

***The Genius Of Play***  
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*genius: attendant, tutelary spirit etc. [OED]*

Using both recent research and published material, this article indicates something of the depth, breadth and complexity of children's play. It draws a parallel between the creative play of early childhood and our relationship to art, literature and drama as mature adults. It puts forward the argument that the imagination is both a vehicle for human creativity and a vital social force which leads us, through empathetic thinking and imitation to the realm of "the other". It argues that to deny children the right to play is to risk cultural, social and personal deprivation.

Despite the existence of numerous excellent books and articles on the importance of children's play, the word "play" is still read, at least in the lexicon of educational policy makers, as the negative and polar opposite of "work". Play is regarded as a euphemism for idle, frivolous engagement - or for doing nothing; whereas work suggests serious, purposeful activity. Work is worthy: play a mere diversion.

The UK *Start Right* Document on Nursery Education, published in 1994, temporarily reconciled the "work" and "play" opposition by stating somewhat paradoxically that: "Play is the serious work of childhood." Here at last, was a welcome endorsement of play; a recognition that children could be working and playing *at the same time* - a principle which early years educators have known for years. It confirmed the notion that although much children's play is light hearted and full of charm, it is also earnest, and worthy; with a depth and dimension which demands our patient observation and respect. As Huizinga states:

*"Play is a thing by itself. The play concept as such is of a higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness." [(1949) op. cit. in Eisen, 1990: 7]*

This quotation was taken from George Eisen's moving and sometimes harrowing book *Children and Play in the Holocaust*, where he suggests that children in such pitiful circumstances were unable to play in ways that were anything other than serious. That they still *needed* to play is perhaps the most poignant testimony to the importance of play - it effectively undermines the notion of play as a purely frivolous activity. Eisen himself regards the children's play, their games among the shadows, as one of the mysteries of that tragic epoch.

### **Play with a purpose?**

It is now three years since the *Start Right* document was published and suddenly a whole new set of targets, outcomes and assessment criteria representing a dramatic shift in educational thinking, are firmly in place and work, as the leading educational impulse, is the order of the day once again. Children busy playing at the serious work of childhood - beware!

The pressing need to meet targets means that for many institutions, play is either marginalized entirely, or is used exclusively as a learning tool. The cognitive "learn as you play" model, which requires children to direct their play towards predetermined and specific outcomes, has clear educational advantages; children genuinely enjoy learning this way and as a method of acquiring knowledge it works. However, a diet of too much of this kind of "pre-cooked" play fare, may deprive the child of the freshness, nourishment and vibrancy of his freely-chosen open-ended play, and eventually dull the palette. As all good play-watchers

know, the great fascination of really creative play, is its unpredictability. The unexpected and sometimes astonishing twists and turns which make up the living journal of the day's play, demonstrate the scope, profundity and sheer life-filled, energy of the childhood imagination which, in free play, "moves forward simultaneously in several planes of thought at once." (Lowenfeld 1935:177). To use play as a means to an end, somehow misses the point of what it really has to offer rather as if we were to read great literature solely as an aid to improving our spelling.

### **The Art of Play and Play as Art**

What children actually do when they play is a complex and fascinating issue. Following the work of Lowenfeld, Drummond, Selleck and others, I would argue that part of what children represent in their play is an undifferentiated, expression of what we later come to call art, literature and drama. In a kind of perpetual metamorphosis, children move like quick-fire from the fantastic to the everyday and back again, in the never-ending drama of "the play." They play as the spirit moves them: the same attendant spirit I would suggest, which later inspires our creative outpourings as adults.

I remember an incident in my own kindergarten which shows that even in childhood, the distinction between art and play is not easily made. Who can say where art begins and play ends? A small boy had been to see a dolphin over the weekend; an experience which had strongly moved him. On Monday morning, he came to the kindergarten like a poet suffering under his muse, with a burning desire to express and recreate his thoughts and feelings and to relive his experience. With a sure touch, he took a long blue veil, spread it on the floor, lay upon it on his tummy, crossed his feet to make a tail and gently waved his legs up and down. His participation was so absolute and his imitation so perfect that you could almost hear the water lapping about his feet. I felt as though I was witnessing the creation of a bodily poem or a beautiful piece of installation art. It was one small boy's personal homage to the dolphin which had so impressed him. In the "art" of his play, his body and veil became his paint, palette and canvas as, in his own "childish" way, he brought his deeply felt experience to exquisite expression.

