

(R) What's Real About Imagination?

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The imagination has been so debased that imagination—being imaginative—rather than the lynch-pin of our existence now stands as a synonym for something outside ourselves like science fiction or some new use for tangerine slices on raw pork chops—what an imaginative summer recipe—and Star Wars! so imaginative! The imagination has moved out of the realm of being our link, our most personal link, with our inner lives and the world outside that world.

—John Guare, 1990, pp. 33–34

Everyone uses the term *imagination*, but how many of us really know what imagination is? This chapter describes a brief foray into the imaginative worlds of two of my students, Mark and Sonia. Their imaginative worlds were not easy places to be. As a special educator of adolescent students with cognitive delays, I was trained in a way that featured a deficit model that permitted me to neatly package and dismiss certain words and actions and attribute them to my students' lower levels of cognition and their concrete thinking. My students' imaginings were widely labeled unrealistic or fantasy-based thinking, especially when compared with those of "normal" high school students.

To ignore a student's imagination may seem extreme to teachers in regular education. After all, students' imaginations are supposed to be nurtured in classrooms. Most young children's imaginations are naturally evident. They strike dramatic poses, conjure up imaginary friends, unearth evidence of the tooth fairy, and fervently believe in

unicorns. Eventually, students learn to channel their imaginations toward more academic pursuits by authoring fictional stories, participating in drama, invoking analogies, taking perspectives, and visualizing future environments in which to participate.

Despite the centrality of this view of imagination in mainstream education, it did not seem to fit in my classroom. For example, when 15-year-old freshman Sonia confidently stated her desire to go to college, despite not being able to read at the second-grade level, comb her hair, or cross the street independently, I viewed her aspirations as problematic, as a hindrance that prevented her from seeing the world as it really is. Worried about her ability to form realistic goals, I helped her review her expectations. Together, we figured out the cost of college, previewed college texts, and attended a lecture at a local college. My hope was that she would independently conclude that her idea was not feasible. It wasn't until later—after I began to look at the role of imagination in my students' lives—that I fully appreciated Einstein's statement: "Imagination is more important than knowledge." This quotation provided me with a way of thinking about Sonia's aspirations. Did Sonia wish to attend college, or did she wish to imagine herself attending college? What could Sonia's desires mean to me, the teacher responsible for preparing her for adult life?

MY CLASSROOM

I teach in a public secondary school with nearly 1,700 students who come from 67 nations and speak 35 different languages. Sonia is from the Caribbean; Rick is from China; Mary is a Boston-area native. One middle-class 16-year-old has traveled abroad, while another supports his recently widowed mother and younger sister. Mark, who is legally blind, frequently injects his vast knowledge of drugs, sex, and violence into class discussions, while Ethan, who has pervasive developmental delays, prefers to retreat into his own thought processes.

These students are in my classroom because they've been labeled "developmentally delayed," "brain damaged," or "mentally retarded." Each struggles with academic and social tasks easily achieved by the vast majority of teenagers. Mark has trouble reading basic sight words; Ethan is still learning how to greet people; Sonia is unable to formulate her signature in cursive. Nearly everyone needs frequent "pep talks" on basic hygiene issues such as brushing teeth and taking regular showers.

As with other students with special needs, my students' school days are driven by an IEP, a document that lays out the goals, objectives,

methodology, and time devoted to each skill taught. It is a document that sets measurable benchmarks based on the needs, strengths, and weaknesses of each student. My particular classroom is defined as "language-based" and "functional." Functional curriculum is considered meaningful and relevant when it prepares students for the realities of adult life. Assignments focus on specific survival skills such as maintaining a job, taking public transportation, writing grocery lists, managing a bank account, and making a phone call. Reading instruction is similarly devoted to deciphering medicine bottles, transit maps, television schedules, bills, and recipes. It is a pragmatic curriculum based in reality. There is no "once upon a time."

Given their need to review and break down information, my students have had little time to read the body of imaginative literature consumed by their peers throughout their school careers. For instance, in one discussion, I learned that no one had heard of *Alice in Wonderland* and nobody knew what a fable was. Few fairy tales could be recalled except those that had been viewed on video. Only one student read for pleasure outside of the classroom.

Although my students are exposed to the same social opportunities as other students at their high school, they often feel most comfortable staying together. They split up for many classes and play on different after-school sports teams, and yet they usually huddle together in the cafeteria during lunch time. They tend to rely on each other and their own immediate families for their primary social network outside of school. In this respect, they are socially isolated from the mainstream of teen life in the high school. Paradoxically, they do not necessarily identify one another as friends. If asked who their friends are, they often name someone they know from the cafeteria, an elective, or a club, or they describe a student, name unknown, who frequently greets them in the hallway. Despite efforts to pair them up in inclusive settings throughout the high school, involvement with mainstream students is not sustained. As a result, my students face a dilemma. In their quest to be in the same place as other teenagers, they often find themselves alone, ostracized, or, at best, "tolerated." In special education classes populated solely by students with special needs, my students are much more socially at ease, yet they fail to learn about the "teen scene" swirling about them in the rest of the school. Often, my students' curiosity about "what is currently cool" causes them to resort to the dubious solution of asking *me* to define it.

