



Reciprocity between narrative, questioning and imagination in the early and primary years: Examining the role of narrative in possibility thinking



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ABSTRACT

The concept of possibility thinking (PT) as a driving force of creativity has been investigated both conceptually and empirically for over a decade in early years settings and primary classrooms in England. In the first wave of qualitative empirical studies, play formed part of the enabling context. Criteria for episode selection for PT analysis were that episodes exhibited children immersed in sustained focused playful activity. During the second wave of PT studies, the research team's attention was drawn to children's imaginative storying in such playful contexts and it emerged that consideration of narrative in PT might prove fruitful. The current paper revisits key published work, and drawing on data previously analysed for features of PT, seeks to explore how narrative might relate to the current theorised framework. Fourteen published PT episodes are re-analysed in order to consider the role and construction of narrative in PT. The new analysis reveals that narrative plays a foundational role in PT, and that reciprocal relationships exist between questioning, imagination and narrative, layered between children and adults. Consequences for nurturing children's creativity and for future PT research are explored.

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1. Introduction

In recent years increased attention has been paid to creativity both internationally and in early years and primary education. Scholars have examined its conceptualisation (e.g. Banaji, Burn, & Buckingham, 2010; Craft, 2011; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009; Sawyer, 2004) and its instantiation in the pedagogic practices both of teachers (e.g. Cremin, Barnes, & Scoffham, 2009; Jeffrey & Woods, 2009), and of artists (e.g. Bancroft, Fawcett, & Hay, 2008; Galton, 2008). The interrelated concepts of creative learning (Jeffrey, 2006; Sefton-Green, Thomson, Jones, & Bresler, 2011) and 'possibility thinking' (PT) (e.g. Burnard, Craft, & Grainger, 2006; Craft, McConnon, & Matthews, 2012) have also been explored. In the case of the latter, conceptual and empirical studies in England have developed the notion that children's creativity is driven by PT, exploratory transitions from 'what is' to 'what might be', encapsulated as the posing of the question 'what if?' in different ways and contexts, together with perspective-taking, or 'as if' thinking.

Initially conceptualised by Craft (2001), and set within broader conceptualisations of creativity as everyday, two phases of empirical work have investigated the nature of children's PT and how it is nurtured by teacher pedagogy (Burnard et al., 2006; Chappell, Craft, Burnard, & Cremin, 2008; Craft, Cremin, Chappell, Burnard, & Dragovic, 2012; Craft, McConnon, et al.,

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2012; Cremin, Craft, & Burnard, 2006). Undertaken in settings with children aged 3–11 years, the research team and co-participant teachers noted the contextual role of play in these studies. Criteria for episode selection for PT analysis were evidence of children's immersed playful activity. However, the research foregrounded PT characteristics and enabling pedagogy and whilst the playful context was acknowledged in all presentations and papers, it was arguably also somewhat 'taken for granted'. On discussing the role of imaginative storying evident in the context of the most recent PT studies (Craft, Cremin, et al., 2012; Craft, Mcconnon, et al., 2012), and cognisant of research highlighting the power of narrative in education (Bruner, 1986; Egan, 1986), the team decided to re-visit the second phase dataset. These studies, with children aged 3–11 years, focused primarily on categorising, interrogating and enhancing the PT framework developed in the first phase work.

A new analysis of these published studies was thus undertaken with a view to considering narrative in PT, seeking to investigate two questions:

1. What is narrative in PT and how is it constructed?
2. What is the role of narrative in PT?

In the next section consideration is given to the studies of creativity as PT, noting in particular the role of the enabling context within these, this is followed by discussion of narrative in education.

2. Creativity as possibility thinking

Since 2004, two substantive phases of qualitative research have identified and documented PT characteristics in creative learning for children aged 3–11 in England.

The initial empirical work developed Craft's original conceptualisation and through adopting a deductive–inductive analytic approach created a framework for identifying PT (Burnard et al., 2006). The key features of PT with 4–7 year olds were found to include: question-posing, play, immersion, innovation, risk-taking, being imaginative, self-determination and intentionality (Burnard et al., 2006). These features were fostered by teacher–child interactions in an enabling context in which teachers offered children time and space to develop ideas, prioritised learner agency and 'stood back' in order to observe children's engagement and select when to intervene (Cremin et al., 2006). This pair of studies established an empirically grounded conceptual basis for later work and like the subsequent research were naturalistic enquiries involving teachers as co-participative researchers. They utilised observation, interviews and video stimulated review to prompt reflection on learning.

In the next substantive phase of the work, the team sought to interrogate the framework established in the first phase. Three studies were undertaken, the first focused on the potency of children's questions, yielding a taxonomy of questioning in PT episodes (Chappell et al., 2008). As shown in Fig. 1, question-posing and question-responding were seen occurring in a context of play and immersion in which children engaged in self-determined activity enabling and generating intentional action. At this stage of the work then, play and immersion were re-positioned as contextual features of PT. This study highlighted the importance of the inherent breadth of possibility in any classroom activity, as well as complex relationships between question-posing and question-responding. It delineated different kinds of questioning from leading questions framing creative endeavour to service questions enabling enquiries to proceed, and follow-through questions often used at a practical level. Questions were expressed verbally and more frequently non-verbally through enacted expression.

The second study in this phase explored the activity of children aged 9–11 in two primary schools (Craft, Cremin, et al., 2012). The episodes selected for analysis were again drawn from playful immersive contexts, this time from within science, art, and mathematics. The study further confirmed most features of PT, but found risk-taking to be absent and noted a lack of non-verbal questioning in the mathematics activity. Significantly, it identified peer collaboration as an emergent PT feature and documented an overlap between imaginative and playful behaviour, which was particularly striking given the older age group.

Another second-phase study was of four year olds in an early years setting (Craft, Mcconnon, et al., 2012). This explored PT manifest in child-initiated play and adults' roles in this. It revealed blending of individual, collaborative and communal creativity and an imaginative dynamic between practitioner and child; pedagogues 'stepped forward' as well as 'stood back' as children transformed what is to what might be. This study also noted the role of provocations and the presence of children's imaginative storying. Revisiting this alongside the other two second-phase studies, the research team began to recognise a role played by narrative, prompting the current systematic re-analysis.

In the first phase studies, play formed a core element of the enabling context to PT, however it was not until the second-phase studies that narrative was really noticed. The identification of playful immersion as a context to PT, rather than forming a focus of analysis, had perhaps fostered an unconscious acceptance of the role of narrative as contextual, and diverted attention from the conscious mining of it. The emergence of narrative in the 2012 studies led the team to re-examine the data analysed in the previously published studies.

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