Imagining Classrooms

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Imagining Classrooms: Stories of children, teaching, and ethnography.
Boys from the local high school are here over recess. Part of their community work this year is to teach games and hobbies to the kids. It hasn’t been working, according to Amanda, a grade three teacher. The high school boys don’t know how to get the kids to share equipment or follow the rules of games. The kids are confused and excited, and some, says Amanda, start acting all macho male to assert that they’re not ‘special’. Just then, a boy grabs the tube of black paint from the desk set up for painting and runs across the dry, sunny field to the posts that hold up the shade cloth. His hands are smeared in paint, and he rubs it all over the post until Amanda runs over to stop him. ‘What beautiful finger painting,’ she says, ‘but that’s enough now.’ In her grasp and with her words, he calms down and allows himself to be led to the outside sink. Together they wash his hands. ‘This is how we wash our hands, wash our hands, wash our hands’, Amanda sings softly.

Two boys, hand in hand, run past where I stand. One suddenly sits. The other tries to pull him up. ‘I didn’t say sit down’, he says, sounding frustrated. ‘I said, “let’s run over there and find the treasure.”’ The seated boy lets himself be pulled up. They run on.

Amanda comes back towards me saying that the boy who took the paint has got out of the play area. She is on duty and has to stay here, so she asks me to have a look for him behind the school. But, she warns, if I see him I should find someone else to deal with him. He’d be too strong for me. I unhook the orange plastic that acts as a gate, and walk a few steps. I see the
boy, huge though young, all in black, lumbering surprisingly quickly towards me. A teacher is already in pursuit. I watch as she tries to hold onto him, and as four more teachers rush to help. Together they succeed, as he grunts and hits out, to steer him towards the small fenced enclosure at the side of the playground. He is locked in for the rest of recess (Special School, author field notes, 9 October 2007).

In this story of a recess at a school for low-IQ students, we see many people working hard to make collective life work: the boys from the high school, the teacher Amanda, and the boy trying to play a game of pretence. We also see this work breaking down, and more work done to try to recover forms of cooperation. This work is variously attempted with equipment like paint and sports gear; words that pretend the scenarios of finger painting and treasure hunting; and bodies grasping and leading. These are all moments, some playful and some forceful, to achieve the co-construction of goals. Underlying all this is imagination.

Imagination is used, I will argue here, to create a belief that disparate people have shared goals. Moreover, imagination is necessary to form the bonds between people necessary for the achievement of those goals. What I hope to argue, in short, is that the concept of and the relationships necessary to cooperative group life are achieved through particular routines for doing imagination.

Participation and observation at a school for low-IQ children made these processes of material, coordinated group action obvious. Because these children were poor at working together, or even recognising the need to work together, the methods that teachers used to teach cooperation were particularly clear. Above we have seen the consequences for various people – teachers and children alike – when the imaginative routines they have attempted go wrong. Posts get painted, games are abruptly stopped, children are chased and enclosed. But we will find that the same types of imaginative routines are worked at other schools also.

What I tell in this chapter is animated by a great admiration for the teachers whose classrooms I participated in. As I felt overwhelmed by the onward rush of events, I saw teachers coping with ease. Used to having time to reflect, I didn’t know how to deal with the ever-changing needs of children, but these teachers
Having a friend made it seem simple. In this chapter, I try to do justice to these talented teachers, telling stories of events rushing on and teachers responding. Theirs is a particular imaginative skill, and one that has nothing to do with representation. They are seasoned interveners, and the passages they walk are hugely unpredictable. They use their own imaginations and that of their students to solve a distinct public problem that has to do with making ‘the other’ socially capable.

