

Remembering Slade: Re-visiting the connection between very young children's play and drama

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The death in 2004 of British drama educator and advisor Peter Slade, prompted a re-visiting of his groundbreaking work about children's play and drama. Slade's insightful recognition and acknowledgement of young children's play as the genesis of drama provides a profound lens into the central role the child holds in guiding learning. Given the sometimes precarious position play has, not only in children's lives but also in adults' lives, Slade provides a timely reminder about the importance of re-capturing play, or our sense of playfulness, not only for drama but in all aspects of young children's learning. This article pays homage to the work of Peter Slade and addresses the empowering role children's play has as an essential component of learning and life.

"Because Drama begins so early, our observations start with the baby and the toddler, and ... many of the earliest experiments of the baby are embryonic forms of Drama"

(Slade, 1954, p. 20).

Introduction

When reading the book *Child Drama* written by Peter Slade in 1954 I realised these were the words and ideas of a man who was ahead of his time. Peter Slade, a British drama educator and adviser during the 1940s-1970s, positioned play as central to the process of drama, which concomitantly places the child as a vital source for the genesis of drama. Slade developed his ideas about drama by watching children's creative play. His careful observation of human behaviour, beginning with infants and toddlers, led to a germane understanding of how play contributes to the holistic development of the child. Slade saw play as a source of happiness and as meaningful action in children's lives.

Acknowledgement that the child is central to any learning experience should come as no surprise. History has shown, however, throughout the twentieth century, that those involved in education have struggled to incorporate an equitable and genuine child-centred pedagogy (Cannella, 1997; MacNaughton, 2005). Slade's insightful positioning of the child and play in drama provides a compelling platform for examining child-centred education together with the often misread or dismissed concept of play (Elkind, 2007; Paley, 2005).

The theory and practice of British drama educator and adviser Peter Slade is the focus of this article. Moreover, the significant contribution Slade has made to drama education because of his belief in placing the child and play as central to drama is highlighted and addressed. Two immediate questions come to the foreground: What does it mean to place the child as central to drama? Why is it important to consider young children's play as a significant component of drama?

Situating a child-centred approach to teaching and learning

Historically, from an Eurocentric and westernized standpoint, the teaching and learning process was devised as a way to instil selected fundamental knowledge into the minds of our youngest citizens through a transfer of knowledge from one who knows most (the adult) to one who knows least (the child). Such a process has often been referred to as "the banking concept", a term that was deftly coined by Freire (1972, p. 45). Through this depository or didactic system of transferring knowledge there was little recognition of what the receiver possessed as knowledge. As such, there was little or no exchange of knowledge or dialogue between the parties involved. Common teaching practice was an illustration, as well as a replication, of society where those who had power (the adults) continued to reign over those who did not have power (children, or any other group of people categorized by society as lesser or worthless) (Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; MacNaughton, 2005).

Amidst this state of affairs, however, were people who saw the world somewhat differently and who proffered alternative perspectives about the interminable human pursuit of meaning making. In education, names such as Bruner, Counts, Dewey, Montessori and Vygotsky (as discussed by Elkind, 2007; Kincheloe & Horn, 2007; Pinar, 2004; Slattery, 2006) come to mind as people who attempted to change the face of education and the process of learning and teaching. Each contributed alternative perceptions of educational practice in an effort to redress what was commonly accepted as a directive, technicist, or behaviourist approach to learning, which was firmly established during the nineteenth century and continued somewhat unchallenged into the first part of the twentieth century (Vallance, 1974/2006). Strongly evident

in the legacies of the aforesaid theorists was a broader view of what constituted education and the significant role the child held in how learning not only became a shared experience, but also became more meaningful when driven by the child.

The connection between infant-toddler play and drama

Among these notable names, (or at least following closely on the heels of these and other educational ground-breakers), was Peter Slade. In a sense, Slade was a visionary who saw and recognized children and what children did (play) as the lynchpin to what good education meant. In the following quote, Slade (1954, p. 19) outlines what he sees as essential to learning and life.

