

PLAYING AND NATURE, PURE AND SIMPLE?



In the 4th Century BC Plato advised that educators should “Let your children’s lessons take the form of play.” Today evidence demonstrating that play supports children’s social, emotional and cognitive development underlines Plato’s advice. Playing, for example:

- provides children with opportunities to enjoy freedom, and exercise choice over their actions;
- offers children opportunities for testing boundaries and exploring risk;
- offers a very wide range of physical, social and intellectual experiences for children;
- fosters independence and self-esteem;
- develops respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction;
- supports well-being, healthy growth and development;
- increases knowledge and understanding; and,
- promotes creativity and capacity to learn (adapted from Best Play 2000, p.11).

Although play is recognised as a significant contributor to educative processes (Fisher et al. 2008) researchers have warned that recent trends threaten children’s right to play (Jarret & Waite-Stupiansky 2009, Zigler & Bishop-Josef 2009). In response advocates have rightly emphasised play’s benefits and its essential contributions to learning and wellbeing (e.g. Pellegrini 2005). However, whilst the educative importance of children’s play is clear, there is a risk that if children only experience guided forms of play the full value of children’s free play may be diminished.

Most early childhood educators understand the importance of play and remember that it has many forms: large-motor play, small-motor play, mastery

play, rule-based play, construction play, make-believe play, symbolic play, language play, playing with the arts, sensory play, rough-and-tumble play (Miller & Almon 2009). Most educators also accept that freedom is a basic tenet of play (Hewes 2007) but fewer are likely to have considered a fundamental contradiction in educator assumptions about schoolyard play. In particular educators are unlikely to have reconciled beliefs that children’s play ought to be freely chosen and self-directed with using play as a pedagogical tool. Similarly many educators will not have considered children’s recess and lunchtime play as a pedagogical issue let alone thought about the hidden curriculum of school grounds (Titman 1994).

Part of the problem with liberating schoolyard play and optimising it as a pedagogical resource has been that the vast majority of existing modern playgrounds have been designed by adults to be permanent, to look child friendly, to be tidy, and to placate feelings that children ought to be provided with special places. Unfortunately these design features have not addressed children’s need to construct, to imagine, to find places of refuge, or to just be with other children. Nor have modern playgrounds allowed for fascination that engages and extends children’s interests (Trageton 2007). Unsurprisingly then children come to feel alienated (Titman 1994, Moore & Wong 1997) by what Prue Walsh (2006) calls these ‘monuments to misunderstanding’ and growing numbers of children have begun engaging in unsafe or antisocial behaviours (Evans 2001). Unwittingly teachers and carers probably compounded the situation by managing misbehaviour

without wondering if in reality the playground might have been the problem. This may be because, since ‘modern’ playgrounds introduced play structures and equipment 150 years ago (Moore 2006), many educators have come to accept as normal the ‘mismatch between formally designed playgrounds and places where children actually prefer to play’ (Holloway & Valentine 2000, p.12). As a result educators have inherited a mindset that allows “adult values and needs, rather than those of the children ... [to] mould many school grounds and policies on their use” (Tranter & Malone 2004, p.153). A solution to this dilemma seems to be in educators remembering that for children play is not about products or outcomes, it is about the act of playing.

Play is usually fun but often it is far from simple. In free play children naturally negotiate new meanings for objects and people: sticks, for example, are transformed into horses, wands or spoons; possessions are transformed into symbols; and, humans are transformed into super-humans. Subsequently other players who want to experience interesting, fulfilling and meaningful participation have to interpret what the transformed people and objects represent (i.e. they must engage in metacognitive processes). There is nothing new in this except perhaps to note that educators who provide the resources and time for genuinely free self-initiated play are helping to shift the focus of children’s attention from what people, objects and actions seem to be to the multiple levels of interpretation and meaning that players negotiate for people, objects and actions (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte 2007). Unfortunately and too

often children's play is subjected to other's ends and we begin to understand what John Dewey (1976, p.277) meant when he wrote that "the source of whatever is dead, mechanical, and formal in schools is found precisely in the subordination of the life and experience of the child to the curriculum." Paradoxically by appreciating the rich complexity of children's free play as processes of collective inquiry where actions and meanings are continually reinterpreted in ever changing physical, social and intellectual contexts educators are allowing play to move from being about "the skills that happen to be part of it ... [to being about] the wilful belief in one's own capacity for a future" (Sutton Smith 1995, p.290). In other words educators are allowing free play to nurture the dispositions and capacities that are essential for 21st Century children's learning.

Liberating schoolyard play and realising its educative potential has proven difficult because mainstream education has focussed on play as a means to deliver predetermined goals (Sutton-Smith 1995) and because modern playgrounds prioritised gross motor movement and

competition (Kozlovski 2008). Change is possible however, and just a little more than decade ago some European, North American and Australian communities began greening playgrounds precisely because children valued the "much higher quality of play experience [they offered] for children of all ages" (Staempfli 2009, p.269). The greening impetus was supported by evidence that playing in green school grounds was "positively associated with stronger academic performance in Maths, Spelling, Reading and Writing" (Bagot 2010) and by confidence that green nature reduces stress (Wells & Evans 2003), restores attention (Faber-Taylor & Kuo 2008) and improves health outcomes (Ulrich 2008) because all these benefits were and are scientifically verifiable. For the educator though these were not sufficient reason for facilitating nature play however. A fundamental reason for bringing nature into education settings was that nature enriched children's free play and thereby enhanced processes of collective inquiry. Children were allowed to associate natural elements and loose parts like sticks, stones and water with play and children were allowed to play with nature in many ways,

they could: build cubbies, make mud pies, play hide-and-seek in long grass, and just relax on thick mattresses of fallen leaves. First and foremost playing with and in nature was fun and when it was fun what followed was a natural extension of free participation in rich and diverse contexts.

My own research at Galilee Catholic School, Aldinga (Johnson 2013) showed, for example, that playing freely in nature supported children's creativity, feelings of belonging, and sense of efficacy. Other independent research also showed that free play in and with nature:

- offered excitement and fun;
- sustained longer lasting play;
- supported diversity of play;
- responded to player's needs; and
- reduced the number and severity of accidents (Trageton 2007, p.189).

In the 21st Century educators can embrace a new paradox of play. That is: by supporting and elaborating children's interest in playing freely with and in nature educators can shape children's ongoing meaning-making though authentic, affective and empowering inquiries. As educators we may not be able to prescribe where children's playful inquiries will lead



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(and we never have) but surely after more than two millennia we can at last take Plato's advice and provide the physical and cultural conditions which will truly let our children's lessons take the form of play?

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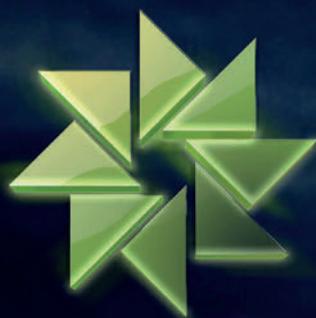
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