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The role of play by Margaret Gracie

Abstract

In 'The role of play', the fifth article we are highlighting from the extensive *FORUM* archive available online, Maggie Gracie draws on material and observations she had collected during a year of study in an infant and reception class in the mid-1970s to develop ideas about the need to enable pupils to develop genuine autonomy of action and independence of thought. Prevailing curricular structures in school undermine or inhibit this development. Teachers can and must change these structures, so as to limit their tendency to construct children as passive recipients of a predetermined and self-sufficient learning experience. An important element in this construction is the teacher's own prior mastery of what it is the pupil is learning. Gracie considers how this inevitable imbalance in knowledge and understanding can be circumvented through play and in opportunities for artistic expression: 'When they play and when they paint, the children have few constraints on their power to formulate ideas, experiment with them and evaluate the results'. However, play tends to be regarded as less educationally important than the (inevitably teacher-directed) work of engaging with reading, writing and numeracy, thereby undermining the value accorded to pupils' independent and autonomous thinking and action. Gracie's account, tentative and preliminary though it is, serves to remind us of the need to value play in our own day, and to rebut a policy of 'school readiness'.

Keywords: play; learning; autonomy; independence of thought

Introduction by Jane Martin and Patrick Yarker

Margaret Gracie, who was known as Maggie, was born in Croydon in 1941. She studied sociology at Leeds University, and actively supported Bert Ramelson's Communist Party candidacy in the by-election of 1963, caused by the death of Hugh Gaitskill. Gracie undertook her initial teacher education at Leicester University School of Education in 1964, where Brian Simon was a lecturer. Gracie's political commitment saw her involved in the sustained anti-racist struggle in Leicester, then at the forefront of the fight against racial discrimination and racist anti-immigration policies. Maggie became secretary of Leicester Campaign for Racial Equality in 1967, and was central to the Inter-Racial Solidarity Campaign. She remained actively opposed to the rise of the fascist National Front in the 1970s. In 1964 she had married Deepak Nandy, who would found the Runneymede Trust in 1968 to further racial equality, but the pair separated in 1969.

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Leicestershire was in the process of abolishing educational selection, a feat it would achieve at the end of the 1960s, the first English county so to do. Leicestershire's education plan involved creating middle schools, and Gracie's first teaching post was in one of these, at Bushloe High School, which had opened in 1959. The school experimented with non-streaming, and had a resource-based centre in which the teachers of the youngest pupils worked in teams. Gracie's first article for *FORUM* (in volume 12, number 3, and written as Margaret Nandy) explored teaching sociology. Several other articles followed, including 'The role of play' (*FORUM* 19(3), pp83-85).

Maggie Gracie joined the pioneering Countesthorpe College a year after it opened, in 1971. Four years later, in 1975, she became warden of Blaby Teachers' Centre, which served the Countesthorpe area with a remit that included all schools, primary and secondary. In that year, she also joined *FORUM*'s editorial board, serving on it until the close of 1980. Her commitment to progressive educational approaches and to the vital importance of involving teachers in their own continuing professional development led to a friendship with Lawrence Stenhouse and Jean Ruddock at the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) at the University of East Anglia, whose work on the humanities curriculum project (inspired by Jerome Bruner's 'Man: a course of study' or MACOS) offered a way for teachers and students to generate and road-test curriculum content and practices. Gracie wrote about this work in 'The teacher and in service training' (*FORUM* 18(1)), where she argues that teachers are the most important people to involve in planning and organising and contributing to professional development courses.

After two years at the teachers' centre, Gracie was appointed deputy head at the newly opened purpose-built comprehensive, West Moors Middle School, in Dorset. She brought Stenhousian curricular approaches to the school, along with a trademark modesty, sharp insight and commitment to the support of staff. Her colleague Lee Enright, in his obituary of Gracie in *FORUM* (25(3), p 89), wrote that, for her: 'the curriculum was not something that could be imposed on those who were to teach it, and that teachers had a responsibility to be involved in the decision-making process. Indeed she felt that a curriculum that did not come from the staff could never fully be implemented by them'.

