

Play Wales/IPA

Moments of nonsense and signs of hope: the everyday ‘political’ nature of children’s play

Abstract

This paper extends themes from ‘Children’s Right to Play’ (Lester and Russell, 2010) in which play is presented as participation and (self-) protection through appropriating time/space in mundane routines and environments. It is suggested that playing also acts as children’s political expression; children endeavour to take decisions and establish temporary control over their immediate environment in order to make things different/better. Such playful/political acts invert, subvert, reinforce and reconfigure institutional power structures, signs, and materials, creating time/space in which things are more vibrant and intense, offering moments of hope that they can change the conditions of their lives.

These everyday unwitting acts are largely unnoticed by adults, and represent a markedly different form of political engagement from ways in which children are brought into adult-led political realms. Yet somehow adults need to acknowledge that these moments matter to children and without presuming any particular direct action strive to maintain conditions that leave time/space for playing (a ‘good’ space). These moments also matter for adults: the very conditions in which children’s playfulness thrives are also ones in which adults can realise that minor everyday collective acts can disturb dominant economic-political forces and offer moments of hope that people can get on and go on together..

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Introduction

This paper draws on and extends ideas presented in the Working Paper ‘Children’s Right to Play’ (Lester and Russell, 2010) in which we intimated at a relationship between the three interconnected themes of the UNCRC (protection, participation and provision) and the nature and value of play. That is, playing is children’s way of participating in their everyday environments to appropriate moments of time/space for being different from the demands of the adult designed world and from this develop systems (biological and social) that enable them to better look after themselves and cope with the uncertainty of life (indeed, to value certain forms of uncertainty and ‘stress’ as a desirable state). On this basis it is possible to claim that Article 31 spans the remaining 53 Articles, and is not an afterthought or luxury, something to consider when all other rights are being supported. But to appreciate the centrality of Article 31 in children’s lives requires looking at play in a slightly different manner than dominant minority world accounts of this form of behaviour, and to extend an appreciation of the nature and value of playing that contests the ‘learning and development’ rhetoric of play to one that positions play as vital to children’s full participation in their worlds, enhancing self-protection and through playing children can make provision for themselves by appropriating time/space for their own desires (play and the three ‘p’s).

This is not an attempt to idealise ‘play; it is not something set apart from everyday existence, or a romantic image of the innocence of children being displayed in creative ways in idyllic (often portrayed as ‘natural’) environments. Rather playing is opportunistic, appearing in the cracks and crevices which are always present in space, no matter how far powerful structures seek to close down possibilities for action. It arises from the material at hand and may more accurately represent children’s ability to articulate Article 12 and other participation articles by expressing their urges, emotions and actions ‘freely in all matters affecting the child’. As such the presence of children playing may serve as a useful barometer of the ability of local communities to support the conditions in which the totality of the UNCRC articles are being supported

The context of the UNCRC

The UNCRC, while obviously noble in intention, has attracted a considerable amount of controversy, notably that it is ‘high in rhetoric but low in intensity’ (Prout, 2005:31). Arneil, cited in Archand and Macleod (2002:6), suggests that a ‘rights focused discourse is conceptually ill-equipped to accommodate the importance of establishing and supporting caring relationships and so provides an inadequate way of conceptualising the claims of children’. But, as Prout (2005) acknowledges, perhaps the strength of the UNCRC can be found in its ambiguity, and general Articles can be contextualised at local level, a point further developed by Lee (2001: 95):

If the Convention had been intended to clarify children’s position, it would indeed crumple under this burden, but the Convention operates in a rather different way. Having generated childhood ambiguity, it then lays the responsibility for managing that ambiguity on the legislatures and policy-makers of the states that have ratified it.

As suggested later in this paper, the ways in which children’s rights, and in particular rights of participation, are translated from policy to local practices (and *vice versa*) are highly complex. It is also important to establish the point here that ‘children’s right to play’ as a stand-alone article may represent a rather confusing and limited understanding of the very nature of playing, which is a perceptual, emotional, action relationship to the environment that is opportunistic, spontaneous and unpredictable. Playing is an expression of the well-being of an organism, a smooth running of biological systems in a complex relationship with the external environment. ‘Playing’ cannot be seen as being in the gift of adult actions; adults cannot ‘provide play’. However, the ways in which adults construct and create the conditions of childhood are very influential, but not fully deterministic, in shaping children’s perceptions, feelings and behaviours in the local spaces of their daily lives.

While it is acknowledged that the 54 Articles of the UNCRC are interconnected and indivisible, there may be considerable tension between some of the key themes and guiding principles of the UNCRC. Adult interpretations and representations of ‘children’s needs’, care and protection, and ‘best interests’ generally assume priority in any decision made about children and there is often a focus on protection and care rights at the expense of

participation rights (or rather participation assumes secondary significance and is used to reinforce the supremacy of care and protection rights; children participate in adult-decision-making processes to reaffirm the structures and processes designed to care and protect children). This may be exemplified by Rehfeld’s (2011) claim that the UNCRC justifiably emphasizes protection over participation rights on the grounds that firstly children by nature are an at-risk population and secondly the rights of participation and democratic citizenship ‘require a minimal bundle of cognitive and emotional capacity...which children, again by nature, lack’ (Rehfeld, 2011: 141).

Rehfeld continues by acknowledging that millions of children live under conditions of material poverty and political instability which invariably impacts on their experiences of childhood. Any claims to political rights can only be addressed when children’s basic protection and welfare rights are secured. From this argument, the claims of Articles 2, 3 and 6 would trump Article 12. Claims made on behalf of children from the South highlight the ways in which children’s survival rights are severely compromised, and this may be more important than the North’s preoccupation with children’s participation. James (2010: 486) comments, following a moving presentation by Ennew (2008) on the plight of homeless and street children in SE Asia, ‘it was hard to deny the implication that the concerns of European scholars about childhood were somehow more trivial when compared to the enormity of the problems faced by children and young people in the majority south’. However, James cautions against the dangers of getting caught up in discussions around the primacy of protection over participation rights as it potentially detracts from a position that sees childhood as a universal feature of all societies that is a ‘participatory social space’. There is a danger that focussing on protection and provision needs¹ at the expense of the interrelationship between all the articles may mask the underlying ways in which childhood is produced and often valued as an inferior condition of being human. Children are seen as being at a lower level of development and by doing so ascribed lower status, a position that is embedded and reinforced in State social, economic and political systems and actions.

