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Another Way of Seeing: Perceptions of Play in a Steiner Kindergarten

Mary-Jane Drummond

Introduction

During a recent sabbatical term, I undertook a series of observations of children’s play in a number of early childhood settings, one of which was the Rosebridge Kindergarten, a Rudolf Steiner kindergarten in Cambridge. The quality of play in this kindergarten made a strong impression on me; for at least an hour every morning the children (aged from 4 to 6) were deeply engaged in complex, collaborative and imaginative play. Over the last six months I have revisited the Rosebridge Kindergarten many times, and recorded many hours of observation: I was determined to try to find out why these children’s play was so intense, sustained, and varied. I have had many discussions with Steiner educators in the process of this enquiry, as I tried to answer some of the questions that the children’s play had raised for me.

In this chapter, I report the fruits of my enquiry, and try to demonstrate the relationship between the quality of the children’s play and salient features of the Steiner educators’ thinking. I will try to establish connections between what the children do in the kindergarten, during the period dedicated to play, and the key concepts around which the Steiner approach to young children is constructed. I will examine the educators’ understanding of children and childhood, the role of the kindergarten teacher, and the whole kindergarten environment, and suggest ways in which mainstream educators, in other kinds of early childhood settings, might learn from their approach.

The influence of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) was, of course, immediately apparent in every discussion of which I was part. But my principal interest was in the way in which the educators themselves had assimilated and applied the original inspiration. In this chapter, then, I do not attempt to trace the educators’ thinking back to its source in Steiner’s own works. Instead, I have tried to explore the ways in which they have made Steiner’s thought their own (rather as the educators in Reggio-Emilia speak familiarly of ‘our Piaget’ — the Piaget they have constructed for themselves, through study and application). I have drawn on the accounts, both oral and written, of practising and former kindergarten teachers, and on my own copious observation notes. I have not attempted to describe the kindergarten programme in its entirety, but have focused almost exclusively on the period spent by the children in spontaneous play, which lasts for about an hour every morning.
Understanding Children: A Steiner Perspective

To mainstream educators, Steiner kindergarten practitioners appear extraordinarily serene and certain when they talk about their work, using the most theoretical and abstract terms with great assurance. The key concepts they work with, deriving ultimately from the writings of Rudolf Steiner, are of the utmost importance to them in shaping their practices, their pedagogical interactions, and their personal responses to individual children. For this reason, any attempt by an outsider to understand the sights and sounds of a Steiner kindergarten must be rooted in an awareness of the same key concepts, however remote they may at first seem from the preferred categories of mainstream early years educators.

Two of the most important ideas appear together in the following extract from the opening pages of a book by a celebrated kindergarten teacher, Freya Jaffke (1996):

(See text for the extract and subsequent discussion.)
She added with a rueful expression . . . ‘and mainstream education does do so much suppression.’ This reverence for the individual, the precious visitor, runs through the Steiner account of childhood like a refrain. It seems to me to illuminate the meanings of their unfamiliar discourse. So Jaffke (1996) writes, emphasizing the unique freedom of the individual child and bringing all these concepts together into one nutshell of conviction: ‘Imitation is the activity of the will. The activity of the will is the activity of the "I". The greatest freedom lies in imitation!’ (p. 73).

Children’s Powers, Children’s Play

One of my observations in the Rosebridge Kindergarten focused on a group of children playing close to each other in the clear carpeted space that takes up one half of the kindergarten classroom: an extract follows.

Ike is building a van. He stacks up two piles of wooden chairs for the driver and his mate, and creates the front with a clothes-horse folded just so that a plank can be placed across to make a dashboard. Here he places a fat round log for the steering wheel, and assembles other smaller logs for brake, accelerator, clutch and radio. All complete, he announces, looking hopefully at Amy playing nearby ‘If anyone wants to be a builder with me, I’ve got a seat for them.’ Amy leaves the puppet show she is making and jumps on board. Owen, who has helped with the construction of the van, is not impressed. ‘Can I play with you?’ Ike: ‘No, there’s only two seats.’ Owen: ‘But you’re playing in the puppet show.’ Amy: ‘But he’s driving me to the show.’ Ike bursts into action with a roar of truck noises, then slams on the brake: ‘Here you are!’ Amy gets off, Owen gets on. The builders continue their journey to the builders’ yard, with the van radio on full blast, while Amy and Caitlin complete the puppet show. They build a space for the audience surrounded by clothes-horse screens, covered with lengths of cloth. They build the stage at the front of this space and close the curtains. Then they assemble the characters and properties for The Three Little Pigs, laying them out in exquisite order from behind the curtain, facing in, so that to the audience, not yet assembled, they will appear in the right sequence, facing out.

