

REFLECTIONS ON

The State of Play – a professional development day at the University of Gloucestershire Friday 27th January 2012

An unashamedly long Reflection piece ... because like all good hair products, it was worth it.

This was a very well attended day of both graduate and undergraduate playwork students and practitioners held by the Play and Playwork team at the University of Gloucester. Eight papers were delivered in total with some lasting an hour and other 10 minutes. The reflections below represent my own take on what was said but overall I can say it was a very interesting and thought provoking day.

A professional development day that can not only keep an old dog like me interested for the whole time but also spark some interesting links and ideas is a successful one in my book. Very clear progression from last year's Philosophies at Play conference too. Short comments from me follow each summary below.

Always difficult to define highpoints in a successful day but in particular I would say:

- In considering the death of childhood, "There is no substance without its historical context."
- "A culture that does not value children's play will not value a group of people who take this as their core work."
- "If children do not see 'play' in the developmental aspects of delivery in many child based settings then why should an educational/developmental paradigm be taken as dominant in the play training for those in the children's workforce?"
- "Children's lives are made up of moments, fleeting moments, each of which is significant for its own reasons."



The Papers

Francis Barton presented a paper titled, *Technology, innocence and experience: Walter Benjamin on 'the child' and play*, which included the quite tragic personal story of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940).

Benjamin saw the figure of 'the child' as a "recurrent and ambiguous theme" in time, which Francis weaved into a paper on the main theme of a general, modern perceived loss of innocence and an apparent end of childhood. Adults, he said lament this but he argued that this was a position that has to be questioned. He likened this to those for and against new technologies, the (Techno) Phobes and the Philes, as in the modern context it is new technology that is often seen to be at the root of lost innocence.

He reminded us though that, "We are technological whether we like it or not ... we can't get away from it." The Abacus, slide rule, laptop ... even speech ... all are examples of technology and adoption of these appears not to have resulted in the death of childhood so far. He quoted Peter Grey saying that what children are suffering from is actually 'too much adult contact rather than too much screen time' and reminded us that this theme of technology robbing the young of their childhood is a recurring theme in history.

In the end it is the idea of past, present and future that seem to be at the root of the issue. Today's children are living now and yet when adults complain of a loss of childhood it is the past to which they are referring (Grey's point). He quoted William Gibson (1993) saying "The future is already here; it's just not evenly distributed" meaning that what some people see as modern, new and different is dependent on the place those people are in at in the present; and in the context of technology and change it is dependent on their own experiences. The past 'lingers' and an enthusiasm for the future (such as in new technology) and a nostalgia for the past (the 'prelapsarian', a time before the fall of childhood) is ever present and presents a dialectic that can be uncomfortable to get into. In this context Benjamin believed we are doomed to repeat the values of the past.

Francis ended by saying that any discussion on childhood today, particularly the death of childhood, must include an appreciation of the past; a point Benjamin seems to have grasped firmly. "There is," Francis said "no substance without its historical context."

This was a paper that resonated particularly well with me as I have tended to approach the question of play and playing from a historical perspective in my own work and I find the 'no substance without its historical context' to be particularly important. I found the addition of the future to the mix a very interesting concept in a paper that proved to be a good link to many of the points raised in other presentations throughout the day.

Wendy Russell introduced the *Contemporary Issues in Playwork Symposium* as part of the main day by reminding us that there is a history to everything and everything has a context. In her short presentation on the key elements of knowledge and of critical thinking she discussed the role of epistemology and Socratic dialogue as tools to making a present, sound and valid argument backed up by effective evidence. Four students on the universities module of the same name, part of the undergraduate and postgraduate Play

and Playwork Programme, were then invited to present a position paper on a contentious issue of their choice.

The four well established individuals in the playwork field, Chris Martin, Debbie Willett, Tom Williams and Hattie Coppard then presented their papers as a structured argument on a number of topics that, even if it were not intended, were very complimentary.

Chris Martin was first to speak arguing on, *The survival of playwork in England: reinvention not retrenchment*.

Chris started his argument with the proposition, "A culture that does not value children's play will not value a group of people who take this as their core work", his point being that at a time when resources are tight and playwork is in serious decline we, as playworkers, are not in a strong position to make any claim towards improving the situation. His solution to this was to call for reinventing playwork as an agent of cultural change which he argued would require playwork(ers) to go beyond the profession of playwork and move into and influence other fields.

In presenting evidence for his argument he quoted the 1960 Albemarle Report into the future of youthwork in which a big case was made on the need for training and qualification of youthworkers. He argued that there were parallels between what Countess Albemarle said in her report about youthwork and what Lady Allen of Hurtwood was saying at the time about playwork; the real difference between the two was that the Albemarle Report resulted in 'a plan' and he proposed that this is what we need in playwork.