Protection and provision rights are relatively un-contentious, and imply a particular role for adults in children’s lives, surrounding the child to ward off dangers and provide resources they could not obtain for themselves (Lee, 2005). Participation rights potentially offer a contrasting but complementary role for adults – that of *being with* children (which paradoxically may also mean being away from them) rather than surrounding them; children are ‘accompanied rather than possessed’ (Lee, 2005: 18). The argument Lester and Russell (2010) present in the Working Paper ‘Children’s Right to Play’ also suggests that paying attention to one set of rights over another may weaken children’s position to be actively involved in developing the capabilities of looking after themselves, especially when it comes to playing. The supremacy of protection rights, supported by notions of best interest (which are generally based on the best future interests of the child) may give rise to restricting children’s ability to find time/space for themselves by increasing licence for adults to plan for children’s play in safe, supervised institutions and segregated spaces.

¹ That is not to deny or trivialise the fact that protection and provision rights are vitally important where children are subject to exploitation and high levels of material deprivation and environmental degradation)

The intention of this paper is to explore how children’s play may be seen as a political act that challenges adult-child relationships yet at the same time offers a note of hope that oppressive acts and practices can be re-worked at micro level and a different way of adults being together with children may emerge.

Children as *political* actors

The starting point is to introduce another ‘p’ to the analysis here i.e. playing is a form of *political* activity carried out by children in their everyday worlds. Presenting play as ‘*political* activity’ offers another dimension through which to view children’s play in the context of Article 31 and the broader relationship with all other articles of the UNCRC, but also may help to unsettle some of the dominant accounts of childhood, and by association adult relationships with children at micro and macro levels of organisation.

In developing this argument, it is necessary to briefly state the case for adopting a political perspective and draw a distinction between *Politics* and *politics*. This act itself may be seen as political, as any understanding of politics may be contested and definitions are themselves a political choice and reflection of the ideology adopted by the author (Bambra *et al*, 2003). For the purpose of this paper ‘*Politics*’ may be defined as the formal structures of governance and the activities of the State, which manifests itself through public life and the conduct and management of community affairs. The application of *Politics* presented here differs from ‘*politics*’, which is used to refer to any activity concerned with the acquisition and exercise of power to gain one's own needs and desires. *Politics* (lower case ‘p’) in this sense is a feature of the complex relationships with people, materials, symbols and space which recognises that the networks developed through such relationships are imbued with power, authority and influence, both overtly and through more subtle forms. It is the process through which the production, distribution and use of resources is determined in all areas of social life. For children *political* acts are the foundations for the ways in which they negotiate the conditions of their everyday worlds. What is important here is that ‘*political*’ is not pre-formed or a universal state but its meanings are context specific and ever-changing; any definition of politics must inevitably be relational and political acts can be found anywhere and everywhere (Kallio and Hakli, 2011b).

It should be stressed that the distinction drawn here between ‘*Politics*’ and ‘*politics*’ potentially reduces a highly complex relationship to binary positions. Contemporary approaches to the study of children as political agents are largely centred on the ways in which children participate in and contribute to adult *Political* systems, while little attention may be given to the nature of children’s *political* activity. By only attending to the manner in which children may participate in *Political* arenas omits the multiple ways in which children carry out their political acts of conformity and resistance in their everyday lives. Equally simply paying attention to the intimate micro everyday worlds and activities of children cannot, in itself, illuminate the ‘tangled politics’ that determine the nature of childhoods created by adult *Politics* (Philo and Smith, 2003). States, institutions, policies, families, professional adults, the media, economic forces, and so on all play a role in constructing the conditions in which children’s political activity takes place. From this, it may be seen that there are multiplicities of childhood, but the conditions which give rise to these may have universal features. It is also important to establish that not only do these conditions produce

a specific form of childhood, but also establishes and frames the nature of adult relationships with, and practices for, children.

Children and *Politics*

Rose (1999: 124) describes childhood as ‘the most intensively governed sector of personal existence’. Such governance is framed by a politics of the child as becoming-adult and questions of justice are intimately connected with what is in the best interests of children for their future-adult status; that is, for the liberal, rational, autonomous citizen that all children must one day become (Nakata, 2010). There is considerable ambiguity in relation to children’s ‘political’ position; the State may perceive young people as competent and liable in some instances, e.g. the age of criminal responsibility, but as incompetent and irresponsible in other areas, e.g. full voting rights (Skelton, 2010). It would be reasonable to assert that until recently little attention has been given to the notion that children are Political actors, for the general reason that children are below voting age and as such have little direct influence on the formal political structures of States, both at local and national level (Philo and Smith, 2003)., It is generally accepted that Politics is connected with rights and responsibilities, and there is a feeling that children should be spared from this burden (Kallio, 2008). Equally childhood is a period that belongs to children, making Politics something that is beyond them. However, it may be possible to discern situations in which children have been accepted as ‘Politically’ active, see for example the research into children and young people as child soldiers, and in less extreme circumstances, the ways in which children may engage with mass political movements (as demonstrated recently by the protests against the increase in University fees and more widespread demonstrations about cuts in public spending in the UK)

Children are perceived as potential bearers of rights, and as they achieve the requisite stages of maturity they can grow to acquire Political competence and involvement in appropriate Political forums supported by ‘citizenship education’ programmes:

The specific goals of citizenship shape the ways in which children are constructed, and the care of children begins and ends with their education to these ends. Ultimately, the individual child is largely a tool to illuminate the nature of the autonomous adult citizen by providing the perfect mirror within which to reflect the negative image of the perfect adult form (Arneil, 2002: 74)

As a liberal discourse, the focus on children’s participation rights, and in particular Article 12, is oriented toward the production of a future adult subject: a subject which is both neoliberalism’s end and the source of its legitimacy (Nakata, 2010). This future focus seeks to embed a particular notion of ‘citizenship’ i.e. participation and legitimisation of dominant ways of accounting for the world and the perpetuation of a particular form of adult-child relationships. Children are defined by what they lack and in doing so are constructed as the negative image of the positive, mature adult. While in the UK we espouse a vision of the child as citizen, and even seek to educate children in this role, in practice children and young people, in their everyday lives, remain apart from the world of the adult citizen ‘treated as non-citizens by the systems of surveillance and control through which ‘childhood’ is protected as a social space in the life course’ (James and James, 2004: 37).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the ways in which children have been brought into adult Political systems and processes, not as children *per se*, but as future adults who are expected to become ‘good’ citizens. Thus, interpretations of Article 12, and the child’s right to express their views freely in all matters affecting the child generally assumes that children need to be ‘supported, empowered and educated by adults to learn how to act as [P]olitical agents’ (Kallio and Hakli, 2011a: 99). Here, ‘Politics’ is considered from the perspective of ‘grown-up’ systems and levels of understanding, leading to a range of actions which seek to include children in democratic decision making systems. For example, Kallio and Hakli’s (2011a) review of the Finnish Children’s Parliament and associated structures designed to encourage children’s participation presents a valuable account of how governments have responded to implementing Article 12. There is no doubt that such actions have contributed to the recognition that children’s voices should be heard as active citizens and children are capable of acting in and on various aspects of social and political life (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010).