### **Our Research**

In a recent small-scale study for the Institute of Steiner Waldorf Education, a group of students were asked to study children in their free play. Our objective was to find out what they were actually playing and to classify some of the different types of play. One of the graduate students, Edward Marks, observed a group of twelve children at the Ringwood Waldorf kindergarten. Although such studies are prone to subjectivity, Edward strove to be rigorous and respectful in his methods. He never interfered, not even to ask questions - as he felt that any involvement on his part would subtly effect and alter the play. He was also aware that children have a surefire instinct for knowing when they are being watched and either play to the crowd or clam up completely, so he occupied himself with some small task such as sewing, and made his notes discretely. He aimed to be a friendly presence without disturbing the children. Creative playtime lasted for just over an hour and a half each morning and over a period of eleven days Edward was able to observe almost seventeen hours of uninterrupted play. During this time he recorded a total of fifty four "themes"- all of which were initiated by the children. The teacher also intervened as little as possible only making helpful suggestions or giving direction when it seemed absolutely necessary.

The following list is a selection of some of the themes:

- horses and masters
- cheese factory
- paper factory
- spaceship and dragon
- really big house or castle

- dark houses (with lantern)
- car journey - as mice
- cooking
- ironing
- trains and engines
- forest
- café
- big school
- snakes (mummies, daddies, etc.)
- insects
- fishing
- ferry boat
- doll as baby
- wizard of dark house
- home-made “weeing” doll
- having lots of visitors
- shopping
- pussy cats

The themes flowed into each other, involving different groups of children at different times, and allowing inspirations for play to rise and fall in a kind of co-operative dream of the imagination. New belief systems were invented and willingly adopted in a process which Coleridge understood as:

*“That willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.”*  
(Biographia Literaria, Ch. 13)

Sometimes a theme would be played and then abandoned, to be revived later, occasionally not until the following day. Themes were played out in a variety of ways which included: socio-dramatic play; solitary play; exploratory play; play involving leaders and followers; play which followed a “script,” (for example, Peter Pan and Wendy made a brief appearance) and there was much re-enactment of puppet stories in which narrative, dialogue and “set design” all featured strongly. Puppets who fell over were repositioned and ordered, by authorial command, to “stay!”

The children usually named their games, as a way of defining their subject and of signaling the start of a particular play. Naming the game also allowed everyone entry to the same imaginative sphere. Roles were allocated and characters defined and refined as the action progressed. This process of definition was very important to them; like our literary use of titles, chapter headings and character delineation, it helped the children to establish a framework of meaning for their play narrative.

*“We're mischievous mousies, yeah?”* was the title and opening chapter of one game. Later on, knowledge, such as what mousies eat and what threatens them was added (cheese and cats). Further chapters included mousies getting into a car (with symbolic basket for steering wheel); mousies going shopping to buy food and inevitably, mousies being chased by cats.

Not only shared definitions but also agreement over what was permissible within a particular game needed to be established. Two boys were heard having a conversation about whether or not the house which they had already built, could or could not become a castle; after *lengthy* deliberations, they finally reached mutual agreement and decided that it could. (These important social negotiations just don't happen at the solitary desk or worktable.)

Some play was fleeting, for example, a piece of wood became a skillfully played saxophone in which the child's gestures faithfully recreated the original observation, even down to the smallest detail. Other play was sustained and complex. Children created a succession of "worlds" which, though sometimes fantastic, nevertheless represented a coherent whole; each with its own symbol structure and appropriate set of props. A particular spot was usually chosen to function as the doorway in a variety of different versions of the game of *house*. This threshold became the agreed *sign* and symbol of boundary and ownership. The sanctity of the door as the central sustaining feature in games of house, seems to be a universally recognized feature. Entry by any other route is simply not permitted; if children do start coming in through the walls, it usually signals the breakdown of the game. This was one of many self-imposed "rules" which were accepted by the group. A series of more tangible props were also used to support play activity. In the syntax of their play these physical props functioned as instant, adaptable and supremely interchangeable metaphors: conkers (chestnuts) became matches; string, snakes; a hand-sized piece of wood a mobile phone.

