

REVIEW ARTICLE¹

Sue Palmer (ed.), *Play Is the Way: Child Development, Early Years and the Future of Scottish Education*, 2nd edn, CCWB Press, Paisley, 2021, 224 pp, ISBN-13: 978-1916009424, price (p/b) £10.00.

Reviewed by **Richard Brinton**

Living into the (Different) World of Early Childhood

During the Covid-related lockdowns of recent years, when walking by empty playgrounds, gates locked, signs barring entry, I often wondered who was speaking up for children's needs. Put aside the disastrous social, psychological, economic, political and further consequences of the lockdowns; who was highlighting the effects on our children of closed schools, restrictions on outdoor play, their isolation from friends and relatives, with guilt put on them of potentially 'killing granny'?

When some schools *were* allowed to open, it was often with severe restrictions on socialising, pupils sometimes in cubicles, with masks not allowing them or their teachers to read facial expressions, and outside play severely restricted. These days children are often treated as little adults, but this was even worse: they were objects, dots on a graph, no thought given to their deeper needs and the potential lifelong psychological effects of government policies. Stiff upper lips, 'They'll

get over it', just as the dots on the graph seemed to do....

Fortunately, there are some who are fighting for children's rights, working persistently for the understanding of child development and children's needs – and the long-lasting effects it can have if we don't pay attention to this. So it was with very good timing that Sue Palmer's book as editor, *Play Is the Way*, first appeared in 2020, with a new edition in 2021. Palmer is known for her other books in past years, from *Toxic Childhood* (1st edn, 2006),² in which she not only considered what promotes healthy development but also the many, often commercial, influences which work against it, to *Upstart* (2016).³ The latter marked the start of a campaign by *Upstart Scotland* in which, with the support they had gathered, they had high hopes that new guidelines could be readily incorporated into a kindergarten stage, emphasising play as a foundation for learning, rather than the prevailing 'schoolification' of early years.

For mostly political reasons, it was delayed. As so often happens, also in our individual

lives, a delay can bring a ripening process. One senses this in *Play Is the Way*, which brings together many experts and writers in early years, laying an even firmer foundation for the understanding of early childhood – and, thus, kindling for new campaigns. Often when pushing for change, one has the feeling that one is trying to find and put in place many pieces of a puzzle. If a few pieces are missing the results may be only partial, at the time disheartening. I was involved in the OpenEYE campaign from 2007 onwards when we opposed many of the schoolification elements of the then newly introduced (in 2008) Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). We would have wished for a free-choice element for all early-years settings (especially as the bill introduced mandatory curricula even for pre-5 year-olds, before compulsory schooling in the UK); yet we did succeed in winning exemptions for Steiner and Montessori settings. This, and the book which came out of it, *Too Much, Too Soon?*,⁴ helped strengthen the case for later campaigns.

It should be a lesson and encouragement for campaigners on any issue: that any change on a larger scale usually happens in smaller steps, sometimes not even recognised at the time, waiting for foundations to be laid and the pieces of the puzzle to come together, leading to greater understanding, acceptance and momentum.

Many of these steps are discussed at length in *Play Is the Way*. For instance, the publication, independently, of Scotland's Play Strategy in 2013; new practical guidance from Education Scotland for early-years settings, *Realising the Ambition: Being Me* (February, 2020); the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scottish law in 2021, just prior to the second edition of *Play Is the Way*.

Experiences gathered from other directions have also been critical. Lisa McCabe, for instance, provides an inspiring account in Chapter 6 of the introduction of a

relationship-centred, play-based education for early years in the Falkirk district, with 'Play is the way' as their slogan (the book under review here is named after that). McCabe observes that 'in recent years the teaching community in Scotland has evolved from a position of play-neutrality to one of play-enthusiasm'. She notes that the success of the programme depends on the people involved, from the programme leaders to parents themselves becoming enthusiastic advocates for play. 'Parent Power' is further taken up as the title for Chapter 8, in which co-authors Patricia Anderson and Diane Delaney describe their experience as founders of the parents' organisation, *Give Them Time*.

McCabe noticed a definite shift in parental attitudes just in the last few years, towards a more play-based early years. Up until then, 'parents were a group that needed to be convinced', she writes. What accounted for the change? It seemed that the Covid lockdown experiences (described earlier) had a potential silver lining: through the necessitated home education, parents gained a greater understanding of their children's actual needs for play; through the 'locked-down' schools when pupils returned to classrooms, they were horrified by how the restrictions were affecting and treating their children (see Chapter 6, pp. 83–5). 'My thoughts so far are that the attitudinal change in those parents arose from their experience, during lockdown, in having a changed role as educator of their child.'

I have noticed many articles along these lines – that not just in Scotland but throughout the United Kingdom, the lockdown experiences of parents with their children were a major contributor to the continuing increase in home education. From what they received from schools, parents were not just horrified at the restrictions imposed on their children but also at the content of the educational curriculum itself, especially for the earlier school years.