This position would come under concerted attack in the lead-up to the imposition, in 1988, of the national curriculum.

After three years at West Moors, Gracie returned to Leicester to study to become a solicitor. She died in December 1982, aged only 41. A pamphlet, *Margaret Gracie: a teacher for our time*, published in 1983 and edited by Brian Simon, testifies to the powerful impression her character, ideas and practice made on her colleagues.

Gracie devoted her life's work to teaching and to the encouragement of teachers. A commitment to discovery learning and the intellectual rights of children, not only to

understand the syllabus but what assessment is about also, were among the values that guided her work in the classrooms of the schools where she taught. Above all else, a strong impression is created of a 'teacher's teacher' who left 'some powerful signposts pointing towards teacher professional development and the creation of full learning communities in schools'.[1] Her text is presented as originally published, even though certain language in it may read today as exclusionary.

The role of play

Margaret Gracie

Along with many other teachers, my long term interest in education is to help children become autonomous thinkers, able to plan, execute and evaluate their own studies. Most of us have the assumption that autonomous thinking is an ability which develops gradually and can be fostered in school by many years of systematic skills learning. I would like to argue here, however, that although certain skills contribute to thinking ability, practice in autonomy is at least as important, and the lack of this practice may be an important reason for our evident failure to reach the objective. Secondary school teachers are familiar with the paradoxical resistance students can mount against curriculum innovation and changes in teaching methods. In recent research, Roy Nash explored the ways in which the pupils' expectations influence the teacher and contribute to the maintenance of traditional roles in the classroom. He reports that children prefer the teacher who 'keeps order', 'teaches you', 'explains', 'is interesting', 'is fair' and 'is friendly'.

> Many of these expectations pupils have implicitly recognise a passive conception of their role. For example, the children think they should be kept in order. They do not believe they should be given the opportunity to control their own behaviour. Again they say that they should be 'taught things'. They don't demand to be given the opportunity to find things out for themselves … The conception of teacher behaviour they consider correct is one that considerably restricts their own autonomy and their range of purposeful action. If the experience of school does generate such limiting self-definitions it is surely not achieving its aim.[2]

Roy Nash suggests that it is the child's previous experience of school which leads to his preference for traditional modes of instruction. This is certainly a hopeful line of enquiry since teachers are capable of changing the child's previous experience of school. Alternative explanations for the teenager's lack of interest in independent learning – adolescence, changing interests and the generation gap between pupil and teacher – imply that the teacher cannot alter the situation. But if the typical experience

of school from five to 13 is seen as a process which progressively cuts out choice and individuality and persuades children that the important learning has already been done by others, we cannot be surprised if the child's concept of school acts to prevent him exercising autonomy. We can go on to explore the ways in which this negative concept is formed, and ways of changing it.

The following extracts may help to demonstrate the optimistic view that the child's experience of school can help to change his expectations.

> Tommy is the headmaster, Robin is the school-teacher, and I am the naughty boy. Robin asks us what are two and two. We say they are six. He gives us the belt. Sometimes we run away from school and what a commotion! Tommy and Robin run after us. When we are caught we are taken back and everybody is sorry.[3]

> Three girls are in the reading corner, and one of them, Joan, is choosing a book. She can't settle and seems to be trying to coax Susan and Jane into playing a game. Suddenly they are playing schools. Susan instructs Jane, 'Now you read this', handing her a book. Joan and Susan read a harder book together. Soon they change the book and Susan points to the words on the cover, 'Mr … don't pretend you don't know it … Mr Grumpy'. Some more changing of books and reading aloud until Susan finds the flash cards. She held up the card 'be'. Joan put up her hand and Susan ignored her, knowing that Joan can easily read 'be', and helped Jane to read it, giving her the card to hold when she succeeded. Susan told Joan, 'Sit on your bottom, and then let Joan fetch a cushion'. 'Oh! Sit on your bottom! You know what you'll get. Don't you?'. They continued with the flash cards until the word 'news'. Susan and Joan both read well, and Joan tries the answer 'knows'. Susan, knowing that 'know' is one of the cards, hunted through the pile to demonstrate Joan's mistake.[4]

The second extract is in some ways exceptional with Joan modelling her teaching style closely on her own teacher's. At other times, the same children played at traditional schools, even though they had no such experience, using appropriate concepts of school to explore reality and fantasy.