What is performed at Special School, I will suggest, are imaginative practices aiming to get children to relate to materials and other people by providing a structure in which this relating makes sense. We see this most clearly in the moments of play that fail. The two boys are playing a game of pretence that bumps its way along with the guidance of the more powerful player. He reminds the other player of the purpose of running across the field and he says again that this is a joint goal – let’s go find the treasure. Running across the field together again makes sense, and the sitting boy rises and continues. The students from the high school meanwhile fail because they can’t get the children to understand the shared system (rules) needed for their games to work. The children do not seem to understand that for the game to work they must follow specific conventions and that they have to act together to enact these. They do not have an imaginative scenario that will make sense of the game to be played. In one game, the shared goal and rules made sense because it was embedded in an imaginative story; in the other game, there was no imaginative story and no success. Recognising this suggests that play is important for our learning to relate to others and to materials within some overarching real or imaginary system. Play, in this view, is a way of learning to act together in communities of practice.

What is also special about the imaginative routines of this school is the skill of the teachers. Imagination enables these teachers to flexibly relate themselves to unpredictable child needs via people, materials, words, and structures. It can never be taken for granted that children already agree that they are part of

* There is huge debate about what play is ‘for’, if anything. Perhaps my favourite answer is that provided by Brian Sutton-Smith, who suggests that, given the great variety of play types and practices, play is ‘for’ learning adaptive variability (Sutton-Smith 1997). For other impressive accounts of how play has been dealt with in scholarship, see Schwartzman (1978); Goldman (1998).
a group with some shared goal. Nor can it be assumed that they understand or are committed to following any system of rules. These things are forgotten or ignored, and children are locked behind fences. Thus, Amanda does not refer to particular elements in a system of rules. She cannot assume that this boy knows that he is not allowed to put paint all over the posts because he knows he must care for school property, though this is one of the school rules. Instead she tells of beautiful and complete finger painting, claiming to value his actions but see them as no longer necessary. Next we see him running away, breaking the rules of being a good knower (fitting in with collective systems of behaviour) or having good knowledge (that, for example, due to the systems of rules and discipline, he will be caught and punished for leaving). He is large, angry, and unpredictable. Therefore, teachers must rush to seize and enclose him where his actions will remain uncertain, but will now be constrained. Without the power of already shared systems to govern behaviour, teachers must find ways, every time, to guide children towards better behaviours for their learning and cooperating. This takes a certain imagination, one that is flexible and responsive. These teachers, then, display impressive talents at responding to sudden particulars in ways that will keep group life as together as possible.

Learning happens in relationships with other people and things – what is important about the imagination at Special School is its role in making these relationships. I will make this argument with scholars who suggest that successful learning is achieved by membership in communities of practice. I then return to this particular case and ask why this imagination is so obvious at Special School: what is special about Special School? We then look at how imaginative routines done at other schools make children relate in different ways. And we will close with an account of what makes the teachers who work at Special School so impressive, a close that returns us to the teachers’ relational imagination.

The scholars I appeal to here suggest that the common picture of learning as adding to the store of information in a mind is incomplete. What is revealed instead is learners acting with material in ways that are deemed wrong (and
corrected) or correct (and extended) by those around them. It is when we know how to do things – such as how to categorise information or objects, or to use the right words to refer, or the order of steps to solve a number problem – that we can be said to have learnt. Lucy Suchman (1987), for example, argues that the cognitive models that were used to build artificial intelligence failed because they exactly ignored such socially and materially situated aspects of human thinking. To be an intelligent agent in this new picture would mean noticing and gradually adapting to others’ ways of talking and acting with each other and with the materials around them. This is the case for the most seemingly objective forms of knowing, such as mathematics. Jean Lave, for example, shows that ‘everyday’ mathematical ability is a matter of adopting various techniques for using the materials available rather than working through singular processes of mental computation (Lave 1988). Learning mathematics, in other words, would not only mean access to a mental storehouse of information. Instead, it would mean knowing how to use mental and physical objects in ways that achieve the goal sought. These are not lone mental activities, but require being embedded in the social and material systems that mathematics is to achieve: calculating a supermarket bill, or weaving a carpet.

Talking about learning in this way shifts the site of knowing away from lone agents. Attention is instead paid to the collectivity necessary to, and produced by, the course of acting together. This was evident to Edwin Hutchins as he wondered how naval ships could be sailed successfully even though no one person had all the knowledge necessary to manipulate the mechanics of the ship or direct its navigation. His answer was that the ‘boundaries of the cognitive unit of analysis [should be moved] out beyond the skin of the individual person’ (Hutchins 1995: xiv). His book looks therefore at the complex of words and gestures that kept this group knowledge coordinated well enough that the ship could be brought into port.

