



Cultural Blindness: Killing Play & Imagination

Educational toys?

For some time now I have been very disturbed on entering early childhood centres and observing how people set up spaces of ‘cluttered impoverishment’ for growing minds. The same kind of unease overtakes me when I wander around ‘educational toy’ fairs. Although I understood the ‘impoverished clutter’ was anti-child, I hadn’t been able to put my finger on why the centres and toy fairs sparked the same discomfort in me until recently. It was a comment about meta-theories by Ronald Lally at the Childspace *Yeah Baby* Conference that did it. He opined that the makers of so-called ‘educational toys’ start with the belief that children are empty vessels and/or blank slates, and that the ‘educational toys’ they provide will remedy the deficit.

Slow learners

Of course! As soon as the obvious was pointed out to me, it was hard to see why it took me so long to get it - but I think what I was experiencing is a form of cultural blindness. (Of course I would say that wouldn’t I? I am hardly going to own up to being thick.) With very few exceptions, the fare at an ‘educational toy’ display is anything but educational, but we have grown up with that stuff. It has been part of the ‘topography’ of every centre we know, it is lovingly catalogued in the Ministry equipment lists and so we, like sheep, are drafted down the chute to materialist fake education.

Real or fake?

It was the fake education which caused me the unease - and contributes to our society’s disease. Take just one example: one of those ‘puzzle boards’ with all the various kinds of brass catches and latches screwed onto it - this equipment is an ‘educational’ fake. The board could not be part of a real game, the latches and catches are out of their rich context where they have a pivotal role, the activity is closed - meaning that the equipment doesn’t offer other possibilities, except maybe use as a paper-weight. This is an example of ‘pouring into the empty vessel’. It is impoverished because the only thing it can preach to children is that these cultural artifacts work like this when out of context. (Owning up: I even *made* wooden jigsaw puzzles in a not too distant past life.)

Value things you can see, or experiences you can’t see?

To be sure, not one person who creates the kind of ‘pedantic equipment’ that kills play and imagination stone-dead had that in mind as their aim. They might have money in their sights, but never murder. The history of schooling as we know it is relatively recent (born with the industrial revolution), and the triffid-like explosion of ‘educational equipment’ mirrors the skew society took even more recently when people opted to look for their Quality of Life in things, instead of in the experience of Living Life Creatively.

Magpie madness

When the kitchens of the affluent or aspiring affluent boast kitchen whizzes, coffee machines, electric coffee grinders, battery operated pepper and salt grinders, bread makers, electric waffle irons, whizz sticks, electric can openers, electric carving knives, toasted sandwich makers,

dish-washers, micro-waves, ice makers, icecream makers, milk shake machines, stoves, slow cookers, electric fry pans, poached egg makers, electric grills named for celebrity chefs, a stove with a grill... you will find the same materialism-gone-mad mirrored in centres. I recently visited a centre that had bought the range in plastic food - white bread slices, brown bread slices, baguettes, focaccia bread, cooked noodles, cooked rice, green peas, broccoli, cauliflower, onions, eggs sunny side up, bacon rashers, a T bone steak, and much more - augmented with wooden or plastic models of many of the appliances listed above. All of it fake. This is very bad news for our children, a symptom of systemic disease in education.

The unconscious are sleepwalking with the credit card

There is no logical way to explain either situation-of-excess above. I believe both scenarios are the twisted outcome of the impoverished-curriculum-education-methodology we have imposed on growing minds, minds that have been drafted into the rut of material props to fill in where the imagination fails. The purchasers in both examples are 'on automatic pilot', following ubiquitous subconscious programming (advertising) from the commercial world, endeavouring to deliver a 'feel good hit' to the pleasure centres of their brains by making a purchase. At the same time, they are unconsciously responding to the brain's drive for novelty: 'Oh look at those road mats, we haven't got one of those, that would be great in the block corner'. When people fail to apply critical thinking before they wander out with the cheque-book-credit-card they seem to feel the need to justify their purchases with self-convincing logic: 'These plastic udon noodles acknowledge our multicultural society.' 'They will be able to count out the carrots.' 'It will encourage learning the road rules and new vocabulary.' Sounds good but it is bollocks. It has nothing to do with true play and therefore true learning. Let's look at some play basics.

