

The imagination of God

Godly Play as an imaginative approach to Religious Education

For this lecture, cf the Handout which depicts the PowerPointPresentation

Dear colleagues and friends, dear members of the Godly Play community in the UK,

Thank you very much for the kind invitation to speak at this special occasion. I see my task with this lecture not so much in talking about Godly Play as such. I suppose most of you are far more experienced in Godly Play than me. I see my task to show you some ideas about imagination as a fundamental dimension *underlying* Godly Play. My aim is to offer you some tools to place imagination within the frame of religious education. I hope you will be able to link such tools into your different experiences with Godly Play as a method. I will, however, try not to talk theory all the time, but include some practical exercises as well. To begin with, I shall boldly put a few questions:

Jerome Berryman calls Godly Play an imaginative approach to religious education. But what is actually meant by that description?

What *is* imagination, how does it *work*, what can or should teachers do to *support* it, where are boundaries and dangers in doing so?

Is there a specific relationship between imagination and religious education. As you might guess, my answer to this question is: “Yes there is” – but how can we get a good grasp of this relationship?

Is God only an imagination? A wonderful question! Maybe we should leave the “only” out and ask more precisely: Is God an imagination?

These are questions that went through my head when I prepared for today.

I suggest we take three steps:

First, I think we need to get a bit familiar with the term “i.”

Secondly I briefly want to look at imagination in the theory of GP

In the third step I will try to explore what we can gain for religious education if we think about “the imagination of God”.

The literature I have been using comes partly from the German discussion on imagination and religious education, and partly from the English speaking parts of the world. I won't go into details here but let me show you a few of my English references:

There is Mary Warnock's study from 1976. Warnock, being a British philosopher, is tracing imagination in the history of modern philosophy, ranging from David Hume (18. century) to Ludwig Wittgenstein in the 20th century. This book is out of print now but you will probably find it in every major library.

In 1988, the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney took an even wider look than Mary Warnock. His book “The wake of imagination” spans from Hebrew imagination to postmodern artists such as Samuel Beckett or film-director Wim Wenders.

In 2000, Paul L. Harris, American professor for education at Harvard, looks at “The work of imagination” from the perspective of developmental psychology and pedagogics.

The last book I want to draw your attention to is by Garrett Green, American expert on religious sciences and Christian theology. His study is called “Imagining God. Theology and the religious imagination”. It was published in 1989.

1. Imagination - term and characteristics

The oldest and easiest definition of “imagination” is - on the one hand - to present something to yourself which isn't actually there yet – on the other hand - this process proves to be such a powerful human ability that it can change what actually is there.

Let's unpack a bit, what is implied here. To do so, I need your participation. I have prepared some small exercises.

1. First exercise: Let me quote a sentence from a fairytale:

*“And as she was sewing and looking out at the snowflakes, she pricked her finger with the needle and three drops of blood fell on the snow”.*¹

Most of you will immediately have recalled a certain picture, an image of the scene in that fairytale. For some, this might be influenced by a picture that came along with the story in your fairytale-book, or in a film you’ve seen once. For others, this image contains most of all how you yourself imagined what the scene might look like.

The point I want to make here is simply: *Imagination is most commonly attached to images (visual)*

2. Second exercise:

Let’s stay with this fairytale for a moment. Can you remember a situation or a moment when this image that you just recalled, was formed?

The point I want to make here is: *Imaginations are often depicting specific memories in the past.* Thus, imagination has a *reproductive* nature. Our imaginations are bound to experiences we once made. And there are many thinkers who would argue that every imagination goes back to what one has perceived before.

3. Third exercise:

Cut a lemon - --- The point I want to make here is: *Our imagination employs various senses.* Often it starts with the visual. But it interacts with our whole body.

4. Forth exercise:

Let’s leave this lemon here and move beyond a direct visual impulse, including our memory again. Most of you will remember their most hated teacher and how unfair he or she has treated you in a particular moment. ... *Can you remember?* ... Even if you go into this memory today, your face might turn red from anger, you might even start to shiver a bit, making a fist or so. Neurologist Oliver Sacks has written remarkable books on how our senses interact, what our brain can contribute and can not and how limited our understanding of all this is.

