

A child's journey into the future



or Sailing the seven Cs

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"The right to play is a child's first claim on the community, because play is nature's training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing deep and lasting damage to the bodies and minds of its citizens"

These wise and profound words were spoken by David Lloyd George, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, in an address to the UK National Playing Fields Association in 1925. Seventy-six years ago, before the play movement or out-of-school-hours services had been thought of, this far-sighted statesman had a clear view of the true importance of the child's right to play. But how things have changed! – at least in the UK. Here is a more modern quote, also from a senior British politician ...

"A child not in lessons is a child not learning."

This was said by David Blunkett, the UK Secretary of State for Education, in his address to the UK Labour Party conference in September 1999. I found it so

astonishing that I double-checked on the BBC website to make sure that, yes, these were his exact words. And this is a frightening prospect for those of us working with children out of school in the UK (as I was at the time). As a statement about child development and education it is obviously and blatantly false, and every out-of-school-hours worker knows it to be false from their own daily experience. This leaves only two possibilities: either Mr Blunkett imagines it to be true, or else he knows it is false. And I don't know which of these two possibilities scares me the most.

If he imagines the above statement to be true, isn't it shocking to realise that the man responsible for the education of all the children of the UK is so abysmally misinformed about the basic facts of child development? And on the other hand, if he knows it's not true, that is, if he is deliberately lying, isn't it appalling that such a senior politician is prepared to knowingly mislead (i.e. lie to) the entire British public, simply in order to bolster his party's outdated and misguided education policy?

Around this time there was a lot of concern in the British press over the government's attempts to

formalise early education. Here's just one example from the UK's Guardian newspaper in July 1999:

“Play is out, early learning is in. Minister backs structured nursery schooling and warns days of children colouring and cutting are over”.

I can't imagine any Australian politician has said anything quite so stupid on the subject, but I wonder if you have come across similar negative attitudes from the authorities here? If those in power place so little value on children's learning out of school, it is all the more important that we ourselves recognise the true value of what we do, and act as advocates for play at every level.

But why is play so important to children's development?

Consider the young of three species of mammals, the bear-cub, the piglet and the human child (visualise, if you like, Winnie-the-Pooh, Piglet and Christopher Robin, and you'll get the picture). As newborn infants, these are all roughly the same size, and as full-grown adults they are also roughly the same size. But there is one important difference. The pig and the bear grow from birth to adulthood in two to three years. The human being takes almost twenty years to reach adulthood. Their physical bodies are of similar size and internal design; there is no physiological reason why the human should take so much longer to reach maturity. So why do humans take so much longer to grow up?

The reason is that the human is a learning animal. Unlike other species, we need this time to learn all the things we need to learn in order to function as adult human beings in the complex societies we have developed. The other species can get by mainly on instinct, and it only takes them a couple of years to learn all they need to know to be a successful adult bear or pig. Our species, on the other hand, has evolved this long period of immaturity we call childhood, specifically to enable the young to learn stuff. In other words, children have evolved as natural learners. That is their sole function in life.

And the important thing is, that this evolution of children as natural learners took place over many thousands of years, during which there were *no* schools, *no* teachers, *no* education authorities, *no* ELLA tests, in fact not even a word for “education” (which was invented much later by the Greeks). Children learn all the time, regardless of whether we teach them or not. And what we nowadays call “play” is one of the fundamental mechanisms that our species has evolved to enable that learning to take place. We don't have to make children learn. Indeed, I sometimes feel our clumsy adult interventions largely serve to get in the way or stop them learning. Our role as adults is not to *make* children learn, but simply to do the best we can to provide a fertile environment for that learning, and maybe to guide and facilitate it along its many pathways.

Here's another way of looking at the same issue. Think for a moment about yourself, and the adult person you are today. Then think about the processes that happened throughout your life that helped you become this person. In particular, ask yourself what are the most important things you have learnt throughout your life that have helped you become the person you are today?

Now imagine an old-fashioned weighing scales. On one side put the things your teachers taught you, and on the other side, all the other important things you learnt. This should give you a different perspective on the true importance of out-of-school learning.

If learning through play is important now, I believe it will become even more important as the new century progresses. In fact, I believe that “schooling” as a means of education is becoming increasingly pointless, and will soon be completely irrelevant to the children of the new century.

This may seem a controversial claim, so how can I justify it?

