All children are philosophers because all children play

Anyone who says children do not think critically has never watched a two-year-old pick up some new object for the first time and stare at it.

Marc Armitage

Have you seen this quotation which is credited to a famous philosopher at all recently on any one of a dozen memes flying around the internet? "You can learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." You have, haven't you? Do you know who said it?

The quote seems to imply that playing somehow speeds up the process of understanding or at the least has a central role in the development of it, which makes sense. So, let's explore this idea and the link with children, their play and philosophy. At the same time we will also highlight a bit of a problem with the above quotation.

You may not think of philosophy as a hot bed of play research but at some a point in history pretty much all 'research' was philosophical and only philosophical. In addition, much of the oldest surviving written material we have about play comes from the writings of the classical philosophers of around 2,500 years ago. They noticed that all children ran, jumped, skipped, climbed, etc; and they noticed that in a social context there were common themes running through children's play. They saw these as patterns and patterns have to be explained and they so applied the greatest philosophical question of them all to the issue of play: *why.*

The above quotation is credited to one of these classic philosopher: Plato (428-348 BC) did you guess right? He is probably one of the three great ancient philosophical names that most people recognise even without a formal training in philosophy (along with Socrates and Aristotle) if only because Monty Python made them and the names of a number of other famous philosophers difficult to forget[1]. He wrote, among other works, the great books *Republic* and *Laws* both seen at the time, and after, as instrumental guidance in organising the modern society of the day. As an aside, it's interesting to note that Plato also founded one of the earliest known organised schools, the *Academy*, just outside of Athens in Greece[2].

In fact, philosophers before and after Plato have had a lot to say about the topic of play and this has produced some very interesting ideas including exploring the role of daydreaming, the link between play and ethics and the development of culture, among others. More recently, philosophy has again become closely associated with play and even with Playwork. The Playwork Team at the University of Gloucestershire[3] has now held three international conferences on the theme of the Philosophy of Play (with a fourth imminent) and have published a book of proceedings from the first[4]. And a fine read it is.

The modern-day philosopher and ethicist John Wall[5] was a keynote speaker of the first of these conferences in 2011 and for me (as I was there) the most intriguing point I took from his keynote was the idea that 'play' is something that is all around us all the time but which only becomes 'real' when we engage with it. A deeply philosophical idea and one which makes perfect sense in a Playwork perspective.

---

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l9SqQNgDrgg
2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platonic_Academy
3 http://www.playwork.co.uk/
4 Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell & Malcolm MacLean (eds) (2013) *The Philosophy of Play*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
5 https://johnwall.camden.rutgers.edu/

But perhaps the most significant connection between philosophy and children's play comes in the phrase 'critical thinking'[6]. This is a relatively recent phrase, which we are all likely to recognise even though we may not realise the connection, but it has its roots in classic philosophy. The ability to think critically is central to the development of concepts and thus to understanding. When children are playing this thinking process is at the centre of what they do and this is what makes all children philosophers.

All understanding relates to concepts as a starting point: things happen to us; we happen to things and so patterns develop which encourage us to consider them and draw conclusions. We can consider these to be 'knowns' from which we extend our understanding. This may be as simple as the discovery that if I let go of an object it falls to the ground. Which becomes all objects that are dropped fall to the ground. Which further becomes this object is fragile and if I let go of it, it will fall to the ground and break.

Then one day, I let go of something and rather than it falling to the ground, it floats away – upwards. Something new has happened, some 'unknown' has broken the pattern, and my overall concept of letting go/dropping down/possibly breaking has to be revised.

To 'think critically' simply means to consider objectively what has happened and draw conclusions. Yet this is not an accidental process – it has to be deliberate and when it is we can actually see it happening because what differentiates this from serendipitous discovery is simply a question of focus. Anyone who says children do not think critically has never watched a two-year-old pick up some new object for the first time and stare at it. That stare, that focus, is critical thinking.

Serendipitous discovery and the development of understanding are obviously related (how did we come about the object in focus in the first place, for example) which also suggests that any effective play space for children of all ages must contain both knowns and unknowns to which they can apply and revise their current understanding about the world of which they are part.

But it would be wrong to think that such understanding is only about physical objects and the material properties of the world. Children apply the same critical thinking to understanding personal and social issues too and as a result can often tackle complex social situations which tax even many adults.

For example, some years ago a fellow researcher called me from a primary school while conducting some field research on friendship groups. She had called about a specific topic she had not encountered before and asked, 'Do you think it's possible for an eight-year child to be gay and not know even though all her friends seem to know?'