For those who walk with their eyes open it can be found in any place on earth where there are Children, parched and battered though it may be. It is a creation, a skill. It blossoms where there are [is] patience, understanding, happiness, freedom, observation and humility. It is born of Play and is nurtured, guided and provided for by the wise parent and the able teacher.

Slade refers here to what he terms a human activity, namely Child Drama where play is seen as a pivotal and precious commodity.

Beginning with the very young child, he talks with alacrity about the early stages of drama and creativity. Entering the infant and toddler's realm, he describes actions such as a baby copying movements, the early creative babbling speech interspersed by other experimental sounds, and the early discovery of active limbs that learn to move in a multitude of directions. Sometimes the use of active limbs has very effective results such as "the imperious sweep which clears the table of a meal in one fine moment of time" (Slade, 1954, p. 20).

Such actions of the young child might irritate the adult. However Slade makes the important point of difference about the disconnection between the child's intention and the adult's understanding. It is clear he holds a perceptive view of the very young child. As Slade (1954) emphasizes:

The particular matter for us to note is that there *are* two points of view, and

the Child has one, to which, in all justice, it has an equal right. This is very important, for if we are to understand Children we must realize that there is a logic and a reason for everything, which prompt certain actions. (p. 21)

A view such as this clearly indicates Slade both honoured and respected the child with a willingness, borne from humility, to learn from the child. In my mind, this places the child as central to the learning experience and as a catalyst for what is to unfold.

A young child's investigating of the world in which he or she lives, is the basics of play, and where play occurs drama begins. Play produces excitement and adventure as often witnessed in the age-old game 'peek-a-boo' or 'peep-bo'. Joy exists in the curiosity of seeing another person and then "expectant hope, accompanied by quiet" (Slade, 1954, p. 24) when the other person is hidden, only to be revealed again through the magical process of hiding and appearing. Such play begins to evolve into more sophisticated approaches from hiding using hands and eyes, to disappearing behind other objects or doorways where "as walking improves, we find a little running to the threshold, followed by expectant pause, and then a dashing away" (ibid.). This is the beginning of dramatic entrances and exits. The element of tension can be seen in the young child's offer and then quick withdrawal of an object; an amusing practice which can be repeated several times to the sheer delight of the toddler. These playful and unique moments are never captured again because a certain type of naivety accompanied by unself-consciousness makes these times and actions both precious and unaffected.

The power of imagination in young children's play

Play, however, is often overlooked or taken-for-granted because it is deemed relevant only to the child's world and not pertinent to the apparently more serious acquisition of knowledge. Adults appear detached from this world of the child. Or, could it be that adults ostracize themselves from the



Play is nurtured, guided and provided for by the wise parent and the able teacher.

world of play? Stinson comments on this phenomenon when she asks the question, "Why is it practically universal to celebrate play on the part of young children . . . but not for the rest of us" (Stinson, 1997, p. 61)? Stinson (1997) continues, noting "that adults often consider having fun to be childish and unimportant, secondary to achievement and work" (pp.61-62). Indeed, Paley also suggests that teachers should call their own work play; if, as Vygotsky believes, "children rise above their average behaviour in play" (Paley, 2005, p. 3) adults, too, should follow the child.

Within educational settings the view iterated above affects how educators perceive play and *how* they include it in their programmes. For that reason, the concepts of both play and fun deserve serious consideration if they are to be, as Slade (1954) suggests, a valid part of a holistic education and of a way of life. Based on Vygotsky's theory that play creates meaning, Swedish arts educator Lindqvist (2001) believes that "play ought to be considered as an interpretation of children's experience in order to create meaning" (as cited in Anttila, 2003, p. 53). Accordingly, play becomes inextricably linked to children's learning. I wholeheartedly agree if fun and play are welcomed into our lives, new horizons can open up brought about by the power of imagination, which has flourished through play. If imagination is stunted, the creative ways in which the world can be impacted are limited. Play, I believe, enables us to empathize with one another and to also engage with more serious matters through the medium of make-believe.

