

Imagination in Children's Writing: How High Can Fiction Fly?

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1. Development and imagination

When human development is conceived as a process that projects itself from the inner being to the outside world, it is the educators' greatest task to repress individualistic tendencies and the individual's most primitive impulses, imposing patterns of social behaviour and knowledge of the world. This attitude explains the traditional opposition between imagination and knowledge. Taken as part of the human potential, imagination exists as the individual's innate resource, impenetrable, secret and unquestionable and, for these reasons, must be tamed. It is a skill which has to be worked on. Despite the so-called talks in favour of creativity, the development of imagination seems to be always circumscribed to the limits allowed by the system of production. The bookish exercise of fantasy is associated to hallucinations, dreams and incoherent non-objective projects. To a lesser degree, such thoughts may even be tolerated as a temporary stage in childhood or as characteristic of poets, artists and philosophers who, for this reason, might rarely attain either prestige or social status. Popular mentality, which is borne in the rational and competitive values of society, proclaims: "art cannot feed anyone".

Taken to extreme consequences, the dreaming potential is expressed in marginality, alienation and madness, that is, a danger which must be fought against. Since living in society requires man's enforcement within well-defined limits of behaviour and expression, imagination has been historically and pedagogically combated. To the detriment of imagination, reason and knowledge are valued and given the role of repressing thought aiming at the consolidation of the objectively shared practical and technical knowledge. Actually, that is the "pre requirement" for productive, professional and autonomous social insertion.

As an example of such tendency it is worth examining the analysis of school manuals done by Duborgel (1992). Through the development of linguistic manifestations, texts and illustrations it was possible to perceive the gradual subordination of imagination to the benefit of the ideal of the "positive adult", that is to say, the one who conforms to the system and starts to organise himself according to more objective, economical and co-ordinated criteria.

Vygotsky's contribution to the understanding of human development subsidises another concept of imagination associated to evolution processes and knowledge. Like the other typically human superior functions, the imaginative essence springs from collective activities, which are progressively incorporated by the individual as internal properties, that is, moving from inter to inner psychic function. Seen from this perspec-

tive, knowledge and imagination are part of the same process of building the self in its relation with the world and, more specifically, with Man's social and historical context.

In Luria's research (1990), as Vygotsky's collaborator, peasants living in remote regions were asked to make any three questions they felt like to the researcher. The aim was to establish a relationship between "imaginative models" and the social and schooling variables. Although the activity may seem simple, the great majority of the illiterate individuals, who lived in isolated rural areas, refused to formulate any questions as they themselves surprisingly realised the interdependence between both functions - imagination and knowledge. The answer below, given by one of those individuals, is the evidence of such perception:

*I don't know how to get knowledge ... where could I find the questions?
To ask questions you need knowledge. You can ask questions when you
can understand things, but my head is empty. (p.184)*

It seems to me such posture is in line with the thesis of those theoreticians who have a pedagogy of imagination in mind (JEAN, 1991 and DUBORGEL, 1992). In opposition to Sartre, they defend imagination as the conscience of what is real. I also believe in imagination as a mental activity which goes beyond the mere perception and is capable of building - in different levels of perception - representations of reality, reproducing and recreating it.

Confined to the limits of memory, "reproductive imagination" appears in association with practical experiences and more immediate interests (LURIA 1990). In more advanced levels of development, "creative imagination", associated to logical and verbal thinking, is the function which is present in the great discoveries and achievements of humankind - scientific, artistic, literary or technological revolutions. It consists of the possibility of creation understood as a qualitative leap which allows one to dare, to challenge institutional order (which is supposedly unquestionable) and thus overcome limits. The apparently "absurd hypothesis" of injecting a virus in a contaminated terminal patient could be taken as an example. That was exactly Louis Pasteur's great boldness and merit in the discovery of the rabies vaccine. The principle of vaccination devised by that renowned scientist was considered so illogical until 1885 that, to prove his hypothesis, he had to run the risk of being taken for a criminal. Imagination paid its price when challenging institutionalised logic but it gave back to humankind a compensation in terms of knowledge and recognised scientific development.

