

'Play Bastardised ... children's voices silenced.'

Louis Bradfield



2010 marked 22 years of Louis's involvement with the Maridahdi Community in Toowoomba. Originally, Louis was Director of the community kindergarten and now he is principal of Maridahdi Early Childhood Community School. Currently Maridahdi is working with families to establish a second campus at Mount Tamborine to begin in 2011. Louis has spent 27 years reflecting on a way of teaching that best supports children as thinkers and learners. During this period, he has had opportunities to 'think out loud', 'to share his story'... as a lecturer, tutor and consultant. In 2002 Louis was a National recipient of a NEiTA (National Excellence in Teaching Award) for his 'passionate' dedication and contribution to early childhood education. In 2003 he received a Centenary Medal for Distinguished Service to Education. In his other life ... he is a parent of three amazing young adults, is a fitness fanatic and a successful artist!!

Maridahdi teachers are always on the lookout for research to inspire; to increase clarity or challenge the work we do. The most exciting piece of late is this discussion, inspired by the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari:

In contemporary educational contexts young children and learning are tamed, predicted, supervised, controlled and evaluated according to predetermined standards. Contesting such intense governing of the learning child, this book argues that the challenge to practice and research is to find ways of regaining movement and experimentation in subjectivity and learning.(Olsson, 2009)

Everything becomes ground and sea when children learn; everything becomes movement and experimentation. Letters, light, numbers, colours, everything is thrown up in the air, nothing is wrong and everything is potentiality. Sense and nonsense walk together hand in hand. (Olsson, 2009: 5)

The use of the word 'bastardised' has been chosen with intent. It is a powerful and emotive word that reflects the nature of this discussion about play.

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines 'bastardising' as 'changing something

so its value declines'. This definition best describes bastardisation in relation to the discussion of play.

It is 'bastardised' when children's access to play becomes increasingly limited with their removal from the play equation. Opportunities for thought rapidly decline in environments that are dominated by adults. The industrialisation of education is an adult agenda; schools liken children to vehicles in a Toyota production line, with a narrowed focus on measurable outcomes. Politicians strive for increased productivity under the guise of 'transparency' with outdated methodology chosen as the preferred vehicle to drive home such limited signs of success.

Maridahdi challenges the current construction of play, and it questions the existence of play in the current educational landscape. Play is now being hijacked by adult agendas, limiting the opportunities for children to explore possibilities and their own potentiality.

At Maridahdi, play implies ownership, a voice for children. Play gives children permission to explore their own desires.

For the purpose of this discussion, it is my intention to equate play with thinking, as an expression of a child's desires.

Very often there seems to be an idea of the child wandering around in the world ready to imitate and repeat what family traditions, formalised school systems and cultural heritage pour into them. Children's own desires are rarely considered important or valuable. The only desires taken seriously seem to be what comes from the

outside: family, school and cultural imposing their desires on to the children. (Olsson, 2009)

Neill (1995) contends that in the early 1900s 'every child had been hothoused into being an adult long before he had reached adulthood', supported by 'adults' underlying belief that play was a waste of time'. While the current discourse around play acknowledges its power and preaches its benefits, in action it seems little has changed.

Definitions create much of the current rhetoric supporting play's bastardisation.

Current curriculum litters itself with play references more concerned about ensuring palatability, successfully disguising adult agendas while extinguishing the voices of children, furthering evidence of the advancement of 'schoolification' (Dahlberg, 1991).

References, on one hand, acknowledge play as a means for children to make sense of their world, and that play is platformed as a credible 'context for learning and development'. But this construction of play is lost in action.

The term *educational play* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006) illustrates how jargon adds supposed weight to the value of play, while devaluing its true origins. Play no longer has standing in its own right, it requires additional support to prop it up (which presents further evidence of 'bastardisation' to increase acceptability and adaptability, so it is recognisable as an acceptable educational form). The sad reality for children is that if we link play to

children's desires, then that play, in any form, is almost non-existent in current educational settings.

A shift in culture to accountability, to a more industrialised approach to education, has been projected onto the early childhood landscape. While research now presents play as the more preferred method to direct instruction, it rarely translates to children's daily reality. The dichotomy between what is said and what is done further supports play's 'bastardisation'.

Materials are no longer presented and selected for the possibilities or the potential they present but to ensure an adherence to clearly articulated goals and measurable outcomes.

Materials viewed as symbols of play, litter educational landscapes; play opportunities for children often cease on contact. The ever-increasing prescriptive nature of materials presented to children shut down opportunities for thought. The inclusion of these resources is carefully orchestrated to ensure deliverable outcomes. For children, these materials send immediate messages about what needs to be done, inviting limited and controlled responses. Encounters with the unknown or the unfamiliar, are non-existent.

Deleuze, with inspiration from Nietzsche, saw thought as a matter of creation that takes place when the mind is provoked by an encounter with the unknown or the unfamiliar, forcing us to think. (Olsson, 2009)

The power of consumerism is a further contributor to play's 'bastardisation'. The messages attached to toy and equipment

catalogues are that whatever you desire for your child can be granted with the purchase of the appropriate resource. Messages warn children's learning potential is severely comprised without the latest gimmicky resources. Parents are pressured to comply in order to make children perform. (If anyone has seen the latest Fisher Price advertisement on television, you will know exactly what is being referred to).

Out-of-date routines continue to reinforce and repeat messages of control, rigidity, and conformity. No longer are there opportunities for children to explore, to risk take and explore possibilities.

Insulting messages of control and rigidity continue to restrict. Early childhood programs position themselves as holding the preferred approach; as the only educationalists who value the child, who allow them to learn through play. Yet in reality, 'they act as an extension of the state, a tool for governing and educating citizens'. (Olsson, 2009: 35)

Play bastardised, children's voices silenced, opportunities for thought limited.

Bibliography

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