Because of my students' academic and social shortcomings, the casual observer easily can misinterpret who they are and what they can accomplish. Certainly, the labels "retarded" or "delayed" don't suggest

the complexity of each student as an individual. In the program in which I teach, students enter as freshmen and stay with me for up to 8 years. Thus I have the opportunity to see in great depth and over the entire span of their adolescent development how remarkable these students are.

In the events I will describe below, my students came into contact with literature in a way rarely encountered in a functional, special education setting. Yet the journey through this encounter with "real" literature was fraught with difficulty and potential danger. As they entered the literary world of M. E. Kerr's *Night Kites* (1989), their imaginations were activated in ways that I had never seen in a regular education classroom. Their experience with literature outside the functional curriculum brought powerful changes, changes that challenged me as their teacher in ways I had not begun to anticipate. Through these events, Mark and Sonia taught me a great deal about their separate abilities to be imaginatively engaged as readers. These students provide the focal point of this chapter.

MARK

I first met Mark in the computer room at his elementary school. He was a large 13-year-old with an arresting appearance: His head was closely shaven except for a long "rat tail." He wore overly tight clothing, extremely thick glasses, and a hearing aid. Being legally blind, Mark had difficulty negotiating the classroom without his cane. When his teacher inquired about the cane's location, he deftly deferred responsibility for its whereabouts to his grandparents. During our conversation, he was articulate and motivated to be "cool." While expressing his eagerness to become part of the high school scene, he inquired about drugs, gangs, and graffiti. After hearing about our program at the high school, he expressed a desire to receive vocational support, get a job, and "make some change" so that he could buy CDs and electronic equipment.

Mark's teacher at the elementary school had requested that we explore the idea of Mark skipping a grade and moving to the high school. Due to health and motivational issues, Mark had been attending school only 20% of the time. The hope was that the vocational opportunities available at the high school would induce him to attend school. Although his teacher felt that a change in his program was necessary, she had concerns about Mark's safety at the high school. Mark freely expressed opinions without much awareness of whom he might be insulting. He felt that his racist, homophobic, and sexist

comments were the norm, and lacked the understanding that someone might become enraged enough to react violently.

The following year, Mark began attending high school regularly, proudly wearing a black leather jacket and eventually taking responsibility for bringing in his cane and maintaining his hearing aid. I soon learned that Mark's home life was complex. He lived with his grandparents and up to three uncles at any given time. His grandmother, who struggled with health issues, seemed primarily responsible for Mark's well-being. Although Mark reported shouting, violence, and both alcohol and drug use in his family, there also was genuine love and care.

Mark came to the high school knowing that he wanted to be "cool." It almost seemed like he was performing a role. Difficulties proliferated when he misinterpreted or overstated his role—especially with young women. His efforts to be involved were poignant reminders of the struggles that students with cognitive delays have in sustaining significant relationships with their peers. In his sophomore year, Mark announced his vocational goal to become Howard Stern's replacement as a radio talk show host. In his own words, Mark fully intended to "knock Howard Stern off the air." In order to accomplish this goal, Mark began to perfect a deliberately outrageous persona by inserting discussion of drugs, sex, violence, and graffiti into the classroom. To the amusement of his peers, he also rehearsed frequently his on-demand belching and farting techniques. Mark rejected interviews for jobs identified by his vocational teacher, preferring instead to wait for his opportunity to displace Howard Stern.

SONIA

While planning Sonia's transition to the high school, I attended a meeting at her elementary school. When I arrived, the students were still on the playground, and the teacher was providing supervision. The teacher pointed out Sonia, and I could not help noticing her unusual choice of clothes. Her elementary teacher explained that she had tried everything to help Sonia choose clothes less likely to result in ridicule by her peers. On any given day, Sonia might be wearing a mismatched symphony of textures and colors; sneakers with nylons or long underwear; pants carefully ironed the night before, but put on backwards.

The staff also mentioned Sonia's determination to establish a social relationship with a male, a determination that frequently created a wake of angry and confused boys who were unable to deal with the intensity

of any given encounter with Sonia. Her teachers were worried about her preoccupation and inability to assess the intentions of these young men. As if on cue, Sonia bounded over at that moment and joyfully announced, "He's looking at me." She tossed her head, smiling confidently. "Who is?" we asked. "That boy," she replied. We looked in the direction of her pointing finger. A staff member gently commented that all of the boys were playing basketball; their eyes were on the ball. Sonia's joy collapsed. Ignoring the teacher's efforts to call her back, she walked away after abruptly ending the conversation with a blank stare.