This was by no means an uncharacteristic episode of sustained imaginative and collaborative play. I present it here to illustrate the ideas introduced in the previous section, and to show how the powers of imitation, will, imagination and memory read out, so expressively, in these children’s play.

It is not difficult to discern, I think, in this brief extract, a great number of acts, mental and physical, that we could safely describe as learning. We might choose to characterize that learning within any number of categories, drawing for example on the HMI areas of experience (DES, 1985), on the Desirable Outcomes document (SCAA, 1996), or the ‘foundations for early learning’ set out in the recent framework Quality in Diversity in Early Learning (ECEF, 1998). My purpose here is to show how Steiner educators construct their understanding of the play that occurs so spontaneously and plentifully in their kindergarten classrooms.
Perceptions of Play in a Steiner Kindergarten

In a conference paper, Sally Jenkinson, former kindergarten teacher and currently early years consultant to the Steiner Fellowship, makes a passionate case for the ‘creative play of early childhood’ (Jenkinson, 1997). Using examples from her own kindergarten, and from a small-scale observation study in another, she documents the way in which the children’s imaginative play is ‘both a vehicle for human creativity and a vital social force which leads (them) through empathetic thinking and imitation, to the realm of “the other”’ (p. 101). She elaborates on this proposition by using specific examples from children’s play to show how play can ‘awaken social sensitivity and imitation . . . through the playful activity of imaginative empathy.’

‘You can be the big school girl.’
(How do big school girls feel and act?)

‘I’m a spaceship man.’
(How might a spaceship man behave? What fears might he have? How might he face up to challenges?)

‘Are you a mouse?’
‘No, I’m a prince.’
(So you need to treat me very differently), (pp. 105–6)

My own observations too reveal many such examples of children ‘living imaginatively into the experience of the other’ — the experience of the avaricious king guarding his gold; the kindergarten friend who mustn’t be late for her puppet show; the puzzled mechanics whose flying machine has developed an engine fault and are temporarily baffled. One of my favourite observations, occurred during a long sequence of construction/role play. A magnificent structure involving blocks, chairs, tables, a large chest, screens and long planks (for the wings), with the chairs organized on top of the tables, had occupied five boys for some 25 minutes. They have been talking to each other with their mobile phones (small blocks).

Adam to Daniel, the pilot: ‘Can you hear me?’
Daniel: ‘Yes, but don’t shout, I’m driving.’
Adam: ‘I can see a flying saucer, going higher and higher so make that go higher, right? Over.’
Daniel: ‘Right. Higher and higher.’
Michael: ‘120. 105.’
Daniel: ‘Adam, Michael, put your seat belts on.’
Ike: ‘Put on your seat belts please, or you’ll fall out.’

And so on, until the engine develops a fault. They notice that the large chest has a keyhole and is locked.

Daniel: ‘It’s the engine. We have to open it up.’
There is an interval here while the boys fetch the materials they need to make a key. (‘We need really stiff paper’) and then return to the flying machine.

Sean: ‘The bonnet’s not working.’
Adam: ‘Oh my God. Let me have a look. [dramatically] There’s a cat in the engine! There’s a cat in the bonnet.’
Amy: (playing nearby) ‘I’ll get the cat out if you like.’ (Which she does, much to her satisfaction.)