This way of talking about learning also shifts what knowledge objects are. Perhaps, as Verran suggests, objects of knowledge, like numbers, are also produced in moments of acting with other people and with materials. Verran suggests that numbers are produced in our interactions with numbered objects. To understand her argument, we need the concept of interpellation developed by
Louis Althusser. Interpellation for Althusser means to find oneself part of the relations of power as soon as action is taken to pull you in. A policeman calls ‘hey you’, and you, in turning, become subject to him, subject to the material and ideological structures of the state (Althusser 1977: 160–165). Similarly, according to Verran, the writing or saying of a numeral in relation to a material thing calls us to recognise it as a number, a sign of material order or quantity. Her story runs like this:

As I stand before a rickety market stall with tomatoes arranged into a small pile, exuding their tomato smell in the hot sun, “ogún” sounds as a pile of five small tomatoes is pointed to. The pointing-at-tomato-pile-while-at-a-stall-in-a-market interpellates, hails, the numeral *ogún* as numbered-tomato-pile (Verran, 2001: 102).

‘Ogún’ is made sensible by the sounding of the word, simultaneous to the pointing at five tomatoes.

In making these various arguments about the collective enacting of knowledge, these scholars reiterate and extend Ian Hacking’s suggestion that we talk about knowing not as representing, but as intervening. To Hacking the real is not something static that we represent, but something that we come to know through our interactions with it (Hacking 1983: 146).

All these theorists take for granted that collective routines are easy, or easy enough, for us naturally social humans. This is not always the case: children in particular must learn the necessity of, and the skills required for, thinking together with others and with materials. How do we learn to become successfully related to others in our goals, our bodily routines and our thinking? These questions are particularly pertinent at Special School, where teachers describe their children as concrete and egotistical.

**Friendship and Thinking with Others**

I’d really like them to have a friend. That’s basically […] when they leave here a lot of our kids don’t really have friends, and that’s, that connection
just doesn’t happen for them, and we do a lot of stuff on empathy and a lot of stuff on how to speak to people and being a good friend and that. Their social group is a lot smaller than other people’s, and they often don’t get the skills, those sort of innate skills that other people seem to just develop. And in this [class]room there’s a couple of friendships, and that is just the best thing, and that they can just chat as friends, and that’s quite rare in this setting. So yeah, I’d like them to have a friend (Special School, author interview with teacher, 26 October 2007).

These are words that Special School teacher Diane uses in an interview when asked what imaginative skills she would like her children to have when they leave her classroom. For her, children’s friendships are difficult and precious accomplishments, based on a type of connection that ‘just doesn’t happen for them’. These skills and the ensuing connections are mysterious: ‘innate skills that other people seem to just develop’. Diane takes these skills to be basic necessities for living happy lives. These are issues for the building of relationships, strong self-esteem, and personal resilience. On the other side, the lack of interpersonal skills has a cruel face that might lead these children into social and legal conflict. Diane explains that ‘I worry about the lack of empathy with a couple. That’s what I worry about, because I think that as they go through life they could end up more in trouble’ (Special School, author interview with teacher, 26 October 2007).

Teachers at other schools agree that building good relationships is necessary for success in life, but their concern rests less with the social issues and more with the question of learning. Interpersonal bonds are central to Justine’s understanding of the success of her children later in their lives. When I ask her whether she is worried that her children might not meet the increasingly formal, Australia-wide ‘benchmarking’ standards for literacy and numeracy, she says no. She explains that her children always do well in high school education because they have high-level interpersonal skills (Government School, author field notes, 25 May 2007). They will learn because they are good at relating.
Let us move inside from the playground we opened this chapter with. Where are we? The classroom mainly referred to in this chapter is marginal in several senses. Located on the outskirts of Melbourne, in an area that has grown rapidly in recent years, it is quite literally a place on the margins. This has made it easy for authorities to ignore. The school has been built for a much smaller number of pupils than are now enrolled, and after years of waiting extensive additions are finally being built to ease some of the problems of overcrowding.