The ability to endow an object with a different order of existence is a genuine childhood talent. The child becomes the creator of the play object and invests something of herself in her creation; she has sought and found something there, a reflection of her own creative gift perhaps. Picasso, in a process which mirrored this childhood activity, brought us the playful art of the "found object" and opened our eyes to new ways of seeing - something we could learn equally well from our children, if only we would look.

As well as giving life to objects, the children at Ringwood, as mentioned above, also created imaginary *worlds*, sometimes alone and sometimes together. David Cohen (Cohen 1987: 109) gives a lovely example of an imaginary world or "paracosm" called Gondal. This world, created by the two Bronte sisters, Charlotte and Emily, was full of dashing romantic military officers! They believed that they had learned how to devise interesting characters and plots through their youthful games with Gondal. It seems to be stating the obvious to suggest that the inspirations which flow into the creations of such childhood worlds come from the same rich vein which we later tap when we write stories or poems as older children and adults. To those keen to promote excessively formal literary programs, however, it appears to be anything but obvious. It is the imagination, after all, which creates good literature, not the ability to write letters.

The use of the free imagination and the possibility it gives for moving beyond the confines of a difficult situation has also been a life saving gift for those in captivity or in hiding, as Brian Keenan, John McCarthy and many others have testified. Eisen's words speak for them all: "With the aid of make-believe one could symbolically demolish the physical confines of a little room or bunker." (Eisen 1996: 72)

In the Ringwood study, much of the play centered around children "being" someone or something else, and I would argue that it is here that the genius of play begins to awaken social sensitivity and intuition at a very profound level, through the playful activity of imaginative empathy.

Some examples from the study follow:

"You can be the big schoolgirl." (How do big schoolgirls feel, act?)

"I'm a spaceship man." (How might a spaceship man behave? What fears might he have? How might he face up to challenges?)

"This is the door of my kindergarten." (Now I can be as kind or as unpleasant as my own teacher.)

“Are you a mouse?” “No, I’m a prince.” (So you need to treat me very differently.)

“What can I be?” (Whatever you wish!)

The question, “Who am I in this game?” and “How must I be as my new self?” is a major preoccupation for most young players. Through imaginative play, and in particular through socio-dramatic play, children are able to express and explore their own viewpoints and feelings, and as Jane Hislam perceptively observes, they are also able to explore *those feelings which are not necessarily their own*. (Moyles, Hislam et al, 1994). In the magic of empathetic imitation, which is quite different from copying, children live imaginatively into the experience of “the other.” Then, guided by the inspirational spirit of play, the ability to “read” the thoughts and feelings of others begins to awaken and the journey towards emotional literacy begins.

This capacity, is absent in most children with autism. In his book, *The Development of Play*, David Cohen argues that although autistic children do play with objects, by moving them around and so on, they hardly ever engage in pretend or imaginative play. He suggests that this is because autistic children find it impossible to develop a theory of the other mind. Like adults with Asperger's syndrome, they might know what tears are, but not what they mean. Most autistic children are unable to perceive what another person might think or feel because, sadly, they are locked into their own worlds. (Cohen 1996:166).

Tina Bruce gives an example of a child who begins to explore, through unsentimental imitation, the very different thoughts, feelings, and experiences of someone else.

*“A new girl called Jo joined a nursery class. Jo had an artificial arm and two girls, Nadia and Jody were fascinated when she took it off at story time because she did not want to wear it all the time. That afternoon, the children played together and Nadia was Jo. Through her play, Nadia entered an alternative world to her own, in which she had no arms. She used all her knowledge of what arms are for and she came to know about Jo as she hadn't before.”* (Bruce 1994: 117)

A society that is unable to live into the experience or feelings of “the other” is one which can be described as culturally autistic. It is my belief that through their own play, children can foster and develop the very qualities which will provide a powerful antidote to the “cultural autism” which threatens our society today.

By trusting to the wise tutelage of the spirit of play, we educators can be partners in the creation of a social future. In the “quick, now, here, now, always” of their play, children are learning what it means to be human. They need our support and understanding in this most daunting of tasks. (Eliot 1942)

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