Biological body play basics

Play is genetically encoded in warm blooded animals, and that includes us. We are biologically driven to play - or in the words of this conference, we have the **urge** to play. Stuart Brown¹, from his long study of play in animals and humans, cites the 'warm blooded play basics' as -

- spontaneous

- purposeless

- repetitive

- pleasurable, joyful

- puts the player at risk

- and involves anti-gravity moves such as leaping, spinning mid-leap, jumping and diving.

So at the very basic animal-human level we have physical play urges encoded into us, and given the 'space', these genetic codings will play themselves out. Read through that list of play design-features again and ponder on how you would plan for spontaneous leaps into the air, or how you plan for seemingly purposeless activity? Ponder on our interference in children's play with what we call extension, or interests, or scaffolding and themes. Notice that our 'trained social behaviours' of scaffolding and extension are a not good match with anything on the list of biological play basics.

Biological social play basics - chasing and tag

Warm blooded animals, and that includes us, also have encoded into them social play urges. The most basic of these is playing chasing. This always involves taking turns at being the chaser, and at being the chased, the players are building their **body** of knowledge around the reciprocity of experiencing and sharing power. Tag is a strategy game played among humans and other animals where the players are building a body of knowledge around giving and receiving the authority. As

for the physical-body basics of play, these games are spontaneous, repetitive, joyful, serve 'no purpose' other than the game.

'Purposeless' serves a purpose

Paradoxically, the purposeless play of animal youngsters, and that includes us, does have long term payoffs that could be labelled 'a purpose'. For instance, research has shown that unless children can play joyfully and spontaneously in **unison** with other children, they will **not** be able to work together in unison with others when they reach adult-hood. Similarly, if children do not play at all, they are statistically likely to grow up to be violent and anti-social to the criminal extreme². It seems that Nature has genetically encoded into the organism play urges which serve as the apprenticeship which prepares the organism, in all dimensions of its being, for a future as a healthy competent physical, social and spiritual being.

The best and most beautiful things in the world
cannot be seen or even touched - they must be felt with the heart.

Helen Keller

Helen Keller may have been blind and deaf, but she had 20/20 vision on matters of spirit. She acknowledged that you cannot see spirit, and yet it is the best and most beautiful aspect of our humanness. Because the spirit is invisible 'educational literalists and fundamentalists' are completely in the dark, hence their selling of - and training in - fake education, stuff you can see and 'education' you can tick the multiple question boxes for. Exit the spirit. Where spirit is present, however, everyone senses and delights in its presence, child, adult and animal alike. So where are you most likely to find spirit amongst children? In their play, and especially in their imaginative play.

The highest form of play

Joseph Chilton Pearce³ has been studying play for decades and he rates imaginative play as the highest form of play. It is this play that builds on those already mentioned, and this form of play which distinguishes us from the other warm blooded animals. Imaginative play prepares all of our neural structures for the high human art of creativity. Educator Ken Robinson joins Pearce in celebrating creativity, and he acknowledges creativity as the most valuable and most needed of all human attributes on the planet for these times. Robinson argues convincingly that "we don't grow into creativity, we are educated out of it".⁴

Now you see it now you don't

Imaginative play begins early, around the eight to ten month. The child will pretend to drink from an empty cup or pretend to eat from an empty spoon. Consider the elegance of development: the child has scarcely learnt the physical action in the body, and not too many months later, from that 'body of knowledge' the child can pretend to do the activity. This type of imaginative symbolic play continues until some time in their third year when another band of consciousness called theta (3 - 8 Hz) becomes available to cognitive processing of the child. This allows the symbolic metaphoric abstract play that lays the foundations for abstract thought and for a rich spiritual life throughout the child's Life journey.