In the case of learning, whenever children create hypotheses to understand reality, it is creative imagination which overcomes more elementary conceptions previously absorbed. Therefore, the evolution of knowledge is a process connected to creative power whose result puts an end to the most primitive representations while opening new perspectives to the creative mind. Man needs not only knowledge but also the creative capacity to generate it. Imagination is that most daring side of intelligence which takes risks, formulates hypothesis to explain the unknown and jumps into unpredictable projects challenging certainties of the present, the limits of truth, of what is considered right and institutionalised.

From this perspective, how can imagination and writing relate to one another?

2. Writing and imagination: relationships and evolution tendencies

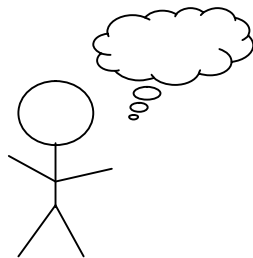
As imagination helps to envisage the unknown in the learning process it can be said to be an integral part of the literacy process favouring the development of children's concepts with respect to the use and to how written language works. In the successive movements towards literacy, the learner reveals strong traces of a daring creativity and, in the effort to learn, gives up more elementary ideas to create new more elaborate hypotheses in a progressive linguistic process of adjustment, discovery and linguistic recreation.

On the other hand, that same writing, which is learnt due to imagination and cognitive effort, is a privileged means to express dreams, fantasies and mental representations. If reading enables the individual to "see other things" rather than only letters, lines and pages, writing implies being able to "translate" what has been conceived, visualised or imagined by the author into concrete proposals of understanding. Through the linguistic expression of writing what is absent becomes present, the impossible acquires effective possibilities, distances in time and space may be reduced, ideas take shape, characters come to life, hypothetical situations are transformed into singular configurations and knowledge is reinterpreted in the most varied contexts. Overcoming the author's very own fragile, incomplete and temporary nature, the text can even gain autonomy and immortality. Writing allows for the reproduction or recreation of reality in immeasurable possibilities of interpretation and understanding.

The inherent potential of writing seems to be far from revealing itself as a promise to those who supposedly learn to read and write.

Assuming that imagination is part of the group of superior functions and, as such, reveals itself as a vital element to being, learning, knowing and doing; accepting the concept that writing, as a form of linguistic expression, is a privileged means to express fantasy; and feeling absolutely sure that writing presupposes a certain dose of reproduction and recreation of reality, I enquire: how does imagination reveal itself and develop in children's writing?

Without meaning to exhaust the subject of imagination in the development of writing, I would like to proceed by examining it in the scope of my PhD research in classes ranging from the first to the fifth grades in a state school in São Paulo (1) and in my subsequent studies based on the same corpus of research. The starting point is the production of a text whose main appeal was to stir imagination or fantasy (2).



Pedagogical stick figure

After drawing the above pedagogical stick figure on the blackboard, in each of the classes (first to fifth grades), I gave students the following instructions: *"This person is thinking. Write about what he/she is thinking, everything that crosses his/her mind."*

The imprecision of the drawing as well as the thematic vagueness, both done on purpose, induce the subjects, in most cases, to talk about themselves (their worries,

