

# PLAYFUL ADVENTURES

---

François Matarasso

## WHY IS OUR CHILDHOOD NOT A GOOD GUIDE TO OUR CHILDREN'S?

For someone like me, who grew up in the 1960s, the world of 2022 can seem quite disorienting. Although the Sixties are now seen as a time of social, political and cultural upheaval, that was not how they appeared to a child in primary school. The world is mysterious to children, but the limits of their understanding protect them with simplifications they can deal with. So, at least for me, the world seemed rather stable. At the global level, it was divided between us and the largely unknown communist bloc, who were the bad guys: about everyone else we knew little and thought less. Everyday life was similarly intelligible. Mostly, the other children at school, their families and everyone else you met seemed much like you. They looked and spoke like you, kept the same festivals, watched the same TV shows. The other, like the communists, was elsewhere. With two television channels, offering just an hour or two of children's programmes a day, our window on the world was small and closely controlled. And the future seemed equally straightforward: there were jobs and professions to choose from and you could picture yourself living a life much like that of your parents, only better.

I don't evoke this childhood idyll, or fantasy, to inspire nostalgia. Nor indeed do I mean to suggest that this eight-year-old view of the world was in any way accurate. But it illustrates how much and how fast the world has changed. A child growing up in Europe now has a more complex view of the world than ever before. Her primary school will include children of different races, cultures and ethnic backgrounds, brought up in different faiths. They dress and eat differently and often speak another language at home: she herself may be learning a new language by coming to school. She is more likely to live with only one parent or with a stepparent. She may not live in the country where she was born and her walk home from school may be along

---

*Playful Adventures* v.3 (07/22) was originally written in 2008 and published in *Engage Journal* 22 (July 2008) under the title 'The Seriousness of Games, Art, young people and learning. It was subsequently revised for a talk at the ARTES conference on 14 November 2014 at Florence (Italy). This version was published on 1 July 2022 at <https://parliamentofdreams.com> and <https://miaaw.net> © 2022 François Matarasso, under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) licence. You are free to copy, distribute, or display the digital version on condition that: you attribute the work to the author; the work is not used for commercial purposes; and you do not alter, transform, or add to it.

unfamiliar streets, among strange people. Television, computers and smartphones will give her access to an unimaginably large and diverse world, filled with wonder and beauty, as well as horror and chaos. She will have learned about places and ideas to inspire her dreams: she may also have seen images that bring her nightmares. She will be growing up in a world where war, atrocity, hunger and poverty are the norm, where getting a zero-hours contract as a barista is seen as a success, and where her older siblings still live at home because there is nowhere affordable to rent. She will, as she grows older, be wondering what place there will be for her in this complex, exciting, scary world. But whatever she is thinking, her eight-year-old understanding of normality is very different to that of my generation.

Again, this sketch is not intended to be dystopian or even pessimistic, but to mark how different a European childhood is today than it was when the people who rule, manage and administer our lives were themselves children—because it is largely my generation that is in charge now. The generation that grew up in that relatively simple, stable world I evoked is making decisions about how to support the education of children growing up in a world that they may understand in an abstract, theoretical way but cannot experience as do the children for whom they provide. And yet, precisely because the world in which today's children are growing up is so different from the one that shaped previous generations, it is vital to help them prepare to succeed in it.

### WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION CAN PREPARE CHILDREN FOR LIFE IN THE MID 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY?

Few people would disagree with that, of course: the disagreements arise when we ask what success means, what is needed to achieve it and how children can best acquire the knowledge and capabilities it requires? It is a vital debate and, since the idea that universal education was a public good found acceptance in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has animated education theory, policy and practice. I am not an educationalist and, with only an outsider's understanding of the theories and methods of education, I shall not venture into that territory. But it is not necessary to be an expert to have a view about why we educate our children: that, after all, is something every parent cares about.

For British politicians, of left and right, the answer has been broadly consistent throughout my life. They see education as serving to equip young people with the skills needed to find jobs. In November 2013, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, told the Confederation of British Industry that: *'The second thing we've got to get right is education [...] to ensure that the people can take part in a modern industrial economy'*.<sup>1</sup> Again, who would disagree with that?

It would be a grave failure not to equip young people with the skills to get rewarding jobs and earn a living. But the statement begs the question of what skills and capacities are needed to 'take part in a modern industrial economy'. For Cameron, as for most of his class and profession, the answer is clear: '*English and Maths are the two most important vocational qualifications [and] children should go on taking and retaking English and Maths until they get them*'.<sup>2</sup> Literacy and numeracy are certainly vital skills, but are they enough? What about the other things our child is learning in her multi-lingual, multicultural classroom, such as the ability to live and work with difference, to empathise with others or cooperate? What about her innate gifts and talents, which Plato wanted the teacher to bring to life as a midwife helps a mother to give birth? And what about her sense of right and wrong, her values and her ethical understanding?