So, when Sonia entered the high school the following fall, I was already familiar with that blank stare. Equally apparent were her passive stance in class, her silence, and her easy tears. And yet, there were moments when she would comment happily about her latest boyfriend or excitedly recount the latest Rikki Lake or Power Rangers episode. Outside of the classroom, I had frequent glimpses of a fully animated Sonia running down the halls in pursuit of a young man who clearly was embarrassed or angered by the chase. In school, love notes frequently would flutter to the floor from her notebook. I would ask her if the person addressed in the note really was her boyfriend. Sonia would respond with tears and a blank stare, refusing to engage in conversation. Sometimes a frustrated young man would come to me asking for help. Sonia was calling his house four or five times a night, waking the entire family. Despite my interventions, she would find another red-faced young man for a relationship that existed only in her mind, announcing to his friends that she was his girlfriend. On two different occasions, male students asked to transfer out of class; they couldn't get Sonia to understand that they were only classmates.

In October of her sophomore year, Sonia accused a young man, Gary, known for his behavioral outbursts of demanding that she have sex with him. Both of these young people were about 16 years old at the time. In a meeting with administrators and a social worker, Gary was about to be disciplined despite his insistence that it had not happened. Since he was known as a troublemaker, it was easy not to believe him. As I looked at Sonia, however, I recognized her all-too-familiar confident pose. This prompted me to ask several questions: "Sonia, did Gary really say those words?" Sonia became very still. "Did those words come from his mouth into your ears? Or were the words in your mind?" No answer. "Did you hear the words or think the words?" Evident confusion began to erode her confident stance. Eventually Sonia responded, "The words were real. They were really in my head. I am not sure if I heard them." As we continued talking, we concluded that Gary had not propositioned her at all.

Early in Sonia's junior year, I arrived in the locker room after having been called by a concerned staff member. There I witnessed a dramatic and detailed telling of a romantic encounter that I later confirmed had not happened. Sonia was animated, her confidence evident, seemingly unaware of the snickering around her. It was a Sonia who was the diva of the ball, the lead actress with males swooning at her feet, the popular high school student with dates galore. After seeing me, she dejectedly climbed down from the bench and quietly finished dressing. She seemed to wilt. Although I was dismayed to see her joy and confidence gone, at the time I was pleased that Sonia knew enough about reality to change her behavior in my presence.

That year continued to be difficult as Sonia was asked to leave her homeroom and a dance class after not being able to control her amorous advances. One morning, Sonia's mother called the school. Sonia had been taken home, as usual, by a special needs van, but had not taken the elevator up to her apartment. Instead, she had decided to walk to her "boyfriend's" house by negotiating the streets independently—a potentially dangerous decision given her inability to cross streets safely. The next summer, she nearly lost her job in one of the summer programs, after a male co-worker complained about her persistence.

Over the years, I watched Sonia persevere; she held on to her reality of having boyfriends despite considerable intervention by staff and family members. She met weekly with a social worker; I consulted regularly with psychologists; we considered medication. In class, we discussed the difference between thinking about words in our head and hearing actual words being spoken. We talked about wishing for something versus something actually happening. We analyzed the nonverbal and verbal signs of sexual interest and disinterest by watching the characters on favorite TV programs; we read news articles on sexual harassment. We carefully defined the differences between a classmate, a peer, a friend, an acquaintance, and a romantic partner. Sonia was provided one-on-one staffing during the unstructured moments of the day. Behavioral contracts were written with the final—and often painful—consequence of dropping a class. Despite these efforts, Sonia remained unable to control her amorous advances.

A DILEMMA

By their junior year, I felt that I clearly had failed both Sonia and Mark. I had failed despite my design of a functional curriculum that provided vocational opportunities, that explicitly addressed behavioral

issues, and that helped them differentiate reality from fantasy. I began to wonder what kind of functional curriculum would have a ghost of a chance, given the students' intensity in pursuing their unrealistic and, it seemed to me, self-defeating dreams.

But as I persisted in helping the students establish what I considered to be realistic goals, I also had a growing sense of uneasiness. There was something extremely judgmental and omnipotent in my stance. After all, I wouldn't necessarily dismiss an ambitious, talented high school student who aspired to become the next Howard Stern. Nor could I set aside my wondrous glimpse of a fully engaged, vibrant Sonia expounding in the locker room, pursuing a young man in the hallway, and rapturously writing love notes. I began to worry that my assumptions about the world might block my ability to see these students as individuals capable of envisioning their own futures. Each of them displayed a drive, an intensity that I wanted to transform, not extinguish. What parts of their visions should I listen to and work with, and what should I set aside? I realized that I did not know what to do. I felt as if there were no answers.