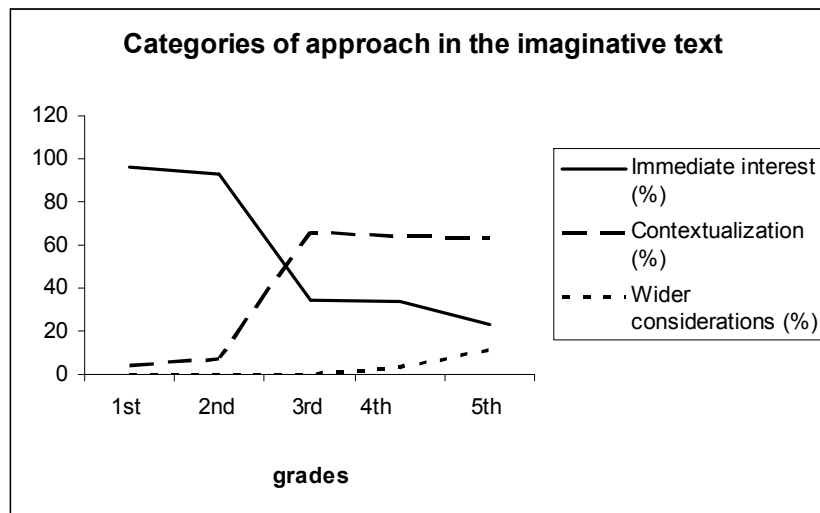
interests and desires) without any commitment with a given reality, thus generating an appeal to their imagination. When the proposal is to talk about one's dreams, thoughts or fantasies, not necessarily (or assumedly) "mine", the feeling of freedom and the appeal to one's creativity are assimilated in different ways. For some students, the fact that they could write about any theme and in any way (without having to produce a specific content) instigated them to throw themselves into the task of creating and imagining at once. Uncommitted to the challenge of the task, others did something quicker, easier and immediate. Another group, still, dealt with the given freedom in an anguished way, without knowing what or how to carry out the task. The latter made innumerable requests, all stemming from the same focus of tension: *"I don't know what to say. Tell me something to write here..."*

The production of the text as proposed attains an expressive dimension in which the subject with more or less competence is induced to: 1) consider a hypothetical situation (the character and its thoughts); 2) select one or several themes springing from a range of dreams, fantasies, desires and recollections; 3) produce a text which, besides the challenges of the written language itself, would be able to conciliate the two first items mentioned. Based on these challenges, I would go even further in the questioning formulated before: how do children tend to conceive a written production whose proposition appeals to one's imagination? How do they deal with reality and imagination in the written compositions? How far does the nature of the proposed theme favour the flight of fiction?

The analysis of the texts reveals three basic categories for the configuration of the hypothetical situation: immediate interest, contextualization and the wider and more abstract considerations distributed among the five groups studied as follows:

CATEGORIES OF APPROACH IN THE IMAGINATIVE TEXT

	Immediate interest (%)	Contextualization (%)	Wider considerations (%)
1 st grade	96,29	3,70	0
2 nd grade	92,85	7,14	0
3 rd grade	34,28	65,71	0
4 th grade	33,33	63,73	3,33
5 th grade	22,85	62,85	11,42
Total	46,45	43,22	3,22



The figures show a predominance of the ‘immediate interest’ group, a way of production that tends to diminish as the initiative to create a contextualised situation, able to support the theme referred to, increases. The "wider considerations" group – a more developed alternative because it shifts the focus of the theme away from the immediate reality – starts to appear timidly only from the fourth grade onwards. This direction of the evolutionary aim is, by the way, compatible with the results of Luria’s work mentioned before which, respected the due specifications of the research, the historical moment and the subjects studied (3), also proved the individual’s growing possibility of more abstract approaches, according to the schooling degree and social interchange. However, unlike what was found by the Russian researcher, there have not been (despite some pupils’ need to be stimulated when hesitating to produce their texts) any cases of refusal to produce, considered by Luria the most elementary category in the building of fantasy and which predominated among the illiterate peasants, inhabitants of isolated areas. This suggests that the experience of the students in the city of São Paulo and very probably their attendance at Pre school classes provided them with a basic repertoire to give rise to imagination, already in the first grade of Primary School, no matter how simple such production might seem.

