

The seriousness of children at play

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The nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche could turn a phrase or two.

It was he who coined 'God is dead' ('Gott ist tot') though spent subsequent years explaining how he had been misinterpreted – akin to Francis Fukuyama today recasting 'The End of History and the Last Man'. Nietzsche also gave the world 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger' and, in another felicitous phrasing, 'Without music, life would be a mistake'.

To those interested in early education he shaped the memorable phrase 'the seriousness of children at play'. In fact, in 'Beyond Good and Evil' (published in 1886) he wrote that a man achieved maturity only when he regained the seriousness he had as a child at play.

I have had cause to reflect on 'the seriousness of children at play' having spent much of September visiting primary schools across the country.

To do a disservice to all those teachers in Years 1 to Year 6 who have kindly hosted me - whilst their classrooms have been united in positive engagement and progress for their pupils, it is in the Reception classes where I have watched joy in deep learning.

I digress for a moment. Many years ago on an inspection in Southampton I observed a Reception class teacher read to her class, with families invited along. She did this every Thursday from 2.30 – 3pm, a slot that was regularly oversubscribed by parents and grandparents.

She always read tales from her own culture, one quite alien to many in the room. As the tale unfolded in her immaculate 'foreign' English, one by one, two by two, children and parents fell asleep. After 25 minutes most indeed were either asleep or in a heavy doze. The bell went, school ended, families dispersed.

Afterwards I spoke to her about this marvellous achievement. I mentioned Philip Pullman's lovely lines: 'It takes "Thou shall not" to reach the head. But it takes "Once upon a time" to reach the heart.

She replied that in her culture – in Sweden – Reception children were far too young to be in school. And that afternoon sleep was more important than phonics!

Back to early years settings. What have I observed in glorious technicolour?

- Four boys over a large tray of water, mixing drinks for each other, and me. We got into a rich conversation about seeds and fruit and vegetables. They were transfixed by the colourful concoctions they were creating with cucumber, tomato, apple and lemon.
- The mixed group who spent at least ten minutes tirelessly running up and down a bank, each with a spoon in hand with which they banged the kitchen sink at the top of the bank – counting, the first to fifteen.
- Three girls who put on their aprons meticulously, gathered their materials and sat down to paint over and between and underneath a pile of leaves they had gathered: a salmagundi of multi-coloured leaves mushroomed upon their table.
- The team of seven boys and girls who raced their tricycles round and round until the learning assistant asked them to park each bike by its number and shape, which they did with marvellous accuracy.
- A mixed group who having studied 'through, around, over, under' embedded that understanding with an elaborate dance in part of the outdoor climbing frame.

And I've not begun to enthuse on the bilingual storytelling I see when working in other countries.....

Gather together groups of early years educators from different cultures to debate what are the best play and learn experiences for that age range – and the spirited animation of their different views is a wonder to listen to.

I'd rather watch the seriousness of children at play. Thank you Nietzsche for giving me that vocabulary. I share it where I can.

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