TEACHER AS LEARNER

In 1996, I had the pleasure of working with an intelligent and enthusiastic student teacher. Hired as an aide, Austin had decided to stay on for another year as a student teacher. In January, he announced his plans to read M. E. Kerr's adolescent novel, *Night Kites*, in class. I quickly read the book and immediately suspected that this venture might be a difficult one. I wondered how Sonia would handle the romantic scenes. Given Mark's homophobic comments, how would he respond to the gay character in the book? How would the students react to the scenes involving domestic disputes? Three of the students had limited decoding skills and were able to read only short paragraphs. Ethan had difficulty paying attention during any classroom discussion. How could he possibly remain focused enough to follow a book being read aloud with the rest of the class? I easily could anticipate that the students would have difficulty keeping track of the characters and places, would be confounded by complex sentences, and would be stunned by idioms. Additionally, I wondered how the time-consuming task of reading a complicated adolescent book would provide measurable progress as defined by the IEPs. These plans had been written to address functional academic skills within a strictly fixed period of time. I considered the challenge of explaining this departure from standard, well-accepted functional academic fare to parents, administra-

tors, and Austin's academic program advisor. Nevertheless, as Austin and I discussed his ideas for teaching the book, I decide to quiet my reluctance and support his decision. I was confident that Austin would put in the necessary effort to prepare thoughtful lessons.

We ordered *Night Kites* from the Perkins School for the Blind's collection of Books on Tape to accommodate Mark, who struggled to see the print even in a large-print book. During the first week, Austin provided an introduction to novels in general. During the second week, visuals began to fill the room as the students learned how to negotiate a plethora of names, places, and changing relationships. A large chart with names and movable arrows was used to clarify the shifting relationships of the characters. In response to confusion over the idiom, "he jumped out of the car," Austin designed a model car out of cardboard and paper. The car was used to keep track of the particular scene in which the idiom appeared. The students were given the homework assignment of drawing pictures of individual characters. These portrayals were used to trace turns in the dialogue and to keep track of which characters were in various scenes in the book.

Each student eventually decided to choose his/her own character and read that character's words while engaged in role play. By Chapter 3, all of the students, with the exception of Ethan, had fully assumed the personalities of the book characters they had chosen to represent. For example, Sonia chose to read the part of Dill, a popular young teenager who was on the pom-pom team and had the status of being the narrator's girlfriend in the beginning chapters. Sonia was pleased with her role and took it very seriously. In fact, she insisted on remaining in character even when we weren't reading the book, as can be noted in the following transcript of a conversation that took place immediately before class:

Austin: Can you get the door, Sonia?

Sonia: (solemnly) I'm Dill now, Austin.

Austin: Okay, you are Dill now. Thanks, Dill.

Sonia: (giggle) Sometimes I have to remind you.

Her determination to stay in character is also evident in this conversation taped on the same day during reading class.

Austin: What kind of hands does Dill have?

Sonia: Square?

Austin: (reading from book) Little square hands.

Sonia: Little square hands. (incredulous tone) My hand doesn't even look square.

Mark: How could your hand look square?

Austin: Are we talking about Dill's hands or Sonia's?

Sonia: (long pause) Dill.

Sonia remained so much in character as Dill that she became angry at both the characters in the book and the students who were reading those characters' parts. In the story, Dill's boyfriend becomes interested in another character, Niki. In one class session, Sonia became so outraged that she yelled at her classmate Mary, who was reading the part of Niki, a sexy, provocative character in the book, "Hey, you can't steal my boyfriend." During the rest of the period, Sonia sat hunched over in her chair and shot angry looks at her classmate. For days, Sonia felt a genuine loss in status.

While Sonia remained carefully in character, Mark was flexible in his ability to pirate any character whose immediate concerns related to his own. In addition to reading the part of a gay character who was dying of AIDS, Mark adeptly assumed his classmate Ethan's role as narrator by actively pursuing a relationship with Mary. Mark became angry with Ethan and pursued Mary by deliberately telling Ethan, "Back off—she's my girlfriend."

Other shifts occurred in the classroom social terrain as the book reading progressed. Within a week's time, nearly everyone was upset with everyone else. Emotions flared, and resolution was elusive because identities were constantly shifting and boundaries were few. Students were upset with not only the characters but with their classmates. They began arguing with one another, mixing up the fiction in the book with the reality of their lives. And yet, in the classroom, they had a more active interest in one another. Early mornings were filled with furtive glances and whispered gossip as they sat on a blue couch—away from the teacher. During class discussions, there was a frenetic eagerness to answer, to have their turn, to enter the text together.

By mid-March, after a series of particularly chaotic, confusing days, I began to consider whether we should stop reading *Night Kites*. Frustrated and tired, I arrived at a weekly BTRS meeting, which had not yet begun. A snack was being put onto the table while members straggled into the room. Exhausted and bewildered, I proclaimed that I "needed to do something" about my students' response to *Night Kites*.