Jenkinson contrasts this kind of play, in which ‘the ability to "read" the thoughts and feelings of others begins to awaken, and the journey towards emotional literacy begins’ with ‘the cognitive learn as you play model’, ‘pre-cooked play fare’, with predetermined and specific outcomes. She recognizes that children do learn in this way, indeed enjoy this learning, but insists that to use play as a means to an end, to a desirable outcome or an attainment target is, essentially, to miss the point. As children play together, negotiating themes, structures, rules, masterfully manipulating signs and symbols, creating imaginary worlds, peopling and inhabiting them, they are doing more important work than the teacher can set out in advance in her short or medium term plans.

In all this imaginative and imitative activity, the will is strongly involved. Jaffke’s (1996) account describes how, in children of 5 and over, the will works to establish a purposeful connection between the idea and the imagination.

If the will wants to act on an impulse to play, it must now unite with the idea. With the aid of the imagination, it finds or transforms objects into what the idea demands. (p. 66)

For this reason, the Steiner educators provide an environment which can be transformed by the children. They do not provide pre-structured play environments (post offices, launderettes or castles) or ready-made toys. The children arrive each morning into an open space, where they may use the screens, the blocks, the tables, the lengths of cloth, to create their own environments. Similarly, there are few objects that crudely represent the world outside the kindergarten: no toy telephones, or stylized play people. One educator told me: ‘Our dolls have no faces,’ and another, Joan Almon, described how she had no cars in her kindergarten, preferring the children to rediscover the wheel every day (through the plentiful provision of the right sort of planks and logs). The principle is that it is the child who transforms, rather than the adult who pre-forms. And, indeed, my own observations show how enormously skilled the 4- and 5-year-olds become in using the screens and lengths of cloth, which they secure with ribbons and knots and elastic bands, with great assurance, to shape their own play-spaces, their houses, palaces, flying machines, Euro-Star, racing cars, and boats of all kinds. In the same way the baskets full of conkers, cones, shells and small blocks of wood do duty for food, treasure, credit cards, tickets to the show; I have seen a short length of tree trunk (about as thick as my arm) used by the same child to fill the petrol tank of her car, and then to hoover its interior.
The case the Steiner educators make for play may or may not be convincing to those who hear it for the first time, or who cling devotedly to the categories into which they were inducted in their initial training. But it is certainly a case rooted in the familiar principle of active learning, in that they maintain that children’s play essentially involves them in imaginative, transformative and exploratory acts: ‘physical thinking’ is Sally Jenkinson’s (1997) fine phrase. Furthermore, they maintain the crucial power of imitation allows children to become active members of their various communities, to learn the languages of play and social intercourse, to assimilate and reproduce the ways of being, of doing, of representing and expressing, that they see all around them. Without plentiful opportunities for play, Jenkinson writes, children risk cultural, personal and social deprivation.

The Kindergarten Environment and the Role of the Adults

I have already described some aspects of the kindergarten environment and indicated how it is shaped to match what the Steiner educators see as important characteristics of their children’s lives. Children, says Jaffke (1996), ‘as creatures of the will and the senses, nestle into their environment, whatever it may be.’ It follows that the preparation of the environment, and the selection of materials, must be both meticulous and principled. Jaffke claims: ‘We carefully select the impressions which confront and surround the children’ (p. 11). This claim is no exaggeration, as my own observations amply demonstrate. There are materials which can be transformed, as we have seen, and there are natural objects of great beauty and simplicity; the flowers are fresh, the muslin cloths are neatly hemmed, the dolls have clean (if featureless) faces. The wooden bowls are polished; the bread and jam is attractively served at a table prepared with candles and flowers; the puppets are most beautifully sewn. But it is not just in the provision of material resources that the Steiner educators attend to children’s powers of imitation and will. They also maintain that the work of the adult is a crucial force in the children’s lives. Accordingly, when the children arrive in the kindergarten, they find the adults sitting calmly at work — sewing, carving, buttering the bread for the children, or mending a broken toy. They are doing adults’ work, and doing it with care, enthusiasm, diligence. This work of the adults, say the educators, creates the freedom, the rhythm and the creative space, in which children can play. As Jaffke (1996) neatly puts it, ‘the children are left actively in peace’.