The intention of this paper is not to de-value this work; children’s participation in such Political arenas makes it harder to ignore their voice and right of presence. However, there are concerns over whether much of the progress in children’s Political participation and the efforts to include children in adult agendas have been matched by any real evidence of changes in children’s everyday experiences (Kallio and Hakli, 2011a). Certainly in the UK, the issues that children have proclaimed as being important (including places to meet up and play with friends) may be a distant dream from the reality of many children’s lives. Participation brings children into adult arenas, and children are far removed from the ways in which they act in their everyday environments. Analysing the decisions made in these Political structures, Kallio and Hakli (2011a) suggest that the Finnish Children’s Parliament have followed the policy streams determined by adults and avoided any politically contentious or controversial issues. As Venn (2007), cited in Kallio and Hakli (2011a: 102) comments ‘the responsabilization of children by the representative system strips their voices from dissidence and instead recruits them in stabilising the norms of good conduct’. As such, children and young people get caught up in adult agendas and reinforce what is acceptable and desirable e.g. in developing guidance on what constitutes a ‘good school’, children often espouse ideas that conveniently coincide with adult values. Other more controversial areas e.g. children’s desire to spend time with friends on their own after-school rather than attend adult-organised provision are avoided as they don’t fit adult policies (see, for example, Forsberg and Strandell, 2007). Such approaches also operate at more local levels as children are encouraged to ‘participate’ in their everyday institutions, perhaps epitomised in the ways in which children ‘design’ programmes in play settings. The claim made in this paper is that such Political processes run counter to the ways in which children’s *political* lives are lived and the ways of supporting children’s Political engagement may actually diminish the recognition of the vitality of everyday politics both for children and adults.

Children and *politics*

A counter argument presented here suggests that paying attention to children’s *politics* leads to a different interpretation of children’s right to play. The claim is that Article 31 may

be seen as holding primary importance in supporting children’s participation (in particular Articles 30, 12-17) and by doing so, support children’s ability to develop self-protective mechanisms and their ‘protection’ rights. Adopting this position reconfigures the ways in which Article 31 has generally been connected with and accounted for alongside education rights (Articles 28 and 29)

A key premise which underpins the argument is that power is profoundly present in children’s lives; adults exercise powers at molecular and molar levels of organisation to structure children’s routines and spatial practices, and as discussed in the previous section, will often bring children into these power structures to ratify their decisions and provide a superficial process of ‘consultation and participation’ to give credibility to their paternalistic actions. Now of course it may be argued that all activity is political, just as all activity is spatial, and for much of the time children’s everyday practices are not consciously perceived to be direct political acts. But as Kallio (2009:6) notes:

even young children may act as political agents regardless of, and detached from, participatory policy procedures in everyday life. They resist, conform and negotiate on their own terms, even if these struggles and negotiations do not and cannot be carried out in official political arenas or follow conventional political modes

Thus, from a ‘*political*’ perspective, children’s intentional actions and spatial practices will draw on awareness of the ways in which spaces are produced and dominant accounts of space use, and they continually negotiate their way through the ‘tensions, power relations and ambiguities’ (Kallio, 2009:6) that are embedded in their everyday lives and routines. Children’s ‘political selves’ can achieve particular social purposes and understanding these processes counters the charge that children are apolitical but rather suggests that children’s political sensitivity is largely mismatched and unnoticed in adult Political agendas (Buckingham, 2000). The intention of the next stage of this paper is to pay attention to a dominant mode of children’s political activity, i.e. playing, as a form of minor politics in which children momentarily take control over the conditions of their lives and carry out small everyday acts that disturb the adult imposed boundaries of childhood

Playing and *politics*

Colin Ward (1978) includes a section in the ‘Child in the City’ entitled ‘play as protest’, an expression of the *political* nature of playing or ‘fleeting pockets of anarchy that occur in daily life’ (Ward, 1966: 2). In this sense, anarchy (as often portrayed in popular accounts) is not an overthrow and rejection of all power structures but rather a different ordering in which children have the capacity and capability to organise themselves. Playing is children’s *minor* re-working that acknowledges a differently ordered world is possible and can be brought about by encounters in time/space that temporarily hold off dominant ways of accounting for the world. Children’s playful disposition and imaginings ask the question ‘what if...’ and find expression in ‘as if...’ actions and behaviours.

The use of the term ‘minor’ is not an expression of scale but rather evokes the ways in which other possibilities can be actualised; they are moments when/where children can exercise collective agency over their immediate conditions and move beyond what already

exists (the dominant reality or major accounts of adult-child relationships). In this context actualising alternative possibilities or ‘ever-present virtualities’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) does not imply a lesser version of reality, but the possibility of becoming different, moments when the body inhabits space in ways which resist classification and ordering. Kallio (2009: 7) continues ‘children are good at using embodied means to arrive at their objectives and thus prefer to bring their bodies into play when objecting or adapting actively to someone else’s will’. It is this embodied nature of playing that gives us a glimpse of children’s current relationship with their environments.

Such a perspective also challenges the dominant view that humans are rational, autonomous individuals, which is the bedrock of liberal democratic processes, and replaces it with an account that values the needs and passions of the body as powerful motivating forces for human action. Children’s play, rather than being an exercise in progress towards autonomy and independence (the adult rationality of play) becomes momentary space/time in which life cannot be reduced to what has already been produced and marks the potential to create and work with difference (Colebrook, 2006). Through playing, children have the capability to reconfigure the ‘everyday’ to become anything but everyday (Highmore, 2002). Aitken and Plows (2010:332), citing the work of Benjamin (1978), note that play, rather than mere imitation, marks the capacity to affect and be affected by the world; as such, ‘young people’s capacity to play is also a capacity to re-conceive history and geography, which in turn creates a moment of revolutionary possibility’. Equally, Katz’s (2004) longitudinal study of Howa childhoods notes that children’s play is never simply imitative but is also inventive; ‘if in their play children are engaged in making meanings, then the very act of playing encompasses new possibilities for making sense or nonsense of the world’ (Katz, 2004: xi) This can be simply illustrated, for example, by the ways in which children create ‘playground poetry’ as an expression of subversion of adult conventions and expectations. At times this may be covert political action that plays with socio-cultural norms that emerge between children away from adult gaze. Stevens (2004: 158) observations of children’s playground culture capture a lovely example of this as children recite the following rhyme:

Abraham Lincoln was a good old soul
He washed his face in a toilet bowl
He jumped out the window
With his dick in his hand
And said, Scuse me ladies
I’m superman.