To my surprise, my dismay was met with the group's full, intense attention. Those present listened and probed with a deep respect for the chaos that the students were creating. No one offered familiar prescriptive remarks that began with, "Have you tried . . . ?" My colleagues

wanted to know more; they saw nothing to fix! And yet they saw the depth of the problems. Several members advised me to view the chaos as data and to think about it further with the group. After this meeting, I returned to my classroom with new possibilities; I no longer sought a "solution" to a "problem." While still concerned with the unexpected and deeply problematic nature of the students' response to literature, I began to observe, audiotape classroom discussions, keep field notes, and review transcripts.

CREATING THEIR OWN TEXT

The students began arriving earlier and earlier in the morning. They would appear with books in hand, sit at our meeting table, and ask to begin before the scheduled time. After a few weeks, they requested 4 more hours per week to read *Night Kites*. The audiotape version of the book arrived. The steady voice of the reader helped Mark and the rest of the students get from one page to the next. While the book tape was playing, the students carefully followed along. At times, they would become impatient with the teachers' inability to cue the tape to the right spot and excitedly would scan the text for words to support a point of view or answer a question. This normally passive group of students became engaged in animated, loud discussions. In fact, there was so much discussion that progress through the text was extremely slow. It was not unusual to cover one page during a 2-hour class. It was during this time that I brought in my own tape recorder and began to tape their conversations.

When Austin and I deliberately interrupted the students to inject the skill of turn taking, conversation would cease. Students would appear confused or stunned by our insistence on pragmatics while they were focusing on meaning. They began to use Austin and me in a different way. No longer were questions and comments addressed primarily to us. There was no waiting for the teacher's question. The teacher became participant and the students spoke freely, answering one another's questions, expounding on one another's ideas, creating their own understandings. They seemed to be claiming their own learning in a way I had not witnessed previously.

Two years after they finished reading *Night Kites*, I encountered a book by Jeffrey Wilhelm (1996) which makes the argument that teachers can help marginal students become motivated to read by helping them enter the book, by "being the book." The following passage seemed to capture what I had seen in my classroom:

If reading is truly the producing of meaning, then all the materials of the curriculum become pre-texts, by which I mean an excuse or a reason to pursue personal inquiry and create personal meanings. If we are interested in student learning and transformation, then textbooks and stories become the texts that catalyze the real text that is the reader's response and new understanding. The questions and the answers will become those of the student and may be most fruitfully embedded and expressed through creative, artistic, and student-centered response "texts." (p. 10)

Austin and I learned to talk less and appreciate the students' bursts of intellectual activity. If the conversation became dynamic and my tape recorder was not already running, I quickly would turn it on. The students began to recognize this action and would exclaim in my absence, "Turn on the tape recorder. Roxanne would like to hear this." It was as if they could step out of their conversation, recognize that it had value, and anticipate my desire to learn with and from them.

Being the Book

As the days passed, it became more evident to me that the students were actively comparing their own lives with the events depicted in the novel. Yet the way they did this was sometimes so engaged as to be alarming. In the moments leading up to the following transcript, for example, the students had been listening to a section on the tape where Mr. Rudd, the narrator's father, angrily advances toward his son's bedroom. After the passage, the students requested that the book tape be shut off, and the conversation literally exploded as the students related personal accounts of family arguments complete with door slamming, yelling, and angry footsteps. Everyone was interrupting, agreeing, disagreeing, and adding a personal story. Mark, who had been waiting for a lull in the classroom conversation, finally gained the attention of his classmates and insisted that Austin act out the part of the angry father, Mr. Rudd.

Mark: Well, would you act like Mr. Rudd right now?

Austin: What do you mean?

Mark: Well, right now. Right on the job. Can you do it?

Rick: Act it out?

Mark: Yeh.

Austin: You mean you want me to make mad footsteps?

Mark: Yeh.

Rick: Boom . . . Boom . . . just . . . just . . . step your foot on the floor.

Sonia: Ow.

Austin: Umm. . . . What else do you want me to do?

Mark: Pretend you are coming right into your son's room . . . and and and pretend Eric [the narrator] is like lying on the bed and and you start yelling at him.

Austin: Did that happen in the book?

Mark: No. . . . No we don't know that yet. . . . But but pretend that you are staring at him when you come into the room.

Austin: Umm. Are you making a guess about what's going to happen next?

Mark: (hesitates) Yeh.

Austin: How come you want to see an angry scene? You haven't told us to act out any other scenes before.

Sonia: Why this one?

Mark: Because it is like emotion. So it is like a emotion scene . . . where . . . you know . . . where somebody is making an emotion . . . where they're mad . . . cuz the person won't go somewhere with them.

Mary: Maybe you had that experience in your life? Before?