My point here is: *Imagination involves body language and recalls neurologically complex interaction.* Let me briefly refer to what John Hull wrote about his imagination. John Hull lives here in Birmingham and can be regarded as one of the most forward thinking persons in the area of religious education theory in Europe these days, mainly though his “gift to the child” approach. As most of you know, he is blind, not from birth but due to an illness. In his autobiographical book “Touching the Rock. An Experience of Blindness” (1990, Enlarged edition ‘On Sight and Insight’ 1997) he describes how after he became blind, he gradually lost his visual imagination. He reached a point which he calls “deep blindness”. This was when he realized that not only his visual memory of persons and objects faded but also the meaning he could give to words like “appearance” or “red”. Instead his other senses intensified enormously so that he calls himself a “whole-body-seer”. This description has helped me to take into consideration how imagination is related to emotion, to human will and creativity in order to give meaning to what happens to us.

5. Fifth exercise:

Could you please imagine a bag full of coffee beans. I don’t mean this instant coffee or finely ground coffee, but real beans. In your bag there is one pound of coffee beans. *Can you imagine that?* ... Now, could you now estimate please: How many beans are in your bag to make one pound?

¹ Grimm’s fairytales, Snow White

----- How did you come to this figure? What did you do in your imagination? ----- The point I want to make here is not the right answer but the fact that *people employ different ways to find a solution*. They bring memorized experiences into their imagination in order to support individual strategies of problem solving. German philosopher Immanuel Kant said: Imaginations bring perceptions and thinking into a synthesis. The content of our imaginations is not totally limited to the output of experience. Thus Peter Fauser, a German educationalist and maybe the most prominent researcher on imagination, comes to the conclusion: "*Imaginations are the inside of our experiences.*"² They start beyond the things we actually, really experience.

6. Sixths exercise:

Lets stay with the contribution of our imagination to problem solving for a moment. The following example is taken from a research done with English pupils in the early 80s.³ This is Mr.Short. This is how tall Mr.Short is, if you measure him by paper clips (6). If you use matches to measure him, he is 4 matches tall. Mr.Short has a friend, Mr. Long. Mr.Long is 6 matches tall. How many paper clips do you need to measure how tall Mr.Long is? (9) ---- 30% of the pupils used an additive strategy: For Mr.Long we need 2 more matches, therefore we also need two more clips. Answer: 8. The wrong answer points us back to the strategies that the pupils applied. This task needs relational multiplication, not addition. But how should the pupils know that? Apparently they need to be able to create a connection between the nature of the task and suitable mathematical structures.

The research by Kathleen Hart goes on with far more complex tasks and one of its major results is that again and again pupils used something like "intuition", which is a vague inner image of what the correct answer would look like, in the drawing. The problem for teaching here is that such intuitive operations are very difficult to access under classroom circumstances. Children facing the tasks say: "I don't know what I have to do." They can feel, that 8 paper clips is the wrong answer. And than, all of a sudden, the right answer is there. What is the teacher's job here? My point is: *In order to get good teaching results it is necessary to include such unconscious strategies into the ways of problem-solving*. This insight is also growing into the teaching of history or literature. Pupils find it far easier to learn any given content when they are allowed to imagine, and by that to identify themselves with certain persons, might it be Henry VIII or Romeo and Juliet. You might think that this all has nothing to do with religious education but let me just draw your attention to the way we tell sacred stories in the desert box or phrase the wondering questions in the parables you will see imagination deliberately set at work.

7. Seventh exercise:

Fairytales and lemons referred mainly to the *reproductive* function of our imagination. From there, we have gradually moved on to the productive function. My exercise here is your newspaper-reading about the climate-change. What climate research can predict goes far beyond everything our experience has memories for. This is where imagination is at work by *opening new perspectives*. *Imagination has a sense for the unreal, the unthought, the crazy*. Artists could not work without the *productive* imagination. Thus another phrase to describe

² Cf. Fauser, Peter et al. (ed.): *Vorstellungen bilden. Beiträge zum imaginativen Lernen*. Velber 1996. Some of the exercises in this lecture were taken from this book. Fauser, Peter et al. (ed.): *Einsicht und Vorstellung. Imaginatives Lernen in Literatur und Geschichte*. Velber 1999. Rentschler, Ingo et al. (ed.): *Bilder im Kopf. Texte zum Imaginativen Lernen*. Velber 2003.