Many pieces of the puzzle seem to be coming together, and McCabe is very positive about the future. 'We are on the brink of something monumental in Scotland: a whole system movement.' Indeed, running up to the Scottish National Party conference of October 2022, there was a possibility they would be voting on whether to create a kindergarten stage and move the school starting age to 6 years of age.

The positive steps in Scotland towards a kindergarten stage before the actual start of school at six makes the situation south of the border in England seem rather behind. Back in the days of education minister Beverley Hughes promoting the Early Years Foundation Stage in the mid to late 2000s, I remember her stating that she was proud that the UK was to be foremost in the world in focusing on the early years. But focusing on what? She wasn't able to shake the British tradition of schoolifying the early years, traditions which date back to the Victorian 1800s. Several of the *Play Is the Way* contributors write about this elephant in the room: the time and effort required to shift something that is embedded in a culture.

Vocabulary has been a problem, most particularly with the word 'play' itself. Coming out of the whole culture in Britain, 'there still remains a feeling in Scotland that play is somehow "frivolous"', says Marguerite Hunter Blair in Chapter 2. Though especially pronounced in Britain, this attitude does extend beyond its boundaries. Blair quotes Jean-Jacques Rousseau from 1762:

PLAY is a very misused adult word. To a child it is a way of life. To an adult it often means the unimportant recreational things we do when we are not working. Because this is the way we think of it for ourselves, we often dismiss it in children with the remark: 'Oh, he's just playing.' But the variety and function of play in a child's life is worthy of much more serious attention than this remark implies.

In Chapter 1 Dr Suzanne Zeedyk discusses the common use of the phrase 'learning through play'. 'We still seem anxious about the idea of children playing for the sake of playing.' Hence the somewhat misguided phrase 'learning through play' to bring in a note of seriousness. Though the 'PlayTalkRead' mobile programme in Scotland – bright purple buses which travel around the countryside – focuses primarily on play and creativity for children and their parents, Zeedyk asks if it would have been as successful (as it has been) if the buses were labelled 'PlayPlayPlay'.

In the Falkirk programme described above, Lisa McCabe also speaks of this problem. 'The use of "play" does somewhat split the crowd', she observes. Should they say 'play pedagogy', or drop 'play' altogether? But they stuck with 'play'. 'We're in this for the long game and won't keep having this "to play or not to play" debate. We must grasp it, define it for our purpose and be confident about it.' And this is where the many factors seem to be coming together for a tidal shift of acceptance in Scotland.

I haven't yet spoken of the chapters which 'lay down the evidence' for the benefits-for-life of a focus on play in early childhood (with 'early childhood' defined in the UN Charter as 0 to 8 years of age), and this is clearly given by a number of the contributors to the book. It would take a whole further essay in itself to give sufficient description to this, and the readers of this review are referred to the book itself, which is well worth the purchase and the read. The emphasis is not simply about 'happiness' of the child during those years. Blair sums up the benefits succinctly in Chapter 2 with the acronym SPICE: social, physical, intellectual, creative/cultural and emotional. Keeping the 3 Rs out of this age group reaps benefits in all these areas, including 3 Rs, by age 9 to 11, with better skills, comprehension and motivation.

Dr Pam Jarvis writes about ‘The myth of early acceleration’ in her chapter; Sue Palmer’s chapter is entitled, ‘Literacy matters but building strong foundations for literacy matters more’; and Juliet Robert writes, ‘The five Rs of math: developing a firm mathematical foundation in the early years’. (Further reading on the topic can be found in the books *Too Much, Too Soon* and *Upstart*, cited earlier.)

The book is also not just about play and its benefits in the early years. In the last part of the book entitled ‘The Wider Context’, a recurring theme is on inequalities, a much-debated topic in pedagogical contexts. Inequality in Scotland is especially strong still by social class, which Prof. John Frank and Dr Rosemary Geddes delve into in Chapter 13. In Chapter 15, Shaddai Tembo takes the topic of inequalities further: into the three issues of race/racism, LGBT+ equality and the role of men in early years.

In Chapter 14, ‘3 Ps before 3Rs’, Alan Sinclair tackles the subject of healthy child development from another perspective. For those that believe the 3 Rs to be the bedrock of education with benefits flowing on from that, he quips at the very start that ‘...this belief involves another R: rubbish’. Sinclair explains that the writing is already on the wall by age two, citing the evidence.

If children do not have these life skills [of communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving and personal-social] at two years of age, the foundation is missing, and all their subsequent life is more likely to be impaired. I repeat: *the majority of children do not catch up* (Sinclair’s emphasis) –

...it is bluntly written; but before we go rushing for the expert ‘how-to’ books for new theories on the pre-2s and how to catch up, a subtitle in this chapter pretty much sums up an attitude shift needed: ‘Mother Nature writes the rules’.