But at other times children’s play may lure adults into a form of knowing complicity with a suggestion of saying ‘forbidden’ words that prove to be something else (adapted from Opie and Opie, 1959: 97)

The higher up the mountain
The greener grows the grass
The higher up the monkey climbs
The more he shows his
Ask no questions, tell no lies

I saw the old man doing up his
Flies are a nuisance
Bugs are worse
That is the end of my little verse

Scott (1990), cited in Sutton-Smith (1997), suggests that such playful renditions may be seen as actions that inject a critique of their position while hiding away from adults, or playing with their presumed innocence with adults, a form of insubordination that Scott refers to as the 'infrapolitics' of the powerless. Playful moments, woven into the fabric of everyday life and liminal spaces allow for the expression of intense affects, when the 'as if' nature of playing, the ability to maintain collective control over being out of control, offers the chance to express 'virtual' emotions – a parody of primary emotions (anger, disgust, shock, fear, sadness and joy) without the real consequences (Sutton-Smith, 2003). Such moments are improvised and unpredictable and rarely planned, situated and pre-arranged. They are the outcomes of children's desires which seek to rework practices, as Rose (1999: 279) in more general terms suggests:

These minor engagements do not have the arrogance of programmatic [P]olitics – perhaps even refute their designation as politics at all. They are cautious, modest, pragmatic, experimental, stuttering, tentative. They are concerned with the here and now, not with some fantasized future, with small concerns, petty details, the everyday and not the transcendental...And in relation to these little territories of the everyday, they seek to engender a small reworking of their own spaces of action.

Playful events are not exceptional but mark the ability of children's playful dispositions, or a certain anticipatory readiness to a different way of using 'things' (Bennett, 2004), or response-abilities to the environment, to simply disorder and push at the boundaries that seek to contain them. It also offers a reminder that the world is not closed and fixed in place no matter what totalising and hegemonic systems seek to impose. Playing produces moments which are pleasurable and for the time of playing children get a sense that life is better; a sense of optimism that things can simply go on (Kraftl, 2008). Playing in this sense offers a utopian perspective that is far removed from adult utopian desires for children to become adult. They generally occur away from adult gaze and surveillance but even when with adults children can playfully rework existing routines and expectations. This can be further demonstrated through de Leon's (2007:414/415) observation of a Mayan conversational ritual. Here two young children (Jacinto and Lol) play with the cultural routine of greeting each other:

Jacinto: are you there, compadre?

Lol replies in a welcoming tone: I am here

Jacinto repeats the question but adds another element: are you there, jaguar?

Lol replies: I am here, pig

Adult relatives who are with the children laugh at this interplay, which appears to encourage the children to continue with this moment of playfulness.

Jacinto: Are you there, airplane?

Lol: I am here, lizard

Jacinto (laughing): Are you there, chair?

Lol (also laughing): I am here, table

Jacinto: Are you there, old rooster?

Lol: I am here, machete!

De Leon (2007: 415) observes ‘the dance of turns becomes an overlap of laughing screams from both boys who challenge each other, producing a list of names until Grandma says anchan! (“be quiet!”)’. Here we see a fairly mundane example of the seepage of playing into normal routines, and the moment of shared enjoyment between children and between adults and children before adult power restores order. Such moments are vital, and offer the possibility that not only can things be different, but there is the possibility of more of these moments to come. It also suggests a totally different perspective than is currently used when talking about children as political actors; the focus here is on the expressions of children in mundane everyday contexts rather than the ways in which children may be brought into adult Political arenas.

Minor acts of resistance in adult-child relationships

A fundamental element of children’s ability to find time/space for play is tied up with the very nature of adult-child relationships which in turn determine the dominant spatial productions and practices for children, and by doing so also determine and situate ‘adults’. In majority world countries, children and adults often share the same space and participate in communal practices, as discussed by Lester and Russell (2010:28/29):

There is a distinct lack of spatial positioning of children and they are ‘immersed in places thick with meaning that entwine them from their youngest age in the continuous building and sustaining of their local worlds (Nieuwenhuys, 2003:100). Play is an integral part of daily patterns and is closely linked with the demands of household tasks and other chores. The temporal demands on children to carry out tasks become extended by combining play with work

But with the increasing pace of globalisation, and the move towards urbanisation and new forms of economic production, traditional patterns are being replaced by a vision of childhood that is drawn from the minority world. Here childhood and adulthood are held by common-sense and habitual practices to be the opposite of each other (Lee, 2005). This finds expression in a range of social, cultural and political structures and actions that seek to locate and situate children in separate places, a representation of not being adult and as such need to be in special institutions designed to act upon their immaturity. Sutton-Smith (1997: 116) comments:

Children are a social stratum that is set apart. The public transcript of adults is the rhetoric of progress, which is a justification for educating and disciplining children for their future part in the adult world.

Children spend their days moving through a range of bordered spaces of one kind or another, hopefully progressing towards the state of becoming self-reliant, responsible and

mature (Aitken and Plows, 2010). Yet, as illustrated, the institutional borders are porous and subject to children's playful inversions and subversion; 'people cross these borders bringing with them conflicting ideas, experiences, ideals, values and visions (all the things that make up discourses) and different material resources' (Prout, 2005: 82). Curti and Moreno (2010:414) refer to these moments as 'mo(ve)ments', a dynamic process of 'negotiations, challenges and re-constitutions' to both boundaries that attempt to contain children's bodies and also an expression of children's everyday political agency in which mo(ve)ments seek to establish temporary control over the conditions of their lives.

Bordered spaces not only seek to create and maintain a version of childhood but also inevitably shape the roles of adults who work with children in these spaces. Common-sense productions of space and spatial practices subjugate the identities of both children and adults through subtle and not so subtle institutional materials and symbols that pattern relationships in an un-reflexive manner (Mozer, 2006). Disciplinary power (Foucault, 1990) subjects people to relations of power and by doing so produces a 'subject', a position that is always situated in diverse spaces and restrained or liberated by accounts of what it is to be a subject. But a subject who is at the same time produced and constrained can also act with intent in the diverse spaces in which they are subject and 'engage in a performative politics of reinscription' (Youndell and Armstrong, 2011:2). Just as children may temporarily disturb order, especially through playing, so adults can also overcome the constraints on their actions by more powerful others, contributing subversive acts to the disturbance of adult-child relationships. An interview with a playworker reveals this process. The playworker works in an after-school club situated in a community centre, sharing space alongside a range of other community based projects. The manager of the space has some very clear ideas about children and play, particularly around the idea of play fighting and children's aggressive superhero/war play. This leads to the imposition of a zero tolerance approach to these forms of play, reminiscent of Holland's (2003) analysis of approaches in Early Years Centres that reprimand children, when moving into these play behaviours, 'we don't play with guns here'. The playworkers, who are directly accountable to the manager, yet at the same time sympathetic to children's desire to engage in these forms of play, have evolved a response that ignores play-fighting while the manager is away from the setting, but collude with children in being aware when the manager is around and adopt a much more secretive approach which may include such things as using fingers as 'guns' and shooting each other behind the back of the manager, playing dead and even threatening to 'tell' the manager when this form of play emerges (both adults and children).