Our classroom here is part of what is designated a ‘special’ school. With this appellation, the school is made different from what are referred to by these and other teachers as ‘mainstream’ schools. The children likewise take on this identity; they are special children, set apart from ‘mainstream’ children. It is both their intelligence and their behaviour that leads them to be defined this way.

Most of the children here are boys – in the class I work in, it is six out of eight. Teachers tell me that this is because the weight of disorders associated with low IQ like autism and ADHD is carried more heavily in male genetics. It is also suggested that boys are more likely to be disruptive to a mainstream class and therefore more likely to be classified as suitable in IQ terms for this school. A low-IQ girl in a mainstream school is more likely to be ignored. It is marginal, ‘anti-social behaviour’, not just intelligence, that defines a child as ‘special’.

Once at this school children are further defined by intelligence, with the school body broken into groups by a combination of age and level of functioning. The class I spend time with are ‘high functioning’ grade fours, and according to their teachers, are remarkably able for this school. So by membership in this class, children are set above most of the children at the school. But ironically this leads them to even more awareness that they are ‘special’. In the class I work in, three children attend a ‘mainstream’ school for a number of days each week, ranging from one day a week to four. Another child was removed from his mainstream school because of his behavioural problems. At this school they are relatively normal, the smart kids. At their other primary schools they are likely even more obviously ‘special’ – the kids who are there only sometimes, the dumb kids.
Each classroom is managed by two adults, one a trained teacher and the other a trained integration aide. Most of the staff are female, and many explain that they have taken work here because it is better suited to motherhood than work at a mainstream school. This teaching, though physically and psychologically exhausting, needs little preparation or planning. It is regarded by staff as easier and less time-consuming work than teaching in a ‘mainstream’ school.

The teachers are paid more than integration aides. If a teacher is away, a relief teacher must be put in their place. In theory an integration aide, regardless of skill or experience, cannot be given full responsibility for a class. In practice, however, an integration aide such as Michaela in the classroom I spent my time in, might do large amounts of sole teaching, both in specialist subjects like computing, and when Diane, the teacher, was away and the relief teacher was not sure how to proceed. This work is not formally recognised, nor even officially allowed. Until an integration aide gets formal teaching qualifications she will be taken as ‘assistant’ regardless of the work she does. Part of my hope here is to highlight the skill of both the women in this classroom, the talented ‘special’ school teachers, marginal to the mainstream education system, and the integration aides, marginal to the proper work of the ‘special’ classroom.

Finally, as I’ve suggested above, this classroom is marginal to the systems of sociality and knowledge that direct life and learning in other schools I visited. The levels of accomplishment and potential that children show necessitate different and lower goals. Some grade four children are being taught to brush their teeth regularly, others to listen while someone is speaking, still others to stay in their own classroom. The children in our high-functioning classroom are learning to take responsibility for a classroom job (sweeping the back room, putting up the chairs) and to read, write, and count.

Here, with children impaired in their ability to understand what are taken to be basic concepts elsewhere, a question is raised. What should be taught and to what end? The school aim is defined in the parents’ booklet, which states that children should learn to live as independently as possible in the community. But how can these children be taught to integrate into the community? The answer I will put forward here, describing the work of teachers at Special School and
elsewhere, sees teachers responding to opportunities to build skills in social bonding and group thinking, and helping children to understand themselves as related to the structures and systems they live within. Imagination at this school is used to produce children as knowers able to relate themselves to society.

THE MINEFIELD OF DISTRIBUTED COGNITION

‘Bang’, the physical education (PE) teacher calls out. ‘Bang’ repeats Dwyane, and rushes around the side to try the course again. Today they’re supposed to be working on their teamwork by collectively trying to work out the right way to step through a four-by-four grid of hoops laid on the ground. It is a minefield, their teacher has told them. He alone can see the way through because, he tells them as he pulls his sunglasses on, he has magic glasses. All he’ll say is ‘bang’ to tell them when they’ve stepped in the wrong hoop. The children have to work out the correct way through the minefield by watching each other and talking about it. They rush through, without stopping to talk or think or take proper turns. ‘Bang’, says the teacher, ‘bang, bang’.

