

Lego and the merits of imaginative education.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Theme Detailed

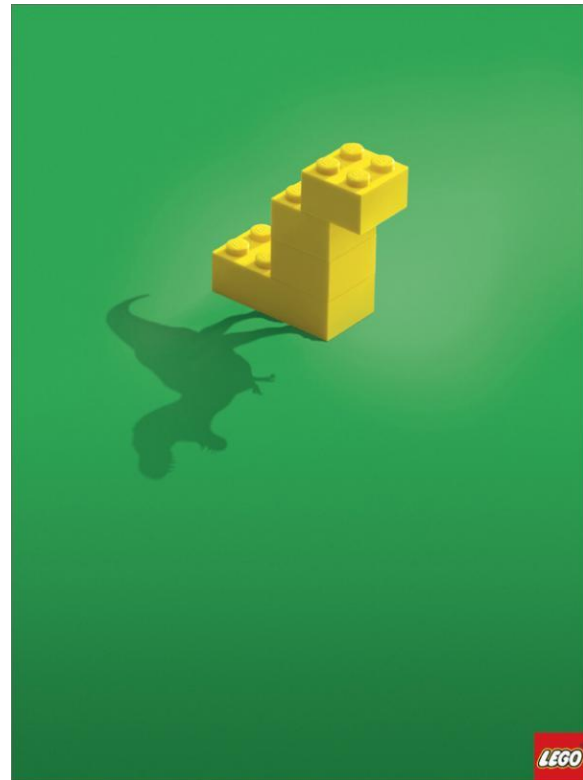
Theme Applied

Personal Reflection

Conclusion

Introduction

The image chosen for this essay is selected a marketing campaign created by the design company Bruner, for Lego in 2006. It depicts four yellow Lego blocks stacked to make a staggered form against a green background. Light coming in from the far right hand side of the image hits the stack of Lego blocks casting a shadow at the near left hand side. This shadow however, does not show a symmetrical reflection of the cuboid shaped blocks as expected. Instead the viewer sees a shadow of a dinosaur, its shape roughly mirroring the form of the staggered Lego blocks. The theme that will be used to analyse this image is imagination in education, more specifically in Ireland's primary and secondary education system. This image was chosen as its subtle style promotes imagination through the use of Lego. Several topics and issues arise from this. The first section will discuss the idea of imagination through the lens of utopia, and its opposite dystopia. Subsequently, anarchic thinking as a means of imaginative education will be discussed. This will be followed by the negative impact of quantitative and summative assessment on imaginative thinking. Following an analysis of the image in relation to these topics, I will reflect on the relevance of this image and theme to my own personal experience as a student.



Theme Detailed

The word 'imagination' derives from the latin verb '*imaginari*' which means to picture or create an image of oneself (see, Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018). This shows imagination is very much exclusive to each individual. In simple terms, utopia is defined as a perfect world. So how are we supposed to create a common utopia if we each have different visions for it? This is where education comes into play. It should be the responsibility of schooling to teach us how to imagine, plan and work together to achieve utopia, or a version of it. This idea however, is perhaps a utopia in itself. In reality, schooling is increasingly about being 'trained in a narrow body of knowledge and skills that (are) taught in isolation from larger and vital questions about who we are and what we might become.' (Tan Le cited in Friedmann, 2000, p.461).

It is difficult to discuss the possibility of utopia without the probability of dystopia. One person's idea of utopia might be another's dystopia. The education system has a significant amount of power to influence the minds of the next generation. However, in a system that is based on facts, figures and a quantitative points system, it is apparent that there is a fear of the possibility of dystopia, or failure, within today's education system. This possibility is compounded by teaching limited information in a structured and highly disciplined manner. 'Dystopias have been deployed to stifle necessary and beneficial change by making people fearful of such change, with the paradoxical outcome that the failure to change plunges society further into the mire' (Geoghegan

cited in Papastephanou, 2008, p.94) This fear of dystopia impacts negatively on the use of imaginative thinking in schooling.

