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Book Review: Love Letters to Play

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Book review

Bottrill, G., & Cook, S. (2002). *Love Letter to Play*. Sage. ISBN 978-1-5296-0801-4

Reviewer

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To say the book *Love Letters to Play* is unorthodox is an understatement. Through purposeful design, Cook and Bottrill have *not* provided the reader with a resource or best practice; rather, they have created a companion for the reader to return to as a source of future enlightenment. In doing so they have created a fresh, progressive read and model to create deep reflection. Their preface says it best regarding the entries: "They are not answers. They are not theory. They are not telling you what to do. You won't find photos of activities that you can copy or explicit ideas for what to do in your days with children." [Preface xi]

Stephanie Cook, a teacher exploring alternative educational approaches and how these might bring positive change to the English education system, has teamed up with Early Years practitioner and consultant Greg Bottrill. *Love Letters to Play* unfolds as part international glossary of words accompanied with heavy rumination, part handwritten journal entries complete with flow charts and recognisable thinkers' quotes. This book takes a stand, along with the current parent and educator appetite blossoming for a kind of 'boutique-scholar' literature fiercely defending self-governing within children. Cleverly titled publications such as Pasi Salberg's *Let the Children Play*, Michaelleen Doucleff's *Hunt, Gather, Parent*, as well as Susan Linn's *Who's Raising the Kids?* are delivering current perspectives in holistic child-rearing and education. Each read includes anecdotes, connection to research or solutions approach with advice to roadblocks (be it technology, competency, preconceived notions). These books fall short in that they inform us from an adult point of view how accountability for children is compromising their development. Here is where Cook and Bottrill begin in trail-blazing fashion. Immediately upon reading this I began focusing on my own relationship with play and childhood, something few books have been able to accomplish.

Part one encompasses more than three quarters of the book. Each entry, alternating with a photo of play-in-action, includes a handful of questions and themed by a word connected to play from a litany of cultures. My first impression of so many questions, each highlighted in bold was tiresome; however upon reflection, this was possibly the greatest impact this book had on my work with children and my own family: the lack of explicit ideas. Many of the questions posed are geared to unveil your own childhood, who you are, and what you truly believe of playwork practice. Along with the questions in part one are the cultural words, defined to drive provocation for example the noun 'Kadan' in Sanskrit meaning 'where the heart lies', asking to imagine if play was the best friend of childhood: "Perhaps if we were able to personify play it could help us understand why children are so connected to it and its possibilities." [79] This book personifying play surely will challenge any reader, no matter their expertise, to undertake the significant process of self-reflection.

The final quarter of 'Love Letters to Play' gives the feel that one is enjoyably peeking into the author's journals. Full of handwritten proclamations in boxes with arrows, they create a tone consciously

highlighting the concerning assumptions of an adult world's role and the perils of restricting play. "The adult wants transparency of 'doing-ness' the demand for visible learning. It seeks evidence for its agenda." [224]. It is obvious that, rather than blanket advocacy of the importance of children's play, it is a full-scale critique of how easily play is stifled. The authors explain: "The adult world seeks conformity, it values structure and linearity. Play defies overt order. It has an order of its own." [235]. They conclude with a call to courage: "The adult world's role is to create conditions for children to encounter struggle for themselves and develop the 'right thinking' to find a way through it...Our role is not to add struggle but to unveil it. We enable children to take courage & move forward...Play is the interplay of hardship and success." [264].

Love Letters to Play arguably stands alone due to the fact it is written in the realm of play, forcing self-reflection rather than providing us with another 'why' play is such a critical piece in children's development. This book gives us a meaty chunk of 'how' without informing what to do through expert eyes. "Does every last minute of childhood need to be plotted and filled with the 'Known'?" [111], "Do we become less human in the moment we say no to play?" [61] It struck me after wrestling with every question posed, there is no better way of utilizing the written word to personify play and understand it than including its audience in the reflections. From the text and layout to the theme and title, this is play provocation at its best. A welcome sequel to Bottrill's earlier publications and the many books that surface the importance of play and how it is so easily derailed, it will be of value for anyone concerned with child rearing, education and progressive child development.