Eventually one boy works it out, and another copies him. The teacher points it out, ‘see, Victor’s done it. Watch what he’s done’. They keep jumping from hoop to hoop, while their teacher says ‘Bang. Bang. If you’ve worked it out, go tell your friends’. Finally five get across the hoops in a row, and now start to call out the colours so their classmates can get across. Otherwise they’ll all have to start again. Logan is excited, yelling ‘we did it’ and ‘it went bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang’ (Special School, author field notes, 25 October 2007).

This lesson has been designed to make this class better at working in a group. PE teacher John tells the class that the task is hard because they need to get eight people thinking as if they are one person. He is teaching children the need for attention and communication to achieve shared aims. Only if they watch and talk to each other will they all manage to make it through the minefield in one go.
Imagination is used here to create a scenario that requires children to work together within a system – the hoops are a minefield they must cross together, pretends John. He works this imaginative scenario throughout the game by looking through his ‘magic glasses’ and calling ‘bang’ when the children step in the ‘wrong’ hoop.

For a lesson of this kind to succeed the imaginary scenario must embed both the goal and the process by which it is possible to achieve it. The children must be aware of the overall aim – to get the class across the minefield – and the way they can do this – by taking turns to attempt to cross. By choosing a good scenario, John has embedded rules and processes neatly within the task. But the higher aim of the lesson is for children to think of themselves as a group, and enjoy the bonds they are forming. These are complex bonds of trust, authority, support, and assistance. Again it is the scenario itself that makes these bonds happen – the children have to teach and learn from each other in order to get through the minefield. They find this exciting: ‘bang bang bang bang bang’. It is because they enjoy the scenario that they will allow the teacher to hold authority. This can be visualised as forming a circular logic. John must make students trust his authority; they must authorise him to make the rules (Benjaminsen 2007).

The lesson’s success here has rested on three conditions all achieved through John’s use of an imaginary scenario that has laid the system and goal down clearly. These conditions are that the children know how to go about achieving the shared goal; that they are enfolded into and communicate as a group; and that they enjoy being so enfolded. These three conditions are necessary for imaginative scenarios to clot children as cognitive groups. This happens in other ways at other schools.

**Imagination and Shared Work**

*Imagination for Group Building*

At two schools I witness the purposeful use of imaginary games intended to help children from non-English speaking backgrounds become better able to engage with the linguistic conventions of their school community. Imaginative play, in both these cases, is to be the process by which children will become more adept
at handling the words, sentences, and interpersonal relationships seen as vital to their membership of an English-speaking school. Through imaginative play, they will become members of the larger linguistic group.

In one case, that of Government School, imaginative play is encouraged by the supply of various types of play materials. In one area of a large hall are dressing-up clothes arranged in a ‘house’; in another, plastic facsimiles of money and foods; in yet another are large foam mats and tubes. Children are taken out of their classrooms to play with children from other classes with whatever they wish. They will then gather to tell the larger group what games they have played.

In the other case, that of Catholic School, it is the space itself that is to encourage imaginary games. In the account that circulates at the school, a teacher listening to her children play in their cubby (a small play space) noticed the complex language they were using as they enjoyed their game. She suggested a cubby be built at this school to provide a space for the many first-generation refugee and immigrant children whose numbers were rapidly increasing. In response, the school raised funds to build a ‘village’: a building in four linear sections, each open at the front. Staff call one room ‘the house’; one has plants growing and is called the garden; one has a cross above the door and is called either the church or the hospital; and the final one has a counter around the front edge and is either a shop or a restaurant.

