The word 'play' must be seen to be equal among agendas

Written by Marc Armitage

In the 1970s the American evolutionary biologist Robert (Bob) Fagin expressed concern about a significant loss of focus on play research in the field. Up until this point evolutionary biology had probably been responsible for the more significant theories in play that had so far come about. Of the four 'classic theories', for example, (the first really scientific attempts to explain play) all four had an evolutionary element and three were very specifically from the field of evolutionary biology.

This lack of focus that Fagin could see was largely because the generation of biologists responsible for this work on play were quite literally dying out, and interest among the new generation was lacking. That is not to say that there were no biologists interested in play at the time except they tended to have a focus on play as part of some other agenda. This meant that the word itself was beginning to disappear among the lexicon of twentieth century evolutionary biology.

This disappearance of the word play has a long history which continues today, and it tends to happen when the topic of play meets another, usually more powerful agenda. The word play becomes subsumed by that agenda and disappears. By default, this trivialises play into unimportance.

There are many examples of this both large and small. The name change of the then Pre-school Playgroups Association (formed in 1961) to the Pre-school Learning Alliance (in 1995) was a highly contested move by the organisation to gain more credibility - the word 'play' being seen as holding it back.

Twenty years later, the largest body of play therapists in Australia made a serious proposal to remove the word play from their title citing the need for the organisations' work to be taken more seriously by parents and other clinical bodies.

This move seemed to have been defeated by a poll of members. Small scale examples of the disappearance of the word ‘play’ are almost constantly around us: playgrounds renamed ‘recreational facilities’, playtime being called ‘breaktime’, various playthings marketed as ‘education toys’; and one recent poster produced by an occupation therapy body demonstrates how subtle this disappearance can be and how easy the trap is to fall into contributing to it.

The poster provides a set of positive things for children to play in the outside world yet manages to do so without mentioning the word play within the poster once. Instead, what children are being shown doing is described as ‘nature based vestibular activities’. The poster, which incidentally is from a source with much pro-play related material, has knowingly or unknowingly contributed to the disappearance of the word play by subsuming it within the broader agenda of occupational therapy.

This is how it happens: small, almost incidental acts contribute to the replacement of the word play which leads to a trivialisation of it. In the long run this is damaging to the field of play professions across sectors who then battle with having their work taken seriously – because they use the word ‘play’.

On top of that, it also has the potential to denigrate the work of some of those early play theorists, chiefly among them woman, who fought to carve out a place for play in the world of more ‘serious agendas’. To name just a few:

Alice Bertha Gomme (1853-1938) effectively forced the then Folklore Society to accept children, almost exclusively seen through the lens of play, as being part of a distinct area of study (which then became childlore and later playlore) but had to do so by carrying out a quite massive exploration of children’s play and self-publishing it in such a way that it embarrassed the Society into accepting the folklore of play as legitimate.

Hermine Hug-Hellmuth (1871-1924), pioneered the early technique of incorporating play into the psychoanalysis of children (which we would today call play therapy) but faced an uphill struggle in the fight to gain and retain credibility for herself and her use of play as a chosen medium. Up to this point, toys had been used as a tool in the psychoanalysis of children but were somehow seen as unconnected from the broader concept of playing.

The same is true of the anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978) who's role in breaking an apparent disinterest in the field for seeing children and their play as being as culturally as significant as that of other groups led to seeing the lives of children and their playing as a key element of socialisation. She had to deal with some serious attempts to trivialise her work and question her methodology.

And in more recent history, the archaeologist Grete Lillehammer (to date) almost single-handedly pioneered the use of exploring play as an analytical tool towards considering the child's world in prehistory, despite also facing an almost complete disinterest in the archaeology of children.

Each of these, and many others, have fought tooth and nail to raise the importance of the words play and playing in the lives of children past, present, and future; without them we would not have playlore, play therapy, a sociology of playing, or an archaeology of play.

To deliberately lose focus on the word play and allow it to be subsumed, even when this might be being done for apparently justifiable reasons, places the work of these key people in jeopardy. It also makes the work of those today involved in children's play much harder than it needs to be. The battle has been fought - we should not need to have to battle for it all over again, and rather than allowing 'play' to be subsumed by alternative agendas we should be fighting for it retained and given the status we know it deserves.

After all, there is a reason that Article 31 of the UN Convention on the rights of the children mentions play, rest, learning, and culture, but more importantly it places the word ‘and’ between them: play ‘and’ rest, play ‘and’ learning, etc. It does this so as to place the word ‘play’ as separate and equal with these other agenda. Let’s not lose that focus. The word ‘play’ must be seen to be equal among agendas.

About the author

Marc Armitage is a consultant, researcher and writer in play, playing and playwork. He has been a professional Playworker for more than thirty-years and freelance since 1989.

He regularly travels the world speaking to groups of professionals from a broad spectrum of work sectors in the children and young peoples workforce including playworkers, early educators, primary and secondary school teachers, out-of-school people, parks and playground designers, politicians, policy makers and many others.

He also spends a lot of time talking with children. With. That's the key word.