The idea of play as a guiding principle in children's learning and experience is exactly the premise that Slade sets before us with the foresight of a person that understands children and their contribution to the meaning-making process. Alongside this profound observation is the importance of paying attention to the messages children convey in their everyday play. These messages, especially from the very young child, can very readily be bypassed if the adults in the child's world remain blissfully unaware of the rich plethora of stimulating and motivating moments ripe for engagement. As Stinson (2002) astutely reminds us:

How many times children notice the extraordinary moments that we miss: the rainbow in the puddle, the trail of ants, the sound of grass growing. It may require great patience for us as adults to allow children to be engaged.

I think this capacity is worth cultivating. If we are always disengaging young children from what calls them, is it any wonder when they learn not to get too involved, and then we eventually berate them for their lack of concentration? (p. 161)

The joy of infant and toddler play with links to drama

It is this skill to take notice of what children are doing that Slade (1954) has sagely incorporated into his epistemological encounters in drama. There are delightful examples, if somewhat quaint and quizzical in today's world of instant gratification and technological wizardry, of children's play festooned throughout the text that show what children do as being central to Child Drama. An example includes "running play of the street", which is described as including "mixed walking and rhythmic skips or hops, so delicate and lovely to behold" (Slade, 1954, p. 47). Such observations align superbly with the very young child's bodily exploration when infants and toddlers are given the freedom to discover the wondrous things their bodies do because, as Brownlee (2008) states, "moving is playing for a baby" (p. 40).

Other forms of play are aspects of personal and projected play, such as "ball games [and] dance" (Slade, 1954, p. 35).

These are described as "forms of acting" where additional elements such as imagination, copying, leadership, speech and music arise. Slade predicts that out of projected play a bevy of traits will emerge to service the child's on-going participation in the world through a range of interests.

In a similar vein to the earlier views about play expressed by Lindqvist (as cited in Anttila, 2003) and Stinson (2002), Slade (1954), too, highlights the importance of play for all human beings. As Slade elucidates, "Play opportunity, . . . means development and gain. Lack of Play may mean a permanent lost part of ourselves" (1954, p. 35). Consequently, play formulates a strong basis for Child Drama. Terminology such as imagination, discovery, curiosity, experimentation, excitement, inquisitiveness, anticipation, surprise, humour, joy, and the feeling of power are all notably evident as essential foundations for dramatic play or Child Drama. The necessary dualisms of love and hate, happiness and sadness, despair and hope are also present and pertinent to the process of drama when seen on a continuum of experience and predicated on moral courage and justice.

The divide between play and drama

In the drama world there has long been a divide between educators and the importance of play, which, quite possibly, is the reason why Slade (1954) launched forth with his proclamation about play as central to Child Drama. Unfortunately, the divide between play and drama is still somewhat prevalent. As stated by Dunn (2003):

Most early childhood educators working within the pre-primary years, when asked about how they approach drama in their curriculum, will confidently respond by suggesting that the dramatic needs of their students are met through play. The response to this question is a good deal less clear, however, when it is posed to teachers working with children in the 6-8 years age group – the primary school. For



Young children delight in the process of discovery and playing together.

these teachers, play is far less likely to be valued as either an aspect of drama or an approach to learning. Here dramatic play is generally banished to the playground – cast out as being something children can do in their spare time. (p. 117)

In my opinion a pervasive view of this kind can continue to perpetuate the disavowing of play and, as such, the denying, or even worse, the ignoring of young children. In many ways this translates to the rejection of our very youngest citizens whose play is not seen, acknowledged, or taken seriously. A lack of acknowledgement of children's play, and thus of lives, jeopardizes the notion of being child-centred. In *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) the image of the young child as competent and confident is fostered through an empowering curriculum where play is both valued and honoured and starts with infants and toddlers. If play is 'cast out' from older children's lives the same thing could happen for infants.

Early childhood educators, especially those who work with infants and toddlers, have the privilege of being privy to the emerging origins of play. The value born from such intimate encounters with the very young child's world of play places the early childhood teacher in an enviable position in comparison to those who work with older children (Mueller Tokunaga, 2006). Because play can be valued within early childhood settings, teachers of young children are, indeed, very fortunate to be able to share in the gifts children offer through their play. Teachers / adults, however, need to be ready to receive these precious gifts whenever and wherever they are offered.