³ Kathleen M. Hart: *Children's understanding of Mathematics: 11-16*. Oxford: John Murray 1981. Cf. Bauersfeld, Heinrich: *Imagination und Lernprozess*. In: Fauser, Peter et al. (ed.): *Vorstellungen bilden. Beiträge zum imaginativen Lernen*. Velber 1996, 143-163.

imagination is “our sense for the possibilities”. We have various senses, some say, five, some say six – I would like to call *imagination an additional, elusive sense that human beings have*. This might also be a good point to clarify the term imagination in contrast to “phantasy”. Both terms are often used as synonyms. I have to admit that this is true across our everyday language as well as in pedagogical and theological literature. I don’t know whether you find this distinction helpful, but when I speak about imagination in Germany, I use the English word phantasy in order to make one particular difference. I found this distinction in the work of Mary Warnock. She said: Imagination is how we exceed reality, in order to return to reality in a different way. Phantasy is what we do when we exceed reality in order to turn away from it without the intention to return. As I said, what I find interesting concerns not so much the terms phantasy and imagination as such, but how they point to the relationship to reality.

8. Eighth Exercise

As you might see, we are well underway to the religious imagination. My last exercise tries to build a bridge. Could you please imagine a situation in RE, where somebody would say “I cannot imagine this”. ----- This sentence “I can’t imagine this” appearantly neglects and exceeds what I have said about imagination before.

It seems as if people find not only the reproductive, but also their productive imagination limited in some cases. Such a sentence might be said right from the heart, after a strong effort to make up ones mind, with a lot of conviction in the voice. I would suggest to take such a situation as a starting point to reflect what role imagination plays in religious education.

If we take a story like Matthew 14, where Jesus walks across the water. When children say: “I can’t imagine this” – what do they refer to? They might use their reproductive imagination with reference to empirical evidence. There is little space for wonders like this if you follow the pattern of experience and historical knowledge.

By the way, I have often asked myself why we don’t have more stories on wonders in Godly Play although we have so many wonder-stories in the New Testament. Maybe – I am only guessing – it has to do with the specific problems that wonders cause in childrens imagination, as compared to what parables or sacred stories refer to. This difficulty caused by the reproductive, experiential imagination might make it difficult to refer the personal imagination to the religious meanings that are in this wonderful story of Jesus power of the powers of nature.

It might be useful for children to hear or to read someone else saying: Yes, I can imagine. Now, whether you think this is a helpful way to answer or not – the point I want to make here is: *Imagination can be stirred by someone else’s evidence*. In education we learn to change perspectives. In Godly Play we do this a lot in the parables, think of the Good Samaritan where we deliberately ask who becomes the neighbour to whom in this story. My point here is that for religious meaning making, the *social* dimension of imagination plays a limited, but very subtle role.

9.

The story from Matthew I have just used contains wonder. I have often asked myself why we don’t have more stories on wonders in Godly Play although we have so many wonder-stories in the New Testament. Maybe – I am only guessing – it has to do with specific problems that we think wonders might cause in childrens imagination, as compared to what parables or sacred stories refer to. This is the point John Hull made in “God-Talk with young children”.⁴ The reference to the reproductive, experiential imagination might make it difficult to refer the personal imagination to the religious meanings that are in this story of Jesus power of the powers of nature. But from the findings of Paul Harris, even pre-school children do not build

⁴ Hull, John: *Wie Kinder über Gott reden. Ein Ratgeber für Eltern und Erziehende.* Gütersloh 1997, cf. esp. chapter IV.

up “a firm and impenetrable barrier between two different mental spheres: the sphere of mundane reality where ordinary causal principles hold sway, and the world of fantasy and metaphysics, where the impossible can happen. ... It seems more plausible that children construct a semi-permeable boundary between the world of imagination and the world of actual possibilities.”⁵ Harris goes on offering powerful demonstrations how children are capable of negotiating the two worlds with each other.

Where did we get so far? We have seen, that a formal definition of the term imagination doesn't get us very far. It might be useful to draw a distinction to phantasy, but even that can be disputed. But we have collected 9 characteristics of how imagination works in human beings and we have slowly approached the specific problems in religious imagination – characteristics that can easily be applied to Godly Play in practice and theory. In the second step of this lecture I want to look at imagination in Godly Play theory and afterwards I want to offer you a model to put imagination in a principle place between religion and education.