Such a response enables adults and children to overcome the constraints imposed by authority, to play with the rules, and also to simply get on together. The manager may on limited occasions 'catch' children out and 'tell the children off' and children accept this but then will carry on as before, perhaps this time with initial caution before moving back into their everyday ways of getting on with things. The space created through these encounters is not 'elsewhere' but is immediate, here and now, a space of being different carved out from hegemonic discourses and in the chinks and cracks which are always there in our relationships and social spaces (de Lauretis, 1987)

These minor engagements can hold off the normalising accounts of adult-child relationships that are formed and maintained at more major scales of organisation. But of course, many of the everyday encounters between adults and children reinforce existing power structures and spatial practices, hence the stance adopted by the manager of the After-School Club. It is not possible to determine any direct causal link between adults relationships and children’s play (as previously discussed, children play with and against adults) but perhaps what is most important is that children and adults have the opportunity to be thrown together in a variety of spaces in order to learn how to get in together rather than being kept apart. However, the point needs to be established that the process of minor politics occurs in a highly complex web of relationships in which dominant Political and economic forces, under the general guise of globalisation and neoliberalism conspire to establish top down forces that shape the nature of everyday practices. Any region, locality or community is subject to multiple internal relations which are also the product of forces which spread out well beyond to a global scale of influence (Massey, 2004). As Katz (2004) argues, such forces are continually countered and resisted through everyday practices, outlined in Katz’s study under the headings of ‘resilience, resistance and re-working’. These are clearly evident in the ways in which children’s play establishes moments of hope by imaginatively reworking the constraints on their daily lives, and by doing so realise that life can go on and there will be other opportunities for disturbance. Such processes are also evident in adult responses to the apparent constraints presented through dominant and habitual spatial practices. For children to exercise their ‘right to play’, as an expression of their participation and protection rights in general, requires changes to totalising accounts of adult-child relationships and critically exploring ideas about what children are, what they can do, and how adults and children are constructed and situated within society (James, 2010)

Conditions to support playfulness

As may be seen from the discussion to date, children’s playful relationships with each other and their environments are highly complex, spontaneous and context specific but it may be possible to discern some essential qualities within communities to support play. For example, Burghardt’s (2005) analysis of animal play proposes a number of key environmental and biological conditions which need to be present for playing to occur, including sufficient metabolic energy, buffered from stress, a need for stimulation and a lifestyle that involves complex sequences of behaviour in varying conditions i.e. the environment is not fixed and predictable. Given this, one can see that there is a complex combination of metabolic, neural, body, behavioural and ecological forces at play, producing what Lester and Russell (2008) refer to as a playful disposition, or Bennet’s (2004:350) anticipatory readiness as a ‘perceptual style congenial to the possibility of thing-power’

Lester and Russell (2010) draw on the work of Ungar (2008) to offer a conceptual framework to appreciate how a child’s right to play (and all the associated benefits of this across protection, participation and provision rights, summarised under the broad term ‘resilience’) may be supported within local communities. Tellingly Ungar (2008: 225) notes:

resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a

condition of the individual’s family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways.

From a children’s rights, play and resilience perspective, Ungar’s principle of ‘navigation’ suggests that a resilient community is one in which children are able to navigate to ‘health-sustaining resources’. Ungar cites the example of a child seeking self-esteem or any other aspect of well-being (joy and pleasure, friendship, moderate and desirable stress to enliven routines etc.) requires access to experiences and relationships that build self-esteem, ‘one can only navigate towards what is available and easily accessed’ (Ungar, 2008: 225).

In conventional terms, this suggests an association with provision rights, i.e. that the community provides health resources which children can navigate towards (in general terms this suggests food, shelter and support for basic metabolic needs; spaces that afford a degree of arousal and stimulation, the buffering from severe and toxic stress and so on). But also in the context of this paper and the relationship between playing and political agency, navigation would imply that children can appropriate available time/space within everyday routines and spaces to create moments of playing and to claim the potential health benefits that are associated with this process. Playful navigation, from this perspective, can be seen as full (*political*) participation, by exercising collective agency to appropriate available times/space for their desires – a much broader approach to navigation here than perhaps suggested simply by provision rights and the pattern of making separate spaces available for children away from their everyday environments²

Ungar’s second and interconnected principle is ‘negotiation’; again in general terms this implies that communities understand and negotiate time/space on behalf of children through their actions and attitudes. The process of negotiation, as suggested in this paper, does not assume consultation with or provision for children, but more accurately represents the responsibility of local communities to adopt a holistic or ‘caring’ approach to analyse and account for the ways in which micro and macro actions carried out by adults, through *Political* systems and everyday relationships (adult *politics*), may potentially impact on children’s ability to navigate their own time/space for play.

The local conditions under which children and adults may playfully get on together, as a way of enlivening the practicalities of everyday life and wonderfully revealed, for example, through Katz’s research in Howa and New York, resonates with a more general outline of the conditions which establish the ‘good city’ (Amin, 2004, 2006). In this work, Amin outlines a number of prevailing conditions or ‘registers’ (*the 4 ‘r’s*) in relation to urban life that may lead to ever-widening habits by which urban places can become spaces of solidarity where people ‘learn to live with, perhaps even value, difference, publicise the commons, and crowd out the violence of the urbanism of exclusionary and privatised interest’ (Amin, 2006: 1012). Amin’s focus then is not simply on the physical conditions of space but the quality of the inter-subjective relationships that contribute to producing a ‘good space’, a space of collective will to work out ways of living together and not apart. Adopting such an approach refutes a utopian blueprint to replace it with a more pragmatic

² Although this is not to deny the importance of making specific provision for children’s play in circumstances where children cannot ‘self-navigate’ and appropriate time/space in their immediate environments

account that can accommodate multiple ways of exploring relationships. These registers seek to acknowledge the complexity, heterogeneity and multiplicity of networks that exist in space rather than reduce them to highly normative accounts of what may constitute a ‘good life’. They are adapted here in order to begin to consider spatial features that may cultivate conditions in which children’s (and adult) playfulness may thrive. It will be apparent that what is discussed here is far removed from the traditional response to support children’s play through the design and provision of segregated playgrounds or staffed play provision:

1. **Repair:** this register acknowledges that urban spaces are composed of ‘objects-in-relation’ from fairly mundane everyday features of space to more advanced technologies. These technologies and objects regulate spatial practices and act as the filter through which ‘society reads and accepts social boundaries and demarcations, measures the achievement of modernity, assesses what it is to be modern and naturalises forms of authority and control that *made visible* in their raw power would face considerable scrutiny and opposition’ (Amin, 2006: 1014, my highlight). It is this process of ‘making visible’ which is important here. The dominant productions of space and its various technologies and symbols provide a backdrop to the ways in which children are positioned, the common ‘no ball games’ signs, road signals, the spread of electrical cables, sewers and grids, traffic flows, work patterns, media and so on all structure the rhythms of spatial life. As Amin comments, these ‘technologies’ are the life-support systems of urban space, but it is not a neutral patterning; technologies and symbols are imbued with power and intentionality. It is suggested that children’s political acts of playing are expressions of placing dominant orderings and powerful practices to democratic scrutiny, initiating a ‘policy of repair’, or as Katz (2004) would have it of re-working and differently ordering materials and bodies. No discussion around the ‘good life’ in terms of the policy of repair can ignore the need to ensure universal access to the basics of life, and the argument developed here is this must inevitably include time/space for playing. Thus, paying attention to the ways in which the technologies of space and their impact on children’s ability to navigate to ‘health-sustaining resources’ (Ungar, 2008) becomes a prime consideration in accounting for a good space for children and adults. In minority world countries, it immediately raises issues around children’s independent mobility and the dominance of automobiles, the increasing institutionalisation of childhood and other spatial practices. In the majority world, issues of repair may be more about toxic environments, unequal distribution of technology and so on.
2. **Relatedness:** the second of Amin’s registers is intimately connected with the politics of repair and here Amin proposes a relational politics of place, recognising that urban spaces are marked by levels of disconnection and ever-widening disparities in income, employment, housing, life span, well-being and so on. A politics of relatedness pays attention to imagining a socially just city based on an ethics of care which recognises difference as an essential component of being human in relationships with other humans (and beyond). An ethics of care raises important questions about the ways in which responsibility is enacted and how caring about others is negotiated across space (Aitken, 2009). This extends ideas from feminist ethics to recognise that ‘caring’ is not a private concern for women that is somehow

inferior to public politics. Rather caring should be seen as the key to social accountability and responsible citizenship (McEwan and Goodman, 2010). The foundation of an ethics of care resides with the acceptance that people are interdependent, and relationships are spatially formed through affective encounters with others, what McKie *et al* (2002) refer to as ‘caringscapes’. Thus rather than seeing children as ‘adults-in-waiting’, children are valued and cared for as being different from adult (but no less important). While children share the same biological features as adults, inhabit the same cultural and social spaces and develop intimate relationships with each other, in another sense children are different from adults, not only as a socially constructed difference, but biologically different; they perceive, sense, feel and act in the world differently. As such they are ‘other’ than adult and this notion of being other offers the possibility of seeing children, not through some universalising adult gaze that seeks to work with the commonalities and the becoming adult of childhood, but as ‘strangers’ to adult representations; there are aspects of being a child that are distant from being an adult. Lee’s (2005) analysis of the ‘separability’ of children is important here: a notion of ‘separability’ allows for moments in which children and adults can at times be together and apart; adults care for the ways in which children seek to be different and through this dominant accounts of ‘the child’ as inferior and separate from adult become ‘de-territorialised’, allowing for the possibility of reconfiguring adult-child relationships. Following Massey (2005), spaces are produced through the encounters of heterogeneous materials (bodies, emotions, materials, histories etc.). While dominant and powerful forces seek to control the ways in which spaces are produced, they can never be fully closed; there is always room for different ways of producing space in everyday life, what Katz refers to as small acts of resilience through mutual care-giving or the ‘minimal cultural decencies that serve to define what full citizenship in society means’ (Scott, 1985). Such relatedness is the foundation for children’s ability to navigate time/space for playing. Local everyday acts cannot be taken out of context from the wider forces which shape these actions, leading to Amin’s (2004: 41) concept of the relational properties of ‘propinquity’ or a ‘politics of negotiating the immanent effects of geographical juxtaposition between physical spaces, overlapping communities, contrasting cultural practices’.

3. **Rights:** this register acknowledges that all people, following Lefebvre (1996), have a right to participate in the production of the ‘urban’; the right to participate means having the ability to navigate to what is desirable, as previously discussed using Ungar’s (2008) framework. In the growing trend of urbanisation, participation may be impossible for many; in the South the production of urban space is driven by dominant political and economic forces which minimise any participation by the mass population; in the North, urban spaces are highly normalised through the exclusion and restriction of those who do not conform to the narrow standards established by the powerful elite. Amin (2006: 1019) comments ‘far too much of contemporary urbanism is driven by the need to crush vitality and to raise the alarm against non-conformity’. Amin’s application of ‘rights’ in the context of access to public space extends this from an individualistic account to a collective solidarity in which difference is an inevitable and vital part of public life and refers to the ways in

which people are ‘thrown together’ and through this process can learn to get on together. Of course, this extends to children and young people also; children are not private possessions, but have a place in producing and benefitting from being together with other children and adults in shared spaces of encounter.

4. **Re-enchantment:** the final register of Amin’s analysis asserts that urban spaces are spaces that offer moments of hope through the daily encounters with difference and the prospect of a caring sociality that comes from being thrown together in public space. A significant feature which contributes to an urban re-enchantment is the design intentions of public space – often driven by economic/political acts that promote certain forms of desirable (consuming) behaviours while restricting others (performative and disorderly). Playful use of public space offers a reminder that space cannot be fully fixed and presents a wider, more democratic use of the public realm that connects with the right to the city expressed by Lefebvre (1996). It also conjures up new uses that disrupt existing conventions and forms new relationships, which in turn are subject to continuous reformation.

Once the good city, as defined through Amin’s registers, begins to become solidified (but not ossified) the ‘politics of representation, now so strongly tied to corporate power – might be forced to give ground to another kind of politics based on participation on the ground and by those discounted as political subjects’ (Amin, 2006: 1022).

What this may suggest is that there is no simple cause-effect relationship between environmental conditions and children’s ability to carve out moments of playfulness in their daily lives. Ungar (2008:342) comments that resilience (and specifically in terms of this paper the relationship between resilience and playing) is ‘characteristically chaotic, complex, relative and contextual’. Rather than adults seeking to design separate space for children, attention is paid to the production of social and political space that addresses rights of presence for all and confronts the ways in which ‘others (i.e. non-adult) may be excluded from such spaces (Amin, 2004). It is somewhat inevitable that children’s playful production of public space in the minority world exposes tensions and contradictions in the dominant social order; it undermines common-sense understandings of children, space and play. Yet a respect for the otherness of children and their right to play also offers the possibility for unexpected encounters and moments under which the contradictions of social space are brought to life. Children’s playful creation of ‘spaces of hope’, even in the face of ‘limited horizons’, imagines a different world:

This sort of [playful] imagination – a potentially revolutionary imagination – is in desperately short supply under the globalised conditions of capitalist production...In the face of the sort of dismalism these conditions provoke, where neoliberal leaders feel emboldened enough to pronounce ‘there is no alternative’ to capitalism’s rapacious trajectory, it becomes crucial to find ways to spark this imagination and then build upon it (Katz, 2004: 257)

Such imaginings are not simply the preserve of children’s play but are present in everyday interactions between adults and children, minor moments of resilience, re-workings and

resistance, a form of political imagination that may find expression in ‘vigorous social movement’s (Katz, 2004:259) that may simply make the everyday more playful, and by doing so create democratic spaces that are fairer and more just.