This adult behaviour has another function: it models for the children both purposeful activity and ‘stewardship’ of the world as it appears in miniature in the kindergarten — behaviour that they learn to imitate as they come to join in the routines of setting the table, polishing the wooden bowls, tidying away at the end of the play session, and working in the garden. Sally Jenkinson (1997) describes a further aspect of the educators’ practice: that it explains the mystery of adult work. She imagines a child asking her or himself ‘What do adults do?’ or, more urgently, What are adults for? In the kindergarten, the children see adults performing ordinary, everyday acts which may no longer be visible in the hurry and bustle of the
child’s home — slicing and buttering bread, mending clothes, kneading dough, pegging out washing, building and spreading the compost heap, harvesting the fruit and vegetables from the garden. The seeds of stewardship and citizenship are sown in this process of role-modelling, which is, for mainstream educators, an alarmingly dramatic contrast to the typical activities of the hard-pressed teacher in the overcrowded infant classroom.

The principle at work is, once again, imitation, not instruction. The key elements to be modelled, according to Jaffke, are order, rhythm, good habits and loving consistency. The adult exemplifies these acts of the will, deliberately working at a task, such as carving or embroidery, that takes a long time; or a task for the common good, in which she takes both pleasure and great pains. She exemplifies order by working slowly and thinking ahead, not rushing chaotically to catch up with herself. These adult behaviours, writes Jaffke (1996), in a metaphor of great tenderness, act as a mantle, which provides protection from external things, and also allows what is inside to flourish, to be strengthened and tended. She writes of ‘the mantle of warmth’ — physical warmth, soul-warmth, and warmth on a spiritual level, which has to be continually and consciously created (p. 38). She describes too ‘the mantle of activity’, through which the educators’ behaviour, actions and attitudes create ‘a world worth imitating’. And she elaborates on the mantle that arises through the educators’ use of spoken language. Or, rather, from their extremely judicious, almost parsimonious, choice of language: ‘in the context of play we do not need to use many words’, she warns. There is no need, in the kindergarten environment, to bombard the children with verbal accounts of sharply defined concepts. Nor is there any evidence, in my observations, of the relentless questioning of the mainstream teacher (benevolently) intent on eliciting a verbal display of understanding from child after child. The familiar question and answer routine (initiation/nomination, response, evaluation) documented in so many studies of classroom interaction (Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Wells, 1986; Bennett and Kell, 1989) is conspicuously absent from the Steiner kindergarten.

The educators are by no means silent, however; it is just that they never speak to the children or to each other in that particular teacher’s tone of voice, so caustically satirized by Joyce Grenfell, so ubiquitously heard in mainstream classrooms. The educators talk, laugh, and sing; but they never call for silence in order to issue streams of instructions. The silence that falls when a child lights the candle on the table before eating, or when the whole group is ready to start painting, or just before the fairy story begins, seems to arise from the children themselves, and not from the adult’s injunctions. The aim in all cases, according to Jaffke, is to ‘organize as little as possible and to regulate daily life as much as possible through real meaningful activity’. This principle runs through the children’s lives as well, and their real meaningful activity, during the first part of the morning, is the spontaneous, creative, transformative play that I am trying to characterize in this chapter.

At the Rosebridge Kindergarten, the morning session draws to a close with the telling (not reading) of a fairy story, sometimes traditional, sometimes seasonal. These stories are chosen not just for their rich language and their literary worth, but
also for their moral meanings; they are stories which ‘seek to nourish rather than merely entertain or instruct’, as a parent of Steiner school children has put it (Judith Woodhead in Drummond, Lally and Pugh, 1989). Each story is told more than once, sometimes every day for a week, so that the children have time to absorb the formal and beautiful language in which it is told, and to respond to the qualities, or virtues, the story brings, not merely the characters and the plot. With repeated telling, says Janni Nicol, the children come to see the deeper images in the stories, not the outer physical dimensions. The Steiner educator understands the importance of the role of myth and story in the search for deep underlying human truths and values, recognizing that human experience is not confined by the boundaries of the rational world. Sally Jenkinson (1997) writes of ‘the realm of the subjunctive — the kingdom of our wishes, hopes, fears and possibilities — (that) is also our real world’. And it is both these worlds that I have been observing, spontaneously represented, in the play of the Steiner kindergarten.