Too often, in focusing on the skills needed for employment, political discourse neglects or even ignores such vital aspects of our human potential. And even in its focus on marketable skills, David Cameron's simplistic, utilitarianism has a dubious, old fashioned confidence in the nature and needs of a modern industrial economy. In fact, when there are few jobs for life, when people train, retrain and train again and may work in several different fields during a working life that is likely to include part-time and flexible working, the most valuable skills may be transferable and adaptable—the ability to work independently, to learn from experience, to take initiative, to be a team member, to think creatively and so on. And unlike literacy and numeracy, which can be drilled into young minds and tested again and again '*until they get them*', these skills are better learned than taught. How can rigid, standardised, graded education equip students for life in complex, fluid and unreliable working and social environments?

This is where art has something to offer children and young people, though its importance is still rarely understood by politicians. In their own, relatively stable schooldays, art was confined to a lesson a week, perhaps some music tuition if they were lucky, and a rare school outing to a museum or theatre. It was seen as giving children an opening onto their culture—because it was still possible then to think in terms of one universal national culture—that could be built on in adult life. It was not seen, except by some visionary educationalists, as integral to how a child might develop a wider range of competencies and how she might learn to understand and relate to the world. Part of what has been achieved since the schooldays of most politicians has been a transformation of our understanding of art's place in education, but the generational lag and the influence of utilitarianism in our politics means that we have not yet been able to act consistently on that changed understanding.

I am not proposing more and better access to art in schools as a substitute for teaching literacy and numeracy, science and citizenship. Nor am I offering

it as a panacea to the social, economic and other uncertainties of a world in rapid transition. But I do argue that creative approaches to education in and through art can help equip children with some of the life skills they need to succeed in our complex, diverse and globalised world. Art can help children and young people understand more about themselves and the society in which they will use the literacy, numeracy and other skills they are acquiring, so that they know better the power and risks they may encounter. In the end, art's greatest value in education may not even be what children can learn from it but *how* they learn. To see why that is, we need to look more closely at how art works with children and young people and how they work with it.

## HOW DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGE WITH ART?

### 1. VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

All children discover art for themselves. From a very early age, they draw, paint, sing and dance, mostly without hesitation, and they love stories with a passion. Art is so important and so natural to children because it is central to how they understand and interpret their experience. Through it, they can represent, to themselves and to others, what they have seen, heard, experienced and felt. They can externalise their developing ideas in communicable form and learn whether they are similar to or different from others, and how to communicate better what they want to share. They can begin to understand what they and others see as good, important or valuable. They can look for meaning in what surrounds them. As they grow older, if they stay with it, they can discover that art is a deliberate, often self-conscious but only partly rational activity that sets out overtly to reflect or create meaning by exploring subjective experience and bringing to it enough clarity or order that people can be comfortable with it. Art is a toolbox of resources that people use to tinker with how they see and are seen and so, perhaps, come to terms with their existence. It is not the only means humans have created for this purpose, but it remains the most open, free and accessible. As the great Portuguese artist, Paula Rego, once said, *'Art is the only place you can do what you like. That's freedom.'*<sup>3</sup>

Since art is a working space, where people make meaning and values from experience, it is naturally messy. Workshops and studios are not tidy, like classrooms. The people who work in them know where things are and why, but visitors may see only a chaotic assemblage of materials, half-finished work, abandoned failures, scrap and trash. An artistic space, whether actual or metaphorical, can be hard for an outsider to interpret. Walk into a dance

workshop with a group of 10 year olds and it may not look more interesting than the average gym class, but in the minds of those taking part, linked in a shared imaginative space, a process of creative exploration is at work. In *Star Trek*, the crew relaxes by using an immersive roleplaying experience called the holodeck: to an outsider, nothing is visible, other than someone going through a series of incomprehensible motions, but to the participant, the purpose and meaning is reality.<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bayard, the French professor of literature and psychoanalyst, has written perceptively on the existence of imaginary worlds in literature, where the reader's *'identity is often blurred and shifting and his relation to literary characters can remain unclear, but he is undoubtedly an inhabitant [of this world] and undergoes the psychological effects of the events that occur there'*.<sup>5</sup> Anyone who wants to understand art, and how it works on people, must be willing to enter the space. To stand outside, and refuse to acknowledge internal experience as real, is to be wilfully blind. The internal experiences of love, hate or friendship, like those of art, are no less powerful because a school inspector cannot see or grade them.

In fact, the privacy of artistic experience is one of its principal assets. People become vulnerable in an artistic space, because they open themselves imaginatively to all sorts of unknown possibilities. They are willing to share that space with others only because everyone is similarly vulnerable. Art without trust is impossible. The inaccessibility of the space to an outsider—a non-participant observer—is part of what makes the experience safe. A space of trust can give a child who would normally spend the whole lesson erasing her work the confidence to make and leave her mark.