Although infant and nursery schools have a tradition for allowing individual development and freedom of expression, it does not follow that every aspect of early education helps to promote a concept of school which will enable the development of autonomous thinking, and since a child's first experiences of education must be significant in this process, the constraints on autonomy at this level need further investigation.

There is an important factor operating against the child's ability to reason for himself: the teacher has already mastered the skills which the children are learning. This puts the teacher in a very powerful position. Even if she allows freedom to choose activities, set the pace and determine how long to stick with an activity, in the fields of

learning reading, writing and mathematics, the teacher alone determines the structure of learning activities and evaluates each child's progress. At first sight, there appears to be no problem for one can hardly expect a child to learn to read on his own or rediscover mathematics with no guidance. The teacher's knowledge and experience is however a problem as it makes it hard for her to present a model for the excitement of discovery. Because she knows so much she encourages the passive role of learner which grows through the years at school into the pupil's rejection of the contribution he can make to learning.

Marginal counter strategies

The infant classroom is already full of constraints on independent learning which the teacher finds beyond her control. Reading schemes provide a built-in drive towards competition and external standards: lacking any other scale, children use their progress through the scheme as a general guide to how well they are doing. The teacher may try to establish non-competitive working relationships, but the children working in small groups have a different system: they do praise each other's work, but they also compare and criticise, particularly in terms of quantity and neatness. The classroom may contain aids to self-evaluation – the number line, lists of common words and phrases, letter shapes and mathematical apparatus – but the child is propelled to seek final evaluation from the teacher because, after all, she knows how to count, spell, read, cut, sew and paint best. A teacher can try to minimise the harmful effects of constraints like these. She can choose reading books on an individual basis from a large range, or write her own, or choose an unnumbered or uncolour-coded scheme; she can discourage spiteful and boastful evaluation of work; and she can constantly encourage the development of the child's ability to assess their own progress. But can she minimise the pervasive constraint, the gap between her mastery and the children's ignorance of basic skills?

Pitfalls of play

There is an area in the classroom where children do exercise autonomy. When they play and when they paint, the children have few constraints on their power to formulate ideas, experiment with them and evaluate the results. While observing the children in one infant classroom over a period of several months, I arrived at two conclusions about the role and context of play in the real world of the classroom. First, play follows the patterns indicated in the literature of educational play. It is important for its instrumental role in developing learning skills: social relationships and the nature of social reality (the Wendy house etc.); pre-reading, pre-mathematical and pre-scientific skills (clay, sand, water, constructional materials); and therapeutic (any type). Second, although it occupies a large proportion of some children's time, it occupies little of the

teacher's time because she has organised her room so that she can concentrate her attention on reading, language and mathematical work. This leads to a more important conclusion: that the absence of the teacher in play activity creates an implicit set of priorities in the child's mind, 'play is less important than work'. But since play may well be the vehicle for establishing a positive attitude towards independent learning, the low priority for play snatches back this opportunity.

The only way to give play a higher status in the classroom is for the teacher to spend more time in this area of activity. Again, her role in play is important in establishing the child's autonomy. When a teacher intervenes in the play situation, it is usually to further the instrumental value of play in developing concepts. In practice, this often means that the teacher diverts the child's line of enquiry and imposes her own direction to fit with her concept of the potential development of the child. The result is again to deny the child the only avenue that remains for the exercise of his autonomy. Is there not a role for the teacher which will emphasise the child's role and create that shared learning relationship drawing the teacher and child together in the excitement of discovery?