Complex multidimensional beings

Of Western educators, Rudolf Steiner was the person who best understood the interplay between the multiple dimensions of the child's being. Here in Aotearoa-New Zealand Dr Rangimarie Rose

Turuki Pere outlines the multidimensional interplay which is the child in her book “Te Wheke: A Celebration of Infinite Wisdom”⁵. Sharing her ancestral wisdom, Rose warns us that we “must never underestimate the power of our Hinengaro”, the power of the mind. Pearce would agree with her whole heartedly. He has written at length on the power of what he calls “unconflicted behaviour”. Research has shown that after the age of seven, children can access the causal brain which has the ability to over-ride the laws of physics - the mind is that powerful³. An example of this would be the people who walk unscathed across fire pits, where the temperatures melt aluminium, but do not blister the feet of the person able to ‘reside’ the frequency of the causal mind. Leave that frequency, enter the ‘frequency of doubt’ just for a moment, and the person will instantly suffer severe burns. As Rose reminds us, the mind is all powerful, so it should come as no surprise that the human child is genetically encoded to ‘play in the mind’ to get it ready for higher things like creativity - spoon bending and walking on water are in the advanced modules.

It’s all in the mind. It’s only your imagination

These two often-heard comments from our culture alert us to the possibility that we might not only under-estimate the mind and imagination, we might write them off altogether. Certainly there is little in our training and curriculum to set us up to support this highest form of play. But we have all done it ourselves as children, so in a way we are experts - we just have to tune into what we know about imaginative symbolic metaphoric abstract play. The clues are in that mouthful of a name:

images and symbols

metaphors = things that stand for something else

abstract = aside from concrete existence.

The child forms an image in her mind and places it into the sensory world creating another reality. This reality is more real than virtual reality because she inhabits it with her mind, body and spirit. She actually moves and travels in that world, she modulates it with her mind. It could be termed an ‘imaginal world’. Sometimes this is her own reality which she inhabits alone, and sometimes it is a shared reality which she ‘builds’ and inhabits with friends. She takes her image of a castle and superimposes it onto a carton. She invites her princess friends to step across the swimming-towel moat into her castle. There, together, they make potions to heal the injured bird - which looks for all the world to the unimaginative like a stone. The stone stands for the injured bird, it is a metaphor, it is magic. Think about it - this is the play-apprenticeship which will enable a community to vision in the abstract, to dream up an unseen reality which is not yet upon us. This is exactly why Ken Robinson names creativity as the most important of human gifts for these times. This sacred ability is unseen, it is in (and of) the spirit. It is also the province of those who plan and design, write and paint, plot and vision, calculate and compose, explore and discover. It is the gift of architects and ecologists, of peaceful parents, film makers, vege gardeners, poets, lovers and - of every child who is given the space to play out the urges which have been coded into his or her DNA over thousands and thousands of generations.

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.

Albert Einstein

Unpicking this alchemy

What are they playing out in these worlds? They are playing out two aspects which go to make up the whole: urges and content. The urges are universal but the content isn’t, it is ‘local’.

It depends on what has imprinted in their lives to this point: a child who had never heard of princesses, castles and moats would not turn a towel and a carton into a royal residence - there would be no **impression** to **express**. After viewing the Royal Wedding in April, children all around the world were playing out/expressing the 'wedding imprint' in their imaginative play. (And not only children - how many women lined up to get a surgically enhanced fake bum to match Pippa Middleton's derriere? These impressions can be powerful. "I want it, I will have it.")

Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine and at last you create what you will.

George Bernard Shaw

Content is alive and living

Content comes from (at least) two sources: the content from the child's life experience and their world, and the content that educators introduce into their world. The content that comes from their world can be the most pressing - living (playing out) the arrival of a new baby in the house, living (playing out) duck shooting, living (playing out) the violence and shaming they experience by bullying others, living (playing out) the music they make as a family, or living (playing out) the wedding they watched on the television together. What about the content we introduce to bring an added richness to the children's lives? I would argue that mostly, we default on this score because we have no idea: no idea about the content and no idea about developmental appropriateness of the content.