## 2. AMBIGUITY

The ambiguity of artistic experience is also crucial to permitting safe exploration. People generally avoid ambiguity because it can be dangerous. Operating industrial machinery or accounting for money depends on clear and reliable processes. But human beings are not machines and their experiences are contingent. Their behaviour changes in response to different people, different situations and different times. When two people speak, shared knowledge may give their words a sense unavailable to a third person lacking that knowledge. People are malleable and porous, constantly influenced by what is around them. They need to learn how to live in a world of uncertainty, where interaction with others cannot always be predicted or relied upon.

Among the many paradoxes of artistic practice is that it demands empathy, engagement, openness and vulnerability towards the other but produces experiences that remain internal, unshareable and ultimately unquestionable. As John Carey, another professor of literature, observes, *'other people's feelings cannot be accessed'*.<sup>6</sup> Artistic experiences can be claimed or denied with equal

confidence, and that makes them a very safe place for interacting with others. Though they articulate profound feelings, beliefs and values, they do so in ways that people need not commit to: there is an essential deniability to most artistic experiences. Beliefs and values form the basis of social relations. They govern the degree to which individuals or groups find one another mutually acceptable. The arts make a space within which our beliefs can be formed, experienced, questioned and reformed; at the same time, they enable people to learn how to explore beliefs through interaction with others. A rich access to such experiences can give children and young people capacities and understanding that will serve them throughout their lives.

### 3. EXPLORATION

The arts have an important if not necessarily self-conscious place in people's lives, though the work that matters to them is not always that which others would wish them to like. But setting aside, for the moment at least, contested ideas of artistic worth, it is obvious that people would not spend so much time watching films and drama, reading, listening to music or looking at pictures, to say nothing of amateur participation, unless it meant a lot to them. And it rarely means more than when they are children because then they are living an experience of continual exploration. (Most adults, unfortunately, lose that sense of unmediated exposure to the world, as they fall into the illusion of thinking they understand it: that is one reason why descriptions of artists, by other adults, so often use clichés such as playful and child-like.) Art is among the most flexible, enjoyable, varied and exciting ways children have of engaging safely with the external world. It offers a secure bridge between external and interior worlds, and it is by constant use that children deepen their understanding of both, and learn to make their own judgements.

Art's role in permitting exploration is central to its importance in childhood. In a school day dictated by the learning outcomes of every lesson, there should be some activity which is itself an outcome rather than a vehicle for instruction. Good artists cannot say where their work will arrive, only where they think they are aiming. Indeed, it is a reasonable test of a good art education activity that its results cannot be known in advance and still less guaranteed. If the aim is to produce something sure to look good on the classroom walls for parents' evening, the activity is likely to be less valuable as art, or education. Unless there is the possibility of failure—and learning that failure is both normal and survivable is one of the most important things that children should bring into adulthood—there is no real creativity at work. The primary task of an artist working with young people is to ensure that the journey itself, the experience of participation, is so rich and rewarding that failure to reach an anticipated outcome is no more than disappointing. It should encourage

the participants to reflect on the ground they have covered and how they might move on with a better chance of success next time.

But outright failure is unusual when children are supported imaginatively through a creative process. The trust that gives them confidence is mirrored in the confidence that an experienced artist will have in them during a workshop: they will be trusted to succeed in their own terms. This is not because there are no standards or because success is easy but because children set themselves goals that they can imagine, and what they can imagine is within their grasp, even when they do not yet have the technical or other skills they may gain as they grow older. Young people need to be trusted and, like most people, they respond to trust by proving themselves trustworthy. It is a calculated risk, but the arts are not about giving something ready-made to children—there is no shortage of such experience elsewhere in their lives—but about empowering them to take an autonomous role in shaping their own experiences. (Paradoxically, an artist working with children, whether in school or elsewhere, is often expected by teachers to deliver better outcomes than a normal class, if only to justify their inclusion in the timetable governed by instrumental education policies.)

#### 4. WONDER AND EMPATHY

Such autonomy helps foster other important aspects of artistic experience, including a capacity to wonder and to empathise. Good artists remain able to look at the world as if for the first time and, by doing so, they can question how it is seen. They help revive a proper sense of the extraordinary adventure it is to live at this time, in this place, and with these possibilities. Wonder also imbues many of the processes they use. Turning out a plaster cast to reveal negative space, making and transforming a digital image, or producing a satisfying sound from an instrument are all experiences that feed a child's natural capacity to marvel. A child who marvels at what other people do, or are, or think, or say, uses empathy, that vital, necessary recognition that other people are also autonomous beings, observing us as we observe them. Seeing how others have responded to the same idea, and yet produced different images or stories, is part of learning to place oneself in the world and in relation to others, rather than at its centre. As people externalise themselves through their art, they engage with the very different visions of others, and gradually develop their own sense of what they like, what they feel comfortable with and what they believe.

