

Converse shoes – the playwork badge of office

Marc Armitage

I've been asked a number of times why I continue to wear black and white Converse originals on my feet and am rarely seen without them – even in a suit (true story). Today, I explain one of the reasons why.

This last week I have tied neck-ties onto two primary school boys about to have their school photos taken (trickier than I thought as I've never actually put a tie on someone else) and tied up the shoe lace of another younger boy in a day-care setting. In both these cases they approached me and asked if I could help.

There is another common factor in these two examples in that none of these children really knew who I am. They've seen me around because I have been working at both these settings for a while – but not directly with any of these children and not on a very regular basis.

Quite some years ago I was stopped outside my local shops by a very nervous eight-year old boy. It was early evening towards the end of the year and so it was already dark. He told me he was lost and that he and his family were from out of town visiting his grandmother but after heading for the local shops with his older brother they had become separated and he was lost.

There followed some very clever questioning (by me, you know) to work out where he might have come from:

'Was his grand-mothers house very far away?' *No.*

'Which direction was it in?' *That way. I think.*

'Was it a house or a bungalow?' *House.*

'Was grand-mothers house down a street or round a square?' *On a square with other houses.*

'Was there anything near her house you can remember or something you passed on the way to the shops?' *There was a big field behind her house like a playing field.*

That narrowed it down. It could only be up near the local primary school. So, we set off to find it with me saying keep watching and anything that rings a bell let me know.

We chatted all the way. He was from London, he had an older brother, it wasn't his grandmother's birthday (or maybe it was he wasn't sure), his mum was there too ... and suddenly, "There!" He pointed to a square of houses with the school field to one side. "It's there!" And he was off. He ran straight across the square and up to one of the houses not waiting to knock on the door or ring a bell he just opened the door and went straight in. No word to me, no backward glance ... just straight in. I waited for a bit longer just to make sure no old lady appeared on the doorstep with a puzzled expression on her face and then turned back for home.

The thing I haven't told you about this story was that he had said he had been standing outside the local shops for some time getting increasingly agitated (he thought at least twenty-minutes). His parents had stressed to him 'never talk to strangers' and in this case this policy has seriously backfired because all he could see around him were strangers.

He told me he had thought of going into one of the shops to ask for help but found that an even more frightening prospect than being lost. But then, he saw someone wearing black and white Converse shoes on his feet and this turned out to be significant.

The very first thing he said to me outside the shops was not, 'Hello, could you help me I'm lost?' it was, 'Are you a playworker?' At the time this really floored me - how on earth did he know I was a playworker? On that wondering journey looking for grannies house he explained that back at home in London he was a regular at his local adventure playground and playcentre and lots of the playworkers there wore black and white Converse. Tenuous perhaps but significant enough as this was in the 1980s when playwork in the UK was strong and there were lots of us around. It was this one simple thing that prompted him to approach me and ask for help and I've worn my black and white converse like a badge of office since then.

This harks back to the question of trusting adults being essential in creating playful communities that I touched on in my last Blog, *A Tree and a Boy*, and the importance of 'someone' knocking on a few doors as part of that. Perhaps that is what happened here: was there some unspoken, unconscious door knocking going on on my part; something tangible enough to enable a child to ask a stranger if I could tie a noose around their neck, do up their shoe laces, or help them when they are lost? It's not something I did consciously and I admit I'm not quite sure what it was ... but it can't just be a question of footwear, surely?

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