As the educators describe their role in their programme, it is clear how closely they hold to their construction of children’s powers — imitation, will, imagination and memory. Everything they do, and do not do, say, and do not say, is imbued with their understanding of children and childhood. Kindergarten teachers have an awesome responsibility: to be genuinely worthy of imitation — not just in manner, but in gesture and in action, in speech and in thought. The daily programme that they shape, through their acts, their speech, their thought, is highly structured, rhythmical and repetitive, and yet at the same time open and responsive; it creates the time and the space in which the child’s powers of imitation and imagination are creatively expressed in acts of the will.

Applications, Implications, Explanations

Implicit in this short and selective account of my growing understanding of the Steiner kindergarten programme are some very stark contrasts with taken-for-granted practices in mainstream early years settings. In some ways, it is what the Steiner educators do not do that seems most challenging. The absence of printed material, including books, the educators’ apparent indifference to the letters and sounds of the alphabet, the lack of adult/child interaction during sustained incidents of complex play: these features are, at first, difficult to assimilate. Seeing and hearing the educators refrain from explicit instruction is another challenging experience. Even when basic literacy and mathematical concepts are, clearly, relevant (in setting the table for example, when each child needs a bowl, a mug and a napkin, or when the last delicious slices of bread and jam are being distributed) the Steiner educators do not initiate didactic exchanges. If the supply of bread and jam runs out while the children are still hungry, the Steiner educators tend to replenish it, whereas my own pedagogical instinct is to embark on early subtraction and division exercises. Joan Almon made a similar point in a conference presentation: ‘when we churn butter in the kindergarten’, she said, ‘it’s because we want to eat butter’. She hardly needed to remind the mainstream members of her audience that in other settings the
butter-churning enterprise is inevitably tied to a didactic purpose — a project on farms, cows, or People Who Help Us. In mainstream schools and classrooms where I have taught, the children have all experienced baking with yeast, kneading dough and seeing it rise. But not every week, as the Steiner children do. Their weekly baking day serves a real purpose in their lives. It is not a fleeting contribution to a topic on Harvest; they need the bread for their regular mid-morning snack. In Joan Almon’s words, ‘the kindergarten is not a place for empty or arbitrary activities, but for what arises out of life.’

The children’s play, in the Steiner account of it, is equally free from explicitly pedagogical purposes. Musing on Sally Jenkinson’s warning words about the cognitive model of play, with pre-cooked play fare and specific outcomes, I remembered attending a lecture, not many weeks before, by a well known mainstream early years specialist, with both practitioner and academic credentials. Her account of play included a distinction between occupational play, stereotyped, routine, repetitive, non-cognitively complex, mainly effortless, and, in contrast, learning-centred play, characterized by its cognitive complexity, its purposefulness and its orientation towards achievement. This latter kind of play, she claimed, needs an adult. The contrast between this position (one of many such in current texts on play) and the Steiner account of play could not be greater, for all that these exponents hold much in common. Their grounds for agreement include the importance of early childhood as a distinct phase in human life, the importance of quality educational experiences for young children, the importance of the adult in structuring and monitoring those experiences, the importance of play. But whereas the mainstream argument for play is constructed around learning outcomes, achievements and cognitive gains, the Steiner advocacy rests on very different premises, which I have tried to outline in earlier sections of this chapter.

After one morning’s observation in the Rosebridge Kindergarten (the day the two girls built the puppet show back to front) I sat with the two educators to review the significant events of the session. In the course of this discussion I jokingly referred to the deplorable Desirable Outcomes document, and suggested that its requirements were not going to pose any problems for the educators (who are expecting an inspection visit in the coming year). To my surprise and delight, a few weeks later Janni Nicol, the kindergarten teacher, sent me a written account of that same morning’s activities, analysed under the Desirable Outcomes headings, which she had composed as a demonstration piece for an audience of interested parents and supporters, (and, no doubt, the impending inspector). It is the most fascinating document (and, incidentally, a useful triangulation of my own observations).