In fact, in the most typical texts of the first and second grades, prevailed simple recollections, which only mentioned one or more ideas related to immediate interests or elements from the young authors’ context without the worry to situate the thought of the stick figure or deepen the consideration of the theme, as can be seen in this example (4):

Example 1 (a seven-year-old boy from the first grade)

chocolate (8) cake
 coca cola
 ham sandwich (8)

As this was collected during the period before break, that is, a time when pupils might be hungry, many students made reference to food and drinks, surely their immediate interest. Even though regarded as a list of elements directly connected with reality (food, everyday school subjects or toys), the fact that the pupil accepts the

proposal of an imaginative text (instead of refusing the task) places him/her in the corresponding category 2 of Luria's research: "formulation of practical questions without the help of an imaginary situation".

The "contextualization" texts, which predominate as from the fourth grade onwards, are characterised by the authors' worry to build an imaginary situation for the thought of the character in question. A ten-year-old girl, having taken care to transform the stick figure into a detailed drawing of a feminine figure with a guitar, wrote below her drawing: "This is Sandy" (a popular Brazilian singer) and then sprang into her text which is part of the lyrics of one of the mentioned singer's hits.

Example 2 (a ten-year-old girl from the 4th grade):

Let's jump, let's jump, let's jump (dialectical transcription)

More elaborate than example 1, the writing in question, either due to the information given below the drawing or because of the reproduction of part of the lyrics, managed to recreate a public figure with a well defined identity though the text itself is only a reproduction of something known.

What is common among the texts in this category is the creation of practical situations supported by the authors' worry to place their writing in time ("when I grow up", "on mothers' day"), situation ("when he kicked a penalty", "a dream") space ("at school", "at the circus") or define the character ("this is me", "Ronaldinho"), giving information to the reader, even though there is no intention to engage in the development of the theme, as observed in the example quoted. The contextualization of the fictitious situation represents a qualitative leap over the previous more inarticulate productions, still corresponding to Category 2 as proposed by Luria "formulation of practical questions", but now "with the help of an imaginary situation". Because of this worry, the deepening of the fictitious situation, with more or less competence, becomes a differential in the produced texts, which can be seen in the example that follows.

Example 3: (a ten-year-old boy from the 4th grade)

Once I dreamed that I was a hero that I had imagined, he was a very strong hero, he threw laser through his eyes, he had X ray vision (8), flew, climbed (8) the walls, the ceiling and had many other weapons.
One day he tried to give a mortal (8) jump from a bridge, below there was too much water, there was only water, but deep down, at the bottom there was some treasure which inside had powers (9), jewellery, diamonds and crystals and a lot of gold. He went to the bottom, grabbed (9) and then when he opened (9) there was a doll.

More than the worry to contextualize the text (a dream) or the situation (a hero with certain powers who dives into the infinite water under a bridge), what is evident in this case is the author's effective willingness to deepen the expression of his fantasy. Comparing examples 2 and 3, the author of the second text, despite his spelling,

referential and text cohesion problems, is willing to go beyond the boundaries of the real, breaking the limit of what is possible. Feeling himself protected by the situation of the dream (an area where everything can happen), he gets rid of the narrow limits of reproducing reality to leap into the condition of recreating it.

The access to the different levels of imagination oscillates about an axis between reality and fiction. The first is characterised by the transposition of the real to the written production (example 2), despite different possibilities of execution. In this case, pupils usually refer to objects of their own world and themes of their everyday life, though, sometimes, disguised in approaches full of fantasy (huge houses, friendship with idols, imported cars, impossible love affairs, etc.). The second depends on the recreation of reality by the breach with the possible or with what has never been seen or done by Man (example 3), justifying the qualitative tendency which, in this category, enables "creative" imagination to overcome reproductive imagination.

In the study, the quantitative distribution of these two plans of approach reveals the predominance of reality over fiction, as one can see in the following table.

