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## Imagination and Literacy: A Teacher's Search for the Heart of Learning

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## Book Review

**Karen Gallas: *Imagination and Literacy: A Teacher's Search for the Heart of Learning*. Teachers College Press, 2003. 181 pages. \$22.95 paperback, ISBN: 0807744050**

*By Gordon Wells*

Ever since her first book, *The Languages of Learning: How children talk, write, dance, draw, and sing their understanding of the world* (1994), Karen Gallas has delighted and informed her readers about what primary schoolchildren can achieve when their teacher is genuinely interested in their contributions to classroom activities and, as a teacher researcher, collects and reflects on the data that they so willingly provide. This book continues that tradition, but with a significant addition. In *Imagination and Literacy*, Gallas continues to draw on her corpus of classroom observational data, but with a difference. Here, her focus is on the nature of imagination and its central role in learning, not only for children but for learners of all ages.

As with her previous works, the spur to her investigation was a puzzle—a challenge to understand how her professional practice could better serve each child in her Kindergarten and First Grade Classroom. For some reason, although fully involved in 'sharing time', Denzel was apparently not able to enjoy and enter into the worlds created in the books that Gallas regularly read to her class, although he firmly believed in the value of learning to read. What was it that was missing from his earlier experiences that debarred him from entering into the absorption in stories, manifested in other children by what Gallas calls 'The Look'?

Only later did she find a clue to an answer, as she read through her fieldnotes at the end of the school year. Contrary to what she had originally thought, Denzel was not unable to enter into the world of imagination, but he did so through movement rather than through listening to the stories that she read to the class. It was at this point that Gallas began to immerse herself in the study of what thinkers in other disciplines have had to say about imagination.

In the next—although brief—section of the book (chapters 2-3), Gallas draws on a wide range of writings by philosophers, theologians and naturalists, as well as on her own reflections on her experiences during a sabbatical in New England, to sketch a theory of imagination that puts it at the heart of our efforts to make sense of our experience, both first-hand and encountered through the representations of others. Thus prepared, she returned to the classroom with the intention to observe imagination at work more closely, particularly in relation to the development of literacy.

In the remainder of the book, Gallas first describes how putting imagination at the heart of learning and teaching changed both the structure of her program and the nature of her classroom community. These descriptive chapters constitute Part 2, entitled 'Building a Literate Identity.' Then in Part 3, 'Imagination in the Real World' she develops the implications of putting her vision into practice on a larger scale: What if our public education system were to reclaim the rightful place of imagination at the center of education?

From the beginning, I found this book both enticing and stimulating, and my appreciation of Gallas's thought-provoking vision only increased as I saw it in practice in the later part of the

book, where she describes and quotes copiously from the classes she taught after taking time off to ponder the meaning of 'imagination.' From kindergarten to grade four and from Massachusetts to California, children from a wide spectrum of ethnolinguistic and social backgrounds flourished in the classroom communities that they jointly created with their teacher. And, as happens to all teacher researchers, she found herself growing together with them.

This is a profoundly important book. I recommend all educators to read it.