Austin and I considered that his request might be a tactic to go "off-topic" in an attempt to discuss violence, one of Mark's favorite topics, and we tried to redirect the conversation. Mary and Sonia, however, assumed that his request to re-enact the scene was genuine; they asked him questions that got to the heart of his attempt to solve a problem by re-enactment, thereby possibly emancipating Mark to explore new possibilities. Mark eventually volunteered that he broke a police scanner, his prized electronic possession, during a loud disagreement with his grandfather. Mary and Sonia clearly had understood his intention to work out something in his own life.

The Role of Imagination

At about this time, Karen Gallas spoke in a seminar meeting about imagination. Karen stated that she was paying attention to her own imaginings and thinking about imagination as a tool in education. I remember that we all were so excited about her ideas that for a short time chaos reigned at the table. As the meeting continued, I had considerable difficulty focusing. I was too busy remapping my own classroom's topography and dealing with my anxiety. Was Mark's wish to be the

next Howard Stern any different than my wish to hit the lottery—especially since I never actually buy lottery tickets? I again thought of Mark's request to act out the angry footsteps scene. Did it reveal the imaginative pursuit of a deeper understanding of family discord? Were both Mark and Sonia using characters in the book in the same way young children re-enact and understand events in their own lives? While I originally had thought that teaching decoding and comprehension skills was perhaps the best outcome I could expect from Austin's idea of reading the novel, both Sonia and Mark were demonstrating the power of a story to help us to imagine the possible and escape from the irrefutable past.

There were quieter, but no less dramatic, moments too. For instance, in field notes beginning in mid-March 1995, I noted Sonia's early morning entrance into the classroom, when she announced, "Look, I dressed like Dill today." And, indeed, she had. In playing the part of Dill, she had reconsidered her own unusual style of dressing. Despite her established history of dressing in a melange of cacophonous colors, she had the neat, preppie appearance of a pom-pom girl. I was amazed as I recalled all of the curriculum that I and other teachers had developed to help her with her appearance. Despite our expertise, we had not reached her. Dill had.

Sonia's conventional attire persisted throughout the 6 months we read the book. Afterwards, she shifted back to her own idiosyncratic style, but I observed over the next year that at least her repertoire of clothing styles had expanded because she would now observe what was outside of her and add new ways of dressing. On certain occasions she would dress in conventionally appropriate ways, explicitly telling me that she had found a look in a magazine or that she was dressing like a character in a book or movie.

I learned to appreciate the students' determination to use the book as their entry point into the dramatic and social world of high school students, a world that had always eluded them. It seemed as if I had found a strange and unexpected part of an answer to my original question: How could these students learn about social life if they could not be accepted successfully in the social world of the high school? The students had created an imagined yet real social world of their own through entering the book, a world with at least some of the features of the high school. Austin and I watched as *Night Kites* actually provided a setting where the students catapulted over the confines of their lives. This was exciting to them and to us, their teachers; but I was not ready to call it a real answer.

Possibilities

The process of “being the book” had opened up for our students some possibilities that we had not been able to provide within our functional curriculum. However, with students like these, some might ask, Is there any point to spending time on the traditional contents of language arts classes: the nature of authorship, characterization, plot, and other literary conventions and practices? I discovered that my students persisted, in spite of my instruction, in overruling conventional understandings of how a novel was put together, of what it “really” was. For them, characters were real people. At times, they were certain that Austin and I had written the book or that the characters might have influenced the author’s plot. As rookies in the world of adolescent literature, the students came without much prior knowledge regarding authors and characters. For example, in the following transcript, Mark suggests that Erik, the narrator in *Night Kites*, could have consulted with the author regarding the plot of the story.

Mark: But what if she [M. E. Kerr, the author] . . . I know but what if Erik and and Erik came up to her . . .

Austin: Uh uh . . .

Mark: M. E. Kerr.

Austin: Okay. (deliberately)

Mark: (conspiratorial tone) And said, “I want to write a story with a little twist in my brother on it.”

Austin: Um.

Mark: (definitively) That’s probably what happened.

Austin: Are you saying that Erik Rudd is a real person? (silence)

Mark: No reason not to. Well maybe there is. I don’t know.

Rick: Maybe maybe a make-up character.

Austin: Well, Rick thinks maybe he is a made up character. What do you think, Sonia?

Sonia: I think he is probably real. (interrupted)

Mark: Maybe he’s just an actor or something.

At the time, Austin and I were, once again, bewildered. Did Mark really envision a scenario in which Erik, the narrator, wrestled from M. E. Kerr the reins of authorship? What made my students wish to see the characters as authors of their own fate rather than fictitious figments of the author’s imagination? We wondered whether Mark thought characters were actors, similar to television. I had assumed that

the students' failure to understand the place of both literary characters and authors was evidence of their disability. We had seen that they were tremendously successful, given appropriate supports, at entering the book. But what they didn't seem to have was the ability to pull themselves out of the book, to look at the book as the creation of an author, an object created for readers like them.