First Janni Nicol gives a closely observed, vivid, narrative account of the morning, with many details included that I could not see from my vantage point, some yards away from the table where she had been sitting sewing with a group of children. Next she takes each of the six Desirable Outcomes headings and re-describes the children’s activities using the official language of the SCAA document. This account too is full of detail; it is precise and definite; it is clear and confident; but the children’s living experiences have somehow vanished from the scene. For example, under Mathematics she writes:
. . . the children used mathematical language such as in front of, bigger than, more, through etc. to describe shape, position, size and quantity. They recognized and recreated patterns . . . They compared, sorted, matched, used order, sequence . . . and so on.

In the final section of her paper, Janni Nicol reverts to her own way of seeing, to the educational discourse she shares with the community of Steiner school parents and supporters. She constructs these concluding paragraphs around the crux of the matter, her conviction, her certain knowledge, that whatever the children ‘achieved’, in terms of what the DfEE or QCA deem desirable, was not the result of formal instruction:

These are things which happened, and which happen every day, through the rhythm of our work . . . in the (children’s) way of learning, imitating, observing and role playing; in the joy of being, in exploring themselves and each other.

This teacher’s written summary seems to me to encapsulate a way of seeing play, and the consequences of play, that is, at the very least, worth serious consideration by a wider audience. She concludes:

And where was it all recorded? Well, for us it was written up in brief in our planning review of the day . . . but for the children? We hope it was recorded in their hearts and souls, in their memory and imagination, to be recalled later in their lives and transformed into a creative impulse, in scientific exploration, in the ability to think broadly and widely and to carry a moral impulse to help mankind and the future of the earth. These are OUR desirable outcomes for the children who pass through our kindergarten.

The Steiner educators, whose work I have presented here, have, I believe, much to offer early childhood practitioners in other traditions. The key concepts that have emerged for me, during the months in which I have been trying to learn, trying to understand, are trust and value. It seems to me that the Steiner educators express in every line and every utterance their fundamental trust, in both children and adults. They trust in the pedagogical value of what children spontaneously do in their play, in a harmonious and supporting environment (by leaving them ‘actively in peace’); and they trust as completely in the value of their own, adult activities — their story telling, their sewing, their music-making, their calm, sensitive watchfulness, their joyful, loving presences — as they consciously shape the environment in which the children learn by living.

Conclusion

In embarking on this enquiry, I had two distinct purposes: the first, to learn more about children’s play, and the second, to learn more about the Steiner kindergarten approach. It was only in the course of the work that I became aware of the relationship
between the two, and realized that understanding the Steiner approach would help me to understand children’s play. I found, too, that much of what I learned from the Steiner educators complemented and illuminated classic texts on play that I had read in the past but forgotten and set aside. For example, Piaget’s great work on play (Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood, 1951) offers many insights that can almost be read as a commentary on the Steiner position. His emphasis on the child’s early fascination with symbolic play (it is important to remember that the book’s original title is La Formation du Symbole), and his pithy one-liner ‘Play is a form of thought’ (p. 167) echo the analysis I have presented here. In the same text he writes: ‘The conflict between obedience and individual liberty is the affliction of childhood’ (p. 149). A Steiner educator, commenting on these words, exclaimed ‘Yes! and that’s why shop play and restaurant and cafe play arc so important’ (for in these contexts, the child can play at ‘individual liberty’).

The concepts of imitation and will, presented in the first section of this paper, are in a similar way prefigured in the work of Groos (1901) whose immensely long book The Play of Man (full of endearing asides — for example, why do children climb trees? ‘So that their elders cannot get to them’ (p. 88) deserves to be rescued from oblivion. In his meticulous classification of human plays (plural), he includes as a major category Playful moving of foreign bodies. Subdivisions of this large group of plays (in adulthood and in childhood) include Hustling things about, where he writes of children’s play with puddles, revealing their ‘joy in being a cause,’ and Throwing plays where he describes:

the power of will over matter . . . The peculiar satisfaction derived from throwing . . . projecting our individuality into a wider sphere of action . . . The extension of motion originated by ourselves . . . becomes a part of us. The force which we behold at work outside of us is our own. (p. 104)

This passage can be read as an illuminating gloss on the Steiner account of children acting, through their will, on their worlds, transforming them, recreating them, indeed, hustling them about. Later, as Groos painstakingly pursues his immense project of mapping every known form of human play, across the world, from the dawn of time, he brings together, with a simple word-bridge, with a connecting rope of thought, two of the key concepts discussed in this chapter. Arguing that dramatic imitation leads to aesthetic sympathy, he attributes this whole area of human enterprise to the power of imitation: ‘Imitation proves itself to be the author of the symbol’ (p. 327).