Rich content

Steiner understood better than most just what kind of fare was suitable content for a child, and at which stage of the child's development it was most beneficial. Like Carl Jung, he understood the archetypes which are coded into the human consciousness, and knew that they too needed to grow and develop through imprints and expression. He catalogued stories to tell children at certain stages of their psychological-spiritual development so that they would play out the archetypal energies most suited to their healthy development. Steiner teachers tell stories to children, they do not read them. They tell each story a minimum of seven times, the repetition leaves an imprint with energy enough for the child to act the story out. Steiner understood that it is only when the imprint and energies are **lived** (acted out) that the child 'knows the story', and the story has become part of the '**body of knowledge**' of the child. 'Method actors' are adults endeavouring to recapture their childhood capabilities.

Are you smart enough to gift rich content?

Lots of the stories in 'library corners' are not rich in content at all, they are as 'impoverished' as the boards which have zips, hooks and eyes, domes and velcro on them. They do not deal with the adventures of Heros and Sheros who embody the universal human archetypes, and neither do they deal with what Joseph Campbell called "The Hero's Journey"⁶, which is itself the universal archetype of how to live a fulfilling human life. The didactic stories which populate most early childhood libraries are calorieless fare, designed to 'pour instruction into the empty pail', attempting to teach children manners and morals and colours... "Here is a red strawberry. The red cow is munching the green grass..." How insulting is that to a sharp intellect? Any child who is asked to bring their vermilion socks and their cerise scarf more than seven times will 'learn their colours' in the same way that they learnt what a toothbrush is, or the toilet seat. Children are not thick, but the same cannot be said of our educational aids and educational methodology. Both are proof of a learned cultural blindness that we must overcome - and quickly. Childhood is so

short that we don't have decades in which to make our transition to teachers who know how to support the play that is encoded into the child's deepest being, the play that is the gateway to the creativity which serves both the individual and the society he or she lives in.

Where would you start - gently or slash and burn?

If you are serious about this, then you are in for a serious undertaking that will bring up all sorts of personal ego stuff for you and the whole team. Get your team on board with you first or you could end up being dumped into the landfill yourself. Getting your team on board could take some time because what you will be doing as a team is educating yourselves about child development, children's creativity, encoded potential and the role of play in unfolding that potential. Personally, myself, I would start by getting a season's ticket to the land-fill and cleaning out everything that actively prevents children from activating their inner programming. I would choose the landfill over TradeMe and garage sales, because the latter simply shift the damage to other unsuspecting children. Having gotten rid of the fixed climbing structures, the plastic play houses, the fake food, the plastic 'science equipment', the plastic 'literacy and numeracy aids'... and all the other commercial novelty gadgets, I would start again. This time **I would keep in mind the child and what they do with their many dimensions when they enter into the living that we call play.**

It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them.

Leo F Buscaglia

Keep in mind...

The imagination is the sacred space and sacred process by which children call up known images, synthesise known images to create new images, and generate original images. These are the skills of creativity, this is the child laying the foundations for high level creative abstract thought in his or her later life. This complex process also lays the foundations of empathy, and of a rich spiritual life in the heart.

The child makes the image and **puts it into the sensory world thereby creating an imaginal world in which to live and express his or her life's energies.** No longer are children *pretending*, they are **living in this imaginal world** and the living will alter things. In a very similar way, psychodrama alters things in an adult's life. We can assist this play by the intelligent choice of physical things to include in their physical sensory world, things that make this process flow easily. Keep in mind:

The more structured the equipment the more it kills learning, and the ability to learn.

The more structured the equipment the more it kills play, creativity and the child's inner life.

The more open ended the equipment, the more it supports creativity, and the ability to learn.

The more open ended the equipment, the more it supports the child in body, mind and spirit.

'Open ended' is a bit of a weird name really - it just means there are (almost) infinite possibilities with an artifact/object in the physical world that is 'open ended'. For example, a plain carton beats a commercial play house (or fire station, or castle etc) every single time. The carton can 'be' anything the players designate. It has a limited life span, resulting in a space that is refreshed regularly with each new carton incarnation. As a bonus, the carton does not hail from the petro-chemical industry as do plastics - the carton is made of a renewable resource and can be recycled.