PLANS OF APPROACH IN THE IMAGINATIVE TEXT

	Reality (%)	Fiction (%)
1 st grade (7 years old)	100	0
2 nd grade (8 years old)	82,14	17,85
3 rd grade (9 years old)	97,14	2,85
4 th grade (10 years old)	83, 33	16,66
5 th grade (11 years old)	74,28	22,85
Total	87,09	12,25

From an evolutionary perspective, the data suggest that the flight of the imaginary is not only restricted but also shows a low growing rate throughout Primary school: once it becomes possible (around the second grade) the tendency to use writing as a support for fiction is small and still shows few chances to develop (5). Wouldn't this be a consequence of the way writing is dealt with at school? Wouldn't this be a consequence of the devaluation of fiction by educators?

Finally, in the last category, children were able to free themselves from practical situations of immediate interest or of the contextualization of a scene (real or fictitious) to evoke "wider" contents based on acquired knowledge, personal anguish and critical positioning. The text below is a typical example of this category:

Example 4 (a twelve-year-old boy from the 5th grade)

How crazy is the world! People destroy forests and kill animals if I could (8) I stopped (9) everything making the world a better place for humans and animals.

The example shows that the possibility of "considering wider and more abstract themes" (a late and rare configuration, which only appeared in the two last grades, amounting to 3,22% of the cases studied) does not guarantee the disposition to turn the text into a means to deepen the development of ideas. In other words, even under the predominance of more "developed approaches", one cannot be sure of "beautiful productions". In this case, as well as in example 2, what seems to be at stake, unfortunately, is both pupils' prevailing posture of non-commitment with the task, and especially, of low motivation in the face of the challenge to write. If writing potentially brings the chance to venture oneself, to express dreams and fantasies, to create new characters and universes, in the school practice pupils seem to be conditioned to the mere completion of tasks which may cause nothing but pain in the hands and tiredness.

It could be different. Why not?

By respecting the characteristics of the age groups and the degree of knowledge of the written language, singular cases put in evidence a potential which is still badly exploited at school. The text that follows, still an example of the third category ("wider considerations") shows that the power of abstraction of ideas can be combined with a disposition to write, recovering elements of reality in a way to recreate it from a critical perspective:

Example 5 (an eleven-year-old girl from the 4th grade)

Thoughts

This person, about who (9) I am going to write is an ordinary person like thousands, millions of inhabitants in this country. He wakes up hardly has breakfast and leaves home hurriedly, putting on shoe, trying to comb his hair, after all late like everybody else. (9)

This citizen always thinks what everybody else thinks. He thinks about strangling his boss, about a rise (8) in salary, holidays, a better position and all this at work.

At home he thinks about bills, his favourite team's game, the food that is not ready, his wife that is a pain in the neck (with due respect) and nags him to watch a soap opera and this at home He also has his social life, is jealous of his partner's suit, gets mad at a certain Victor because he looks at his wife and argues with his best friend and with his children that make his life difficult to pay for their school, asks for something impossible and are always fighting (9)

In his sexual life (9) his wife has always got a headache. And finally but not so important the traffic that is a nuisance, there are only bad drivers traffic lights out of order and accident (8) (9) And even so he loves his life.

The author of the text formulates her "thoughts" based on the description of the life of a so-called character (apparently an imaginary specific situation) but the generalisation used to refer to him ("an ordinary person like thousands, millions of inhabitants in this country", "late like everybody else", "thinks what everybody else thinks") suggests that the meaning of the text refers to the contradictions of people's own lives. It deals, therefore, much more with social criticism based on a certain personal experience than on a restricted circumstantial narrative, which makes it correspond to Luria's category 3: "formulation of questions pertinent to one's own knowledge".