A new paradigm of accounting for play

Institutional Political participation is relatively easy to account for by showing how children are engaged in formal and semi-formal Political processes (Children’s Parliaments, Youth and School Councils and so on) and how they ‘have their say’. But such engagement is also limited in terms of representing the body of ‘childhood’ in any given location. Research would suggest (just as in adult Politics) that only certain ‘types’ of children may desire to engage in Adult political forums (Kallio and Hakli, 2011a), while it could be claimed that all children must inevitably have ‘political selves’ by being a child in a certain location at a given time in history, and that such time/spaces matter for children.

While government policies are important, they cannot solely determine the conditions for play given its opportunistic, dynamic and local context. And while playing might be children’s response-ability or anticipatory readiness to the local conditions of childhood, such conditions are inevitably influenced and shaped by larger forces.

Seeing play as an expression of children’s political agency challenges dominant accounts of children’s right to participate, switching focus from engagement in Politics to exploring the ways in which children can find time/space to express their desires and establish momentary control over the conditions of their daily lives. As the examples of adult-child moments of playfulness recounted in the earlier part of this paper suggests, our given identities and political thoughts are more fluid and changeable than we have been led to believe; these adult response-abilities to playing offer a glimpse of different ways of being with children. Paying attention to these political moments takes us away from the traditional accounts of Politics (the Nation, governmental bureaucracies, civic organisations, citizenship and so on) to seek for what escapes them. This does not mean that ‘one seeks for what lies outside of them; it means that one seeks for what escapes from them and within them’ (May, 2005: 128).

The discussion around play as political action situates playing as a highly complex and multifaceted behaviour that defies traditional methods of accounting and representation. Capturing the everyday, mundane and largely un-reflexive political acts of children is somewhat problematic. All being well, children will create moments of playing throughout their daily routines and spaces; yet how this happens can never be fully captured or accounted for. Much of children’s political lives, or what Kallio and Hakli (2011c) refer to as the ‘*voiceless politics*’ of childhood, cannot be brought into the Political arena. Yet, given the relationship established between playing, health and well-being such moments must be important and that:

The entire realm of small, banal, low-key, daft, happenstance things, moments, events, practices, experiences, emotions, complexities, quirks, details and who-knows-what-else in and of everyday lives...ought to be taken far more seriously (Horton and Kraftl: 2005:133).

Perhaps the important question then is not what is or what is not political but *how* things are political (Kallio and Hakli, 2001b); this implies recognising the complex and multiple political contexts and forces which shape children’s lives, and in turn are shaped by children themselves through their everyday acts at local level. An account of children’s play must pay attention to the processes and relationships involved as children exercise their agency. It also points to the importance of paying attention to the heterogeneity and hybridity of relationships. The traditional binaries of nature/culture, adult/child, organic/technological and so on, while being useful heuristic devices, are ‘ill-suited in particular for perceiving and comprehending a globalised reality in which everything is intermeshed’ (Hengst, 2005:21). Adopting a different approach may reveal the world as an ‘assemblage’ of disparate materials. Rather than analysing the world into discrete components and reducing their ‘manyness’ by categorising, ranking and ordering, seeing the world as the formation, maintenance and fracture of multiple assemblages offers the opportunity to begin to appreciate the complex relationships that constitute the ‘fabric’ of childhood. It synthesises a multiplicity of elements without ‘effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for future arranging’ (Massumi, 1998: xiii). James (2010) uses the term ‘fabric’ to capture the interweaving of warp and weft to produce a patterned cloth. Here the warp are the lengthways threads in cloth that are usually twisted harder and are stronger than the weft, they ‘provide the foundations of the material and it is the number and length of the strands in the warp that determine the dimensions of the material’ (James, 2010: 493). The weft, which is the thread that creates the pattern of the material, represents the multiplicities of childhood *in situ*.

James’ model offers the possibility of moving away from the binary of structure/agency to an appreciation of the complex ways in which warp and weft weave with and between each other. It should be stressed that the structural determinants (the warp of structural and generational conditions of childhood) will produce different versions of childhood and the weft (the idiosyncrasies of individual childhoods) will be framed within this fabric. As James notes (2010):

In terms of constructing research and of analysis of social practices in relation to children and childhood, this has some important implications. Rather than simply focusing on and exploring the experiences, relationships and agency of the child or group of children at micro level and charting what differentiates these from those of other children, such an approach would require us to chart how that child’s experiences are framed at a macro level by the commonalities of childhood – social stratification, culture, gender, generational relations etc. – that set them aside from adults, before exploring the impact of their agency and the many other factors that create the diversity of their lives in different social, cultural, religious, political or economic contexts

An even more radical departure may be found in Prout (2005) and his application of some of the complex ideas developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1988). While James ‘fabric’ approach draws on micro and macro forces, it is essentially based on understanding human relationships in a cultural, economic and political context and as such a potential continuation of the binary of nature/culture. Another dimension may found in Prout’s

(2005) recognition of the hybridity of childhood; the spaces of childhood are not mere containers but are fluid spaces constructed from heterogeneous materials and forces. Humans are caught up in a trans-human network of sacred, viroid, digital, animal and plant life, and geological forces, all of which have their own speed and flows, but which interpenetrate each other at genetic, cellular, bodily, planetary and cosmological scales (Amin, 2004). Such forces are involved in the production of space, and such ‘spatialities’ are ‘decisive in the constitution of the local, but they continue to be written out in the hegemonic territorial imaginary of the world’ (Amin, 2004:34). Recognising the hybrid assembly of heterogeneous materials offers the possibility of seeing how increasingly biological and social forces weave together complex networks of relationships that cannot be accounted for in traditional ways, as Lee and Motzkau (2011:8) comment ‘life processes and social processes now regularly appear to mix with and to influence one another without regard to a biological/social boundary’. They continue this argument by suggesting that many bio-political formations of childhood consist of novel and unpredictable flows between materials and processes, forces, and events which cannot be examined through a bio-social (nature/culture) dualism. Lee and Motzkau’s application of multiplicities of bio-political constructions of childhood enables a complex reading of a specific aspect of adult-child relationships in the UK, namely the introduction of ‘Mosquito devices’ to deter children and young people from assembling in certain commercial and public spaces. A hybrid analysis reveals the ways in which biological (the difference between children’s and adult’s hearing capabilities), technological (sonic devices), economic (the commercial value and function of public space), social (the value attributed to ‘hanging out’ by young people), and political forces (the power dynamics between adult and children’s use of space) assemble together at a particular moment in time/place to establish this specific action against children. Employing a hybrid relational approach raises a series of critical ethical and political questions about adult-child relationships.