As I see it, “schooling” is a system of education based on the principle that we, the adults, already know what the next generation needs to know, and are therefore able to teach it to them as they grow up. This system worked well from the beginnings of human civilisation up to the late twentieth century, because it was indeed possible to predict that each generation would lead a life broadly similar to the last, and would therefore need broadly similar knowledge and skills to successfully continue the established social order. For example, my great-great-grandparents, living on a small farm in southern Ireland, could teach their children – my great-grandparents – all they would need to know about farming life and the skills to carry on their farming tradition. They in turn could teach their children – my grandparents – everything they needed to know, and so it had been since time immemorial.

But not any longer. We now live in such a fast-changing world that we, the adults of today, can barely imagine what kind of lives the next generation will lead when they grow up. All we can be sure of is that they will be using new skills and new technologies that we are not in a position to teach them. To take just one trivial example, my teachers taught me to write with a pen, not knowing that, when I grew up, I would write, not with a pen, but with a computer keyboard. I had to learn myself, through play, how to use a computer. Now my children are taught to use a keyboard, but their teachers have no idea what new means of communication they may be using in twenty years' time, and so are powerless to teach them. If today's teachers imagine they are teaching children the knowledge and skills they will actually use in the new century, I am afraid they are only deluding themselves.

And how does this relate to play and out-of-school-hours? The International Association for the Child's Right to Play summed it up well in a recent paper:

“The old concept of education thus becomes futile in the fast-changing world of the third millennium. We need to replace it with a new system of learning, so that our children will know how to live their lives, not only in situations we have taught them about, but in situations we have never even imagined.

“The mental tools needed to learn and become capable in this way (flexibility, creativity, co-operation, imagination, problem-solving etc.) are those that children acquire through play”.

Here’s another way of looking at it, comparing three different philosophies of education:

19th Century: Traditional education

“Learn what we already know”.

20th Century: Progressive education

“Learn the methods we use to solve familiar problems”.

21st Century: The new age

“Learn to face new challenges we have never even dreamt of, and so cannot teach you about”.

Right now it may seem like we out-of-school workers are struggling to hold on to the concept of play in a hostile climate of regulation, restriction and over-programming of children. Eventually, however, the powers that be will have to recognise that we are the ones who have the key to the future of children’s learning in the new century.

And so, I’ve been wondering about this new approach to education, based on play, that may be able to save our society from the eventual collapse of the old system. What might it be like?

Reflecting on this, I came up with my own ideas for a new curriculum for the 21st Century. There would be seven core subjects in my new curriculum, and since they all begin with the letter C, the idea of “Sailing the Seven Cs” seemed a fitting way to describe it. Here they are:

1. Co-operating

We now live in an economic system based on competing against each other, and, in order to sustain that economic system, those who control it have managed to convince most of us that (a) competition is natural for human beings, (b) competition is inevitable so we might as well prepare our children for it, and (c) competition leads to a happier, healthier society. These beliefs are all based, not on evidence, but on the political propaganda of the capitalist ruling elite. The evidence – and there is plenty of it – all points in exactly the opposite direction. We are naturally co-operative, not competitive. It is co-operation between people, not competition, that has enabled the human species to develop and thrive over thousands of years. And, as a system for organising society, competition is inherently wasteful, destructive and demeaning of the

human spirit. That’s why, in my ideal curriculum, co-operation is the first core subject.

2. Caring

Caring doesn’t seem to play any part in the school curriculum as we know it today. But I can think of nothing that would contribute more to building the sort of society I would like to live in than if everyone was committed to the general principle of caring for one another. So “caring” is the second C in my new curriculum.

3. Communicating

Much of today’s education is concerned with the mechanics of communication; mainly reading and writing. But I think children would be better served by learning about the nature and process of communication itself. Within this I am sure they would want to learn about a range of specific methods in current use, and I’m sure reading and writing would not disappear. But the important thing would be to use these skills to actually communicate with one another in the real world.

4. Challenging injustice

There’s a lot of talk these days about the importance of “citizenship”, and how children should be taught about it. But it seems to me that what politicians mean by “citizenship” is the importance of knowing your place, knowing the rules, and following them meekly. The new century needs not just followers but leaders; that is, people who will not only do the right thing, but who, when they see the wrong thing done, will stand up for justice and fairness, even at personal cost.

Children seem to acquire the basics of this very easily. One of the first social concepts children pick up is “That’s not fair!” From this it is only a short journey to becoming active agents of justice and fairness, first in their own groups, then in the wider society. With support, encouragement and good role models you will soon see children standing up against racism, sexism and all kinds of discrimination and abuse of power. And this is how we lay the foundation for a fair and just society.