This was a genuine question and it had come from comments made by children informally on the playground and in more formal interviews that she was conducting. Conceptually, for children the idea seems fairly straight forward that you are either a girl or a boy. It becomes a known but what if one day, something unknown happens?

The idea of the 'girl-boy' is something that I had come across before in fieldwork with children. This is not the same thing as the stereotypical idea of the 'tom-boy', i.e. a girl who prefers what might be perceived as more male orientated traits. This is something else.

I'll have to paraphrase here but the first time this idea was mentioned in my own school fieldwork it came completely out of the blue in an interview group discussing what people played during lunchtime at their school. The discussion, which was with an all-boy group of nine-year old's, had turned to the question of whether girls played different things to boys. A specific girls name was mentioned at this point and the group agreed that she played boys games rather than girls games. I asked if other girls joined in with boys play too. The reply

---

6 For a greater detail on the history and development of critical see http://www.criticalthinking.org

was, 'yes, but she isn't really a girl'. These boys could not exactly pin down what they meant by this but they were adamant that they were not saying that she was a girl who liked playing boyish games but rather she was actually a boy.

I'm not saying that this girl was gay or even that it was any display of masculinity that indicated that she even might be. But what I am saying is that these children literally considered her to be a boy. As a concept this may or may not have had anything to do with her sexuality but has everything to do with the concept of her identity as an individual within a peer group. An identity that she herself considered accurate.

This was a question they had considered, in depth and critically and it may well be that for most if not all of them this was a new situation – an unknown – but they had the understanding of peer relationships with other boys in their box of knowns. They considered the issue, made what they felt was an objective judgement and concluded that they understood it. It therefore became a new known and they subsequently applied that understanding to their ongoing relationship with her as a member of their peer group.

This application of critical thinking became an essential element in them understanding the social world of which they were a part though interestingly the adult researcher – who was not a part of that peer group and therefore had not taken part in this critical thinking – struggled with understanding this concept at first. In other words, she had not previously been in a position to cause her to consider her current understanding on this one and possibly revise it.

This is an issue that has occurred more than once in fieldwork of mine and has involved identity concepts with boys and with girls and in each case children have dealt with this element of their social-world in exactly the same way as they have done with their physical-world: by thinking about it critically and revising their understanding to suit. If I drop something it will fall – sometimes. Girls do girls things and boys do boy things – sometimes.

Complacency is the enemy of critical thinking and in practice that means that the more we take on face-value the more fixed and unmoving our concept base may become and revising our understanding becomes suppressed. Critical thinking is a process that requires active consideration (focus) and depth (time to focus) and as we become adults and our store of knowns becomes greater there is a temptation to forget this, to take more at face-value and thus make greater assumptions.

Here is a very simplistic but telling example.

That Plato quotation that we all know and love, the one above about, 'You can learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.' This Plato guy seems to have had a very positive view of the role of play, no? But are you taking this meme on face value without applying any critical thinking to this idea?

Why do I ask? Well, because Plato did not say the above – it's a paraphrase of something said by Richard Lindgard[7] in a book first published in 1907, which is a little after Plato's time yet it is still accredited to him despite not being found in any of his writing. He did have a lot to say about play and this has undoubtedly contributed to our understanding of the topic yet ultimately much of what he had to say about it was negative. He believed that play gave children ideas and that those ideas might threaten the status quo in society. Thus, play was something that needed controlling.

Plato was most definitely not a friend of children's play. Does this knowledge change your understanding of Plato's consideration of play? Would it encourage you to learn more, to think critically about words credited to him?

---

7 Richard Lingard (1670) *A letter of advice to a young Gentleman*, republished with notes by Frank C Erb in 1907. New York: McAuliffe & Booth.

By taking a meme such as the above and blindly accepting it as fact we are not acting as individuals who apply critical thinking to our exploration and discovery. We are taking things at face-value. This might be seen as a negative trap for our children to fall in to yet we seem to easily fall into the trap of doing so as adults.

So here is your homework: if Plato did not say the above about play what did he say about it? What was his attitude? How did that manifest in his writing? Go and find out, apply some critical thinking on this one and by doing so you will be linking the worlds of play and philosophy together.

Oh, and by the way: just don't get me started on that George Bernard Shaw quote about growing old … because that's one is not real either.

Marc Armitage
Play, Playing & Playwork

marc@marc-armitage.com
www.marc-armitage.com

www.twitter.com/marcatplay
www.instagram.com/marcatplay
www.facebook.com/marc.armitage.at.play