As the end of the school year approached, my students still discussed excitedly whether or not the characters were real people. They decided to write letters to M. E. Kerr to ask about the characters (each letter was answered by Kerr). They also planned to make suggestions as to how the author might change the book. Sonia wrote stating that she wanted to become pen pals with one of the characters.

Even though at the end of 6 months our students still seemed to confuse fictional characters with real people—wishing to correspond with both the author and the characters—I did see students use the text as text. More important, however, was the “near distancing” that Mark experienced. While nearly all the students remained with their adopted character during our reading of *Night Kites*, Mark was the exception. At first Mark had taken on Peter, the gay character, without knowing he was gay. After learning that his character was gay and had AIDS, Mark was hesitant to remain in character as often as did the other students. As the character came into the classroom, we had multiple discussions about being gay. As mentioned earlier, one of Mark's favorite targets was gay people, so we had wondered how he would respond to this aspect of the book. As expected, Mark's giggling, snickering, and rude remarks were conspicuous. Austin and I consistently and assiduously sanctioned Mark for these remarks, but they still continued.

However, as the months passed, and students grappled with the nature of the author's creation, Mark tried desperately to understand M. E. Kerr's motivation for including a gay character. In the transcript above, Mark hypothesized that Erik, the narrator, asked M. E. Kerr, the author, to include a story “with a twist” about his gay brother, Peter. During the same class session, Mary presented her ideas about authorship. She reflected on the author's motivation to write about Peter and the topic of AIDS. Unsolicited by the teacher, she offered her thoughts, and, amazingly, Mark listened respectfully, seeming to consider things from a more distanced place, escaping for the moment his discomfort.

Mary: Author likes writing these words . . . these things down.

Austin: What do you mean?

Mary: I think, I think she thinks about it in her life. Maybe she has experience with gay people or AIDS people before.

Austin: That is interesting. Do you think she has to have experiences with gay people or people with AIDS in order to be able write about it well?

Mark: Yeh.

Mary: Yeh or no. You don't have to. You just need to be near people who got it.

What is significant about this transcript is what isn't there. There is none of the snickering, silliness, comments under the breath, or disrespectful name calling that Mark frequently interjected into prior conversations where AIDS was mentioned. A month later, Mark entered into a dialogue with Austin about a person with AIDS.

Austin: I actually . . . on Saturday I heard a man with AIDS come to speak to a group I'm working with.

Mark: What? And he was the speaker?

Austin: He was the speaker. And he was talking about how his life has changed now that he has AIDS.

Mark: (quietly) Wow. He even said he had AIDS too, Austin?

Austin: Yes.

Mark: Wow.

Austin: He was very open about it. He came to speak to our group because he has AIDS. He wanted our group to learn about it.

Egan (1992), like many others, asserts that literature has the power to broaden our empathy for other humans: "By imaginatively feeling what it would be like to be other than oneself, one begins to develop a prerequisite for treating others with as much respect as one treats oneself" (p. 55). To take on a character's perspective is an imaginative act that may evoke empathy in the process. In Mark's case, as he came in contact with a character who was gay, and engaged in talk about the book in which that character resided, he temporarily transcended his former stance. He seemed at least occasionally to leverage his experience with a fictional character into responding differently to something in "real life."

Lessons Learned

So what could I, their teacher, assume that my students actually learned from this extended and often terrifying (from the teachers' perspective) experience? I'll focus only on Sonia and Mark. I've writ-

ten about how Sonia was able to learn something about presenting herself to the world in conventional attire, something that we could not teach her with our functional curriculum and counseling. It was not a complete transformation; on many days, Sonia still looked strange. However, she did learn how to look outside herself and model her dress after other, more conventionally acceptable characters, both real and fictional. In addition, she began to reach out and participate in discussions in our classroom. Before we read *Night Kites*, Sonia would sit quietly in her seat during classroom discussions. In the year that followed, she excitedly participated in discussions that engaged her imagination: poetry, fiction—but not mathematics!

What about her problematic imagined love affairs? After *Night Kites*, she and I began to set time aside to read adolescent romance novels. As I read, her face became dreamy; at other times she could not stifle her giggles. She and I talked about her romantic feelings toward young men. This was new. The blank stares I previously had elicited became more infrequent. Over time, I have come to recognize that Sonia's pursuit of possibilities can be considered within the norm. Sonia's public imaginings are not so different from the private imaginings of most other students in the high school. One principal difference is that she articulates and acts upon her imaginings publicly. Perhaps Sonia simply needs to tell her story and have her story reflected back in the context of a novel. Once reflected, the reality and the fantasy as reality can begin to shift for Sonia.