In both cases teachers assume that providing the material objects and/or settings for imaginative play will direct children naturally towards performing routines of imaginative play that will draw them together as groups. They will dress up, build, and otherwise enact imaginative scenarios they create together using their linguistic resources. The games they are most easily enabled to play are taken by the teachers to be those that mime likely future roles – shopping, having houses, gardens, and children, going to church, and hospital. This will serve the purpose of advancing their skills using the various objects of language – words, sentences, and so on. Certainly they will learn the clause ‘let’s pretend…’ that Gregory Bateson, and those who have followed, have argued is a tool needed for marking and making shifts from ‘real’ to ‘playful’ designations of parts of the world (Bateson 1971; Stewart 1978).
What Kind of Group Life?

It is easy to assume that children will want to be members of cooperative groups. Play is seen as a tool to enable the achievement of this desire. But this desire is not necessarily already real, but is something that is worked towards. Nor is it simply the case that groups will be founded on cooperation. I will suggest that the structure of games the teacher plays with the children is important. It matters because this spills into the bonds that children have with others and into their enjoyment of having these bonds. But what type of bonds should be built – those of pleasure, cooperation, or competition?

During PE and some other lessons, teachers introduce and cement notions of what a game is and what it is for. Are games essentially cooperative or competitive? Are they played for pleasure, or for victory, or for an individual’s physical skills? The ways these questions are answered in teacher structured games bleed into the modes of game-playing children engage in during their free time. Hence, teacher structured games have some impact on the types of interpersonal relationships built ‘freely’ by children. Games have a big impact on how children are able to imagine themselves related to others.

We have already seen John purposefully choose a game for PE that will help develop notions of teamwork in his children. These, it is explicitly hoped, will spill into their classroom and playground lives to some extent. We see something similar at Steiner School where children in grade four play cooperatively at highly complex imaginary games, and PE involves first a warm-up then time for skill development. To warm up children are to play a ‘fun’ game, ‘crocodile, crocodile’, for example. This is a game of tag that pretends that the space of the tennis courts is a crocodile infested river. One child stands in the middle being ‘crocodile’. The rest chant ‘crocodile, crocodile, can I cross the river? If not, why not? What’s your favourite colour?’ The ‘crocodile’ responds by naming a colour, and all wearing clothes of that colour have to run through the ‘river’ and risk being caught by the ‘crocodile’. If caught, they become ‘crocodiles’ too. The last child who is still ‘safe’ is the next lone crocodile. In this game oppositions are transitory; victory passes gradually to one child who wins only to stand against the rest of their class who are now formed as a team with shared interests (Steiner School,
author field notes, 6 June 2007). Here children choose to participate in mixed
gender, large group imaginary games during their morning and lunch breaks.

At the wealthy Independent School, games in PE are structured quite dif-
ferently. Here skill development is built into simple, yet highly competitive
games. A class favourite is ‘war ball’, usually played in gendered teams: boys
vs girls. In this game, whoever has the ball has to throw it at a member of the
other team who, if hit, is then ‘out’. The winners are the team that gets all their
opponents ‘out’ first. As the name suggests, this game is structured around the
metaphor ‘games are war’. Teams are fixed and, when based on biological sex, are
inescapable. Individual success and team victory are achieved by the violence
of a well-aimed throw at the body of another. The boys usually win, and if the
teacher joins in it is always to support the girls. Most children clearly enjoy this
game, asking to play it and participating with enthusiasm.