To support this view he argued that the bulk of recent investment in play in England has gone into playgrounds (in other words provision). He paralleled this with youthwork into which the focus of investment has gone into youth centres - but more particularly into youthworkers making youthwork more broadly 'a service' rather than just a form of provision. The Albemarle Report did much to promote youthwork as a service that had clear, stated aims and objectives and Chris concluded by saying that this proposed 'plan' for playwork should do just that and provide "a clear plan for reinventing playwork as a service" as youthwork has been able to do.

In some respects this may not be a new idea in the playwork field but I found the statement that a culture that does not take play seriously is also not likely to take playworkers seriously presented in such a starkly logical way to be quite powerful. It's a sobering point very well made and it set up Chris' conclusion about needing a plan very effectively.

Debbie Willett spoke on the argument, *Training in play from a playwork paradigm is essential and unique for all staff in the wider children's workforce*.

She pointed out that all people working in childcare in Scotland must be registered and that to be registered they had also to be 'qualified'. In order to do so all receive some kind of training in 'play' but what that entails is very different to what playworkers might see as being relevant.

She argued that the dominant paradigm in much of this non-playwork training looks at the value of play as an educational/developmental outcome as opposed to being valuable on its own and this background knowledge determines how they see play and how they provide for it in their workplaces. She quoted the example of an early education and childcare setting in which the workers spend time planning and delivering a play activity on a particular subject only to find their charges asking if they could stop doing this now and go and play instead.

Where people from other sectors had been introduced to a playwork paradigm she said that they are often surprised and maybe even suspicious but they find it beneficial as knowledge of more than one paradigm provides more options. However she also said a playwork paradigm is especially valuable. Her subtle closing statement was simply that if children do not see 'play' in the developmental aspects of delivery in many child based settings then why should an educational/developmental paradigm be taken as dominant in the play training for those in the children's workforce? 'Playwork' she argued on the other hand really is play-led and so should at least be given equal weight in the training of all those working with children.

Debbie raised an issue that many of us working across other work sectors have found frustrating in the past and, as with the points made by a number of the speakers today, it is important to acknowledge that we playworkers actually do see play and playing in a very different way to others. That children can clearly see the difference between learning/teaching and play should be an eye opener but, as Chris pointed out, if we are not taken seriously how do we get this message across? Debbie's suggestion may be a solution to that.

Tom Williams argued on the statement, *Adventure playgrounds: time to be instrumental*.

He began by arguing for an 'adventure playground methodology' which, he said can and does operate in places other than adventure playgrounds. Despite the obvious value to playworkers of this type of work however it is under serious threat. His main argument was that to protect adventure playground work in the future there needs to be a new 'playwork accountability', in other words evidence that what adventure playgrounds do is worthy of support.

He said that from an early point in their history adventure playgrounds have had an original accountability based on their 'instrumental value' but to secure future funding this value needs to be broadened and able to fit with the trend for outcome driven funding; a trend that is unlikely to change. He said, "We have to get better at the measurement game" and gave a whole series of existing measures that could be applied to playwork that would indicate value but noted that many of these were negative, preventative outcomes.

He developed this by saying that we (playwork) need to define play outcomes ourselves and move from current negative outcomes to positive ones placing an emphasis on recording happiness. The development of national indicators/outcomes for play based on happiness was he said effectively this instrumental value: adventure playgrounds = happiness = instrumental value.

The sheer number of local government outcomes and indicators that could be ticked off in Tom's example was quite an eye opener but equally as interesting was how many of them were preventative: do this and it stops this; have this many of those and this won't happen. The whole well-being and happiness agenda (the positive side of outcomes) may have slowed down a little since our current government came into post but it is still there and is potentially persuasive. Tom made a very good case for highlighting the uniqueness of the adventure playground in this context and when listened to alongside Chris' presentation it suggests a possible link between this 'plan' for playwork and Tom's 'instrumental value'.

Hattie Coppard [who began by saying she 'was not a playworker' ... a point I strongly disagree with because she clearly is] argued, *Nature is all very well but what the play sector needs is more design thinking.*

She began her argument by saying that recent initiatives have resulted in local authorities being more encouraged to take an 'intelligent way' of designing play space that was more natural but in turn this has raised the question what is natural? The urban environment she said is just as natural to the urban child as a rural landscape is for country dwellers.

She argued that the current trend of claiming a general lack of access to nature for children as a bad thing is largely a middle class view and she expanded this by defining children's environments in a very broad way including both urban spaces (such as the classic car parking area) and the digital environment which has become increasingly important to children and young people (her argument here was that as children 'meet' each other in the digital world and interact in it is just as valid an environment as is the physical world).