On the subject of imagination, Greene explains, “of all our cognitive powers, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken-for-granted, to set aside the familiar distinctions and definitions” (Greene cited in Cartwright and Noone, 2006, p.3). From this vision we can see that anarchy plays an important role in allowing the freedom to think imaginatively. The absence of rules, order and boundaries is crucial to pure imaginative thinking. Anarchism does not only provide a more ‘fluid’ learning environment but ‘it changes with the needs and will of those who (re)produce it.’ (Armaline cited in Haworth, 2012, p.7) Learning is exclusive to the individual. Paradoxically, in the current education system standardised testing continues to be the main form of assessment.

Ken Robinson, an internationally known advisory on education believes that standardised testing and summative assessment are the main elements of the education system that are blocking our ability to learn and teach imaginatively. He wrote an interesting report on this topic in 1999 in which he notes, ‘ Children need periods where they can experiment, make mistakes and test various approaches without fear of failure. Immediate assessment can overlook aspects of creative development which only become visible in the longer term.’ (Robinson, 1999, p.128). Students are not comfortable with thinking imaginatively as constant assessment does not allow any time for the mistakes and amendments that occur naturally in the imaginative process.

Theme Applied

The shadow of the dinosaur in the image could represent a sense of imagination through the lens of utopia. To a young child the excitement and mystery of dinosaurs may perhaps animate their idea of utopia. To look at it from an environmental perspective, the dinosaur could symbolise a world where no life becomes extinct. This delves into the areas of global warming and climate change. The advertisement portrays the idea that with Lego we can experiment and build models of our own perfect world. In the same way, the schooling system should act as our principle building block of utopian thinking. Ideally, as students we would learn about the process of imaginative and creative thinking through the lens of utopia, and establish grounded ideas of what we would like to change in order to create a better society. ‘Through their capacity to defamiliarise the existing order of things, utopias render the present mutable and point to ‘possibilities for change that normally would be either ruled out automatically or never thought about,’ (Halpin cited in Webb, 2009). This shows imaginative thinking through the lens of utopia would help students better decide what career path to take, if any, in order to achieve a version of utopia.

This image relates to imagination through the lens of dystopia if you were to imagine the dinosaur as how they are sometimes portrayed in films; terrifying, almost monstrous creatures. As mentioned above, it is clear that today’s education system there is a fear of the possibility of dystopia. The idea of encouraging anarchic imagination in schools is marginalised by the underlying fear of failure. This stems back to the idea that one person’s utopia is another’s dystopia. It is interesting to note that many people prefer to follow instructions instead of experimenting free hand with Lego. This is an indication of the difficulty of imagination for many people where the possibility of failure overrides the anticipation of achieving utopia. The fact that chance plays a large part in utopian thinking is a central reason for the lack of imaginative thinking in the curriculum. Darren Webb voices this concern saying, ‘If utopia is to operate as a means of opening up

possibilities and catalysing change, then a prescriptive totalising vision, with all its associated dangers, may be necessary.’ (Webb, 2009, p743). He suggests that if imaginative thinking were to be introduced into the curriculum, some boundaries would have to be made to avoid the disaster of dystopia. However, if boundaries are put in place is imaginative thinking really being explored? A school environment may be the safest place to experiment the imaginative thinking process without restrictions as failure can occur there without any major negative repercussions.

As briefly mentioned above, the issue of anarchism is made apparent in this image. It is easy to imagine a student using these pieces of Lego along with their imagination as a means of creating the dinosaur creature. The child may have developed this approach entirely by themselves. However, it is just as easy to visualise a teacher in a classroom telling the student to use the Lego as a means of dreaming up a creature. If this is the case, imaginative learning is only taking place to a certain degree. In order to totally embrace imaginative learning, the student needs to be allowed to use whatever materials they want to create whatever creature, structure or idea they want. Lego sets that are accompanied with instructions and the exact amount of pieces to build a particular structure diminish the quality of imaginative learning in play. In the same way, a schooling system that rigidly concludes with a quantitative assessment diminishes the value of education and limits the rich imaginative experience it has the potential to become. It would be beneficial to introduce elements of an anarchic approach into the schooling system over time as it would mean students would learn to think for themselves.