Similarly, a basket of ropes, rolled fabrics of many kinds, pegs and string will beat a commercial playhouse every time. The child gets to play out their construction urge, their enclosure urge, their deconstruction urge - and there is the richness of the content to add to that already rich mix. The resultant structure might be Merlin's cave, Maui's whare, the teepee of Pocahontas, Pippi Longstocking's house (dependent upon having heard these rich stories of Heros and Sheros), or Buckingham Palace.

Plain blocks and stones, pine cones and sticks will serve as giraffes in the zoo, wands for magic, swords to repel invaders, cars on the road, tow trucks on a mission, fences for the cows in a paddock, loaves of bread... the list is endless because the physical props are not closed, they are not one thing, doing one thing, without the possibility of doing another. For example, a doll is a doll, end of story. Although I am not suggesting you dump the dolls - I am suggesting that a stone can be a doll too, and a dog, and a truck, and loaf of bread... whereas a doll will never 'be' a dog, or a truck, or a loaf of bread.

Who owns your imagination?

Bit of a silly question when it is put so baldly, but an essential question if we are going to banish our cultural blindness. You own your imagination and I own mine. Whether I choose to decorate my house, visualise my ideal holiday or plan an exhibition, I do it in my own unique way using my imagination. No one can get into my imagination and do it for me, although I can choose to invite another to co-create any of the above with me. It is the same for the child. The child's imagination is theirs and we do not get in there and tell them how to use it. That has important ramifications when it comes to some of the 'paper work' that 'education' personnel say is essential to good practice.

What's the plan Stan?

Just as we cannot plan for spontaneous leaps in the air, we cannot plan for imaginative play either. We could not know which energies up bubbling up for expression from the children's inner worlds, nor how those energies will combine with the energies of other children to create unique imaginal worlds. By the same token, neither can we plan to 'extend' these worlds with themes or interests. Long and short term planning and child-chosen creative play, exploration and discovery are mutually exclusive. Both long and short term planning are further manifestations of us having to see something to prove that there is value in an activity, and I posit that is because we are unable to recognise and value the unseen. One can prepare fantastic forward-planning that earns ticks in every administrative box, but it could not bear any relevance to the unfolding inner life of the child and their learning. The considerable time spent planning so as to comply with educationally irrelevant demands would be better spent preparing the **seen** environment and the **unseen** environment as an exemplary container from which children can unfold their potential.

Recovering from cultural blindness

The cure for damaging educational practice could be almost instant. It depends on how quickly we can 'fit new improved lenses into our glasses' with which to re-view education. Different 'lenses' - such as the ones presented in this paper - can speed up our recovery to 20/20 vision when it comes to children's play and imagination. With our sharper insights and more nurturing support of children's play comes greater richness in children's lives. Our insights and actions also bring a greater heart-felt satisfaction to our own lives. They afford us the privilege of being fully present as a Sacred Witness to children engaged in highly creative play⁷. We have the joy and satisfaction of knowing that it is our insightful support which enables the children to live (act out)

who they really are.

The Witness

Did you notice that you were not nominated to be The Player of the Day, but honoured as the Sacred Witness? From my own experience of rich creative play in my rural childhood - the play that I trace my creativity back to - I know there is no role in creative imaginative symbolic play for adults. Beach cricket and water-fights - yes, but imaginative symbolic metaphoric abstract play - no. Kimberley Crisp and her team at The Nest have come to know the same by observing the children as they unfold within the Culture of Respect. Within this cultural paradigm, the Sacred Relationship of child and teacher is not made in the play, it is made and nurtured within the care-moments and within ritual.

Back up

In September 2010, I went to the Pikler Institute in Budapest with a lot of questions, questions we thought we knew the answers to from our observations of children unfolding, but we wanted a second opinion. When I asked Dr Anna Tardos, "What is the role of the adult in children's play?" she answered, "There isn't one." We had come to the same place. You and I are honoured to have been nominated to the Supporting Role of Witness, a role that played well, will let our creative children shine in theirs.

Notes for the conference *The Sacred Urge to Play* • Pennie Brownlee

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A beech tree makes a softly illumined living-hut for three seasons of the year.