Interestingly, imaginative play is rare among children in the grade four age
group at Independent School. Gender separations continue into free time.
During lunchtimes most boys from this class play soccer. The girls in the class
complain that there is little to do at lunchtime now that they are this age. They
explain that they usually spend their time talking together. They say they used to
play soccer, but the boys never gave them the ball. The structures of game-playing
witnessed in PE seem to be in a feedback relationship to the free play of children.
Boys play skill-based competitive games. Girls who try to join in, regardless of
their skill, complain that no boy ever passes them the ball. Furthermore, play
is designated as competitive by its very nature. Imaginative games are ‘babyish’
(Independent School, writing piece, 16 April 2007: 1,7). One boy in the class is
not welcomed in this game system – he spends lunchtimes alone in the library
or idly outside. Options to play games that are not sport have been cut: when
I ask him what games he plays that are not sport he does not understand the
question – in asking ‘what do you mean?’ he seems to say there are no games
that are not sport. Girls suffer this same break; they do not play, they talk. Boys
are able to build social relationships of competition based upon bodily skill in
games. Refused access to competitive games, girls build social relationships
in cooperative talk. Unlike Steiner children, none of them are building social
relationships by playing imaginative games.
In my reading of these teacher-structured and child-chosen games, we see some children being explicitly encouraged to see themselves as linked by cooperative game-playing. Other children learn to engage in competitive forms of play across gendered lines, and this limits their engagement in imaginative and cooperative game-playing during free time. These forms of game-playing are structured by teachers’ use of metaphors – rivers to cross, wars to fight. It matters how games are imagined. In games, certain modes of pleasurable relating to others are legitimated. Others are marginalised. In games, the types of bonds children are to have and enjoy are founded.

Of course, cooperation is not taught only by game-playing – children can work together in all manner of projects. But important too are the modes of group-making that are enacted within the classroom itself. These depend on certain modes of teaching that I designate as relational. These we will examine now, thinking particularly about the implications of class-making for the possibilities of learning.

THE RELATIONAL TEACHER

If collective knowing is achieved when members of a group build material and semiotic systems to share their thinking, what is the role of the teacher? I believe it is as a member of and authority over classes. This is achieved materially though classroom layout, in the performance of authority known as interpellation, and in the imaginative bonds developed through work on shared tasks.

Membership in class groups is normally achieved through a mixture of familiar material and semiotic techniques. Teachers call the group a collective noun like ‘class’, ‘children’, ‘grade four’, or ‘room three’. In such forms of naming, the individuals are gathered as members of that group. The group is seated in desks arranged in particular shapes that produce certain relations with each other and with the teacher. Desks arranged in rows force the class to observe together the teacher as authority. This happens at Steiner School. Desks arranged in a semicircle around the mat and board that places the teacher as authority and simultaneously creates a middle space for shared dialogue that includes
the teacher, as at Catholic School. Desks arranged in clumps form the class as constituted by smaller groups, and the teacher moving between functions as authority over all. We see this at Independent School, Government School, and Special School.

It is in the very moment of a teacher calling the ‘class’ to collectively act that the children cease to be simply individuals and become also a group subject to the teacher. In making the class a group, the teacher makes her authority. This is an example of ‘interpellation’. In Althusser’s story, a policeman hails a man. ‘Hey you’ the policeman calls, and the man turns. In the moment of that turn the man is made subject to the policeman’s authority, and in being so, the man becomes also subject to the state formation that gives the policeman power (Butler 1995; Althusser 1977; Law 2000; Verran 2001). In a similar way, it is in the moment of calling by saying ‘class, come sit on the mat’ that the teacher interpellates the class as a group all subordinated to her authority.

Discipline can be exercised by appealing to these group relations, for example, by reminding children of the responsibilities entailed in membership of the group. Teachers may say to a disruptive child, ‘The class are all waiting for you’. Discipline can be undermined when a child ceases to feel part of the group, as when a disruptive child is singled out repeatedly or sent out of the room. At these moments, the power afforded to the teacher by her material and semiotic acts of group-making are evident.

I suggest that the good teacher in a classroom is not just an authority, but also a member of the group and its processes. This is a matter of choosing material and semiotic acts that require her to be active within the class fabric. This requires her to listen to and act with her children, to their words and ways of using material. She has more authority, but this should be understood as meaning that she has more knowledge about how to use words and materials, and that she is trusted with more rights to draw out some ideas and squash others. Authority in this interpretation of learning and teaching is that more faces will look at her when she speaks. Throughout the year they will continue to look as she shows, again and again, her mastery over the material and linguistic tools suitable for their age and interesting to them as individuals. These will include the material and linguistic tools of discipline.
Good teaching to achieve the collective enactment of knowing requires one to be part of the collectivity being built. It is a matter of being an active, responsive, and responsible member of the group of people and objects. It is not simply a matter of telling people what to do.