2. Imagination in Godly Play theory

In his first book on Godly Play from 1991, Jerome Berryman dedicated a whole chapter to “The Imagination and Godly Play”.⁶ There are a few more articles by him in various journals and encyclopedias dating back until 1988, but I will stick to his major theoretical framework for Godly Play. As far as I see, his discussion of the literature on imagination leads him to stress one specific point: It is the ambiguous role imagination plays in the creative process.

Let me explain this a bit:

Berryman understands religious learning as a spiral that repeats itself again and again in two major parts: An opening part and a closing part. The first one includes the disruption of one's circle of meaning (a), (b) the scanning for a new frame of meaning to cope with the disruption, leading (c) to insight. The closing part finds ways (d) to articulate the new insight, binding things back together (re-ligio) and finally (e) testing the result against the experience of other persons. While the opening part is more connected to feeling and the unspoken lesson, the closing part is more connected to thinking and finding language. But throughout the whole circle, imagination is employed. Berryman definition is (quote): “We call ‘imagination’ what we do when we put the imagination into action as the creative process.” In other words: The creative process is imagination in action. Imagination draws us into change. Now, where does the *ambiguity* comes into this role of the imagination? Berryman underlines that imagination is not a value in itself. It is one of those human gifts that we can employ to create or to destroy life. Quote: “To build we must often tear down to clear the way, so this is often very hard to determine.” Imagination can become a dangerous thing. It needs to be set in a framework of other references. This is where Berryman connects imagination to incarnation. “The Incarnation focused the fullest expression of the ambiguity of the imagination. The story of one who was completely God and completely human made the intensity of this ambiguity available to us. Even as creatures of space and time we can enter deeply into the image and life of Christ.” This is a wonderful summary. I wonder whether we can unpack this summary and thereby understand in more detail what the role of the imagination is in religious education. This I will try in the third part of this lecture.

3. The imagination of God

We can understand this phrase in two ways: In the first way we speak about the imaginations that human beings develop about God, their ideas and insights. In the other way we speak

⁵ Harris, Paul L.: The work of imagination. Oxford 2000, p 173

⁶ Augsburg Fortress, 1991/1995. Quotations in the following passage cf. pp.131.133

about God and his imaginations about human beings. If we are to understand what role imagination might play in religious education we must look in both ways. To do so, I want to suggest three steps. The first is about the Bible as a document of the imagination of God. The second step connects us to Meister Eckart, a German medieval philosopher and theologian, one of the best known mystics. In my final step I will offer you a systematic model to organize the role of imagination in religious education.

3.1. The Bible as a document of the imagination of God

The Bible is a book in which we can study imaginative language so to speak. It tells us story after story about possibilities. The content of these stories is determined by the one story of the revealed and hidden God. For this content, imaginations serve as an anthropological medium in order to communicate human approach and relationship. But these imaginations can only serve their purpose if there are imbedded in a individually living relationship to what the stories are about. Therefore, the stories of the Bible which might appear as “possibility-stories” from the outside, are “reality-stories” through the eyes of faith. We can study this at various places, such as in prophetic or eschatological texts. Very clearly this is how the parables work in the New Testament. Jesus used this genre predominantly in order to allow his listeners to get an access to the kingdom of God which can only be found by imaginative means. In Matthew 13,13 Jesus explains: “Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.” Parables speak in every day life-images in order to proclaim a new reality. The kingdom of God is not a kind of content that the listeners must add to the parable in their thinking. They meet it in the parable itself. From what we have said about imagination, we can follow: The parables of Jesus take imaginations which are *reproductive* to everyday life to serve a *productive* religious imagination.

But the Bible goes even further. It doesn't only communicate certain religious contents by means of imaginations, it also conveys an imagination of religion as such. In this sense we can see the Bible as an incarnatory document (a document of incarnation). It speaks about Gods story with the world aiming to be faithfully received as the Word of God. The Bible wants to communicate Gods intention, to create a world, to lead his people out of slavery, to become fully human himself etc. This is the point where I want to name the Bible as a document of Gods imagination. In the Bible the believer can learn that God puts the world in front of him out of pure imagination (creation), that God makes himself imaginable by revealing his name (“I am who I am”, or “I am who I will prove to be for you”, Ex.3,14) and how God imagines his world to be (his intentions with the world, the role he attaches to human beings).

