamental, and useless knowledge contrasted with the new and progressive emphasis on teaching relevant skills and processes that prepared students for the world around them (Egan, 2002). I want to disrupt further this division too many people seem still to take for granted by recommending a new way to approach developing imagination in learning about the world; exemplified by a new program that aims to develop imagination and creativity by the route of accumulating a great deal of detailed and “useless” knowledge about a specific topic.

Learning in Depth

If one begins to study the imagination or creativity in detail, one quickly learns that these potent intellectual abilities are not like the kind of mind-wandering and idle fancy they are sometimes associated with. One realizes that the more one knows about something the easier it is to be imaginative about it, and creativity in any field follows deep knowledge about that field. And furthermore, and further conflicting with common assumptions today, the imagination can work only with what we know. It can’t work with the contents of the library or the Internet. It is common to hear educators say that what is important is to know how to find knowledge as one needs it, rather than load up one’s memory with all kinds of knowledge that may prove to be useless. But ignorance and vaguely grasped general knowledge provide no stimulus for the imagination; richness of detailed knowledge stored in the mind is what gets imaginations up in the morning. You can’t imagine or be creative with what you don’t know, regardless of how skilled you might be in finding out knowledge you need. If your imagination is not working with knowledge, you don’t know what you need, and your mind remains idle.

Well, yes, this also simplifies the spurs to imagination and creativity, but much less so than the casual assumption that developing imagination is in some way at odds with accumulating knowledge. It seemed to me that we needed to introduce into the curriculum a simple program that would be devoted to enabling children to accumulate lots and lots of knowledge about something. The program I have suggested (Egan, 2011) is starkly simple and can be described in a single paragraph:

“Learning in Depth” (LiD) begins, ideally, soon after children begin schooling. It starts with a ceremony in which each child is given a specific topic. The plan is that