Play as a driving force for learning and life

Play in a young child's life is a fluid entity often shifting indiscernibly between real life and an imagined life that comes from within. Play manifests a deepened sense of motivation as the drive of inquiry and accomplishment through play are experienced by the child. Time often seemingly stands still, or moves at a different pace, when a child is absorbed in play. If the imagination is to flourish for the hopes and dreams of childhood to become reality, then time must be given for play to occur (Slade, 1954).

More recently others have looked at play and its function as a motivator for learning. Anttila (2007) looks at "play as culture" (p. 875) exploring the primary and intensive nature of play, which is viewed as strongly embedded in aesthetics. She states that "[P]lay exists before culture and follows culture into the present day. It has always been a part of human interaction and all original human activities" (Anttila, 2007, p. 875). Anttila also refers to dance educator and researcher Stinson (1997) whose research into dance with children revealed that play and having fun contributed to their learning as counter-offences against boredom and extrinsic motivation. Stinson reports that play and its ally, fun, are significant factors in learning when seen as a form of intrinsic motivation. Anttila continues; "As an attitude play involves choice, freedom, intrinsic rewards, and heightened focus" (Anttila, 2007, p. 875), which leads to a sense of control or agency because children are more likely to motivate themselves and take responsibility for enjoying their learning.

Aitken, Fraser and Price (2007) concur with this perspective; they noted that when children were given the prospect to explore and make new discoveries during unstructured free-play "the children appeared to benefit from opportunities to work in their own way in their own time, seeking help when required" (p. 45). Such situations enable children to have agency thereby opening up spaces in which what children know and do has credibility. In this way the child has new-found status where play is valued beyond the rhetoric. Further to the notion of the self (child) as central to learning, particularly in art forms such as drama, the authors go on to say:

As art makers, children express themselves: their ideas, emotions, and points of view. They may also experience a moulding and redefining of their selfhood through the arts experience. In drama, children can "walk in the shoes" of someone new: someone who is not constrained by the child's current identity, nor by other people's expectations. Through drama, too, the child can visit times and places beyond the here and now. They can reinvent themselves through role and they can take risks in a safe and encouraging environment. All this helps children appreciate their potential and not be limited by the daily assumptions of who they are (Aitken, et. al., 2007, p. 45).

Elkind (2007) also supports the idea that both play and fun, together with love, feed young children's motivation to learn and become involved.

From a personal perspective some of the most vivid memories I have of childhood are those times when involved in imaginary play. These imagined worlds were drawn from my own life experiences, books and movies and are as memorable today as they were during childhood. I became Pippi Longstocking or Huckleberry Finn, as my kindred spirit reached out to conjoin with theirs and the wonderful adventures they sought. I lived in a caravan, a lighthouse, on a farm and in an English cottage by the sea where I invented families and friends conjured up out of books or movies. The old overgrown Western Springs Reserve was one of my favourite places; it became the Amazon jungle where I got lost in a fictional world far beyond my own. One of my fondest memories is visiting department stores and imagining the child mannequins as my family. On each visit (only during the school holidays) I would seek out these mannequins to see what they were wearing and invent stories based on the type of clothes they were modelling.

Apparently, because I was told this story, my play or spirit of adventure arose during my toddler years. When I was barely two years old I toddled out of the gate of my home and up the road pushing my pushchair (stroller) full of toys. Fortunately I was found before I could go too far and taken back home, much to my mother's relief. This story, however, reminds me that the origins of play start very early in our lives

and, as such, need to be nurtured from the very beginning. As teachers of very young children it is important to recall memories of play so as to recognize the play that is presented by our youngest citizens.

Play offered a world of possibilities where my imagination had no bounds, yet my play remained hidden almost as if it was a secret pastime that had no place in the real world.

The troubling notion of play and fun (or misconceptions)

The viewpoint of play and fun as unimportant, frivolous and trivial is something I often encounter, not just in the field of early childhood, but also education in general. I know playing or having fun is not necessarily seen as fruitful in a world where so much is at stake, such as tyranny and oppression. It often appears the only way to consider the world in which we live, is to take it seriously, or to take on a deterministic attitude, which allow little space for the creative or imaginative spirit.