She said we often promote the natural world in terms of play as being a flexible, changeable place but made an interesting comparison here with the 'incompleteness' of some sites in the digital world such as Wikipedia for example ('incompleteness' being inherent in the design of such websites rather than necessarily accidental) and the natural world. She said this in contrast to some of the newer more natural playgrounds in which she argued that the emphasis was on the natural materials present rather than on the experiences they provided. She said, "It is what the environment affords that counts." [If nothing else, this is what makes her a playworker].

Her final point was that we have largely been successful in breaking the stuck design of past playgrounds but ... there is also a risk in the future that despite local authorities being more open to using different materials in our playgrounds, especially natural materials, there is a risk of becoming stuck in design again but this time becoming stuck in providing boulders, tree trunks and the like without still grasping that important point of affordances/experiences. This is the design challenge for future playgrounds.

There were many parallels in Hattie's paper and the Children at Play research published by the Department of the Environment in 1973 as Design Bulletin 27. That publication and Hattie made a point that also resonates with what Colin Ward was writing about in the 1970s in acknowledging that where children are is where they play. We clearly do have better playgrounds being built now than even just ten years ago but Hattie's warning about becoming stuck in a new design rut is a very interesting one to watch.

Stuart Lester delivered a paper in his usual listenable tone on the topic, *Rethinking children's participation in democratic process: a right to play*, in which he planned to question the notion of participation as currently used in adult agendas and a political arena. He particularly wanted to explore this in the context of the forthcoming General Comment to Article 31 that the UNCRC is preparing.

He began by saying, "You can't talk about children's play without talking about adults" for a number of reasons and that, "The term 'freely chosen' implies that children are individual, rational choosers". But this ignores the fact that children's lives are made up of moments, fleeting moments, each of which is significant for its own reasons.

In a point similar to that argued by Debbie Willett above he implied that playworkers are more attuned to seeing these 'moments' than other professionals and quoted Fagen as saying, "A place remains for more perspectives on play" reinforcing this by saying that when children play each of these moments is an event – a singularity with each of these events being independent of each other. He said, "These things matter [these fleeting moments] and should be given serious and careful attention."

He mentioned Colin Ward [difficult not to in this context] and 'play as politics' in the context of Ward's writing in the 1973 book, 'The Child in the City' defining politics as both something big and something small, more local, something very clearly about making decisions that have an immediate/relevant impact. So, when children play it is in these 'moments' [the 'now'] that politics take place. But, he adds these moments take place in environments that are shaped by other agendas and this calls into question much of what is taken as children's participation in making decisions.

To be really effective therefore, true participation has to take place in the now and adults, children, the space, all these things have to come together at (or as) that 'moment'. Further than this Stuart said that rather than Article 31 being just one of the UNCRC articles it should, because of the nature of this 'true participation' be at the heart of *all* the articles: it should be nothing less than the instrument that holds the whole convention in place.

Stuart, himself saying at the start that this is a work in progress, raised some very challenging points about the involvement of children in the context of participation. His point that true participation takes place in the now and in the process of playing chimes well with Francis' point in the opening paper and combined well with the idea of adults and competing agendas. Play, as currently defined in Article 31, is open to the kind of misinterpretation that puts some practical obstacles in the way of those working with local, and especially, state governments. We eagerly await the firmer definition of play that the general comment promises but Stuart's overall call, that article 31 be the core of the whole Convention, presents some very exciting possibilities.

Hilary Smith delivered what was the most interactive and visual of the day's papers on, *States of play: reflections on the manifestations of play today*. In this we were asked to consider what we mean by 'states of play', a question that was maybe not as straight forward to answer as it seemed. This led to us defining it as 'a condition of mind or feeling'.

She then presented a number of different images drawn from news stories presented without the context of the text and asked us to work out what story each image might be

about. We got it wrong in almost all of them (for example, an image of some broody looking teenagers lounging against a wall hiding behind their hoodies turned out to be the associated image to a positive story about young people).

As it turned out there was very little connection between the images employed and what the story was actually about, most of them being stock images, which really questioned the perceptions of these choosing the images and placed a question mark over what effect this might have on the reader.

This was a very good paper to end with: very visual and interactive. Interestingly, it was also a paper that summed up the technological advances nicely as discussed in Francis Barton's opening paper, as no PowerPoint presentation this: it used the latest all-singing and dancing Prezi. But the last time I saw this topic covered it was done by Brian Cheesman in Leeds many years ago using an overhead projector and press clippings photocopied onto A4 transparencies ... how technology has changed. Maybe I should be yearning for the good old days more than I actually am!

Marc Armitage

REFLECTIONS ... an occasional Blog thing.

7th February 2012

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