I would therefore argue that from the Bible, the imagination of God in both ways is a key to any attempt of teaching and learning religion. We now need to ask, where these two directions meet – the imaginations human beings develop about God and God's imaginations about his world. To follow this question I find it helpful to turn to Meister Eckart.

3.2. “*inbilden*” (Meister Eckart)

It might seem strange to refer back to a medieval theologian and maybe it will remain somehow awkward to you after I have explained why I do it. Partly it is due to a language problem which we encounter when we speak about education and formation from a German background. Because in German, we have a word that has no equivalent in English and yet it is vital to our understanding of religious education. This term is “*Bildung*”. It has the word “*Bild*” in it, which in English means image. It has the ending “*ung*” which is used to describe a process, rather near to what you do in English with verbs if you want to indicate a continuing process – you add the ending “*ing*”, like in “*educating*”. The term “*Bildung*” differs from “*education*” because it doesn't need the generation-difference to be established,

like in the German equivalent to education, which is “Erziehung”. The word Bildung differs also from “formation”, because it opposes an understanding of educational processes as forming in the sense of a potter and his clay. The term “Bildung” wants to emphasise the emancipatory role that the pupil plays in the process of his becoming himself over and against all authorities. Thus, Bildung is deeply grounded in humanist ideas of education, in the enlightenment and its value of critical relationships to tradition and self-justifying teaching authorities such as any church. For religious education, the term “Bildung” is especially valuable because it can be referred to the creation in the image of God. Therefore, Bildung can employ both the pedagogical ideas of modern humanism and the theological grounding of the relationship between God and the human being.

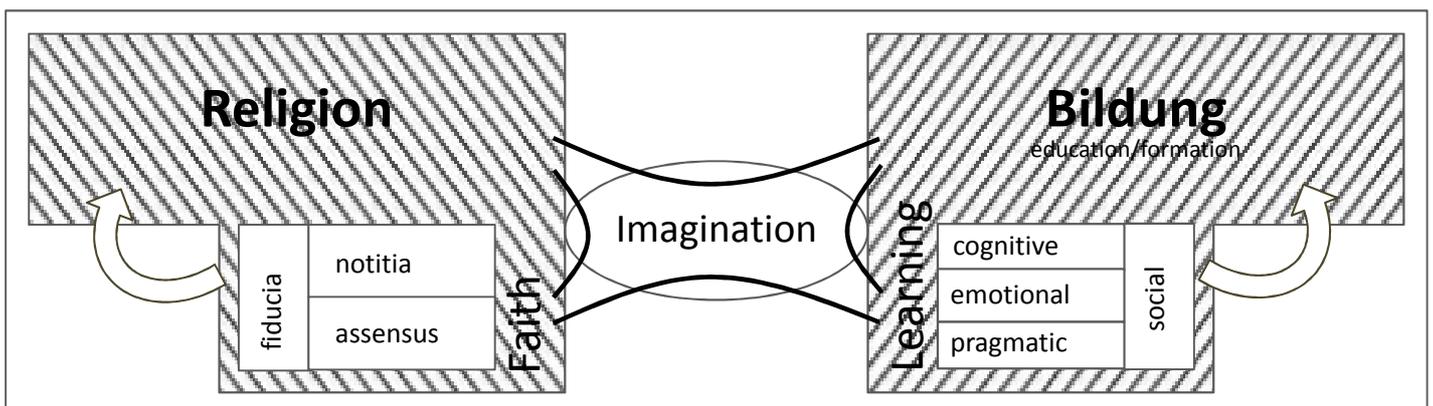
The term Bildung dates back to Meister Eckart (O.P., ca. 1260–c. 1328). His question was how human beings can take part/have a share in the image of God restored by Jesus Christ. In his reply he uses the word “in-bilden”. It follows out of his understanding of a certain Bible passage, 2. Corinthians 3,18. In the King James Bible we read: “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory.” This is the same reference to the *image of God*, that Meister Eckart read in his Latin version of the Bible. And his interpretation is that God kind of imprints his image into the Christian faith and thus *transforms* Christians into the image of the glory of the Lord. God makes himself imaginable for the believer. So, for Meister Eckart, the subject of imagination is first of all not the human being, but God himself, more precisely: God in his relationship to human beings. The understanding of the human being in contrast is that he or she gets a share in Gods imagination and thereby gets transformed to become imaginative, he can become a part of the process which Meister Eckart calls “Bildung”.