3. Rethinking writing and imagination at school.

Learning to write does not necessarily guarantee the possibility of venturing into imaginative writing. From a qualitative point of view, the chance to be able to dive into a text that is the expression of dreams and the recreation of reality seems to depend so much on the amplitude and abstraction of the approach (the treatment of the content) as on the depth and involvement with which the author is ready to face the challenge of writing (rhetorical treatment). So the evolutionary potential of the imaginative text seems to revolve around the following axes

I. Treatment of the content

a) Thematic configuration

Immediate interest

Contextualization

Wider considerations

b) Approach plan

Reality

Fiction

II Rhetorical treatment:

a) Knowledge of written language

b) Involvement with written language

The possible weaving of the different variables explains the diversity of the productions always circumscribed by the infinite potential of the language, the cultural points of reference and the effective pedagogic investment. All writing, while a system of communication and a representation of reality, presupposes a considerable degree of abstraction. The link built between the text and the object it deals with (rhetoric and content) surely represents the level of linguistic knowledge but, more than this, it conveys the author's view of the world (6), the way he/she understands it and relates to it. Therefore, understanding the challenges involved in the teaching of writing makes me question the teaching practices and the social and pedagogic value attributed

to imagination. Teaching to write is, to a certain extent, to feed the possibility of both interpreting and recreating reality. Regrettably,

...tout se passe comme si l'écriture enfantine était 'dirigée' et 'polarisée'(...) par l'idéal d'une écriture plus référencielle, plus transitive, plus vraisemblable, plus réaliste. Corrélativement, tout se passe comme si l'écriture enfantine était destinée à limiter ou à abandonner son rapport aux thèmes de l'imaginaire et aux formes d'expression de l'imagination. (DUBORGEL, 1992, p. 121) (7)

Despite the fact that the tendency of the evolutionary process gradually points to wider and more abstract approaches, the great majority of the imaginative texts analysed is circumscribed by the dimensions of what is real and the immediate interest, not rarely still affected by the precarious involvement with the language. Among the 155 pupils analysed, only 19 launched themselves into texts of fiction; only 5 managed to deal with wider themes. Locked inside themselves and with difficulty to overcome their daily life, pupils seem to hold on to the concrete dimensions of what is real, possible, experienced and known. Yes, pupils do think and dream, but the flight to the imaginary is low, due to their adherence to reality, due to their eagerness to get rid of school chores. After five years of school life, the quality of the textual production reflects a resistance to consider writing a resource which enables them to give wings to imagination.

Notes:

1. The PhD thesis entitled "Children's Writing: tendencies and possibilities" aimed at studying the psychological birth of the building of a text in different types of textual production (self collocation texts, imaginative texts, informative texts and texts of reproductive registers) taking into account the analysis of 659 texts produced by students from the first to the fifth grades of Elementary school at a state school in São Paulo, Brazil. I suggest those readers interested in getting further details of the research (justification, conditions of production, methodology of analysis and theoretic basement) to check the original work, cited in the bibliographical references. In relation to the present chapter, I will be considering only part of this *corpus* of the research, that is, the 155 texts of imagination produced by children aged 6 to 12.
2. The situation of the text of Fantasy was reproduced and adapted from the original research carried out by Duborgel (1992) In the context of the present work, I use indiscriminately the terms "imagination", 'dream' and 'fantasy', referring to concepts, recollections and descriptions that include the allusions made in free thinking in the productions triggered by the request here considered.
3. Luria's research was carried out among peasants in Uzbekistan and Kirgistan between 1931 and 1932 and was only published in the Soviet Union in 1974, arriving in Brazil in the nineties.
4. This and the following examples have been faithfully transcribed from the original texts.
5. From the first to the fifth grades analysed, the apparently slightly rising quality of the fictitious texts has only been broken by the third grade, a group which was considered rather immature by the teachers.
6. A vision sometimes derived from the predominating cultural points of reference, sometimes opposed to it, translating singular ways of getting hold of the world which emanates from the unique personal course of each individual
7. "Everything happens as if children's writing was conducted and polarised by the ideal of a more referential writing, more transitive, more believable and realistic. Likewise, everything takes place as if children's writing was destined to limit or abandon its relationship with the themes of the imaginary and the means of expression of the imagination"
8. Spelling mistakes
9. Grammar and punctuation mistakes

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