Exposure to the arts is part of how people find their values. By working through a diversity of books, good and bad, thrilling and dull, children begin to develop their own taste—but only if the books are the work of artists. The imaginative encounter with Tove Jansson, Dr Seuss, Hergé or Roald Dahl

offers experiences quite unlike those found in the reading schemes that grade ascent of the language mountain. Those may have their place, but they do little to feed a child's imagination or to help them understand themselves in the world. Their stories are forgettable and forgotten. Their ideological frameworks instruct rather than question, and it is not access to instruction that children lack. Later on, it is in passionate discussion of the merits of singers, films and games that teenagers define themselves and their relationships with others, helping them build a sense of shared identity through infinite subtle cultural distinctions obscure to their parents. The sense of identity, shared and individual, that children build through immersion in the arts as they grow stays with them throughout their lives, shaping the kind of people they think they are and forming important tokens of recognition.

## 5. FINDING A VOICE

So the arts provide children and young people with opportunities to explore, to wonder, to empathise and to find their own sense of values. In those experiences, young people can find their voice. Because the arts space, unless it is misused, is safe, it enables the most timid or uncertain to express themselves, and because the language and skills are different, it may be quite different children who shine than those who excel in the classroom. Artists experienced in work with schools will be familiar with the teacher's surprise at how a particular child has been transformed during an arts workshop. A teacher said this to me during a research project I did in Portsmouth 25 years ago: *'He usually finds it hard to concentrate for any length of time, whereas on the day he sustained interest for nearly one and a half hours'*.<sup>7</sup> In reality, this should not be surprising, since the arts create a completely different kind of space in which children can find their own position. The child who struggles with spatial concepts in mathematics may find them entirely natural in choreography. Finding a voice, and the confidence to use it, is the other side of the empathy required to listen to others: together, they are essential to becoming an autonomous member of a democratic society. It looks like play, but young people's engagement with art is more profoundly serious than most people imagine.

## PLAYFUL ADVENTURES

Children and young people get most from art when, paradoxically, least is intended or expected. When art is used as a tool for instruction—deliberately to build skills and confidence, to address 'offending behaviour', or to pass on cultural or identity values—it becomes just another part of an inflexible education system. It ceases to be a space for learning and becomes, like maths



or science, a means of teaching. The child's experience switches from an active one of discovery to a passive one of reception. Art is neither more nor less effective in this utilitarian purpose than any other field of knowledge: success depends on other factors. It is not even particularly interesting, either in the processes employed or in the products that result.

But when children's access to art is more autonomous—and, as I have argued, art is a very safe territory on which young people can explore the benefits and risks of autonomy—it opens up remarkable new opportunities for personal growth and development. The best art projects with children demonstrate its potential to support their learning and to help them grow up to live, work, create and lead in the complex societies of 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe. Through working in drama, visual art, music and digital media, in discovering traditional and new cultural forms, in creating individually and together, and in sharing the results with each other, with their families, with friends and with strangers, young people will always be learning. Their experiences will often lead to positive personal changes welcomed by parents, sought by teachers and required by government.

But engaging with art needs to happen within a liberal, child-centred education framework that encourages the child to find their own way, that genuinely enables them to be the best they can be and not just conform to an external standard. Art's deepest, and very real benefits, come as gifts, unexpected and unobserved. Those who demand them as tribute will get, at best, a hollow simulacrum. As the instruction and testing of children becomes more and more dominant in education, and as the future it is supposed to prepare them for becomes less and less predictable, art still provides a safe alternative in which to explore, discover and learn. It is more important than ever that children and young people should be enabled to engage with art in the way that it works best—on their own terms.

---

<sup>1</sup> Speech by Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP to the CBI Annual Conference, 4 November 2013 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-cbi-speech-2013> (verified 14.06.22)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.paintingsinhospitals.org.uk/19-great-artists-say-it-themselves-part-iii> (verified 14.06.22)

<sup>4</sup> <https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Holodeck> (verified 14.06.22)

<sup>5</sup> 'Son identité y est souvent floue et mobile, et ses relations aux personnages littéraires peuvent demeurer indistinctes. Mais il en est bien un habitant et subit les effets psychologiques des événements qui s'y produisent.' Bayard, P. (2008), *L'Affaire du Chien des Baskerville*, Paris: Minuit, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> Carey, J. (2005) *What Good Are the Arts?* London: Faber p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Matarasso, F. (1998) *Poverty & Oysters, The Social impact of local arts development in Portsmouth*, Stroud: Comedia, p.26.