This is the rational which I would argue is constitutive for how we can theologically understand the role of imagination in any religious education and what any teacher is supposed to do.

3.3. A model to place imagination in religious education

I want to summarize by using a model. It tries to figure the relation between Religion and Bildung, or, as you might say, education and formation. In the following passage I will use a graphic and unfold it as we go along.



I suggest to see imagination as the way in which religion and Bildung are relating to each other.

In order to focus religion as well as Bildung more precisely, I would like to add faith and learning. Let's start with the distinction between religion and faith. For Godly Play it is vital to distinguish between religion as a general human practice and faith in its specific Christian sense. In many discussions I had on Godly Play I got the impression that there are misunderstandings which arise from a kind of *twofold reference to religion* Godly Play conveys, even within Jerome Berryman's writings. Berryman wants to employ religious story and symbol to help children to work on their existential limits: freedom, loneliness, death and the search for meaning in life. These four existential limits are not only experienced by persons who call themselves religious persons, these limits are *human*. Following from that, Godly Play would have no religious end in itself. It *employs* religion to help people to become fully human. In the sociology of religion we call this a functional understanding of religion, as distinct from a substantial understanding of religion. As the term says, the substantial understanding of religion refers to *specific notions* of the holy, of concepts of God, of contents of specific religions such as Catholic or Protestant Christianity. Now if you look in any Godly Play classroom you will find it equipped with stories that come from the specific Jewish and Christian tradition. No wonder that people interpret Godly Play as being rather churchy, aiming predominantly at including children into a particular faith. Berryman's intention to open religion up to children and let them discover who God is seems less evident. Room and stories seem so full of dogmatics that it is hard to believe that the overall Godly Play process does not want to fix children and squeeze them into any particular church. In my experience, people can get really puzzled between the outward appearance of Godly Play and its inner pedagogical convictions. Maybe it helps to add one more distinction within the understanding of faith. This distinction comes from Lutheran Orthodoxy. What can we learn in matters of faith? *Notitia* refers to knowledge. Yes, we can learn the words of the creed, the content of Bible stories and so on. These things are teachable. *Assensus* refers to agreement and approval. This is something we can not teach. Yet many people would say they have learned to believe by a growing understanding of what the creed means, or by other people who seemed to live a faithful life. *Assensus* needs productive imagination in order to connect certain Bible stories to the meaning of one's own life. *Fiducia* means trust. According to Lutheran understanding, the fiducia-faith can neither be taught nor learned. Therefore the model places it at the far side of learning. In Lutheran theology, the fiducia-faith is seen as a free gift of God's grace through the Holy Spirit. *Notitia* and *assensus* are necessary, but not sufficient parts of any person's faith. But *fiducia* is necessary as well as sufficient to come close to God. In order to trust in God you don't need to have much knowledge or an elaborate agreement and understanding of certain traditions. This is why we can regard children's spirituality so high – their faith can show us what *fiducia* means.

Such a distinct understanding of faith can serve us in two ways: It restricts our pedagogical ambitions to teach religion. Secondly it keeps the gospel available to everybody who asks himself about what is good religion, what is bad religion, and where truth might be based upon. Faith needs religious imagination to become vivid, alive, related to everyday life. But faith also works as critical criterium for the religious imagination because it brings the reality of God in Jesus Christ in relation to the imagining subject.

Let's look at the other side, the pedagogical side. Here we have Bildung as the overall category. The pedagogical discussion on imagination asks very distinctively how imagination may help pupils to learn more effectively. Therefore I refer to the different kinds of learning that are commonly suggested in learning theory: cognitive learning which employs our thinking, emotional learning which refers to what we feel, and the pragmatic dimension suggests that we learn most by what we actually do. All three dimensions happen socially, they are highly influenced by the interaction with significant others. The graphic shows

learning imbedded in the general understanding of Bildung. Without this, learning can easily be reduced to a technological transfer of certain competences, thus neglecting its fully human dimension. But the arrow on the right side indicates a critical feedback. This is necessary over against a purely idealistic understanding of Bildung, which is full of fascinating imaginations without actually getting down to the work that needs to be done. Therefore the critical question is needed, what children actually learn inside and outside the classroom.