While I am well aware there are situations where play and having fun are not appropriate, I find these attitudes about play a slight against the inextricable value both play and fun can have in society and the education system. Play seems all too readily eradicated from the young child's world. I agree with Stinson (1997) that the "question of fun" needs to be seriously reconfigured to not only capture the interest and, hence, intrinsic motivation of those we teach, but also open up avenues of alternative ways to live our lives. Play provides another modality to imagine a different world.

Parker-Rees (1999) supports the concept of play as something we should all be involved in. He advocates for playfulness in our adult lives, where, just as the child used play to discover more about the world in which he or she lived, adults too, can play with the 'real world'. He states that "moving around in it, manipulating bits of it and deliberately changing and recombining our perceptions of objects and events, allows us to abstract richer, more subtle and more complicated interpretations" (Parker-Rees, 1999, p. 64) of that world. Play enables us to imagine as we free ourselves from the "here-and-now" (ibid., p. 65) and recontextualise or transform our ideas and lived experiences. As stated by Phillips (cited in Parker-Rees, 1999):



The capacity for transformation, for the imaginative and often bizarre refashioning of everyday experience, was originally the child's unerring, ineluctable talent for making something of his own from whatever he finds (the given is inert until it becomes the made). (p. 65)

This ability to transform the object into something abstract (for example, a leaf becomes a plate, or a shoe becomes a phone) is exactly what the child does in his or her fictional world, thus creating a "metaphorical, transformational nature of representation" (Parker-Rees, 1999, p. 66). This form of playful transformation provides access for the child to communicate in multiple ways using a diverse range of languages. The child is empowered to find alternative approaches to problem-solving, or to imagine what might or could be in a world where change is both inevitable and also essential. In other words the child can be an agent of change through understanding what could be possible.

Given these seemingly admirable purposes of play, I wonder why play is being threatened even in the early years of childhood and why play is left behind as we progress through our lives. Or perhaps, more pertinently, I wonder why play, or our sense of playfulness begins to disappear, or becomes subsumed as we enter our adult years. Can the playful experiences remembered in childhood be rekindled? Is this the appeal to adult educators that Slade (1954) wants us to remember when considering not only drama for children, but all aspects of learning? Can a new-found approach to play be fostered to appreciate the playful and intrinsic dimensions an embodied involvement in learning can bring as it once did during our childhoods? As Slade speculates "Child Drama is an Art as well as valuable education" and substantiated by Read (cited by Slade, 1954):

Drama is absolutely essential in all stages of education. Indeed I regard it as that form of activity which best co-ordinates all other forms of education through art. Since, in my view, education through art should be the basic method in all education whatsoever, it will be seen that too high a value cannot be placed upon Child Drama. (p. 122)

Likewise, play is an essential element of young children's learning, especially when offered by the child and received by the adult. Being sensitive to young children's play and available to engage in their world will open up myriad possibilities and enrich relationships. Playing together lays the foundations for a lifetime of playing with others (Brownlee, 2008). I believe Slade's inspirational perspectives about all children and their play can be used to inform thinking about younger children and, in particular, the apposite place of play in infants' and toddlers' lives.

Concluding thoughts

Because play, or our memories of play, also pertains to the ways we worked through the less than desirable aspects of our lives, play has the potential to remind us of what it feels like to experience through both collaboration and confrontation, not only joy and fun, but also anguish and pain. These facets of play, and how they impact our relationships with others, can provide access to other ways of understanding the world.

While remembering Slade and his salient reminder about play and Child Drama, I believe that issues related to play, fun, and rekindling the imagination need to be valued in all aspects of education. All children deserve our attention, but especially very young children because their play and participation in the world can so very easily be overlooked. Slade did not overlook the very young child in his beliefs about Child Drama. In fact he did quite the opposite by focusing on the young child as central to understanding children's play and the role the young child contributed to Child Drama. Peter Slade should be remembered not only for drama education but also for his honourable insight into the very young child's world and the origins of play. It is quite remarkable that Slade's contribution to drama in the 20th Century can connect so splendidly to the lives of infants and toddlers today.

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