5. Conflict resolution

Almost all the problems we have to deal with in society that aren’t about abuse of power stem from a lack of conflict resolution skills. Again this is something I don’t see playing any significant part in today’s outdated curriculum, but which would contribute immeasurably to building the sort of society I would like to live in. And it goes without saying, I hope, that non-violence would be a core value underpinning our approach to conflict resolution.

6. Creating

One of the saddest things that has happened in the UK education system in recent years is the way creativity and self-expression have been pushed to the sidelines in the government’s reactionary education programme. In the new century I want to see creativity and self-

expression – in all their many forms – right back at the centre of children's lives.

7. Celebrating

And finally, I want to live in a world where there is always an excuse for a celebration. I originally wrote this as "Celebrating diversity", because I love the cultural diversity of the world I live in. I would hate to have to live in a community where everyone was the same – the same colour, the same nationality, the same cultural background etc. I find it sad that in England, where I lived until recently, cultural diversity is generally seen as some kind of social problem, rather than one of the great joys of modern life. This is why I hope our children can grow up to recognise that diversity is not some kind of problem to be solved, but a treasure to be enjoyed and celebrated.

Although celebrating diversity remains fundamental for me, I finally concluded that I'd like to see lots of celebrations of all kinds in the world of the new century. So the seventh of my seven Cs is just "celebrating" in general – and why not?

The seven Cs would not be taught, but would be learnt and absorbed by children working together with skilled adult facilitation. The educators would be much more like today's out-of-school-hours workers than what we now call teachers. Other, more traditional, skills and knowledge would not be excluded, but could be added in around the seven Cs, as and when they became relevant to the children's needs.

And above all, we should remember that "More is Caught Than Taught". "More is Caught Than Taught" (MCTT) is the name of a visionary childcare training programme developed by FOCAL, the Federation of Childcare Centers of Alabama, an African-American development agency working with low-income and minority communities in Alabama, USA. My visit to FOCAL in 1995 was a major source of inspiration for my subsequent career, and the principle of MCTT lies at the very heart of their work. What it means is that children learn the really important lessons of life, not from what we teach them, but from the environment we create for them, and above all from how we, as adults, choose to *be* with them. MCTT relates fundamentally to "sailing the seven Cs". The seven Cs are not things you can teach children. But they *are* things children can learn, if we choose to demonstrate them through how we work, how we relate, and how we treat one another day by day.

I hope I've made a reasonable case for the importance of children's play, not just for the growth and development of every human being, but also for the very survival of our society in an unpredictable, fast-changing world. On top of all this, however, and regardless of whether you agree with my analysis or not, the right to play is a basic human right guaranteed

to every child under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international treaty ratified by the Australian Government in 1992, in a solemn public commitment in front of the entire world community. In essence, Article 31 states:

"The child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities and to participate freely in cultural and artistic life. The state undertakes to provide appropriate and equal opportunities for the realisation of these rights".

This is a commitment which your government, in common with most others, has done little to honour in recent years, but which nevertheless remains in place, as a right to be asserted and demanded by all our children, and by those who work with them out of school.

When things seem really tough, when you feel bogged down by the day-to-day worries of keeping your service going, and it's hard to keep sight of the bigger picture, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child can be a source of new energy and inspiration. Take a deep breath and remind yourself that these basic rights you're struggling to achieve for the children in your community are rights that belong to *all* children the world over, and by working to realise these rights for your children, you become part of a global movement for the right to play, from Nepal to Nicaragua, and from Kurdistan to Kamchatka.

So, to finish with, here are three of my favourite quotes about children's play that didn't fit in anywhere else. The first is from the Hebrew prophet Zechariah, writing in about 500 BC:

"And the streets of the city shall be filled with boys and girls playing in the streets thereof".

Zechariah Ch 5 v 8.

It is ironic that today we have such a long way to go in order to get back to where Zechariah was at 2,500 years ago.

And this is from the great Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen:

"In all life there is risk, and when one is more alive, there is more risk".

(You could try quoting this to your local safety inspector – and let me know how they react).

And finally, this one was on the back of a publicity leaflet from the BBC that came into our office a couple of years ago. We liked it so much we put it up on the notice board, and it always reminds me of why I'm doing this work:

"Children who have spent a great deal of their time playing, will have inside them inner strengths which no-one will ever be able to take away from them, however hard their adult lives turn out to be".