The need for elements of an anarchic approach in education brings us to the issue of quantitative and summative testing. When children play with Lego there is flexibility in outcome. The pieces can easily be taken apart and put back together in a different arrangement that portrays a completely different idea. They can use their imagination to experiment comfortably without the pressure of judgement based on rigid criteria.

‘Testing tends to concentrate on testing pupils recall of factual knowledge and skills which can be measured comparatively. It generally takes little account of experimentation, original thinking and innovation: processes which are essential to creative and cultural development.’ (Robinson, 1999, p.126).

Summative testing puts such a strain on students to get a perfect score that the process of imagination and experimentation is lost. The introduction of formative assessments in the education system would help students better engage with the imaginative process. Informal feedback given at different stages in their work process would allow time for imagination and experimentation. In turn, a higher standard of work would be produced.

Personal Reflection

Similar to others, as a young child I used my imagination naturally, without limits and was happy to do so. I used Lego blocks, free hand, to dream up characters and structures. At five, I began primary school. Quickly, I picked up the idea of rote learning for tests and my imagination rapidly dwindled as it was replaced by spelling and sums. When I was ten years old I asked for Lego for Christmas, but the kind that came with instructions to build an intricate Ferris wheel. The importance of tests and grades weighed heavily on my mind. None the less, I enjoyed being a student. The primary and secondary schools I attended were excellent and the teachers really tried their best to cater for each student’s learning needs, even though this was difficult when we were all being tested on the same information, in the same format. I think it’s important not to place blame

on schools and teachers for the rigid structure of the curriculum as they do not have the power to change the system. Towards the end of my school years some teachers even tried to introduce a small amount of imaginative learning into the classroom. This was the last thing myself and my classmates wanted right before our final tests. The limitations of the quantitative points system do not support imaginative learning. The use of imagination in a system where it is not merited poses too much of a risk to students who wish to secure places in college.

Until there is little or no emphasis on quantitative point testing, students will not be interested in using their imagination. This change will not and should not happen overnight. Rushing into a completely different format of teaching and learning would impact negatively on all involved. Human beings naturally need time to adjust to new situations. John Friedmann outlines this when he says 'Utopian thinking is an ongoing, time-binding discourse intended to inform our striving. It is no more than that, but also nothing less.' (Friedmann, 2000, p.471). No person could have a final vision for imaginative education or even utopia, our ideas change naturally as time goes on. It is something for us to think about and implement over time, but not to dwell upon or to rush into. The Irish education system have begun to introduce formative assessments in some areas of the curriculum. I feel that this is a step in the right direction for imaginative learning. Imagination creates risk which

Conclusion

In conclusion, the image I have chosen can have a number of different connotations in relation to the use of imaginative and creative thinking in education. Lego represents the idea that we should be able to experiment with our visions of utopia in education and easily dismantle or change parts of it as we build over time. 'Without this connection between teaching and utopia, education empties itself of its principal driving force,' (Lewis, 2006). In order to embrace this link between education and utopian thinking fully, the fear of dystopia must be overcome and elements of anarchist methods must be introduced in the schooling system. In the same way that instructions for Lego diminish the imagination in play, it is clear that the weight and emphasis on quantitative points system diminishes the value of education and indeed, the student. It is not reflective of the journey or the richness of possibility which might that been achieved with imaginative thinking. A less rigid structure involving formative assessments is the way forward in order to achieve imaginative learning. As future teachers we must strive to introduce imaginative and creative thinking into our classrooms and push for more recognition of imaginative thinking in formative assessment situations.

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