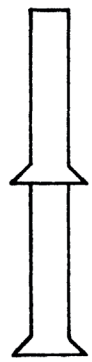
Sharing in play

I'd like to recount one chance event and one planned intervention which helped me to suspect what this role might be. During the course of my observations, I sometimes had the opportunity of joining in children's activities just for fun. One day, the class took to a craze for making animals from Lego. I don't think I played with Lego as a child, and I have had little opportunity to catch up on this skill. I can make a house or other rectangular objects, but I couldn't see how to make a more fluid shape like an animal. I asked Terry to show me. Terry was a little unwilling. I don't think he trusted my motives. He is rather slow in the academic sense and was maybe already used to teachers who asked questions to see what he knew rather than being interested in the answers. However, he mumbled and pointed and transferred the principle for this kind of construction, and I made an elephant. I was pleased and excited with my elephant, even more pleased when other children admired it, showed it to their teacher and put it on display with theirs. I even found it hard to allow it to be taken to bits a few days later. I had been drawn into sharing the excitement of learning, experiment and mastery with the children, and it was some time before I realised that I had learned something more than making a Lego elephant*, that even five-year-olds know things that they can teach to adults* (and other children), and in this way reverse roles and experience shared learning and the confidence of knowing, which is basic to encouraging independent and autonomous thinking.

In this small, chance experience I was able to demonstrate to children that a teacher can experience the pleasure and excitement of learning and can give serious

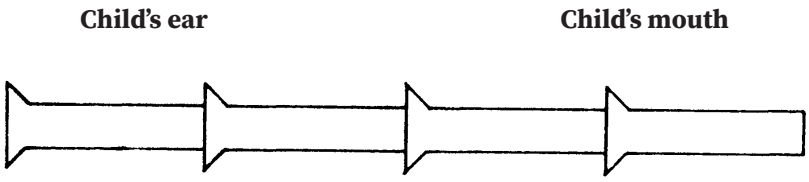
consideration and respect to their ideas, interests and knowledge. I felt that chance was not enough and that there must be ways of seeking out this kind of opportunity in the classroom. Sometime later, I visited a reception class on a regular basis with the hypothesis that a teacher could *intervene in play to establish a reciprocal learning relationship*. In this class, play occupied most of the children's time in the afternoons. Usually I joined a quiet group playing games or using the dolls' house, but one afternoon I decided to join the very conspicuous noisy play area on the carpet with building materials. The 'naughty boys' gravitated to this area, and I suppose I had unconsciously avoided them before. Several boys were building towers with a good range of wooden blocks. I started to make my own tower, and nobody spoke much. Although there was no articulation of a problem, one boy started to try to connect several towers with flat pieces of wood and then continued to build on top. His idea engaged everybody, and we eventually achieved a stable construction. There was no need for me to induce a verbal explanation – we had all been drawn into making discoveries and sharing strategies and we all knew what had been achieved. We were stuck for a while, until another boy introduced a hosiery cone. There was a vast supply of 'cones', in two shapes:

I remember trying to interest the group in a problem that interested me, balancing 'cones' like this:



and seeing how high I could go. There was a moment when the group applied the previously learned principle of inserting flat bases at intervals and continuing

upwards. But somebody had a new line of enquiry. He started hooting and moaning down the cones. It was most exciting hooting and moaning into each other's ears, and looking back, I didn't have any sense of being different to the children in enjoying this experience. It was very noisy and I can remember glancing up to the teacher, as a child might do, seeing no reaction and carrying on. Now someone combined the problems: could we wedge 'cones' together horizontally to make a big tube to hoot and moan through? This was the only stage where we talked about what we were trying to achieve because we had to co-operate in making the long tube and take turns at hooting and being hooted to.



The tube often sagged and broke, but it was wonderfully noisy! On reflection, it was easy to see what the children and I were learning in conventional terms – some principles about balance, construction and sound – but I think they may have learned more: how to frame and test hypotheses; that an adult can share and contribute in the process, not by cutting off to articulate the concepts but from participating in the learning of the group; and that adults and children can have equal status in the learning process.

Notes

1. J. Bull, 'Margaret Gracie: persistent discoverer' in Brian Simon (ed.), *Margaret Gracie: a teacher for our times*, 1983, pp7-12; p7.
2. Roy Nash, 'Pupils' expectations for their teachers', *Research in Education*, 12(1), 1974, pp47-62 and *Teacher Expectations and Pupil Learning*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976.
3. Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969.
4. Unpublished material collected by the author.

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