Another story

The following is another story that illustrates adult-child relationships was recounted by a Primary school playground supervisor, who was participating in a playwork course. Midway through the training programme she recalled a recent lunchtime session. There was one particular child, aged 7, who recently spent a large part of playtime pretending to be Batman, with his coat spread over his shoulders as a cape and making accompanying noises. He would ‘fly’ around the playground bumping into groups of children, sometimes to their annoyance, while at other times children would play along for a while before he drifted off again.

On this particular occasion a teacher was also on duty with the playground supervisor, and seeing the child’s behaviour and the disturbance he caused at times to other children, called the boy over to reprimand him for disrupting other children’s play and ‘why couldn’t he play properly’. As the playground supervisor commented, she felt powerless to say anything at this time and stood alongside the teacher with a sense of unease. Having carried out his role, the teacher started to walk away issuing a final comment to the child ‘and anyway, you are not Batman’. At this point, the playground supervisor, who was still facing the child but preparing to walk off with the teacher turned to the child with a smile and said ‘Na na na na

na na na na, na na na na na na na na...(the theme music for Batman cartoons), winked at the child and walked away.

This is a minor engagement, an example of the ways in which children’s difference can be both suppressed and supported. In discussion, the playground supervisor spoke of her discomfort with the actions of the teacher and her own sense of powerlessness, and because she was on the training course asked herself the question ‘what would Stuart do’, not as an expectation of getting any answer from me but as a way that her perceptions, emotions and actions were able to reconfigure dominant power relationship and bring about an alternative assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), another way of possibly seeing the world and acting accordingly.

At a crude level of analysis, the ‘Batman’ story reveals similar processes of assemblage and hybridity – power, gender and generation relationships, the political-cultural context of education, the influence of technology on children’s culture, a dominant cultural expectation that play is productive and purposeful and so on connect in complex and dynamic ways to establish this particular scene. Such forces shape spatial practices, but they are not fully closed off, and there is always scope for chance encounters and disturbance. Central to this assemblage is the child’s playful disposition – a perceptual, affective, embodied stance - that seeks to engage with the environment in a distinctive fashion and the impact of this on adult perceptions. The playground supervisors perception of the child playing Batman is framed by an assemblage of biological, cultural, historical forces operating in an embodied/embedded encounter to produce a degree of ‘comfort’ with what is taking place. But this level of comfort changes with the introduction of the teacher, who alters the dynamic in the assemblage and uses their power to seek to re-establish order and control over the child and the space by re-territorialising the nature of school playtime as safe and orderly. But the relationship between playground supervisor and child still allows for the possibility of playing with this switch in power and the oppressive act of the teacher. What may at first sight appear to be trivial and rather mundane event assumes significance by maintaining the possibility that things can be different and moments of hopefulness, which in playing manifest themselves as political questions of ‘what if...’ and embodied responses of ‘as if...’ can happen. These things matter, and if we see adult-child relationships continuously constructed through these minor engagements, paying attention to these moments and finding ways of articulating why and how they matter ‘might oblige us to think critically, honestly and perhaps creatively, about what we do, who we are, and what concerns us’ (Horton and Kraftl, 2006: 260).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to present children’s play as a form of minor political activity in their everyday worlds. Playing is a universal feature of childhood that offers moments of simply being different, becoming a child rather than becoming adult, and that such moments are highly important, not for some grand transcendental purpose, but rather for simply enlivening the practicalities of everyday life. It offers moments of hope that life can become better by venturing beyond the limits that the real world imposes and collectively holding an amount of control in a world that is generally beyond children’s control. And as Sutton-Smith (2003) asserts, the opposite of play, so often assumed to be ‘work’, is depression or a

distinct lack of ‘hope’. Playing is a belief and expression that the ‘not-yet’ can be actualised, or as Bloch’s (1986: 274) cited in Anderson, (2006: 695) exploration of hope suggests ‘an enormous experiment of mediated capability of being other in process’. Moments of playing, and the emotional and embodied anticipatory readiness mark an excessive possibility and potentiality (Anderson, 2006) of what can be that is expressed through moments of nonsense and disturbance.

These moments of hope that things can be different and better also invite adults to rethink ideas about what constitutes a ‘good life’, taking us away from an idealistic utopian vision in which children are the future salvation of current ills to one that pays attention to the ways in which adults and children make efforts to ‘spin webs of social justice and human well-being and emancipation out of the prevailing circumstances’ (Amin, 2006: 1010). Given children’s positioning as largely subordinate and separate in minority world countries a change in their rights and status will only come about by challenging and re-working the structural positioning of children and adults. This becomes a political and ethical movement for both adult and children – an opportunity to challenge the ways in which adult-child relationships are constructed and maintained to the detriment of both groups (James, 2010). Employing guiding principles such as ‘navigation and negotiation’ (Ungar, 2008) and Amin’s (2006) registers of what might constitute the ‘good life’ offers a critical framework to begin to account for the conditions in which playfulness may thrive. Rather than considering an isolated call for children’s right to play, we are concerned with the ways in which registers of repair, relatedness, rights and re-enchantment shape the conditions of adults and children’s lives, acting as a ‘democratic audit’ (Amin, 2006: 1021) that gives an impression of the current state of the basics of existence that ranges across all of the UNCRC Articles

This requires a mind shift that makes it possible to ‘hear’ the ‘voiceless politics’ that come alive when children play, to witness these micro-events and ways in which conventional reality becomes blurred. This stance does not mean a further colonisation of children’s lives but rather recognition that children are separable from adults (not separate). There will be occasions when adults and children can be different together, and by doing so unsettle dominant accounts and present different ways of being adult-child. A shift in thinking requires that adults in minority world countries (and increasingly as a form of adult-child relationships being exported globally) care for children’s separability (Lee, 2005) as the basis for the ways in which adults can look after children. This ethics of care offers an alternative to common sense productions in which for the most part children’s everyday experiences are held to be inconsequential unless directly involved in becoming future adult citizens. A re-working may lead to greater imagination of the possibilities contained within ‘adult’s being with children’ and for new forms of social, economic and political order to emerge

Appreciating the vitality of playing requires new ways of accounting for the mundane experiences of children as being important and far from trivial, which in turn requires new ways of accounting for the complex conditions which cultivate environments in which children can navigate to the health-sustaining benefits of playing. This suggests that rather than treating children and adults as autonomous and independent (supported by liberal interpretations of the acquisition of universal rights as one ‘grows up’), attention is given to

the interdependency of relationships, a collective ethics of care that produces an ever-growing solidarity of the vitality of communities in which adults and children can be, and life can go on, together. At the heart of this solidarity are the ways in which adults care for (or negotiate) the conditions in which children can play, and by doing so create space for challenging the dominant assumptions and practices of social and spatial production and imagining other possibilities and desires (Pinder, 2002).

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