In reporting this enquiry, I have been writing as an outsider, a non-participant observer in more than one sense. I am not a Steiner educator, nor will ever be. I have no intention of settling and putting down roots within the Steiner community of discourse. To conclude this chapter then, rather than reviewing the main features of the Steiner approach, I will offer a brief description of how my own thinking about children’s play has developed as a result of trying to learn ‘another way of seeing’. My intention here is to take stock of what I have learned, with gratitude, from my friends and colleagues in the Steiner movement, and to outline the ways in
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which my notebooks full of observations have shaped my present understanding. I do so in the hope that other educators, in any of the great variety of settings where children live and learn, may here find some support for their continuing advocacy of children’s play.

I have written elsewhere of the possibility of making an effective case for play in early years education by attending not to the verb form of the word (to play) but to the noun. Then it can confidently be used as an umbrella term for all the thousands of times and places in which children exercise their emotional and intellectual muscles. In play, under a table or up a tree, alone or in small groups, expressing themselves in words, or with blocks, or music or miniature world materials, children think and feel and act in ways of the utmost importance for their learning (Drummond, 1996, p. 138).

My observations in the Steiner kindergarten have enabled me to move on from this formulation, and to adopt a different metaphor, constructing an account of children’s imaginative play around the idea of a doorway or, rather doorways. In play, I have come to think, children leave the mundane and everyday world in which their parents give them their breakfasts and button them up in their coats, ready for school, and pass through invisible doorways into alternative worlds. The first of these is the social world of shared play, in which children enter into the feelings, the stories, the creativity of their friends and companions. (Two children, inseparable companions, digging in the soil inside a bush in the kindergarten, create such a world. Sean to Katie: ‘Katie, this is our special place’. He says it three times. Sean: ‘You be the girl and I’ll be the boy’. Katie, in agreement, ‘Pretend’. They agree on their names, Adam and Alice. They are pretending to be friends!)

Another door opens as the child enters the realm of their own creativity, exploring possibilities, re-living private adventures, past and present, predicting a future, building a whole library of personal symbolic readings of the universe. This is the domain where children discover their individual capacities to act on and transform the world, to represent it in any way they choose, to write their own life-stories, fairy-stories, creation myths and epics of destruction. (I saw many minutes of solitary play in the Steiner kindergarten and am struggling here to represent in words what I believe to be the inner activity of these solitary, not lonely, children, intensely engaged in play.)

Through a third door, children pass into a world that they will share with a wider society than that of their intimate friends. Here they become part, as and when they choose, of their whole society’s enduring stories. Through this door, children enter into the wishes, hopes, fears and anger expressed in the legacy of traditional stories, poems and songs that communities have shared together over the centuries. This is the door that opens whenever an educator brings children together to tell them a story, implicitly inviting them to recognize the role of myth, fable and story in humankind’s search for meaning, implicitly inviting them to join that search. The themes of these important stories appear again and again in the observations in my notebooks.

As long as children play, and as long as we, their educators, watch them and try to understand what we see, we will go on finding fresh ways to think about and
explain the importance of play. In this chapter I have outlined the ways in which Steiner educators conceptualize children’s play, and described how their insights have affected my own. In the process, I have drawn on some of the classroom observations and thinking work I have been engaged in over the last six months — a task I set myself, a personal enquiry, an individual journey. The task that faces all early years educators in the coming years is to find the tenacity, and the trust in children, to continue to do such work, co-constructing such robust understanding that we can all stand up as advocates, clear and certain, for ‘the beautiful task of play’ (a phrase from Groos’ (1901) concluding paragraph), confident in our capacity to allow children to pass through the doorways of play on their own infinitely varied journeys into the world.

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