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Title **Grumpy old playworker: Part.1**

From pre-fab playgrounds to children's centres: an evolving approach?

It was the autumn of 2005 when the heavy machinery of demolition crashed its way through the old iron gates of the Benchill adventure playground. The telegraph poles that supported the structures and had stood as silent sentinels to thousands of smiles and disputes were quickly razed to the ground as if they were little more than toothpicks; the two grassy knolls that stood at the back of the project, and the space between, were now churned-up mud tracks across which the diggers moved back and forth to carry out the plans for redevelopment.

The kids from the playground had known for a long time about the replacement adventure playground on the old South Manchester High School grounds – indeed, they had been involved in the planning process. At the £1.3 million children's centre, the new outdoor section would be built to run through the tree canopy, arcing through willows, poplars, cherries and acacias to create a beautiful natural play environment that would grow around the children over the passing years.

And now they were here: the new *Addy**, and the aforementioned trees, where the platforms now ran, afforded an excellent viewing point of the ground where the old project had stood.

Throughout the autumn of that year many of the old 'residents' would find themselves in this corner, remembering games played, pointing out where they had painted their names or assembled a den, and made other creations – 'Do you remember the sand castle with the moat running under it, Eddie? That was huge,' recalled Connah. A recurring theme was the old wooden slide. 'It was massive,' said Glen, 'we used to play gladiators at the top; it was old school, and a bit cheap – but that was what was good about it.' Other workers, now long gone, came back to the children's thoughts: Karen, Tracey, Carol...

At some point it dawned upon me that this was much more than just bored conversation – in part this was a kind of grieving process. 'I was wounded when it got ripped down,' were Glen's words during a conversation in the new office. 'That was a sad day.'

Hart (2002) talks about different stages in the participation process with children, using the metaphor of a ladder to highlight the progressive levels. The lower rungs are the non-participatory stages of **manipulation**, **decoration** and **tokenism**. The participatory stages then progress up to the final stage – **child led**, **child directed**. 'Projects in this category are particularly difficult to find,' he states, but goes on to say that this approach may be found in the 'loose parts' (Nicholson 1971) of adventure playgrounds in Northern Europe, where the settings:

'...have plenty of loose materials, particularly wood, and tools for children to use, and a small crew of playleaders [playworkers] to support but not to initiate or direct children's play and building activities.' (p.44)

I had mixed feelings upon reading these words. Initially I experienced a feeling of pride in having been involved in projects that work in this way with children – this was how we had approached things at the Benchill adventure playground, an approach that has a long history dating back to C. Th. Sorensen and the *skrammellegepladsen* (rubbish playgrounds) that rose from the bomb-sites of the Second World War. These original playgrounds afforded:

‘...the possibility [for children] to create their own play environment rather than provide them with already furnished, neat play sites...in an increasingly urbanized environment.’ (Ginsberg 1997: 1)

At this point my initial positive feelings fell away and a sadness came for how essentially we had moved away from this culture when we transferred to the new building: how we gave away our containers full of the materials for loose part play – our various tools, wood, netting, canvas, foam mats, etc. – and in a sense traded this approach for a perhaps more manageable one – the fixed structure play of a modern children’s centre. Initially rather exciting; ultimately, with regard to consultation and all-round development (Hughes 2001), rather stultifying.

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‘The historic liberation of the child from adulthood has led, in turn, to the necessity of its constraint by collective practices. The obvious high profile of children...has rendered them subject to new forms of control.’ (Jenks 1996: 68)

‘Most (children) think their protection and provision rights are generally honoured, but that their participation rights are less well and less consistently respected.’ (Mayall 2002: 122)

So who benefits the most from the current trends influencing the modern children’s centres that I and other play professionals work in? From the perspective of my project, *The Addy* probably meets the criteria of the Every Child Matters White Paper (DfES 2005) in a more quantifiable and direct way than before (at least from the most literal interpretation of the outcomes): considerable time is now devoted to **being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, and making a positive contribution**, outcomes that are regarded as being sound pointers for a practice that is directed towards the best interests of the child, practice that is, without doubt, a worthy endeavour. And in playwork terms, the staff team at my setting have worked hard to keep alive the principles of loose part play that were so evident on the old Addy; and a child-centred dialogue is still very much alive among us face-to-face workers.

However, one word is definitely missing in the minute notes of management meetings within our organisation, a word that is key (in a literal sense) to the environmental aspect of playwork principles, and as a spatial metaphor for children’s inner and outer playworlds: ownership.

I recall now the kids jumping from fences and trees on to the foam mats; standing with aching arms as I helped the kids erect the massive 1970s tent that was tucked away most of the year; the colourful vinyl walls inside adorned with smiling faces and handprints. These are no longer possibilities in my current project. Indeed, it is probably

fair to say that this centre is adult property that the young may pass through, but where they must not loiter with intent.

If every child does indeed matter, then what surely matters most in an authentic play setting is what intrinsically motivates the child, and how the child chooses to express that motivation – this will arise through ownership and playful autonomy. These assumptions, along with the adult's role in facilitating the process of the child's intrinsic motivation, are the core values of playwork (SkillsActive 2002a). If a setting is to meet all of the criteria for an 'enriched environment' (as detailed in best play, Hughes 1996b), which includes the most authentic levels of participation, it is down to the staff team within each setting to advocate vocally for such essential values, in a time when so much uncertainty exists around the playful child.

\* 'Addy' is one of a number of universal and affectionate names children give to their adventure playgrounds

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