What does this look like? Here is one example.

When we get to the music room the music teacher is not there. She is away, and through administrative blunder has not been replaced for the day. Michaela, though ‘only’ an integration aide, runs the lesson while the real teacher (a relief today) sits plucking at his guitar. Roderick asks if they can sing ‘our names’ as a warm-up and Michaela agrees. She starts picking up chairs and putting them in a row. The children help and she moves to find the right CD. She calls each child in turn to stand up the front facing the class. Together we sing with the voices on CD, until they sing ‘please sing me your name’. Alone now, the child at the front sings ‘My name is ____’, and we all join in again. ‘You have to: this is a concert. Your audience are waiting’, Michaela tells Victor when he tries to refuse his turn. Michaela and I take our turns at the front.

Next, seeing Dwyane clapping his hands on his knees, Michaela says ‘I think we’re in the rhythm mood. Let’s do some percussion.’ She begins collecting the drums, scrapers, and triangles from around the room and piling them on the desk. ‘What else do we need?’ she asks the children, and asks, as she finds instruments, ‘What’s this called?’ She does not know which CD contains the song they used last week for percussion, so she says ‘We’ll improvise.’ The kids have fun hitting their drums and scraping their scrapers in time with the song; Cindy even starts dancing in time.

Watching this succeed, Michaela decides on more percussion, getting out the set of drums of various sizes. We all sit on the floor in a circle, each with a drum. Michaela tells the class that each drum is a village and they’re used for talking to each other. Hitting them hard, as Dwyane has been, might be a way to say that you’re starting a war. Michaela selects pairs to ‘talk’ to each other on their drums. Each hits a rhythm, listens, and replies. Michaela asks them what they were saying in words – ‘we were starting a war’; ‘we were
saying nice things, like “I like that you’re my friend”. Michaela and I have a turn, and she asks the children ‘What do you think we were talking about?’ ‘You were whispering,’ comes the reply, ‘you were gossiping’. Lesson over, we walk back to the classroom. I praise Michaela, and she says that since they seemed into it, why not keep it going? (Special School, author field notes, 19 October and 26 October 2007).

I have told this lesson in full because I believe it shows Michaela performing a style of teaching that is seldom recognised as skilful. It might seem that Michaela is just allowing whatever happens to happen, but in fact, in responding to and expanding on what the children are enjoying, she is advancing the children’s collective knowing lives in two ways. First, she takes the opportunity to teach the material handling of objects: voices in musical time, percussion instruments. Second, by calling the singing ‘a concert’ and the drumbeats ‘villages in conversation’, Michaela forms the classes into these groups: concert performers, and community of villages. Using this imaginary scenario, she enhances the class’s sense of their group identity and uses this identity to make group knowledge. She teaches rhythm and volume, turn-taking and friendship. This she does without planning, responding creatively to the needs and desires of the children, and to the possibilities embedded in the objects around them. This is what I call imaginative relational teaching: to take what is happening now and imaginatively move it forward in ways that are positive for her children.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that much of what teachers use imagination for is to help children to think and work together. This, I have suggested, is particularly obvious at Special School, and for two reasons. First, because children are deemed not imaginative, with the bulk of concern centring on the problems this may cause for future relationships. Diane hopes simply that her children will have a friend, or at least will be able to avoid the interpersonal misunderstandings that lead to social and legal trouble. Important for teaching this imagination to children were imaginative scenarios that made sense of bodily processes and
rules, including for language use, and that let children see themselves as members of groups with certain types of relationship.

Secondly, teachers at Special School take as an intrinsic part of their own practice the imagination that helps them to work and think with children moment by moment. I have called this ‘relational teaching’ and have said it is achieved when a teacher is flexible to changing situations and is responsive to children’s changing needs and interests.

I relate this to what scholars like Suchman, Lave, and Hutchins have argued about the importance of collectivities in many types of human thinking and acting. Discussing the disparate topics of artificial intelligence, mathematics learning, and naval ship sailing, they share the conviction that knowing is a matter of knowing how to interact with materials and other people in socially conventional ways.