Mother nature thus also provides the solutions, I would add. The things thrown at families and children by technology corporations in the name of helping educate infants, toddlers and upwards is also ‘rubbish’. Sue Palmer takes up this theme in her book *Toxic Childhood*, giving evidence for how these commercial gimmicks do far more damage than good to child development. There has been a loss of child-rearing wisdom, she relates there, and we need to win it back again, with new understanding and with heart.⁵

There is, however, this yet further dimension which Sinclair emphasises: the 3 Ps, or Pre-conception, Pregnancy and Parents. ‘At present very few people are prepared for pregnancy or caring for a child’, he writes. Preconception we might not initially think of as pertaining to future child health, but it is the time to address problem areas and issues, from the basics of nutrition and health to abuse from a partner, alcoholism and drug addiction. Once those problems carry into pregnancy, they can cause permanent damage to early cells and foetuses. And a good sense for parenting is crucial for the first years of a child’s life. Other more child-oriented countries give more support for parents in these periods, he notes, giving Holland as an example.

It is hard to find a criticism of *Play Is the Way*. On a minor point, I wished at times for an index, but I’m also aware of the time considerations for making a good one as well as the potential it can bring for reading piecemeal instead of going through whole sections.

One critique I would make has to do with certain vocabulary, by no means unique to the book, but rather a symptom of the times. There is, for instance, the need for ‘standardised assessments’, as described by Frank and Geddes in Chapter 13 (p. 161). This thinking is widespread; such assessments assume a standardised model, here of child

development, which brings with it certain dangers. One is that parents, educators and, most dangerous of all, the politicians using the results don't recognise and face the child as a unique being; they don't use their experience and creative abilities to meet the child where he or she is at, but (if not physically then mentally) carry around a clipboard, ticking boxes of attainment, thinking that is the real thing. This was certainly one of the objections brought by the aforementioned OpenEYE campaign to the EYFS. 'Children do not grow by being measured, yet our common language around school and placement suggests otherwise', as Juliet Robert reflects in Chapter 10.

The other danger with the standardised models and assessments is our fascination with statistics, thinking that a 5.7 is better or worse than a 4.5 – not realising that any model can be knocked far off course by new assumptions or criteria introduced, rendering the 'end-point data' meaningless. Thus, any standardised assessment for children needs to be handled with extreme care and background knowledge – something politicians seldom possess, though they are making laws that affect everyone.

Related to the above is the vocabulary of economics, increasingly brought in for making early years and educational decisions. Again, this is widespread, and the language creeps into early years and into this book. Economists evaluate educational models or experiences, such as James Heckman's '7 to 10 per cent return on investment', quoted by Sinclair, for a preschool programme helping parents engage with their children. The benefits came from 'increased school and career achievement and reduced costs in remedial education', and so on. Or in Chapter 13: as emphasised by Frank and Geddes, there is near-universal scientific agreement that investing in early years 'is the most lucrative investment a country can make.... Monetary returns to a society over the life span of an

individual are expected to more than repay the initial investment.'

Unfortunately, economics is practically the only language that central politicians controlling the purse-strings will listen to. The comments here are thus not meaning to devalue the contributions in *Play Is the Way* which use this vocabulary – it may be required at this point in time. But the very considerable danger in moving forward with this way of thinking is that children continue to be viewed materialistically as objects on a factory assembly-line, where end-point return on financial investments put in become the defining criteria. Nicky Morgan, a former Secretary of State for Education (2014–16) was known for her statements to pupils discouraging studies in the arts and humanities because, basically, they don't pay. But how much poorer our lives would be in quality without their contribution to humanity. The economic vocabulary is a stepping-stone on the way to converting schools into mere businesses, following business models – rather than following child development, where the children's well-being and the quality of present and future years to be lived become paramount.

The problem of creating arbitrary models and standardised assessments is well summed up by Pam Jarvis in Chapter 3, 'The myth of early acceleration'. She cites contemporary teaching guru Doug Lemov's principle that teachers should, '...begin with the end.... The only criterion that determines the success of an activity is... whether you achieved an objective that can be assessed.'

Jarvis asks, 'Does teaching and learning really consist of creating fixed objectives and then attempting to transfer "content" directly from adults to children's minds?' I would add, it is not just 'content' that is being inappropriately transferred to children's minds, but adult linear and narrow-tracked ways of thinking, without an understanding of how children's minds work differently to those of adults.

Children respond and play to a different tune than us adults, and it is incumbent on us, for the sake of our children's future and perhaps even our own well-being as parents, educators and citizens, to better understand and live into this.

It appears that in Scotland, politicians are beginning to listen, that there is hope for change in the early years; and it will be owing to the untiring work and vision of people like Sue Palmer and her many colleagues such as those who have contributed to the excellent book, *Play Is the Way*, that the Scots will (touch wood) soon be able to achieve this. Now let's hope for a ripple effect south of the border!

Notes and References

- 1 This review article was written in late 2022.
- 2 *Toxic Childhood*, Orion, London, 2006.
- 3 *Upstart*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 2016.
- 4 R. House (ed.), *Too Much, Too Soon? Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood*, Hawthorn Press, Stroud, 2011.
- 5 In her book *Detoxing Childhood: What Parents Need to Know to Raise Bright Balanced Children*, Palmer carries forward discussions and advice for parenting. Numerous other books are also available for parents of young children following more holistic, developmental orientations. See, for example, the lists of Floris Books (www.florisbooks.co.uk) and Hawthorn Press (<https://hawthornpress.com>).

About the reviewer

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