Mark's beginning movements away from his homophobic stance are described above, but here I would like to relate a more striking outcome, more striking because it shows how these students' experience with literature can be brought back to their understanding of the functional curriculum and their place in the real world. As I described above, early in the reading of *Night Kites*, Mark commandeered the role of the narrator, Erik. As part of this identity he started to pursue Niki, Erik's girlfriend in the novel, by being verbally and physically suggestive to Mary, the student who was taking Niki's part in class. In spite of our attempts to curtail his advances, this became so problematic that Mary, with the support of the staff and her mother, decided to ask for a sexual harassment hearing available to her through the school. In the hearing she confronted Mark and told him what made her uncomfortable. She also told him to stop. With the help of the staff, Mark came to understand that there were consequences to his actions, that Mary did not want his advances, and that he had to step out of his imaginings, out of his character, and stop. After the hearing, he did stop harassing Mary. This episode left both Austin and me wondering whether our experi-

ment with literature had overstimulated these students in ways that would not be useful to them and in fact might even be harmful.

A year later, I was working with Mark on his entrance into the workplace. Now 17, he had gotten a job and needed to become familiar with the employees' handbook. This included a section on sexual harassment in the workplace. For teachers of students with developmental disabilities who are heading, we hope, for successful vocational placements, this is an area that evokes great concern. If a student does not understand the requirements of the workplace in areas such as sexual harassment, the result can be much worse than termination from the job. As I read through the manual with Mark, I could see that he understood it. He explicitly drew on his experience with *Night Kites* and the terrible episode that it evoked; he anticipated the contents of the policy before we had even read all the way through it. He stated his desire to be "respectful of the ladies." I knew that he actually had a base of social experience to draw from and that he would remember and understand this in a way that he could not have if we had approached the topic only through the functional curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Night Kites served as the catalyst for Sonia and Mark to rehearse their stories and create an imaginative space in which they and their classmates were integrated into a more accepting world that included the novel's characters and author as full participants. Although I initially thought that these students "didn't get" literature, I now marvel at their intuitive ability to satisfy personal needs and purposes by engaging with literature. Sonia and Mark used their imaginative powers to look beyond the actual and demand an alternative—a way out of the restrictive nature of their lives. When Jeffrey Wilhelm, author of *You Gotta BE the Book* (1996), interviewed highly engaged readers, he noted that

Readers who successfully entered a story world began to make moves to relate to characters and see the story world. They noticed cues for creating and sustaining a "secondary world" in their minds as they read. They created characters and felt emotions in relation to character activities and problems. Quite often, the readers would become a presence in the story world, and begin to move around in that world or manipulate it in some way. In this way they would project themselves and their real-world knowledge into the story world. [They] evoked a complete story world, and at this point the virtual world of the story had intense and comprehensive reality for them. (p. 56)

Amazingly, the dynamic engagement of the students in my room easily could fit Wilhelm's description of what successful readers do. In that sense, my students are highly successful "readers" who, nevertheless, have difficulty with decoding and comprehension skills. There is, however, another major difference. In direct contrast to the students in Wilhelm's study, who were prompted to reveal their thoughts when engaged in a book, my students did not have the social awareness to keep their ideas private as they read. In fact, one of Wilhelm's students actually was reluctant to share her thoughts, stating that she felt that teachers were not interested in hearing how students go "underground" with their experiences as readers (p. 31). My students obviously did not have that inhibition. Not only did they articulate their notions, but they also sustained a public imaginary quest to uphold a "secondary world" while reading *Night Kites*.

After completing *Night Kites*, the students in my classroom pursued even more time to read. Their faces would soften as I read a poem; they savored newly comprehended metaphors; they gleefully awaited meeting new literary characters. These were truly amazing feats considering that these learners are labeled as concrete thinkers unable to generalize, synthesize, or perform other high levels of abstract thought. And yet, adolescent literature, with all its varied and steamy plots, provided them a way to do just that. It allowed them to reflect on their experience and meaning making by providing them the opportunity to imaginatively negotiate their way through the high school scene.

Within the context of my classroom, my role of teacher has changed. I believe that functional curriculum, which might be regarded as a factual narrative, needs to be reconsidered and taught in such a way as to engage imaginative processes. Instead of looking at reading in purely functional terms, as a means to derive literal meaning from texts or learn about life skills, reading should be considered as a site for unique human beings to engage in imaginative rehearsals that serve their own paths of development. I now know that the stories of others are essential in encouraging students to write their own stories and determine their own goals.

Still, I am unable to conclude this chapter gracefully. Questions remain: How does the ability to use one's imagination shape learning? When should unreliable images of reality be honored as a rehearsal of imaginary ideas? When do these unreliable images promote false hopes for the impossible and the outrageous? And how can we best use the power that imagination obviously holds to further our students' learning? While these questions and many more remain, I am in awe of the power of imagination. As Ursula LeGuin (1989) writes:

Only imagination can get us out of the bind of the eternal present, inventing or hypothesizing or pretending or discovering a way that reason can then follow into an infinity of options, a clue through the labyrinth of choice, a golden string, the story, leading us to the freedom that is properly human, the freedom open to those whose minds can accept unreality. (p. 45)

My students agree.